

Titles of the Church (#5)
The Israel of God
Sermon by Pastor Sylvia Chan

Today we are going to study another title of the church, this is the 5th one. The purpose of these studies is not to accumulate more and more biblical knowledge so that we feel good about ourselves. We study these titles so that by the grace of Yahweh God we would fulfill the meaning of these titles in our lives.

The Church is the Israel of God

ESV **Galatians 6:16** ¹⁶ And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. (Gal 6:16 ESV)

This is a greeting from Paul to the Galatian Church; he says that “peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” He is calling the Galatian church the Israel of God!

The people of Israel are the Jews, but in Paul’s churches, many or most of the Christians were not Jews. Indeed, Galatians 2:9 specifically says that Paul and Barnabas went to preach to the Gentiles:

ESV **Galatians 2:9** ⁹ and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (Gal 2:9 ESV)

The term “circumcised” here refers to the Jews, because circumcision is the sign of the covenant between Yahweh God and Abraham. This verse says that James, Cephas (Peter) and John went to the Jews, whereas Paul and Barnabas went to the Gentiles. That’s why many or most of the Christians in Paul’s churches were Gentiles, they were not Jews. Then why did he call the Galatian church the Israel of God?

In order to answer this question, we have to look into the meaning of circumcision.

Circumcision is the Sign of Covenant between Yahweh God and Abraham

NAS **Genesis 17:10 – 14** 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

The Israel of God

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.”
(Gen 17:10-14 NAS)

Here Yahweh God gave instruction to Abraham concerning circumcision. Circumcision is the sign of the covenant between Yahweh God and Abraham; every male in Abraham’s household has to be circumcised. Any male who is not circumcised shall be cut off from his people, that means he would be kicked out of Abraham’s household.

Abraham is the father of the Jewish people, so if anyone is kicked out of Abraham’s household, he is cut off from the Jewish people, which means he is not recognized as a Jew. On the contrary, anyone who is in Abraham’s household would be recognized as a Jew.

From this passage we see that circumcision is the mark of a Jew. If a person is not circumcised, even if he is born in a Jewish family, he is not recognized as a Jew. But most Christians are not circumcised; so why is the church called the Israel of God?

Circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit

ESV **Philippians 3:3** ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (Phi 3:3 ESV)

Here Paul says to the Philippian church: “we are the circumcision.” But most Christians in Paul’s churches were Gentiles, they were not circumcised! Why did Paul say to the Christians in the Philippian church: “we are the circumcision”?

NAS **Romans 2:28 – 29** 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. (Rom 2:28-29 NAS)

Here Paul distinguishes between “circumcision in the flesh” and “circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit”. We see that:

- A person is not a Jew if he is only circumcised outwardly in the flesh;
- Circumcision is not outward in the flesh; that means circumcision in the flesh is not true circumcision. Then what is true circumcision?
- True circumcision is of the heart, by the Spirit;
- And a Jew is one who is circumcised of the heart by the Holy Spirit.

This passage brings out a very important point: spiritual circumcision is the circumcision of the heart by the Spirit.

When Paul said Christians are circumcised, he is not talking about the circumcision of the flesh, but about the spiritual circumcision of the heart done by the Spirit.

When do Christians receive the spiritual circumcision?

This leads to a very important question: When do Christians receive the spiritual circumcision? When are we circumcised by the Holy Spirit?

^{NAS} **Colossians 2:11 – 12** 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. (Col 2:11-12 NAS)

Here it says that:

- Spiritual circumcision is the removal of the flesh, done at the baptism.
- Therefore our baptism is our spiritual circumcision.

^{NAS} **Romans 6:3 – 4** ³ Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴ Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3-4 NAS)

At baptism we were baptized into Christ's death, that means we died spiritually with Christ, we were buried with Christ, then we are raised up with Christ and we walk in the new life with Christ.

Our baptism is our spiritual circumcision; through this spiritual circumcision we become spiritual Jews, therefore the church is the spiritual Israel of God!

Our Blessing and Our Responsibility

So Christians are the spiritual Jews, and we share in the blessings for the Jews. We are the chosen people of God, we are the heirs to the Kingdom of God. But with our blessing comes responsibility.

NAS **Isaiah 49:6** ⁶ He says, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isa 49:6 NAS)

Isaiah was an Old Testament prophet who lived around 700 years before the Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah prophesied that the Jews will be the light of the nations, and that the salvation of Yahweh God would reach to the end of the earth. This prophecy has been fulfilled when the Lord Jesus came into the world. True Christians who believe in the Lord Jesus are the light of the world and we will bring the gospel message of salvation to the ends of the earth.

Yahweh God wants all men to be saved. He starts His salvation plan with a group of people, namely Abraham's descendants; and Christ the Messiah is from Abraham's descendants. God leads Abraham's descendants and teaches them with the statutes that He has given them.

NAS **Deuteronomy 4:6** ⁶ “So keep and do *them*, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ (Deu 4:6 NAS)

God's plan was that if Israelites live by His statutes, they would stand out from the other nations on earth, and become a light in the world. The other nations living in darkness would see this light and be drawn to it. In this way Israel would bring the salvation of God to the ends of the earth.

But Israel rebelled against God, and couldn't fulfill the mission that God had given them. At the end Israel was wiped out as a nation. By the time of the Lord Jesus, Israel was reduced to just a small colony of the Roman Empire.

Now in the New Testament era, Christians are the spiritual Israel of God, and Israel's responsibilities have been passed to us. That's why the Lord Jesus says, “You are the light of the world.” We are to be a light for the nations in the world. The church is to take up the responsibility of bringing salvation to all nations. Are we fulfilling our responsibility?

Conclusion

We can see God's heart in His salvation plan. We are saved so that we can save others. We are given this big task, which is a privilege. Throughout history God has been actively working to save the world through His chosen people – the Israel of God.