

Genesis 15:10-12

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The covenant ceremony is prepared. God causes Abram to fall into a deep sleep.

To make a covenant involved the practice of cutting an animal in two halves in the covenant ceremony. Abram promptly obeyed God and *cut them in two* except the birds ([Leviticus 1:17](#)). This could not be mistaken as a sacrifice, because in a sacrifice the pieces would have been placed on an altar and roasted or burned. Abram *laid each half opposite the other* forming a passageway between the pieces or halves. No specific directions were given; however, it can be assumed that Abram was familiar with covenant ceremonies from that era and knew the procedure. The ceremony was for the covenant participants to walk between the carcass halves as a sign of the agreement they had made. Perhaps like a signing ceremony might be today.

Now the penalty for breaking the covenant was death. Cutting the animals symbolized this oath, indicating that the covenant maker pledged his own life on his word. We can observe such a ceremony in [Jeremiah 34:18-19](#) which describes an event that took place during Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem (589-587 B.C.). In that event, a covenant was made by cutting a calf "in two" and the covenant participants "passing between its parts." Those who walk between the two portions of the animal invoke the same fate (death like the animals) on themselves if they are unfaithful to their covenant partners. However, they were also united by the bond of blood, a permanent relationship. In the Jeremiah passage, God chastises the leaders of Judah for not keeping their word with Babylon, and makes it clear He plans to turn them over to Babylon to teach them a lesson for going back on their word.

It is noteworthy in [Genesis 15:17](#) that only God passed between the pieces, signifying he was binding himself to give the promised land to Abram's descendants without putting Abram under any obligation. In this case, God's promise is unilateral. Sometimes God's promises are unconditional, and only need to be received. And sometimes God's promises depend upon our obedience in order to gain the promised benefit. It is important to discern which is which. We can cause ourselves major problems trying to earn something God gives, or believing we are entitled to something God requires us to seek.

The birds of prey were unclean birds that could symbolize the 400 year oppression that God speaks of in the coming verses.

A deep sleep fell upon Abram. “Tardemah” was a God-induced deep sleep or trance which was imposed on a man ([Genesis 2:21](#); [1 Samuel 26:12](#); [Isaiah 29:10](#); [Job 4:13, 33:15](#); [Daniel 8:18](#)). *Terror and great darkness fell upon him* which suggests awe-inspiring divine activity which appropriately introduces the prophecy in the next verses ([Isaiah 29:10](#)).

Biblical Text:

¹⁰ Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. ¹¹ The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. ¹² Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror *and* great darkness fell upon him.