

Jeremiah 34:18

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And I will give the men that have transgressed my covenant, which have not performed the words of the covenant which they had made before me, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof,

Analysis

When they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof (כָּרַת הָעֵגֶל, *karat ha-egel*)—"cut the calf." This describes the ancient covenant ratification ceremony from Genesis 15:9-21, where God Himself passed between severed animal parts in fire and smoke. The ritual's meaning: "May I be torn apart like these animals if I break this covenant." When Jeremiah's contemporaries cut the calf and walked between the pieces (v. 19 specifies who participated), they invoked self-cursing oaths, calling down covenant judgment upon themselves if they violated their sworn commitment.

The Hebrew verb *karat* ("cut") is the standard term for making covenants, preserving this bloody ritual's memory in covenant language itself. Ancient Near Eastern treaties employed similar ceremonies—vassals would dismember animals while swearing loyalty, understanding the symbolism: covenant breaking brings death. Israel's leaders re-enacted this with full knowledge of the implications, making their subsequent covenant violation (re-enslaving freed servants) not mere disobedience but covenant treason deserving death.

This foreshadows Christ's covenant-making blood. Hebrews 9:15-22 explains: "without shedding of blood is no remission." Jesus became the covenant victim, torn apart that covenant breakers might be forgiven. The Old Testament's bloody covenant ceremonies point forward to Calvary, where God in Christ took the

covenant curse upon Himself. Unlike Jeremiah's generation, who broke covenant and faced judgment, believers stand forgiven because Christ bore the covenant curse in our place.

Historical Context

This ceremony occurred during the brief Babylonian siege lifting (34:21-22), when Zedekiah and Jerusalem's leaders made a covenant to free Hebrew slaves, probably hoping God would deliver them from Babylon. They performed the ancient ritual publicly, likely in the temple precincts, invoking solemn oaths. When Babylon temporarily withdrew, they immediately re-enslaved those freed (34:11), treating God's covenant as a superstitious bargaining chip rather than binding obligation. This cynical manipulation sealed Jerusalem's doom.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How do you respond when God's 'lifting the siege' (temporary relief) tempts you to abandon vows made in crisis?
2. In what ways might we treat covenant commitments (baptism, church membership, marriage) as negotiable rather than life-or-death serious?
3. How should meditation on Christ bearing the covenant curse affect your faithfulness to covenant commitments?

Interlinear Text

וְנָתַתִּי י	אֶת	הָאֲנָשִׁים	וַיַּעֲבֹר ו	אֶת	הַבְּרִית	אֲשֶׁר	לֹא
And I will give	H853	H376	and passed	H853	my covenant	H834	H3808
H5414			H5674		H1285		
הֵקֵי יְמוֹ	אֶת	דִּבְרֵי י	הַבְּרִית	אֲשֶׁר	כָּרַת ו		
which have not performed	H853	the words	my covenant	H834	me when they cut		
H6965		H1697	H1285		H3772		
לִפְנֵי י	הַעֵלָל	אֲשֶׁר	כָּרַת ו	לְשֵׁנֵי יָם	וַיַּעֲבֹר ו	בִּי	
before	the calf	H834	me when they cut	in twain	and passed	H996	
H6440	H5695		H3772	H8147	H5674		
בֵּתְרָיו:							
between the parts							
H1335							

Additional Cross-References

Genesis 15:10 (Parallel theme): And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not.