

# Circumcision of the Heart

A number of passages in both the **Law** and the **Prophets** speak of **circumcision** in terms that clearly do not describe **physical circumcision** and by default must refer to **spiritual circumcision**. The following passages are a summary of this vital Old Testament teaching.

Brit milah (breet mee-LAH) in Hebrew literally means "covenant of circumcision," (also known as a bris) and is the term used to describe the Jewish circumcision ceremony for an 8-day-old boy, marking the covenant between God and the Jews.

Today, Orthodox and Conservative Jews still require circumcision or hatafat dam brit [extracting a drop of blood], its ritual reenactment. The Reform movement has accepted converts without milah or mikveh since 1892, a decision based in part on the absence of biblical law and also upon minority positions in the Talmud that argued circumcision was not the sine qua non for conversion. While the Reform and Reconstructionist movements do not require milah or mikveh, an increasing number of rabbis affiliated with both do make it a condition for their conversion candidates. ([Description of the Ritual As Performed by Jews Today](#) or see also [Brit milah article](#) where it is interesting, but not surprising, that there is no explanation given for passages like Dt 10:16 and Dt 30:6!)

**C H Spurgeon** (in a comment on Col 2:11) writes "The Jew boasts that he is a circumcised man, but you have spiritually all that circumcision meant literally. Even though you have not wounded your flesh, you have more than that, for you have the death of the flesh and your very flesh has been buried with Christ. **All that circumcision can possibly mean you have in Christ**"

## Related Resource:

- See Discussion of Significance of Circumcision of the Heart in Old and New Testament

## Scriptures on Circumcision Especially "Spiritual" Circumcision

**Genesis 17:9** God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. 10 "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be **circumcised**. 11 "And you shall be **circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin**; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. 12 "And every male among you who is eight days old shall be **circumcised** throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. 13 "A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be **circumcised**; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. 14 "But an **uncircumcised male** who is not **circumcised** in the flesh of his foreskin, that person **shall be cut off** from his people; he has **broken My covenant**."

**Circumcision** (cutting away the male foreskin) was not entirely new in this period of history, but the special religious and theocratic significance then applied to it was entirely new, thus identifying the circumcised as belonging to the physical and ethnical lineage of Abraham (cf. Acts 7:8; Ro 4:11). Without divine revelation, the rite would not have had this distinctive significance, thus it remained a theocratic distinctive of Israel (cf. v13). There was a **health benefit**, since disease could be kept in the folds of the foreskin, so that removing it prevented that. Historically, Jewish women have had the lowest rate of cervical cancer. But the symbolism had to do with the need to cut away sin and be cleansed. It was the male organ which most clearly demonstrated the depth of depravity because it carried the seed that produced depraved sinners....This cleansing of the physical organ so as not to pass on disease... was a picture of the deep need for cleansing from depravity, which is most clearly revealed by procreation, as men produce sinners and only sinners. **Circumcision** points to the fact that cleansing is needed at the very core of a human being, a cleansing God offers to the faithful and penitent through the sacrifice of Christ to come. (MacArthur, J. J. [The MacArthur Study Bible](#). Nashville: Word Pub) (Bolding added)

**Circumcision** was God's appointed "sign of the covenant" (Ge 17:11), which signified Abraham's covenanted commitment to the Lord—that the Lord alone would be his God, whom he would trust and serve. It symbolized a self-maledictory oath (analogous to the oath to which God had submitted himself; see Ge 15:17): "If I am not

loyal in faith and obedience to the Lord, may the sword of the Lord cut off me and my offspring (Ge 17:14) as I have cut off my foreskin." Thus Abraham was to place himself under the rule of the Lord as his King, consecrating himself, his offspring and all he possessed to the service of the Lord. ([NIV Study Bible](#), [Zondervan](#))

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**Leviticus 26:40-42**-note 'If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me, and also in their acting with hostility against Me— 41 I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies—or if their **uncircumcised heart** becomes humbled ([kana](#); Lxx = entrepo = literally "turn back" or "turn about" and then to be ashamed as in Titus 2:8, cp Zechariah's description after they look upon Him Whom they have pierced - Zech 12:10-14-note) so that they then make amends for their iniquity, 42 **THEN** (Don't miss these critical **expressions of time** in your Bible reading!) I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land (cf [Abrahamic versus Mosaic](#); [Abrahamic vs Old vs New](#)).

**Comment:** Leviticus 26 deals with obedience (Lev 26:1-13) and disobedience (Lev 26:14-46, cp similar sections outlining first the blessings for obedience and then the cursings for disobedience = Dt 7:12-26, 28:1-68, 30:1-20) to the Old Covenant of the Law into which Israel had entered at Mt Sinai (Ex 24:3, 6,7, 8). In the last half of Leviticus 26 (Lev 26:14-46) God is reviewing their disobedience and explains that the root of their disobedience is their "hard" uncircumcised heart condition. In other words they were disobedient because they were not genuinely saved (like Abraham Ge 15:6). As an aside, while most of Israel in the OT was not genuinely saved, God always preserved a remnant of genuine believers in every age (see study on the doctrine of the [remnant](#)).

**Arnold Fruchtenbaum, a Jewish believer, alludes to the concept of remnant commenting that** God chose Israel to be an elect nation, not true of any other nation in this world. However, national election **does not guarantee the salvation of every individual member of that nation**. Individual salvation is based on individual election on God's part and **faith** on man's part. In Dt 10:16 (see below), individual members of the elect nation are encouraged to '**circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart**.' Whereas **circumcision of the flesh** is a sign of one's membership in the elect nation (**Ed**: Fruchtenbaum is not completely correct - This is unfortunately what physical circumcision came to mean, but originally that was not the meaning. It was originally intended to signify that an individual had entered the Abrahamic Covenant by grace through faith and was a mark that they were genuinely saved. The analogy is modern Baptism - water baptism does not save anyone, but does serve as a public testimony that one has been saved), **circumcision of the heart** is a sign of individual election. (Bolding added)

**Comment: If they confess....and their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled:** How can an uncircumcised (in essence an unregenerate heart) become humbled? No one seeks after God (Ro 3:11-note, Ps 14:2) so for a godless heart to truly become **humbled** strongly suggests it has been (or is in the process of being) transformed by God's Spirit (cf Spirit's work in Zech 12:10-note) and is thus behaving like a heart which is circumcised (see notes on Deut 30:6-note and Deut 30:11-note). In support of this premise Job 22:29 records "When you are cast down, you will speak with confidence, And **the humble person He will save**." They **confess** their sin in Lev 26:40-note, which is also an action of a heart that is moving toward God. David writes "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, **"I will confess** (same verb yadah as in Lev 26:40) **my transgressions to the LORD**"; And You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah." (Ps 32:5) Proverbs says "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses (same verb yadah as in Lev 26:40) and forsakes them will find compassion." (Pr 28:13-commentary) And in context what is the "compassion" the humble confessor experiences? God will remember His covenant (Lev 26:42). In Lev 26:45-note he reiterates **"I will remember for them the covenant...that I might be their God"** This phrase **"I will remember My covenant"** is used in Genesis when God promises never to destroy the earth by a flood (Ge 9:15). In Ezekiel 16:60-note God declares to unfaithful Israel "Nevertheless, **I will remember My covenant** (God has a perfect memory regarding His covenant! We see this same phrase in Gen 9:15; Jer 31:3) with you in the days of your youth, and **I will establish an everlasting covenant** ([see all uses of this phrase](#)) with you." (COMMENT: phrase and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you is a prophetic promise of the New Covenant described in Jeremiah 31:31-34-note and which will be finally and fully fulfilled to Israel and Judah at the return of the Messiah Who will then set up His [1000 year Messianic Kingdom](#); see also [New Covenant in the Old Testament](#); [Prophetic Promises of the New Covenant to Israel in the OT](#); [The Old Promise and the New Covenant - Jeremiah 31:31-34](#) by Walter Kaiser)

As **Matthew Henry** says "God is said **to remember the covenant** when He performs the promises of it, purely for His faithfulness' sake not because there is any thing in us to recommend us to his favor, but because he

will be as good as his word."

I would submit that these who were described initially as having uncircumcised hearts will be given circumcised hearts based on the Abrahamic Covenant (and the New Covenant)(see Deut 30:11-[note](#)). As I note in Lev 26:45-[note](#), the phrase "**that I might be their God**" is seen repeatedly in descriptions of those who God has brought into the covenant with Him.

So let's summarize Lev 26:40-42, 45 - Israel sins against God. God punishes Israel for her sins. Israel confesses her sins against God and humbles her heart (cf Zech 12:10-14-[note](#)). God remembers His everlasting covenant with Israel that He might be their God (When will this be fully fulfilled for the nation of Israel? In [the Last Days](#), the [Great Tribulation](#), the [Time of Jacob's Distress](#) [Jer 30:7], "[a time of distress](#)" [Da 12:1] "They will call on My name, And I will answer them; I will say, 'They are My people,' And they will say, 'The LORD is my God.'" see Zech 13:8-9-[commentary](#))

I agree with **Wenham** who writes "What this remembering (in Lev 26:45) will mean in practice is not spelled out here, but Deut 30:1-11-[note](#), **a similar passage in a similar context**, explains that it will mean restoration to the land of promise and prosperity there. **This would seem to be implicit in this Leviticus passage too**" (NICOT) (Bolding added)

If one looks at the three occurrences in the **Pentateuch** (Torah) where the state of one's heart is described as uncircumcised/circumcised, in fact there seems to be a progression:

Lev 26:41 I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies—or if their **uncircumcised heart** becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity, (**As discussed above an uncircumcised heart is not a penitent heart, which implies that God must circumcise their heart as described in Deuteronomy 30:6 which is in the context of God's Blessing and Cursing which parallels His blessing and cursing here in Leviticus 26**).

Dt 10:16 So **circumcise your heart**, and stiffen your neck no longer. (**Note God is commanding them to do something only He can do which He states He will do in Dt 30:6!**)

Dt 30:6-[see commentary](#) "Moreover **the LORD your God will circumcise your heart** and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

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**Deuteronomy 10:16** (Context is Dt 10:15 - Refers to the Abrahamic Covenant) "**Circumcise then your heart**, and stiffen your neck no more. 17 For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords (Rev 19:16-[note](#)), the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality, nor take a bribe."

**Comment: Physical circumcision** was originally intended by God to be a sign that one had entered into the Abrahamic covenant (Ge 17:9, 10). In other words, physical circumcision was an outward act which testified that the individual had experienced an inner "circumcision" of their heart. While God is calling on Israel to "circumcise" their hearts, clearly no human being can carry out such an act without supernatural intervention. As the new **ESV Study Bible** says that "Circumcision of the heart comes from renewal through the Spirit of Christ." God's charge is not just for Israel to "get a grip" and change their rebellious attitude toward Him! Our hearts are intractably deceitful and sick (Jer 17:9) and we are all by nature, hard hearted, stiff necked rebels toward God and His Word, **unless and until** He graciously brings about an individual's "heart circumcision" in response to that individual's **faith** - in other words, "spiritual circumcision" is by grace through faith, which sounds like salvation in the NT, because it is!

**Dave Guzik comments:** God command them to do something that only He could do in them to show them the need to have the inner transformation, and to compel them to seek Him for this inner work.

**Warren Wiersbe comments on Israel's misinterpretation of the rite of circumcision** Unfortunately, this same spiritual blindness is with us today, for many people believe that baptism, confirmation, church membership, or participation in the Lord's Supper automatically guarantees their salvation. As meaningful as those things are, the Christian's assurance and seal of salvation isn't a physical ceremony but a spiritual work of the Holy Spirit in the heart (Php 3:1-10; Col. 2:9, 10, 11, 12). Jewish circumcision removed but a small part of the flesh, but the Holy Spirit has put off the whole "body of the sins of the flesh" and made us new creatures in Christ (Col 2:11). (Be Equipped: Chariot Victor Pub)

**Physical circumcision** was important as the sign of the covenant (cf. Gen. 17:10 and Gen. 17:9), and was

intended as an outward act bearing eloquent witness to the cutting away of the hardness of sin from the heart of man (cf. Jer. 6:10; Ex. 6:12). ([Criswell, W A. Believer's Study Bible: New King James Version. 1991. Thomas Nelson](#))

**Bible Knowledge Commentary:** The proper response to their election by the sovereign Lord was to **circumcise their hearts** (cf. Dt 30:6). An **uncircumcised heart** means a will that is hardened against God's commands. It is another way of saying the person is stiff-necked or stubborn (cf. Dt 9:6KJV, Dt 9:13KJV; Dt 31:27KJV). Thus the command to **circumcise their hearts** assumes that human hearts are naturally rebellious and need correction. Though human hearts are slow to change, Moses warned the nation that no bribe or anything less than an inward transformation could satisfy the Lord, who is the great God. God's treatment of the helpless (the fatherless . . . the widow, and the alien) further illustrates His absolutely just character (showing no partiality) and highlights His requirement for Israel to be just. ([Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible knowledge commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books](#)) (Bolding added)

**Oesterley** - Circumcision in its symbolic meaning is found fairly frequently in the OT; an 'uncircumcised heart' is one from which disobedience to God has not been 'cut off' (see Leviticus 26:41 , Deuteronomy 10:16 ; Deuteronomy 30:6); the expression 'uncircumcised lips' ( Exodus 6:12 ; Exodus 6:30 ) would be equivalent to what is said of Moses, as one who 'spoke unadvisedly with his lips' ( Psalms 106:33 , cf. Isaiah 6:5 ); in Jeremiah 6:10 we have the expression 'their ear is uncircumcised' in reference to such as will not hearken to the word of the Lord. A like figurative use is found in the NT ( e.g. Colossians 2:11 ; Colossians 2:13 ). (Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible)

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**Deuteronomy 30:1-6** "So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has banished you (**Ed:** The prophecy described in the following passages will ultimately be fulfilled at the end of the [Time of Jacob's Distress](#) in Jeremiah 30:7, the 3.5 year period which Jesus referred to as the [Great Tribulation](#)), 2 and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, 3 then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. 4 "If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. 5 "The LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers. "Moreover the LORD your God will **circumcise your heart** and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. ([See in depth commentary on this verse](#))

(Deut 30:1-5 prophesies of) The gathering of Jews out of all the countries of the earth (that) will follow Israel's final redemption. Restoration to the Land will be in fulfillment of the promise of the covenant given to Abraham (see Ge 12:7; 13:15; 15:18, 19, 20, 21; 17:8) and so often reiterated by Moses and the prophets. (**Circumcision** of their heart is a) work of God in the innermost being of the individual is the true salvation that grants a new will to obey Him in place of the former spiritual insensitivity and stubbornness (cf. Jer. 4:4; 9:25; Ro 2:28, 29). This **new heart** will allow the Israelite to love the Lord wholeheartedly, and is the essential feature of the New Covenant. (MacArthur, J. J. [The MacArthur Study Bible](#). Nashville: Word Pub) (Bolding added)

The Church does not replace Israel and this promise has never been fulfilled in its entirety to the nation of Israel. ([What is replacement theology?](#)) ([What is replacement theology - supersessionism?](#)) **Circumcision** of the heart is an internal, spiritual work of God which results in true salvation and a "new heart" that provides a supernaturally enabled desire to obey God (see Ezekiel 36:26-27-[see commentary](#))

**Bible Knowledge Commentary** - The promise that the Lord your God will **circumcise your hearts** (cf. Dt 10:16) means that God will graciously grant the nation a new will to obey Him in place of their former spiritual insensitivity and stubbornness. After returning to the Promised Land with a new heart they will remain committed to the Lord and therefore will experience abundant blessing (live). Loving Him wholeheartedly (cf. Dt 30:16, 20; see Dt 6:5), they would not fall back into apostasy as they had done before. A new heart is an essential feature of the New Covenant (cf. Ezek. 36:24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32-[see notes](#)), which will not be fulfilled for Israel as a nation until the return of Jesus Christ (cf. Jer. 31:31, 32, 33, 34-note). ([Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible knowledge commentary](#)) (Bolding added)

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**Jeremiah 4:4** "**Circumcise** (command) **yourselves to the LORD** and **remove** (command) the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah

and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest My wrath go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds."

**Comment:** Here the meaning of **circumcision** is the idea of purifying, separating from the sinful tendency of the flesh, that propensity inherited from Adam in which the unregenerate seeks only to please self, never God. In other words, God desires that the **inward condition** match one's **outward profession**, which of course is not just an OT idea related to circumcision. God's intent has always been that the outward symbols (e.g., circumcision, baptism) should be signs of an inward reality of a new heart willing to and now able to obey Him. Mere outward conformity to the standards of the covenant does not please God

**MacArthur** comments that "This surgery (Ge 17:10, 11, 12, 13, 14) was to cut away flesh that could hold disease in its folds and could pass the disease on to wives. It was important for the preservation of God's people physically. But it was also a **symbol of the need for the heart to be cleansed from sin's deadly disease**. The really **essential surgery needed to happen on the inside**, where God calls for taking away fleshly things that keep the heart from being spiritually devoted to Him and from true faith in Him and His will. Jeremiah later expanded on this theme (Jeremiah 31:31, 32, 33, 34; cf. Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Ro 2:29). God selected the reproductive organ as the location of the symbol for man's need of cleansing for sin, because it is the instrument most indicative of his depravity, since by it he reproduces generations of sinners." ([The MacArthur Study Bible](#). Nashville: Word Pub) (Bolding added)

**Ellicott** - The words show that the prophet had grasped the meaning of the symbol which to so many Jews was merely an outward sign. He saw that the "foreskin of the heart" was the fleshly, unrenewed nature, the "flesh" as contrasted with the "spirit," the "old man" which St. Paul contrasts with the new (Romans 6:6; Romans 8:7).

**Matthew Henry** - An unhumbled heart is like ground untilled. It is ground which may be improved; it is our ground let out to us; but it is fallow; it is over-grown with thorns and weeds, the natural product of the corrupt heart. Let us entreat the Lord to create in us a clean heart, and to renew a right spirit within us; for except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven.

**Jeremiah 6:10** To whom shall I speak and give warning That they may hear? Behold, their ears are **closed** (UNCIRCUMCISED) And they cannot listen. Behold, the word of the LORD has become a reproach (Hebrew - [cherpah](#); Lxx = [oneidismos](#)) to them; They have no delight in it.

**Comment:** Their ears were "**uncircumcised**" because their hearts were **uncircumcised** (Jer 4:4)! The Word of the LORD a reproach! Incredible! The Hebrew word **reproach** means an object which has low status and dishonor (Ps 79:4)! **Reproach** in English describes censure mingled with contempt or derision and expresses rebuke or disapproval. As an aside on the cross Christ bore the shame of our sin. Followers of Jesus are called to bear the reproach of Christ and to suffer for His name (2 Cor 12:10; 1 Pe 4:14). **Scorn** in English describes open dislike and disrespect or derision often mixed with indignation. O, the rotten fruit of an uncircumcised heart and uncircumcised ears! **Dyer** observes that "This is the first of more than three dozen times in Jeremiah where the people did not listen to (i.e., they disobeyed) God's Word."!!!

**Huey** notes that "Rather, his words were offensive to them, and they found no pleasure in them. Such a reaction to God's word is typical when a person is in rebellion against God (cf. 1 Cor 2:14-[note](#)). The obedient heart receives God's word with pleasure (Jeremiah 15:16-[note](#))." (New American Commentary)

**Vance Havner** once said "Most Sunday church-goers are trying to eat spiritual food with only a natural appetite—"the word of the Lord is unto them a reproach; they have no delight in it" (Jeremiah 6:10). They go through the mechanics but miss the meaning."

**Jeremiah 9:25** "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "that I will punish all who are **circumcised** and yet **uncircumcised** (now he lists several examples of ancient nations that practiced circumcision and to Judah's dismay placed her right in the middle of the loathed Gentiles!--26 Egypt, and Judah, and Edom, and the sons of Ammon, and Moab, and all those inhabiting the desert who clip the hair on their temples; for all the nations are **uncircumcised**, and all the house of Israel are **uncircumcised of heart**."

**Comment:** Conformity to the external standard of circumcision must be accompanied by "circumcision" of the heart to please God. To see how one can "circumcise the heart" see the teaching by Paul in Romans 2 and Colossians 2 (below).

You would have thought (considering the "promise" of God), that the Jewish hearers would have sought to obey this command or at least to humble themselves and seek His face that He might reveal to them what this



metaphor meant. Tragically, as the Biblical record reveals, Judah refused to heed the divine (merciful) warnings and were utterly destroyed by Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar. (Read the sad words in 2Chr 36:15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21)

**Bible Knowledge Commentary** - If personal achievement or ability would not please God (Jer 9:23), neither would outward conformity to religious rituals. God would **punish** those **circumcised** only in the flesh whether they were near or far (Ed: near = Jew; far = Gentile). Judah's faith in her covenant sign (Ed: cp Ge 17:11) was a misplaced faith because people in some other nations also practiced this ritual-and they were not under God's covenant. Judah's actions exposed the fact that the nation was really **uncircumcised of heart** (cf. Jer 4:4).

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**Ezekiel 44:6** "And you shall say to the rebellious ones, to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Enough of all your abominations, O house of Israel, 7 when you brought in foreigners, **uncircumcised in heart** (refers to their need for spiritual circumcision, a new heart) and **uncircumcised in flesh**, (physical circumcision) to be in My sanctuary to profane it, even My house (the Temple in Jerusalem), when you offered My food, the fat and the blood; for they made My covenant void (The broke the Old Covenant of Law, the Mosaic Covenant)-- this in addition to all your abominations. 8 "And you have not kept charge of My holy things yourselves, but you have set foreigners to keep charge of My sanctuary." 9 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "No foreigner, **uncircumcised in heart** and **uncircumcised in flesh**, of all the foreigners who are among the sons of Israel, shall enter My sanctuary.

**Comment:** We see a similar thought in Zechariah 14:21 where Zechariah writes "Every cooking pot in Jerusalem and in Judah will be holy to the LORD of hosts; and all who sacrifice will come and take of them and boil in them. And there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the LORD of hosts in that day." (See commentary)

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**Romans 2:28-note** For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is **circumcision** that which is outward in the flesh. 29 But he is a Jew who is one **inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart by the Spirit**, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

**Comment:** Due to the passing down of teaching from one rabbi to another over the centuries ("traditions of men") the true meaning and requirement of **circumcision** had been lost. And so by the 1st century we find rabbinical "traditions" teaching such fallacies as:

*"No circumcised Jewish man will see hell" and "Circumcision saves us from hell."*

The **Midrash** says

*"God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised would be sent to hell. Abraham sits before the gate of hell and never allows any circumcised Israelite to enter."*

Here Paul Paul corrects this serious error in rabbinical interpretation and also explains the somewhat enigmatic OT passages alluding to "**circumcision of the heart**", clearly stating that it is a **spiritual circumcision** performed by the Holy Spirit at the time one receives the Messiah as Savior. It is salvation by grace through faith -- in the OT it was placing one's faith in a prophesied, promised Deliverer as one looked forward to the Cross of Messiah and in the NT it is looking back to Messiah's finished work of redemption at Calvary. Colossians 2:11 (below) also amplifies the **true meaning of the circumcision** that God has always desired.

And so in Romans 2:28, 29 Paul seeks to correct this "eternally fatal" flaw in the rabbi's misinterpretation - physical circumcision never saved anyone! Paul also helps us understand the somewhat enigmatic OT passages alluding to "**circumcision of the heart**". Based on Paul's teaching, we can see that the OT was clearly calling for a **spiritual circumcision** performed by the Holy Spirit at the time one received the Messiah as their Savior. In the Old Testament, this spiritual transaction transpired when one entered the Abrahamic Covenant by grace through faith. Similarly, in the New Testament the spiritual circumcision transpired when one entered the New Covenant by grace through faith. In other words, in the Old Testament, salvation (*circumcision of one's heart*) was achieved by placing one's faith in the prophesied Messiah, even as their "eyes of faith" looked forward toward the Cross of Messiah (at which time He "cut" the New Covenant). How much of the work of Christ on the Cross the Old Testament believers understood is uncertain. One thing is certain - they knew enough to be genuinely saved! And we in the NT (the "church age") with eyes of faith (Heb 11:1-note, 2Co 5:7) look back toward Messiah's finished work of redemption at Calvary (Jn 19:30-note).

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**Colossians 2:9** (see notes Colossians 2:9-10, 2:11-12) For (explains warning of Col 2:8-[note](#)) in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form, 10 and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; 11 and in Him (Note the allusion to covenant - when you entered covenant, you entered into union with Christ the Covenant - Isa 42:6) you were also **circumcised with a circumcision** made without hands (Thus clearly not a reference to physical circumcision), in the removal of the **body of the flesh** (the "old self" who was crucified in [Ro 6:6-note](#)) by the **circumcision of Christ**; 12 having been buried with Him in baptism (Ro 6:3,4-[note](#)), in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

**Circumcision** is a cutting away of something and therefore signifies a removal of that which has been cut away. In this verse Paul is clearly using the well known procedure of circumcision not to describe the physical act but ["without hands"] to describe spiritual circumcision. Here Paul uses the **circumcision** metaphor to explain the same spiritual transaction he discussed in Romans 6:1-11([notes](#)) which describes in detail of the events that occurred when we placed our faith in Christ. At that very moment we were "circumcised with a circumcision made without hands", we were "baptized into Christ" (Galatians 3:27 = identified with Christ) and we experienced a death, burial and resurrection by virtue of our very real spiritual union with Christ. (Col 2:11, 12, 13-notes)

Regarding the "**removal of the body of the flesh**" the Greek verb gives us the picture of taking off and putting away clothes. And so by analogy "the body of the flesh" is taken off like an old garment (by the Spirit at the time of salvation when Galatians 3:27 teaches we "clothed ourselves with Christ", we exchanged our filthy rags of righteousness for His garment of righteousness). At the moment of salvation, the "**body of the flesh**" was put off in the sense that it was **rendered inoperative** (Ro 6:6-note) and now can no longer reign like a cruel dictator over believers as it did when we were unregenerate.

The ruling power of this old sinful nature has been broken (Ro 6:7-note, Ro 6:12,13, 14-note , Ro 6:18-note, Ro 6:22- note). [Ro 6:11-note](#) summarizes this truth and is also a command calling for us to continually reckon ourselves dead to the power of - this call to continually reckon suggest that we are continually in need of remembering this truth for the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

Note that the evil nature is not eradicated, for we still sin, but the power of Sin (our old "dictator") has been broken, and as we yield to and are led by the Spirit of Christ (Ro 8:14- [note](#) Romans 8:14) we are enabled to walk in the power of the Spirit (Ro 8:4, 5, 6- notes 8:4, 8:5, 8:6) and "by the Spirit" to put "to death the deeds of the body" (note on Ro 8:13). "The flesh" now can exert no more power over a believer than he or she allows it to have. (See related discussion of Paul's command to "walk by the Spirit" in Gal 5:16-[note](#))

In short the distinguishing features of the **circumcision made without hands** are:

- (1) not external but internal and not made with hands,
- (2) It divests not of part of the flesh, but of the whole body of carnal affections (the power of sin has been rendered inoperative so now we truly can say "no") and
- (3) this circumcision is not of Moses nor of Abraham but of Christ.

**Ray Stedman** writes: "I will never forget an incident that occurred a number of years ago here at the church. A young man came to my office carrying a thick Bible under his arm, which he had been reading. Looking at me very earnestly, he said to me, "Would you circumcise me?" After I had picked myself up from the floor, I explained to him why, one, he did not need physical circumcision, and, two, what circumcision meant. I pointed out that it was an eloquent symbol when it was properly understood." ([Beware! Colossians 2:8-15](#))

**MacDonald** on "**circumcision made without hands**" - "This circumcision speaks of death to the fleshly nature. It is true **positionally** of every believer (the moment we receive Jesus as Lord and Savior), but should be followed by a practical mortifying of the sinful deeds of the flesh (Col 3:5-note). The apostle speaks of believers as the true circumcision (Phil. 3:3), in contrast to a party of Jewish legalists known as "the circumcision" (Gal. 2:12).([Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. Nashville: Thomas Nelson](#)) (Bolding added)

**Jonathan Edwards** on the external symbol and the spiritual reality - The change effected in regeneration, repentance, and conversion, is signified by baptism, as has been shown, and so is circumcision of the heart signified by the same thing. None will deny, that it was this internal circumcision, which of old was signified by external circumcision; nor will any deny, now under the New Testament, that inward and spiritual baptism, or the cleansing of the hearts, is signified by external washing or baptism But spiritual circumcision and spiritual baptism are the same thing; both being putting off the body of the sins of the flesh; as is very plain by Col. 2:11-13. "In whom also ye are circumcised, with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the

flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him," &c.

#### **David Jeremiah - What is the profit of circumcision?**

Lord, to You there is much in every way! So I circumcise myself to You, Lord, and take away the foreskin of my heart. If my uncircumcised heart is humbled, and I accept my guilt—then You, Lord God, will remember Your covenant with Jacob, and Your covenant with Isaac and Your covenant with Abraham You will remember.

Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for Your truth, Lord God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers. In Him I was circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ. I, being dead in my trespasses and the uncircumcision of my flesh, God has made alive together with Him, having forgiven me all trespasses.

I put off, concerning my former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and I am renewed in the spirit of my mind, and I put on the new man which You created, Lord God, in true righteousness and holiness.

## **OTHER RESOURCES ON CIRCUMCISION**

Gotquestions has several well done articles related to circumcision:

- [What does the Bible say about circumcision? What is the Christian view of circumcision?](#)
- [What is circumcision of the heart?](#)
- [Is baptism the New Covenant equivalent of circumcision?](#)
- [Is baptism necessary for salvation?](#)
- [What is the Catholic understanding of baptism?](#)
- [What is the symbolism of water baptism?](#)
- [What is the origin of baptism?](#)
- [Do Christians have to obey the Old Testament law?](#)
- [Why was God going to kill Moses in Exodus 4:24-26?](#)

#### **Fausset's Bible Dictionary**

The cutting off all round of the foreskin (the projecting skin in the male member, the emblem of corruption, Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4) of males, appointed by God as token of His covenant with Abraham and his seed (Genesis 17:10-14). The usage prevailed, according to Herodotus (2:104, section 36-37), among the Egyptians, Ethiopians, and Syrians. But his statement may refer only to the Egyptian priests, and those initiated in the mysteries. The Jews alone of the inhabitants of the Syrian region were circumcised. So, circumcision kept them distinct from uncircumcised Canaanite pagan around. If the rite existed before Abraham it was then first sanctioned as a token of God's covenant with Abraham and his seed, and particular directions given by God as to the time of its being performed, the eighth day, even though it were a sabbath (John 7:22-23), and the persons to be circumcised, every male, every slave, and (at the Exodus it was added) every male foreigner before he could partake of the Passover (Genesis 17:12-13; Exodus 12:48).

So, the rainbow existed before the flood, but in Genesis 9:13-17 first was made token of the covenant. The testimony of the Egyptian sculptures, mummies, and hieroglyphics, is very doubtful as to the pre-Abrahamic antiquity of circumcision. (See note Genesis 17, Speaker's Commentary.) The Hamite races of Palestine, akin to the Egyptians, as (Judges 14:3) the Philistines and Canaanites (the Hivites, Genesis 34), were certainly not circumcised. The Egyptian priests probably adopted the rite when Joseph was their governor and married to the daughter of the priest of On. The Israelites by the rite, which was associated with the idea of purity, were marked as a whole "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 7:6-7). In Jeremiah 9:25, "I will punish all them which are circumcised with the uncircumcised: Egypt, and Judah, and Edom," two classes seem distinguished: Israel circumcised in flesh, but uncircumcised in heart; and the Gentile nations uncircumcised both in flesh and heart.

Hyrchanus first compelled the Edomites to be circumcised (Josephus, Ant. 13:9, section 1; compare Ezekiel 31:18). Its significance is, the cutting the outside flesh of the organ of generation denotes corruption as inherent in us from birth, and transmitted by our parents, and symbolizes our severance from nature's



defilement to a state of consecrated fellowship with God. Jehovah consecrated the nation to Himself; and whatsoever male was not circumcised on the eighth day was liable to be "cut off." Moses had neglected to circumcise his son, owing to Zipporah's repugnance to it, as a rite not generally adopted in the East, even by the descendants of Abraham and Keturah, the Midianites. Therefore he was attacked by some sudden seizure in the resting place for the night, which he and his wife were divinely admonished arose from the neglect. She took a sharp stone or flint (compare margin Joshua 5:2; Joshua 5:8), the implement sanctioned by patriarchal usage as more sacred than metal (as was the Egyptian usage also in preparing mummies), and cut off her son's foreskin, and cast it at Moses' feet, saying, "a bloody husband art thou to me," i.e., by this blood of my child I have recovered thee as my husband, and sealed our union again (Exodus 4:25).

The name was given at circumcision, as at baptism (Luke 1:59; Luke 2:21). The painfulness of Old Testament initiatory rite, as compared with the New Testament sacrament of baptism, marks strongly the contrast between the stern covenant of the law and the loving gospel. Jesus' submission to it betokened His undertaking to fulfill the law in all its requirements, and to suffer its penalty incurred by us. "Oh wherefore bring ye here this holy Child? Such rite befits the sinful, not the clean; Why should this tender Infant undefiled Be thus espoused in blood, while we have been So gently into covenant beguiled? No keen edged knife our bleeding foreheads scored With the sharp cross of our betrothed Lord: But we belike in quiet wonder smiled. While on our brow the priest, with finger cold, Traced with the hallowed drops the saving sign; While Thou, unsparing of Thy tears, the old And sterner ritual on Thyself didst take: Meet opening for a life like Thine, Changing the blood to water for our sake." - Whytehead.

"Uncircumcised" is used of the lips (Exodus 6:12; Exodus 6:20), the ears (Jeremiah 4:4; Jeremiah 6:10), the heart (Leviticus 26:41; Deuteronomy 10:16; Acts 7:51), in the sense closed by the foreskin of inborn fleshliness; impure, rebellious (Deuteronomy 30:6; Isaiah 52:1). Even the fruit of the Canaanites' trees was called "uncircumcised," i.e. unclean (Leviticus 19:23). Christians "are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands in putting off the body (not merely the foreskins, as in literal circumcision) of the sins of the flesh (i.e. the whole old fleshly nature with its sins) by the circumcision of Christ" (Colossians 2:11; Romans 2:28-29).

The reason of the omission of circumcision in the wilderness (Joshua 5:5-6) was, while suffering the penalty of their unbelief the Israelites were practically dis-covenanted by God, and so were excluded from the sign of the covenant. "The reproach of Egypt" was the taunt of the Egyptians that God brought them into the wilderness to slay them (Numbers 14:13-16; Deuteronomy 9:23-28); which reproach lay on them so long as they were in danger of being "cut off" in the wilderness as uncircumcised, but was rolled off the younger generation by their circumcision at Gilgal. Paul warned Christians who regarded circumcision as still possessing spiritual virtue, that thereby they made themselves "debtors to do the whole law," and "Christ should profit them nothing" (Galatians 5:2-3; Galatians 5:12). He calls its practisers "the concision," in contrast to the true circumcision (Philippians 3:2-3), a mere flesh cutting.

So he resisted the demand that Titus should be circumcised; for, being a Greek, Titus did not fall under the rule of expediency that Jewish born Christians should be circumcised, as Timothy was (Acts 15; Acts 16:1; Acts 16:3; Galatians 2:3-5). Christianity did not interfere with Jewish usages, as social ordinances (no longer religiously significant) in the case of Jews, while the Jewish polity and temple stood. After their overthrow the Jewish usages necessarily ceased. To insist on them for Gentile converts would have been to make them essential to Christianity. To violate them in the case of Jews would have been inconsistent with the charity which in matters indifferent becomes all things to all men, that by all means it may win some (1 Corinthians 9:22; Romans 14). The Arabians circumcised in the 13th year, after Ishmael's example (Genesis 17:25). The Muslims and the Abyssinian Christians practice it still.

## OTHER DICTIONARY ARTICLES

- American Tract Society [Circumcision](#)
- Bridgeway Bible Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- Baker Evangelical Dictionary [Circumcision](#) - R K Harrison
- CARM Theological Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- Easton's Bible Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- Fausset Bible Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- Holman Bible Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible [Circumcision](#)

- Hastings' Dictionary of the NT [Circumcision](#) [Circumcision](#)
- Hawker's Poor Man's Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- Smith Bible Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- Webster Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- Watson's Theological Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- 1911 Encyclopedia Britannica [Circumcision](#)
- Condensed Biblical Cyclopedia [Covenant of Circumcision](#)
- International Standard Bible Encyclopedia [Circumcision](#)
- Kitto Biblical Cyclopedia [Circumcision](#)
- McClintock and Strong's Bible Encyclopedia [Circumcision](#)
- The Nuttall Encyclopedia [Circumcision](#)
- The Jewish Encyclopedia [Circumcision](#)

## TORREY'S TOPIC CIRCUMCISION

- Instituted by God Genesis 17:9,10
- Described Genesis 17:11 ; Exodus 4:25
- Enforced by the law Leviticus 12:3 ; John 7:22
- CALLED THE
  - Covenant of circumcision Acts 7:8
  - Circumcision in the flesh Ephesians 2:11
  - Concision Philippians 3:2
- A painful and bloody rite Exodus 4:26 ; Joshua 5:8
- Promises to Abraham previous to Romans 4:9,13
- A seal of the covenant Genesis 17:11 ; Romans 4:11
- Introductory Jewish ordinances Galatians 5:3
- Outward sign of Romans 2:28
- Inward grace Romans 2:29
- Necessary to enjoying the privileges of the Jewish State Exodus 12:48 ; Ezekiel 44:7
- WAS PERFORMED
  - On males home-born and bought Genesis 17:12,13
  - On the eighth day Genesis 17:12 ; Leviticus 12:3
  - Even on the sabbath day John 7:22,23
  - With knives of flint Exodus 4:25 ; Joshua 5:3
  - By the heads of families Genesis 17:23 ; Exodus 4:25
  - By persons in authority Joshua 5:3
  - In the presence of the family, &c Luke 1:58-61
- Accompanied with naming the child Genesis 21:3,4 ; Luke 1:59 ; 2:21
- First performed on Abraham and his family Genesis 17:24-27
- Not performed in the wilderness Joshua 5:5
- Performed by Joshua at Gilgal Joshua 5:2,7
- Punishment for neglecting Genesis 17:14 ; Exodus 4:24,26
- Without faith, vain Romans 3:30 ; Galatians 5:6
- Without obedience, vain Romans 2:25 ; 1 Corinthians 7:19
- THE JEWS
  - Denominated by Acts 10:45 ; Galatians 2:9
  - Held it unlawful to intermarry with those not of the Genesis 34:14 ; Judges 14:3
  - Held no intercourse with those not of the Acts 10:28 ; 11:3 ; Galatians 2:12
  - Despised as unclean those not of the 1 Samuel 14:6 ; 17:26 ; Matthew 15:26,27 ; Ephesians 2:11,15
- Sometimes performed on slain enemies 1 Samuel 18:25-27 ; 2 Samuel 3:14
- Abolished by the gospel Ephesians 2:11,15 ; Colossians 3:11
- Performed on Timothy as a matter of expediency because of the Jews Acts 16:3
- Necessity of, denied by Paul Galatians 2:3-5
- Necessity of, asserted by false teachers Acts 15:24 ; Galatians 6:12 ; Titus 1:10

- Trusting to, a denial of Christ Galatians 3:3,4 ; 5:3,4
- Paul denounced for opposing Acts 21:21
- Saints the true spiritual Philippians 3:3 ; Colossians 2:11
- ILLUSTRATIVE OF
  - Readiness to hear and obey Jeremiah 6:10
  - Purity of heart Deuteronomy 10:16 ; 30:6
  - Purity of speech Exodus 6:12

## STUDY OF HEBREW WORD FOR CIRCUMCISION

**Circumcised** (04135)(mul) to cut short, to cut off, to circumcise with most uses in the Torah (Pentateuch) with 17 uses in Genesis but 8 uses are found in Joshua (see below). Its usage is continued in rabbinic and modern Hebrew. However, the verb "to cut off" is not found in other Semitic languages. The only derivative of **mul** is **mûlôt** found in Ex. 4:26 "So He let him alone. At that time she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood"—because of the **circumcision**.' The physical act of circumcision was introduced by God as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant (see Ge 17:10ff [above](#))

**W E Vine** - The special act of circumcision was a sign of God's gracious promise. With the promise and covenantal relations, God expected that His people would joyously and willingly live up to His expectations, and thus demonstrate His rule on earth. To describe the "heart" attitude, several writers of Scripture use the verb "to circumcise." The "circumcision" of the flesh is a physical sign of commitment to God. Deuteronomy particularly is fond of the spiritual usage of the verb "to circumcise": "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer" (Deut. 10:16, niv; cf. Deut. 30:6). Jeremiah took over this usage: "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah...., because of the evil of your doings" (Jer. 4:4). Few occurrences of the verb differ from the physical and the spiritual usage of "to circumcise." Mûl in the Book of Psalms has the meaning of "to cut off, destroy": "All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off" (Psa. 118:10, niv; cf. vv. Psa. 118:11-12). The verb is translated as peritemnô in the Septuagint. The verb and the noun peritomê are used in both the physical and the spiritual sense. In addition to this, it also is a figure for baptism: "In him you were also circumcised,... not with a circumcision alone by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:11-12, niv). In the English versions, the verb is rendered "to circumcise," "to destroy" (kjv), as well as "to cut off" and "to wither" (rsv, nasb, niv). (Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament and New Testament Words)

**Gilbrant - Mûl** is a verb that means "to circumcise," "to cut off." Most frequently it speaks of male circumcision. In Gen. 17:10-27, God tells Abraham that male circumcision would be the sign of the eternal covenant that He would establish. All infants who were descendants of Abraham were to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth (17:12; cf. Lev. 12:3). Modern medicine has discovered that blood clotting agents do not take full effect until eight days after birth. God, of course, knew this all along. In obedience, Abraham circumcised his own son Isaac (Gen. 21:4). Under the Mosaic covenant, all males participating in the Passover were to be circumcised (Exo. 12:44, 48). Apparently, circumcision was not practiced by the Israelites during the wilderness years. Thus, as part of the covenant renewal under Joshua, all the males were circumcised (Josh. 5:2-8). In Gen. 34:15-24, Jacob's sons insist on the circumcision of the sons of Hamor and Shechem in order to make them vulnerable to attack. This was in retribution for the rape of Dinah, the daughter of Jacob. Male circumcision also became symbolic for the dedication of the hearts of God's people. Deuteronomy 10:16 indicates that those who love God over all others do not have stiff necks, but have circumcised hearts (cf. 30:6). Jeremiah bemoaned the uncircumcision of Israel's heart even though their bodies may have been circumcised (Jer. 9:25f; cf. 4:4). Both male circumcision and circumcision of the heart are themes that continue in the NT. Controversy in the early church arose over whether Gentiles were to be circumcised (cf. Acts 15). Paul established that circumcision, especially for the Gentiles, was not essential for Christianity. Like the prophecy of Jeremiah and the teaching of Deuteronomy, Paul emphasized the circumcision of the heart through repentance and faith (Rom. 4:9-12; Gal. 2:15-21). Mûl may also mean "to cut off." This meaning is clear in the Hiphil occurrence in Ps. 118:10, "I will cut off the nations" (cf. vv. 11f). This has no connection to male circumcision, but means "to cut to pieces," "to annihilate." (Complete Biblical Library Hebrew-English Dictionary)

**E B Smick** - The use of the verb in the OT begins in Genesis 17. Here the Lord confirms his covenant with Abraham recorded in Genesis 12:1-3. The practice of cutting off of the prepuce of the penis was a practice used even before the time of Abraham (Old Kingdom Egyptian tomb art and hieroglyphs (Egyptian Grammar, A. H. Gardiner, p. 448). It was probably used as it is to this day as a puberty rite marking the passage of a son to the privileges of manhood, a rite sometimes accompanied by licentious overtones. The operation was performed on a boy about thirteen years old. God revealed to Abraham that he was to use this shedding of blood as a sign of the covenant with Abraham. In the OT God ordered the child to be circumcised on the eighth day of his life, removing it

from a puberty rite to a sign with strictly religious significance. This infant circumcision seems to have been unique in antiquity. Moderns have proved the practice has hygienic value but there is no place in the OT where this point is made. Since the practice symbolized God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants, it is from the various aspects of this covenant that circumcision derives its spiritual significance. To those in the OT who took its meaning seriously, it was the mark of submission to the sovereign will of God. As so often happens with religious symbolism, the Hebrews eventually used this sign of a deep spiritual reality as an end in itself and wrongly made of it an automatic entry into the kingdom of God. The prophets became aware of this perversion and preached against mere circumcision of the flesh, that is, circumcision not accompanied by living faith. Jeremiah spoke of the circumcision of the heart. He said, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart, you men of Judah" (Jeremiah 4:4). But long before Jeremiah the people had been warned of this danger. Indeed, Jeremiah was quoting Deut. 10:16. The use of the verb in Deut. 30:6 proves the statement above, that circumcision symbolized the deepest spiritual reality of the Hebrew religion. The verse says, "The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." In Matthew 22:36-40 our Lord instructed the Pharisees that this was indeed the greatest commandment and the sum and substance of all the law and prophets. The verse in Deuteronomy clearly teaches that true circumcision was a work of God in the human heart—the spiritual life God creates in his people. This is precisely the teaching of the apostle Paul in Col. 2:11 where speaking of the full deity of Christ he says, "In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ." (Cf. also Romans 2:28-29 and Romans 4:9-12.) Because baptism and circumcision both symbolize the regenerative work of God which always included cleansing from sin and love for God, some segments of the church baptize their infants just as God instructed the OT saints to circumcise them. Others in church do not stress this analogy and so baptize only those who profess faith in Christ after reaching the age of discretion. (Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament)

**Mul** - 35x in 32v - circumcise(4), circumcised(25), circumcising(1), cut off(3), shafts(1), surely be circumcised(1).

Genesis 17:10 "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.

Genesis 17:11 "And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.

Genesis 17:12 "And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants.

Genesis 17:13 "A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

Genesis 17:14 "But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

Genesis 17:23 Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the servants who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him.

Genesis 17:24 Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

Genesis 17:25 And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

Genesis 17:26 In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son.

Genesis 17:27 All the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

Genesis 21:4 Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.

Genesis 34:15 "Only on this condition will we consent to you: if you will become like us, in that every male of you be circumcised,

Genesis 34:17 "But if you will not listen to us to be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and go."

Genesis 34:22 "Only on this condition will the men consent to us to live with us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised.

Genesis 34:24 All who went out of the gate of his city listened to Hamor and to his son Shechem, and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city.

Exodus 12:44 but every man's slave purchased with money, after you have circumcised him, then he may eat of it.

Exodus 12:48 "But if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it.

Leviticus 12:3 'On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

Deuteronomy 10:16 "So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.

Deuteronomy 30:6 "Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

Joshua 5:2 At that time the LORD said to Joshua, "Make for yourself flint knives and circumcise again the sons of Israel the second time."

Joshua 5:3 So Joshua made himself flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth.

Joshua 5:4 This is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the people who came out of Egypt who were males, all the men of war, died in the wilderness along the way after they came out of Egypt.

Joshua 5:5 For all the people who came out were circumcised, but all the people who were born in the wilderness along the way as they came out of Egypt had not been circumcised.

Joshua 5:7 Their children whom He raised up in their place, Joshua circumcised; for they were uncircumcised, because they had not circumcised them along the way.

Joshua 5:8 Now when they had finished circumcising all the nation, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed.

Psalms 58:7 Let them flow away like water that runs off; When he aims his arrows, let them be as headless shafts.

Psalms 118:10 All nations surrounded me; In the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off.

Psalms 118:11 They surrounded me, yes, they surrounded me; In the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off.

Psalms 118:12 They surrounded me like bees; They were extinguished as a fire of thorns; In the name of the LORD I will surely cut them off.

Jeremiah 4:4 "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD And remove the foreskins of your heart, Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Or else My wrath will go forth like fire And burn with none to quench it, Because of the evil of your deeds."

Jeremiah 9:25 "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised--

## STUDY OF GREEK WORD FOR CIRCUMCISION

**Circumcision** (4061) (**peritome** from **perí** = around + **témno** = cut off) refers literally to cutting and removal of the foreskin. As discussed below both the Old and New Testament also use the concept of circumcision in a figurative or metaphorical sense. (See also exposition of **Scriptures on Circumcision**)

Although **circumcision** was required by the Mosaic law, the rite was neglected during the days when the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness. Perhaps this was a sign that the nation had broken their covenant with God through their disobedience. The rite was resumed when they entered the land of Canaan, with Joshua performing the ritual on the generation born in the wilderness (Joshua 5). The Hebrew people came to take great pride in circumcision; in fact, it became a badge of their spiritual and national superiority. This practice fostered an exclusivist mentality instead of a missionary zeal to reach the Gentiles which was God's original intent for His "chosen" people.

A daily prayer of a strict Jewish male was to thank God that he was neither a woman, a Samaritan, nor a Gentile. Gentiles came to be regarded by the Jews as the "**uncircumcision**," a term of disrespect implying that non-Jewish peoples were outside the circle of God's love. As discussed below, God applied the very same term ("uncircumcised") to describe His "chosen" people. The terms "**circumcised**" and "**uncircumcised**" became emotionally charged symbols to Israel and their Gentile neighbors. This issue later brought discord into the fellowship of the New Testament church and especially caused confusion about how one obtained genuine salvation.

**Bartlett** comments on the Jewish misinterpretation of physical (and spiritual) circumcision writing that for the Jews...

Circumcision was commonly regarded as affording immunity from penalty. In these assumptions, the Jews overlooked two basic facts, namely, that **birth** is not **worth**, and that **rites** do not in themselves confer **rights**. And we must keep ever in view that it is **faith alone which saves**. **Forms** without truth are **plates** without food. They are **empty words** without meaning and value. ([Galatians 3:1-22 - Doctrinal Exposition](#)) (Bolding added)



The Jews should have known the true meaning of circumcision, for Moses and the prophets repeatedly used this very term **circumcised** as a symbol for **purity of heart** and **readiness to hear and obey**. For example, as discussed above, through Moses the Lord challenged the Israelites to "**Circumcise** then your heart, and stiffen your neck no more." (Dt 10:16). As discussed earlier, clearly Moses was not speaking of physical circumcision. Can't you hear the Jewish audience say (I am speculating here) "What in the world is Moses talking about? I can't cut my own heart. I wouldn't be able to live without a heart." Whatever their response to this truth, it was clearly spoken to "peak" their interest. Even in this same sentence, Moses gives a clue as to what he meant, for he associates an uncircumcised heart with one who stiffens their neck (clearly a metaphor that pictures a person who was stubborn and/or disobedient - the Hebrew words translated "stiff necked" are elsewhere rendered "stubborn" in the NAS - e.g., Dt 9:6, 13, 31:27, Neh 9:16, 17, see also same 2 Hebrew words in Jer 7:26, 17:23, 19:15). In other words, an uncircumcised heart reflected a will that was hardened toward God's commands.

**Nelson's Study Bible** has an interesting thought on **physical circumcision** noting that "Since the Canaanite worship system involved sexual excess, the distinctive sign on the body of the male Hebrew would be a significant reminder not to participate in the rituals of the Canaanites. ([Nelson Study Bible: NKJV. Nashville: Thomas Nelson](#))

In any event, the more significant meaning of **circumcision** was as a symbol of the need for the heart to be cleansed from sin's deadly disease. This "cutting" needed to happen internally, for God was calling for the removal of the "body of flesh", which was the predisposition to sin (inherited from Adam) and which kept man from being spiritually devoted to God. It seems that God selected the reproductive organ as the location of the symbol for man's need of cleansing for sin, because it is the instrument most indicative of his depravity, since by it he reproduces generations of sinners. In any event, physical circumcision was a sign of being under God's covenant with Abraham, a covenant that was entered into by faith, not by works. We find Abraham entering that unconditional covenant with Jehovah in (Ge 15:6) where Moses records that Abraham "**believed** (Hebrew = "aman" conveys basic root idea of firmness or certainty. Thus Abram in a sense "leaned his whole weight upon", he said in essence "Amen, Lord" or "so be it Lord") in the LORD and He **reckoned** [God imputed Christ's righteousness or placed it on Abraham's account] it to him as righteousness." (Ge 15:6-note)

In the midst of a series of warnings to Israel regarding punishment for disobedience to the LORD, Moses records a ray of hope in God's gracious promise that "If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me, and also in their acting with hostility against Me— I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies—or if their **uncircumcised heart** becomes humbled (conveys the basic sense of being lowly, meek) so that they then make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land (this is the same covenant Abraham entered into by faith not works). (Lev 26:40, 41, 42) The cause of Israel's rebellion was an "uncircumcised heart," a heart that had never been changed by the Lord and one which refused to bow (to be humbled) before Him.

**Moses** gave Israel a prophetic promise that "the LORD your God **will circumcise your heart** and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. (Dt 30:6)

What God's **law** demanded, God's **grace** would enable. This verse primarily refers to the future salvation of Jews alive at the return of Christ (cp Ro 11:26, 27-note), when by grace through faith their hearts will be spiritually circumcised. In the intervening centuries, God has partially fulfilled this promise, as there have always been physical Jews who by faith received God's promise of new life in Christ (the so called **remnant**). In the OT, these Jewish believers were looking forward to the Cross, whereas in the NT they (and all believers today) look back to the finished work of Christ on the Cross. Thus circumcision of heart defines an internal work by God and is another description of true salvation, a salvation that imparts to that individual a new will that now desires to obey God instead of to rebel against Him (Ezek 36:27). This promise of a **new heart** would allow the Israelites to love the Lord with all their heart and soul. This promise is most fully expressed in the New Covenant originally promised to Israel (see Jer 31:31, 32, 33, 34, Ezek 11:19, 36:26 discussed in the topic New Covenant in the Old Testament).

The **physical circumcision** God had called for was always meant to be an **external sign** of an **internal change of heart** resulting in a love for God.

In Romans 4:10, 11, 12, 13 **Paul** is explaining the figurative meaning of circumcision as the "cutting off" of Christ from the living via Crucifixion. Earlier in Romans Paul had made it clear that "he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is **circumcision** that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and **circumcision** is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. (Ro 2:28, 29-note). This internal "**circumcision**" is what Jesus was calling for in the Jewish leaders (who knew the letter of the law) when He declared "You blind Pharisee, first **clean** (katharizo - aorist imperative - commanded calling for an immediate, definitive response!) the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. (Mt 23:26)

The Jews boasted in the covenant sign of **circumcision**, but it was only in their flesh. The true spiritual circumcision God desired had never reached their hearts. In a similar way, people today who depend on baptism and some other church sacrament (ordinance), and yet who have never repented and trusted Christ, are in the same situation as the Jews in Jeremiah's day - they think they're a part of the divine covenant, but their confidence is false and they stand deceived and in imminent danger of entering into a Christ-less eternity.

In Acts **Stephen** infuriated his Jewish audience with the indictment that

You men who are stiff-necked (literally "hard necked" and thus obstinate, stubborn, rebellious) and **uncircumcised in heart and ears** are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. (Acts 7:51)

Their **uncircumcision** in heart and ears marks the Jews as just like the unsaved Gentiles (who were often referred to as the "uncircumcision"). Their sin had never been forgiven. They were as unclean before God as uncircumcised Gentiles and they therefore stood condemned before God.

A crisis erupted in the church at Antioch when some men

some men (Judaizers) came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are **circumcised** according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. (Acts 15:1)

The Judaizers insisted that a believer from a non-Jewish background (Gentile) must first become a Jew ceremonially (by being circumcised) before he could be admitted to the Christian brotherhood. A council of apostles and elders was convened in Jerusalem to resolve the issue (Acts 15:6-29). Among those attending were Paul, Barnabas, Simon Peter, and James, a leader of the Jerusalem church. To insist on circumcision for the Gentiles, Peter argued, would amount to a burdensome yoke (Acts 15:10,19). This was the decision handed down by the council, and the church broke away from the binding legalism of Judaism which demanded physical circumcision.

In summary, in Romans 4:12, Paul is saying that there is a difference between being Abraham's physical descendants and Abraham's spiritual children. Jesus had said the same thing to the Pharisees, "I know that you are Abraham's (physical) offspring" (Jn 8:37). But then He went on to say, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham (believe like Abraham did and become his spiritual children also)." (Jn 8:39).

In summary, in Romans 4, Paul insists that **physical circumcision** is not what counts (Ro 2:28, 29-note). There must be faith in the living God (Ro 4:3-note). Those of the circumcision (those who are physically Jews) who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ are the true **Israel of God** (Gal 6:16) ([Click analysis of the phrase Israel of God](#))