

The Circumcision of Our Lord
January 1, 1997

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✧ Jesu juva ✧

CHRIST'S CIRCUMCISION

Luke 2:21

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Today we begin a New Year. We've celebrated Christmas and opened all of the presents. We've enjoyed a short break from work. Last night we counted down the minutes and seconds to midnight. 1996 is over and '97 is upon us. It's a New year, a special day in the eyes of the world. But this day is special for another reason. You see, it's still Christmas time in the church. The baby Jesus was born only eight days ago. Today is the eighth day of His life, which makes today a special festival day within the Christmas season. For on the eighth day, Christ was circumcised and given the name Jesus. It's this event, rather than the beginning of a New Year, that gives today its real significance. Today has always been an important day in the church year, much more important than the world's New Year. For today is the day on which Christ, while still an infant, first shed His innocent blood for us, by being circumcised.

What a strange thing to celebrate, a circumcision. It's something we usually don't even talk about in mixed company. And here we are celebrating festival about it in church? There are several reasons why we do, but to understand it, we must look into the background of circumcision: where it came from, why it was done, what the whole thing meant.

Circumcision has its roots in the Old Testament Covenant. God first commanded that all Israelite males be circumcised when He established the covenant with Abraham. This is recorded in Genesis 17: "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 child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations... and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.'" Obviously God viewed circumcision as a very important act. It was important for several reasons.

First, circumcision was to be a sign. It was to set God's people apart from everyone else. And it certainly accomplished this. Israelites were laughed at, mocked, even shunned by some because of circumcision. They viewed it as abnormal, as self-mutilation. It was, after all, such a painful, strange, and unnatural thing to do. But it set the people of God apart. They could see it in themselves every day. It was an enduring physical reminder to them and others of who and what they were: the chosen people of God, set apart to by Him in the covenant. And as the people of God, circumcision reminded them that they were to serve and obey God, rather than follow the ways of the heathen.

Second, circumcision was a bloody thing, and in no way pleasant. Listen to the account of Moses' son's circumcision in Exodus 4: "Then Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at Moses' feet, and said, 'Surely you are a husband of blood to me!' So He let his son go. Then she said, 'You are a husband of blood!' -- because of the circumcision." The gore of this ritual had an impact. And it had a purpose. It was a sign to them that they were set apart by the shedding of blood, and that they could only be purified by the shedding of blood. Now circumcision didn't actually purify them or cleanse them of their sins. It was not a justifying act. Romans 3 explains that Abraham was not justified by circumcision, but that "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Circumcision was only a sign, a reminder. The blood shed was much like the blood shed in the Temple sacrifices. It was meant to remind them that a Messiah was coming who would shed his own blood for them. Unlike circumcision and sacrifice, this Messiah really would take their sins away and make them pure. The blood of circumcision reminded them of this.

Third, the timing of the circumcision was important. It was to be done on the eighth day, as we heard in Genesis 17. This was very significant. It comes from the history of creation. God created the earth in six days and rested on the seventh. But where is the eighth day in all of this? The eighth day is the day of new creation. The day when heaven and earth will be renewed, at the second coming of Christ. Thus, the eighth day always represents the new creation. (Which by the way is also one of the reasons we worship on Sunday, the eighth day.) By looking forward to the Messiah who was promised in the covenant, and trusting that He would remove their sins, the people of the Old Testament were actually forgiven. They were justified by their faith, just as we are. And thus, they were made new creatures. Thus, circumcision, the mark of the covenant and of the promised Messiah, was also a mark of the new creation. And hence it was done on the eighth day, reminding them of God's grace and the coming Messiah.



And this Messiah in whom they trusted and were made into new creatures did come. He came on Christmas, as a baby. And on the eighth day; today, He was circumcised. But why would He need to be circumcised? He did not need to be made into a new creation. He did not need to have blood shed on His behalf. He did not need the covenant. He was already perfect and in perfect harmony with God the Father. He did not need to be circumcised.

But he was circumcised. Not for Himself, but for us. By submitting to circumcision, the baby Jesus began to fulfill the law that none of us can keep completely. It is because He kept the law of God perfectly that He was found worthy to take our place and bear our sins. Imagine that Jesus hadn't fulfilled every section of the law. Would he be able to forgive us for sins against a law that he had not kept in our place? No, He wouldn't. We would then have to keep that part of the law and would be held accountable for it. But because He did cover every part of the law, we don't need to worry when we break any particular part of it. All has been forgiven by Christ, who fulfilled all. The act of circumcision was the first step in doing this.

Moreover, this circumcision was also the first step in Jesus' suffering for us. The shedding of His infant blood was His first step on the road toward Calvary. It was the first step toward shedding His blood in the crucifixion. Jesus was constantly willing to exchange places with us. He did this

when He died for us at Calvary. And He did it when He was circumcised. So, you see, the blood Jesus shed in circumcision, is blood shed toward our salvation.

Having shed his blood in circumcision, He fulfilled that law for us. And having shed His blood on the cross, He completed the atonement to which circumcision pointed ahead. Therefore, circumcision is no longer needed. It's very much like driving on the highway. There are certain signs which tell you where you are going and how to get there. Once you are there, you no longer need the signs. They are no longer useful. Because Jesus already completed His work, we no longer need circumcision to point ahead to it. It's already here. It's done.

Now we have something else. Something which brings Christ's work in the past to us here and now. Baptism. Baptism has replaced circumcision. Remember that circumcision was meant to be a sign, was meant to look forward to Christ, and was to represent the new creation. Baptism is very similar, but is also much more.

Like circumcision, Baptism is a sign. It is something that reminds us of who we are: that we have been chosen and set apart by God to be His people. But where circumcision was to be only a sign to men, Baptism is a sign to all, to men, to angels, to demons, and to God Himself. When you were Baptized, you were sealed with the sign of the cross and in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. St. John in the book of Revelation describes the importance of the seal. Look at chapters 7 through 9. In summary of that, those who are not sealed are to be tormented and condemned. But the people with the seal of God on their foreheads are described as worshipping around the throne of God. They are given salvation, and the destruction of God's wrath is not allowed to touch them. So, this seal is very important.

Second, as circumcision looked forward in time to Christ Jesus, Baptism looks back at Him. More than this, though, it actually brings the work of Christ to us here and now. Baptism applies what Jesus did to each one of you. When you are Baptized, you both are put into the Body of Christ which is the church, and put on Christ. Galatians 3 says: "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Putting on Christ, means that all that He is we are given and become. He was perfect, we are made perfect. He rose from the dead, we will rise from the dead. He is has eternal life, we will be given eternal life. He is the Son of God and the heir of heaven. We are all made sons of God and heirs of heaven. All of this through putting on Christ; through Baptism. It brings Christ to each of us here and now.

Third, while circumcision represented the new creation, Baptism actually makes the new creation. II Corinthians 5 says: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." Baptism is what does this. The old sinner inside of all of us is drowned in the water of Baptism. And from this same water, a new righteous person is born. Baptism makes us into new creatures.

So you see then, everything that circumcision was meant to do, Baptism does and more. Let us rejoice therefore today as we remember our Savior's circumcision where He fulfilled the law for us, shed His blood for us, and began the trip to Calvary. And let us begin this new year by rejoicing in our Baptisms which have made us new creatures, and which bring Christ Jesus, and what He did for us, to each of us here and now. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠