

## **Genesis 9:1-17**

### **The Noahic Covenant**

The Flood had brought out the best in Noah. He had obeyed completely. He had not argued with God. He had been patient. Now off the ark and with his feet firmly planted on dry land, Noah began again. I cannot imagine the landscape over which he looked. Perhaps trees had survived the Flood, and it is clear from Scripture that plant life had begun to grow. But I cannot see how any of the buildings erected before the Flood could have survived, or at least if they had, they certainly could not have been habitable. His wife, sons, and daughters-in-law provided company, but all of his friends were dead. The relief of having survived the Flood and rejoicing at finally being told to leave the ark must have been quickly followed by depression as Noah surveyed the soggy horizon and considered his situation.

In this section, God introduced three significant changes to the dynamic of the earth. First, God granted mankind the permission to eat meat. Second, the relationship between mankind and animals was changed. Finally, God made a covenant with Noah and his children. In these addresses, we also see a change in that God broadened the conversation. He spoke not only to Noah but now included his sons as He made His remarks.

#### **God Blesses**

The writer states simply a fact that should never be underestimated by any person. “And God blessed Noah” (v. 1). We must never forget that it is no small thing to be blessed by God. He is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. It is remarkable to even consider that a perfectly holy and righteous God could possibly choose to be on our side; to be devoted to our welfare. Yet, that is what God does. Any of us who are called as God’s children can say with Noah that “God blessed us.”

But we must also see the condition of the ‘blessed’ Noah. He had spent a year in the ark with his family and representatives of the entire land animal kingdom. He must have smelled terrible, though perhaps he couldn’t tell. He had no permanent shelter unless he retreated back into the ark. He needed to work hard to plant crops and to try to make something of the new earth on which he found himself. He had no friends. But Noah was blessed.

I think of Jacob, another who was similarly blessed.

<sup>24</sup>Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup>When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. . . . <sup>29</sup>Then Jacob asked him and said, ‘please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘why is it that you ask my name?’ And he blessed him there. . . . <sup>31</sup>Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh” (Genesis 32:24-25, 29, 31).

Blessed people are not always clean, rich, and healthy. Jacob was dirty and limping around after a night of little sleep. Noah was smelly and alone. Yet both were blessed. We would do well to remember that.

The blessing God offered was addressed to Noah and his sons. However, since this was before the Sinaitic covenant, the blessing was, like those of the Garden, applicable to all humanity. Fallen though man was, he was still created in the *imago dei*. As we will see, the idea of blessing was essential to the patriarchs. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph would all be similarly ‘blessed.’

The first element of that blessing was that the survivors were to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (v. 1). Notice that the corollary admonitions of ‘subdue’ and ‘rule’ from Genesis 1 were absent. The command was repeated at the end of this first speech and acted as a bookend to the conversation. The purpose of the language is to transport the reader by to Creation in Genesis chapter 1. Noah was the second Adam. Included in this command was the idea that the original intention of God had not changed. Though man was now corrupt, he was still given dominion over and the responsibility to populate the earth.

Interestingly, for those critics who argue that the biblical account of the Flood was a Hebrew revision of the much earlier *Gilgamesh Epic*, it is worth noting that in that account, after the Flood, overpopulation was the key problem and an arrangement needed to be made between the gods and man:

“In addition let there be a third category among the peoples,  
Let there be among the peoples women who bear and women who do not bear  
Let there be among the peoples the *Pašittu*-demon  
To snatch the baby from the lap of her who bore it.  
Establish *Ugbabtu*-women, *Entu*-women, and *Igišitu* women,  
And let them be taboo and so stop childbirth” (The *Gilgamesh Epic*).

The second element of the blessing was that “the fear of you and the terror of you will be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea, into your hand they are given” (v. 2). This was a sign of both continuity and change. While Noah and his offspring would continue to have mastery over the animal kingdom, it seemed that now both man and animals were no longer vegetarian. This marked a change from the relationship between Adam and the animals in the Garden. In Eden before the Fall there was no fear and terror. All was in perfect harmony. Now, however, certain members of the animal kingdom were adversaries. They were threats. They could eat man, and man could eat them.

This was because of a third element of the blessing, “every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plant” (v. 3). This was not an absolute blessing, though, as it had limitations. Noah was clearly told that “you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (v. 4). Again note the parallel with Genesis. Then God had told Adam “<sup>16</sup>the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘from any tree of the garden you may eat freely; <sup>17</sup>but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die’” (Genesis 2:16-17). Now God tells Noah “every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you . . . only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.” Each time there is a freedom given and a restriction placed.

Blood was equated with life, and the prohibition of eating blood became the central premise of several food laws in the original Mosaic covenant.

“It is a perpetual statute throughout your generations in all your dwellings: you shall not eat any fat or any blood” (Leviticus 3:17).

“<sup>26</sup>You are not to eat any blood, either of bird or animal, in any of your dwellings. <sup>27</sup>Any person who eats any blood, even that person shall be cut off from his people” (Leviticus 7:26-27).

Even when the covenant was modified as the Israelites prepared to enter Canaan, this provision remained.

“<sup>15</sup>However, you may slaughter and eat meat within any of your gates, whatever you desire, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which He has given you; the unclean and the clean may eat of it, as of the gazelle and the deer. <sup>16</sup>Only you shall not eat the blood; you are to pour it out on the ground like water.” (Deuteronomy 12:15-16).

And in the New Testament churches, when accommodations were established that allowed for Gentiles to enter into participation in the faith,

“<sup>28</sup>it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: <sup>29</sup>that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication” (Acts 15:28-29).

This was not merely a matter of decorum or a preventative against disease. To the ancient Hebrew, ‘blood’ and ‘life’ were equivalents, “for the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11). The rationale for the entire sacrificial system that developed in ancient Israel was that the substitution of an animal’s life, as represented by the shedding of its blood, was sufficient to appease the divine.

Meat eating was, and remains, an important part of the human diet. It provides the precious protein that was all too rare in the ancient world. In fact, the ideas of ‘fear’ and ‘terror’ that the animal kingdom possessed with regard to man were no doubt preservative in intent. Their trepidation around man allowed them to survive.

The final element of the blessing was that God prohibited the killing of another human by either man or animals. This is the second post-Flood prohibition. “<sup>5</sup>Surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from everyman, from every man’s brother I will require the life of man.

<sup>6</sup>Whoever sheds man’s blood,  
By man his blood shall be shed,  
For in the image of God  
He made man.

<sup>7</sup>As for you, be fruitful and multiply;  
Populate the earth abundantly and multiply in it” (v. 5-7).

Murder was hereby placed within the orbit of sacred law. The *imago dei* - that divine image of God in man - was to be inviolably preserved. That man was wicked had not effaced that image. Man was still God’s special creation and, as such, merited God’s special protection. Human death required an

accounting. This was to become a given in Israelite culture. When unknowingly confronted by their brother Joseph in Egypt, the brothers were told to return and bring back the youngest, Benjamin, who had not been sent with the others. Fearing the worst <sup>21</sup>they said to one another, ‘truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us.’ <sup>22</sup>Reuben answered them, saying, ‘did I not tell you, “do not sin against the boy”; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood”’ (Genesis 42:21-22). Not knowing it was Joseph standing before them, they believed him to be dead and were certain of being held accountable by God for his death.

This sense of holding accountable is prevalent in Israel’s culture. It was used as an illustration of the wicked religious leaders of Israel,

“Thus says the Lord God, ‘behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them”’ (Ezekiel 34:10).

Accountability for the death of a man was even required of animals,

<sup>28</sup>“If an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall surely be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall go unpunished. <sup>29</sup>If, however, an ox was previously in the habit of goring and its owner has been warned, yet he does not confine it and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death. <sup>30</sup>If a ransom is demanded of him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is demanded of him. <sup>31</sup>Whether it gores a son or a daughter, it shall be done to him according to the same rule. <sup>32</sup>If the ox gores a male or female slave, the owner shall give his or her master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned” (Exodus 21:28-32).

And unlike many other ANE cultures where a monetary payment would suffice, this was not permitted under the Mosaic law.

“If a man takes the life of any human being, he shall surely be put to death” (Leviticus 24:17).

<sup>31</sup>Moreover, you shall not take ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death. <sup>32</sup>You shall not take ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to live in the land before the death of the priest. <sup>33</sup>So you shall not pollute the land in which you are; for blood pollutes the land and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it. <sup>34</sup>You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord am dwelling in the midst of the sons of Israel” (Numbers 35:31-34).

This also established the principle of *lex talionis* - the law of retaliation. That is, the penalty must be commensurate with the crime. Notice that it was not related to the social status of the individual. All were made in the image of God. Capital punishment was the divinely ordained consequence for willingly taking another’s life.

<sup>19</sup>“If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: <sup>20</sup>fracture for

fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him.

<sup>21</sup>Thus the one who kills an animal shall make it good, but the one who kills a man shall be put to death. <sup>22</sup>There shall be one standard for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native, for I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 24:19-22).

Some have argued that the wording does not uphold this application. They claim that the phrase, *bā'ādām*, means not “by man” but rather “in exchange for that man” and thus removes the idea of capital punishment from the command. Most modern interpreters do not share that interpretation. Capital punishment was a necessary part of society and was carried out by the state as a means not only of enforcing law, but of mitigating against personal vengeance.

“<sup>12</sup>He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. <sup>13</sup>But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint you a place to which he may flee. <sup>14</sup>If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him even from My altar, that he may die” (Exodus 21:12-14).

Even in the New Testament, we see that society was given the authority to administer retribution for criminal offenses.

“<sup>1</sup>Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. <sup>2</sup>Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. <sup>3</sup>For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; <sup>4</sup>for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. <sup>5</sup>Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake” (Romans 13:1-5).

“<sup>13</sup>Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, <sup>14</sup>or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right” (1 Peter 2:13-14).

Finally, we need point out that the threefold repetition of “I will require” stated by God demands attention to His determination to see this obeyed in its entirety.

### **God Promises**

In His second speech, God moved from exhortation to testimony. Rather than speak to Noah and his sons about their privileges and prohibitions, God spoke to Noah and his sons about Himself. “<sup>8</sup>God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying, <sup>9</sup>‘now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; <sup>10</sup>and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth’” (v. 8-10).

The idea of covenant is emphasized by the use of the word *berit* which occurs no less than seven times in verses 8-17. It means to erect or to make stand. This again was an example of God's sovereignty. He was not compelled to this covenant either by Noah himself or anything Noah had done. The covenant was not offered in response to anything. It was offered freely and without outside motivation by God.

This was the fulfillment of the promise God made to Noah in Genesis 6:18, "I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall enter the ark - you and your sons and your wife, and your sons' wives with you." Then, it was a promise to those who entered the ark. Now, it was a confirmation of that promise to those who came out of the ark. We serve a God Who remembers and a God Who keeps His promises. That God had His sovereign plans for His people and that He would keep His word regarding those plans was essential to Israelite faith.

"God is not a man, that He should lie,  
Nor a son of man, that He should repent;  
Has He said, and will He not do it?" (Numbers 23:19).

"It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Deuteronomy 9:5).

"<sup>10</sup>For thus says the Lord, 'when seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup>For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope'" (Jeremiah 29:10-11).

Notice that even the animal kingdom was included as recipients of the covenant. This promise was universal and inclusive. That is further proof of the unilateral nature of the covenant as well as the fact that it was a covenant that did not even require acceptance by its recipients. God made this covenant by Himself, for Himself.

The very idea of the covenant was fundamental to Israel. The formula was often repeated, perhaps most significantly with Abraham, and at Sinai.

"I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you" (Genesis 17:7).

"I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they sojourned" (Exodus 6:4).

The details of the covenant are that "I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth" (v. 11). While God's word would have been sufficient for Noah and his generation. God recognized that the wickedness

of man meant that over time, the details of the covenant might be confused or forgotten. Therefore, God ordained a sign of the covenant.

This sign of the covenant was specifically described.

“<sup>12</sup>This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all successive generations; <sup>13</sup>I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. <sup>14</sup>It shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow will be seen in the cloud, <sup>15</sup>and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh. <sup>16</sup>When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (v. 12-16).

By way of comparison, we might consider two other signs of covenants mentioned in the Old Testament.

“And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you” (Genesis 17:11).

“<sup>16</sup>So the sons of Israel shall observe the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. <sup>17</sup>It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed” (Exodus 31:16-17).

The Hebrew word for rainbow, *qešet*, can mean either the rainbow itself, or the bow as used as a weapon. In Scripture, it is used in the former case in Ezekiel, where the prophet sees God’s radiance in the rainbow, and in Revelation, where John sees a rainbow of emerald adorning the throne of God. In ANE iconography, the bow was often used as a sign of power and victory. As a result, many have critically viewed this symbol in Scripture as descriptive of how Yahweh had vanquished His foes. Such symbolism might be seen in passages such as,

“The Lord is a warrior;  
The Lord is His name” (Exodus 15:3).

“Your bow was made bare,  
The rods of chastisement were sworn” (Habakkuk 3:9).

However, if the symbol is being used in that way in this circumstance, then what is it that God has conquered? It seems, therefore, that the bow does not stand in such a relationship to the passage. The rainbow was a symbol of peace, not war. It symbolized the end of God’s hostility to man on this occasion.

Such symbols were common in Hebrew culture. One immediately thinks of the blood of the Passover lamb.

“The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:13).

As with the blood, God did not need the rainbow to remind Him of His promises. He had no need of external evidence to determine who occupied each of the homes in Egypt. The symbol was for those it protected. The purpose of the sign was to confirm the promise, to remind all that this was the work of God unilaterally, and finally to endorse the covenant as a covenant with all. As it says, this is an “everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (v. 16).

As a way of conclusion and emphasis, God concluded His speech with the affirmation that “this is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth” (v. 17). The sign pointed to the covenant. It was not about the rainbow, rather it was about the promise of God. God demonstrated time and again that He would remember His promises to His people. Examples can be found with Abraham and especially Moses in the Old Testament.

### **Takeaways**

We worship a God Who blesses us. Though it may not seem so at the moment, we cannot lose sight of the fact that we are a blessed people. Regardless of our worldly circumstances, health, or family situations, if we are children of God we have been forgiven of our sins and granted eternal life. How can we consider ourselves other than blessed?

We worship a God Who promises, and Who keeps His promises. Our remembrance of the many times God has been true to His word ought to compel us to worship our Savior gratefully and wholeheartedly.