

## Covenant part 1; Berith Genesis 15

### Introduction

**1** I wonder what you think of when you hear the word covenant? **1.1** Perhaps immediately for believers, the two halves of the Bible the old and new. **1.2** Perhaps you think of the old financial term, deed of covenant, which is now replaced by gift aid? Or maybe you think of the **1.3** national covenant of Scotland of 1638, when Scotland pledged herself to God in the face of the king's interference in church affairs, with the linked supporters, the covenanters?

I want to share with you today, over these sessions, some aspects of God's covenant which I believe are essential if we are to understand properly our relationship with God, His to us, and our relationship with one another and His wider community.

The reason for looking at this is because society today has little concept or understanding of what covenant is or really means. But if we are related to God, He wants us to reflect his nature fully and how He deals with us. If this is old hat to you, treat it as a refresher. If it's first time, I hope it's of benefit.

### **2 What is Covenant?**

The nearest thing we have to covenant today is marriage. But in the Eastern mindset of the Scriptures, there were different kinds of covenant

- **2.1** covenant between nations
- **2.2** covenant between families and households
- **2.3** covenant between individuals

The definition of a covenant is

- **2.4 An irrevocable, self-sacrificial commitment between two parties to mutual terms of agreement , sealed by a vow or oath.**

**3** The OT has many examples of covenant, for example,  
-**3.1** Noah (Gen 9.11)

- **3.2** Abraham (Gen 15)
- **3.3** Jacob and Laban (Gen 31.44)
- **3.4** Moses and Israel (Ex 6.4 first)
- **3.5** David and Jonathan (1 Sam 18)
- **3.6** God covenants with creation itself (Jer 33.25)

Generally speaking, making covenant was a messy business, and involved blood. This is probably because it was such a deeply binding agreement that blood, because it was deemed to contain the life, was to be shed to indicate the life-affecting power of covenant. When a covenant was made, life was never the same again, and you were often in that relationship until death, or even through generations ahead, as we'll see. Tied in with covenant, unavoidably, is a dying to oneself – you move from the story of 'I', to the story of 'we'. This self-sacrificial aspect of covenant is absolutely key when we come to Jesus' teaching.

#### **4 Cutting Covenant**

I always have problems with English translations of the Scripture, because they don't give us the full force of the original. Often, translators have been careful not to offend our sensitivities, so they leave us with a culturally acceptable equivalent which misses the point. Covenant is a bit like that.

The English word 'co-venant' comes from Latin, which means 'coming together'. (French from a – lier, to bind together, Latin aligare)

**4.1** The Hebrew has to do with feeding with meat, with butchery, which is why where we talk about 'making covenant' the Hebrew always talks about 'cutting covenant'. And in many places where covenant is mentioned, sacrifice is mentioned. – So, with Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, of course, blood is spilt, flesh is cut. Sacrifice is part and parcel of the process and practice of covenant.

#### **5 Rites of Covenant**

In our reading in Genesis 15, we can notice some key things about the process of covenant. Most of these things would be in place at some point in all covenants made; they are

Sacrifice – **5.2** Oath – **5.3** Sign – **5.4** Meal

With Abraham, these are spread out over a few chapters, 15 to 18, but they are all there.

**5.1** In the rite of covenant, animals would be sacrificed, and cut in half down the backbone to make two walls of blood. The covenanters would then place themselves in between the walls, and make their **5.2** covenant oath, usually using a formula such as ‘May God do this to me and more if I do not keep the terms of this covenant oath I am making.’ and then the terms of the covenant would be spelled out.

**5.3** Then, there would be a sign – precious things exchanged, or a mark in the flesh of the covenanters, sealed so as to leave a scar. For Abraham, the sign was circumcision, for Moses, the Sabbath.

There might also be an indication in the names of the relationship; I might be known as Colin friend of David; it’s like the wife taking her husband’s name. And we see it with God and Abraham, when Abraham’s name is changed by Yah, to be Abraham, and God becomes known as God of Abraham.

**5.4** And then, a meal. The sacred rite of sharing a meal is almost forgotten in our society, but not in the eastern world. When someone sits down to eat with you, you are bound to protect and honour them in your house. That’s why part of the shame of Lot in Sodom is not only the sexual sin, but the offence against the covenant of protection he offered his guests to let them be abused by the men of Sodom.

## **6 God and Abraham**

**6.1** But with Abraham, there is a significant difference. Abraham gets the sacrifice ready, keeps the birds away from eating it. But then, God puts Abraham to sleep. This is because this is not a covenant between two men, but it is God making covenant FOR Abraham. **6.2** And God makes the oath to Abraham that all nations will be blessed through him.

**7** There are two Greek words for covenant which I want to mention – one is **7.1** syntheke, a covenant WITH, of equals. But there is also **7.2** diatheke, a covenant ON BEHALF OF people, such as a king would make with his subjects. In this covenant, the terms and promises are all made by one party for the other. And this is what

God is doing for Abraham. God vows His love upon Abraham and his descendants, despite adversity. Through Abraham, God vows to bless all the nations of the earth. Abraham is out of the picture, though, in the land of Nod.

**8, 8.1** Then, a few chapters later, in 17, God calls Abraham to make a sacrifice; literally, to die to part of himself – the foreskin of his penis. Abraham and his male family shed their blood and make an unforgettable mark in the most intimate part of their anatomy – also the part most associated with procreation. It's very up close and personal. Very self-sacrificial.

**8.2** Finally, in chapter 18, Abraham sets a meal before God, and at that meal, God reveals his plans for Isaac, the blessing he has promised.

We find this pattern to some degree in other covenants in the OT – David and Jonathan will have made a vow to each other, David comes to live in Saul's house and eats at Saul's table.

In the next session, I want to follow on to look at a significant aspect to covenant which is key to how the outworking of Covenant unfolds, which will be the next part of the puzzle.

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