

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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**Broadcast Date:** 6 April 2003

**No.** T0260

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## Circumcision (Colossians 2:11); House (2 Corinthians 5:1)

I started work in the pharmaceutical chemical industry in the late 1960s. The company made active ingredients, such as Paracetamol. The charging of the chemical reagents to the processes, the control of the chemical reactions, and the packaging of the products, were all manual operations. Again, at the sister company a few miles away, where the medicines were made, the pharmaceutical granulation, tableting, bottling and packaging operations were all carried out by hand. With the advent of computer technology, these manual operations were replaced with automation and sophisticated process controls. Now it's the machinery which does the work and it's fascinating to watch the high-speed tablet machines supplying tablets into blister-packs, which are then heat sealed. These blister strips are inserted into packets, along with patient information leaflets, which are also machine-folded. The packets are machine-boxed, and the boxes automatically labelled.

Nowadays such chemical and pharmaceutical industrial products could be described as being "**made without hands**", although the operators still have to use their hands to supply materials to the machinery, and to activate the controls. However, the title for this *Truth for Today* series, "**Made without hands**" means something entirely different. Although we could translate it "not hand-made", it really means "not man-made". In other words, it's God's work not man's. This can be seen from Mark 14:58, where the false witnesses against Jesus said: "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple **made with hands**, and within three days I will build another **made without hands**.'" They thought Jesus meant He was able to replace Herod's temple, which took 46 years to build, with another by an act of God! – see John 2:18-22.

The scriptural meaning of "**without hands**" is stated by Daniel the prophet when he interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great image with its head of fine gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay. In 2:34-36, he says to this Babylonian ruler: "You watched while a stone was cut out **without hands**, which struck the image on its feet...and broke them in pieces ... [it] became a great mountain and filled the whole earth." Notice the emphasis in his interpretation in verses 44-45 that this is God's action: "And in the days of these kings **the God of heaven will set up** a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain **without hands**, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold – **the great God** has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure."

At the time of recording this message, world attention is focussed on Iraq, the very area where Nebuchadnezzar lived. Christians may be wondering if we are approaching the time of the kingdom reign of their Lord, whilst mankind is asking "Where will it all end?" In this prophetic outline of the course of world-dominating powers, the Roman Empire was the "legs of iron". Its revival as "feet of iron and clay" is still future to us, but may not be all that distant. However, we can confidently say that the proposed solutions to the present troubles will not bring about the long-desired worldwide conditions of lasting peace and security. Neither will the United Nations or western powers or any other human intervention. No! But God will – exclusively, dramatically and finally through the Lord Jesus Christ, the stone cut out of the mountain **without hands**!!

The term "**made without hands**" in the New Testament has this same meaning - that of God's work, which is always successful, complete and permanent. Today's talk covers two of the four New Testament occurrences of this phrase: first of all there's a look back to what God did with us at the cross of Christ, and then there's a look up to heaven to see what He has prepared for us.

The first topic, "**circumcision made without hands**", is a spiritual cutting off, in contrast to the physical act of circumcision instituted by Abraham and practised by his natural descendants. But, first of all, let's read Colossians 2:9-13. "For in [Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. In Him you were also circumcised with **the circumcision made without hands**, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in **the working of God**, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses."

Throughout Colossians 2, Paul is exhorting his readers to live out the Christian life, and to “walk in [Christ]”, verse 6. He states, in verse 10, that believers are fully fitted for this because they “are complete in [Christ]”. God has cut them off from their old life and its activities by “the circumcision of Christ”, buried them “with [Christ]” in baptism, resurrected them “with [Christ]” and given them new life “together with Him”. God has spiritually placed them in this position “with [Christ]”. This vital work of God became effective in them when they believed in the God who raised Jesus the Lord from the dead.

In Old Testament times, God intended that the physical rites of circumcision, religiously practised by the nation of Israel, should be followed up with the practice of holiness. Moses and others referred to its moral significance in statements about uncircumcised lips, ears and hearts. However this rite had one fatal flaw – it was carried out by men, who found themselves powerless to live out its real meaning. Therefore Peter says “the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands” (Ephesians 2:11) was “a yoke on the neck...which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear”, Acts 15:10.

In Romans 2:28-29 Paul points out the requirement for this inward reality when he argues, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.” Gentiles were in an even worse position, “dead in...trespasses and the uncircumcision of [the] flesh” (Colossians 2:13). But when the Lord Jesus died upon the cross for us, God dealt with all that we were naturally as rebellious people “by the circumcision of Christ” (Colossians 2:11). “The body...of flesh” whose whole activity and power is geared towards carnal desires has been “put off” by God through Christ’s work when He died unto sin. “The putting off” of Colossians 2:11 conveys the same idea as “**disarmed**” in verse 15, when “principalities and powers” were triumphed over in the cross.

Paul uses the same thought again in 3:9, “since you have **put off** the old man with his deeds.” Here we return to the exhortatory aspect of this passage of scripture, and to the practical response of being “circumcised with the **circumcision made without hands**”. I am:

1. to accept through faith what God has done, 2:12
2. to have put off the old man and all of his features, 3:8-9
3. to silence him when his evil or natural desires rear their ugly heads, 3:5
4. to have put on the new man, the characteristics of Christ Himself, 3:10 and 3:12-14.

Now another illustration before I speak about the second topic. When I was a boy, I used to pride myself in being able to ride my bicycle **without hands**. I would display this by folding my arms as I rode, so that everyone could see me. I suppose some of you will have done the same, but it was both foolish and dangerous. Religious pride, with its “look at me, I can do it in my own strength” attitude is rather like riding **without hands**. Paul warns of this in Philippians 3:2, “Beware...of the mutilation”. Let’s always remember God’s verdict about us, the circumcision of Christ, and so “rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” for these are the features of the true circumcision, Philippians 3:3.

I’ll now read the passage of scripture, 2 Corinthians 4:16 and 5:1-4, where our second topic, “**a house not made with hands**”, occurs. “Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day... For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, **a house not made with hands**, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life.”

The teaching of 2 Corinthians about believers’ physical bodies starts back in 4:7, where Paul describes them as “earthen vessels” in which is deposited the treasure of the Gospel message. The “clay pot” description is to emphasise that effective evangelism depends on God working through us, not on our efforts. In this respect, the teaching of Colossians 2 and 3, that we have just considered, is presented in a positive way in 2 Corinthians 4:10 – the dying of the Lord Jesus has to be practically applied, day by day, so that we can live out His life – the “new man” rather than the “old man”.

Paul encountered many difficulties in his preaching career, and he was often physically abused. He mentions in 2 Corinthians 4:11, that God allowed this for a special reason: “For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.” God deliberately allows such dangers so that the Gospel work, “the shining out of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”, isn’t hindered by the preacher. (The story of Gideon aptly illustrates these points: the pitchers had to be broken so that the light might shine out!) This constant threat of death can only be faced by faith in the God of resurrection, verses 13-14. Through

faith we know that there'll be heavenly bodies for us in the resurrection. Paul confidently asserts in 5:1: "...we have a building from God, a house **not made with hands**, eternal in the heavens"!

Let's remind ourselves again that the expression "**made without hands**" means God's work, His provision, which is perfect, complete and permanent. Now let me state four contrasts from the passage about the bodies we now have for this life, and the bodies which we'll have in heaven:-

1. the first is described as a tent, the latter as a building
2. the first is of the old creation, the latter is in the new creation
3. the first is earthly, the latter is heavenly
4. the first is mortal, the latter immortal.

### 1. A tent compared with a building.

Our present bodies are temporary dwelling places. In heaven we'll have resurrection bodies which, as 2 Corinthians 5:1 states, will be substantial and eternal buildings. Tents are unsuitable as long-term dwelling places; they are flimsy and can easily be knocked down! They don't provide enduring security for anyone. They don't have any foundations – only guy ropes and tent pegs. Our heavenly bodies will last for eternity as they are founded on the sure work of God in raising the Lord Jesus Christ out from among the dead! A pilgrim's shelter now – a permanent structure then!

### 2. The old and the new creations.

Our present bodies belong to the present material visible creation. 2 Corinthians 4:18 states that the things which we see around us are "temporary", that is, they belong to time; but unseen things are "eternal". Although we haven't been shown the exact nature of our heavenly bodies, "we know that when [Christ] is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is", 1 John 3:2. Philippians 3:20-21 rightly affirms that Christians are eagerly waiting for this time when the Lord Jesus Christ, as Saviour, "...will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to **the working** by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself."

### 3. Earthly and heavenly.

The contrast can't be more different. The bodies we now have are only suitable for earthly conditions. (Space exploration has shown that they are not even suitable for living on other planets). The "building of God, **a house not made with hands**," is said in 2 Corinthians 5:1-2 to be "in the heavens" and "from heaven". God will provide believers with resurrection bodies designed for eternal life in the wonderful environment of heaven, where He dwells in love and in glory. Verses 47-49 of 1 Corinthians 15, the great resurrection chapter, expands on this point: "The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man."

### 4. Mortality and Life (or natural and spiritual).

2 Corinthians 5:2-4 express the apostle's desire to be clothed with his heavenly body "that mortality may be swallowed up by life". As each of us grows older, there's increasingly not only an appreciation of the fact that "our outward man is perishing" but that our flesh is mortal, that is, subject to death. For every human being there's disease, distress and decay, all of which lead, eventually, to death. None is exempt from these natural processes of life here on earth - and all the pain, discomfort, difficulties and sorrows they bring. All of these things will be absent in heaven! "And God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful.'" Revelation 21:4-5. Little wonder that Paul says: "...we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our habitation which is from heaven" 2 Corinthians 5:2.

Paul also realised that the whole ageing process was being accelerated for him in the sufferings he endured for the Gospel. (JN Darby translates 2 Corinthians 4:16 "...but if indeed our outward man is consumed.") By weighing himself in the balances of life Paul concludes in 4:17-18: "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal." To him, mortality, and all of its baggage, was both trivial and transient, because he was waiting to be transformed into the realms of everlasting glory!

To conclude this study of "**a house not made with hands**", this teaching in 2 Corinthians is extremely practical and helpful:

1. The twenty-first century is dominated by the “here and now” attitude and materialism abounds. The Christian can achieve the correct perspective about present things by refusing to be sucked into a “by sight” view of life. The things of sight are, at best, only temporal. Eternal things can be seen by faith and by beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Let’s “...walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7)
2. Everything that a Christian has to endure in his body can be treated as a passing event, which brings eternal benefits – a surpassing weight of glory! Paul knew that was especially true for him in his service for his Lord.
3. It shows the importance of regular spiritual activities, to ensure that “the inward man” is renewed daily.
4. The Holy Spirit of God helps in this respect by providing us with foretastes of heaven. “Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee”, 2 Corinthians 5:5
5. This means that even death can be faced. Using a home-and-away theme, Paul asserts in verses 6 and 8: “So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord...yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present [at home] with the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 5:6-8).
6. Overall, the passage shows that the real hope of the believer is not the unclothed state, the intermediate state between death and resurrection, mentioned in 2 Corinthians 5:2-8, but the clothed state. This clothing, of the spirits and souls of believers with their heavenly bodies, takes place at the Rapture. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 says that’s when the dead in Christ are resurrected and living saints are translated.

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