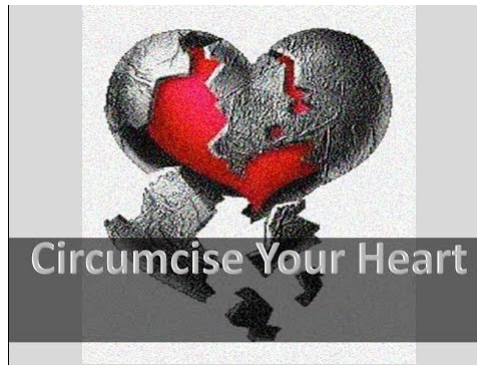


# Circumcision of the Heart



## EXTERNAL vs INTERNAL CIRCUMCISION

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**INTRODUCTION:** While God had indeed commanded **external circumcision** of the foreskin as a sign of entrance into the Abrahamic covenant, the deeper significance was that this physical act was intended to be a manifestation of the **obedience** that flowed from one's **faith** (see discussion of the relationship to faith and obedience [here](#) and [here](#)). In other words, the physical act of circumcision was to reflect one's belief in the **Abrahamic Covenant** and the "**Gospel**" that had been preached to Abraham. In Galatians 3:8+ Paul taught that "the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, **preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham**, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS SHALL BE BLESSED IN YOU." He later added "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed (singular). He does not say, "And to **seeds** (plural)," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your **seed** (singular)," that is, Christ." (Gal 3:16-[see note](#)) The reader should be aware of the fact that in the original Hebrew the word **descendants** (or seed) is more literally the word "**seed**" and each use in the following passages is in the **masculine singular** which would be compatible with Paul's explanation in **Galatians 3:16** that the reference was not to **seeds** plural but to **Seed** singular (masculine), specifically a reference to the **Messiah** (Study the following passages that speak of the "descendants" [the seed - **every** occurrence of descendants or seed is in the masculine singular] = Ge 12:7 13:15,16 15:5 17:7,8 21:12 22:17,18 26:3,4 28:13, 14 until the "Seed" culminates in Ge 49:10-[see comment](#)). Thus **belief** in the the promise which Jehovah gave to Abraham was tantamount to **belief** in the promised Seed, the coming **Messiah**. That belief resulted in an **internal circumcision of the believing person's spiritual heart** which was shown to be a true spiritual circumcision by their willingness to perform the **physical circumcision**. The latter (physical circumcision) was always intended to be a sign pointing to the former (spiritual circumcision)! Unfortunately, fallen men (all mankind Ro 5:12-note) seek to come to God their own way, via their works of presumed righteousness (which are really "filthy rags" Isa 64:6-[note](#), or [here](#)). The result was that many in the Jewish nation perverted the **sign of circumcision** (Ge 17:11) as a "work" which they taught merited salvation. In short, the sign in essence became the covenant instead of that which pointed to the covenant (see how one might misinterpret Ge 17:13 for example but to do so is to take it out of the **context** of the "whole counsel" of God's Word and a text out of context is a pretext [pretense]!).

As an aside there is surprisingly only one use of the actual word [circumcision](#) in the Old Testament, and it is found in a somewhat

enigmatic passage that refers to Moses failure to circumcise his son, which drew a harsh rebuke from his wife "So He let him alone. At that time she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood "-- because of the circumcision." (Exodus 4:26) **The Net Bible** has an interesting note - "The Hebrew simply has lammulot ("to the circumcision[s]"). The phrase explains that the saying was in reference to the act of circumcision. Some scholars speculate that there was a ritual prior to marriage from which this event and its meaning derived. But it appears rather that if there was some ancient ritual, it would have had to come from this event. The difficulty is that the son is circumcised, not Moses, making the comparative mythological view untenable. Moses had apparently not circumcised Eliezer. Since Moses was taking his family with him, God had to make sure the sign of the covenant was kept. It may be that here Moses sent them all back to Jethro 'Ex 18:2) because of the difficulties that lay ahead." (See [Why was God going to kill Moses in Exodus 4:24-26?](#))

**Romans 2:26-note For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27-note And will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? 28 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.**

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).

**Colossians 2:9 (see notes Colossians 2:9-10, 2:11-12) For 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 you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; 12 having been buried with Him in baptism, 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). 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.

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** - "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](#)) (Bolding added)

**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."**

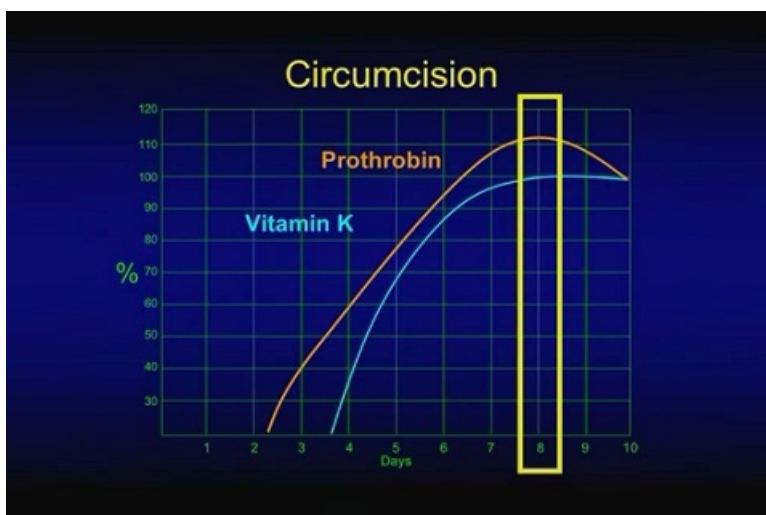


A [mohel](#) performing circumcision

**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. (Borrow [The MacArthur Study Bible](#)) (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](#))

Why circumcise on the eighth day? See the diagram below which shows that the clotting factors in a newborn are not fully developed until the 8th day. Therefore circumcision prior to that time could potentially result in uncontrollable bleeding (and even death from exsanguination). God invented the complex coagulation system of the human body and here He demonstrates the perfect inspiration of His word -- the 8th day and not before!



**Leviticus 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, 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.**

**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**). What does their **uncircumcised heart becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity** mean? First, it is a promise of hope, that not all is lost for the nation of Israel. An **uncircumcised heart** becoming **humbled** surely must be an allusion to the Jews receiving a new heart, for that is the only way a rebellious sinner would make amends for their iniquity. And if God remembers the unconditional Abrahamic covenant, the implication is that these Jews have entered into that covenant by grace through faith. He remembers the promises to the patriarchs and will fulfil the promises for those Jews who enter into the same covenant as the patriarchs, entering by the same faith Abraham demonstrated in Genesis 15:6.

**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, **circumcision of the heart** is a sign of individual election (**ED**: Strictly speaking a sign is something that can be seen, like physical circumcision of the foreskin, but the only way circumcision of the heart can be "seen" is by that individual bringing forth fruit in keeping with repentance, especially the fruit of obedience to Yahweh, out of love, not out of legalism, obedience made possible only as the Spirit empowers that individual to obey). (Bolding added)

**Deuteronomy 10:16-17+ "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+), the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality, nor take a bribe.**

**Context** - Deuteronomy 10:12-13+ "Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the LORD'S commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?"

**Comment** - God was calling them to carry out a spiritual transaction, spiritual surgery, if you will, on their heart (the center of their being), not a physical act of circumcision. He had just called them to a high standard in Dt 10:12-13+, a standard that could only be met by an individual with a circumcised heart, a heart that was supernaturally able to heed God's call. And remember God never calls for His people to carry out some act or behavior unless He gives them the ability to obey. God's Spirit was clearly active and for those individual Jews who would believe (like Abraham in Ge 15:6), the Spirit would carry out supernatural circumcision. We know this is true by comparing to Acts 7:51+ where Stephen declared to the first century Jews ""You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did." The key phrase is "just as your fathers did." To what is he referring? In context, clearly the first century Jews were (always) resisting the Holy Spirit, which is what the majority of their physical "fathers" did in the Old Testament. Just as the OT fathers resisted the convicting, "circumcising" ministry of the Holy Spirit, so to the NT Jews were doing the same thing. And why? Stephen says the heart of their problem was the problem of their heart - stiffnecked and uncircumcised. In Dt 30:6 below we see God promises to circumcise the hearts of the Jews in the last days.

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

**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:** 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)

**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. ([The Bible knowledge commentary](#)) (Bolding added)

**Deuteronomy 30:1-6+** "So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you (Ed: The prophecy described in the following passages will ultimately be fulfilled at the end of the "[time of Jacob's distress](#)" [Jer 30:7], the 3.5 year period which Jesus referred to as the Great Tribulation), 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, 2 and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart (Ed: Not legalistic obedience, but supernatural obedience motivated by love and desire to be pleasing to the Lord) 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 "And 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. 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, in order that you may live.

**Comment** - See more detailed comments. When will this circumcision of the heart come to pass? As alluded to above, the prophecy will be fulfilled at the end of the **Great Tribulation**, the [time of Jacob's distress](#), when God's Spirit will "pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn." (Zech 12:10+). At that time Zech 13:8+ says "'That two parts in it will be cut off and perish; But the third will be left in it." The third of Israel that is left in the land are those Jews who have received circumcised hearts fulfilling Dt 30:6 and they will enter into the Messianic Kingdom as "born again" Jews, true Jews as Paul says in Rom 2:29+.

(Deut 30:1-5 prophesies) 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. (Borrow [The MacArthur Study Bible](#)) (Bolding added)

**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 ED: cf Dt 10:12-13+), 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. 36:24-32-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). ([The Bible knowledge commentary](#)) (Bolding added)

**Jeremiah 4:4 "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD and remove 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** - Notice **circumcise** is a command. God's commandments always include His enablements! 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 but is true in the NT of all who genuinely believe in Jesus and are truly born again. 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

**John MacArthur** writes - 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 31:31-34+; cf. Dt. 10:16; Dt 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. (Borrow [The MacArthur Study Bible](#)) (Bolding added)

**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."**

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).

**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). (See [The Bible Knowledge Commentary](#))

**Ezekiel 44:6-9 (context Ezek 44:4-5 - "the glory of the LORD filled the" Temple) "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 (lacking spiritual circumcision, not regenerate, lacking 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 (speaking of the Old Covenant, 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:** **Foreigners** refers to Gentiles and not only were they uncircumcised in flesh (physically), they were also uncircumcised in their heart (spiritually). In short they were not regenerate individuals. Apparently at some time in the past Jews had brought Gentiles into the Holy Temple which was against the Mosaic law (**they made My covenant void**) and the result was that the Temple had been profaned by their presence.

**John MacArthur** - Since the Lord's glory fills the temple, it is sanctified (Ezek 44:4), and God is particular about what kind of people worship there. Sins of the past, as in Ezekiel 8:1-11:25, must not be repeated and if they are, will exclude their perpetrators from the temple. **Only the circumcised in heart may enter** (Dt 30:6; Jer 4:4; Ro 2:25-29), whether of Israel or another nation (Ezek 44:7, 9). Many other peoples than Jews will go into the kingdom in unresurrected bodies, because they have believed in Jesus Christ and were ready for His coming. They will escape His deadly judgment and populate and reproduce in the 1,000 year kingdom (**Ed**: The Judgment of the Sheep and Goats identifies Gentile believers who will enter into the [Millennial Kingdom](#); see ["Who populates the Millennial Kingdom?"](#)). Such **circumcision** pertains to a heart which is sincere about removing sin and being devoted to the Lord (cf. Jer 29:13). In the Millennium, a Jew with an uncircumcised heart will be considered a foreigner (Ezek 44:9). "**Uncircumcised in flesh**" refers to sinners and "foreigners" identifies rejecters of the true God. (Borrow [The MacArthur Study Bible](#))

**Acts 7:51+ "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.**

See in depth commentary on this passage.

**STIFF-NECKED** (Ex 32:9 33:3,5 34:9 Dt 9:6,13 31:27, 2Chr 30:8, Neh 9:16, Ps 78:8, Isa 48:4 Jer 17:23)

Stephen, the accused, is now the accuser, and the situation becomes intolerable to the Sanhedrin.

**Furneaux:** "And as he saw his countrymen repeating the old mistake--clinging to the present and the material, while God was calling them to higher spiritual levels--and still, as ever, resisting the Holy Spirit, treating the Messiah as the patriarchs had treated Joseph, and the Hebrews Moses--the pity of it overwhelmed him, and his mingled grief and indignation broke out in words of fire, such as burned of old on the lips of the prophets"

**Stiff-necked** (4644) (**Sklerotrachelos** from **skleros** + **trachelos** = the neck) is found only in Acts 7:51 (but see 6 uses in Lxx below) and is literally stiff-necked which is figuratively describes someone as obstinate, which in turn is defined as one who manifests a fixed and unyielding course or purpose implying usually an unreasonable persistence. This is one who is perversely adhering to an opinion, purpose, or course in spite of reason, arguments, or persuasion. Stephen is saying in essence that the Jews would not allow themselves to be persuaded by the Truth of the Gospel, which had been proclaimed throughout the Old Testament (see Gal 3:8) and was the proclamation the Holy Spirit would have used to circumcise their hearts if they had received it in faith instead of pursuing their own righteousness by works of the law (rather than by grace).

Sklerotrachelos portrays the idea of a stubborn ox that cannot be broken; and a neck so strong the animal is useless, because it cannot be turned right or left.

**Sklerotrachelos** - 5 verses in the Septuagint.

Exodus 33:3 "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an **obstinate** (Lxx = sklerotrachelos) people, and I might destroy you on the way." 5 For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the sons of Israel, 'You are an **obstinate** (Lxx = sklerotrachelos) people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now therefore, put off your ornaments from you, that I may know what I shall do with you.'"

Exodus 34:9 He said, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so **obstinate**, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your own possession."

Deuteronomy 9:6 "Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a **stubborn** people....13 "The LORD spoke further to me, saying, 'I have seen this people, and indeed, it is a



**stubborn** people.

Proverbs 29:1 A man who **hardens his neck** after much reproof Will suddenly be broken beyond remedy.

**Sklerotrachelos** is first in the Greek sentence for emphasis. In Acts 7:1-60 This is the climax of Stephen's speech (Acts 7:51-53), the personal application that cut his hearers to the heart. Throughout the centuries, Israel had refused to submit to God and obey the truth He had revealed to them (including the Gospel, albeit as far as we can determine not as in a full-orbed sense as we have it explained in the New Testament). Their ears did not hear the truth, their hearts did not receive the truth, and their necks did not bow to the truth. As a result, they killed their own Messiah and then proceeded to kill Stephen.

**UNCIRCUMCISED IN HEART** - They had only physical circumcision which was useless in regard to attaining righteousness before God. The Jews placed great stress on the physical ritual of circumcision, forgetting that it was meant to be symbolic of their complete dedication to the will and purposes of God. Thus, their hearts were still cold toward God and their ears inattentive to His Word, so that God could not reach them

**HEART AND EARS** - "The phrase "uncircumcised hearts and ears" is another figure for stubbornness." (NET Note)

**Uncircumcised** (564) (**aperitmetos** from **a** = negates + **peritemno** = to cut around, to circumcise) is an adjective which literally describes that which is not cut around. In context it is used figuratively of those uncircumcised in heart and ears a spiritual condition which resulted in their stubbornness toward God and His Messiah. In Jeremiah 9:25 the Lxx uses **aperitmetos** figuratively to refer to gentiles with uncircumcised foreskin.

**ARE ALWAYS RESISTING THE HOLY SPIRIT** (Ne 9:30):

Isaiah writes "But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; Therefore, He (Jehovah) turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them." (Isaiah 63:10)

**Resisting** is literally rushing against or upon in a hostile manner.

**John Phillips** explains that "There are three ways in which the Holy Spirit can be opposed. He can be grieved, He can be quenched, and He can be resisted. Only a Spirit-indwelt believer can grieve the Holy Spirit. The word grieve is a love-word. We can grieve only someone who loves us and who stands in a special relationship to us. A church can quench the Holy Spirit by allowing men to usurp His authority, by refusing to follow His leading, or by permitting false doctrine or moral evil to take root. Sinners resist the Holy Spirit. Stephen now dropped his defense and went boldly to the attack, vilifying his listeners for their persistent and continuing opposition to God. Their chief sin was that of resisting the Holy Spirit. Their treatment of the saviors, the Scriptures, and the sanctuaries God had given them, and, above all, their treatment of the Son of God, constituted a persistent sin against the Holy Ghost." (Explore Acts)

**Resisting** (496) (**antipipto** from **antí** = against + **pípto** = fall) strictly, fall against, rush against; hence, strive against, oppose: resist by actively opposing pressure or power. To resist by force and violence. The picture is of men who were continually (**present tense**) rejecting the Holy Spirit's appointed messengers and their Gospel proclamation. (Compare Jesus' sermon in Mt 23:13-39).

**Griffis** writes that "The Greek word here is **antipipto**, which means "to pull against," like a heifer that pulls backward." (Characters with Character)

**Antipipto** 3v in Lxx:

Exodus 26:5 "You shall make fifty loops in the one curtain, and you shall make fifty loops on the edge of the curtain that is in the second set; the loops shall be **opposite** each other.... 17 "There shall be two tenons for each board, **fitted** (**Antipipto** - conveys idea opposite one to the other) to one another; thus you shall do for all the boards of the tabernacle.

Numbers 27:14 for (What is "for" explaining? See context - Nu 27:12-13 - explains why Moses can only see the Promised Land but cannot enter) in the wilderness of Zin, during the strife of the congregation, you (Moses) rebelled (Lxx = **Marah** = was contentious, disobedient; Lxx = **antipipto**) against My command to treat Me as holy before their eyes at the water." (These are the waters of Meribah of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.)

The English translation of the Septuagint of Nu 27:14 = because you transgressed my word in the wilderness of Sin, when the congregation **resisted** to sanctify me. You did not sanctify me at the water before them." (This is water of dispute of Kades in the wilderness of Sin.)

**Net Note** explains it this way - Using the basic meaning of the word **qadash**, "to be separate, distinct, set apart", we can understand better what Moses failed to do. He was supposed to have acted in a way that would have shown God to be distinct, different, holy. Instead, he gave the impression that God was capricious and hostile – very human. The leader has to be aware of what image he is conveying to the people.

**YOU ARE DOING JUST AS YOUR FATHERS DID** (cp Heb 3:12, 8, 4:2, cp Jesus Mt 23:31): Literally "as your fathers also ye." Their fathers had made "external worship" a substitute for spiritual obedience (i.e., obedience enabled by the Holy Spirit). Stephen's piercing denunciation of his Jewish audience reminds us of similar words of Jesus in Luke 11:47-51.

## CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT

**Note** - the following notes are from comments on Joshua 22 and duplicate some of the preceding discussion.

### Passages on Spiritual Circumcision:

Leviticus 26:41+ I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies—or if their **uncircumcised** (Heb = [arel](#) = having foreskin) **heart** becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity,

Deuteronomy 10:16+ “So **circumcise** (Heb - [mul](#)) **your heart**, and stiffen your neck no longer. (ESV = "circumcise the foreskin of your heart")

Deuteronomy 30:6+ “Moreover the LORD your God will **circumcise** (Heb - [mul](#)) **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.

Jeremiah 4:4 “**Circumcise** (Heb - [mul](#)) **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 6:10 To whom shall I speak and give warning That they may hear? Behold, their ears are **closed** (Heb - [arel](#) = having foreskin = uncircumcised) And they cannot listen. Behold, the word of the LORD has become a reproach to them; They have no delight in it.

Jeremiah 9:25-26 Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “that I will punish all who are circumcised (Heb - [mul](#)) and yet **uncircumcised** (Hebrew = orlah = foreskin)—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.**”

Acts 7:51+ “You men who are stiff-necked and **uncircumcised in heart** and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.

Romans 2:28-29+ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 29But 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.

Colossians 2:11+ and in Him **you were also circumcised** with a **circumcision made without hands**, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; 12 having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

One other point to make is to notice the repetition of the phrase **all your heart** in the context of the frequent call for obedience...

Deuteronomy 4:29+ “But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him **with all your heart** and all your soul.

Deuteronomy 6:5+ “You shall love the LORD your God **with all your heart** and with all your soul and with all your might.

Deuteronomy 10:12+ “Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God **with all your heart** and with all your soul,

Deuteronomy 11:13+ “It shall come about, if you listen obediently to my commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the LORD your God and to serve Him **with all your heart** and all your soul,

Deuteronomy 13:3+ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God **with all your heart** and with all your soul.

Deuteronomy 26:16+ "This day the LORD your God commands you to do these statutes and ordinances. You shall therefore be careful to do them **with all your heart** and with all your soul.

Deuteronomy 30:2+ 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,

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.

Deuteronomy 30:10+ if you obey the LORD your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the LORD your God **with all your heart** and soul.

Joshua 22:5+ "Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God and walk in all His ways and keep His commandments and hold fast to Him and serve Him **with all your heart** and with all your soul."

Joshua 23:14+ "Now behold, today I am going the way of all the earth, and you know in **all your hearts** and in all your souls that not one word of all the good words which the LORD your God spoke concerning you has failed; all have been fulfilled for you, not one of them has failed.

1 Samuel 7:3 (Read this entire chapter 1Sa 7:1-17 for the context) Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, "If you return to the LORD **with all your heart**, remove the foreign gods and the Ashteroth from among you and **direct your hearts** to the LORD and serve Him alone; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines."

1 Samuel 12:20 Samuel said to the people, "Do not fear. You have committed all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD **with all your heart**."

Jeremiah 29:13 You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me **with all your heart**.

Joel 2:12+ "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "Return to Me **with all your heart**, And with fasting, weeping and mourning;

Zephaniah 3:14 Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel! Rejoice and exult **with all your heart**, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Matthew 22:37 And He said to him, " 'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD **WITH ALL YOUR HEART**, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' "

Mark 12:30+ AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD **WITH ALL YOUR HEART**, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.'

Luke 10:27+ And he answered, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD **WITH ALL YOUR HEART**, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

The question arises "**How is wholehearted obedience humanly possible?**" My contention is that it is **not** humanly possible, that is possible by the natural man, for as Paul explained in Colossians we were **ALL** "formerly (BEFORE THE COLOSSIANS' HEARTS WERE "CIRCUMCISED" - Col 2:11+) **alienated** and **hostile** in mind, engaged in evil deeds," (Col 1:21+) and we were God's enemies (Ro 5:10+, cf Ro 8:7-8+). Therefore it is clear that the only way Israelites could truly love God **with all their heart and soul** was if they had a "new heart," which in OT terms would be a "circumcised heart." Ezekiel 36:25-27+ helps understand the "circumcised heart"...

Then (THIS IS A PROMISE TO ISRAEL IN THE FUTURE - IT IS IN ESSENCE A DESCRIPTION OF **THE NEW COVENANT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**) I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 "Moreover, **I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you**; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, **AND** you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

In Ezekiel 36:27 note that the first clause describes God's sovereign, gracious provision to sinful men and women and the second clause describes man's responsibility to obey. In short, God gives us a new heart and His Holy Spirit and the Spirit empowers us to have (1) the desire to obey (our old nature does not have that desire) and (2) the power to obey, as Paul describes in Php 2:13NLT+. It is important to note that this passage in Ezekiel does not support the false teaching of "*Let go, let God,*" but does support the more accurate phrase "*Let God, let's go!*" His part, our part. God's sovereign provision, our human responsibility. See the

related discussion on the "[Paradoxical Principle of 100% Dependent and 100% Responsible](#)".

Notice the the **stringent requirements** of God in Deuteronomy 10:12-13+. And then 3 verses later in Dt 10:16+ there is a "clue" as to how it is possible to fulfill the **stringent requirements**, for in that verse Moses tells Israel to "**circumcise** (Hebrew verb is [Perfect tense](#) - "denoting completed [or "perfected"] action" - which would imply a permanent change) **your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.**" The **NET Note** says the Hebrew literally reads "**circumcise the foreskin of**" (and adds that) "Reference to the Abrahamic covenant prompts Moses to recall the sign of that covenant, namely, physical circumcision (Ge 17:9–14). Just as that act signified total covenant obedience, so **spiritual circumcision** (cleansing of the heart) signifies more **internally a commitment to be pliable and obedient to the will of God** (cf. Dt 30:6+; Jer 4:4; Jer 9:26)."

The Holy Spirit is omnipresent in space and time (Ge 1:2), and He is the member of the Trinity who is convicting men and constraining them. Somehow, some men are moved by Him to begin then to seek God for themselves, and God "is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6+, cf Jer 29:13). The Gentile Cornelius was evidently one such man, so God then led Peter to go to Cornelius to instruct Him concerning Christ (Acts 10:1-2+).

Notice that in Jeremiah 4:4 the prophet issues two commands calling for his hearers (Jews in Judah about to be taken into captivity in Babylon) to experience **spiritual circumcision** calling on them...

**Circumcise** (Heb = [mul](#); Lxx = [peritemno](#)) 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 4:4)

**Note** - **Circumcise** in the Lxx is a command in the [aorist imperative](#) ("Just do it!") which can only be carried out by [depending on the Holy Spirit to obey!](#) (cf Ro 2:29+). It is also in the passive voice, in this context clearly a "divine passive" (the Spirit of course being the effecting Agent.) The second command to **remove** (also [aorist imperative](#)) **the foreskins of your heart** is translated in the Lxx with [peritemno](#) and sklerokardia (skleros = hard + kardia = heart) which reads "**circumcise** the hardness of your hearts." Human beings cannot carry out this "internal circumcision" without the enabling power of the Holy Spirit! Clearly, Jeremiah is calling for spiritual circumcision just as Moses was calling for the second generation of Israelites to circumcise their hearts in Dt 10:16+

And so in calling for **circumcision of their hearts**, Moses and Jeremiah are not speaking of a human (natural) work, as with external circumcision, but a supernatural work of internal heart circumcision, a work made possible and carried out only by the Holy Spirit of God, not by the will of man. This would be the OT equivalent of being "born again" in the New Covenant and receiving a new heart (cf Ezekiel 36:26-27+, Jer 31:31-34+). It follows that when Abram believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness in Genesis 15:6+, the Spirit of God in effect "*circumcised*" Abram's heart.

As we look at Israel's behavior toward God beginning with the unbelief and disobedience of the majority of the nation at Kadesh-Barnea, it seems that many, if not most, of the Israelites in the Old Testament failed to believe in the manner of their physical father Abraham, and thus they failed to have a "circumcised heart," and were not even able to obey God's commandments from an internal motivation and energization. Any obedience that many of the Israelites did show to God had to be external obedience, energized by their flesh and not by the Holy Spirit. Caleb, Joshua, Moses, Aaron and doubtless others not named would of course be exceptions.

Stephen's sermon in Acts 7 would support this idea of "heart circumcision" as an absolute necessity to enable a person to truly obey God with **all one's heart and all one's soul** as in Dt 10:12. In his message to the Jews who were opposing his ministry (Acts 6:8-15+), he boldly (remember he was Spirit filled/empowered Acts 6:3, 5, 8+) declared "You men who are **stiff-necked** and **uncircumcised in heart** and ears are always (NOT JUST "SOMETIMES") resisting (present tense = continuous attitude/action) the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did (see COMMENT below)." (Acts 7:51+) The Greek word for **stiff-necked** is [sklerotrachelos](#) ([skleros](#) = hard + [trachelos](#) = the neck).

**COMMENT** - Read 2 Ki 17:7-20 which explains why God sent the fathers into exile. Israel stiffened their neck and would not listen to Yahweh, they rejected His statutes and His covenant and forsook all His commandments! A stiffened neck is a manifestation of an uncircumcised heart, which was the tragic condition of most of Israel, but God always preserved a remnant of Israel who had circumcised hearts (cf 2 Ki 19:18)

In the Septuagint Translation of Dt 10:16+ we find two similar Greek words, [sklerokardia](#) ([skleros](#) = hard + [kardia](#) = the heart) which translates as "the foreskin of your heart" and [skleruno](#) (from [skleros](#) = hard) which translates stiff-necked. Stephen explains that these Jews were continually (present tense and active voice = making a choice of their will) **resisting** ([antipipto](#)) **the Holy Spirit**, which clearly teaches that the Holy Spirit was the member of the Trinity Who produced heart circumcision in the **New Testament** (as Paul taught in Ro 2:29+, cf Col 2:11+) and also in the **Old Testament**. It also implies that in those Israelites who did not resist the

work of the Holy Spirit, He would supernaturally "circumcise" their hearts. Notice Stephen's statement "**just as your fathers did**" indicates that OT Israelites had also been resistant to the work of the Spirit and thus their hearts remained uncircumcised and unable to obey God with **all** their heart and **all** their soul.

**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 **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!

Of course, some Israelites did yield to the work of the Spirit and they would have been part of the **believing remnant of Israel**. Obviously Joshua and Caleb were prime examples of the **remnant**, for God Himself testified that "they have followed the LORD fully." (Nu 32:12+), something they could not have accomplished without a "circumcised heart," and the sanctifying influence (power) of the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that the Agent of regeneration and of subsequent sanctification in both testaments is the Holy Spirit.

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### Have you experienced supernatural circumcision of your heart?

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#### Related Resources:

- See related comments on Deuteronomy 30:6 and comments on Deuteronomy 10:16
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#### QUESTION - [What was the role of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament?](#)

**ANSWER** - The role of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament is much like [His role in the New Testament](#). When we speak of the role of the Holy Spirit, we can discern four general areas in which the Holy Spirit works: 1) regeneration, 2) indwelling (or filling), 3) restraint, and 4) empowerment for service. Evidence of these areas of the Holy Spirit's work is just as present in the Old Testament as it is in the New Testament.

**The first area of the Spirit's work is in the process of regeneration.** Another word for regeneration is "rebirth," from which we get the concept of being "born again." The classic proof text for this can be found in John's gospel: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). This begs the question: what does this have to do with the Holy Spirit's work in the Old Testament? Later on in His dialogue with Nicodemus, Jesus has this to say to him: "You are Israel's teacher...and do you not understand these things?" (John 3:10). The point Jesus was making is that Nicodemus should have known the truth that the Holy Spirit is the source of new life because it is revealed in the Old Testament. For instance, Moses told the Israelites prior to entering the Promised Land that "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deuteronomy 30:6). **This circumcision of the heart is the work of God's Spirit and can be accomplished only by Him.** We also see the theme of regeneration in Ezekiel 11:19-20 and Ezekiel 36:26-29.

The fruit of the Spirit's regenerating work is faith (Ephesians 2:8). Now we know that there were men of faith in the Old Testament because Hebrews 11 names many of them. If faith is produced by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, then this must be the case for Old Testament saints who looked ahead to the cross, believing that what God had promised in regard to their redemption would come to pass. They saw the promises and "welcomed them from a distance" (Hebrews 11:13), accepting by faith that what God had promised, He would also bring to pass.

**The second aspect of the Spirit's work in the Old Testament is indwelling, or filling.** Here is where the major difference between the Spirit's roles in the Old and New Testaments is apparent. The New Testament teaches the **permanent** indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20). When we place our faith in Christ for salvation, the Holy Spirit comes to live within us. The Apostle Paul calls this permanent indwelling the "guarantee of our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:13-14). In contrast to this work in the New Testament, the indwelling in the Old Testament was selective and temporary. The Spirit "came upon" such Old Testament people as Joshua (Numbers 27:18 = "a man **in whom** is the Spirit"), David (1 Samuel 16:12-13) and even Saul (1 Samuel 10:10). In the book of Judges, we see the Spirit "coming upon" the various judges whom God raised up to deliver Israel from their oppressors. The Holy Spirit came upon these individuals for specific tasks. The indwelling was a sign of God's favor upon that individual (in the case of David), and if God's favor left an individual, the Spirit would depart (e.g., in Saul's case in 1 Samuel 16:14). Finally, the Spirit "coming upon" an individual doesn't always indicate that person's spiritual condition (e.g., Saul, Samson, and many

of the judges). **(ED: THE SAME COULD BE SAID OF BELIEVERS TODAY WHEN THEY FALL INTO SOME SIN OR BACKSLIDE)** So, while in the New Testament the Spirit only indwells believers and that indwelling is permanent, the Spirit came upon certain Old Testament individuals for a specific task, irrespective of their spiritual condition. Once the task was completed, the Spirit presumably departed from that person. **(ED: THIS IS A PRESUMPTION AND NOT CLEARLY STATED IN THE OT - DID THE SPIRIT LEAVE JOSHUA ALL THE DAYS HE LED ISRAEL AND EVEN TO THE END WHEN HE EXHORTED THEM AT AGE 110 TO BE FAITHFUL?)**

**The third aspect of the Spirit's work in the Old Testament is His restraint of sin.** Genesis 6:3 would seem to indicate that the Holy Spirit restrains man's sinfulness, and that restraint can be removed when God's patience regarding sin reaches a "boiling point." This thought is echoed in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-8, when in the end times a growing apostasy will signal the coming of God's judgment. Until the preordained time when the "man of lawlessness" (v. 3) will be revealed, the Holy Spirit restrains the power of Satan and will release it only when it suits His purposes to do so.

**The fourth and final aspect of the Spirit's work in the Old Testament is the granting of ability for service** Much like the way the spiritual gifts operate in the New Testament, the Spirit would gift certain individuals for service. Consider the example of [Bezalel](#) in Exodus 31:2-5 who was gifted to do much of the artwork relating to the Tabernacle. Furthermore, recalling the selective and temporary indwelling of the Holy Spirit discussed above, we see that these individuals were gifted to perform certain tasks, such as ruling over the people of Israel (e.g., Saul and David).

**We could also mention the Spirit's role in creation.** Genesis 1:2 speaks of the Spirit "hovering over the waters" and superintending the work of creation. In a similar fashion, the Spirit is responsible for the work of the new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) as He is bringing people into the kingdom of God through regeneration.

**All in all, the Spirit performs much of the same functions in Old Testament times as He does in this current age. The major difference is the permanent indwelling of the Spirit in believers now.** As Jesus said regarding this change in the Spirit's ministry, "But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you" (John 14:17). [GotQuestions.org](#)

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**C H Spurgeon** - Circumcision in Deuteronomy 30:6 Mark of Covenant Grace - Faith's Checkbook

HERE we read of the **true circumcision**.

**Note the author of it:** "The Lord thy God." He alone can deal effectually with our hearts and take away their carnality and pollution. To make us love God with all our hearts and souls is a miracle of grace which only the Holy Ghost can work. We must look to the Lord alone for this and never be satisfied with anything short of it.

**Note where this circumcision is wrought:** it is not of the flesh, but of the Spirit (Ro 2:29). It is the essential mark of the covenant of grace. Love to God is the indelible token of the chosen seed; by this secret seal, the election of grace is certified to the believer. We must see to it that we trust in no outward ritual, but are sealed in heart by the operation of the Holy Ghost.

**Note what the result is:** "that thou mayest live." To be carnally minded is death (Ro 8:13a). In the overcoming of the flesh we find life and peace (Ro 8:6) If we mind the things of the Spirit, we shall live (Ro 8:11, Ro 8:13b).

Oh, that Jehovah, our God, may complete His gracious work upon our inner natures, that in the fullest and highest sense we may live unto the Lord. Amen

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**QUESTION - [What is circumcision of the heart?](#)**

**ANSWER** - The idea of "circumcision of the heart" is found in Romans 2:29. It refers to having a pure heart, separated unto God. Paul writes, "A Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter." These words conclude a sometimes confusing passage of Scripture regarding circumcision and the Christian. Verses 25-29 provide context:

"For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 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."

Paul is discussing the role of the Old Testament Law as it relates to Christianity. He argues that **Jewish circumcision is only an outward sign of being set apart to God**. However, if the heart is sinful, then physical circumcision is of no avail. **A circumcised body and a sinful heart** are at odds with each other. Rather than focus on external rites, Paul focuses on the condition of the heart.

Using circumcision as a metaphor, he says that only the Holy Spirit can purify a heart and set us apart to God. Ultimately, circumcision cannot make a person right with God; the Law is not enough. A person's heart must change. Paul calls this change "circumcision of the heart."

This concept was not original with the apostle Paul. As a Jew trained in the Law of Moses, he was certainly aware of this discussion from Deuteronomy 30. There, the Lord used the same metaphor to communicate His desire for a holy people:

"And 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" (Deuteronomy 30:6).

Physical circumcision was a sign of Israel's covenant with God; circumcision of the heart, therefore, would indicate Israel's being set apart to love God fully, inside and out.

John the Baptist warned the Pharisees against taking pride in their physical heritage and boasting in their circumcision: "Do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (Matthew 3:9).

True "children of Abraham" are those who follow Abraham's example of believing God (Genesis 15:6). Physical circumcision does not make one a child of God; faith does. Believers in Jesus Christ can truly say they are children of "Father Abraham." "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29).

God has always wanted more from His people than just external conformity to a set of rules. He has always wanted them to possess a heart to love, know, and follow Him. That's why God is not concerned with a circumcision of the flesh. Even in the Old Testament, God's priority was a spiritual circumcision of the heart: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done" (Jeremiah 4:4).

Both Testaments focus on the need for repentance and inward change in order to be right with God. In Jesus, the Law has been fulfilled (Matthew 5:17). Through Him, a person can be made right with God and receive eternal life (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9). As Paul said, true circumcision is a matter of the heart, performed by the Spirit of God. [GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org)

## Circumcision

### R K Harrison

Removal of the foreskin or prepuce of the male genital organ, whether for religious reasons or as a purely hygienic measure. Circumcision was practiced in the ancient Near East by the western Semites, including the Ammonites, Moabites, Hebrews, and Edomites. The procedure was rejected by the east Semitic peoples of Mesopotamia, the Canaanites, and the Shechemites.

**The Old Testament** . The special meaning of circumcision for the people of Israel is found in Genesis 17 and occurs within the context of God's renewed covenant promise to Abraham, following the initial contractual relationship ( Genesis 15 ). On the second occasion, God again promised lands and offspring to the still childless patriarch, and gave him the sign of circumcision, which was to be imposed upon Abraham and his descendants as a token of covenant membership (Genesis 17:10 ). For the Israelites circumcision was a religious rite and **was intended to mark the beginning of covenant solidarity for Abraham's descendants** rather than describing the historical origins of the procedure.

While Abraham and his household were circumcised forthwith, the Lord's command required that hereafter male infants were to be circumcised on the eighth day of life. This in itself was distinctively different from contemporary pagan practices, which seem to have associated the rite either with puberty or with approaching marriage.

From the beginning sharp knives made from chipped flints were used for the resection, since flint maintained a superior edge. For this reason the retention of flint instruments for purposes of circumcision endured for centuries after the beginning of the Iron Age (ca. 1200 b.c.). Traditionally the head of the household administered the rite in Israel, but on special occasions a woman might officiate (Exodus 4:24-26 ).

**In the Mosaic law, a spiritual interpretation was imposed upon the procedure** when the Israelites were instructed to circumcise their hearts (Deuteronomy 10:16 ). This demand required them to recognize that, in addition to bearing the physical mark of covenant membership, they were also under obligation to manifest specific spiritual qualities of commitment and obedience to the Lord's will. Jeremiah 4:4 made precisely the same demands upon his contemporaries because of their evil deeds, which were the

very opposite of what God required. For him, circumcision entailed consecration to the Lord and to the high moral ideals of the covenant, of which holiness was representative (Leviticus 11:44). A true covenant member would be motivated by love of God (Deuteronomy 6:5 ) and one's neighbor (Leviticus 19:18 ). (**ED: SUCH MOTIVATION TO LOVE GOD WOULD ONLY BE ENABLED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT**).

**The New Testament** . When Greek paganism threatened to swamp Judaism some two centuries before Christ was born, circumcision became a distinctive indication of Jewish fidelity to the covenant. Thus John the Baptist was circumcised (Luke 1:59 ), as were both Jesus (Luke 2:21 ) and Saul of Tarsus (Philippians 3:5 ), on the eighth day of life, making them accredited members of the covenant people. But Jesus was already casting doubt on the preeminence of the rite when he stated that his healings made people completely whole (John 7:22-23 ). Stephen reinforced this by accusing contemporary Judaism of the very tendencies that Jeremiah had condemned (Acts 7:51 ). Although in the period of the primitive church the believers maintained Jewish religious traditions, problems began to arise when the gospel was preached among Gentiles. Christians who had come from a Jewish background felt that Gentiles should become Jews through circumcision before being able to experience Christ's saving work.

This attitude rested partly upon the contemporary notion that circumcision was a necessary part of salvation, as well as being its effective guarantee. Others repudiated this view of salvation by works, particularly when uncircumcised Gentiles received God's outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-48 ). They saw that the prophecies of Ezekiel, in which the Lord promised a clean heart and an indwelling of his Holy Spirit (36:25-27), and the dramatic proclamation of Joel that God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh (2:28; cf. Acts 2:17 ), were now being fulfilled. The spiritual significance of circumcision had been achieved by divine grace without the performance of the physical rite, thus making the latter obsolete.

Not all Jews rejoiced at their badge of pride and privilege being set aside (Philippians 3:4-6 ), and consequently a group of Pharisaic Jews known as the "circumcision party" proclaimed at Antioch (Acts 15:1-5 ) the necessity of circumcision for salvation. Peter opposed these Judaizers, affirming the saving efficacy of faith in Christ alone (Acts 15:8-11 ), and denying the necessity of circumcision for the Gentiles.

To resolve the issue Paul and Barnabas consulted with the elders in Jerusalem, where it was agreed that Gentiles should not be compelled to be circumcised (Acts 15:13-21 ). Paul was indifferent to the Judaizers' vaunted claims of "circumcision spirituality, " and although he circumcised the partly Jewish Timothy (Acts 16:3 ) to facilitate his mission, he opposed circumcision for the Gentile Titus (Galatians 2:3 ). In Galatia, Paul resisted strenuously the Judaizers' doctrine of righteousness by works, which he stigmatized as a "different gospel" (Galatians 1:6-7 ), and reviled the proponents as "dogs" and "evil workers."

This controversy was to follow Paul throughout his ministry. To counter the Judaizers' position he conceded that, while circumcision was of great value for the old covenant, it carried no significance for the "covenants of promise" (Ephesians 2:12 ). What was fundamentally important in God's sight was being a "new creation" (Galatians 6:15 ) and keeping God's commandments (1 Corinthians 7:19 ), apart from which circumcision or uncircumcision are meaningless, and allowing faith to work through love (Galatians 5:6 ). Paul taught resolutely that, in the new covenant, salvation came by grace and faith, not works (Ephesians 2:8 ). For the believer, circumcision or the lack of it was a matter of total indifference. What really counted was the faith and obedience that have always characterized covenants between God and humankind. ([Circumcision by R K Harrison](#))

## Related Resources on Circumcision

- Scriptures on Circumcision
- [Circumcision by R A Torrey](#)
- [What Does the Bible Say about Circumcision?](#)
- [Is baptism the New Covenant equivalent of 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](#)
- Smith Bible Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- Wilson's Bible Types [Circumcision](#)
- Webster Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- Watson's Theological Dictionary [Circumcision](#)
- 1911 Encyclopedia Britannica [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](#)