

“The Prayer Closet”

September 21, 2014

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

Vance and Carol Johnson: the Lord will protect them and those they serve from false teachers; the Father will draw many of the Philippine to Himself through faith in the resurrected Jesus; the Spirit convict the hearts of many regarding God’s truth for our salvation

President Obama: the Lord will give him both courage and wisdom to lead our nation and a coalition of others to defeat ISIS in Syria and Iraq, to establish conditions for peace in the Middle East, and specifically to extend the power of the USA to protect the persecuted Christians there and around the world

Board of Elders: the Lord will give them wisdom for leading and watching over the spiritual and organizational life of the church; that each man will enjoy the direction and blessing of the Spirit in his family life, work and association with the other elders; that the Lord will bless the Board with unity of in their decisions

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: Ryan Boettcher, Butte College (son of Bob & Karen): for God's blessings and good health in Ryan's day-to-day living; also that Ryan will successfully navigate school, work, and marriage, keeping God's will in the forefront and remembering to be true to his life goals.

Young Adult of the Week: Sgt. Jonathan Sweetman, Army Reserves (son of Catherine): That God would continue to guide and bless Jonathan in his work, protect Lindsay's health and their baby girl due in November.

Please pray for our homebound family members: Fred & Jean Pauly, Gary & Ruth Lentz, Hilda Chapman

(please call the office to request updates)

I.

The title of today’s message is “Second Start 2”. If you were here two weeks ago you know that I didn’t get done and therefore I had to break that message in half and take up the second half today. So it is still the same passage, 8:1-9:28. Thinking about this as we approach God’s Word, most of us would identify this as part of the flood narrative. This is surely one of the defining [events] in human history, though our secular culture entirely ignores it. God created man and woman, they began to multiply upon the face of the earth, but they had fallen into sin. The sin became so overwhelming that God said, “Enough!” Out of all humanity He found only one [of whom] He could say, this is a righteous man. And then He had a flood and wiped out the entire world.

That is what we think of, and rightly so. But I don’t know that we always take due note of what comes after the flood. Because it is what happens after the flood that helps us to understand the way things work in the world in which you and I live. We are going to look at that today.

Remembering what the first portion of this section of God’s Word deals with, we concentrated on God’s grace in remembering His promise to Noah that he and his family would survive the great flood. The statement is given to us in Genesis 8:1, *“God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark.”* I pointed out at the time that the critical aspect, the thing that you need to zero in on in that statement is the [phrase] *“...with him in the ark.”* God remembered Noah, all the rest were simply those with him. That is an important thing for us to grasp, because it is a foreshadowing of the relationship that we have with God through Jesus Christ. God remembered Noah, the rest of those in the ark were only remembered as those “in Noah”. Paul makes the same kind of inference and comparison in I Corinthians 10:1. This is what Paul says in reference to the relationship between Israel and Moses. *“I do not want you to be unaware brothers,”* he is saying to the Corinthians, *“that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea and all were baptized into Moses.”* So when the children of Israel come out of Egypt and they are wandering through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, God sees them “in Moses”, just as in the ark God sees only those who are “in Noah”. The application is clear and powerful. If only those who were with Noah in the ark were saved from the judgment of the flood, it is only those who are in Christ now who will be saved from the time of judgment. So that simply presents us at the very outset if we look at the long sweep of the Biblical record, and it is both past and future, the issue is simply this: are you in Christ? That is the issue: are you in Christ? You cannot possibly make a name for yourself before God that will attract His attention. He only sees, only takes note of, only responds to those whom He sees in His Son. So if there nothing else you do today if you have come here and you are curious about one thing and another about the Word of God, let me just say you need to spend the rest of this time talking to the Father and saying, “Please, please let me be in the Son, let me be in Christ.”

That was the first thing we looked at. The second is that we focused on Noah. First we looked at God and the nature of His grace, then we looked at Noah and we saw a couple of things that were very important about Noah in addition to the fact that he was righteous. In fact we might understand this as being the heart of his righteousness. What we are told is that Noah waited for God. He waited for God in this case to accomplish salvation from the flood. And we saw that while he waited, Noah was not passive. He wasn’t just “waiting around.” We know that he kept his house in order inside the ark. Did you ever ask yourself what the practical realities would have been inside that ark with all those animals? You would need to stay on top of the work! It can be funny [to think of], but ask yourself this, how soon would those animals start attacking and killing one another if they were given the opportunity? I suspect that Noah and his sons spent a lot of time keeping their house in order.

But that wasn’t all that we saw Noah did. We saw that Noah at one point sent out a raven and a dove. What was he doing? He was trying to determine when is the right time for me to get off this boat? Now did he have every confidence God would tell him when it was time to get off the boat? Yes, he did. But he kept asking the question, “Is this the time?” What about us in this room? Are we in a conversation with God? Are we waiting on God, are we asking Him to bring certain things to pass that we would like in the way of blessings or opportunities, new

developments; are you just waiting around, or are you continually looking to Him and asking the question, “Is it now?” Because in addition to asking the question you want to be certain you are prepared to act when the time comes. I think there are many times people ask God questions, they seek His face, but because they are not prepared to act, the time comes, it goes by and they are still standing there. I am delighted with the response of the people in this church who stepped forward and took up the opportunity to work in Awana, but it makes me nervous when we don’t respond until the very last moment. It makes me nervous and I wonder to myself, how many of us were in prayer two months ago, three months ago? Are we ready to act when the moment comes? Are we asking God when is the time? That is one of things we as elders are asking regarding calling someone to be the youth pastor here.

The last thing that we took note of regarding Noah is that when Noah got off the ark, he built an altar to worship the Lord. We looked at this and we recognized that this was probably one of the greatest and most solemn acts of worship ever performed by humanity. There were not that many animals and he gave a generous number of them in thanks to God, standing there amidst the ruin of the world, looking at the havoc made by flood and geological upheaval, the small pool of the living. What was the nature of that worship? Surely he gave thanksgiving because he was alive. In the world around him that is dead, he is alive. Beloved every time you walk out of this church and into the community, you are in exactly the same situation as Noah. You are alive in the midst of a dead world. Do you give thanks?

But that is not, of course, the entirety of what would be in Noah’s mind. As he looks around himself and he sees a world that just so altered that he wouldn’t recognize any place, he surely also had a petition: “God in heaven, help me; help me, help my family. We have a work to do that is immeasurable. A whole world is going to have to be put back in order. How will we ever establish the conditions of life? He asked for help; he knows he has been saved, he knows he has received grace; he knows he has been cared for; he knows he has been set in this place at this time and he is given an impossible task. So he says, God help me; help me to accomplish this task. Surely what he recognizes is that as he rebuilds the conditions for life, he is doing so amidst the consequence of sin. This the second start. The second start is not a return to Eden. The second start is an acceptance of the ruin that sin has created, and then saying that here in the midst of this ruined place I am going to call upon the grace of God to rebuild the conditions of life.

All that I have just done is to draw an analogy to anyone of us who passes through a time of sin. When we have fallen into the dark shadows, we have taken and made bad choices, we have involved ourselves in things we never should have done, we come out at the other end, we receive the grace of God, we say, “Thank You, God, I am alive! I could be dead because of my sin. Now I will receive grace, but I must understand the consequences of my sin are real and now as I rebuild a life, I must rebuild it through the ruin that my own sin has caused.” Oh we take the reality of sin far too lightly, so that then we wonder why life is hard. This is why. It is not because my neighbor is a sinner. That may well be true. But it is because I am a sinner, and the record of ruin is written in my life. So I need the grace of God in ways extraordinary indeed.

That was two weeks ago. Today we take up a bigger picture, a larger view as the title states. What we have before us is a second beginning if not really a new beginning. In the next breath after stating His satisfaction with Noah’s sacrifice, God declares this in Genesis 3:21, *“I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth.”* This is the second beginning. This is the redeemed. This is the description of those who were on the ark. They come off the ark. They are assigned the task of rebuilding the conditions for life upon the earth. This is the dark doctrine of depravity. It is the doctrine against which we spontaneously protest. Who of us wants to actually admit the fact, not that we are sinners – you see a sinner is a person who occasionally does something wrong; that is how we think. “Occasionally I do something wrong, I mess up, then I get straightened out and I get back on the path and I am ok!” But that is not the description that the Word of God

gives to us. What the verse gives to us is that I wake up in the morning alienated from God, trapped inside my own selfish thoughts and ready to set out on a course that will serve me regardless of what pain and trouble it causes to others. Whoa, nobody wants to think of themselves like that. But it is true. The substance of depravity is demonstrated well enough in the Old Testament. David says this about himself. Most of us I think are familiar with this statement. Psalm 51:5, *“Behold I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.”* This has often been mistaken as a condemnation of sexual contact. That is not what is being talked about. What is being talked about is that David’s mother was a sinner, she was depraved in her inner person. How many mothers have taken their children as personal possessions and used them for their own self-gratification? Of course! Scriptures give us very little [basis] for having sentimental romanticized expectations or perceptions of people. If you really want a full statement of the depravity of man you have, however to turn to Ephesians 2:1-3. This is where Paul writes it out for us. He does it in a way that just leaves you cold. This is what he says,

“You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all—catch the “we”; Paul is saying “I the Jew, a member of the covenant people of God, we walked in the same way as you Gentiles, you pagan idolaters, all of us, he says —we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

You cannot take those verses seriously and continue to have a romanticized sentimentalism about the goodness of people. You know that I delight in small babies, especially when they belong to someone else. They are cute, they are adorable, and they are little. The most important thing about them is that they are little, because if they were big and acted as the do as babies it would be horrifying.

Moving on, it is in the context of this reality that God decrees a new world order or relations for humanity. A new world order: you probably have heard that phrase now and then. Let me just say right off that there is only one more new world order going to come down the line. It comes with Jesus. There is no other new world order available. This is the one we live and we will live in until Jesus returns. That is why this portion of the Word of God is so critical. This is the new world order which God establishes as a result or in the light of the consequences of human choice. Human choices must be contained and humanity preserved in spite of its propensity to self-destruction. In make believe we can start over as if we had never played the game before. How many have played those video games? Wonderful. “Oh, messed up and the Zorks got me. Start over: yeah!” Well, that is not reality. We live amidst the consequences of our past choices.

In Genesis 9:1 notice that God repeats the original command and directive. He says be fruitful and multiply. Some have noticed that in this statement there is a change from what came before. No comment is made regarding “subdue” or “exercising dominion.” The hesitancy at this point is reasonable, considering the risk. How safe is it to give power to sinners? It is not safe. Does humanity rule the world? Oh yes. There is almost nothing that can resist or oppose us. We know that. You and I sometimes cringe when we hear the Environmental Protection Agency put one animal or another put on the endangered species list. But beloved like it or not, they are endangered and they are endangered by only one creature, and that is us. You and I may differ with those who say it is human pollution that has threatened the balance of our climate, but there is only one creature on earth that creates pollution, and it is us. What has happened as a consequence of the fall is not that we are powerless but that now we have what can only be described as an incomplete rule. This is manifested by the huge number of unintended consequences that flow out of the meddling by humanity with what God created in the first place. Sensible people know that the more power we have in our hands the more dangerous we are to everything, including ourselves.

Let me ask you a question: how many of us in this room grew up in the shadow of the fear of nuclear holocaust? That was no vain or empty fear. You and I both know that if we wanted to, or in other words if God removed His

restraining presence and allowed humanity to act out the foolish hatred and pride we could destroy this planet with nuclear weapons. We can do that, and that should not be forgotten about us.

In Genesis 9:2-3, God indicates a drastic change in the relationship between animals and humanity. Animals now live in spontaneous fear of us. (I am not sure this is entirely true anymore. I have gotten into a personal talking relationship with the deer on my property. I find this extremely frustrating and the raccoons seem to ignore me at will as they are digging up my garden! But you and I both know what this is talking about.) We use animals now; we didn't before. We eat them; we didn't before. Fear and terror have replaced trust and harmony between humanity and the animals. There is a memory of what has been lost. Isaiah spoke of it as part of God's promise of restored goodness in the creation. You can read it in Isaiah 11:6-9. This is what Isaiah says,

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, as the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

Do you hunger for that day? Even if you are a hunter – I understand that – but someday...perfect harmony, a delight and a celebration in the sheer goodness of being alive and knowing God. What a day. Therefore how real the burdens are in the meanwhile.

In Genesis 9:4 God sets the lifeblood of animals aside as not for human consumption. This is not merely an incidental or culturally limited detail as any who are familiar with the scriptures know. It was widely believed then and is still believed by people today that by eating the blood of the victim you gained the power and strength of what you had eaten. The Bible also teaches that the life of the animal, including humans, is found in the blood. But God does not want anyone to be deceived into thinking that we gain life or powers from someone or something by eating their blood. Why does He care? Because life is a gift to us from God, as much with our physical as with our spiritual lives. There is only one blood source that does us any good. You all know what that blood source is, don't you. What is that blood source? It is Jesus. He wants that to be absolutely and irrevocably clear in our minds. When we take the elements of communion we should think to ourselves very specifically, “This cup may not physically be blood, but it is intended by God to be the blood of Christ and it is what gives me life, for He has given His life for me.” So I would commend us to reflect upon this and anticipate the next time we share the meal: it is not juice to be “tossed off” but blood to be received with the utmost reverence, and may I say with fear.

The life blood of both animals and humanity is associated with or found in the blood. But there is here given to us an unbridgeable gulf between animals and human kind. This is essential for us to comprehend. We see this when God establishes the principle of retributive justice as part of the plan for ruling and subduing and filling the earth. This is Genesis 9:5-7. This is what he says,

“And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. ‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.’ And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.”

What a remarkable statement. You understand what God has just given into the hands of sinners? He has just handed over to sinners not only the obligation but the right to exercise capital punishment, that is, punishment to death for those who have taken the life of another. It is the apostle Paul who in Romans 13:1-7 fully articulates, spells out, the implications of Genesis 9:1-7. But you really need to start with Romans 12:14-21. This passage lists some basic principles by which Christians are to live together and live with others in the world. Here is what Paul says to us as Christians:

“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

What words! That is a description of the church. That is who we are. That is how we are supposed to be. That is how we are supposed to respond to a world of sinners around us. How wonderful if just the people of God, the church would live according to these principles for daily life. But we don't! And people without the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit present to direct and restrain them from evil choice, to appeal to our fallen nature, do far worse. That is why we need a restraining power.

That brings us to Romans 13:1-7. This speaks directly to the nature and role of government for preserving society. This is what Paul writes:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”

I cannot possibly unpack even in a short comment what that passage sets in front of us. Let me only make a couple of observations. This is an endorsement of capital punishment. Capital punishment goes beyond revenge. Historical records are clear. Revenge leads to feuds and feuds have led to wars. When God decrees from his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man at issue is not just a killing but a judgment. To be considered is both the need to determine the guilt or the innocence in the first place, but also what will best serve the public interest or good. This is the task and responsibility of government, the state, however it is put together. This, by the way, is the significance of including the provision regarding animals. You might find that strange. But if the ox were to gore someone you were supposed to kill that ox. There was no thought that the animal was morally culpable or responsible for what it had done. The animal was not being punished. Later, when Moses establishes the law, he is clear that it is the owner of the animal who bears responsibility. But the immediate issue both here in Genesis and again when Moses gives the law is the need to protect the community from evil. What is the evil? It is the evil of a dangerous animal. And may I say [it could be] the evil today it is far more likely to be a dangerous drunk driver. It is the responsibility of the government, the state, to step in and make certain that what is evil is restrained. The standard principle for the application for biblical as well as the more general political and ethical principles is that the broader or the greater case includes all the lesser. So if we will entrust to men the judgment regarding life and death over those who have committed murder, then we must have already agreed to the idea that men can evaluate and make judgments regarding all the lesser degrees of evil in which men engage, and all that is necessary to protect the community from the consequences of that evil. The state is expected to handle all other matters of justice and the need to regulate behavior for the restraint of evil. This is the charter for civil government.

Why do we have government? [It is] because we are sinners; our neighbors are sinners. [It is] because humanity is the most dangerous animal upon the face of the earth, and we do horrible things to one another. You may not follow the news on a consistent basis, I like to do so, not because it is pleasant but because it is informative. Recently a man who had been a governor was condemned for it was discovered he had embezzled thousands and thousands of dollars. Do you know who pays for that? You do, although he wasn't in this state. It is the lesson of Genesis 8 and 9 that we cannot take sin lightly, that we must in fact be willing to take a disciplined and consistent approach in submission to the authorities and recognize the need to restrain evil, for evil devours all things. That is why I had us read this morning – and I so appreciated the reader's comments – turn with me so we can read once again I Timothy 2:1-4. This is Paul's exhortation to his son in the Lord, Timothy.

“First of all then I urge that supplications and prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead – and here is what is essential – that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior who desires that all people will be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.”

We tend to glorify persecution. We ought not. We tend to speak lightly of the advantage that might come if people were made to shape up under hostility. We shouldn't. I doubt very many people are coming to faith in Syria and Iraq right now. Living in the face of terror does not give much freedom to the heart or mind. You and I live in a democratic society. We still have a voice. Christians stopped talking when the Nazis began to take power in Germany. They thought it was safer to be quiet. They were fools. We must not keep quiet, for the day will come when we will not have freedom to speak and there will not be peace; there will be fear.

Let us pray: Father in heaven, You have established the church of Jesus Christ upon the face of the earth as a physical, visible presence of Jesus Himself. You have granted to us the immense, the immeasurable gifts of Your Word and Your Spirit. By all rights our Father we are the most powerful group of people upon the face of the earth. But our power is after the model of Jesus, who called us to be servants, to overcome evil with good. Father, strengthen us, clear our minds, purify our hearts, focus us so that we learn to walk and speak and serve others in the character of Christ, and so release the power of the Holy Spirit with the transformation of the lost and the restraint of evil. Oh Father, we give thanks to You and we pray in Jesus' name.

Questions for Understanding and Application: “Second Start 2”

1. What do you see as the difference between passive and active waiting? How would you explain this to an adolescent? How might you do it as regards a person’s spiritual life?

2. What might be the advantages and what are the disadvantages of starting over, whether on a project, in a relationship or any other such thing?

3. Do you agree that while people are almost never as bad as they could be they are never as good as they should be? How does this work out in practical terms day by day?

4. Do you agree that humanity generally has a craving for power? Is the following statement true: “the more power we have in our hands the more dangerous we are to everything, including ourselves”?

5. What is the special role of blood in this age and why is this so?

6. What do you see as the proper role or responsibility for government in society such that you agree to pay them to do it? What would you not include in that list?

7. How does retributive justice differ from simply a revenge killing?

8. How is it that the new principle of retributive justice becomes the foundation or charter for all civil government and the state?

9. Why should Christians have nothing more than a prudential fear of natural disasters?

10. What lessons do we learn from the sad story of Noah’s getting drunk?

11. According to Genesis 9 what will be the dominant realities of the New World Order? 16