

What's the Message – Lesson 104

Today's lesson is entitled, "a fresh look at God's covenant with Abraham, and with us."

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Lord, we pray that You would open our eyes to understand more fully the importance of Your covenant with Abraham, and that we would see more clearly the connection of Jesus to that covenant and His atonement for us on the cross. Amen.

Throughout our Old Testament studies I have emphasized God's covenant with Abraham as being the major theme that tied the history of Israel together. Now I expect it will seem strange to our listeners, that here among the lessons we have been studying about Jesus, that I would start this lesson by referring back to the Old Testament and to God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis, chapter 15.

In that chapter we see God adding some details to the covenant He had first announced to Abraham in chapter 12, such as his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and that they would possess this land that stretched out before him. But then Abraham questioned God, asking for a sign that this promise would be sure and certain. And God gives him that sign. However, it is a sign that we are not familiar with, and most people would see it as being a strange event, and wonder what it has to do with anything, let alone the work and purpose of Jesus. So Dale, please read this paraphrase of selected verses from Genesis 15.

Then God spoke to Abraham and said: *I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess. But Abraham said, "O Lord, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" So the Lord said to him, "Bring Me a heifer, a she-goat, and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." Abraham brought all these to Him, cut them in two, and arranged each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.*

Now Teacher, this is not only strange, it makes me think of witchcraft. What in the world is going on here? What does it all mean?

First we need to remember that we are talking here about a God-initiated relationship between Yahweh and those He had chosen to be His own people. The Hebrew word used is **berith**, which we translate into English as “covenant.” But the word “covenant” does not fully convey all the implications and content. A typical man-made covenant would be made between two equal parties. This time, however, we have a **divine berith**, and the two parties are anything but equal.

Secondly, the ceremony that we see here was called the Blood Path, a ritual where the two participants in the covenant confirm, or seal, the agreement in blood. It was a common practice at the time of Abraham, and continued in use for thousands of years thereafter. Life is taken, and blood is drained out into a trench between the two halves of the animal (or animals). The two participants would take turns walking in this blood path . . . to signify that if they failed to keep their portion of the covenant, their blood would similarly be shed. This ceremony marked the significance and importance of a particular covenant. But Dale, there are a couple more verses that we need to understand.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abraham; and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him.

Why would Abraham have such fear that a great dread came upon him? Because he realized that neither he, nor his descendants, could fulfill their obligations under this covenant. This being the case, how could this covenant ever be fulfilled?

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot and a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham and said, “To your descendants I give this land.”

And God gives the answer. The two symbols, the firepot and the blazing torch both are symbols that refer to Yahweh. What this

means is that God would walk through the blood for **both** of them, and by this act says that God will – in fact – shed His blood to make His covenant with Abraham complete, and that the descendants of Abraham would become the blessing to the world that God had called them to be.

Now, let's bring this forward in time to the crucifixion of Jesus. You should recognize that the heifer, goat, ram, dove and pigeon were used in the daily sacrificial offerings at the Temple in Jerusalem, as prescribed by Moses. There would be one sacrifice at 9 in the morning, and a second one at 3 in the afternoon.

Since the crucifixion of Jesus was during the celebration of Passover, the first of the great Jewish feasts, on this day the High Priest – Caiaphas, the same man who had declared Jesus to be a blasphemer and insisted that Pilate crucify Him – would be the one who officiated at the daily sacrifices for the sins of the people. And while that daily morning sacrifice was happening, Jesus, the Lamb of God, was raised up on the cross.

And as Matthew records it in his Gospel, *Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice . . . and yielded up His spirit.*

The ninth hour is 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the precise time of the afternoon sacrifice on the altar of Yahweh. So God was here fulfilling the covenant He had made with Abraham nearly two thousand years before. God shed His blood on our behalf, just as He had promised to do.

Next time we will explore the victory of the cross.

