

## The Sign of the Covenant Genesis 8:20-9:17

“And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you.” What does that mean? What is a covenant?

Well, in the days of Moses, a covenant was a legal agreement, often written down. It was between a king, and one of his vassals, usually a lesser noble of some kind. It was sort of like a contract, but had some important differences.

Contracts are usually focused on the future – I will do this for you if you will do this for me. In contrast, a covenant always began with a description of the great things that the king had already done for his vassal. In this particular case, God had just delivered Noah and the animals that had been with him on the ark from certain death in the flood.

But just as in a contract, God also makes promises about the future in this covenant. In chapter 8 verse 21, God promises never again to curse the ground because of man’s sin. In chapter 9, God explains his promise more fully. In verse 11, God promises never again to send a flood to destroy the earth. He repeats this promise in verse 15 – the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

This promise relates to an even larger assurance – that God will preserve the stability of the seasons. God promises to man and all the animals that seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease. Man and the animals can thus go about their business in a predictable, stable natural world.

In short, what God has done for man and the animals is to preserve their lives, and what God has promised to man and the animals is to preserve the environmental conditions that will allow their lives to continue. It would be hard to imagine a greater blessing than this.

Sometimes we pause to thank God for the beauty and bounty of His creation, like at Thanksgiving. But do we ever thank Him for the regularity, for the stability of the world in which we live? Perhaps we appreciate the predictability of natural forces the most when they become unstable for a time. The extraordinarily severe drought afflicting Texas has moved the people there to pray for rain. And to say that this week has been unusual would be an understatement: earthquakes in Colorado and Virginia? A hurricane in New York Harbor? None of us should take the stability of God’s creation for granted.

But the very fact that such events are in fact unusual should make us grateful for the underlying stability of the world most of the time. After all, if floods like the one we had this past spring happened all the time all over the world, agriculture would be impossible. If hurricanes like Katrina blew in off the ocean every year, no one could live on the Gulf coast. It is the precisely the predictability of nature that has made the construction of our complex civilization possible. Indeed, it is the regularity of natural forces that makes it possible for us to conduct experiments and to gain scientific knowledge and to develop new technologies.

Yes, God has greatly blessed all of us in fundamental ways. And in the days of Moses, when a king established a covenant with his vassal, the vassal was told how he should respond to

such blessings of a king. Every covenant thus included lists of obligations that the vassal was to carry out – perhaps paying taxes or providing military service.

So, what does God command Noah and the animals to do in order to express their gratitude for the bounty and regularity of the world? In the first place, God tells them all to be fruitful and multiply, to bring forth abundantly the life that God's world has made possible. God commanded them to do something that was good for them and for their children, something that would make their lives more rich and full.

What a gracious God we serve. For we must never forget that all of God's commandments are intended for our good. When God tells us to observe the Sabbath, He puts healthy boundaries around our working lives that prevent us from burning ourselves out, and that keep us close to Him, Who is the only source of our life. When God tells us to honor our parents, He sets up the basic circumstances necessary for a happy family life and a stable society. All of the Law of God is intended to help us love Him and love one another more completely.

But God's grace is also displayed in the things he tells us not to do. When God tells us not to steal, He secures private property as the foundation of all prosperity. When God tells us not to commit adultery, He establishes a safe context in which human intimacy can be expressed and He sets up the family as the best forum in which children can be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

The same thing is true of the negative command God gives in this passage – neither man nor animal is to kill a man. Of course this makes sense. After all, God has just preserved Noah and the animals through the flood waters, so of course God is interested in preserving life. And of course it's clear that no society, no civilization can continue to exist if people go around murdering one another whenever they see fit. This is one of God's laws that is obviously good for us.

But God gives a different reason that we should keep this law. No one, either man or animal, is to kill a man because man is made in the image of God. To commit murder is in one sense a blasphemous act, for to strike at an image of God is to strike at God Himself.

But why would God have to command us to do obviously good things like to have children? Why would God have to command us not to do obviously bad things like killing each other? Because of the continuing reality of sin in the world. Chapter 8 verse 21 tells us the sad truth – not even all the waters of the flood could wash the earth clean of sin. And that's because sin does not principally reside in the world around us. Sin, this natural inclination all men have to put ourselves first, this natural tendency we have to push God and other people away from us, this sin lies inside each one of our hearts.

We saw this sin illustrated in the natural world after Adam first ate the forbidden fruit. Because of Adam's sin, his relationship with the world's vegetation was damaged. Instead of the earth yielding its fruit to him, Adam was told that he would have to struggle with the world, that he would be able to raise crops only by the sweat of his brow. And that's still true today. Even the most experienced farmer, even the most skillful gardener has to coax his plants to do his bidding – and sometimes the soil conditions or the droughts or the floods or the fungus or the

weeds or the worms frustrate his best efforts. The fact is that because of his sin, Adam and all his descendants have become separated in some sense from the vegetable world.

And in today's passage, we are reminded that the same sad truth applies to the animals. Even though Noah had obviously had sufficient control over all the animals to direct them into the ark and to keep them there for over a year, after the flood he and his descendants would lose that control. Because of the continuing sin in Noah's heart, the animals would become wild, separated from him and all his descendants, terrified in our presence.

But just as God gave us His commandments for our good, so God made the animals wild for their good. For how many wild animals would remain alive today if they all trusted human beings, if they all acted like pets, coming to us whenever we called to them? Given the wickedness in our hearts, not one of them would have survived.

And that's because of something else God told Noah – God said that after the flood he would be allowed to kill and eat the animals. Now, again, we don't know exactly why God made this change. Perhaps this was intended to be a blessing – we all know how good a steak can be. Or perhaps eating meat had somehow become a necessity. Perhaps the profound geological changes that happened during the flood had killed off some of the plants man would need to sustain his life and health. Or perhaps God knew that, given the sin that continues to be in our hearts, men would lose the knowledge of which plants they would need to eat in which combinations in order to have enough protein in our diets.

But whatever the reason God told us that we could eat meat, he also put a boundary on how we could do that. God told Noah that he was not to eat blood, because blood is associated with life. In placing this restriction on man's diet, God was showing us the importance of being reverent with life and thus with all living things. It is God who created life, not us, and so we have no right to be callous or abusive with living things.

And so we can see that the covenant God made with all men and animals is a covenant of life. God blessed man and the animals by saving their lives in the flood, and God promised to maintain the conditions that would allow their lives to be preserved. God commanded them to fill up the earth with life by having lots of children. God told people to be reverent with all life, but especially reverent with human life because God made us in His own image.

Now, in ancient covenants what usually followed the proclamation of the king's blessings and the requirements he placed on his vassals was a bloody ceremony. One of these takes place in Genesis 15, when Abraham took several animals and killed them, cutting them in two pieces. When he separated the pieces of the slain animals, between them was formed a bloody path. The king and the vassal making the covenant would walk on the bloody path between the pieces of the animals, promising that if either broke his promise, he would be killed in a similar fashion. It's hard to imagine a more dramatic way of pledging to keep your word.

Now, it's true that Noah does offer up an animal sacrifice in chapter 8 verse 20. But that was before God said anything about the covenant in chapter 9 verse 8. Noah's offering seems instead to be a simple sacrifice of thanksgiving to God, a way of praising God for delivering him

from the flood. Noah didn't cut the animals in two and walk on the ground between them – he just burned them up as an offering to God.

That's what makes this covenant so special – it didn't require blood. In fact, it didn't require man to make any promises at all. God may have told Noah what He wanted Noah to do, but God didn't require Noah to make a pledge to keep God's law. From what we read in chapter 8 verse 21, it seems instead that God knew quite well that we wouldn't keep His covenant, that we wouldn't obey His laws.

But that's what makes a covenant different from a contract. If someone breaks a contract, the other party to the contract is released from his promise. After all, if I don't keep my promise to deliver 5 bales of cotton to you, you don't have to keep your promise to pay me \$100 a pound for it. A contract is thus mutually conditional, depending on the faithfulness of each of the parties that make it.

In contrast, a covenant is not a conditional promise, but an unconditional one. Each party pledges to keep his word. But if he breaks his word, the other party is not released and the covenant is not destroyed. No, if someone breaks a covenant, what happens to those slain animals happens to him. The covenant stays in place, and the covenant-breaker is put to death.

So, what was the sign of the covenant? What was it that sealed the promises that God made to all men and animals? Instead of requiring a bloody ceremony, God said He would set His bow in the clouds. And when do you usually see a rainbow? When the rain has passed, and the sun has reappeared. Whenever we see the rainbow, we are to be reminded of God's promise not to send another devastating flood, of God's promise to maintain the physical stability of the earth.

But there's one other thing about a rainbow that should give us pause. Sure, it's shaped like a bow that you would string and use to shoot arrows. In fact, the shape of the rainbow is that of a bow that has been pulled back with an arrow on the string, ready to be released.

But if that arrow were to be released, in what direction would it fly? The shape of the rainbow tells us that the arrow would fly upward toward Heaven, not downward toward the earth. When God set His bow in the clouds, He was thus proclaiming His intention not to strike the earth again.

And maybe that solves the final mystery about the covenant God made with Noah. After all, God made a covenant with Noah, and God included in that covenant things that Noah needed to do. Noah was not to shed any man's blood, because man is made in the image of God. But the history of the world since the time of the flood has included much more than its share of bloodshed. As a whole, mankind has not kept the covenant God has made with us.

The covenant is broken, and we have broken it. Ours is the blood that should be shed. But instead, where does the rainbow point? In what direction does the arrow of God's wrath travel? Upward. It is God's blood in Jesus Christ that is shed to satisfy God's covenant. That's why God didn't require Noah to make a blood oath – God knew that Christ's blood would be shed on the cross to pay the penalty for all our sins. It is God's own sacrifice that makes possible the continued stability of our world. It is nothing that we do or fail to do that saves us – we are

saved by His grace alone, in much the same way that God saved Noah from the waters of the great flood.

So let us rejoice in the wonder and the stability of God's creation. Let us celebrate and cherish life in all its forms. Let us be especially reverent with one another, made as we are in the image of God. But most of all, let us be thankful that God has shed His own blood that we might be in fellowship with Him.