

## THE COVENANT WITH NOAH Genesis 8:13-9:17

One of the interesting aspects of the Christmas season is watching young married couples identify and build the traditions they are going to establish for their future. Every family has its 'family lore'- those traditions and stories that give it a solid foundation, an identity. To hear parents and grandparents tell the stories of where we came from and what actions and events make up our history help us feel more a part of the family and give us a sense of place (it's even interesting when we figure out what stories are not told, and what secrets have been kept hidden).

In some ways my immediate family starts with the story of my engagement to my wife, which actually happened at a birthday party she threw for me. When I was about to blow out the candles on the cake, I surprised her, and everyone else, by getting down on one knee and saying, "My wish is that you would marry me." After we talked with everyone and made a number of phone calls to friends and family, we went outside and immediately saw a rainbow in the sky. We, of course, took this as a sign of God's blessing on our engagement and marriage, and after 12 years I'm happy to report that we have not had a single fight. And if you believe that last bit, I have some ocean-front property in Arizona to sell you.

Interestingly, though, the rainbow has been a powerful symbol in almost every ancient and modern belief system. In my research (Wikipedia), I found these samples:

In Norse mythology, the rainbow is a bridge to heaven attainable only by the virtuous or victorious in battle.

In Australian, the aborigines believed the rainbow to be a gender-less creator.

In Buddhism, the rainbow is the highest state available before Nirvana.

In an ancient Chinese folktale, two of the colors of the rainbow, the blue and the red, are star-crossed lovers who can only be together when the rainbow appears.

And maybe my favorite, in a bizarre sort of way: in Bulgarian legend, if you walk under a rainbow, you might actually change genders.

For God and for Noah, though, and hence for all believers in the God of the Bible, the rainbow is a symbol of God's covenant love for His people.

What is a covenant? A covenant is an agreement that's made usually between 2 parties, with one typically being in a superior position of power. It consists of an agreement of how to act towards one another and blessings if the covenant is kept and curses if it is broken. Ancient covenants always had symbols and rituals to attend the words of the agreement. One of the great advances of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in archeology, sociology and theology, was how frequent covenantal literature and treaties were in the ancient near east, where Genesis was written. One of the benefits for us has been to see how much of the Hebrew Scriptures are written in the language of these covenants, as God seems to be speaking in the accepted language of the day.

The theme of 'covenant' is a theme that runs throughout Scripture. It started in the garden when God called Adam to live in relationship with Him. Now, some of you may be thinking, "I don't remember there being a covenant in Genesis 1." And you're right, the word covenant is not in the first few chapters of Genesis. But if we look at the prophetic literature of Israel, particularly Jeremiah 33, we see that God refers to His act of creation as 'establishing a covenant' with the day and the night, and really with all of

creation. (We even see in the covenant with Noah this interesting idea of God being in covenant with more than just people when He says that the covenant is with the animals.)

You see, there has never been a time when we were not in relationship with God. It's not as though God created Adam as an autonomous person and then decided to make a covenant with him. No, we were created to be in covenantal relationship with God at all times. And you can trace the history of Israel based on its covenants until we see a new covenant made by Jesus, in words which we celebrate every Sunday, when He said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."

So, it is important to understand the concept of covenant in order to understand the language and teaching of Scripture. And we learn something new about God and about our relationship to Him with each covenantal ceremony. The covenant with Noah tells us quite a bit about two things: *mercy and hope*.

Now, I want to do something that's going to require us to put our thinking caps on a little bit more: I want to look at how Noah is related to two major biblical figures and where he stands in the history of the covenants. The first comparison we'll make is with Adam, and it's there that we're going to see *hope*. The second comparison we'll make is with Jesus, and there we're going to see how *mercy* is given to us. I think you're going to appreciate how Noah is related to both of these men, and how the covenants that God makes are really one covenant of grace.

### *Noah is a new Adam*

Notice what God tells Noah and his sons in 9:1, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Do you recognize these words? This is the Creation Mandate again, just like in Genesis 2. It's the same basic command He gave to Adam, with some expansion for protection of life. He gives Noah the same authority and dominion over the animals and all creation that He gave Adam.

Do you know what's happening here? God is making all things new. The rainbow is a fitting symbol here, isn't it? It's a symbol of hope. Throughout the Bible, whenever God's judgment is poured out, He always begins a new work with the remnant.

This was true with Noah and his family. In the midst of the flood, they surely must have wondered if this was how God was going to treat the world from then on. But then they found that God, in His mercy, was going to begin rebuilding and stop destroying. It was true with the second generation in the desert who entered the Promised Land with Joshua, even though their parents under were barred from entering as punishment for their grumbling and sin. It was true with the Israelites who came out of exile with Ezra and Nehemiah. For each, even though hard times and punishment came upon them, they were given new life.

There are two reasons people lose hope: either they can't get over their failures in the past and they don't believe there's anything good for them in the future.

Are you in a place where it's hard to find hope? Do you find it hard to get out of bed in the morning, even when you've gotten enough sleep? When you look at the future, do you think to yourself, "Don't get your hopes up; it's not going to get any better"?

If so, the true story of Noah is for you- it's a reminder that God gives us a new day. He is constantly whispering, "Behold, I make all things new." You can be part of something that God's doing that is greater than you can imagine. If God can cause the

kind of devastation that happened in the flood, think of the greater redemption and re-creation He can accomplish!

### *Noah is a type of Christ*

The story of Noah isn't there just to give us an example of how to act in adversity, or how God treated people way back when. It's given to us to tell us about Jesus. I see two ways we can understand Noah as an example, or type, of Christ.

The first way is that we're told Noah was a righteous man and did the work that God gave him to do to save both his family and a remnant of creation- in short Noah's work 'saved the world.' Now, if you go back and read the flood story, you'll notice that there's never anything said about anyone else helping Noah. Now certainly he may have had help (like Steve Carrell had his sons help him build the ark in the movie *Evan Almighty*), but the Scriptures attribute the work to Noah alone. And, in a similar way, Jesus was a righteous man who did the work that God gave Him to save His people and bring blessing to the world.

The second way we see this typology work has to do with Noah's name, which means 'rest.' It was through Noah that the land would find rest from the curse. And yet it's only a temporary rest, as people go back to sinning and doing violence in the earth. One of Jesus' greatest titles is "Prince of Peace," because He is the One who will bring ultimate rest to the earth and to His people. "Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."

We talked about the reasons people lose hope- the future looks bleak or the past is too hard to face. Here's what this part of the story means for you, if you're struggling with your past. Whatever you've done, it's not too much for God. It won't shock Him and it won't ruin His image of you. He already knows you, but He can forgive you if you enter into covenant with Him.

That's where the rainbow comes in again. Now, the English Standard Version, which we read, has the word 'bow,' while others, like the NIV have the word 'rainbow.' We could make a case that both are correct translations, because it's obvious that God is talking about what we call rainbows, but the Hebrew word that's used here is the word for bow, as in 'bow and arrow.' God is presenting a weapon of warfare as a sign of His covenant. And here's the interesting question, which way does a rainbow point? If it pointed down, the symbolism would be that God is ready to strike us at any moment (a popular, but erroneous conception of God). But, thankfully, the bow points towards heaven, towards God Himself. Ironically the battle bow is a sign of peace.

Jesus Christ won that peace when He went to the cross and aimed the bow, that was pointing at us, directly at Himself. He took God's wrath away from you. Now there is no longer any judgment reserved for you.

I've mentioned Bono before- he seems like he gets it- "At the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics...every action is met by an equal or opposite one...And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that 'as you reap, so you will sow' stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff."

Do you need hope this Christmas? You won't find lasting hope outside of Jesus. He is the only source of Grace in a world of 'eye for an eye.' He says to us, "Behold, I make all things new." Do you believe that? It's the truest story that's ever been told.

Some of the resources I used for this Genesis series were *Last Things First* by JV Fesko, *Creation and Blessing* by Allen Ross, *Genesis 1-4* by C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-11* by JM Boice, *Patriarchal Saints* by James B. Jordan, sermons by Tim Keller and Ricky Jones, and various other resources. As usual, the reader should assume that little, if any, of this material is truly original.