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Preface

In 1975, my wife, Kay, and I visited Reichardt and Elizabeth Taylor, in Uruaçu, Brazil. I was overseeing five churches in the area at the time. Conversation turned to my concern about the lack of enthusiasm and spiritual hunger of so many long-time Christians. I also shared frustration concerning how to encourage on-going vital faith in the church.

In response, Reichardt said, “Maybe this will help,” and gave me a set of cassette tapes by Malcolm Smith. I wondered how a series on the blood covenant could minister to me.

I took the tapes with me on a trip to a little church at Morro Agudo (Pointed Hill) in rural Brazil. I arrived a couple of hours early, trudged up the hill, climbed a tree at the top, and settled into the crook of a limb, overlooking the countryside below.

As I listened to the first cassette, my heart erupted in praise, and I nearly fell out of the tree with excitement over new insights I gained into the Last Supper and of once-obscure Bible passages. Perched on that hilltop, I saw more clearly who I am in Christ and the nature of my relationship with Him. My deeper understanding of the ancient ritual of blood covenanting helped me understand what it means to be one with the living God. Through those messages my walk with the Lord was transformed.

Years of studying the ancient rite of blood covenanting, biblical heroes, and covenants in the Bible further confirmed my conviction that all Christians need to understand the ancient ritual and what it means for us today.

After helping me research and listening to me teach hundreds of sessions on the topic, Kay worked with me to compile what we’ve learned so we can share it with you. Our hope and prayer is that as you read *The Great Exchange*, the insights gained will impact your faith and transform your lives, as it has ours.

Chapter 1



The Ritual of Blood Covenant

As Jesus and His disciples sat around their final Passover meal together, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, gave it to His disciples, and said, “take, eat, this is My body” (Matt. 26:26). Eat my body? What did Jesus mean when He told His disciples to eat His body?

As if that were not strange enough, He then took a cup of wine, gave thanks, and said, “Drink from it all of you, for this is My blood . . .” (Matt. 26:27–28a). Christians have been called cannibals because of Jesus’ invitation to eat His body and drink His blood. Yet, if asked what Jesus was talking about, most Christians could not answer.

Why would He say such a thing to His disciples? Jesus often explained how His teachings applied to life so His listeners would comprehend the message. For example, when telling the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin, Jesus said, “In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). When sharing that the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, He finished by saying, “So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous . . .” (Matt. 13:49–50).

Many parables end with such application. However, Jesus didn’t give an explanation when He shared the story about the man sowing good seed in the field only to have the enemy come behind him and sow tares (weeds)

among the wheat. Later, when the disciples were alone with Jesus, they asked, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field" (Matt. 13:36).

The disciples were not afraid to ask questions. Rather, they sought understanding. So, why didn't they ask for clarification when He told them to eat His body and drink His blood? After all, to us, those are among the most mysterious words that He said.

Many disciples found his message difficult. However, they didn't question his meaning because they understood the significance of eating His flesh and drinking His blood. They knew exactly what Jesus intended. No further explanation was needed.

Jesus was asking His disciples to join with Him in a blood covenant. The ancient rite of cutting a blood covenant was familiar in their society. They knew the ritual and understood the significance of eating flesh and drinking blood as part of a covenant ritual.

As followers of Jesus today, we need to know what it means to eat His body and drink His blood, and to understand the symbolism in our actions as we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, we need to be familiar with the ancient blood covenant ritual behind the ceremony in order to understand the nature of the relationship we have with our Lord.

What Is a Blood Covenant?

A blood covenant is the most binding of agreements. In the East, covenant relationships are even closer and more binding than family ties. Indeed, a friend by covenant is closer than a brother by birth. In the West, we say, "Blood is thicker than water," but the Arabs have a different saying. They say, "blood is thicker than milk." Two children nourished at the same breast are called "milk-brothers,"¹ therefore, people joined by blood covenant are closer than two brothers born from the same parents. In some cultures, a marriage between those whose parents were linked by a blood covenant was deemed incestuous.²

Although the concept of covenant is almost unknown in the Western world today, during biblical times, the people "lived in the atmosphere of covenants as in the air they breathed."³ To people all over the world, it was common practice, and was understood by everyone.⁴ Even in recent history, it was common in many places, including Africa, the Middle East, and among Native Americans. However, as time passed, crucial elements were omitted or changed, leaving only semblances of the ancient ritual.

In history, literature, and in scripture there are many records of making covenants. Covenant "supplies the framework for understanding all parts of

the Old and New Testaments.”⁵ In the Greek, a single word is translated either as “covenant” or “testament.” The very names *Old Testament/Covenant* and *New Testament/Covenant* tell us that covenant is the central theme of God’s Word to us, and yet many of God’s people have been oblivious to the significance of the covenant for centuries.

Covenant speaks of relationship, and a blood covenant forms the closest relationship possible. It is significant that God chose to join with Abram in a blood covenant. It is also meaningful to see the circumstances in which it took place.

Rather than covering all the covenants in Scripture, our focus will be on the Abrahamic Covenant, which is the Old Covenant, and on the New Covenant, which is in Jesus Christ.

Abraham Needed a *What*?

In Genesis 15, Abram was old and childless when God promised him he would have a great reward. In those days, an inheritance was useless without children to pass it on to. Consequently, the Lord assured Abram that his heir would come from his own body, and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. Because Abram believed God’s promise—in spite of his advanced age—he was called righteous.⁶

God then promised to give land to Abram and assured him it would be his. But the land was occupied. How could he take it from those who now possessed it? By that time, Abram had walked over it and seen the fortified cities and the giants there. He was a peaceable man. It was too much for him to imagine that the land on which he was standing would be his. His faith was not big enough to encompass such a promise. It was too much to comprehend.

Abram’s response to God was to question Him.⁷ Abram said, “How shall I know?” The phrase is also translated, “Whereby shall I know?” The questioning word means *what* (interrogative *what*) or *thing*.⁸ Were Abram alive today, we might read that when God spoke to him, he replied, “Say what?”

What Abram asked was, “God, by what can I know that You mean what You just said? God, I need a *what*, a thing, so that I will know.” It is significant that Abram asked a “*what*” question.

What is a pronoun. It takes the place of a noun—a thing that is concrete and has substance. When we’re not sure we can believe God, we want something with substance. A thing we can touch, feel and see—one

that is concrete enough to answer any uncertainty. Something specific that will leave us sure we heard what we think we heard.

That is what Abram was looking for. Something substantive. In two short verses he moved from being a man of faith to a man of uncertainty. He asked God for something concrete, but he left the decision of what to God.

Notice that God did not rebuke Abram for asking. He was neither surprised nor offended by the question. He knew that Abram was having trouble believing, and He wanted to strengthen his faith.

In response to Abram's question, God gave him a *what* by which he could know and believe. He made a blood covenant with him. Through the most sacred of rituals in that society, the doubts were removed from Abram's mind. In fact, God called him the Father of Faith. Because we need the same kind of assurance, we will look at the nature of a blood covenant, at Abram's life, and at others who can teach us what it means to walk in a covenant relationship.

The Nature of a Blood Covenant

When I was a boy I loved to read comic books and go to the movies, especially Westerns. Through them, I learned about Native Americans becoming blood brothers. The mysterious ritual that bonded two people together intrigued me. Seeking the same kind of relationship, a friend and I pricked our fingers and held them together. As we attempted to follow (however poorly) the primitive ritual, we had no idea how ancient it was. Nor did we understand the all-inclusive nature of the commitment made between blood brothers.

Covenants were made for various reasons. Tribal heads often united for protection from a common foe or to strengthen their position through increased land, peoples, or resources. In more recent years, a traveler might join in covenant with a hostile chief in order to insure his safe travels. Henry M. Stanley, who first journeyed to Africa searching for David Livingstone in 1871, made over fifty such covenants in his travels through Africa.⁹ Sometimes two men, like Jonathan and David, cut a blood covenant because they had a special affection for or affinity with each other.*

*Later, covenants were made between Lords and vassals, with each pledging loyalty to the other and each gaining from the relationship. These were called suzerainty treaties. They were an adaptation of the blood covenant, but are different from what we are considering because they were made to ensure the loyalty of the vassal to the Lord.

Through the sacred ritual of blood covenanting, men united in purpose, direction, possessions, riches, poverty, and relationship. With so much at stake, blood covenants were normally established only with friends who were trusted and were of a similar status in society.

The rite was so sacred that witnesses would agree to kill their own friend if he was not faithful to fulfill his vow. The covenant makers also called on nature and on God (or gods) to be their witness(es), and they expected dire consequences if they were unfaithful. “The idea that the sky above one’s head, the land beneath his feet, and the gods of the territory are all prepared to avenge a violation of the covenant was usually enough to guarantee fidelity of both partners.”¹⁰ Thus, the blood covenant became known as an unbreakable covenant.

Marriage is a blood covenant, but is not treated as such because people rarely understand the meaning of the ancient ritual. When Eve was created, God declared, “For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Becoming one flesh is covenant talk.

Jesus confirmed God’s intention that marriage is a blood covenant relationship when He said, “‘Have you not read . . . a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh?’ Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matt. 19:5–6).

The purpose of this book is to look at how the blood covenant affects our relationship with God, so we will not discuss the wedding ceremony further. However, notes have been added through the remainder of this chapter to document how a present day, Western wedding ceremony compares to a blood covenant.*

*Today, signatures of witness are required on a valid marriage license. However, as witnesses sign their names, they are no longer committing themselves to kill their friends should they be unfaithful to their covenant commitment.

The Seven Exchanges of the Ancient Ritual

Seven key elements were included in the solemn pageant of cutting a blood covenant, and the rite was usually held with ritualistic pomp appropriate for a great occasion. There might be some variation in the order of the ritual, but each step is important because each represents a different pledge, or exchange, of the covenant.

1. Exchange of Cloaks

In the exchange of cloaks, with great ceremony, two men stood before witnesses, removed their cloaks, and traded them with each other. The exchange of cloaks signifies an exchange of their possessions and a promise of provision. In essence, as each presented his cloak to the other, he was saying, “All I am and all I possess, I give to you. Everything I have is now yours. You have access to whatever is mine whenever you want it. This includes my possessions, my status in society, my reputation—anything and everything I have now belongs to you. With my possessions, I will care for you and provide for you whenever you are in need.”

Putting on the new cloak represented agreement of the exchange. The two held in common their homes, flocks, bank accounts, servants, and even their families. They were handed over freely, because they belonged to the other. Only the wife was not shared.

In ancient days, the outer garments were made by hand. The quality of the material, the way it was made, how much cloth was used, and the pattern all signified something of the status and occupation of the wearer. Each was distinctive, unique, and personal to the owner, revealing a man’s identity long before his face was distinct. For example, Joseph’s brothers knew Joseph from afar when they saw his multi-colored cloak.¹¹

As men traded cloaks, they also exchanged identity, as the unique robe of each now became the robe of the other. The identity, the resources, and the reputation of the two now became one.*

*A Western wedding ceremony does not include an exchange of cloaks, but traditional marriages do include the concept of shared resources and reputation, where the two become one.

2. Exchange of Weapons

Next, wearing their new cloaks, the two men faced each other and exchanged weapons. They traded bow and arrows, sword, and shield, signifying a promise of giving their strength and protection to the other. With the exchange of weapons they conveyed, “I will give my life to protect you. Your enemies are now my enemies. Your battles are now mine. If you go to war, I will go with you. If anyone comes against you, I will be there for your defense. If anyone attacks you, I will hunt him down and get revenge—even if it costs my life.”

The men in the exchange gave their best as a symbol of giving their all in the defense of each other. Only their best would do as they proclaimed

protection to one another. In offense and in defense, the two would now be as one.*

*A marriage ceremony does not include an exchange of weapons, but it is generally assumed that the husband, as the stronger, will be the protector of his wife and family. A wife is committed to protecting her husband's reputation.

3. Exchange of Names

Two men making a covenant also exchanged a portion of their names. If Nathan Wilson made a covenant with Joshua Stewart, he added the name *Joshua* or *Stewart* to his own name. He then became known as Nathan Joshua Wilson, Nathan Wilson Stewart, or Nathan Joshua Stewart. Joshua Stewart would take part of Nathan Wilson's name into his in the same manner.

The two became known as one, with one more aspect of their identity shared. Whenever one introduced himself, he would also be introducing his blood brother. If one made a commitment or signed his name on a document, the other was included. If one made a pledge to something, he would be pledging his blood brother as well. Each shared with the other in all obligations, liabilities, and advantages of the name.*

*In most cultures there continues to be some kind of sharing of names after marriage. In many, the woman takes part of the man's name. In others, the man also takes on part of the woman's name. Even if names are not exchanged, it is common for obligations, liabilities, and advantages of the union to be shared by both.

Chapter 2



God Cuts a Covenant

Abram needed something with substance, a *what*, to help him believe God's promise of the land. God's response to Abram not only had substance, which formed the foundation of Abram's faith, it also defined the relationship God desired with Abram—and with all who follow him. God cut a covenant with Abram, establishing the most intimate relationship possible. Only through a relationship with the living God could Abram learn that He was faithful and could be trusted.

The Covenant Between God and Man

If we look at the scriptural record of the life of Abram, we can confirm the steps of the ancient ritual. The covenant God cut with Abram is a vivid scriptural record of covenant making.

We get our first insight into their relationship in Genesis 12:1 when God spoke directly to Abram, telling him to leave Haran and continue to the land God would show him. God appeared to Abram again in Genesis 15:1 saying, “After these things, the *word* of the LORD came unto Abram *in a vision, saying*” (KJV, emphasis added). The Hebrew for *word* is *dabar*, which also means *matter*, or *thing*. God didn't just talk to him. Like matter, the word that came to Abram had substance. It was based on pictures, action and deep symbolism. God did not just *say* something to Abram; He came to him in word *and* in vision. More precisely, the word itself was in a vision.

Abram experienced something—something with substance as God cut a blood covenant with him. Generally, a vision uses more of the senses and stirs more emotion. Could it be that the word of God came to Abram in a vision because the Lord wanted to be sure that he heard the message and that he never forgot it? This was important to God and He ensured that Abram heard the word.

1. Exchange of Weapons

“The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you’” (Gen. 15:1a). God is saying to Abram, “I am your shield and protection. I am your defense.” God does not have swords, shields, and armor to exchange in making a blood covenant. He gave Himself instead.

When God told Abram, “I am your protection!” He prefaced His promise with the words, “Do not fear.” With God as his shield, would Abram have anything to fear? God’s word to him was a covenant commitment.

God doesn’t ask anything of Abram at this point—or need anything. If Abram had the best weapons in the world, would God need those for His protection? No. Abram has nothing to give. It is a one-sided exchange because the almighty God does not need or want Abram’s help in His defense.

2. Exchange of Cloaks

God follows the proclamation of protection with, “I am thy exceeding great reward” (Gen. 15:1b KJV). God did not have a cloak to give Abram. If God had given a cloak, symbolizing giving of all He had, no man nor people could contain it all. It is impossible; He made the heavens and the earth. Therefore, God is saying to Abram, “Out of the vastness of who I am, I will reward you.”

If God rewarded Abram, he would be blessed. If He gave him a great reward, his cup would run over. However, God didn’t stop there. He said, “I am thy *exceeding great* reward,” ensuring Abram of provisions more abundant than he would ever need.

The reward Abram would receive from God is even broader than physical provision. In the declaration, “I am thy reward,” God gave Himself. No gift is more precious than the giving of self. And no gift is greater than God giving of Himself.

Because a covenant is an exchange, it would be understood that Abram would also give of himself and all he had to God. Later, Abram was tested by the Lord to see if he gave his all to God.

Abram was in his eighties and Sarai in her seventies when God first told Abram that He would give the land to his descendents.¹ Even as impossible and ridiculous as descendants seemed at his age, he did not ask for clarification.

However, later (Gen. 15:1) when God spoke to Abram of being his shield and his reward, Abram had questions. Could it be He questioned because He heard God talking covenant talk? His reply to God suggests that was the case.

In response to God's declarations, Abram asks, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" . . . "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir?" (Gen. 15:2–3 NIV). He is saying, "God, why would you make covenant with me and give me an exceeding great reward? I don't even have a son to pass it down to. I only have a servant that would inherit everything."

Abram's prompt statement, "But, God, I don't have an heir!" is an indication that he understands God is speaking to him in covenant terms. When men cut a covenant, they become the head of a covenant that passes through the generations. Abram is saying, "What is the use of You being all this to me and bringing me into this kind of relationship, if it is only for me?"

Many would be thrilled to have such a promise for their own consumption, with no thought of generations to come. However, Abram, and the culture of his day, understood blood covenants and had vision for the future. He questioned, "If I don't have anybody to pass it on to, what's the use?"

God responded with a promise, "Then the word [*dabar* = matter, thing] of the LORD came to him." God told Abram that Eliezar, his steward, would not be his heir, but a son from his own body would be. He then took Abram outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then He said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:4–6 NIV). Abram believed what God was saying in spite of the evident physical impossibilities. Believing brought him into right relationship with God.

Earlier when the Lord said He would give the land to Abram and his descendents (Gen. 12:7), Abram didn't question God. However, now, when God told Abram He was going to give him the land, Abram's faith was stretched. God said, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." Abraham responded, "O LORD God, how may I know that I shall possess it?" (Gen. 15:7-8). The Hebrew word for "how" is an interrogative that can be translated, "how?" "what?" or "anything."²

As we discussed in the previous chapter, Abram is asking, "God, how will I know what You are saying is true? By *what* will I know that I will inherit it? Give me something of substance." After seeing the giants and strongholds throughout Canaan, he didn't have faith to believe God could give him the land. Abram needed a thing, a *what*. God told him to go get some animals. He made the covenant to give Abram a *what*. God didn't need to make the covenant. His Word was good without a guarantee. Still, God met Abram in his need for something substantive to help him believe.

Chapter 2 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Read Psalms 18:2, 30, 35 and 28:7.
 - What do these passages ask from us in our relationship with God as our shield?
 - Practically and specifically, what does it mean that God is your shield?
2. Read Genesis 15:1 and Psalms 23:1. How does it change *your* life—your faith and actions—to acknowledge that the living God promised Himself to *you* to be your reward?
3. How does it feel to know that your part in the covenant pageant is symbolized by a turtledove and pigeon (Gen. 15:9–10)?
4. When you celebrate the Lord's Supper, what does God want you to remember, other than that Jesus died on the cross for your sins?
5. God has already given all He has and all that He is to those who choose to be one with Him through Jesus Christ. If you belong to Him, it is already yours. What do you need to do to access it?