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M I N I S T R I E S

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How to Circumcise Your Heart

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses recounts the history of Israel's journey in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. One of the main points in his speech is to stress to Israel that they are to be humble and grateful.

Israel is not to say, "[It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land](#)" (Deuteronomy 9:4). Moses makes it clear that God is *not* giving them the Promised Land because of their righteousness. Israel is not to think that their blessings and inheritance are somehow the result of how awesome they've been at being religious. They definitely *haven't* been awesome. At all. They've actually been quite terrible.

Moses reminds Israel of the times they've provoked God by their rebellion. He reminds them of all the events surrounding the Golden Calf incident and what a disaster that was. All of this is setting them up for what he tells them next, which is pretty peculiar. Here is what he says:

Deuteronomy 10:12-16

[And now, Israel, what does the Lord \[YHWH\] your God require of you, but to fear the Lord \[YHWH\] your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord \[YHWH\] your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord \[YHWH\], which I am commanding you today for your good? Behold, to the Lord \[YHWH\] your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord \[YHWH\] set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.](#)

Moses tells Israel to "circumcise" their hearts, which is an interesting metaphor. It paints a dramatic picture of how we are instructed to remove the stubbornness from ourselves, which is necessary if we ever hope to truly fear God and walk in obedience.

This tells us that obedience ultimately comes down to a matter of the heart. Something about the heart needs to change in order to serve God fully.

The Hebrew word for heart is *lev* or sometimes *levav*; a word used in the Scriptures to refer to one's physical heart, like in 2 Kings 9:24.

2 Kings 9:24

And Jehu drew his bow with his full strength, and shot Joram between the shoulders, so that the arrow pierced his heart [*lev*], and he sank in his chariot.

However, in the minds of the biblical authors, the heart was much more than a physical organ that pumped blood. The ancient Hebrews, among other cultures at the time, actually thought of the heart—not the brain—as the source of your thinking and feeling.

Old Testament scholar, Dr. John Walton, says this:

In the ancient world, people had no knowledge of the physiology of the brain (and likewise no knowledge of the physiology of the kidney or liver). All of the functions that we associate with the brain, they tended to attach to the various entrails, the heart being most prominent among them because blood (the essence of life) obviously flowed through the heart, and a dead person's heart stopped beating. Thus, the heart is the center of intellect, emotions, will and belief.

-John Walton & Craig Keener, “NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture”

Hundreds of times in the Hebrew Scriptures, we see that the heart is connected with the intellectual activity we know today to take place in the brain. For instance...

- The Bible refers to the “intention of the thoughts of his heart” in reference to man’s wickedness (Genesis 6:5).
- Humans “know” with the heart (Deuteronomy 8:5)
- Humans “discern” with the heart (Proverbs 16:21)
- Humans “desire” with the heart (2 Samuel 7:3; Psalm 37:4)
- Abraham’s servant & Hannah spoke in their heart—that is, prayed to God silently in their mind (Genesis 24:45; 1 Samuel 1:13).
- The Bible speaks of Aaron feeling “glad in his heart” at the sight of Moses (Exodus 4:14).
- Hannah’s heart felt sad (1 Samuel 1:8).
- David’s heart felt glad (Psalm 4:7).
- Wisdom rests in the heart—that is, the heart is portrayed as the seat of the intellect (Proverbs 14:33).
- People are warned against going after their own heart—that is, the heart is portrayed as the seat of the human will (Numbers 15:38-40; Jeremiah 13:10)

So when Moses tells Israel to circumcise their heart, he’s basically saying that the very center of their intellect, emotions, and will must change. That is to say, the essence of who we are as people needs a transformation in order to be fully obedient to God. In other words, we need to become new creations.

This, of course, raises an important question: how on earth do you circumcise your heart? What’s interesting is that the apostle Paul struggled over this same question. If the heart is the center of one’s will and desires, Paul had a lot to say about the struggle within his heart between obeying God and

obeying his flesh:

Romans 7:14-19

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

So right here, Paul is saying that he struggles with his heart—his will and desires. His flesh—that is, his carnal nature—is inclined toward sin and against obedience to the Torah. And yet, he says that there is something else inside of him—in his inward being—that delights in God’s law and wants to walk in it:

Romans 7:21-25

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ [Yeshua Messiah] our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Again, we see this struggle of the will within Paul. He wants to be faithful to God’s ways, but in his flesh, he serves the law of sin. How do we overcome our carnal desire to sin? How do we circumcise our hearts—remove the stubbornness from ourselves—so that we can walk in obedience? According to Paul, we can’t. Not on our own anyway:

Romans 8:7-8

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; **indeed, it cannot**. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

So what’s the answer? How do we overcome the desire of our flesh to sin? Well, Paul goes into more detail in chapter 8 of Romans. But before we get there, let’s go back to Deuteronomy for a minute.

It’s interesting that in Deuteronomy 10, Moses tells Israel to circumcise their hearts. However, later in Deuteronomy, Moses gives a prophecy that God Himself will be the one to circumcise their hearts. This is what he says:

Deuteronomy 30:6

And the Lord [YHWH] your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord [YHWH] your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

This prophecy is given after Moses predicts that Israel will be exiled from the Promised Land due to their disobedience. He says that while Israel is in the midst of the nations where they have been scattered (30:1), when they return to the Lord and repent, then He will gather them back, restore their blessings, and circumcise their heart, enabling them to serve God fully.

Of course, we know that the first part of this prophecy came to pass. The northern kingdom of Israel was

exiled and taken into captivity in Assyria, and later the southern kingdom was taken into Babylon.

During the Babylonian exile, several prophets were raised up who spoke about Israel's eventual return to the land and what was expected to take place. For example, Jeremiah spoke of a time when YHWH would "bring them from the north country and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth" (Jeremiah 31:8). The entire chapter 31 of Jeremiah consists of God's promises to Israel—He will gather them, restore their fortunes, and rebuild their cities. In the midst of all these promises about their return from exile, Jeremiah says this:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord [YHWH], when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord [YHWH]. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord [YHWH]: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord [YHWH]. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

So Jeremiah echoes Moses' prophecy. Israel was taken into exile, just as Moses said. In the midst of their exile, Jeremiah assures them that God will gather them again. And just as Moses said that God would bring about a supernatural change in the hearts of His people—that is, He will circumcise their hearts—Jeremiah makes a similar statement. He says that God will write His Torah on their hearts.

The prophet Ezekiel likewise spoke about the regathering of the exiles back to the land. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel said that Jerusalem would be rebuilt and the people would dwell in peace and safety. Also like Jeremiah and Moses, Ezekiel prophesied that there would be a supernatural change in the hearts of God's people. They would be given a new heart, enabling them to fully serve the Lord:

Ezekiel 36:26-28

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Moses says that God will circumcise the hearts of His people. Jeremiah says that God will write His Torah on the hearts of His people. Ezekiel says that God will give His people a new heart—He will remove their stony heart and give them a soft heart of flesh. These metaphors are all saying the same thing: God plans to bring about a supernatural transformation of the human heart—our mind, emotions, and will—enabling us to fully walk in faithfulness and obedience.

You'll notice that these prophecies regarding a changed heart are wrapped up together with all these other prophecies about a New Covenant and a greater Exodus. You will also notice that the fulfillment of these prophecies, according to both Jeremiah and Ezekiel, is based on being forgiven and cleansed of sin.

This means that having a circumcised heart is connected to atonement. It's connected to receiving forgiveness for our sins. As Jeremiah says, “**For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more**” (Jeremiah 31:34).

Having a circumcised heart is also connected to the Holy Spirit: “**I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules**” (Ezekiel 36:27).

So when does all of this actually take place? Well, according to the New Testament, the apostles apparently believed that these prophecies had already begun to break through into our reality through the death and resurrection of the Messiah!

Colossians 2:11-14

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, **God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses**, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Through Messiah’s death and resurrection, we have been “circumcised” by dying and rising with Messiah into new life. We, who were once dead, in our “uncircumcision” have been made alive with our “circumcision” through faith in Messiah, having our sins forgiven.

Paul isn’t pulling all of these concepts out of nowhere. His teaching here is based on God’s promise to forgive our sins and to circumcise our hearts.

In Romans 2, Paul teaches that the Gentile believers have proven that their faith is authentic because they “**show that the work of the law is written on their hearts**,” which is the goal of the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah:

Romans 2:14-15

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

Again, Paul isn’t pulling this out of nowhere. The idea of the Torah being written on their hearts is taken straight from the prophecies declared by Jeremiah.

In addition to the passage we read earlier in Colossians, Paul speaks of the circumcision of the heart in Romans, too. He says circumcision of the heart is accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit, which goes back to the Ezekiel prophecy:

Romans 2:29

But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Now, many Christians have mistakenly taken this verse to mean that physical circumcision is no longer

expected of God's people and that God cares only about circumcision of the heart. However, as we've already established, circumcision has always been about the heart and not just the flesh.

Paul isn't teaching anything new; Moses himself emphasized the circumcision of the heart, as we've seen. And Moses clearly didn't think that inward circumcision of the heart negates outward circumcision of the flesh—just the opposite! Circumcision of the heart has always meant a heart that is willing and desires to be obedient by faith.

Paul's point here is simply that faith transforms us from the inside out, not the outside in. The Spirit gives us the desire to follow the Law of God, which would include God's command regarding physical circumcision. Without the inward transformation accomplished by God's Spirit, which empowers us obey God's law, physical circumcision is meaningless. It would be like getting physically baptized without having put one's faith in Messiah and experiencing the inward baptism. Here is how Paul puts it:

Romans 2:25

For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.

Again, the point of inward circumcision of the heart is to lead to obedience to God's law, not to negate or replace parts of God's law. For more information on this, see our two-part teaching, [Circumcision: The Eternal Sign](#).

But getting back to the main point, Paul's teachings in Romans and Colossians makes it appear like the apostolic interpretation of these prophecies in Ezekiel and Jeremiah is that they have somehow already been fulfilled in Messiah, at least in part. The reality of the these future promises has broken into our current time through the Messiah's atoning death and resurrection.

A greater exodus has begun to take place: We've all been exiled from God's presence due to our sin. But through Messiah, we have been forgiven and set free from our captivity and allowed to return to God's presence. Forgiveness is available for all who receive it by faith. And with forgiveness comes a new Spirit-empowered life, enabling us to walk in obedience.

Now let's get back to Romans 8. Remember, in the previous chapter, Paul recounts a struggle that we all can relate to. It's a heart struggle. It's a struggle between our desire to obey God and the desire of our flesh to serve the law of sin. What is Paul's answer to how do we overcome our stubborn will to sin?

Romans 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua].

So Paul's answer to the sin problem begins with understanding that we're no longer condemned. We've been forgiven. This goes back to Jeremiah 31:34, remember? The basis of the New Covenant: "**For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.**"

Paul continues:

Romans 8:2

For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua] from the law of sin and death.

Through Messiah, we have been set free from sin and death. We are no longer held captive by our sin, our stubborn will to disobey. We have been delivered.

Romans 8:3-4

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The Torah on its own does not have the power to transform the human heart. Only the Holy Spirit can change the heart. Through Yeshua's atoning death and resurrection, our hearts are changed—circumcised—in order that the righteous requirement of the Torah might be fulfilled in us when we walk according to the Spirit.

So it is in Messiah that our hearts are circumcised. Through Him, we are changed from the inside out. And it is by walking in the Spirit that we are able to overcome our stubborn will. This is a progressive sanctification—as we continue to follow Messiah and pursue holiness throughout our lives, our hearts will continue to change. God's Torah will become etched more deeply within the fabric of our being.

When Messiah's Kingdom comes in fullness at the end of the age, and when these prophecies that have been inaugurated by Messiah's death and resurrection reach their full completion, our hearts will be fully changed. Until then, we walk in accordance with the Spirit and trust that the One who began His work in us will bring it to completion:

Philippians 1:6

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ [Yeshua Messiah].

In conclusion, the Torah commands us to “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn” (Deuteronomy 10:16). It seems that the way we obey this commandment is to put our faith in the Messiah. Circumcising our heart begins by receiving God’s forgiveness afforded to us through the Messiah’s work on the cross—His death and resurrection. And from that basis, we walk in accordance with the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to overcome sin. This inward circumcision of the heart doesn’t negate God’s laws but transforms our will so that we desire to keep them.

God has given you everything you need. Receive His forgiveness today, allow Him to change your heart, and ask Him to empower you to overcome as you walk in accordance with His Spirit every day.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverthing.net

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