



Part 26 – Life Under the Rainbow

Genesis 9:1-17

Genesis chapter 9 once again establishes the vital importance of covenant for understanding what God is like and how he relates to his people. The Hebrew word “covenant” (*berit*) occurs seven times in verses 8-17. God made a covenant with Noah and through Noah with all creation to never again destroy the earth by water. Like all

biblical covenants, this one contained promises and corresponding obligations. The Lord committed himself to never again destroy the earth with a flood. He promised to uphold a continuing cycle of seedtime and harvest and through that cycle to maintain man’s food supply. In this covenant God obliges mankind to respect and preserve human life, and to punish appropriately those who unlawfully take it. And, again typical of biblical covenants, there is a sign to remind the partners of God’s faithfulness to his promise.

1. A gracious promise

Vv. 1, 8-11

- “Although there are echoes here of the charge to Adam (1:7), sin has darkened the scene. The image of God remains (vs. 6) and man is still heaven’s viceroy, but his regime will be largely one of fear (vs. 2), and his fellow-creatures are now his food (vs. 3), and violence will be abroad on the earth (vv. 5-6).”¹
- The new post-flood world is not Eden. Paradise was lost with man’s rebellion against God. Even righteous Noah is a sinner. So God will no longer relate to man by means of a covenant of works; a covenant which depends in part upon the perfect obedience of mankind. Sin has ruined any such prospects. Rather, for fallen men and women to relate to, know, and be bound to God, the covenant must rest upon God’s grace.
- Covenant is the chief organizing principle of the Bible. The entire history of salvation is, in the Bible, an unfolding succession of covenants in which the one great, everlasting Covenant of Grace takes clearer and clearer form and is worked out step by step in history. The only reason people knew the Messiah was coming was because it was one of the promises God had made when he entered into a covenant with his people: the covenant with Abraham, with Israel at Sinai, and with the royal house of David. All the great features of the gospel: election, atonement, calling, faith, a holy life, and the promise of life everlasting are all revealed in terms of God’s everlasting covenant of grace.

2. A continuing responsibility

A) Fill the earth.

Vs. 1

- Noah is presented as another Adam; the first man at the headwaters of a new world. God commends to Noah the same instruction he gave to Adam in Genesis chapter 1: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (vs. 28). God’s command to humanity to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and rule over it stands in stark contrast to the attitude of the pagan gods of the time. Indeed, God’s command that humanity multiply stands as a stern rebuke to the voices of modernity which seek to treat humanity as intruders upon the earth.
- The heroes of the Ancient Near Eastern flood sagas were rewarded by being granted immortality and removed from human society. But God made Noah the progenitor of a new society, the instrument by which mankind’s rebirth would be accomplished. In the oldest of the Mesopotamian flood epics

¹ Derek Kidner, Genesis (IVP: Downers Grove, 1967) p. 100.

overpopulation and human noise were the reasons for the flood. So to ensure that the problem didn't reoccur the gods imposed controls on mankind's fertility, inflicting women with sterility and imposing a high degree of infant mortality. In sharp contrast, the Bible is everywhere enthusiastic about the life of human beings and the continued growth of the human family. And so God, once again, repeats his creation mandate that humanity should be fruitful and multiply.²

B) Exercise dominion over the earth.

Vs. 2

- In some ways this seems to be a recapitulation of the original creation mandate to have dominion over the earth and its animals (1:28). And yet the language used is more commonly applied to military contexts. This implies that human dominion will not be peaceful as it was in the garden. The world now labors under the fall and therefore human dominion will be characterized by conflict. The fall did not end humanity's dominion over the earth but complicated it with sin. "Despite human sin, God now confirms and enhances human dominion over animals."³

C) Respect all life, especially human life.

Vv. 3-7

- Blood is often equated with life in the Old Testament. "By forbidding the eating of blood, this regulation instills a respect for the sacredness of life and protects against wanton abuse. Adding meat to the human diet is not a license for savagery."⁴ In this new but fallen world, God will not pardon murderers as he had done with Cain. He establishes capital punishment for murder on the grounds that humans are his image-bearers.

3. A visible reminder

Vv. 12-17

- The wonderful lesson of the rainbow is its message of God's mercy and faithfulness through and after the flood. God's people can be comforted that they will not be overwhelmed by the storm of trials. Remember, the promise of the covenant God made to Noah is not that there will be no more storms but that God will not destroy mankind or the world. Indeed, storms will continue to occur even in a Christian's life. No rainbows form unless there has been rain.
- And, for the believer, who sees in the rainbow the pledge of God's faithfulness and mercy and longsuffering, this is a particularly wonderful sign and appropriately beautiful. The rainbow always comes after, not before the storm; not as warning that the storm is coming, but as a reminder that God's faithfulness has kept us safe through it.
- The promises of God's covenant can far too often be seen by us as merely words on a page. But God's rainbow is to remind us that they are much more than that. The covenant signs are real, objective, tangible things: things to grasp, to hold on to, to stand upon, and, in the darkness and the storms of life, to climb upon for safety. On his death bed Isaac Watts was asked by a friend in that rhetorical way questions can be asked at such a time: Do you believe the promises of God? He replied, "I believe them enough to venture an eternity on them!"



² Bruce Waltke, Genesis (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2001) p. 144.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid