

## Study 1 — God's Covenant with Everyone

It may sound preposterous but God is already relating to every living creature. In one sense, no one needs to seek a relationship with God but to acknowledge the one he has initiated. I call this a relationship, not because people are aware of it, or want it, but because God is relating to everyone, with a promise and a clear statement of its terms, that is, a covenant. Clearly, it is a bad relationship because none of us, of ourselves, have wanted God in our lives, and it can't continue in this way because God seeks to resolve the issue of mutual hostility. But I call it a relationship because people are responsible for how they respond to what God is to them.

The first specific revelation of this covenant begins with the story of an angry, violent world and a God who is grieved.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth (Genesis 6:5-8, 11-13).

Anger and violence are fearful when they come and the covenant about to be revealed is one we need to know well. When this world shows its ugly side, the question that may come to us is, "Is God good?" There is no more fundamental question than this. 'Who is God?' Can he be trusted?' We note a few points from the reading above.

First, evil has become pervasive, intense, universal, deep seated and constant. This has led to the world being filled with violence. Terrifying indeed! If we ignore God, corruption and violence are the result. The human race has had opportunity to see the damage that evil causes, and to do something about it, but has not. There is not going to be any change without God doing something.

Second, God says he will flood the earth. If we read the whole story that follows, it reads like the creation story in reverse. In the beginning, God made order out of chaos, a separation of water above from water below and a separation of land from sea. Now the rain will pour from above and break open from subterranean depths and the whole world will become a sea. Humanity's place to live will be gone.

Third, Noah finds grace in God's eyes! Noah is not better than others. His point of difference is that he trusts in God and this is the nature and source of his righteousness. He knows he is answerable to God and that God expects him to live righteously. He is not naturally good, but is, in the words of Psalm 23, led in paths of righteousness. This is why he stands out from his community as different. God doesn't give him what he deserves. He finds grace in God's eyes—that is, God chooses to treat him with favour out of his own kindness, not because he deserves anything different from other people. We may well look at others who ignore God and become corrupt and violent, but, from the Bible's point of view, all of us want to forget God and go our own way. We all need to find grace in God's eyes.

Fourth, we are all descendants of Noah. The reason we are still on the planet is because Noah found grace in God's eyes. It is this point that will be confirmed to us all in a covenant God makes with him.

Noah begins to build an ark. There is no sign of climate change at this stage! He is going on information that is 'unseen' (Hebrews 11:7). He doesn't complain or disagree with God about this judgement. The world is ripe for it. Noah just does what God tells him to do to be saved.

In this way, Noah and all his family ride out the judgement of the world until the flood subsides and they are able to leave the ark. This salvation becomes a model of judgements that have come and will come in the future (Isaiah 54:8-10; 2 Peter 2:4-9).

When Noah and his family step out on dry land again, Noah worships God with a sacrifice, acknowledging God. And God welcomes his reverence and makes this promise.

And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." (Genesis 8:21-22).

Notice, first, that the promise to not curse the ground implies, not cursing it again in this way. The curse of Genesis 3 still stands (Genesis 3:17; Isaiah 24:6; Romans 8:21-22). Second, the reason for *not* flooding the earth again is the same as the reason for cursing it in the first place (cf. 6:5). If God gave every generation what it deserved, history would soon be over. The world has not become a better place because of the flood. The only people alive are Noah and his family and God says they are the same as the people he destroyed. The creation continues for the same reason as Noah was saved: because of God's grace.

Now, God renders his promise as a covenant; he *confirms* it with Noah (the word suggests he is confirming what was so since creation—that is, God will continue to look after creation as he has done from the beginning).

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth" (Genesis 9:8-17).

We note, first, that the covenant is made with all living creatures, in perpetuity. Second, in the midst of threatening clouds, the rainbow tells us not to be doubtful of God's covenant with all creation.

In summary, we see that the world can be a violent place and belief in a powerful gracious God seems to be a fiction. It is in the face of how the world is that God makes this promise to Noah and his covenant with us all. Second, the flood is what God sent, not what mankind caused. God is promising to preserve humanity even though it warrants his destroying it over and over again. Third, he will maintain the weather patterns so we can have good prospects in looking after ourselves in the world. It is important to note that God has not given us a predictable creation to presume on but himself as a God we can trust. Fourth, this promise is for all creatures, for always—as long as water refracts light into a rainbow. There may be a hint that when bad weather threatens our livelihood, or our lives, we may see at the same time as the rain, a rainbow that God uses to 'remind himself' of his promise.

The story continues by showing that the certainty God offered in this covenant was largely disregarded and the rampant ambition of civilization made a further judgement necessary (Gen. 10).

The revelation of this covenant could seem to be an isolated event but it is a statement for all time and becomes part of the Biblical narrative as the message of God touches the nations. The prophet Isaiah hears God's word about the violence and upheaval in his times and God says to him,

The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered;  
for the Lord has spoken this word.  
The earth mourns and withers;  
the world languishes and withers;  
the highest people of the earth languish.  
The earth lies defiled  
under its inhabitants;  
for they have transgressed the laws,  
violated the statutes,  
broken the everlasting covenant.  
Therefore a curse devours the earth,  
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;  
therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched,  
and few men are left (Isaiah 24:3-6).

This promise comes at the end of a series of prophecies about various nations. Here is a summary statement about all the nations that break God's covenant with them. They may not acknowledge any such covenant but it is already in place and they have broken it. This may sound severe but if we understand covenant, God has been preserving the creation for all peoples, even though they have been ignoring him. They ought to have recognised that behind every good in the creation stands a good Creator who retains his control of what he has made, and acknowledge that he is to be trusted and obeyed.

When Jesus Christ comes and his good news is being announced wider than Israel, the apostle Paul encounters peoples with no prior understanding of God's revelation to his people. On one such occasion, through Paul, God miraculously heals a lame man at Lystra (in Asia Minor). The locals are impressed and begin arrangements to worship the apostles as Zeus and Hermes—gods in skins! Here is how Paul remonstrated with them.

"Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:15-17).

He is referring to the covenant relationship in which they stand with God—a covenant God made to preserve the reliability of seasons to enable food production and contentment. We are accustomed to complain about the weather and the difficulties of making a living but, in fact, God has maintained and continues to maintain our environment in the face of our ungratefulness, corruption and violence. People shouldn't worship idols—that is, give highest value to something in the creation when there is a Creator who remains bonded with what he has made. This encounter also reveals that it is normal for people to operate in life with 'gladness of heart'—that is, we need a happy heart in order to live well. If we understand God's relationship to the world aright, we can be thankful for the good things provided for us in this world and be drawn to God rather than away from him.

A similar event takes place some years later when Paul is in the sophisticated city of Athens. He attracts the attention of the local debaters who love to consider all possibilities about life and religion. They think Paul is talking about two new deities called 'Jesus' and 'Resurrection' because that is what Paul is teaching. Christ has come, died and been raised from the dead. Paul knows this is the hope of the world and announces it at every opportunity. He is so misunderstood that the Athenians think he is talking about new deities.

Again Paul takes them to God's covenant with creation. He recognises their interest in worship—to the extent that they acknowledge an unknown God they don't yet know about.

Paul takes his opportunity to tell them about this God they don't know but who has been relating to them and expecting them to relate to him.

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring."

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:24-31).

Several things should be noted. First, God doesn't need looking after. He looks after us—with life itself, ability to breathe and everything.

Second, he has been in charge of our geography—where we live, and the history that gave us our particular circumstances, all with a view to our finding him. We may not think we live in the 'best of all worlds' but we do live in a world designed to draw us to our Creator. Even some Athenian poets had acknowledged something like this—suggesting that we are like children to God, that he has a fatherly care for all his creatures.

Third, we ought to recognise that God cannot be represented by any part of his creation but has his own integrity as a Person to be acknowledge and loved.

Fourth, Paul returns to the fact that he had been telling them about Jesus and says their ignorance cannot go on being overlooked because God has sent his Son to tell us about him and will send him again to judge the world accordingly.

Our world wants to limit itself to things that can be seen and controlled. It wants this to be all there is so there is no God to answer to. It thinks that religion is what we make for ourselves to fill blanks in our experience and deal with our fears. In fact, God is relating to his world, is bonded to his world to do it good and to so provide and manage it that it will be possible for us to find him. This is his covenant with the world. But God's covenant relationship goes far beyond this as we must go on to see.