

## God's Covenant Relationship With Abraham

'The Lord said to Abram, "Go for yourself (your own advantage) away from your country, away from your family and your father's house(hold) to the land that I will show you; and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name famous and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you; in you will all the families of the earth be blessed." So Abram departed as the Lord had commanded him ... Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran (where his family lived)' (Genesis 12:1 to 4).

"Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, look northward, southward, eastward and westward; for all the land you see, I will give to you and to your descendants forever; and I will make your descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth, so that if a man could count the dust of the earth then could your descendants be counted. Arise and walk through the land, the length of it and the breadth of it, for I will give it to you" (Genesis 13:14 to 17).

'When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am the Almighty God; walk blamelessly before Me and I will make My covenant between Me and you and I will multiply you exceedingly." Then Abram fell on his face. God said to him, "As for Me, My covenant is with you and you shall be the father of many nations; nor shall your name be Abram but your name shall be Abraham for I have made you the father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will make nations of you and kings will come from you. I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you, generation after generation for an eternal pledge, to be God to you and to your descendants after you ... As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you, generation after generation. This is My covenant which you shall keep between Me and you and your descendants after you; every male among you shall be circumcised and it shall be a token between Me and you. Every male who is eight days old shall be circumcised, generation after generation ... My covenant shall be in your flesh for an eternal covenant ... The male who is not circumcised, that man shall be cut off from his people because he has broken My covenant ... My covenant, My promise and pledge will I establish with Isaac." And God stopped talking with him and went up (to heaven) from Abraham, and as God had said to him, Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised' (Genesis 17:1 to 24).

Abraham was a Hebrew (Genesis 14:13), descended from Eber, the father of the Hebrews (see genealogies, Genesis 11:10 to 26). Abraham was a man with tremendous faith and that was accredited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). God made an extraordinary, far-reaching promise to Abraham, and amazingly, by then Abraham was already seventy-five. In obedience to God's suggestion, Abraham left Haran where his family lived and moved to Canaan. It took a further twenty-five years before the promise of a son was realised. God personally promised the land of Canaan, now called Israel, to Abraham's descendants. They would live in the land unceasingly as long as they kept the covenant God made with Abraham. We need to fully understand how significant and serious that covenant was, that was sealed with a token of blood and pain.

A blood covenant or promise, even in ancient times, was the strongest form of mutual agreement between two parties. In the modern world we sign a binding contract with ink, not blood. A blood covenant was used to make a binding agreement or treaty for peace, for mutual defence between tribes, or as an agreement to share food crops or water. There was usually a small ceremony between men and their witnesses. Women and children rarely took part or had any say. The tribal leaders would exchange something they owned; a sword, a spear, clothing, women, children, animals or slaves. They would often exchange their tribal identities and/or their names. Then they would become 'blood brothers'. That often involved a small cut where they would rub the blood from each other's bodies together, or sometimes they would drip blood into a cup and once thoroughly mixed, would be drunk by the two leaders to indicate they were now of one blood. Sometimes the two leaders would prevent the complete healing of the cut. They rubbed salt, ash, resin or some other substance into wound so it would leave a scar. After the covenant was sealed with blood, the leaders and their witnesses would celebrate with a memorial feast, which the women, children and the remainder of the two tribes would gather together and share. That feast formally cemented the blood covenant. Abraham knew exactly what God was speaking about when He offered to share a covenant with him and his descendants, and Abraham fell on his face. The enormity of having a blood covenant with Almighty God our Creator, would make anyone fall on their face!

The 'token' of the covenant between God and Abraham is an excruciatingly painful thing. Many people think circumcision is a sign of being Jewish, but it is much more than that. It is a painful reminder of the covenant

between God and Abraham, sealed in blood. The covenant was no light matter. Every single male, Hebrew and Gentile, who lived in Abraham's household had to be circumcised or they were to be cut off from among the Hebrew people. We can only guess at the terrible pain suffered in Abraham's household that day! They had no pain relief, no anaesthesia, no sterilisation and no sharp lancets to do the job. For all those men to allow themselves to have that agonising and humiliating procedure done to their bodies, Abraham must have been very convincing. He must have been able to embed into their hearts, the importance and the seriousness of that covenant.

By agreeing to the covenant, God was giving Himself to Abraham as his Defender, his Shield, his Provider, his Healer, his Prosperity, his Strength both physical and spiritual for the whole of Abraham's life, and the lives of his descendants. God promised to make Abraham the father of many nations; He promised him and his descendants the whole land of what is now Israel, and He promised Abraham countless offspring. Then they exchanged identities. God changed Abram's name to Abraham; from exalted father, to father of a multitude. In the middle of Abram's name God placed His breath "Ha" and Abram became Abraham, the father of all believers and followers of God. Then God changed His identity to the God of Abraham, and the whole world knew He was the God of Abraham. Later God confirmed His covenant to Abraham's son and grandson and became the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

It wasn't long before the Hebrews became indifferent to the important covenant God made with Abraham. Although Abraham, Isaac and Jacob kept the covenant, it was later put to one side. The Lord reminded Jacob, then renamed Israel, about His covenant name just before Jacob's move to Egypt (Genesis 46:3). The Hebrews lived in Egypt for four hundred and thirty years (Exodus 12:41) and during that time had either forgotten the covenant, or minimised its significance. It was the Lord Who remembered the covenant. 'God heard their groaning and He remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (Exodus 2:24). The next man to be reminded of the covenant was Moses. "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God (Exodus 3:6). Then God reminded Moses of His covenant name. "This shall you say to the Israelites, 'The Lord God, the God of your fathers, of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob has sent me to you! This is My name forever, and by this name I am to be remembered from generation to generation'" (Exodus 3:15). Moses had to remind the Israelites there was a covenant. 'Moses took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people, and the people said, "All the words which the Lord has said we will do and we will obey."' (Exodus 24:7). With the covenant agreement accepted by the people, Moses realised the lives of the Hebrews would never be the same again. God told the people how to live, not to be dictatorial, but to benefit mankind as a whole.

God told them not to eat certain meats, and we know some of the meats that were forbidden were toxic and could cause food poisoning, as is recorded in the scriptures when they ate quail. God told them to wash their bodies, bury their waste and wash their hands before eating – simple acts of hygiene. The Hebrews knew nothing about bacteria, but by obeying these laws, they could remain healthy. God gave the Hebrews many laws that when broken, brought swift punishment. Some of those laws are still adhered to today in our modern society. We must not steal and we must not kill. Both crimes bring a form of punishment. To keep the Hebrews pure, they were not allowed to mix with pagan nations that had idol worship, and they were strictly forbidden to marry Gentiles. They had to keep themselves separated from their pagan neighbours, live separately from all other nations and live holy lives. "You shall be holy for Me, for I the Lord am holy" (Leviticus 19:2).

When some of the Hebrews, later called Jews, did disobey God and marry Gentile people and established families, they were told to separate from their Gentile spouses, send their children away and return to the covenant with God. There were so many thousands of people married to foreigners, they had to send them away in groups (Ezra 10:11 & 14). One can only imagine the agony and grief in their hearts as they sent away all their children to a foreign land, never to see them again. Once again, the Jewish people realised the seriousness of the covenant. They had no alternative. Obeying the covenant brought blessing; disobeying the covenant brought a curse. They were God's chosen people; unique, separate and isolated. Physical contact with people from other nations was strictly forbidden. The commandments had to be obeyed. The Jews were not even allowed to sit at a meal table with an outsider. The Jews had the one true God to serve and obey, but their neighbouring nations did not, and the same is true of Israel today. No other nation was ever given the covenant, the promise of the Messiah or were personally selected by God, Creator of the universe. Only the Jews had that privilege. The Jewish people still circumcise their sons, and they keep the God-appointed feasts and festivals, including the Sabbath and Passover, to this day. However, there is usually very little teaching about the covenant and what God actually required of them.

The Gentile nations did not know God and were hopelessly lost. They worshipped idols and gods in the vain hope of gaining eternal life, but that was a pointless exercise. Other nations often knew God was with the Jews but were powerless to receive the same blessings and strength. Some ancient nations died out, but the Jews remained sure and strong. Because of anti-Semitism, the gulf between Jews and Gentiles widened, bringing about suspicion and distrust, hostility and fear, anger and hatred, pogroms and murder. Then God promised to make a new covenant with Israel that would eventually include Gentiles. "Behold, the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah; not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers ... My covenant which they broke", says the Lord. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel; I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be My people" (Jeremiah 31:31 to 33). 'If that first covenant was not defective there would have been no room for another one. However, God finds fault with them when He says, "Behold, the days will come when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their forefathers ... but they did not keep the covenant so I withdrew from them," says the Lord. "For this covenant that I will make with the house of Israel ... I will etch My law upon their minds and engrave them on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be My people." ... When God speaks of a new covenant, He makes the first one obsolete, and what is obsolete is no longer used and is discarded' (Hebrews 8:7 to 13). Notice the new covenant is solely with the house of Israel. In Hebrews 8:10, Judah is not mentioned. That is because Judah and Israel have become one nation with one leader; the land of Israel.

The covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants took a dramatic turn 2,000 years ago. The fulfilment of the promises that all the prophets had prophesied about; the Man the Jews were waiting for arrived in Israel. Jesus the Messiah was born a Jew, died as a Jewish Man, rose again and became the Messiah to the Jews. This time, instead of the Jewish men having to shed their blood in circumcision, Jesus gave His blood and His life. Jesus was God's side of the blood covenant that was made with Abraham. Jesus came to the spiritually lost children of Israel first. 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 15:24).

Jesus ratified the blood covenant agreement God had made with Abraham by ushering in the new covenant promised by God. Jesus was the Mediator of the new blood covenant (Hebrews 12:24). These verses are combined from the three Gospels; 'As Jesus and the disciples were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread and praising God, gave thanks and asked God to bless it to their use, and when He had broken the bread He gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is My body; do this in remembrance of Me." Then He took a cup of grape juice, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to the disciples saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the new covenant which is poured out (shed) for many, for the forgiveness of sins"' (Matthew 26:26 to 28; Mark 14:22 to 24; Luke 22:19 & 20).

Jesus said, "I tell you the solemn truth, he who believes in Me has eternal life. I am the Bread of Life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died, but this is the Bread that comes down from heaven. If anyone eats of this Bread he will live forever; and the Bread that I give for the life of the world is My body ... You cannot have any (spiritual) life in you unless you eat the body of the Son of Man and drink His blood. He who feeds on My body and drinks My blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day; for My body is true (spiritual) food and My blood is true (spiritual) drink ... Just as the Living Father sent Me and I live by the Father, even so, whoever feeds on Me shall live with Me. This is the Bread that came down from heaven. It is not like the manna which our forefathers ate and yet died; he who takes this Bread for his food shall live forever ... Is this a stumbling block to you? What then, will your reaction be if you should see the Son of Man ascending to the place I was before? It is the Holy Spirit Who gives (spiritual) life ... The words that I have been speaking to you are Spirit and eternal life ... This is why I told you that no one can come to Me unless it is granted to him by the Father ... Did I not choose you?" (John 6:47 to 70).

'The first covenant of God's will, was not ratified without the shedding of blood. When every command of the Law was read out by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of slain animals, together with water and scarlet wool, and with a bunch of hyssop, he sprinkled the Book of the Law and all the people saying, "This is the blood that seals the covenant which God commanded you ... In fact, under the Law almost everything is purified by blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no release from sin' (Hebrews 9:18 to 22).

Then later, after Jesus died and rose again, the Gospel message went to the spiritually lost Gentiles via Paul. 'Is God the God of the Jews? Isn't He the God of the Gentiles too? Yes, of the Gentiles also' (Romans 3:29). 'The Jews who believed were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles (Acts 10:45). The moment we accept the shed blood of Jesus our Messiah, Jews and Gentiles

alike, enter into the blood covenant God made with Abraham. Jesus shed His blood for us, but we must 'circumcise' our hearts for Him. Of course that is not literal, it is spiritual. 'Circumcise yourselves to God and remove the foreskins of your heart, you people of Judah and you people of Jerusalem' (Jeremiah 4:4). 'True circumcision is not external ... True circumcision is of the heart; a spiritual matter, not a literal matter' (Romans 2:28 & 29). The Gentiles who lived in Israel at the time of the early church were clearly searching for God, because they were in the synagogues where Paul preached. Gentiles in the synagogues? 'Paul spoke (argued) in the synagogue every Sabbath and won over for the Kingdom, both Jews and Gentiles' (Acts 18:4).

The Lord said to Israel: 'If you will obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession from among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine. You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6). Since the death and resurrection of Jesus, all believers, Jews and Gentiles alike have the same privilege of being in the Kingdom. 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellence of Him Who called you out of the kingdom of darkness and into His marvellous light' (1 Peter 2:9).

We should now be able to fully understand the significance and seriousness of the covenant with God, that was sealed with a token of blood and pain. 'Now may the God of peace, Who brought our Lord Jesus out from among the dead; the Great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood that sealed the eternal covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will; and work in you to accomplish that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus our Messiah; to Whom be the glory forever and ever, Amen' (Hebrews 13:20 & 21).

Amen and God bless you.

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