

• *The next question: how does salvation relate to circumcision?*

• *Today some regard baptism or church membership the same way*

• *If salvation does not come by any religious symbol then what is it for?*

• *Paul answers by pointing to the order of events*

• *Abraham was justified before he was circumcised*

• *Modern equivalent - there are many people who have experienced salvation before they ever 'went to church' or were baptised*

• *Sheer facts*

### What is circumcision for?

(i) *Circumcision was a sign*

(ii) *It was a sign that the promises*

At the time of the apostle Paul, Jewish people often thought that salvation was a matter of belonging to the nation of Israel. This made Jewish men very proud of being circumcised. But if salvation is by faith, then salvation is not by circumcision. So the next question Paul approaches is: how does salvation relate to circumcision? Circumcision was (among other things) the mark of being a Jew. It was the means of entry into the nation of Israel.

People in Christian families or 'Christian nations' (as they are called) sometimes regard baptism or church membership or even their nationality in a 'Christian' country in the same way. They say, 'I come from this Christian people, so I am a Christian.' It is this kind of confusion that Paul addresses in Romans 4:9-12.

Salvation does not come by any religious symbol like circumcision. Paul raises the question: <sup>9</sup>*Is then this blessedness [of being forgiven and 'justified'] upon the circumcision or upon the uncircumcision? For we are saying faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness.* According to Genesis 15:6 Abraham was 'reckoned righteous'. But what exactly was it that brought this justification? How did circumcision fit in?

Paul answers by asking them to notice the order of events in Genesis. <sup>10</sup>*How then was it reckoned to him? Was it while he was in circumcision or while he was in uncircumcision?* At what stage in Abraham's life did he get this 'reckoned' righteousness from God? He answers: *It was not when he was circumcised. It was when he was uncircumcised.*

Paul says: you seem to think that it is circumcision that saves the Jew. But if you will remember, Abraham was said to be justified before he was ever circumcised. He was justified at the point mentioned in Genesis 15:6. The point where he was circumcised was some time later<sup>11</sup>. So we can know for sure that Abraham was justified without being circumcised. Paul is arguing from sheer history. It is a fact that Abraham was justified without circumcision and before circumcision.

This same kind of argument can be applied to modern equivalents. One can argue from the personal history of people who undoubtedly experience God's salvation. Think of it in connection with baptism. There are many who seem to think that one receives salvation through baptism. Salvation-by-baptism simply does not fit the experience of those who came to salvation before they were water-baptized. Yet it is possible to know that one has experienced salvation. It is possible to know that one has received the Holy Spirit. It is possible to experience the Spirit of adoption in whom we cry 'Abba Father', and to experience the witness of the Holy Spirit. So one can ask Paul's question: how then was it experienced? And there are many people around who have experienced salvation before they ever 'went to church' or became church-members or were baptized.

Salvation did not come to Abraham by the ceremony of circumcision. It was a sheer historical fact that his being declared righteous was independent of his being circumcised. He was uncircumcised at the time God 'justified' him. Similarly, for many Christians it is a sheer fact that their experience of salvation did not come by baptism.

**But then one might ask: what is circumcision for?** If circumcision does not automatically save, what was its purpose? Paul answers: <sup>11</sup>*And he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness of faith which he had while uncircumcised.*

(i) **Circumcision was a sign.** It was a sign of new life. In Genesis 17 Abraham receives a new name. He is made a new person, given a new enablement. Circumcision is a sign of what has happened to Abraham **after** he had been declared righteous. (ii) **It was a sign that the promises of salvation would come through Abraham's line.** Abraham and Sarah were miraculously given God's strength to conceive and bring to birth the miracle

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 17:26

of salvation would come through Abraham's line

(iii) Circumcision was a seal

• But it was a 'seal' to no one but Abraham

• The 'seal' of the Christian's salvation is the experiential receiving of the Holy Spirit

• Not baptism but the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts

miraculously given God's strength to conceive and bring to birth the miracle child Isaac. From this beginning the Saviour would come in the line of Abraham. This is why a Jewish child was circumcised at birth. As soon as he was born he was a member of the people in whose line the Saviour would come. (iii) **Circumcision was a seal.** A seal is a way of making something secure and certain. Pilate 'sealed' the tomb of Jesus to make sure no one would tamper with it. 'Make it as sure as you can,' said Pilate. 'So they . . . made the tomb sure, sealing the stone . . .'<sup>1</sup>. Circumcision was a seal of the salvation that Abraham has **previously** received. Circumcision said in effect to Abraham: 'I have accepted you as righteous. You are mine. You are justified because you have believed my word. The way in which you were saved is the way in which all of your spiritual children will be saved.' God was 'sealing' Abraham's salvation. He was making it doubly clear to Abraham that he was truly one who belonged to God and had God's salvation.

It is important to realize that circumcision was not a 'seal' to anyone other than Abraham. Paul says: 'he received . . . circumcision as a seal of the righteousness of faith which **he** had . . .'<sup>1</sup> 'Which **he** had!' It did not say to Abraham that all of his line would be saved. It said that **he** was saved and others would be saved if they followed him in his faith. When Abraham's children were circumcised it did not seal **their** salvation. It simply reminded them of the way Abraham was justified.

The 'seal' of the Christian's salvation is the Holy Spirit. Remember the meaning of the word 'seal'. It refers to something that secures or makes something absolutely certain. When Abraham was given circumcision it was an absolute guarantee of his salvation. It made him 100 per cent certain that he was justified. The equivalent of this in the Christian life is the experiential receiving of the Holy Spirit. The sealing of the Spirit not only means that our salvation is made sure by the presence of the Holy Spirit. It also means that we ourselves have a consciousness of our salvation. Ephesians 1:13 says, 'In Christ also, you people, having heard the Word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and having believed in him, you were sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise.'

This is the great question: what 'seals' salvation? The Jew thought it was nationality or circumcision. Many people have thought baptism somehow 'seals' ('makes certain') our salvation. But this is nonsense. What seals our salvation is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us. When the Holy Spirit is richly and abundantly poured out upon us, it makes it certain that we are truly Christian. And it makes **us** certain ourselves. The Holy Spirit witnesses to us that we are truly the children of God. You cannot be sure of your salvation just because you have one of the 'symbols' of the church or of some Christianized nationality. You have to have faith in Jesus, the indwelling of the Spirit in **your** heart. And the Spirit has to witness to you that you are a child of God.

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 27:65, 66



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