

CHRIST THE COVENANTER
2. CHRIST IN THE COVENANT WITH NOAH
GENESIS 9:8-13

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever made an important appointment and then failed to keep it through forgetfulness. Perhaps you then resolved to arrange for some kind of reminder so that you would not forget future appointments. Here, in Genesis 9, we have a vitally important life or death arrangement (a covenant), which both parties are continually reminded of, to secure successful compliance.

Let us briefly outline the background to this arrangement. A series of Divine actions had resulted in the creation of a world in accord with the Divine purpose (Gen.1-2). The chapters following revealed progressive and increasing attempts by the human race to thwart the Divine purpose (Gen.3-6). The result was the Divine decision to blot out all but Noah and his family from the earth (Genesis 6-8). With this backdrop of Divine wrath and judgment, Noah left the ark and walked on the renewed and cleansed earth.

I. THE PREPARATION FOR PEACE

God prepared the ground for His *Covenant with Noah* by propitiation, propagation, provision and protection.

1. Propitiation (8:20-22)

Noah and his family began life in a fresh, new world with sacrifice and worship. This is the first mention of an altar in the Bible. Conscious that God had justly “withdrawn” from dwelling on the earth to His throne in heaven, Noah’s heart turned heavenwards with a desire that his prayers and offerings ascend upwards to Him.

We are told that the Lord smelled the “smell of satisfaction” or “the tranquillising odour”. God was propitiated or “satisfied” by sacrificial blood. Thus, sacrificial blood is the basis of the *Covenant with Noah* and symbolises the sacrificial blood of Christ which forms the basis of the *Covenant of Grace*.

2. Propagation (9:1,7)

God instructed Noah about the new society he was to establish and expand. The parallels between the instructions given to Adam in Genesis 1 indicate that God views this as a new beginning in a new world. Like Adam, Noah was to be fruitful, increase in number and fill the earth (9:1, 7). After all Noah had lived through, it would have been natural for Noah to conclude that it was not worth bringing children into such a world with all the risks from man and God. But God makes clear to Noah his “worldwide” responsibilities. In his book *The Christ of the Covenants*, O P Robertson commented on the need for the Christian to maintain a “worldview”:

Redeemed man must not internalise his salvation so that he thinks narrowly in terms of a “soul-saving” deliverance. To the contrary, redemption involves his total life-style as a social, cultural creature. Rather than withdrawing narrowly into a restricted form of ‘spiritual’ existence, redeemed man must move out with a total world-and-life perspective.¹

¹ O P Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Philipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1980), 110.

3. Provision (9:2-4)

Noah, like Adam, was to have dominion over animals (1:26, 28). Sin having loosened the bond of voluntary subjection on the part of the animals to the will of humanity, and humanity having lost the ability to have power over nature, God instilled something new into the animals; a “fear and dread” of humanity. The dominion was restored but it was of a different nature to the harmonious and happy dominion of Eden. “Into your hand are they delivered” implies that humanity was given the power of life and death over them.

Although God provided Noah and his family with animal life to sustain them (9:3), in order to preserve their respect for life, they were forbidden to eat “flesh with its life”, i.e., its blood (v4). Blood was to be drained out of the animals before being eaten (Lev 3:17; 7:26–27; 19:26). Blood is identified with life because a beating heart and a strong pulse are the clearest evidences of life.

However, the restriction was not just about retaining respect for life, even when found in animals, but was primarily about reserving a special place for animal blood in atoning sacrifices (Lev 17:11). Ultimately this restriction was made in view of the sanctity of the blood of our Great High Priest, who is both priest and sacrifice.

4. Protection (9:5-6)

The respect for animal life was carried over into a new emphasis on the sanctity of human life, a greatly needed corrective after the murderous violence which characterised the fallen pre-flood world. No sin shows greater contempt for life than murder. Whereas an animal's blood may be shed but not consumed, human blood was not even to be shed (except in strict justice). Three times God said he would require it, or demand an account. There was to be strict correspondence between offence and punishment. The reason for this is given as the uniqueness of man as made in the image of God.

Just as God renewed Noah's authority to propagate life, so here He gave new authority for protecting life. He instituted the civil magistrate, and armed him with public and official authority to repress the commission of violence and crime (Rom.13:1ff). If God was never to exterminate the world with a flood again, then He must erect a barrier against the power of evil and lay the foundation for an orderly society. H C Leupold remarks on this passage:

By this word government is instituted, this basic institution for the welfare of man. For as man receives power over other men's lives under certain circumstances, then by virtue of having received power over the highest good man has [his life], power over the lesser things is naturally included, such as power over property to the extent of being able to exact taxes, over our persons to the extent of being able to demand various types of work and service, as need arise. Government, then, being grounded on this word, is not by human contract or by surrender of certain powers, or by encroachment of priestcraft. It is a divine institution.²

II. THE PROMISE OF PEACE

Having prepared the ground for His *Covenant with Noah*, the Lord then enters into covenant with Noah. This covenant was initiated by God, it involved the whole world, it intimated peace, and it was inspired by grace.

² H C Leupold, *Commentary on Genesis* (London: Evangelical Press, 1972), 333.

1. Initiated by God (9:9)

Verse 9 begins with “And I, behold, I...” This language not only reminds us of how God earlier intimated his intention to destroy the earth (6:17), but also emphasises the divine initiative in the *Covenant with Noah*. Notice all the “I wills” and “I shalls”. God initiated, designed, announced and established this covenant. As in all the covenants between God and man, God is the Giver and man the receiver. Leon Morris highlights this in the following way:

Here we notice that not only is the initiative with God, the whole ‘covenant’ is His. Noah is not represented as doing anything in the matter, either in the way of seeking a covenant or of performing covenant obligations...The covenant is one of grace, with the Lord freely bestowing His blessing on His servant, and not granting it as a return for services rendered.³

2. Involves the whole world (9:10)

Although we call this covenant the *Covenant with Noah*, it actually encompasses and involves the whole cosmos and for all time. It is called the *Covenant with Noah*, because it was made with Noah as a representative man rather than as an individual (Gen.9:9-10). Notice the scope of the terms; “every living creature” (twice), “all living creatures”, “all life”. The repetition of these wide-ranging terms serves to underline the universal message. Just as all would reap the external and non-redemptive benefits from what God did to the snake in the *Covenant with Adam* (Gen.3:15), so all would reap the external and non-redemptive benefits of what God was doing here in the *Covenant with Noah*.

3. Intimates peace (9:11)

In the ancient Near East, covenant treaties were made after wars between the warring nations as a first step toward embarking on peace. So God, after warring against sin, here made a covenant of peace. The main theme of the covenant is “no worldwide flood again”. Note, though, that it is not a promise never to flood particular places, and it is not a promise to never destroy by fire.

God promised an orderly and predictable place for His image to fulfil the Divine commission. He granted Noah a world of regular cycles – seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night (8:22). What a relief! Without this promise, the first cloud or spot of rain would remind Noah of the great deluge and arouse terror in his heart. But now the forces of nature are bridled, the powers of evil are put under greater restraint, and humanity is protected against the violence of both man and beast. Arthur Pink highlighted the lack of this perspective today:

The terms of this covenant refer us to that which is almost universally lost sight of in these days, namely, the fact that behind Nature’s ‘laws’ is Nature’s Lord. Men now seek to shut God out of His own creation. We hear so much of the science of farming and the laws of diet that our daily bread and the health of the body are regarded as something that man produces and controls. Our daily bread is a gift, for without the recurring seasons and God’s renewal of the face of the earth, man could produce no grain at all, and the recurring of the seasons and the renewal of the earth are the fulfilment of the covenant that God made with Noah.⁴

³ Leon Morris, *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: Tyndale Press, 1955), 66.

⁴ Arthur Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis* (Albany: Ages Software, 2000), 114.

4. Inspired by grace (9:11)

Just as in Genesis 3:14-15, here also God bestowed unmerited favours and blessing forfeited by sin. Though God had just drowned and “cleansed” the wicked world, He knew that the heart of man was still evil and disobedient. He looked ahead and saw that wickedness would soon again cover the face of the earth. Yet, in His grace and mercy, He promised that He would never drown it all again. He promised that He would not deal with humanity according to our sins. Matthew Henry emphasised the connection between God’s continued mercy and the continued existence of the world:

It is owing to God’s goodness and faithfulness, not to any reformation of the world, that it has not often been deluged and that it is not deluged now. As the old world was ruined to be a monument of justice, so this world remains to this day, a monument of mercy, according to the oath of God, that the waters of Noah should no more return to cover the earth.⁵

Just as in Genesis 3:14-15 (with the disgraced, detested and defeated snake), here also the external and non-redemptive blessing is intimately connected to, flows from, reveals and administers the *Covenant of Grace*. Just as in Genesis 3:14-15, here also the external blessing provides a context for spiritual blessing. The general regularity and routineness of life is God’s gracious gift and is a great help to us in overcoming the ruinous effects of sin and in fulfilling our God-given obligations in the world. Just as in Genesis 3:14-15, here also humanity is exhorted to grasp by faith the spiritual and redemptive blessings represented in the physical and non-redemptive blessings. Just as in Genesis 3:14-15, here also a physical sign (the rainbow) with a spiritual meaning is given to encourage and strengthen faith in the *Covenant of Grace*.

III. THE PROOF OF PEACE

Covenants were usually sealed as proof of completion and commitment, and this covenant is no exception. Here the rainbow was introduced as a seal to the *Covenant with Noah*. By faith Noah was to look through the window of this visible sign and seal of physical blessings, and see into the spiritual blessings of the *Covenant of Grace*. Just as the defeated snake revealed a defeated Devil as a result of the *Covenant of Grace* so the rainbow of peace revealed a pacified God as a result of the *Covenant of Grace*. This rainbow was a colourful, confirming, comforting and Christ-centred seal.

1. Colourful seal

The rainbow is the result of pure white light being refracted and divided into various component colours. So God who is light does, through the *Covenant with Noah*, display His manifold (*lit.* many-coloured) grace (1Pet.4:10).

2. Confirming seal

God said of the rainbow: “This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations” (Gen.9:12). The covenant needs no token, as far as God is concerned; tokens are given for us, because of our littleness of heart, our unbelief, and our constant forgetfulness of God’s promise. Like the sacraments, the physical eye of sense is used to strengthen the spiritual eye of faith and to remind us to keep our covenant commitments. Although God said that when he would see the covenant sign in the sky, he would remember the covenant (Gen.9:15-16),

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Iowa: Word Bible Publishers), 71.

we must not conclude that there is a possibility of God “forgetting”. God’s “remembering” implies that when God puts a rainbow in the sky, He is bringing the terms of the covenant before His eyes and actively thinking upon His promises to humanity.

A question has been raised as to whether there was a rainbow before the flood. Some are of the view that God took an existing phenomena and consecrated it here as a covenant seal. However, the effectiveness of the sign would be much stronger if it was something new and uniquely associated with this covenant.

The Hebrew word for rainbow is also the word for a battle bow. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, God referred to judgment storms by using the language of bows and arrows. The rainbow arcs like a battle bow hung against the clouds and pointing away from the earth. The bow is now “put away,” suggesting that the battle is over. Thus the rainbow speaks of peace. In it there is no string, and in it there is no arrow.

3. Comforting seal

This proof is given repeatedly, time and time again in every time and place. Let the next rainbow we see remind us that God has kept His promise for millenniums. He will keep every promise He makes to us. How comforting it is that again and again in the skies we see God’s pledge and promise of grace. In their commentary on Genesis Keil and Delitzsch wrote this about the rainbow:

As it shines forth against a dark background which but shortly before flashed with lightnings, it symbolises the victory of bright, gentle love over the darkly luminous wrath; growing as it does out of the interaction of sun and dark clouds, it symbolises the readiness of the heavenly to interpenetrate the earthly; extending from heaven to earth, it proclaims peace between God and man; reaching, as it does, beyond the range of vision, it declares that God’s covenant of grace is all-embracing.⁶

A universal sign was used to communicate and confirm universal non-redemptive blessings, and to induce the whole universe to seek the redemptive grace portrayed in it.

4. Christ-centred seal

The rainbow directs our thoughts to Christ in different ways:

a. The rainbow as a covenant witness

The rainbow is the heavenly witness of the *Covenant with Noah*. Jesus Christ is the Faithful Witness in heaven of the *Covenant of Grace*.

b. The rainbow as a bridge

The rainbow appears to be a bridge between heaven and earth, reminding us that in the *Covenant of Grace* Christ bridged the chasm that separated man from God. Arthur Pink put it like this.

As the rainbow is the union of heaven and earth – spanning the sky and reaching down to the ground – so grace in the one Mediator has brought together God and men.⁷

⁶ Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on Genesis*.

⁷ Arthur Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis* (Albany: Ages Software, 2000), 119.

c. The rainbow as the joint product of storm and sunshine

There can be no rainbow without rain. There can be no peace with God without judgment upon sin. Again, Arthur Pink movingly writes:

There are many parallels between the rainbow and God's grace. As the rainbow is the joint product of storm and sunshine, so grace is the unmerited favour of God appearing on the dark background of the creature's sin. As the rainbow is the effect of the sun shining on the drops of rain in a raincloud, so Divine grace is manifested by God's love shining through the blood shed by our blessed Redeemer. As Nature knows nothing more exquisitely beautiful than the rainbow, so heaven itself knows nothing that equals in loveliness the wonderful grace of our God.⁸

d. The rainbow as the conclusion of the storm

When we see the rainbow, we know that particular shower of rain is over. When Christ comes to us, our present trials and troubles seem to be over for a while. In a sermon on the rainbow, Charles Spurgeon illustrated the reaction we should have to the sight of a rainbow:

Little children run in clapping their hands with glee; "Father, there's a rainbow!" Out they run to look at it; and they wonder whether they could find the end of it; they wish you would let them run till they could catch it; they look, and look, and look, and look, and when the shower begins to abate and it dies out, they are so sorrowful because they have lost the splendid vision. Beloved, let us be children. Whenever we think of Christ let us be little children, and look, and look, and look again; and let us long to get at him, for, unlike the rainbow, we can get at him.⁹

The Jews confess their sins when they see the rainbow. So should Christians whenever, by faith, they see Christ who has delivered them from the deluge of wrath and the flames of hell.

e. The rainbow as the crowning beauty of nature

In the rainbow we see *transcendent glory and beauty*. We never tire of looking at a rainbow. However, nobody can adequately paint one. It is impossible to do justice to the rainbow on a canvas. There is such a melting and blending of colours, that human art shall never be able to rival the art of God. In the same way, no painter can adequately capture Christ, and no preacher can perfectly preach Him. He transcends every human attempt to depict or describe Him.

Just as the rainbow is the crowning glory of nature, so Christ is the crowning glory of heaven. In Revelation 4:3 we read of a rainbow about the throne in heaven, showing that the bow is not a temporary symbol for earth only, but is a symbol of everlasting and heavenly things. The Lord is sitting on His heavenly throne surrounded with the insignia of the *Covenant of Grace*.

In a most comforting passage for the storm-tossed Christian, the prophet Isaiah highlighted the redemptive nature and essence of the *Covenant with Noah*

⁸ *Ibid*, 119.

⁹ C H Spurgeon, *The Rainbow* (Albany: Ages Software, 1997) 467.

In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the LORD thy Redeemer. For this is as the waters of Noah unto me: for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth; so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee. For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the LORD that hath mercy on thee (Isa.54:8-10).

SUMMARY

The *Covenant of Grace* was first revealed and administered to sinners through the post-fall *Covenant with Adam*, and especially through the covenant sign of the disgraced, detested and defeated snake. The *Covenant of Grace* was further revealed and administered to sinners through the *Covenant with Noah*, and especially through the covenant sign of the rainbow. This physical covenant sign which highlighted non-redemptive blessings for all humanity, also preached the spiritual reality of a pacified God resulting from the *Covenant of Grace*. However, only those with faith could benefit from the spiritual reality signified in the physical sign.

Let us go back to our dark cathedral. Sin-darkened humanity is benefiting from light now shining through the snake-shaped window cut in the side. In the *Covenant with Noah*, God effectively cuts another window, this time in the shape of a rainbow. Again, everyone inside profits from the improved light conditions, just as everyone profits from the benefits of a generally stable cycle of seasons promised in the *Covenant with Noah*. Again, some just take the physical light and some just admire the window. Others, however, look through the window by faith and see a more wonderful spiritual reality shining brightly through it; a pacified God resulting from the *Covenant of Grace*. The generally peaceful and stable cycle of the seasons promised in the *Covenant with Noah*, and sealed with the covenant sign of the rainbow, symbolised the spiritual peace and stability between God and His people guaranteed in the *Covenant of Grace*. The rainbow of peace in the *Covenant with Noah* revealed sufficient of the *Covenant of Grace* to enable Noah to put His faith in the Christ of the Covenant who would bring about peace through the blood of the cross.

Have you followed Noah's faith? Have you used the covenant sign of the rainbow of peace to lead you to the Prince of peace?