

BLOOD AND CIRCUMCISION

Studies in Colossians

Study 3

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GOOD NEWS

Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD! (Psalm 150:6)

Our creator God, our heavenly Father guarantees that the sun faithfully rises each morning. He designs us so that laughter suddenly erupts in a human heart and reverberates out among bystanders, reminding the weary that there *is* wonderful joy in this world. Wonder is evoked by stars, oceans, clouds, mountain views, and people—all the sights and sounds; the One who made all things, is worthy of praise—praise from every creature. Even so, the daily news is heavily focussed upon the pain, difficulty, injustice and inequities of the world. We are continually reminded of the wars and the sadness and the violence and the death. Our own hearts are sometimes shocked by the inappropriateness and sinfulness of our own words, thoughts and actions. High rolling business executives, and bright young people with the world before them, suddenly take their own life. Violently spilled blood spatters across the lounge of a domestic home. A tsunami, a fire, a flood or a cyclone suddenly devastates thousands. We are overcome by depression, or guilt or a profound loneliness. Why is it that our life has to be so painful, so often and so unexpectedly?

It was C.S. Lewis, who said, 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world'.

So, it's a deaf world, Mr. Lewis? And God comes to us to speak his Word of grace?

It seems a strange message indeed that a much-loved man, Jesus—full of grace and truth—with healing in his hands, wisdom on his tongue, and compassion and mercy in his heart, and a single-minded love for a Holy God—should be put to death at the hands of brutal Roman soldiers, to effect the forgiveness of sins, the removal of guilt and shame, the justification of the ungodly, the transcending, fulfillment and superseding of all religious hopes, and the reconciliation of the human race to God as Father, and of the cosmos unto the plan of God for eternity. And that this death of this wonderful man should be followed by an earth-shattering resurrection, the like of which had never been seen before—and all things should then come under the Lordship of this once crucified, now resurrected man, Jesus, Israel's Messiah! But that is the plan, and that is the mystery, that Paul writes to the Colossians to confirm. This plan, strangely enough, only becomes clear, by the Spirit, to a regenerated mind.

The Good News is that God has this great plan, and that he calls us to participate in it, with gladdened hearts, with a freedom that shouts, with serving hands that find satisfaction in working, and with sun-beaten, sweat-soaked sacrificial lives, that display true, hopeful, hope-filled love in the midst of the most tragic of situations.

THE BLOOD VICTORY: LEGAL, ALL OF GRACE, AND RECONCILING

The Lord God laid the foundation for revealing his grace and love, in the unique life and *culture* of the nation of Israel. Theirs was a 'blood religion', and the first prophet Abel—his blood was shed, by his brother Cain, who murdered him; Abel trusted God who was gracious to him (Gen. 4), and was thankful; but his brother was angry—and angry at God. These ancient people knew the shedding of blood, in the worship they were given and taught by God, somehow dealt with their sins and guilt, and gave them peace. It was blood for the conscience, which was at the heart of peace, for living. The sins of a person were transferred to the life of a lamb or goat—which was killed.

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement (Leviticus 17:11).

The gift of God was the atonement that dealt with sin and united hearts to God. Now, Israel learned, that their sacrificial system was pointing ahead to a sacrificial Lamb, that was indeed a human being—God's own Son, God himself come down.

Paul tells the Colossians that central matter, in this way: Through Jesus, 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (Colossians 1:19).

For, 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness' (Hebrew 9:22).

LEGAL: The blood of Jesus—his lifeblood—was given in his death to atone for the sins of the whole world. Paul writes in Colossians 2:13-15 of 'the record that stood against us with its legal demands' as being erased upon Christ's cross.

13 And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, 14 erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

In all of life, whether Jew or Gentile, the laws of life condemn us in our failures. It is quite clear that 'no human being will be justified in God's sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for **through the law** comes the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20). The deficit, debt, the failures of the legal demands of life, upon a person had been accounted for. Forgiveness and justification, from God, has a legal, a *forensic* element to it. Hence the work of Jesus on the cross, is one which effects, for a sinner, the just pronouncement from God, the debt-bill is paid: 'No Condemnation'! (Rom. 8:1).

ALL OF GRACE: See, *God made you alive*. See what *God has done*, in his grace and love for the Colossians (cf. Ephesians 2:5), even when they were outside of the Covenant people Israel. This is in contrast to what false teachers were requiring the *Colossians to do*—obey regulations, have and revere visions, and worship angels.

RECONCILING: God made you alive *together with him*. He made his enemies into friends, through forgiveness in his own self-giving love, in the life and death of his Son, Jesus who bore our sins. He publicly, legally *disarmed* the accusing, demonic powers of accusative ammunition (Ephesians 6:12). Fear of death (Hebrews 2:15) was ended. God's wrath was averted. Jesus bore that wrath; he brought us into Sonship.

SPIRITUAL CIRCUMCISION—BACKGROUND

9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. 11 In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; 12 when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:9-12).

The Colossians have *come to fullness in him*—Jesus. Paul means that believers have been given a *relational* fullness (not a *quantitative* fullness) in Christ Jesus, such that nothing extra needs to be blended with it. Paul always lived and moved in that fullness, saying: I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ (Romans 15:29). The Colossians need the same confidence.

Historically, in order to be included among God's people, the male members of the covenant community—in Israel—were to be circumcised (Genesis 17:9-14). The prophets envisaged that many nations, foreigners and aliens (Leviticus 19:34; Ezekiel 47:22-23) would join themselves to the Lord (Jeremiah 50:5, Zechariah 2:11).

At the coming of Jesus Christ, there was not a direct replacement of the rite of circumcision with the rite of baptism. Indeed, their inter-relationship is quite varied, and often ambiguous within the New Testament (Acts 16:3; 21:21). However, baptism into Christ has numerous significant *parallels* with circumcision, as follows:

Circumcision was an act of *initiation* into the covenant community, *commanded* (Genesis 17:11) for Abraham and his descendants. It was as a *sign* of the covenant of grace, through faith alone (Romans 4:11). It was a *seal* of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, *and* likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the *faith* that our ancestor Abraham had *before* he was circumcised (Romans 4:11-12). It represented the *removal of impurity* (the word for 'uncircumcised' is closely associated with 'unclean' in Isaiah 52:1). It was observed as an ordinance of divine origin, and—interestingly—was considered to be an occasion for *joy and rejoicing*.

However, a *spiritual* circumcision of the heart was always intended and expected. See Deuteronomy 10:16, *Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer*. It was a command, stubbornly resisted through much disobedience. As many hearts became *uncircumcised*, God's curse kicked-in according to the covenant:

1 When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, 2 and return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, 3 then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you. 4 Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. 5 The LORD your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. 6 Moreover, *the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live* (Deuteronomy 30:1-6).

Circumcision was no mere outward token of nationhood. Leviticus 26:41 reveals that a *circumcised heart* was linked with *obedience* to the covenant with Abraham. *Uncircumcised hearts* in Israel were the result of continual *disobedience*, indeed *hostility* towards God. Severe judgments were meant to awaken obedience (Leviticus 26:13-16; 18-20; 21-24; 39-42). Prolonged disobedience did not thwart the purposes of God however, for he promised to *circumcise the hearts* of his own people, himself (Deut. 30:6). Jeremiah 4:4 indicates that the circumcised heart is the primary concern (cf. Ezekiel 44:7). So, the promise is, that God himself would create obedient hearts. In Romans 2:28-29 Paul highlights the inward character of real circumcision:

28 For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. 29 Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart--it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

The Circumcision of Christ – Made Without Hands

How were these Colossians circumcised in him? Paul links *circumcision* with *baptism*, and both with *the cross* of Christ. The RSV does not say 'with a spiritual circumcision', but is translated as 'a circumcision made without hands'.

NOTE: 'The Circumcision of Christ' may mean either:

- (i) That *undergone* by Christ in his flesh as he was stripped in the crucifixion, or
- (ii) That *effected* by Christ in an inward cleansing by his death and resurrection, in which case 'stripping off the body of flesh' refers to new birth—and baptism. The old clothing comes off in baptism, as does the old humanity conditioned by sin, and believers are clothed in a new humanity by sharing in Christ's resurrection power (therefore live in it, as Col. 3:5, 12)

1. This is something that God does—not us (2:13), thus fulfilling Deuteronomy 30:6: Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, *in order that you may live*.
2. Paul's prime interest is not really circumcision at all, but the *fullness* of deity dwelling in Jesus Christ, and *the fullness of the lives of the Colossians* now dwelling in Christ. Use of this circumcision terminology:
 - (i) Refers to various other verses exhorting them to fully resist any imposition of Jewish traditions requiring circumcision or the observance of days, or veneration of angels (2:16-18) as well as any deceptive philosophical syncretism (2:8). This would weaken the all sufficiency of Christ alone.
 - (ii) It links up too, with what follows (especially 3:5, 9, 12, 14), which involves putting off the old humanity, putting on the new.

Physical circumcision was not required for gentile believers (Galatians 2), but spiritual circumcision certainly was, and is; that is, the removal of the *flesh* (Gk: *sarx*), namely our old humanity in rebellion (Romans 6:6). Baptism was almost immediate, for all new believers receiving the Holy Spirit, inducting them into the new humanity.

This participation in Christ, causes one to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4):

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

What is Paul getting at? In Christ's great work, God has acted decisively. It is into this finished work—through faith—that the Colossians have fully entered. Baptism marks *the entry point into new life*, fullness of life. It is fully theirs. It is fully ours.