

Followers of the Way

God's enemies are our enemies

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Genesis 15:1-21; Galatians 3:15-17

Genesis 15 describes God's covenant with Abraham, a man He called "my friend" (Isaiah 41:8). This was not God's first covenant with a human being, of course. Generations beforehand, God told Noah, "I will establish my covenant with you" (Genesis 6:18) – the first use of the word covenant in the Bible, the covenant itself being set out in Genesis 9:1-17. Theologians also talk about God being in covenant relationship with Adam and Eve, both before and after the Fall: see Genesis 1:26-30 and 2:16-17 (sometimes called the Edenic covenant) and Genesis 3:14-19 (called the Adamic covenant). All these covenants are worthy of separate study. But as we start a new sermon series on covenant, today we are going to concentrate on Genesis 15, since it shows covenant in its fully-fledged form. As we do so, we will see how God put its various features in place using components that already existed in ancient Near Eastern culture in Abraham's time, and that these still resonate in the New Covenant era.

First, a word about what covenant is not. It is not just what we would call an agreement or a compact, contract, or treaty. The Bible uses all those words at various times to describe arrangements between people, as (for example) in the "agreement" of Nehemiah 9:38, "compact" of 2 Samuel 5:3, "contract" of Isaiah 16:14 and 21:16, and "treaty" of Genesis 21:27. In each case, the context shows none of these words are interchangeable with covenant, as something less than sworn vows accompanied by animal sacrifice is involved. Covenant is something stand-alone, and of much greater significance than any of these other types of dealings the Bible records. Covenant partners do not share. They give everything, yet in such a way as not to lose what they give, but to gain what they lack. Covenant is multiplication instead of addition or subtraction.

This is how covenant worked in Abraham's day, and these principles continued even into Jesus' time:

Negotiation

First would come a prolonged discussion over covenant terms, with negotiators involving the wider family or tribal group at every stage to make sure everyone was comfortable with what was proposed. This was vital, because once a covenant was made, it was an everlasting agreement. It could be added to (we see God progressively adding to His covenants) but not taken away from. The seriousness and everlasting consequences of what was involved meant discussions over covenant obligations would commonly take three years, but this could extend to as many as six years in complex situations.

In Abraham's case, there was a history of dealings between him and God that eventually brought them to the point where a binding covenant could be made. There is reference to

some of this background as God reminds Abraham how He “brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it” (Genesis 15:7). These words in effect form a preamble to the covenant that follows.

Setting a time and place

With negotiations complete, a time would be set to conclude the covenant, where all involved (tribes, families) could come to observe the ceremony. Here, only God and Abraham needed be present. God started with one man, and over the course of centuries He broadened His covenant out to include first a family, then His chosen nation, and finally all nations. Since God was the initiator of the covenant with Abraham, and He set the time and place for it to be made.

Note, by the way how the covenant states the names of the parties to it. God identifies Himself by His personal name, saying, “I am the LORD” (Genesis 15:7) – a name not revealed to Abraham previously.

Covenant animals

Animals would be selected for the covenant sacrifice. A heifer (a cow that has borne only one calf, or no calves at all), goat, ram, dove and pigeon. Unsurprisingly, these were exactly the animals God told Abraham to bring: see Genesis 15:9.

Animal sacrifice

Central to the making of a covenant was animal sacrifice. The animals would be killed, and cut in half lengthways so the covenant partners received identical parts of each creature – except the dove and pigeon were not divided, as one bird represented one covenant partner and the other bird the other covenant partner. The two halves of the heifer, goat and ram would be laid on the ground to form a line with a passage in-between, into which their blood would flow. This is exactly what Abraham did: see Genesis 15:10. The Bible does not say God told Abraham to prepare the animals this way, but Abraham knew God was making a covenant with him, and he knew the right set-up.

Exchange of cloaks

People making a covenant would exchange cloaks, as symbols of their authority. For example, a father would put his cloak around his son’s shoulders to show the son was his heir or successor (compare the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:22). So, giving your cloak to a covenant partner was a way of passing to him all your authority. God had no physical cloak to give Abraham, but he clothed him with authority all the same, saying in effect that everything God has, Abraham can lay claim to. In return, he asked Abraham the same He asks of us – to give up the (in truth, rather limited) authority we have over our lives and possessions. This exchange of authority applies in a similar fashion under the New Covenant, meaning Paul was able to tell the believers in the Galatian Church, “you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.” (Galatians 4:7).

Exchange of belts

The covenant partners would exchange belts, as well as cloaks. Since belts held the sword, bow and quiver, they stood for the will and ability to fight. Handing them over was a way of pledging help in war, meaning your covenant partner’s enemies became your enemies, his fight became your fight, what he hated, you would hate, and what he loved, you would love. We need to take this to heart: it means God’s enemies are our enemies. This is why

Jesus says, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own ... but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." (John 15:18-19).

Abraham had a personal retinue of "318 trained men born in his household" (Genesis 14:14). But God has the whole host of heaven and even Creation itself at His command. He promised Abraham He would "bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3). Abraham got a very good deal when he exchanged cloaks and belts with God, and so do we. In the New Covenant, we get access to the weapons of spiritual warfare Paul speaks of in Ephesians 6:13-18 – the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shield of faith, helmet of salvation, sword of the Spirit, feet fitted with the readiness of the Gospel – bolstered by prayer and all the power of heaven.

Passing through the blood

After exchanging cloaks and belts, the covenant partners would walk the full length of the passageway between the carcasses of the sacrificed animals. Returning to the middle, they would shout out their covenant vows (including the covenant blessings and curses) so everyone present could hear. Each in turn would then say, "As bodies lie on the left and bodies lie on the right and there is blood underneath our feet, I promise you even in war I will never desert you. Bodies will fall on the right and bodies will fall on the left and you can count on me, even when blood spills and there is nothing left you can count on me." After this, the assembled family or tribe would give their assent to what had been said.

With "Abram ... [in] a deep sleep" (Genesis 15:12), God performed this part of the covenant ceremony: "When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram" (Genesis 15:17-18). And we see how God also recited the covenant terms: see Genesis 15:18-21.

Cutting the covenant

Now each covenant partner would cut a vein in their wrist, tying the wounds together so the blood mingled. (This is why the Bible talks of "cutting" a covenant.) This was performed by heads of families or tribes on behalf of the group – a sign that each covenant partner's life was no longer their own, but belonged to the other. The two became one. Christ "died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." (2 Corinthians 5:15).

As they cut their covenant, the partners proclaimed, "As this blood falls into this ground, if I ever break this covenant may this soil reject me, may it vomit me out, may the curses pronounced come upon me" – interesting, then, to think of how God told Israel, "if you defile the land, it will vomit you out" (Leviticus 18:28).

Exchanging names

Once the covenant had been cut, the partners were ready to exchange names. In the ancient Near East, a man's name was a sign of everything he was – what he represented, what he owned, all he stood for in terms of character and allegiance. It included the positive and negative, his debts as well as his wealth, extending to everything including his family and children.

When God appeared to Abraham to “confirm my covenant between me and you” (Genesis 17:2), He exchanged his original name (Abram) for Abraham (Genesis 17:5), turning him from *exalted father* to *father of many*. Abraham did not have a name to give God, but as part of the exchange, God allowed Himself to be known as the God of Abraham (Genesis 26:24 and elsewhere).

Breaking bread

At this point, everyone would go to one of the covenant partner’s homes for a meal. The people sat down while the covenant partners stood before them. Each in turn would take a loaf of bread, break it, and give it to the other, saying, “Take, this is my body. I will give my body to be crushed, I will lay down my body, but I promise you that none of your children will lack while I am still alive or while any of my family is still alive. We will work and we will strive, and if any of your children are taken into captivity, if they are in slavery, in hunger, or in prison, we will do anything with our bodies, we will work to pay whatever is needed to be paid so your children will never lack a rescuer. So, take my bread; it will be crushed for you.” All the gathered people would then break pieces off the bread and eat, so that by sharing in this way, the covenant became personal for everyone.

The Bible does not record a meal or the breaking of bread when the covenant was cut in Genesis 15, but there is when “the LORD appeared to Abraham” (Genesis 18:1) to tell him, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” (Genesis 18:10).

Drinking wine

Taking a cup of wine at the end of the meal, each covenant partner would say to the other, “This is my blood; it will be poured out for you. There is nothing at all that I will hold back from you, I will pour out my life for you.” They then drank from the cup and shared it among their families or tribe as a final act to seal the covenant – an astounding thing, when we remember Jesus’ words: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Luke 21:22).

Memorial

A covenant memorial would often be set up, to help make sure it would never be forgotten. And just as Jesus commanded his disciples to eat bread and drink wine “in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24-25), so God gave Abraham circumcision (Genesis 17:9-11) as a covenant sign or memorial. Circumcision was tremendously significant, since sperm had to pass through this covenant sign to fulfill God’s promise to make Abraham the father of many nations (Genesis 17:4-6).

We should not forget that God also gave Abraham land. This land is God’s, yet He gave it in covenant to Abraham and his descendants. Just so we are in no doubt about it, God made sure to tell Abraham that under what He described as an “everlasting covenant” (Genesis 17:7), “The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.” (Genesis 17:8). When God says covenant, He means covenant. When He says whole, He means whole. And when He says everlasting, He means everlasting.

Conclusion

The things we have been talking about are not just of historical interest. Believers in Jesus are under the new covenant in His blood – a covenant foretold in Jeremiah 31:31-34,

which Ephesians 2:11-19 tells us extends to cover Gentiles as well as Jews. In the passage we heard from Galatians, Paul affirms that covenant is more powerful than the law, because “the law... does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.” (Galatians 3:17). He reminds us, “no-one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established” (Galatians 3:15), and how much more this applies to a covenant established by God. If we are to grasp fully our standing before God and what is required of us in these days, we need to take on board what covenant means.

A covenant partner could do things a son could not. In fact, in some ways the bond between covenant partners was stronger than that between father and son. If a son sat in his father’s chair, he would be disinherited, because this action signified taking over from his father and wanting his father dead. But the same thing could be done by a covenant partner with no repercussions. Covenant partners would stand by their vows even if it meant they would be killed.

We have just finished a sermon series on Clash of Kingdoms, examining the ongoing war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world (Satan) that grows in intensity day by day. God is our covenant partner and His enemies are our enemies. Our covenant obligations require us to take God’s side in this fight, come what may. We can join the battle with confidence, because we have access to His weapons and we can act with His full authority. He has put his name on us, given us His covenant sign, and treated us as sons and heirs, no longer as slaves. Now is time for us to stand by our side of the bargain. May we prove ourselves worthy covenant partners today and throughout whatever lies ahead. Amen.