so why is the COVENANT so important?

“Life-changing” is a very strong term. We pastors are inclined to use it too often, such as when we sometimes promise that hearing a special speaker will be a life-changing experience. But this isn’t always the case; not everything that is reported to be life-changing really is.

However, the story of the covenant is an exception. Here I use the term “life-changing” carefully and guardedly, for what you will read concerning the covenant will alter your thinking and significantly alter your life.

learning about the covenant

It was a cold December day in Dallas in 1983 when I made my way across the city to a hotel in the northern section of town. I had no reason to suspect that my life was about to be changed. The speaker for this three-day seminar was a man named Milton Green, who came with rather unusual credentials. He liked to refer to himself as “a Southern Baptist carpet cleaner from Cleveland, Tennessee.” He opened the seminar by talking about the covenant.
So Why Is the Covenant So Important?

I had heard the word “covenant” before. I remember Professor Malcolm Shelton talking about it when I was a graduate student at Southern Nazarene University in Bethany, Oklahoma. I recall hearing John Oswalt refer to it frequently when I was in the master of divinity program at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. I recall Lefferts Loetscher from Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey referring to covenant theology in early America. All of them were superb teachers, but apparently I was not a very attentive student. Somehow I never quite grasped the teaching on covenant.

But this day would be different. Milton Green began to describe the steps of the covenant-making ceremony. He spent only a short time on it, perhaps 20 or 30 minutes, but it launched me on a pursuit that has lasted for years. As he started through the steps, it was as if scales fell off my eyes. I turned to my pastor friend Travis, who was sitting beside me, and asked, “Have you ever heard this before?” He said he had not. When Milton began referring to the new covenant, my heart was pounding in anticipation. This was truly something new.

As a result, I began to study the covenant with intensity. I searched the Scriptures over and over—and for the first time in my life I wore the cover right off my Bible. Over the course of the next decade I would have numerous dialogues with my friend Pastor Henry Poteet, asking him repeatedly what he knew about this concept called the covenant. I preached on that topic in city after city, and each time I saw lives changed. It was the first time I had ever witnessed such a dramatic change of that sort. The covenant was impacting others the same way it had me.

the covenant is foundational

So why was this happening? What is it about the covenant
that is so life changing? From my studies I discovered some remarkable insights. For one thing, understanding the steps of the covenant-making ceremony and its role in human history causes many Bible verses to spring to life with meanings that may not have been previously considered. Looking closer, I found that in many ways the covenant is the foundation of our faith and the epicenter of what we understand about our relationship with God. Upon it is based our understanding of salvation, holiness, healing, worship, deliverance, and sanctification. The covenant is truly foundational, and discovering this can be exhilarating—even life changing.

_early teaching on the covenant_

Despite all its importance, not many books are written about the covenant. To find out why this is so, we need to go back in history, starting with June 16-18, 1885. On these dates a professor by the name of H. Clay Trumbull was asked to give a series of lectures. He chose to lecture on a topic that would eventually find its way into a book titled *The Blood Covenant: A Primitive Rite and Its Bearings on Scripture*. So positive was the response to this book that a second edition, with much added material, was released in January 1893. The book is a classic, for it opens new ground in understanding the depth of God’s love for us and the way it has been articulated in the pages of Scripture.

In the years that would follow the second edition of Dr. Trumbull’s writings, numerous writers would attempt to put it in popular form, some more successfully than others. Unfortunately, the basic message of his book has fallen by the wayside, and the term “covenant” is not generally understood by most of the people who benefit from its inexplicable privileges and promises.
what is a covenant?

The word “covenant” in its Hebrew form is used nearly 300 times in the Bible and comes from the root word meaning “to cut.” In its simplest form, a covenant is an all-encompassing agreement between two parties with clearly outlined perimeters and promises. It is a mutual understanding between two persons who bind themselves together with specific obligations to fulfill. What’s so significant about that? Why would I be so excited to share this concept with you when it involves such a simple definition?

when God initiated the covenant

The best way to find out why the covenant is so important is to take a look at what God had in mind from the start. The story of the covenant begins with God’s heart being broken when He saw the destitution and destruction of humanity. He never designed His creation to be in such disarray and chaos. As He looked from heaven to earth, He observed that the ancient people (the people in Abram’s time—2,000 years before Christ) participated in covenant-making ceremonies. They did this with full knowledge that once having committed themselves to each other, everything they had belonged to each other. They intentionally would release their individual identities in order to have a merged identity.

God knew that the covenant would be an effective way to reach humanity and help them understand the intensity of His love for them. By making a covenant with humanity, God would bind himself to them and ask them to bind themselves to Him. Doing this would mean that everything He had would belong to them—all the blessings of heaven would be theirs.

So God searched for a person, just one person, who might
So Why Is the Covenant So Important?

The word “covenant” in its Hebrew form is used nearly 300 times in the Bible. It comes from the root word meaning “to cut.”
be capable of hearing from God and obeying Him so that He could establish this covenant relationship with him. Before long He discovered a young man named Abram, and He began to talk to him. At first the message seemed strange: “Leave your home. Go to a new place. I’m going to give you some land.” Abram must have been puzzled, but God didn’t give up. “I am going to enter into a relationship with you,” He said.

“What kind of relationship?” Abram asked.

“The covenant,” said God, assertively.

“The covenant?” queried Abram.

“Yes,” said God.

“But, God—when people enter into covenant, it means that everything they have belongs to each other. Are You saying that You, Almighty God, would enter into a relationship with a mere human like me?”

“That is precisely My intention,” replied God. And the covenant was born.

From a conversation something like this was launched the most profound, compelling scriptural truth of all human history. For the covenant that God made was not merely with Abram (Abraham); it was with all his spiritual descendants. That’s you and me.

Then Why Haven’t We Heard About This Before?

Again, we return to the question of why something as important as the covenant is rarely mentioned except in casual reference. Why haven’t we heard sermons about it? Why haven’t we read books and listened to tapes or CDs about it? Why doesn’t the Bible refer to it more and explain it better?

Dr. Trumbull in his late 19th-century classic work deals very well with that specific issue: “It seems strange that a primitive rite like the Blood Covenant, with its world-wide sweep,
and its manifold applications to the history of sacrifice, should have received so little attention. . . . The suggestion of any real importance in the religious symbolism of this rite has been generally brushed aside without its receiving due consideration.”

But there is an even further explanation as to why it is not thoroughly explained in the Bible itself. Simply stated, “Because the primitive rite of Blood Covenanting was well-known in the Lands of the Bible, at the time of the writing of the Bible, for that very reason we are not to look to the Bible for specific explanations of the rite itself, even where there are incidental references in the Bible to the rite and its observances; but, on the other hand, we are to find an explanation of the biblical illustrations of the primitive rite, in the understanding of that rite which we gain from outside sources. In this way, we are able to see in the Bible much that otherwise would be lost sight of.”

In other words, the Bible doesn’t need to give a thorough explanation of the covenant, because the people in that time simply understood its significance and importance. We have a distinct disadvantage. So many of us today read the Bible as Westerners, not Easterners, and from a vantage point several thousand years later. We don’t have covenant-making ceremonies in our culture (with a single exception of the wedding ceremony), thus we have no way to relate to this remarkable event and its profound implications in demonstrating the intensity of God’s love and passion for us.

Multiple Covenants

The covenant that we will be focusing on in this book is referred to as the Abrahamic covenant, with its implications for the new covenant of Christ. Sometimes it is referred to as the “blood covenant.” But this is not the only covenant found in
Scripture. Multiple times God reached down and made a unique agreement with humanity. We will not examine the other covenants in this book; we will merely list them.

The first was the Edenic covenant, found in Gen. 1:26-30. This agreement involved God and Adam and some specific requirements and promises. The second was the Adamic covenant, coming from the name Adam, in Gen. 3:1-24 and involved God’s agreement with Adam after sin entered the human race. The third was the Noahic covenant, in Gen. 8 and 9, in which God made an agreement with Noah that literally started the human race over again. The fourth was the Abrahamic covenant, the blood covenant, which will be the major focus of this book. The fifth was the Mosaic covenant, found in Exod. 20 and 40, and involved some specific agreements between God and the children of Israel. The sixth was the Davidic covenant, from the time of David, as found in 2 Sam. 7 and Ps. 89. The seventh and last is the new covenant, referenced in Matt. 26:28. In the chapters to follow we will observe the profound linkage between the Abrahamic covenant and the exciting new covenant.

**So why should we be so excited about the covenant?**

Why is “covenant” such a significant term? It is simply this: “Covenant” is a word that describes God’s relationship to you and me. Since the very creation of the world, God had used a unique pattern, a unique cultural event, referred to as the covenant. Through this He outlined specific requirements and spectacular promises and tells us how He wants us to respond to Him, outlining the promises of what will happen if we follow His ways. And those promises are absolutely thrilling—even life changing, as I hope you will discover in the next few pages.
review and reflect

1. What is a covenant?

2. Why would God choose the covenant-making ceremony as a way of reaching out to us?

3. Why does the Bible not give specific explanations for the rites in the covenant ceremony?