

THE CIRCUMCISED LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

Up to this point we have been following Abram as a believer in the true God, sojourning in the land of promise. But the difference between a believer and a circumcised believer is very vital indeed, and it is to this difference that the Spirit of God directs our attention in Genesis 17.

Our last view of Abram found him attempting to help God. He was trying to solve a problem he felt was far too hard for God. He and Sarai felt they had the solution to the problem, and Abram took Hagar, Sarai's handmaid, for a wife. Of that union was born Ishmael, Israel's continual thorn in the flesh until this day.

Thirteen years elapsed between the account of Chapter 16 and that of Chapter 17, and we can well suspect these were years of unhappiness and unrest in the household of Abram. The presence of Ishmael in the home created endless contempt, bitterness, envy, jealousy, weariness of spirit, and rebellion. These thirteen years were designed of God to teach Abram the folly of acting on his own.

Perhaps you have had some similar experience, when God has allowed you to have your own way, and the results have been most distressing. You were permitted to go your own headstrong way in order that you might learn the folly of acting apart from God. One of the most frightening things about life with God is this fact: That, if you insist upon having your own way, he will often let you have it, till you are sorry you asked for it. "He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul," (Psa 106:15 {KJV})

But after thirteen years of heartache, a new aspect of God's grace opens before Abram. Three new developments are unfolded in Chapter 17:

The first is the new revelation he has of God:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." (Gen 17:1-2 {RSV})

After thirteen years of silence, God appears to Abram in a new revelation and with a new name -- God Almighty. In the Hebrew it is *El Shaddai*, which essentially means "the God who is sufficient," the all-competent God, the adequate God, who knows what he is doing and how to do it. This is an indication that Abram has learned something from his recent bitter experience. God says, in effect, "You have been learning for thirteen years the total inadequacy of your own efforts, through Ishmael. Now learn a new thing about me. I am El Shaddai. You have discovered by sad experience how futile your plans and efforts can be without me. Now learn how capable I am to do everything that I desire to do, whenever I desire to do it."

Would that we could all discover this truth! We need desperately to recover the reality of El Shaddai, the God who is sufficient for whatever we are going through right now! This is what Abram learned.

In this new light from God came a new demand from God. "Walk before me and be blameless." In the King James Version this word *blameless* is translated "perfect." The root meaning of the word is "wholehearted." "Walk before me and be perfect, wholehearted," God says, "because I am El Shaddai." That is, I am all-sufficient to make you blameless. Walk before me, therefore, and be blameless.

I remember one time when I was a boy, I was looking through the iron bars of a large gate at a beautiful estate full of flower-bordered walks, and eyeing it with a great deal of envy. Suddenly, before I saw him, another boy about my own age rushed up from the other side and gave my arms a jerk. The bump I received taught me the foolishness of trying to be on two sides of a fence at once.

This is a truth that is often brought before us in the New Testament. We are so constantly trying to serve two masters, to please self and Christ. We are quite content to serve Christ, if we can also serve self at the same time. But God says to Abram, "This can no longer be permitted. You have come to the place where your dual allegiance can no longer be tolerated. Walk now before me, appropriating what I am, and be wholehearted, be wholly on my side, be mine!"

This is what a circumcised life means, as we shall see fully in a little while. It is Christ asserting his practical Lordship in our lives. When you become a Christian, you did so by recognizing the right of Jesus Christ to be Lord in your life. You did not, of course, understand what that would involve, but you saw, in one way or another, that his willingness to save you involved his right to control you. For a time, though you knew you were essentially different, you lived much as you did before. You made decisions on the basis of how you felt and what you wanted to do. Then the Holy Spirit begins to put on the pressure. He says to you, "Stop this!" or "Start doing that!" All he is really doing is asserting the Lordship of Christ in your life. He is beginning to cut the ties that bind you to the world and the self life within you. This is essentially what he is saying to Abram here.

So important is this step, along with the new revelation of God, that new names are given to Abram and Sarai:

Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the Father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations." (Gen. 17:3-5 {RSV})

And then in Verse 15:

And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall come from her." {Gen 17:15-16 RSV}

Whenever you see God in a new way, it always makes a corresponding change in you. Here God says to Abraham, "Look, Abram, your name now means 'exalted father.' Your trouble all along has been that you were looking for your own exaltation. This must now be changed. You must lose your desire to exalt yourself; you will stop trying to advance and please yourself. Your name will now be 'the father of a multitude,' for great fruitfulness shall be evident in your life. Because you have now learned that I am El Shaddai, your name can no longer be 'exalted' but it must now be 'fruitful,' for you will be the father of a multitude."

The same is true of Sarai. Sarai means "contentious." This speaks volumes of the home life of Abram and Sarai. In Proverbs 21:9 {RSV}, Solomon writes, "It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a contentious woman." Having had a thousand wives, here is a man who knows of what he speaks! Sarai is, therefore, a problem wife. Yet in the New Testament, Peter says that this woman is a model for all women to follow -- not by her name, Sarai, "contentiousness," but by her new name, Sarah, "Princess." She is never referred to as Sarai in the New Testament. God does not set her up as a pattern for women until she becomes Sarah and loses her contentious spirit. As Sarah she learned to develop "a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious," (1 Pet 3:4b {RSV}). Sarai was not naturally thus. She was an argumentative woman, a nagging wife. But she, too, had been taught by grace, and through the years she lost the need to defend herself on every occasion and became Sarah, a princess, a queen, an honored woman, having a meek and quiet spirit, very precious in the sight of God.

Now we come to the great sign of circumcision:

And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your

house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he that is born in your house and he that is bought with your money, shall be circumcised." {Gen 17:9-13a RSV}

And the actual event is recorded in Verses 22-27:

When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; and all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. {Gen 17:22-27 RSV}

What a strange thing this is -- the removal of the foreskin of the male procreative organ -- literally carving in the flesh the sign of God's Lordship! This is the great sign of Jewry, intended by God to be the mark of his possession, that they were God's instrument to use for blessing among the nations. It was placed upon this particular part of the body to indicate that they were to be physically separate from the other nations. The very organ by which that separation could be violated, bore upon it the mark of God's ownership.

As we read the course of Jewish history, we see how this mark, intended to be the sign of humility and instrumentality, became perverted into a mark of superiority and favoritism. Those who bore it began to look on others as "Gentile dogs" and to be self-righteous and proud over their supposed favored position before God. Thus the spirit of anti-Semitism which troubles the world so today was born of the spirit of anti-Gentilism which preceded it. This does not justify either, of course.

Now let us remember that what was physical and literal to Abraham is intended to have spiritual significance to us. In the New Testament, therefore, we no longer read of circumcision of the flesh but of the heart. The heart is the symbol of the soul -- the mind, emotions, and will, the whole personality. Every believer in Christ is to bear on his heart the sign of Christ's Lordship. The total personality is to be at his disposal. That is the Christian's circumcised life.

Many scholars feel that circumcision was the origin of the wedding ring. The act of circumcision was performed by a metal or stone knife which cut around the foreskin leaving a circular scar. So a man and woman, standing before someone who represents God, place a metal and/or stone ring upon each other's fingers, indicating that two hearts are giving themselves to each other.

This is the meaning of heart circumcision: The believer's heart is totally Christ's, to use as he wills -- all his emotions, mind, intellect, and will are dedicated and available, ready at the command of Jesus Christ to be used for his purposes. Paul says to the Philippians, "We are the circumcision, who worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh," {Phil 3:3 KJV}. We are to have no reliance upon ourselves, but rely totally upon him. Every thought, every imagination, is brought into captivity to Christ. That is the circumcised life.

"Walk therefore before me, and be wholehearted, blameless." That will be a life of fruitfulness and blessing, a life that is well-pleasing to God, for it all springs from the realization that the God who lives within is El Shaddai, the God who is sufficient.

Prayer

Our Father, just as Israel could pervert the truth of circumcision in the flesh, so it is possible for us to pervert the truth of the circumcised heart. It is quite possible for us to give the impression that we are totally yours, Lord, that we love you and serve you, and that all we have is yours, and yet to be quite false to that ideal. Help us to discover the glory of the circumcised life, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

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