

- *Higher demands*

Abram is at the point in his life when God is making higher and higher demands on him. He is being lifted up into higher levels of spirituality and godliness. He must 'walk before God and be perfect'.

The introduction of the covenant sign

Another aspect of his obedience is now put to him. Covenants generally have a covenant sign, and God wants there to be a 'covenant sign' in His covenant with Abram. What is happening is that this covenant is being gradually carried forward. The relationship exists, the promises have been made. Now the covenant sign is introduced. God is bringing the covenant to pass. He is moving towards taking an oath.

- *Christians - 'children of Abraham' - are also in covenant with God*

All Christians are 'children of Abraham'. We follow in the footsteps of our father Abram. We too are in covenant with God. For us too there are covenant-signs. God is wanting to say to us also 'Now I know that you fear me' and pour out abundant blessings upon us in which we 'enter into rest' and inherit God's promises.

- *Circumcision – the covenant sign with Abram*

There was only one covenant with Abram. The story of its being given and inherited is spread over chapters 12–22 in the book of Genesis. Often covenants have one or more special covenant-signs. It might be a rainbow; it might be the sabbath. In the covenant with Abram, it is circumcision, a small surgical operation on the organ of reproduction in which some covering skin is cut away.

- *A permanent regulation for his descendants*

This is laid on Abram as an obligation, as one of the things that he must do to inherit the promises. God says to Abram 'Now you for your part shall keep my covenant, you and your seed after you throughout their generations'. To 'keep the covenant' partly means to obey the single rule of Genesis 17:2. He must walk before God and keep every area of his life pleasing to God. It also means that he is to keep the obligation that is just about to be laid on him. He must be circumcised and get the male members of his household circumcised and see that it becomes a permanent regulation for his descendants.

- *Abraham did not live under the law of Moses*

This is perhaps the point at which we should notice that Abram is not living under the law of Moses. Paul makes much of this in Galatians. He points out that Abraham lived four centuries before the law of Moses existed and so he could not possibly have been saved or sanctified or have received any blessing by keeping the Mosaic law. Christians are in the same position. We go back to Abraham, not to Moses. We are Abraham's children and we are justified, given life, given assurance of salvation and are led into the ways of holiness – all without the Mosaic law. The truth is Abraham had **one** law to keep: walk before Me and be perfect. He was meant to know by the Holy Spirit how to walk with God. Mosaic legislation was not needed for his personal relationship with God; it would only be needed *when the nation of Israel came along which would include ungodly people. 'The law is not made for the righteous person, but for those who are lawless...'* ¹.

¹ 1 Timothy 1:9

- *A one-rule summary – 'walk before me and be perfect'*

The whole of God's requirement is summed up in one 'rule': walk before Me and be perfect! First God told Abram about promises. God expected him to believe them. Now God is speaking to him about the kind of life he must live. The order is important. Grace comes first; God's demand comes second. 'Walk before Me ... be perfect'. This is the only 'rule of life' that Abram ever gets. God's command today is not the Mosaic legislation.

• *Grace first – then the demand second*

• *The Christian – walks in the Spirit – one demand*

Circumcision – a symbol

1. *Circumcision a sign of the covenant promises*

2. *Circumcision required as part of Abraham’s responsiveness*

• *Abraham had to act in obedience*

• *The Christian’s covenant sign of water-baptism is likewise a matter of obedience*

We are children of Abraham. God’s demand comes to us in short-and-sharp summaries like the one Abram received. ‘*Be perfect*’¹ (Matthew 5:48) – said Jesus, referring to the love-command. ‘*Abide in Me*’, He said². ‘*If there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying “You shall love your neighbour...”*’³. We fulfil the law by walking in the Spirit and focusing on one demand. Abraham was living this way a long time ago. He was walking in the Spirit before the law existed. The moral aspects of the Mosaic law get fulfilled as we walk in the Spirit.

A further demand was that Abram and his people get circumcised. It is important to notice that circumcision gets added to the covenant at **this** point of the story. Circumcision symbolises the things that are happening at this stage of events.

1. **Circumcision is a sign of the covenant promises.** God calls it ‘*the sign of the covenant*’¹ between Him and Abram. God’s covenant-signs are signs of what God will do before they are signs of what men and women must do. The rainbow was the sign of God’s promise never to send another flood. Circumcision is a sign of God’s promise that newness of life will come to Abram, and he will be empowered to cooperate with all that God is promising will happen. Circumcision is the sign of God’s moving in grace towards men and women through the ‘seed of Abraham’; only then – after God’s grace – can it be a sign of human responsiveness.

2. **Circumcision was required as part of Abraham’s responsiveness.** ‘*You shall keep the covenant*’, said God¹. Earlier, when God was giving promises, Abram was asleep² or he was prostrate and silent before God³, but here is something which he must do. The covenant-promises will be superintended by God. God will bring them to pass. But before they come to pass, God requires certain things from Abram and this is one of them.

Circumcision is first and foremost the sign of God’s moving in grace towards men and women, but Abram did have to get himself circumcised. Adam had a surgical operation performed on him while he was asleep¹ but Abram was not asleep when the surgical operation of circumcision would be performed. He had to get himself circumcised.

The Christian is under the covenant-sign of water baptism. They are not identical or totally parallel, but they are both covenant signs and they both point to the seed of Abraham who is Jesus. One reason why every Christian should take to himself the covenant-sign of water-baptism is that it is simply a matter of obedience. God wanted Abram’s responsiveness and obedience, and circumcision was one of His demands.

¹ Matthew 5:48

² John 15:4

³ Romans 13:9

¹ 17:11

¹ 17:9

² 15:12

³ 17:3

¹ Genesis 22:21



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