



FEED MY SHEEP

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Man-to-man covenants and marriage covenants *Part 9—The Covenants of the Bible*

As we concluded our analysis of the covenant made between Laban and Jacob, some of us might have wondered if the two men actually cut themselves and mingled their blood. This brings up an important point. At the outset of this series I stated, and I have since reiterated, that covenants are so important to our comprehension of the Scriptures that without understanding about covenants, we are going to forever remain at the level of a baby Christian.

Some might wonder then, well, if they are so important, why does not the Bible itself give more thorough explanations of the various components and features of covenants. It seems like we have to pick up a piece here and find a piece there and put it together, to get a better picture. Well, first of all, we need to always keep in mind that God's Word is like a picture puzzle. It tells us in...

Proverbs 25:2 *It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the honour of kings is to search out a matter.*

So yes, many important doctrines in the Bible are not all set down in one page or one chapter. We often do find a puzzle piece here and another piece over there, but God has endowed us with minds, with intelligence; but that's not enough, is it?

Many very intelligent men and women scoff at the Bible. Why? Because they lack one critical factor. One needs the anointing of God's Holy Spirit to give us that inner guidance and understanding and realization that, "Oh, this is another piece of that puzzle"... about this or that doctrine, whatever the case may be. And in the case of covenants, we do find pieces sprinkled here and there. We must also realize the fact that covenant-

making was well known in the times when the Bible was being written, and thus, every time a covenant is made in the Bible, the Bible account does not necessarily give all the details.

Furthermore, since virtually all cultures and peoples made covenants, we can learn much about them by observing what was done in their practices, even from extra-biblical sources, and this we have done to a great extent in the previous parts of this series.

Plus, we must also remember this, that the word *covenant* comes from the Hebrew word meaning *to cut*, and it might be, that just by the use of the word *covenant*, it implies that the parties were cut for the purpose of blood-mingling. That is, admittedly, a speculation on my part, and it is in no way crucial to the points we are making. But I throw it on the table as a possibility.

For example, Laban and Jacob might have cut their hands or wrists and anointed the stone heap with their blood as part of the sealing of the covenant, just as circumcision was, by this time, already a bloody seal of God's covenant with Abraham.

As time went on, the covenant-making ceremony between two Hebrew men came to include several additional steps. Let me lay them out for you, and as I do, you will come to realize just how *sacred* and how *solemn* and how *powerful* these covenants were.

For illustration sake, I will use myself and a fictional man named Frank. Picture James and Frank as being Hebrew men living in OT times. I want you to visualize yourself there as you witness the ceremony.

First, James and Frank exchange their robes or

coats. In those days, the robe, the outer garment, represented the person and their total personal identity. So by this act of giving each other our coats, James is saying to Frank, "I am giving to you my total self; all that I am and all that I possess are yours." Frank would then do the same. What it really signifies is a merging of our two identities.

The second step is when Frank and James remove their belts and give them to each other as well. Again, this is OT times, so they didn't use skinny, little belts as we do today just to hold up our trousers. Belts in those days were very wide and they served the very important purpose of being essential to carry a man's weapons.

Come to think of it, that is still true to a great extent even today in our military forces, isn't it? They have wide, canvas, web-type belts with ways and methods to clip on a canteen, a pistol, clips of ammo, a knife, perhaps some grenades, etc.

So Frank and James exchange their belts and you can see why that represented an exchange of strength. Because at the same time, Frank and James actually give each other their weapons: their swords, their knives, their bows and arrows.

As they make the exchange, they might say something like: "With this belt and weapons, I pledge to you all my ability and power and strength to protect you and fight your battles with you. Your enemies become my enemies. If anyone seeks to harm you, he will have to deal with me also."

This type of covenant was a pledge to last for life, and often *beyond*, meaning it could be passed on to the offspring of the covenant-makers. It was that serious.

The next step in the ceremony was the shedding of blood and the pledge that accompanied it. Covenant means cutting and this was the actual cutting.

This first cutting involved the sacrifice of one or more animals. So Frank and/or James, or some of their men with them, would cut the animals in half from top to bottom. They would then separate the halves so that there was sufficient space for both James and Frank to walk between the parted halves of the bloody animals.

There might have been several ways that the following ritual was done. Some scholars believe that the two men linked arms and walked between the animals. Others say that they took their place in the middle facing each other between the animal halves. Still

others assert that they stood back-to-back in between the parted animal.

Whether face-to-face or back-to-back, all agree that Frank and James then each walked forward until he had cleared the animal/s, and then each turned to the right so that when they returned to their places, they had traced what we recognize as a figure 8. In Bible numerics, 8 symbolizes a new beginning, so that is certainly appropriate in this case.

But when you lay a figure 8 on its side, in mathematics, what does that symbolize? Infinity, right? Or speaking of time, it would represent eternity. So whether that significance was known way back then, or perhaps that is where the sign originated, all that is open for debate.

In any event, during or at the time of this "walk through death," as it were, Frank and James, realizing that the halves of the dead animal represent each of them, they therefore make additional pledges to each other to the effect that "let me become as this animal if I should ever break this covenant."

But there is yet another element in this portion of the ritual which is highly significant. Since the animal half which represents James is *dead*, it also represents the death of James, in the sense that James has died to his old identity, his old self; and James is now identifying with Frank, his covenant partner, in a *new* walk of life.

Okay, do I see some gears turning in your fertile gray matter? Are there light bulbs flashing on in your mind, as you recall certain New Testament scripture passages? We won't announce those connections just yet, but I am glad that you can see how these rituals shed new light on some well-known passages in the New Covenant scriptures.

Frank and James are not finished yet. The animal blood has already been shed, but now comes the shedding of personal blood. One purpose for this was to place a permanent mark on the body as a sign and seal of the covenant. In the ancient Hebrew culture, the hand included the wrist area, so whether Frank and I cut our palms or our wrists, it worked out the same. After we are cut, we go ahead and do what in the Hebrew culture was called "striking hands." For example, we see in...

Job 17:3 Lay down now, put me in a surety with thee; who is he that will strike hands with me?

You can now recognize that as referring to a cove-

nant, isn't it? I believe I mentioned previously that some believe this is the origin of what we call a "handshake." When we want someone to be a little more reassuring in what they are promising us, we sometimes still in these days say: "let's shake on it."

But sadly, as the decades go by, fewer and fewer people have any understanding of the original sacredness and solemnity of the handshake. At this point then, James and Frank both have blood flowing from their palms or wrists and they strike hands so that the blood mingles. The Bible says that the life is in the blood, and therefore, the mixing of blood is the mixing or merging of two identities into one.

We put off the old person and the two of us become one new person as we each assimilate the identity of the other into our new self. Certainly, we can all see how this has been carried down to the present time in our wedding ceremonies.

But it might also be sparking some new revelations of understanding other New Testament passages as well. John 14, for example. These are words Jesus spoke just before He was crucified.

John 14:20 At that day ye shall know that I *am* in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you.

When Jesus poured out His blood on the cross, He sealed the New Covenant with that precious blood. He told his followers that unless they drank His blood, they would have no life in them. (John, chapter 6.) But He did not mean it literally. What He was saying was that when we commemorate His suffering at the covenant memorial meal, i.e., the Lord's supper, or communion, that when we drink that wine, we are metaphorically or symbolically drinking His blood.

You see, Jesus did not simply slice His hand a little bit and ask Peter and the guys to cut their hands, and then shake on it. If He had done that, only those who literally mingled blood with Him would have become one with Him, and that in a physical sense. No, He poured out all His blood, and gave us the means of drinking His blood in the memorial supper. It is a symbol of our becoming one with Him in a higher and spiritual sense, and yet, it will result ultimately in our resurrection to immortality.

Jesus said these words of covenant *before* He shed His blood, and so it was not yet possible for the fulfillment of His pledge, so that is why He said... At that day you shall know that I *am* in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Do you see that? Isn't that marvelous?!

In Isaiah 49 God likens Himself to a woman and he likens Zion-Israel to a baby boy, and then He had Isaiah write something which will now leap off the page at you in a new light. You will recognize it as *covenant language*.

Isaiah 49: 14 But Zion said, The LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me.

15 Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.

16 Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; ...

Even when the nails pierced our Lord's hands, or more likely through his wrists, even that was fulfilling covenant, wasn't it?

Back to Frank and James, Hebrew men of old. At this point in the ceremony, with all the witnesses still present, Frank and James now face each other for the exchanging of more of the terms and conditions of the covenant. They each in turn might say something to this effect:

"Frank, everything I own is yours: all my cattle, all my fields, all my orchards, all my vineyards. If you should ever need anything, it is our joint property. Just help yourself. And if I should die, all my children become yours to raise, and my wife is yours to care for and provide for."

Of course, the list of assets each man owned would be balanced by the recitation of the list of liabilities of each man as well. The two becoming one means everything is shared, the good and the bad, the assets and the liabilities.

Following the pledges of joint assets and liabilities came the pronouncements of blessings and curses. James and Frank each have their turn as they might say things like: "James, may your family be large, may your fields be fruitful, may your harvests be plentiful, may your health be full of vigor," and so forth. That might go on for several minutes.

Then they would recite the flip side of the coin, as they came up with whatever imprecations they wished: "But if you should ever break this covenant, then let your wife be barren, let your wells run dry, let your crops wither and die, let your cattle become diseased, let your children fall victims to accidents and crimes and wars, and may you go to an early grave with much pain and sickness and sorrow."

This description has been of two Hebrew men in ancient times, but I trust we all can see the many parallels to even our modern Christian wedding ceremonies. The two become one, the mingling of blood, the listing of assets and liabilities, this all has come down to us in the phrases, “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.”

Another feature common to both the ancient Hebrews and to modern weddings is the exchange of names; which really is only one-sided in the marriage covenant. Because God ordained the man to be the head of the household, the woman takes the man’s name, but not vice versa.

But when the covenant-makers were two Hebrew men, being equals, they each took the other’s name and included it with their own. You see, that way an enemy might think twice about creating conflict with James, if he knew that Frank was his covenant partner. It tells the world who you are in covenant with. We will discuss this more as we get into some specific covenants.

There are two more steps in James and Frank’s covenant ceremony. The penultimate is the covenant meal. It could be both a solemn as well as a celebratory feast. Again, our modern wedding banquets are much the same way. Everyone is having a great time, eating, drinking, laughing—but then someone raps his spoon against a water goblet and gets everyone’s attention. The best man then stands up to give a speech.

It is usually a tribute to and a solemn and serious reflection of the lives of the bride and groom. At the end, the best man pronounces a blessing upon newly-covenanted couple in the form of what has now come down to us as simply “the toast.”

And frequently, at another point in the dinner feast, the bride and groom stand at the head table, and therefore, in the sight of all the guests as witnesses. They each have a goblet of wine. She puts her glass of wine to his mouth; he drinks. Then he puts his wine to her lips and she drinks. Do you *see* what that *is*, covenantally-speaking!?

She is drinking his blood and he hers! *The life is in the blood.* Therefore, it symbolizes that that the two become one. He is now in her, and she is in him. And the same thing with the food, which in many weddings that I have attended, is most clearly seen when they cut the cake.

She takes her piece and puts it in his mouth. He takes his piece of cake and puts it in her mouth. Many

times, it becomes a silly scene; but that is only because these ancient meanings have become lost in our culture today. We still perform the rituals, but most of us have had no idea of their astounding significance.

But what beautiful rituals they are, when we really understand their deeper meaning! The final step in James and Frank’s covenant-making ceremony is the monument or memorial. This, as we have already seen, can be the planting of one or more trees, or the erection of a monument of stones, or a pillar, or some other such thing which has great permanence...

Because that is its purpose: to serve as a reminder for many, many years to come of the seriousness and the permanence of the blood covenant. Now that the ceremony is all finished, Frank and James are known as friends. That word had much more meaning in OT times than it does today. We have a much looser definition as to who is our friend.

We have already pointed out the significance of the verse which says that there is a friend which sticks closer than a brother. But now, with all the foregoing percolating into your gray matter, you can perhaps better appreciate the sacred significance of these verses when seen in light of covenants:

Isaiah 41:8 But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend.

Exodus 33:11 And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.

When Judas came to betray Jesus in the Garden,

Matthew 26:50 And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him.

(To be continued.)

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