



Digging Deeper Week 2

Covenant Signs

On the day my husband and I were married, we exchanged rings as a sign of the covenant we made. The circle represents unending love and serves as the symbol we use to remember that day when we made promises to God and each other. God often used signs to help His people remember His promises.

The Sabbath day of rest was a sign to remember creation (Exodus 31:16-17). The rainbow serves as a reminder that God will never flood the earth again (Genesis 9:9-17). Another covenant sign that we discover in the Book of Romans is circumcision. This was a sign of the covenant God made with Abram and his descendants. God told Abram that he would have an heir even in his old age: “The LORD took Abram outside and said to him, ‘Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That’s how many descendants you will have!’ And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith” (Genesis 15:5-6). God also promised land and blessing to these descendants (Genesis 15:14-21).

Fourteen years after the Lord made this promise, he repeated it.¹ This time God changed Abram’s name to Abraham and told him that circumcision would be the sign to remember the covenant. God described it clearly in Genesis 17:10-14:

¹⁰“This is the covenant that you and your descendants must keep: Each male among you must be circumcised. ¹¹You must cut off the flesh of your foreskin as a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹²From generation to generation, every male child must be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. This applies not only to members of your family but also to the servants born in your household and the foreign-born servants whom you have purchased. ¹³All must be circumcised. Your bodies will bear the mark of my everlasting covenant. ¹⁴Any male who fails to be circumcised will be cut off from the covenant family for breaking the covenant.”

This covenant sign might seem a little out of the ordinary compared with God’s other symbols of rest and rainbows. It is personal, gender specific, and frankly a little bloody. *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* defines it this way: “The ceremony of circumcision consisted in cutting away the foreskin, i.e., the hood or fold of skin covering the head of the male organ.”²

Circumcision is not just a ceremonial ritual but a continual reminder of covenant loyalty. Historically the practice was performed by fathers or religious leaders, but there is a biblical example of a woman performing the rite (Exodus 4:25). Gentiles who converted to Judaism underwent the practice as well. Jews today usually have a designated person

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referred to as a *mohel* perform circumcision.³ In the New Testament we see that the naming of a child accompanied circumcision (Luke 1:59).

Through our study of Romans, we will continue to find Paul seeking to unite Jewish and Gentile believers. He doesn't throw out Jewish history or rituals but helps the community of believers see the purpose and fulfillment of the old covenant in Christ. Romans 4:11-12 clarifies that circumcision is a sign of Abraham's faith:

¹¹Circumcision was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him to be righteous—even before he was circumcised. So Abraham is the spiritual father of those who have faith but have not been circumcised. They are counted as righteous because of their faith. ¹²And Abraham is also the spiritual father of those who have been circumcised, but only if they have the same kind of faith Abraham had before he was circumcised.

We see that circumcision was a sign of faith, not a requirement for salvation. In Paul's letter to the church at Colossae, he clarifies even further how circumcision is to be understood as a Christian: "When you came to Christ, you were 'circumcised,' but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature" (Colossians 2:11). One commentator says it this way, "Paul believed that what God did in Messiah Jesus, namely, 'the circumcision of the Messiah' (Col. 2:11), had rendered physical circumcision inoperable and insignificant in the new age (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; Col 3:11)."⁴

Circumcision for the believer is to be understood as a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham that found greater meaning and fulfillment in Christ. It is a preference issue for parents today as they make decisions regarding their sons. It isn't a covenant requirement for Christians but can serve as a reminder of God's commitment to His people throughout history.

Notes

1. Warren Wiersbe, *Be Right (Romans): How to Be Right with God, Yourself, and Others* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), 52.
2. Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 238.
3. Merrill F. Unger, 238.
4. Michael F. Bird, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 147.