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On the Circumcision of Christ

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Some thoughts upon the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ.

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Transcript

Today is the feast of the circumcision of Christ, perhaps one of the most neglected of the feasts connected with Jesus' ministry and mission. For this reason, I thought it would be worthwhile to spend a few moments reflecting upon the meaning of circumcision and the way that this meaning is fulfilled in Jesus' life. First of all, circumcision first appears in the context of Genesis chapter 17 with the covenant with Abraham.

The Lord appears to Abraham, declares his purpose to create a covenant with him, gives him a new name, and then gives him the sign of the covenant. The sign of the covenant is an unusual one. It's the circumcision, the cutting off of the foreskin of all of the males of his house.

The gift of circumcision is also connected with a promise that's given at the same time that Sarah will have a child, that the Lord will make Abraham fruitful through her. The narrative context of the gift of the sign of circumcision is an important one to consider. This comes after the story of Abraham, Sarai, and Hagar and the birth of Ishmael.

The pressing narrative question is how the promised seed is going to come. If Ishmael is not the one, how is this child going to be born of a barren mother and an aged father who does not seem to be able to bring about the promise by his own strength? The law of circumcision is given in Genesis chapter 17 verses 10 to 14. The law of circumcision is

given in Genesis chapter 17 verses 10 to 14.

The severity of the sanction upon the uncircumcised male of the people here, the male whose flesh has not been cut off, should be considered in the context of the judgement that's about to fall upon the surrounding peoples, particularly in the destruction upon Sodom. Something similar is seen later on in the story of the Exodus. As the Lord is going to come in judgement upon Egypt, Moses' son Gershom also needs to be circumcised if he is going to be safe.

In a similar way, when the people enter into the promised land, before they enter into battle with the Canaanites, they need to be circumcised. Cutting off the flesh of the foreskin is the alternative to being cut off with all flesh in the general judgements that come upon wicked peoples. In Genesis chapter 9 verse 11, judgement is spoken of as the cutting off of flesh.

In scripture, the flesh is symbolically concentrated in the phallus. Indeed, scripture can speak about the phallus as the flesh. It's the place where the symbolic associations and meanings of the flesh are particularly condensed and concentrated.

It represents the generative source of the flesh, but also the flesh's connection with the force of virility. In the story of Abraham, Ishmael is presented as a child of the flesh, a child that's brought forth by the power of Abraham's own virility. And the problem is that Abraham's own virility is not fit to bring forth the child of promise.

In that sense, even though he can bear children, he is impotent. The cutting off of Abraham's foreskin in circumcision is a symbolic removal of flesh, and also for this reason a sign of promise. Paul in Romans chapter 4 verse 19 speaks of Abraham's body being dead.

Even though he might have been physically virile apart from circumcision, his body was insufficient to father the promised seed. It's only as that flesh is cut off that he is prepared to do so. Howard Ahlberg Schwartz speaks of circumcision as a fruitful cut.

In Leviticus chapter 19 verses 23 to 25, fruit trees are described as being uncircumcised and having foreskin. Not until a tree was satisfactorily pruned of its foreskin could its fruit legitimately be enjoyed. The pruning rendered the fruit of the tree clean, and it also served the fertility of the tree.

Ahlberg Schwartz argues that this helps us to understand the meaning of circumcision. Circumcision is a sort of pruning of the generative organ of the body so that it might bear legitimate fruit in a well-cultivated manner. If we think about the broader context of the story of Genesis and the birth of Isaac, we can notice all these forms of unpruned sexuality, particularly in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In circumcision, Abraham and his household are supposed to act in a different way

sexually. The fruitfulness of Abraham's household would not be found in the rapacious sexuality of groups such as the Sodomites, nor in something like the kings of the region that would take beautiful women into their harems. The promise of the Lord would not be achieved through the virility of the flesh.

Rather, through the pruning of Israel's foreskins, they cease to be a wild tree and are domesticated by God to bear good fruit for Him. And in removing part of the body, they cease to be an untamed people and their bodies are rendered whole. The further effect of circumcision was to cut Israel off from other nations and peoples that surrounded them, and even from their ancestors such as Terah and their wider family.

Abraham had left his father's house, but circumcision clearly marks Abraham out from these other people around him. In circumcision, part of the flesh of Israel is cut off, but Israel is also cut off from the general flesh of humanity. The penis is a particularly condensed expression of the meaning of the entire male body, and the removal of the foreskin is a dedication of the entire body and the entire flesh.

Circumcision was to be performed on the eighth day, the first day that the male child ceased to be impure on account of their birth, and not coincidentally the first day after birth that an animal could be sacrificed. We see this in Exodus chapter 22 verses 28-29 for instance. Circumcision then is connected with meanings of sacrifice.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, circumcision is applied to other bodily organs. In Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 4, the Lord tells the men of Judah and Jerusalem to circumcise themselves to Him by removing the foreskins of their hearts. Israel is described as uncircumcised in heart in Jeremiah chapter 9 verse 26.

In Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 6, Moses prophesies that the Lord will one day circumcise the hearts of His people. In other places in scripture we read about people who have uncircumcised ears or uncircumcised lips, ears that are resistant to the word of the Lord or lips that are unclean. The Apostle Paul speaks about the perversion of the meaning of circumcision when it's not accompanied by the practice of the law.

The true Jew is not merely circumcised in flesh but also circumcised in heart. This of course is the promise of the new covenant. How does all of this relate to the circumcision of Christ that we read of in Luke chapter 2? The first thing that we've noted that is relevant here is the way that circumcision is connected with meanings of sacrifice.

Animals were first sacrificed on the eighth day and circumcision marked the male child out as dedicated to the Lord. In the circumcision of the infant Christ there is already some aspect of the sacrificial import of His life more generally that's been symbolised. In circumcision the seed of Abraham were marked out as the Lord's, pruned for His service.

In the circumcision of Christ the promised Messiah of Israel bears this sign upon Himself.

He is marked out and He will be the one that will fulfil this meaning of circumcision in its true and ultimate intent. Christ's circumcision connects Him with the Abrahamic covenant, with its promise and with the specific calling that Jewish males had within it.

Circumcision is not just a generic practice of the law or a blood right. It marks out the male organ by promise and vocation. Circumcision was given in the context of the promise of the seed, of the promise originally of Isaac, but through Isaac of all the seed of Abraham.

Of course the one who is ultimately the true seed of Abraham is Christ Himself as Paul argues in Galatians chapter 3. In Christ the promise given to Abraham of the seed, the promise that starts in Genesis chapter 17, finally arrives at the one in whom it has its fulfilment. In the circumcision of the infant Christ, the one who is the fulfilment, Himself bears the sign of the promise. Circumcision, as we have seen, was something that prepared Abraham and his family to bear fruit for God, fruit that wasn't just fruit of the flesh and of natural male virility, but fruit of promise.

In the circumcision of the infant Christ we might think of Christ being prepared as the true husband of the people of God, the one by whom the bride will finally bear promised seed. Circumcision, as we have seen, was also something that represented the cutting off of the sinful flesh, as the flesh was symbolically cut off in a place where its meaning was condensed. The person themselves could be preserved when the judgment of the Lord came to cut off all sinful flesh.

In Colossians chapter 2 verse 11 the Apostle Paul writes, Here Paul speaks not just of the cutting off of a single part of the flesh that symbolically represented the whole, but the cutting off of the entire body of the flesh, the whole sinful totality of the flesh that calls for the Lord's judgment upon it. This took place in the cross of Christ. It's the cross of Christ that circumcision ultimately looks forward to, and in Christ's circumcision as an infant there is already a foreshadowing of his death, the true circumcision by which all of the body of the flesh will be cut off, not just the foreskin.

Circumcision in the covenant of Abraham then always looked forward to and anticipated and rested for its meaning upon this greater circumcision that Christ would bring. On this feast of the circumcision of Christ then we should reflect upon the way that Christ brings circumcision with all of its meaning to its final and true telos. In Christ the Abrahamic covenant, promise and calling is finally achieved.

In Christ the promise of the seed that was given to Abraham finally reaches its great fulfillment. Christ is the seed of Abraham. In Christ the pruning of the flesh for fruitful service for God is also achieved.

He is the true husband of the bride by which the promised seed will come. Finally, he is the one by whom the sinful condition of the flesh which calls for the judgment of God will

finally and decisively be addressed.