

Unbreakable Promises

Genesis 15; Galatians 3:15-18

- I. **Seminary work** to write the elements of the Abrahamic Covenant
 - a. Inherit the land
 - b. Numerous descendants
 - c. All nations will be blessed – this will be our focus
- II. **Read Genesis 15**
 - a. Abram is in his tent and the Lord says he will be “his shield and reward.”
 - i. This is the first time “the word of the Lord” is used
 - ii. Protector, refuge
 - iii. All Abram will need for living.
 - iv. Abram essentially say, “But Lord, where is my kids?”
 - b. Jews are reverent to God but not like a westerner. Remember Tevia in the musical, “Fiddler on the roof.” This is an early 20th century Jewish family living in Russia playing out the trials and tribulations associated with getting three daughters married off. In this performance Tevia addresses God several times in a way that is typical of how a Jew speaks to God as “Father.”
 - i. Tevia says something to the effect that he knows God is sovereign and therefore his mule had to come up lame. But did it have to be on Friday? Couldn't it have been on Saturday or Sunday?
 - ii. Tevia says, “Sometimes I think, when it gets too quiet up there, You say to Yourself, ‘What kind of mischief can I play on my friend Tevia.’”
 - iii. Tevai says, “It may sound like I’m complaining, but I’m not. After all, with your help, I’m starving to death!”
 - c. Abram answers as a Jew: “Where is my kids? You promised me kids!”
 - i. Hebrew concept called HUTSPA – intense, persistent, will not quit, will not give up, never let go attitude! Jesus often honors people because of their persistence!

1. Examples: Canaanite woman whose daughter was demon possessed (Matthew 15:21-28). In response Jesus said he had not seen such faith, such Hutspha, even among the Jews.
 2. The woman with the issue of blood who touched the garment of Jesus (Matthew 9:20-22). **Your faith, your hutspha, has healed you.**
- d. In response, God essentially says, “Come outside, I’ll show you” and has Abram look at the stars (v5)
 - e. Then God told him he would inherit the land (v7) but at this time Abram did not even own enough land to bury his wife! In response, Abram essentially says, “Prove it! Or how can this be?”
 - f. What happens next is a covenant, a blood ceremony or blood path. The Hebrew word in v18 to describe this ritual is *berit*, which **literally means, “cutting a covenant.”** It was a very common practice in the desert communities of the Middle East.

III. **Theologically, what is a covenant?**

- a. A covenant is an agreement that brings about a relationship of commitment between God and his people.
- b. God is the one who ratified, or made official, the covenant.

IV. **What are the terms of this covenant?**

- a. **For full effect, this ceremony must be seen through the eyes of a Jew.**
- b. The greater party (God) states what he will do and what you will do.
 - i. God will give the land, numerous descendants and bless nations.
 - ii. Abram is to be perfect – Gen 17:1
- c. The lesser party, Abram, can decline

V. The Ceremony

- a. Abram is asked to bring some animals but does not ask what to do with them. It appears Abram knows what must be done.
- b. Abram lays the half animals so there is a pool or blood path.
- c. Walking through the blood path is saying, "May what was done to these animals be done to me if I do not keep this covenant." The one who failed to keep the covenant paid for it with his life.
- d. **This blood path rite was also typical for arranging marriages in Middle East desert communities and is still practiced today in isolated parts of Egypt.**
- e. Historian Dr. Ray Vander Laan describes in detail the wedding ritual.
 - i. In some Bedouin cultures today, if a man turns out to be a lousy husband, if he's abusive or dishonest or lazy, they don't find him dead; they find his father, at the bottom of a pit, with his throat slit and footprints in his blood."
- f. V12 states that, "a dreadful and great darkness fell upon Abram." No doubt he is scared to death. If he so much as dips his toe into the blood path he is sentencing himself to death! And there will be no land, no descendants and no Messiah!
- g. It is here that the Lord intervenes and takes all of the responsibility and burden for fulfilling the covenant himself.
- h. **A smoking firepot:**
 - i. We know this is God because the greater party always walks through the blood first.
 - ii. Smoke always represents the presence of the Lord
 1. Mt. Sinai covered in smoke (Ex 19:18)
 2. The tabernacle or temple filled with smoke (Is 6:4)
 3. Israel led through the wilderness by a cloud of smoke

i. **A flaming torch:**

- i. Fire always represents God
 1. Burning bush
 2. Pillar of fire guiding the Israelites in the desert
 3. Elijah is carried away by a chariot of fire
 4. The Holy Spirit is seen as tongues of fire in Acts 2
- j. The Lord, symbolized by the flaming torch, passes through the pieces in Abram's place. He stands in, actually walks in, for Abram.
- k. **God is telling Abram, "If you sin, if you're not perfect, if your descendants are not blameless, if you break the covenant in any way, you may do this to me." It was then that God sentenced himself, his Son, to die! Can you imagine Jesus in heaven watching his Father sentence Him to die! Not a word, just a picture.**
- l. The Lord is going to give Abram the land, numerous descendants and be a blessing to the nations. In addition, God will pay the price whether He or Abram or his descendants violates the covenant. Either way, it's on God.

VI. The Old Testament Forward

- a. Old Testament sacrifices continued to use the same five animals
- b. When the blood of animals was thrown against the altar, a Jew was saying to God, "You promised you would pay for my sins. Please keep your promise."
- c. God was so serious about animal sacrifices that He specified how they should be offered in Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
- d. Every single day, at 9am (or mid-morning) and 3 pm (or between the two evenings) an animal was sacrificed where His Name dwelt for Jews everywhere.
- e. Everyday, EVERYDAY, Shabbat, Sabbath, when it rains (get wet), when it snows (you will get cold), when it is hot (I don't care), holidays (especially holidays), every day at 9 and 3 I want a sacrifice.

- f. This ceremony began at the tabernacle, then to Solomon's temple and during the days of Jesus at the temple reconstructed by King Herod.
- g. During the days of Jesus this ritual evolved into something very elaborate.
 - i. A priest standing at the altar with a lamb holding a knife to its throat.
 - ii. Another priest is standing on the highest piece of ground in the temple, called the pinnacle, with a SHOFAR, or horn.
 - iii. Someone in the temple court would be present with an hour-glass or sundial depending on the cloud cover.
 - iv. As the time moved, exactly at 9 and 3 the priest would blow the SHOFAR to announce that the lamb was to be killed and again begging God to not forget His promise.

LET'S LOOK AT ONE OF THOSE DAYS

- i. During the day of Jesus, at Passover, it is recorded that about 2 million people were crowded into Jerusalem. It is 5 minutes to 3. Just outside the city gate near an abandon stone quarry, there were 3 men on crosses and the middle person looked dead. The hour-glass ran and it was 3 pm. The signal was given and again the horn sounded.
- ii. Just then, the man in the middle raised His head and shouted, "It is finished!" Just like His father promised so many years earlier. I think when Jesus said, "It is finished," it was not just His life or His suffering, I think it was ALL finished. I did it! I paid the blood you promised 1800 years earlier!

There are no words to adequately describe the power of the picture of the blood of Almighty God dripping into the dust, just like He promised, to pay for my sins. To think that Jesus was nailed on the cross at 9 and died at 3 should move us to the heart of our soul.

VII. God's Unmerited Favor

- a. God is always the one who initiates relationships with his people
 - i. The loving Father who runs down the road to throw his arms around the Prodigal.
 - ii. The Shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to find the stray.
 - iii. It is always God reaching out to man

VIII. A Challenge

- a. **Resolve to grow strong in your faith**
- b. **Resolve to flee from unbelief**
- c. **Resolve to believe the promises of God**
- d. **HUTSPA**, intense, persistent, will not quit, will not give up, never let go attitude!

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen. (Numbers 6:24-26)

Abram's Animal Ceremony in Genesis 15

An Exegesis of Genesis 15:7-21

The ambiguous images of Genesis 15, when interpreted through the lens of the rest of Holy Scripture and other ancient Jewish documents, serve to point God's children toward the perfectly clear picture of the Father's unmerited grace. The "cutting" of the covenant between God and Abram in Genesis 15:7-21 communicates to us a God who initiates the relationship with his people. The God of this passage is the same caring One who sweeps the house clean searching for the lost coin, the same loving Father who runs down the road to throw his arms around the Prodigal, and the same compassionate Shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to find the stray. It's God who reaches out to man. And God is the one who takes all the responsibility for fulfilling the covenant demands of the relationship.

This project is concerned mainly with the ratification of the covenant between God and Abram as demonstrated in the obscure animal ceremony. I recognize that the birds of prey in Genesis 15:11 and the prophesy of Egyptian slavery in Genesis 15:13-16 contain great theological significance. But the focus of this paper will be on the actual rite of the killing of the animals, the theophany that passed between the pieces and the truths this vision represented to Abram, to Israel, and continues to represent to God's people today.

Through the use of historical evidence and an ample number of related biblical images I will show that Genesis 15 was not always a vague or misunderstood passage. I will attest that the animal ritual was a common practice in the region, that each of the symbols cited was widely recognized and accepted as communicative, and that the original readers of the story clearly comprehended the message of God's mercy and grace.

The ceremony is presented in the context of a couple of "firsts" for Abram and for Scripture. Genesis 15:1 states that the "word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision," the first time the familiar "word of the Lord came..." is used in the Bible and the only time God communicates to Abram / Abraham in a vision.¹ It's clear in the first verse of this passage that, just like in every instance preceding it, God is the one who calls to and seeks out Abram. Abram uses the occasion to question God regarding the promised heirs, the promised great nation, and

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

possession of the promised land that was given in Genesis 12. And the Lord seeks to give Abram confidence in God's word through the animal ceremony.

Abram asks, "How can I know?" And God says, in essence, "I'll show you."

The Lord instructs Abram to bring five animals: a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon. He brings the animals to God and then "cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other" (v.10).

The Hebrew word used in v.18 to describe the ritual is *berit*, which literally means "cutting a covenant." It was a very common practice in the desert communities of the Middle East. And the author assumes it is certainly familiar to Abram and to the readers of the Torah. It's why most scholars speculate that Abram cut up and arranged the animals without the explicit direction from God.² Abram didn't need to be told what to do. He knew what was coming.

The ceremony is linked to the cutting up of animals as found in treaty ratification writings from ancient Mari and Alalakh. In these texts, the participants in the covenant walked through the blood of the animals that collected in the middle of the pieces in order to enact the treaty and curse the one who breaks the promises.³ Second-millennium Hittite texts detail similar procedures for purification purposes, while some first-millennium Aramaic treaties use such a ritual for placing a curse on any violation of the terms.⁴ The Sumerian "*Vulture Stela*" from the middle of the third millennium B.C. describes the use of doves in the cutting of a border agreement between two kings following an armed conflict.⁵ John Calvin held that similar rites were performed when entering into any military alliance or when mustering an army.⁶ The point is that it was a clearly understood practice in that place at that time.

The animals were cut in two and placed opposite each other so that the blood formed a pool, a so-called blood path, in between the pieces as they drained. The two parties---the greater party who establishes the terms of the covenant first, and the lesser party who either accepts or

² Christopher T. Begg, "The Covenantal Dove in Psalm 74:19-20," *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (January 1988): 79. Begg also contends in light of similar ritual practices that, although he didn't cut them in half, Abraham did kill the two birds.

³ John R. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 423.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Begg, 79.

⁶ John Calvin, *Bible Commentary*, Genesis 15, available from "Classic Commentaries" at <http://www.eword.gospelcom.net/comments.html>; Internet.

rejects the terms second---then walked through the blood as a way of saying, “May what was done to these animals be done to me if I do not keep this covenant.”⁷ The one who failed to keep the covenant paid for it with his life.

The other clear biblical example of this type of ritual is found in vivid and chilling language in Jeremiah 34:18-20, “The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces...all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf I will hand over to their enemies...their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field.” Israel had broken a single stipulation of the covenant regarding the treatment of slaves, yet they were guilty of violating the entire covenant. Because of the oath of self-imprecation taken as part of the solemn covenant ceremony, God was holding them accountable.⁸

This blood path rite was also typical for arranging marriages in Middle East desert communities and is still practiced today in isolated parts of Egypt. Historian Dr. Ray Vander Laan describes in detail that the lesser party, the bride’s father in these cases, provides the animal and cuts it in half as Abram does in Genesis 15. The greater party, the groom’s father in these wedding rituals, walks through first, actually stomping barefoot through the blood, promising that his son will be an honorable husband. And if he’s not, he expects to be treated just like the animal. The young woman’s father then performs the same motions, promising that his daughter is a virgin and will make a proper wife. And if she doesn’t, if that part of the covenant is broken, “you may do this to me”---and he stomps through the blood. In some Bedouin cultures today, if a man turns out to be a lousy husband, if he’s abusive or dishonest or lazy, they don’t find him dead; they find his father, at the bottom of a pit, with his throat slit and footprints in his blood.⁹

It’s no wonder a “thick and dreadful darkness” comes over Abram (v.12). Abram has found himself in the middle of a blood path ceremony with Almighty God. As the sun sets, Abram is looking at all this blood, possibly still unsure as to what his terms are going to be in

⁷ John Mark Hicks, *Come to the Table* (Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2002), 28. Although there is no biblical evidence, Hicks assumes the pieces were eaten by Abram after the ceremony as part of a covenantal meal of joy and celebration.

⁸ Andrew J. Dearman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jeremiah / Lamentations*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 311.

⁹ Dr. Ray Vander Laan, “Blood Path” and “Cutting a Covenant,” available from <http://www.followtherabbi.com.html>; Internet.

the covenant, and he's terrified. Maybe God has already told Abram what he expects from him. When the covenant is reaffirmed and circumcision added in Genesis 17, it's clear that God demands Abram to "walk before me and be blameless" (17:1). If that is Abram's responsibility in the agreement at this stage, it is evident why he is frightened. A horror of great darkness falls on him.¹⁰

And that's when the Lord takes all the responsibilities and the burden for fulfilling the covenant on himself.

As Abram looks on in a petrified trance of terror, God appears in the darkness as a smoking firepot. Abram knows it is God and the author of Genesis assumes his readers know it's God because the greater party always walks through the blood first and because smoke always represents the presence of the Lord. When God came to Mt. Sinai it was covered in smoke (Ex.19:18). Each time God came to the tabernacle or the temple it filled with smoke (Isaiah 6:4). God led his people through the wilderness by a cloud of smoke. Isaiah says the Lord comes in dense clouds of smoke (Isaiah 30:27). The prophet Joel (Joel 2:30) and the apostle Peter (Acts 2:19) speak of God coming with billows of smoke. The temple is filled with smoke "from the glory of God and his power" (Rev.15:8).

The picture is crystal clear to God's people. The Lord loves Abram so much he promises to give him a son, descendants, land, and eventually through him the Messiah to save the world. And he symbolically tramples barefoot through the blood to give Abram assurance and confidence that he can trust the word of the Lord. God doesn't rebuke or otherwise chastise Abram for questioning him or asking for a sign. He just gives Abram what he needs in the form of a common, yet deadly serious, ritual.

And then the Lord does something that maybe Abram wasn't expecting. At the point in the ceremony in which the lesser party, Abram, would step into the blood and vow to be treated like the eviscerated animals if he were to violate the terms, God intervenes. The Lord steps in. Figuratively. Literally.

A blazing torch appears---a flaming torch, a lamp of fire---and it also represents God. Fire always represents God. From the burning bush to the pillar of fire God uses to guide his

¹⁰ Matthew Henry, *Concise Commentary on the Bible*, Genesis 15, available from "Classic Commentaries" at <http://eword.gospelcom.net/comments.html>; Internet.

people in the desert. Elijah was carried away to God by a chariot of fire pulled by horses of fire (2 Kings 2:11). The glory of the Lord looks like a consuming fire (Ex. 24:17). The prophets write that God's tongue is a fire (Isaiah 30:27) and the word of God is like fire (Jer. 23:29). It was tongues of fire that represented God's Spirit in Acts 2. And Hebrews 12:29 declares that "our God is a consuming fire."

And the Lord, symbolized by the blazing torch, passes through the pieces in Abram's place. He stands in, actually walks in, for Abram. If the Genesis 17 condition applies here, God is telling Abram, "If you sin, if you're not perfect, if your descendents are not blameless, if you break the covenant in any way, you may do this to me." And it's at that point that God sentences himself, his Son, to die.

There was no doubt that Abram and his descendents were going to sin. And so God stood in for him. God walked the path of blood in Abram's place. The promise from the Lord, in addition to the son, the descendents, and the land is that God is going to pay for his people's sins. God pays the price whether he or Abram or his descendents violates the covenant. Either way, it's on God.

The animal ceremony in Genesis 15 and the significance of God passing twice between the pieces cannot be overstated as his people reflect on what the Creator has done for his creation. The first century *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo quotes God as telling Abram at the end of the ritual "this night will be a witness between us that I will not go against my words."¹¹ Yes, what God has promised he will certainly perform. In the scheme of Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch, this story goes a long way in reminding us that God overcomes seemingly insurmountable obstacles---continuous threats to the bearing of children, to the taking of the land---to keep his word. But it's so much more than that.

First, God's perfect promises are free gifts to his people. God is the one who initiates the relationship with us and provides what is needed to maintain it. And we bring nothing to the table. The Father desires to bond eternally with people who consistently reject him. And he's willing to prove his devotion to the relationship by offering his own life. Not only that, but the Lord is willing to pay the price himself for the covenant failures of man. John Darby

¹¹ Christopher T. Begg, "Rereading of the 'Animal Rite' of Genesis 15 in Early Jewish Narratives," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (January 1988): 41.

summarizes by saying “man only receives from God; we have nothing to give to God.”¹² Warren Wiersbe notes “it was God who made promises to Abram, not Abram who made promises to God. The covenant of grace came from the generous heart of God.”¹³

Second, God’s promise to Abram was unconditional. It was not dependent on Abram at all. The covenant stands no matter what the people believe or what they practice. The fulfillment does not depend on man’s faith or faithfulness. Again, Wiersbe says God’s “I AM” is perfectly adequate for man’s “I am not.”¹⁴ We can’t perfectly keep the terms of our covenant with God. It’s impossible. We are completely unable to walk before the Lord and be blameless. But, praise God, that’s not the end of the matter. Our Father made the provision for us long ago. His walking through the blood symbolizes his willingness to stand in for us, to do what is necessary to cover for us, when we violate the terms of the covenant.

At the end of the day, Abram was assured that his own future, the future of his children, and the future of his descendants were firmly in the hands of the covenant God. “On that day,” verse 18 reads, “the Lord made a covenant with Abram.” The point remains the same for Christians under the renewed covenant: God’s word is dependable. It’s perfect. The Lord keeps his promises. Our Father is faithful; and very, very good.

¹² John Darby, *Synopsis of the Bible*, Genesis 15, available from “Classic Commentaries” on <http://www.eword.gospelcom.net/comments.html>; Internet.

¹³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 1, Pentateuch (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2001), 82.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 80.

The Abrahamic Covenant

Abraham had been promised the land, many children and the coming of the Messiah through his line. In short, the world would be blessed through him. God met with Abraham one day while he was in the shade of his tent. Genesis 15:1 says God would be the shield and reward of Abraham. What did God mean? Why say it like this? God is painting a picture here for a Jew and saying that God is the prize money for Abraham. God will be for Abraham all that he needs for living. God will protect him from what is coming. It should be understood that Abraham is totally Jewish and God is speaking to him as a Jew. Although Jews are very reverent when speaking to God in prayer, they do it differently than a westerner. Remember 'Tevia' in "Fiddler on the Roof?" He says something to the effect that he knows God is sovereign and his mule therefore needed to come up lame. But did it have to be on Friday? Couldn't it have been on Saturday or Sunday? The Jews talk to God as if He is their literal Father. Going back to the passage, if God were to suddenly speak to you and clearly tell you that He would be your shield and reward, most likely we would be silent or just say thank you. The Jewish response is, "Thank you God, BUT where are the kids? I don't have any children so how is this going to happen? You promised me kids!" In Hebrew this concept is called Hutspa; a verb that means intense, persistent, will not quit, will not give up, will never let go. Today it has more of the meaning of pushy or bossy. Yet in the time of Abraham it was another term for faith. Faith to a Jew is not 'I have faith and I believe' but rather 'I'm going to latch onto this thing and I'm not going to let go no matter what. Often Jesus honored people because of their persistence. Ie. the woman gentile with a sick daughter. In response to this woman Jesus said he had not seen such faith, such Hutspa, even among the Jews. Your daughter is healed. God loves people who passionately love God and will not let go. Peter was walking on the water and begins to sink. Jesus said, "O you of little faith." You give up so quick! No doubt Abraham was thankful for Jesus being his shield and reward but still he had the Hutspa to say, "But God, my kids, you promised me kids."

In response God told Abraham to go outside and look at the stars. That is how many your descendants will be. Notice, God honored Hutspa. God then told Abraham that he would give him all of this land. Now Abraham currently lived in a tent. He didn't own enough land to

bury his wife. God said all of it would be yours one day. What did Abraham say, “But how will I know for sure I’ll get this land? (Prove it!). What happens next is both a covenant and a well known ceremony in the desert culture even to this day.

A covenant is a relationship (not an agreement) between a greater and a lesser party, person or group of people. A covenant has to be between a greater and a lesser. Strictly speaking marriage does not fit this definition. In the Middle East, the terms of the covenant are always given by the greater both for himself and the other party. In other words, the greater party states what he will do and what you will do. The lesser party can decline to accept the terms of the covenant. In Genesis 15:9f God sets out the terms of the covenant. God promises Abraham descendants and one of those descendants will be the future Messiah because ‘all nation will be blessed through you.’ (See genealogy in Matthew 1:1) God’s condition is pretty simple. Abraham is to ‘walk before the Lord and be blameless.’ An English word for this is to be ‘perfect.’ You be perfect and I’ll give you descendants, one of whom will be the future Messiah, as well as the land (Genesis 17:1, 28:3, 35:11). This is the terms: God gives a Messiah and a place to live in obedience. Abraham is asked to be perfect; God’s faithful and obedient servant (Refer 17:1 and chapter 22 where Abraham is asked to sacrifice Isaac). Abraham says ok. The following scene (to ratify the covenant) needs to be placed into the Jewish culture to get the full effect (vs. 9f).

Abraham is asked to get a goat (a male), a ram (probably a sheep), a heifer (a female cow that has not given birth yet), a pigeon and a dove. What is very interesting is that Abraham got the animals and in verse 10f immediately did something with them. He knew what was required to ratify this contract otherwise he would have brought the animals and then asked, “Now what do you want me to do?” Rather, Abraham knew exactly what he was doing and it is a cultural practice used to this day.

This is what Abraham did. He killed them and laid the half cow, sheep and goat and the two dead birds across from each other. The result is the animals bleed and the blood runs into the middle, collecting and coagulating in what could be called a pool or a path. This could be called a blood covenant or a blood ceremony.

This type of ritual is still used in the Bedouin culture. A marriage would be arranged between the son of one family and the daughter of another family. Within marriage the

covenant, the son is considered the greater party and the lesser party (the girl) provides the animal. The animal is killed by cutting the throat and allowing the blood to run onto a rock where it gathers into a small puddle. Then the father of the son, the greater party, steps up to the blood, takes off his sandals and stomped into the blood splattering it all over the place. When done, the girl's father then steps up, takes off his sandals doing the same thing. No one says a word yet much is being said. The father of the son is promising that his son will be several things; maybe hard working, not abusive, a good husband, a good father or something like this. If my son does not keep his word, you may do to me what has been done to this animal. In Bedouin culture and in Egypt, if the son violated this covenant, he would not be killed but rather the father. The father would be taken to the bottom of a wadi (a valley with a dried up creek bed), his throat cut and footprints throughout his blood on the ground. Why? Because the dad said, "If I don't keep this covenant (promise), you may cut my throat and walk in my blood just like we did with the animal. The father of the young woman does the same thing. If this woman is not a virgin, a good wife, a good mother... you may do this to me. This is what Abraham is in the middle of. Think about this. God has promised many descendants, a Messiah coming from his descendants and possession of the land. God is so committed to this that He is ready to stake His life on it. What does Abraham have to do? Be perfect! Abraham must have been thinking, "What have I done?"

Genesis 15:12f is in symbolic form. The phrase, "a thick and dreadful darkness came (fell) over him" is a Hebrew expression that means to be scared out of your mind or terrified. Abraham is standing, looking at this blood and he knows if he puts his little toe in the blood, and he is not perfect, he is a dead man. There will be no descendants, no land and no Jesus. The fact is, we would have no hope even today. There would not have been a Christ to die for our sins, humanly speaking.

In the darkness two symbols appear. The first is called a smoking firepot symbolic of God. Often when God appears there is smoke such as the temple filling with smoke or smoke on Mt. Sinai. We know this first symbol represents God because in this ceremony the greater party always walks first. Now try and picture this scene. God is saying to Abraham, "I love you so much that I will give you descendants, Messiah and the land." Furthermore, Almighty

God, in symbol, is walking through the blood-path, in essence saying, "I love you." No words are spoken, it is all a picture. Now it is Abraham's turn.

The second symbol is a torch; fire. Who does the second symbol stand for? It should be Abraham but not once in the Bible is fire a symbol of a human. Fire is always a symbol of God; burning bush, pillar of fire or our God is a consuming fire. Abraham must have been scared to death and as he began to put his foot in the blood God must have stopped him and said, "Abraham, if you and your descendants are not perfect, you may do this to me!" It was at that moment that God sentenced Jesus Christ to death. There was no doubt that Abraham and his descendants were going to sin. Can you imagine Jesus in heaven watching his Father sentence Him to die! Not a word, just a picture.

For the rest of the Old Testament thousands of sacrifices were offered using the same five animals that Abraham offered. If a Jew knew his theology he knew that the animal sacrifice was not offered to have sins forgiven. When the animal blood was taken and thrown against the altar, you were saying to God, "You promised you would pay for my sins. Please keep your promise." Animal blood stood for the fact that somehow God would remember and pay for my sin. God was so serious about this that in Exodus 29:38-41 and Numbers 28:3-8 (later in Deuteronomy 16:2, 5-6) He specified how he wanted animal sacrifices to be offered. See Exodus 12:6, Deut. 16:1, 3 and 5-6 notes in MacArthur Study Bible.

God said I want you to understand my promise that I will pay for your sins. God wanted the Jews, every single day, at 9 a.m. (or mid-morning, Numbers 28:4) and 3 p.m., (literally, "between the two evenings" Exodus 12:6; 29:38-39; Numbers 28:4) to offer a sacrifice in the place where His Name dwelt (Deut 16:2, 5-7) for Jews everywhere. After the Exodus there eventually came a point where the Passover sacrifices could no longer be slain by every family in their house (see Exodus 12:46). Once this change was made the Passover sacrifices had to be killed at the central place of worship. No matter where you were, in Syria, in Rome or Israel, you knew at 9 and 3, at the place where God put his Name, an animal was being killed, blood was being thrown against the altar (see "New Bible Dictionary," editors Marshall, Millard, Packer and Wiseman, page 872, highlighted in orange, 1996) to say 'God please keep your promise.' You would not believe how many Biblical events from then on happened at 9 and 3. Read the Elijah story on Mt. Carmel; lightning came from heaven at 3 p.m. (I Kings 18:36).

Moses must have said, “Everyday, EVERYDAY, Shabbat, Sabbath, when it rains (get wet), when it snows (you will be cold), when it is hot (I don’t care), holidays (especially holidays), every single day at 9 and 3 I want a sacrifice. This began at the tabernacle, then Solomon’s temple and then in Jesus day the temple that was reconstructed by King Herod.

By the time of Jesus this ceremony had become very elaborate. As it approached 9 or 3 a priest would stand by the altar with a lamb holding a knife to its throat. Another priest would stand on the highest piece of ground in the temple, called the pinnacle. This priest would have in his hands a SHOFAR or horn. Someone in the temple court would be present with an hour-glass or sundial depending on the cloud cover. As the time moved and it eventually hit 9 or 3, a priest would blow the Shofar, made from the horn of a goat, to announce that the lamb was to be killed and again they were begging God to not forget His promise. During Jesus day, at the blowing of the Shofar, all the people in Jerusalem, 80-100K people, and thousands more during the holidays, would stop and stand silent because right after the Shofar would be the shedding of blood. The signal is given, the horn is blown, people stand in silence, the lamb is killed and the blood offered.

Let’s look at one of those days. It was Friday, a holiday, and Josephus, a Jewish historian, said there were 2 million people crowded into Jerusalem. It is 5 minutes to 3. Just outside the city gate near an abandon stone quarry, there were three men on crosses and the middle person looked dead. The hour-glass ran and it was 3:00. The signal was given and again the horn sounded. Just then, the man in the middle raised His head and shouted, “It’s finished!” Just like His father promised so many years earlier. I think when Jesus said, “It is finished,” it was not just His life or His suffering, I think it was ALL finished. I did it! I paid the blood you promised 1800 years earlier! And without saying one word about it Jesus tied the entire Bible together in one picture. There are no words to adequately describe the power of the picture of the blood of Almighty God dripping into the dust, just like He promised to pay for my sins. For 1200 years sacrifices has been offered every single day at 9 and 3. To think that Jesus was nailed on the cross at 9 and died at 3 should move us to the heart of our soul. God is a God of pictures. It is the picture that speaks to the heart.

Some interesting facts not included in this lesson. The Passover lamb was always selected five days before Passover. See MacArthur Study Bible note on Exodus 12:6 – A new day was reckoned from sunset. The lamb would be chosen on the 10th day of Abid [later changed to Nisan, cf. Neh. 2:1 and Esth. 3:7; see also MacArthur's Bible on Matthew 21:9 note] and killed on the 14th day; a total of five days. Ironically, the crowds clearly acknowledged Jesus and his Messianic claims during the Triumphal Entry that was five days before Passover. Jesus entered Jerusalem on Sunday (Palm Sunday or Nisan 9, AD 30) and was crucified on Friday (Good Friday, exactly 483 years after the decree of Artaxerxes mentioned in Daniel 9:24-26, note).