

The Language of Faith: Part Three

Speaker: Tim Mackie

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible, and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, this is the third of a three-part series that represents a teaching series I was a part of, at Door of Hope church, when I served as a teaching pastor there. We took some of the most common vocabulary words in the Bible, and Christian faith—and words that are also, at the same time, really misunderstood, or underused in our culture.

In this teaching, we're exploring the biblical word "covenant," and how it's *crucially* important for understanding the storyline, architecture, of the whole story of the Bible. And it really only gets used in a small number of ways in modern English. So there you go. We're trying to recover this really important word and concept. And hopefully this is illuminating and helpful for you. There you go—let's dive into the teaching.

[Musical Break (01:49—1:53)]

Today we're going to look at a word and idea that—it didn't even cross your mind as you were driving or riding your bike here today. And that's the word “thanksgiving.” No, I'm joking, I'm joking. I wouldn't do that to you. That's too cliché.

So no, we're talking about the word and the concept of “covenant.” Covenant. My hunch is that, when you think of Christianity and what Christians believe, a whole bunch of words rise right to the top, and “covenant” is not one of them. It's probably not even in your top twenty.

But the reason why I wanted to put it into the series is because it ought to be. [Tim laughs] It actually ought to be, like, in the top five. It's one of the most important words for understanding how a follower of Jesus sees themselves, sees the world, and sees God. It's a crucially important word and concept.

And it's interesting, there's actually—in our culture—Western culture—there's only one ceremony, or institution, where the word “covenant” even gets used, maybe. What am I talking about? Yeah, marriage—weddings, weddings. But usually religious weddings, right? Like you don't often hear that word if none of the people are religious, you know, participating in the wedding. It's a “religious marriage” term now, in our culture—and that's too bad. We're missing out on so much depth of what's happening in the Christian faith.

So, first things first. [Tim refers to visual] Let me just put a run-of-the-mill occurrence of the word and concept of “covenant” up in front of you. Literally pulled, at random, from many, many places. It's a story that'll, at least kind of, get “on the table” what we're talking about when we talk about the biblical idea of “covenant.” It's from First Kings, chapter 5—your favorite book of the Bible.

So “Hiram, king of Tyre, kept Solomon supplied with all of the cedar and juniper logs that he wanted. And Solomon gave Hiram 100,000 bushels of wheat as food for his household, in addition to 110,000 gallons of pressed-olive oil. Solomon continued to do this for Hiram year after year. The Lord gave Solomon wisdom, just as he promised him. And there were peaceful relations between Hiram and Solomon. The two of them made a covenant.”

[Tim laughs] It's a riveting story. I understand. [Jokingly] You're all like, “*What happens next?*” [Tim laughs] They made a covenant. That's what happened. So the reason why I'm showing this to you is just—their covenant, you know, like in our understanding—religious marriages, or something like that—our first thought is something *sacred* and

transcendent about it. But there are a number of times where the word and concept occurs in stories just like this, all through the Bible.

It's two parties—individuals, in this case, kings—and they are forming a partnership between their kingdoms, their neighboring kingdoms. So Solomon's king of Israel—corresponds to modern-day Israel-Palestine. Tyre is roughly the area of modern-day Lebanon. So there's neighboring kingdoms.

Solomon's got a whole lot of wheat and olive oil—still true today, of that part of the eastern Mediterranean. And Lebanon, still today, produces enormous amounts of cedar and juniper, at least 3,000 years ago. So these two kingdoms—each of them has a unique resource that they have an abundance of. They partner together to help each other—right?—to form a “unified front.” We would call this a “trade agreement,” or something like that.

But the biblical word—at least in English, how it gets translated—is “covenant.” *Covenant*. Now this might seem boring to you, but it's helpful because it's not simply a contract. This is two people representing, like, people groups and their resources, and they're *binding* themselves together, year after year after year, for each other's benefit and to accomplish something together, right? To be this unified, kind of, economic force, here, in the Eastern Mediterranean—there you go.

That at least gives us a window into the most basic meaning of the word. Let me just throw it up here. Hebrew and Greek, you know me. Feel free to zone out for a second, if you want, but you'll regret it—trust me. So in Hebrew—three-quarters of the Bible sitting in front of you is written in Hebrew. It's called the Old Testament—it's what Christians call it. Jewish tradition is just called “the Bible” or “the Hebrew Bible.”

So in Hebrew, all the times this word occurs, it's the Hebrew word—not *berit*, don't say [Tim sounds word out phonetically] *berit*. Say *berit*—you've got to roll the “r.” *Berit*. *Berit*—yeah, *berit*. And then the last quarter of your Bible, called the New Testament, was written—still by Jewish authors—but in Greek, the language of the day. And in Greek, you pronounce this word *diatheke*, *diatheke*. [Tim sounds word out phonetically] Not *diatheke*, *diatheke*. All right, *berit* and *diatheke*.

So what are we talking about? Partnerships. A covenant is the formalizing [of] this relationship. They could just coexist and give logs and wheat to each other, but they *formalize* it—like, they draw it up. There's a *legal* element to it. But it's also personal. Like, they're neighboring kingdoms—they have to coexist together. And so they're going to begin sharing their relationships—and they had a really positive friendship between the two of them.

So it's more than just, like—if you sign a business contract, you also don't sign up, like, “We'll trade wheat and logs and . . . we have to be best friends,” or something like—

that's usually not part of a business contract. But in this case, there is a relationship: a peaceful, friendly relationship. It's a part of it. It's a covenant, a biblical covenant.

This is also the word used to describe what Israelite men and women did when they got married. “Covenant” *is* the word that the Old Testament uses to describe marriage. Here's a couple of examples. One and—actually both of them are cases where the author is describing somebody being *unfaithful* to the marriage covenant.

So Malachi is angry at a group of Israelite men who were bailing on their wives for no good reason. And so he says, “The Lord is a witness between you and the wife of your youth. You've been unfaithful to her, even though she's your partner, the wife of your covenant.” So this marriage is about two different individuals. They both bring unique things—just like Hiram and Solomon—they bring unique things that the other cannot bring.

And together, this partnership can accomplish new, unrealizable things if they weren't in the relationship together. So in a marriage, in the Bible, is deeply connected to procreation. You can't produce humans sitting alone in a corner, in a room by yourself—I trust that's not news to you. So in the biblical vision—so before God, these two, unique “others” come together. And it's not, however, just a business relationship. God's involved—do you see this here? God's a witness.

So whether Hiram and Solomon, you know, break their treatment, or as they say, their “agreement,” or their “covenant,” it's only going to last five years—when the covenant ends, it doesn't seem like God's going to care for Solomon and Hiram. But it does seem like God cares about this one.

So this is a covenant between an Israelite man and an Israelite woman, and then before God in some way. Because, look at Proverbs 2, which is describing an Israelite woman who's leaving her marriage for an illegitimate reason. It describes her as “abandoning the partner of her youth, and her covenant before God.” So this covenant wasn't *just* with her Israelite husband. It was also a covenant with and before God.

So there's some covenants that we would call, like, “contracts”—Hiram and Solomon. There's some covenants that have a “sacred” quality to them—that's marriage—the biblical vision of marriage—because through that covenant, God's own life and love is symbolized in the creation of new life, and the family, and so on. But in both cases, the common denominator is a partnership to accomplish something that couldn't be accomplished by themselves.

Now, if I were you, that would be interesting. You might be slightly bored at this point and I *wouldn't* hold it against you. So here's why I'm trying to get all this on the table. These are random stories and passages—marriage, and Solomon, or whatever. Here's what's most important and most interesting about this word in the Bible. The character

in the Bible who makes the first covenant in the storyline of the Bible—if you start at page one—who's the first person who makes a covenant? It's God. Who's the second person who initiates a covenant in the Bible? It's God.

Who's the third person? Actually, it's Abram, with a guy named Abimelech. They're having a dispute about a well—so don't think about that one. [Tim laughs] Think about the third one and the fourth one, which is God. The first and most-repeated covenant maker in the story of the Bible is God. The reason why this matters to the Christian faith is because “covenant” is actually one of the most *important* ways that ties together the *whole* storyline of the Bible, from the front to the back.

As we're going to see in a little bit, Jesus drew upon the language and the idea of “God's covenant promises” to describe himself and what he was here to do. God's covenant promises are what drive the whole story of the Bible, and it's at the *center* of the Christian faith. Now here's what I could do and what I sometimes often—what I sometimes often—what I sometimes do. What I often do—either one, take your pick, you be the judge.

What I often do at this point in the message is tell the whole story of the Bible. And it usually takes me about fifteen minutes. [Tim laughs] But I'm not going to do that, because I have some other things that I want to do. And on this topic, my friend John Collins and I—who's my partner in the BibleProject—we worked hard to make a video that does the whole thing in five minutes. That's much more enjoyable [Tim laughs] than just sitting here listening to me. So shall we watch it? Yes, totally.

It'll get a whole thing on the table. And then it'll give us, I think, a frame of mind to dive into the biblical story in the book of Genesis. And caveat: we've gotten a lot of feedback about this video because we depict God, metaphorically, as an old man. And some people don't like that. They think it's sacrilegious.

Our response has been: it's a metaphor, obviously—because God's also depicted as a woman in labor in the prophet Hosea, for goodness sake. So—I can't wait to make that video, right? [Tim laughs] So it's a metaphor, *obviously*—but it's a biblical metaphor, from Daniel 7, Revelation 4 and 5, about God as “the old, wise, Ancient of Days.” That's where we're going. So don't let that hang you up from the main point of the video. Okay, that's the caveat. Let's go ahead and watch it.

[video clip from the BibleProject video titled *Covenants* begins (13:12)]

Jon: If you've been around Christians, you've probably heard of the idea of having a personal relationship with God, which can mean different things in the Bible, like having God as a friend, or your father, or maybe your teacher.

Tim: But there is one particular way that the Bible talks about this relationship that you find all over, but, strangely, we don't talk about it that much, and that's the idea of a partnership with God.

Jon: A partnership, like working alongside someone to accomplish a goal together.

Tim: Right, and this is actually what you see at the beginning of the Bible. God creates this good world full of all this potential. And then God appoints these unique creatures—humans—as his partners in bringing more and more goodness out of all that potential.

Jon: But the humans don't want to partner with God. They rebel and try to create a world on their own terms.

Tim: And so this broken partnership is the Bible's explanation for why we're stuck in a world of corruption and injustice and the tragedy of death.

Jon: It's not like there's just one or two humans who have bailed on this relationship. In the story of the Bible, everyone has abandoned the partnership with God.

Tim: So what God does is select a smaller group of people out of the many, and he makes a new partnership with them called a covenant. And in a covenant, God makes promises and then, in exchange, asks his partner to fulfill certain commitments. And the purpose of all of this is to somehow use this covenant relationship to renew his partnership with everybody else.

Jon: Now there are actually four times in the Old Testament that we're told God initiates a covenant relationship—with Noah, Abraham, the nation of Israel, and King David.

Tim: And it's through these that God is forming a covenant family into which all people will eventually be invited.

Jon: So let's see how these work. The first one is with Noah.

Tim: So in this story, God has just brought the flood to cleanse the world of humanity's corruption, and Noah and his family are the only ones left. And so God makes a covenant with Noah, saying, "Listen, I know that humans will continue to be evil, but despite that, I'm not going to destroy it like this again. Instead, the earth will be this reliable place for us to work together."

Jon: Great! So what does Noah have to do?

Tim: Nothing. And that's what's so interesting about this first covenant—is that God is promising to be faithful, even though he knows humans won't be.

Jon: The next time we see God make a covenant is with a man named Abraham. God chooses him—promises to bless him, give him a large family, lots of land where they can flourish.

Tim: And in return, God asks Abraham to trust him and train up his family to do what is right and just. And the whole reason for this covenant is that God says somehow he's going to bring his blessing to all families of the world through this one family.

Jon: So that's Abraham. The next time we see God make a covenant is when Abraham's family has grown into the tribe of Israel.

Tim: And this covenant is with the whole tribe. God asks them to obey a set of laws, which are these guidelines for living well as a community of God's partners. And if they do this, then God promises to bless them, and then they will become a people who represent him to the rest of humanity.

Jon: That's the covenant with Israel. The last covenant is with King David.

Tim: Yeah. The tribe of Israel has become a large nation ruled by David, and God asks David and his descendants to partner with him by leading Israel and obeying the laws and doing what is just and right. And God promises that, one day, one of David's sons will come and extend God's Kingdom of peace and blessing over all the nations.

Jon: So those are the four covenants that God makes in order to restore his partnership with the whole world.

Tim: But here's what happens: Israel breaks the covenant. They worship other gods, they allow horrible injustice, and so they lose their land and are forced off into exile.

Jon: So it seems hopeless, but during this time, Israel's prophets talked about a day when God would restore these covenants in spite of Israel's failure—somehow.

Tim: Yeah. They called it the new covenant. And this is actually what's so interesting about Jesus is that he's introduced into this story as the one who fulfills all of these covenant relationships. We are told that he's from the family of Abraham, and so he will bring the blessings of that family to the whole world. We are told that he's the faithful Israelite who is able to truly obey the law. And we're told that he's the king from the line of David. And so he goes about extending God's Kingdom of justice and peace to all.

Jon: That's really remarkable for one guy.

Tim: Yeah, and what it highlights is perhaps the most surprising claim of all made about this man—that Jesus is no mere human, but rather God become human. And God did this in order to be that faithful covenant partner that we are all made to be but have failed to be. And so through Jesus, God has opened up a way for anyone to be in a renewed partnership with him.

Jon: So Jesus calls people to follow him, and become part of his new covenant family.

Tim: And despite their failures, Jesus is committed to making them into partners who are becoming more and more faithful.

Jon: The story of the Bible ends with a vision of a fully renewed world full of goodness and peace.

Tim: And there's this renewed humanity there, partnering together with God to expand the goodness of his creation. So the end of the Bible's story is really a new beginning.

[video clip from the BibleProject video titled *Covenants* ends (18:23)]

Yeah. All right. That was more interesting, wasn't it—than just me talking. Do you guys get it? Do you see why this is so important? This word represents something about God's essence or nature: that God is a being whose nature it is to share—to share generously. And the first pages of the Bible depict this incredible picture of the beautiful mind and power that's behind all that is, and with whom humans—as the pinnacle of God's good world—are invited into a partnership that—the whole point is that God wants to share existence with others.

And that he wants those others—namely, humans—to represent his image into the creation—to partner together—so that this world that we inhabit can become something it wouldn't by itself. It's of two parties genuinely contributing to the future of this project and goal together. That's what God wants.

And so the whole plotline of the Bible is: this is about this “fractured partnership.” And I mean—look at—it's long, you guys. Like, why is it so long? It's so long because, first of all, humans keep failing, like, their end as partners. And then the character of God is to just keep faithful, and to keep committed, and to keep working forward his great purpose.

And the whole plot tension comes together in this moment that we tried to—we're at the limits of language and visual metaphors, right?—of: that God becomes embodied as the one faithful human covenant partner that we are all made to be but failed to be: the person of Jesus.

And so Jesus represents this culmination of the whole storyline of: he *is* the faithful covenant partner, and he's opening up a new family, where you and I can find ourselves recreated as faithful human beings, who are becoming who God made us to be. [Tim says with joy] This is the *heartbeat* of the whole biblical story: this covenant, this covenant.

So here's what I want to do with all that in mind: I just want to look at one crucially important, covenant-making story in the first book of the Bible. And you're just going to see it leap—all of this—is going to leap right off the page. And it's going to land us right at the Last Supper with Jesus, which will lead us into taking the bread and the cup together—you guys with me? That's our mission.

Why don't you turn to the first book of the Bible, Genesis, chapter 15—which is not on page fifteen, at least not in my Bible. But I have—you know, our Bibles are outlined like no other book that we like to read. This cheap, thin *onion paper*—you know? And then this . . . columns? I don't like to read books with columns, do you? But your Bible's format—anyway. So somehow, chapter 15 is on page twelve, but there you go. I wish it were on page fifteen, but there you have it.

Okay, so Genesis, chapter 15, first words: “After this”—[Tim laughs] pause. Dear reader, the question that occurs to you is, “After what?” [Tim laughs] Okay, so we're in a group of stories about a guy named Abram—he was in the videos—he's later going to be named Abraham. *After what?* So God called him from his land, way out east, in what we today call “Iraq” in the Middle East, to journey west, because God said through him and his family, God was somehow going to restore blessing to “all the nations of the world.”

Then after that, Lot—he didn't leave his whole family. He ended up taking his nephew along—what's his nephew's name? And then Lot ends up taking his sheep down into this region and gets caught up in a small civil war happening between a bunch of small—they called themselves “kings,” but what they were the king of was their city. This is called “city-state” kings. It was how things worked back then.

So anyway, Lot ends up getting caught in the crossfire of the civil war between a bunch of different city leaders, and he gets kidnapped and captured. And so, in the story right before the one that we're reading, Abram does this covert, night-guerrilla operation. He gets 318 commandos [Tim laughs], and he goes in the middle of the night, and he rescues Lot, and he gets all of his stuff back. That *just* happened—you with me? That *just* happened.

“After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. ‘Don't be afraid, Abram.’” And now you understand why he's afraid? You just performed a covert operation to steal your stuff back from five warlords. How are *you* feeling about your life when the next morning—[Tim laughs] you know?—you're on their “most wanted list”? Kind of—that's what's happening here. Okay.

So “Abram, don't be afraid. It's going to be okay. I am your shield. I am your very great reward.” Now the protection stuff warms your heart if you're Abram, right? You're like, “Oh, that's good. That was a bad night. You know, I made it back alive. Now those guys are out to get me. Thank you. I don't want to be afraid. You're my shield—but you're my

reward? You're my future reward? Well, speaking of future rewards, God. Do you remember when you appeared and spoke to me a couple [of] decades ago?" And he goes on.

But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, what is that reward? What can you give me? I still don't have any kids." So the promise was that he and his wife would produce children, and that their family would become so huge—he's going to become a people group and then a nation. Right? That was what God said to him. And so they are a couple of decades into this—he left his home—and what do they still not have? Any children. So "I'm your future reward, Abram."

"That's very nice, God. Thank you. *So how about the kid thing?* Right? I remain childless. And so, at the moment, the one who's going to inherit all my estate is this guy, Eleazar of Damascus," who I'm sure was a very nice man. Right? *But* that's not what God said was going to happen.

So Abram said, "You've given me no children, and so it's this servant in my house who's going to be my heir." So again, if you've been reading through the stories about Abraham, he's in, like—he's like great-grandpa age. [Tim laughs] You know what I'm saying? They're in their nineties—he and his wife, Sarah. You just imagine how they received this promise even still, like, in their seventies or late sixties—and now we're decades . . . and still nothing's happened.

So the word of the Lord came to him, "No, Eleazar's *not* going to be your heir. A son—a son of your own flesh and blood is going to be your heir." Then he took him—which must certainly mean "God took Abram outside." Abram didn't take God outside—[Tim laughs] right? I think he was already there. So "God took Abram outside and said, 'Look up—look up into the sky and count the stars.'"

Now we live in Portland, which means this time of year, we rarely see the stars—[Tim laughs] right?—because of the cloud cover. And then, if you live in the city, even then it's the light pollution, and so on. So let me just—you know, pulled at random from Google Images, just—here's what most humans have looked at for most of human history, when they didn't live with so much light pollution. And this is just one small sliver of a Hubble Space Telescope photograph—are you with me?

"Look up and count the stars." The point's obvious, isn't it? The point's obvious. And God says it, "If indeed you *can* count them." [Tim laughs] That's what God says. So *look up at the stars and count them*. "Yeah, I can't do that. I'm not able to count all of those."

And then God says this, "This is what your descendants will be like." And this is just one—I mean, you're just looking at a screen. [Tim laughs] You know? Like, are you with me? So go out to the middle of nowhere, you're just overwhelmed by the density of stars—hundreds, millions of them. It's just unbelievable.

And that's the promise to a ninety-year-old man [Tim laughs] and his wife. They are decades into trusting a promise that hasn't come to fulfillment yet. And God takes him out and shows him this and says, "Yep, the promise is still good. That's what your family's going to be like."

So just stop—this story is so brilliantly told. It's told slowly, economically. [Tim laughs] Doesn't go on and on. Everything—every word counts. And you just invite yourself into the emotional journey of these characters. First, he's scared for his life. [Tim laughs] He got involved in a regional war.

And now he's reflecting—think—what this promise for decades—he's been sitting with the hope of having children, *unrealized*. There's many people in our church community who know that story very well because you're living it. It's a very painful place to be. And God conjures it all up again by pointing to the sky.

And what is Abram's response to this promise—this, as we're going to see, "covenant promise"—that God is making? What would be your response? *Right? Right?* You're a great-grandpa, and grandma, when you're hearing this, like, "What?" I'm sorry—the age. You're not a great-grandpa. That's the whole point—I'm sorry, it just hit me. It's bad. You're *the age*, right? You're in your nineties, for goodness sake. It doesn't make any sense at all.

Look at Abram's response. It's so remarkable. The story moves me every time I work through it and really ponder what's happening here. What is Abram's response? "Abram believed the Lord." Surely there was some "roller coaster" happening before he got to this point—you know? We're not told. We're just told of, just, this, like, bold, irrational, radical level of trust. He says, "All right, *deal*." It's this posture of radical trust in God's generosity. And then look what God's response to Abram is: "And God credited it to Abram as"—what? "As righteousness."

Now, these are both words—"belief" or "faith," and "righteousness"—that we've talked about in the series. So if "belief," or "trust," in the Bible, it's about relational dependence, placing myself in a posture of trust and dependence—and recognizing and accounting [for] the one who's promising to me as trustworthy, and committing to it.

And then what God does is, when he sees Abram make this bold move of radical trust in his promise, God gives Abram the standing of "righteous"—which again, recall back. At its core meaning, the biblical word "righteous," or "righteousness," means "right relationship." So God declares that Abram is a human who stands in right relationship with him, as God. And what posture does a human who is truly righteous, and does right by God, and is in right—posture-of-Abram, right at this moment? *Trust*.

So the story is so powerful. The fundamental thing, apparently, that God wants for humans—at least one crucial thing—is just a posture of *trust* in the radical generosity of

God. And that generosity is going to mean *responsibility*, like acting in ways that are informed by deep convictions that may not make sense to anybody around, but they make sense to you, because you're trusting in the generosity of God towards you, and he's calling you to something. That's so powerful.

"Then God said to him"—so, first promise: you're going to have those kids, *trust*. Second promise: "Then God said to him, 'I'm the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land, to take possession of it.'" The first promise was kids. What was Abram's response? *Trust*. The second promise is: you're an immigrant in this land. Your family's going to grow, and this will become the land in which they live.

And what's Abram's response to that promise? [With a grin in his voice] "*Um*, now, hold on [Tim laughs], Sovereign Lord," this is verse 8, "How can I know? [Tim laughs] How can I know that I'll gain possession of it?" When it comes to the family—that's more believable? [Tim laughs] I don't know. Then this one: "How can I know?" And what's God's response? It's wonderful—this is my favorite part of the story. What's God's response to his question, "How can I know?"

"The Lord said, 'Go get a heifer.'" [Elongated pause] *What?* What's that have to do with anything—[Tim laughs] a heifer? Bring a heifer? "No, not just a heifer. Go get a goat. Oh—and also a ram. Make sure they're all three years old. And don't forget to bring a dove and a young pigeon." [Tim laughs] That's so bizarre—are you with me? Like, talk about a *non sequitur*—it doesn't follow. "How can I know that this will become my family land?" *Go get a heifer*. [Tim laughs] Right—it doesn't make any—*what?*

And there's this jolt in the story—this brilliantly told story. And the author knows that he's playing with you. There's an ambiguity, and a gap now, that you're like, "What does a heifer and a goat have to do with Abraham's question?" And the answer will come at precisely the right moment. Just wait for it—brilliant story.

So what—okay, so he goes, he gets all these animals. And he brings them out. [With agrin in his voice] Then look what he—then it turns into a horror story. He brought all these animals to him, and he starts *cutting* them in half. Now, that's just a little, short sentence—but, just, what's involved in sawing a heifer in half—are you guys with me? Are you with me?

It's a very bloody scene—entrails, the whole bit, right? And then the goat, and then the ram. And then he took these carcass halves, and he separates them opposite each other. So it's the image: he saws a cow in half [Tim laughs]—right? Just imagine the scene. And then he puts the pieces . . . like that [Gesturing to visual], and then he does the goat [Makes cutting sound]—put it there, right? This—just imagine. So now they're separated, all opposite, lined up [with] each other. That's the image.

And then we're told, "But the birds—nah, he didn't cut them in half." What did he do with them? Did you break their necks or something? But then, so, then they're on the ground too. And then, as you can imagine, like, what is this bloody, gory scene going to invite, if he's out in the middle of nowhere? Vultures, right? And crows. So "birds of prey came down on the carcasses, and Abraham had to drive them away." *Shoo, get out of here. Get out of here.* Isn't this a good story? [Tim laughs] *What?* What's happening right now? This is so strange.

Okay, what is happening? The storyteller doesn't give you everything that he could. And this is a unique thing about, especially the Old Testament: these authors assume that you're constantly reading through the whole Hebrew Bible, constantly—and reading every piece in light of each other.

And so the storyteller doesn't give you the crucial information, because he assumes this is, like, your eighteenth time through, or whatever. And that you remember from the book of Jeremiah what this is all about—because you do, right? [Tim laughs] You remember, from Jeremiah 34, what this is all about.

This is all ritual symbolism of a covenant-making ceremony—Ancient Near Eastern covenant-making ceremony. What on earth does this bloody ritual mean? In Jeremiah 34, there's some Israelite kings who had promised that they would set a whole bunch of slaves free. And then those rulers in Jerusalem went back on their promise, and it was a devastating moment, and God was ticked that they went back on their word.

And so through Jeremiah, here's what God says to those leaders. It's Jeremiah 34. He says, "Those who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and walked between its pieces. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests, all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, I'll deliver into the hands of their enemies who want to kill them. Do you get it?"

So now you get the symbol—like, the blood's intentional. This isn't a sacrifice. It doesn't have to do with "atoning for sins." This is a ritual *symbol* about this covenant. So these people made a promise that they would be the leaders of Israel—they would be faithful to the covenant with God, right? They used this ritual symbol.

And the Bible isn't the only place this is mentioned. There's other ancient texts among Israel's neighbors that talk about this ritual. It means exactly the same thing. It means we're entering an agreement through this covenant, and the stakes are really high. Our choices matter.

And so we walk through together, each partner—the two partners of the covenant—we walk through, and we're saying, "I'm going to, whatever, provide wheat for you and I'm going to give you olive oil," or whatever, right? You make your covenant. And then you

look at the animals and you say, “May my fate be like that of this calf or this goat if I ever break my covenant with you.” Do you see that's what's happening? So it's a symbol of the severity and the high stakes this covenant involves.

Okay, so all that in mind, come back to the story. So who do you think is going to be walking through, down the bloody aisle, together? Who's making a covenant with whom in the story? God's making a covenant with Abram. Verse 12, “As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep”—oh no. No, that's not good. He's supposed to be awake because he has to walk down the aisle—“he fell into a deep sleep, and a thick, dreadful darkness came over him.” He starts having a bad dream.

So just imagine the scene—this bloody animal scene—and then Abraham's just like [Tim makes the sounds of fainting]—right?—he just passes out. And then he starts having these dreams, these dark dreams that we're going to see God is giving to him. It's a window of his family's future.

“Then the Lord said, ‘Know for certain that for 400 years, your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own. They're going to be enslaved and mistreated there, but I'll punish that nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they'll come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good, old age. In the fourth generation, your descendants are going to come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.’”

Lots of interesting things to talk about here. Here's the basic point: what event in the biblical story is this pointing to? So the Exodus story. Abram is going to become a large, large family. And then they're going to go down to Egypt looking for food as a family. Then they're going to end up enslaved there. Moses, “Let my people go”—that whole thing—right?—the Exodus story.

So the promise is going to be fulfilled, but it's going to take another dark turn, because of the injustice and violence of the king of Egypt, and so on. But don't worry, the promise is all going to be fulfilled—God's covenant promise.

Now, what's Abram doing this whole time? He's passed out. He's passed out. Verse 17, “When the sun had set, and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot”—this is another wonderful moment in the story—“a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared”—and started doing what? Started going down the bloody aisle.

So this is—again, this might seem very odd to you—connected back to a message in the series, if you were here, as we did, about God's “glory.” When God's personal presence—the purity and the power that generated the universe—appears concentrated in a spot, the physical manifestation of God's importance and power and significance often takes the form of what? Fire, or cloud, or lightning—that kind of thing. It's super intense.

So we're meant to understand this is the creator, covenant-making God, coming in personal presence to fulfill the covenant ceremony. So we know God's made lots of covenant promises here, but his covenant is with whom? It's with Abram. And where's Abram? God essentially “slipped him sleeping pills”—[Tim laughs] right?—and knocked him out. And Abram's lying there, passed out on the side of this whole scene.

What's *happening* in the story? Like everything's going wrong [Tim laughs] according to a traditional covenant-making ceremony. They're both supposed to own up to their commitments and their promises, and we walk through together. And what God does is “puts something in Abram's drink,” and so that he passes out, and then God *alone* appears and walks through—do you get what's happening here?

There's a million things that you're not told. You're just supposed to ponder and reflect. So, “What's happening in this moment?” But also, “What does this moment say about who God is?” It says volumes—speaks volumes about who God is.

So what does God *certainly* know about Abram's family, and whether Abram's family will actually be faithful covenant partners? Certainly Israel's failure with the golden calf, or the centuries of covenant violation—Jeremiah 34—like, none of this surprised God. So God initiates a covenant relationship with people—with the family of Abram—that he *knows* is going to fail him.

And so what does he do? This is so remarkable. He's protecting Abram. He's protecting Abram from—he and his family's—the worst consequences of their covenant failure. But at the same time, God isn't going to let their failure determine whether or not his purposes to save the world will be fulfilled. He's *determined* to save the world through humans and through a human family, but he also knows that those very humans are going to fail—and so God goes it alone.

Which means what? It means that God's going to fulfill his end of the covenant. Remember—what's the symbolism of all these bloody animals? Who's going to shoulder the consequences of Abram's family's failure to be faithful? Who's the only one walking through, down the bloody aisle—do you get it? This story is remarkable, you guys.

Look at how it ends. Verse 18: “On that day,” the storyteller tells us, “the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants, I give this land from the Wadi of Egypt all the way north to the great river Euphrates, the land of all these Canaanite people groups,’”—and that's the end of the story. Such a strange story. [Tim laughs]

But you get it—do you get it? This says volumes about the character of God. And what that video was about—was about how it's *that* God who's not willing to let his partner's failure define the future of the world. And he will both shoulder the responsibility to be

faithful, and apparently God is going to shoulder the consequences of covenant failure—because that's exactly what he's protecting Abram from as he goes through.

Okay, so fast-forward to the story of Jesus, and we'll conclude here. So when Jesus is going around Galilee, announcing that the “Kingdom of God is here,” and he's reshaping and re-creating a new family of Israel that's eventually going to include all the nations. And he's calling people to a new level of allegiance and devotion to the Kingdom of God. And he boils down all of God's covenant expectations to—“the great command,” he called it—“to love God and to love your neighbor.” Right? He's re-forming a new family of covenant people around himself.

And yet what does Jesus know about the “faithfulness meter” of the disciples that he gathered around himself? What does he know they're going to do? What does Jesus know that Peter—his most faithful disciple—what does he know that Peter's going to do?

And so with all of this, Jesus marches into Jerusalem for Passover. It's a week of conflict with the leaders, and he steals away—right?—the last night, to a secret room, and he has a Passover meal with his disciples. And just watch how this story brings everything together. It's so remarkable.

This is from Luke, chapter 22: “When the hour came, Jesus and his Apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, ‘I've eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. I tell you, I won't eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the Kingdom of God.’ So he took bread, he gave thanks for it, and he broke it. And he gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”

Jesus took bread, he broke it—he broke it in half. And he said, “This is my *body*.” It's the symbol that Jesus is giving his body over to the consequences of human failure and evil and injustice. And his body will be broken “in half,” so to speak—just like that heifer. And then Jesus says, “In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup. And he said, ‘Like, what more do you want? This is the new covenant in my blood. It's being poured out for you.’”

Jesus viewed what was about to happen to him—in the Garden of Gethsemane, in his arrest and in his trial, and in his execution—he viewed it like he's taking the calling and the vocation and the role of that smoking fire pot. And he's walking *right* down that aisle so that others don't have to. And this isn't like “God versus Jesus.” [Tim laughs] This is God embodied—his covenant-faithfulness and love—embodied in the person of Jesus, to save us from the consequences of the horrible failures that have heaped up over human history.

And Jesus, in an act of love, gives himself on behalf of others. That's what's happening here. He's the faithful human who submits himself to the loving guidance of the Father,

and he offers his life as a loving gift to others. He's the faithful one. I actually don't treat people like Jesus did very well. And if I do, I feel like it's like these little, bright moments in an otherwise dark night. And if you know what I'm talking about, like you—I know you know. You guys—I don't know what else to call this except “good news.” It's good news.

And this isn't like, “Oh, great. I'm going to take some more sleeping pills [Tim laughs] and just pass out, and let Jesus do it all.” That's exactly *not* the right response. The right response is: I get up, and in Jesus's power, and in the power of the Spirit, I *move* towards faithfulness, loving God and loving others. But I know that I'll fail, and God knows that I'll fail—and that apparently doesn't, like, deter God [Tim laughs] from doing something on my behalf.

And this is what it means to be a Christian. It means to trust in the generous covenant love of God, that He has actually become the kind of human that he's made me to be, but that I fail to be. And *that's* how He calls me to get up and to follow Him, amen?

So I don't know where you're at today. I don't know if you live in a worldview, as a Christian—if you're a Christian—where this is, like, a moral performance “regimen,” you know? And that's what you think of when you think of “be faithful and obey.” And so God's, like, built into the whole relationship: your failure—and accounting for it—and a means to heal us of it, and urge us forward.

And so some of us might have some real confessing and repentance to do. Some of us might feel like our covenant failures are just, like, this “broken record,” and the cycle that we can't get past. And there are ways to get past it, and it's not going to happen by you “sleeping on the ground.”

It's going to happen by us making choices, in this community, by the power of the Spirit to change and to grow, as we follow Jesus. There might be some of us who truly feel helpless. And what you need to hear, most of all, is that God's covenant love is asking you to simply trust in his generosity and love for you.

[EMSB theme fades in]

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[EMSB theme fades out]