



## **LIVING A CIRCUMCISED LIFE**

What is your doing, saying? By which I mean: what you do, how you live, the things you spend your time on, the things you talk about, say a lot about your values, about the things that matter most to you. So, if people were to try and work out, from observation, what it is that makes you tick ... what conclusions would they come to? And where would your Christianity come in that?

As I said, what is your doing, saying?

That's what we're going to be thinking about as we come to a somewhat tearful chapter of the book of Joshua ...

### **Joshua 5:1-12**

"Fail to prepare, prepare to fail," Benjamin Franklin once said. But the way the Israelites prepare for the conquest of Canaan is a bit unusual – because most of Joshua 5:1-12 is about what? Circumcision.

God commands the Israelite men to circumcise themselves, as their parents had neglected to do so. And the procedure is so important it even gets a placename – Gilgal. *Gilgal* comes from the word for 'roll' (*galal*), because God has "rolled away the reproach of Egypt." It's also called *gib'at ha'aralot* or 'hill of the foreskins' (one heck of a postal address!).

But why does God tell them to do this? And why *now*? I mean, circumcision is uncomfortable enough for an 8-day old boy, but for a grown man it can

cause a fever that lasts up to 3 days and there's the risk of infection, too. All of this after they've just entered enemy territory? They're a bunch of sitting ducks! So, why take the risk? Partly, it's a test of faith. But there's something more, I think.

Several desert peoples practice male circumcision, mainly for reasons of hygiene (coz a grain of sand in the wrong place can cause, well, no end of problems). But there was a deeper meaning for the Israelites. Circumcision is called *b'rit-milah* in Hebrew, or 'the agreement of cutting', and it signifies that Jews have been set apart as God's chosen or holy people. However (and this is important), it's not the surgery itself that made them His people; it's the fact that God loved them and chose them. Circumcision was just a way of declaring that.

You can see it in the life of Abraham, the father of the Jews. Abraham had been God's servant and friend for many years when God said to him, "OK Abraham, here's what I want you to do ..." (at 99 years of age).

So, God tells Israel to do this, as a sign of who they *already* are. But what has this got to do with us? After all, the NT makes it clear circumcision is no longer a requirement, right? That's what Galatians 5:6 says. Even so, we serve a holy God, we're on a holy mission, and that requires us to be a holy people.

And like the Israelites, that holiness happens in 2 ways; on 2 levels:

**1) We are a job, done.** As far as God is concerned, you are holy. Hands up who's feeling holy today? Same here. Fortunately, it's not about what *you* feel – it's about what *God* feels. And God says you are holy – why? Because of what Jesus did for you on that cross 2000 years ago. The writer to the Hebrews puts it like this: "And by that will (as in the will of God), we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all" (Hebrews 10:10).

I.e. everything we are in God's sight is down to Jesus.

That's what makes us holy – that's what makes us saints. It's not about being canonized by the Pope or going through various rites of passage or saying the words of a prayer in the exact way that someone tells you to. It's all about faith in Jesus – not faith in what we've done for *Him*, but in what He's done for *us*. And remember: there's nothing you can do to lose it, because there's nothing you can do to earn it. Who's relieved to hear that? Amen!

But this holiness stuff doesn't end there.

**2) We are a work in progress.** We might be holy from an eternal perspective, but from an earthly perspective there's work to be done. So, the NT is full of commands to live in a way that honours Jesus, not by being circumcised as Jews understand it, because a bit of skin is not enough. God wants us to live our entire *lives* for Him.

The writer to the Hebrews says this, in 12:1: "Therefore ... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run

with perseverance the race marked out for us.” There are some people who think, “All Christians have to do is believe in Jesus, and they can live however they like.” The NT says the opposite: if we truly believe in Jesus, it’s got to make a difference: it’s got to show! God has circumcised our hearts, now He wants to circumcise our lives. He wants our lives to be consistent with the faith we profess.

Good news is: this isn’t something we do, armed with a flint and a steady hand. It’s something the Spirit does.

We just have to let Him – or pray that God will help us to.

### **Painful – But Fruitful**

Even so, you might be thinking, “If we’re already saved, why does obedience matter?” There’s a phrase that’s used in this passage: “I have rolled away the reproach (or disgrace) of Egypt.” What is this ‘reproach of Egypt’?

In Numbers 14, when the Israelites refused to enter Canaan, God threatened to wipe them out, except for Moses and his family. But Moses pleaded with God and said, “If you destroy this people, then the Egyptians will say, ‘Their God could get them out of Egypt, but He couldn’t get them into the Promised Land.’” That’s the ‘reproach of Egypt’ – that He couldn’t finish the job!

When the Israelites cross the Jordan and circumcise themselves, it’s their way of saying, “Oh yes He can!”

Similarly, if we want people to know that following Jesus can make a difference to their lives, guess what? They’ve got to see it make a difference, to *ours*. Mahatma Gandhi once put it like this: “I would gladly become a Christian today, if I could ever find a real one.” OK, so Gandhi had a flawed understanding of what Christianity is, but even so.

We need to talk the talk *and* walk the walk.

A final thought: look at Galatians 6:14-16. Yes, Jesus has made us new, but that might still entail us saying goodbye to:

- Habits – things that have enslaved us for years.
- Attitudes – responses to people and / or situations.
- Choices – decisions that do more harm than good.
- Influences – harmful and damaging relationships.

What needs to go, in us?