

# The New Covenant in His Blood

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Jeremiah 31:31-34, Luke 22:14-20

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It's not really our fault, is it, that even after a brief refresher about covenant two Sundays ago we still live in a culture of people who really don't understand very well what this covenant relationship means. We're unlike the Native Americans of this continent; we're unlike the Mesopotamians going back millennia, to before Abraham and Sarah; unlike those Jewish followers of Jesus around 30 AD in the Upper Room celebrating the Last Supper. We are unlike the children of Israel—David, Moses, Ezra and generations of names unknown to us. We are unlike Africans who even in the last century and I'm sure in this century fully understand, and live in, covenant relationship.

We don't know, so we need to be reminded: what are some of the characteristics defining this odd relationship? (Odd to us, that is: but not to ancients in the Old World, Central America, South America. I don't know about Australia but I'll bet the aborigines and the Maori had blood covenant relationships, too. They knew, and we now know, that a covenant goes beyond a contract—a contract is only as good as the character and the word of one who makes it, and it can be broken.

We know that a covenant is sealed by a sacred oath. (Usually a covenant is initiated by the stronger party to come into partnership, maybe to protect and provide for the weaker.) Each party, however, must freely choose to enter into this covenant which is unbreakable. They negotiate: is it for a lifetime or a year? There is often a name change to reflect the blending of two families, two individuals, two tribes. Always with a covenant there is the shedding of blood. The ancients didn't know everything about the biology of blood, but they did know that without it one would die—"the life is in the blood". So the shedding of blood symbolizes the seriousness, the ultimacy, of this covenant and the penalty under which both parties stand should they break it. There is often then the mingling of blood, whether it's the pinkie fingers of two blood sisters, or the Native Americans who would incise the thumb, or those in the ancient Near East and Africa who would cut on the wrist or forearm and drip the blood of both parties into a basin of some kind with wine or goat's milk. There might be something like one loaf of bread on hand to signify the unity of the two made into one. There was always the exchange of gifts, and a covenant meal—a celebration where the families or clans come and join in and party to celebrate this covenant.

The ancients understood that the covenant bond was more indivisible, more irrevocable, more permanent even than the strongest family ties.

Some of you have heard of Dr. David Livingstone, the Scottish Congregational medical missionary who went to Africa. (Or maybe you've seen the old movie from the 1930's about him). It was 1869; Dr. Livingstone had been altogether out of touch with the West for six years. So another brave man, Henry Morton Stanley, decided to go in after him—and eventually found him.

Some of the details of their meeting in Africa are outlined in E. W. Kenyon's biography "Blood Covenant". It nicely illustrates some anecdotes and some of the features which constitute a covenant relationship. This book mentions that neither Livingstone or Stanley had ever known one single covenant relationship to be broken. Even the worst enemies become trusted friends when they enter into covenant with one another.

Apparently Henry Stanley, on his first trip to find Livingstone, was confronted by a very strong and not entirely peaceful tribe. The chief was not out to kill him, but would not allow Stanley to pass through his territory. Stanley was frustrated, hemmed in, stuck. There was no way to move forward. So his interpreter, who of course was African, said, "Why don't you join in covenant? This chief likes you". Stanley of course asked, "What exactly would that mean?" "It would mean drinking each other's blood". "No thank you", replied Stanley. However, he didn't have many good choices, and before long, he had even fewer. His health was going to pot. His resources were diminishing.

Again the interpreter recommended, "Why don't you now enter into covenant with this powerful chief?" "What would the results be?" asked Stanley. "Everything the chief has will be yours if you are a covenant blood partner." Each party offered a gift. Stanley had only one thing to offer; it cost him a lot. He had to pitch in his white goat. This may not sound like much, but he had dysentery, malaria, who knows what all; he couldn't keep food down. The milk of this white goat was about the only thing keeping him going. But his representative assured him that he only needed offer it to the chief; he would still be allowed to drink the milk from it.

Soon the big day. They gave their sacred promise, their sacred oaths. Upon pain of death Stanley and the chief

entered into this covenant. In exchange for the white goat, guess what Stanley received? An ornamental 7 foot spear (Oh, great—as if he himself was going to run anyone through or scare any of the tribes he comes up against). The chief proceeds. He calls one of his princes. Stanley nominates one from his English retinue as his representative. The priest incises the forearm of the Englishman and the prince. Their blood drips into a cup and Stanley and the chief drink it. The blood is mingled. They are blood brothers. They rub gunpowder into the wounds so that it is indelible; so that anyone they run into knows they are blood brothers to someone.

Now what about that worthless, decorative spear? It turns out that all throughout central Africa, for hundreds and hundreds of miles, tribe after tribe saw this important spear which Stanley was now bearing, recognized it as belonging to the mighty chief, and therefore bowed down before it and asked, “What do you need? How can we help you? How can we provide for you? We recognize you are in covenant with the great chief.” If they mistreated Stanley, they knew they would have to answer to the chief. This is a common pattern for covenant relationships around the ancient world.

Still, if we’re honest, this all strikes us with a pretty big “yuk” factor, no? Children would know this: “Gross. Blood. You drink that?” But what about Jesus? What about this yuk factor. “This is My body. Take and eat it. This is the cup, poured out for you. The cup of My blood. The cup of the new covenant. Sealed in My blood.” Sounds very primitive, not very spiritual for people like us. (You show up, unsuspecting—another Sunday in the House of the Lord. I suspect some of you have been beat up again pretty good this week. Whether it’s the Economy, your personal economy, whether it’s difficulties with a loved one, your health, concerns for those you love; maybe you’re feeling burned out, maybe you’re just barely hanging on and it’s all you can do to just show up, never mind your attitude. Well, God bless you. To show up to worship very important step to be taking).

So, what could this ancient blood ritual have to do with you and me, in this culture, this morning? We’ll come back to this. But what if for now, we consider that the God of the universe who sees all, knows all—knows all your foibles, your tiredness your flaws—and also your faithfulness, your constancy, your courage—what if God, in Jesus Christ His representative, has invited each of you into this sacred covenant with Him. Into this covenant, which is more sacred, more inviolable, than any agreement on earth. What if this is God’s way of reassuring you that you are not alone. You are not fighting your battles alone. Whoever mistreats you, whatever fates come against, you one day will have to

deal with your covenant partner, under whose protection you go. This God stands with you in your struggles and your challenges; not conceptually (“God loves you so honk your horn); not in some desperately “spiritual” hope. If there were a divine Engineer to this cosmos; if there were Anyone in charge; if there were a personal, intelligent, loving sentient being who was in charge—if this weren’t all an accident and a joke—if maybe, maybe this Creator, this powerful God, were aware of you on this little speck of a planet in a corner of the vast universe, one of 7 billion people...Naaah, that’s too farfetched to believe, isn’t it?

But what if? What if this God is reaching out to you in this unbreakable loving commitment to you? What if this God loves you enough to shed His blood for you, to give the life of His Son, Jesus, in order to invite you to stand in covenant relationship to the most High Chief, so that you can keep the Law and live in positive ways, not having to refer back and forth to the written rules. “What do I have to do?” “What’s right?” “What’s wrong?”

This new loving covenant relationship with God will change you from within, until you know. Until you carry a new identity; until you become a different person every day of this lifetime; until you die and then because of His infinite mercy thereafter as well. What if God meant something very reassuring—not just something “yuk” by this covenant invitation to you? (We’ll come back to that).

There is one bit of this ancient covenant ceremony that each one of you who has been married is familiar with. Each one of you who has been to a wedding is more familiar with this than you think. There is a representative, a priest or a pastor. There are two partners, freely choosing and willing to enter into a new relationship with each other. Of course in Christian services we hear “‘til death do you part” or “as long as you both shall live”. It’s negotiated, but often there’s a name change representing two families, two people becoming one. Normally each party has a witness or representative: a best man, a maid or matron of honor. There’s an exchange of the sacred oath: “I do”. (I’ve read—I don’t know if it’s true—that the ring takes the place as a symbol of the old blood incision. Apparently they did believe that a vein from the ring finger goes straight to the heart so there’s a blood connection to the ring). If any of you have been to the wedding reception—there’s that covenant meal—both families and friends come and celebrate. The bride and the groom—they don’t drink their blood mixed in with wine anymore, but they may drink a little champagne and entwine elbows with one another on their first ceremonial drink together. They don’t offer one loaf of bread any longer, but there’s that wedding cake, unbroken until they

first take their piece, and then everyone joins in to eat it to celebrate. (And, however unsubtle for me to mention this a week before Covenant Sunday, every couple is required to turn in their paperwork. They they sign their marriage license and send it in. I've never heard anyone complain about this necessity—except maybe that now the license costs 63 bucks. But no one minds: the paperwork means “We're married now! On purpose! We want the world to know we're in this for good...”)

I think this new covenant, written on our hearts, is a little bit similar to what happens in a marriage relationship. Early on, maybe in the first month, maybe that first year, maybe the first few, you negotiate a little. Things come up. There are temptations, there are unseen frustrations, there are still intriguing people that come along, and what do you do? When you're married, early on especially, you remember your oath, and you say, “Forget it! I have made a sacred promise to my spouse and I am going to keep it—no matter what. I am going to keep my promise. I made it before God, my spouse, and all our witnesses.”

But what happens over the years? The same kinds of things come up. But one day, one year, you notice you no longer have to remember to keep your covenant promise. You have become faithful. It is written on your heart. (This doesn't mean it's always easy. It doesn't mean a husband and wife are necessarily compatible. I don't think God worries much about compatibility. God values covenant faithfulness much more than our comfort. God values our character too much to hope things work out easily).

When it comes to the marriage celebration, we're not surprised at how physical the celebration, the covenant, is. So I hope no one is surprised at how physical the covenant with Jesus is. “Take My body and eat it. Drink this blood. Do this in memory of Me.”... At a wedding what happens? The bride and groom are holding hands. They're kissing. They're putting their rings on one another. They exchange a hug and a kiss. Rodger plays glorious music at the end. They bound down the center aisle together. At the reception, what? Dancing and eating and drinking and joking and hugging. Very physical. So I hope we can get past the “yuk” factor.

Jesus did not say “this is my Spirit”, or “this is my love”, or “this is my commitment”. No. He said “This is my blood I am giving for you”. Why so “unspiritual”? We might as well ask why do the bride and groom stand next to each other? Couldn't they exchange their vows by skyping? Why go to the party and the reception? Couldn't you buy the champagne and goodies and enjoy them in your home without fighting all that traffic? You drive all that distance to see your kids at college? Why? They'll

be back at Christmas anyway. For that matter, why kiss your wife? You already know you love each other.

Why do any of this? Because we're human. We're not just spirits. (So maybe you can anticipate the next step, the ending here, because we're not just spirits, we covenant keepers here this morning... Why would you covenant to worship here? To show up, your body sitting in the pew every Sunday next year that you're within 30 miles. Why would you commit to a small group? You're probably already reading the Bible every day. You're probably already seeing your friends. Why keep showing up? Why go get a mentor or be a mentor? Why tithe 10% of your dollars and your time you're your conversation? Why consider entering into something you'll hear more about next Sunday for Advent? The possibility of a huge church-wide involvement to be a Christmas present to those in our community—with a number of different opportunities you'll be hearing about shortly. All these things that we can do.

Why turn in your covenant to be part of this church? (Of course whether you do so or not is between you and God). But before you get even more busy, before you feel more pressured or more manipulated to turn in your covenant and commit to more activity, there is a responsibility that comes first. Imagine again, the God of the universe intentionally choosing you, inviting you to join Him in the deepest, most enduring personal relationship that exists in all human history—a covenant relationship with Jesus, His son, serving as representative. He cannot break His promise. Jesus, who had already shed his blood, has offered the cup, inviting you and me to respond ever more fully so that our characters, our identities our lives, are more and more changed. In a few moments you'll have a chance, once again, to respond, to become His partner, in this New Covenant. Jesus offers to fill you with the Holy Spirit and make new your heart all over again.

His eternal riches are not received by working longer hours, worrying more, trying harder. These are the claims of the enemy chief. All this self-generated and self-directed energy leads to feeling frustrated, hemmed in, stuck. We see no way forward. God promises nothing to those who strive to do miracles of faithfulness, even for His sake. His promise is to those who come to him empty, in need, with persistence.

Of course your oath is never secure enough; your effort is never strong enough, your motives are never pure enough—but still Jesus invites you into covenant union.

Of course you may feel lukewarm; of course you may not feel very forgiven or very worthy or very holy—all the more wonderful that the Great Chief has chosen you.

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(Remember: there is no instance where even the most vehement enemy failed to become permanent friend in covenant relationship.)

You have been given the royal spear. It does not guarantee you comfort or good health (Stanley, possessing it, still suffered from numerous ailments; still came upon unfordable rivers and impassable mountains). But it means you belong to the High Chief, and He is with you wherever you go. Anyone mistreating you will, in the end, have to deal with Him.

The final paradox: God grants you the blessings of the New Covenant not as you earn them or strive after them—but as you approach, eager to be filled, desperately hungry for more of him. But because God is faithful to keep covenant with you. However you are feeling—never mind whether you feel strong or weak, forgiven or sin-stuck, tired or excited. Never mind what you feel or don't feel—Are you ready to give up your own white goat, ready to let go of whatever is holding you back?

Refocus on His covenant faithfulness. Enter into the New Covenant; enter into His Kingdom. Not because you are particularly trusting or worthy—but because you come in weakness and maybe fear and trembling, and even desperation. There is no other way in.

“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who has promised is faithful.”

## **Jeremiah 31:31-34**

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, 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 ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my Law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

## **Luke 22:14-20**

When the hour came, Jesus took His place at the table, and the apostles with Him. He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.”

Then He took a cup, and after giving thanks He said,

“Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”

Then He took a loaf of bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me.” And He did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the New Covenant in My blood.”