

The Covenant Story: Noah

Series – What Is the Gospel?

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In case you weren't aware, there is such a thing called Wikipedia. But if you're a Star Wars buff there is a 'Wookapedia.' It's true, painfully true. But it helps for people like me who enjoy movies, but I have a hard time remembering all the details. Yes, this is going somewhere. And I want to in some way draw your attention to this next part of the drama of the covenant of grace by looking at the covenant story of Noah. I think in some ways, the story of Noah is often viewed a bit like the first three films of Star Wars: One, two, and three. You know, you remember: The Phantom Menace, The Attack of the Clones, Revenge of the Sith. If you are a Star Wars buff—generally this is deep in the weeds—many didn't like the first three films, particularly Jar Jar Binks. Instead, he was kind of for children. It was kind of embarrassing. Maybe they didn't like the lines, and so forth.

But in some ways people kind of pass over Noah for the same reason, that Noah is seen largely as a story for children. We generally want to go from Genesis 3 and we jump to the story of Abraham. And yes, we sort of gloss over it. We think about Noah. He's certainly there. We think about the flood, but it's largely not talked about when it comes to thinking about the covenant story. Where does it fit? How do we understand it? What is going on with regard to what God is doing? Indeed, there is a great deal going on in the covenant story of Noah and its importance in what is the gospel—in seeing how God is going to unpack this drama that has been started just a few chapters before.

We do not have time to read all the story of Noah, and so we've come to this principal summary of what takes place in this part of the story. Indeed, it is something that still enraptures children, but perhaps bores adults. But the scriptures call us always to have faith like a child—to sit mesmerized by the grace of God, his incredible, incredible grace. It teaches a great deal about everyday life: our relationship to creation and our understanding of salvation in light of creation. It has a lot of deep, deep things to say. My hope is that we can just begin to unpack this this morning. Hear now God's word, Genesis 9:9-17.

⁹ “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷ God said to Noah, “This is the sign of

the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.” [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me. Heavenly Father, we now pray that you would open our eyes and our hearts to see the deep things of the covenant of grace. May it, Lord, enable us to do what your word calls us to do: to worship you and to receive the great gift of the gospel. Help us, we pray, to trust in you, to delight in you, to walk with you. Help the teacher. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

I've borrowed this morning's outline from someone else, because I found it to be such a compelling way of understanding this text I could not improve upon it. Derek Kidner, an Old Testament scholar, professor, preacher, said it like this as he saw this story summarized in these verses. He says it tells us of the nature of God's promise as being **embracing**; it is **perpetual**; and it is, indeed, **unconditional**. It is **embracing, perpetual, and unconditional**.

Those words are rich, and I want you to see how they are reflected in this passage this morning. Indeed, God's promise to Noah is **embracing**. And you remember last week I asked you to remember two words as it relates to God's covenant with all flesh, that it would mean, and all creation that it stands for...What? If it was here? What were the two words? ‘All things.’ Indeed, what we see here when he says in verses 9 and following, “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you...” So far, so good. But then he says, “...and with every living creature that is with you...” And then begins to unpack all that he had done.

What this tells us about the all-embracing nature of God's covenant of grace, that we see here two principal things which are sometimes lost. First, we see that which is easy for us to see. He says the embracing nature of the covenant of grace is it rescues a family. And that family was Noah’s family, which is God saying I have not forgotten my promise in Genesis 3, that I will maintain my promise to the seed of the woman, to the generations that will come from her. And I will see through that seed the crushing of the head of the serpent, who is Satan himself, who wages war against God. Indeed, after the fall when God says his judgment on Satan, he delivers his judgment on Adam and Eve who had rebelled against him, and yet he delivers the covenant of grace, and he says this will come. And he provides a covering for Adam and Eve. And yet even though God continues to demonstrate—yes, his righteous anger in his judgment, he also demonstrates the covenant of grace that God says, ‘Yet I will redeem.’

And yet that promise of redemption and that promise to Adam and Eve was not sufficient, because we see between Genesis 3 and the beginning of the narrative of Noah that, indeed, we read that the thoughts and inclinations of men's hearts are evil all the time. It doesn't mean that they're evil to their most ultimate evil, but the evil which it points to is saying to God, ‘I do not want you as God. I do not want you as Rescuer or Redeemer or Refuge.’ And so God made this decision and his sovereign act. He called Noah. In rescuing him he says, ‘I will be your God,’ in essence, ‘and you will be my people. You are to build an ark. You’re going to take your family.’ God is establishing his promise to rescue this seed that was the promise of the covenant of grace first announced in 3:15. The line that he would procure the covenant of redemption.

But Noah’s work in building of the ark we hear from the New Testament, as Peter looks back,

that indeed, Noah was a preacher. Indeed, in his building of the ark he was preaching and calling people to trust in this one God. And yet they resisted. They continued in their evil. And God in his righteous judgment floods his wrath in waters, and his judgment comes on the earth and on creation. But he rescues this family and he begins again. And in some sense Noah is almost a lower case 'second Adam.' [God] begins again in these verses to reestablish, 'This is my covenant with you and your family.' And then he says it extends to the animals and to the livestock and to every beast of the earth that was with him, "as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

God rescues this family, but then he goes further. You see, it's very easy just to focus on Noah and his family, but God goes further. He doesn't just embrace this family of Noah, he embraces creation beyond man, to creation itself, all creation. Notice the encompassing nature. He says, "I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters..., and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." When he says, "I will establish my covenant with you..."—notice this—and with "every living creature that is with you." What's interesting is that he says that this covenant covers not just this family, but it covers all creation.

Something we need to hear that is implied here—that God's covenant promise, the embracing nature is this: that is, that he embraces all creation, but not all men. And that is to say that man has brought on sin, and its consequences have wreaked havoc on the earth, and yet God doesn't say well, the earth is just sort of unimportant or creation is unimportant. Rather he seeks to also embrace it in this covenant promise, but it doesn't say to all men. It does say to this family. Indeed, not all men and not all human beings will be in heaven with the Lord when Christ returns. His covenant promise does not extend to every human being as if it were universalism. But we do know that God will make all things new: a new heaven and a new earth. He will restore creation.

So God's embracing covenant is both particular and it is all encompassing. It's important for us to indeed remember this, because so often times we are tempted to think that salvation means that God is saving human beings from the world. But, indeed, what we learn through this covenant story of Noah is that in some sense God is also establishing his covenant with creation, to restore it in spite of man. That is to say that we cannot hold to a dualistic thinking that all God cares about is the soul of human beings. And, indeed, it's very easy for us to have this narcissistic thinking that all God cares about are human beings. But in his covenant promise at creation and calling creation good and calling man and his creation very good, he rather continues to ratify and remember that his covenant isn't just to rescue a family and to rescue people and bring them to himself and call them a people of his very own, it's also to restore all things. So he, indeed, brings about his rescue of the covenant of grace in human hearts, not to save us from the world, but to save us in the midst of it—to be a part of what God is doing in the restoration of all things.

So therefore that has great promise with regard to your vocation, your enjoyments, the food that we eat, the animals that we take care of—which is why of all things Christians ought to be great carers of creation and of the earth. Not that we become earth-centric, not that we see

that the created things are somehow greater than what God has created, because we human beings were created in the image of God. But that we recognize that God has called creation good, that our flesh is good. And that when he restores and brings about his grace at work it's not just for your mind and for your soul. It is for your entire body. It is for our creation. And through us, the created world is bringing about this restoration. We must banish any thought that God is a dualist or that salvation has a dualistic thinking to it, but that he means to restore, he means to embrace all things by His grace.

But we also learn—not only does the covenant story of Noah demonstrate the all-embracing nature of God's covenant of grace, it is also **perpetual**. In verses 11-15 he states that he has set out this promise and he no longer, nor ever, will flood the earth with water. And he will not remove all flesh through floods. It doesn't mean there will not be floods—indeed, there are—but that his judgment on the earth will not come by way of flood. What we see here is that God is continuing the ongoing drama. This is not a pause in the covenant of grace. We're meant to see that God is eternal in nature and that his promise holds true. And when he says in verse 12, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations,” is as sure of a remembering of the promise of Genesis 3:15 as any. Indeed, he goes further to say in this ongoing drama, “I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. And when I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature.”

Now what's key in understanding this ongoing drama in the perpetual nature is when the Scriptures—and we've covered this before—and that is in the Scriptures when it says that God will remember, it isn't implying that God has forgotten. ‘Remembering’ in Hebrew. . . It carries a very much, a much richer nuance than we understand. When we use the word remember—I'm trying to remember—we tend to think of it as something we have forgotten. But, indeed, it is an active, not a passive act on part of God. It's not saying that God has forgotten and so therefore when he sees a rainbow in the clouds it's, *Oh, that's right, I remembered I wasn't going to do that again*. No, indeed, because we know from the fact that God is sovereign and the creator of all things from nothing, that, indeed, the flood has taught us that the Lord is the Lord, not just in the storm—he is the Lord of the storm. So he is the one who has placed the clouds in the sky and the rain that comes from them and the snow that flows in winter. He is the one who sets the bow in place. So the bow is a sign—not that he's forgotten and now remembers—no, he's choosing, perhaps, even to remind us.

So the Lord sets not only an ark as a rescue, but we could say the Lord Himself in his promise is like an ark. But it is also the bow which says: I choose to remember my promise. And so that we somehow think that this isn't just something that happens in Genesis, remember what I said last week? That if we want to understand the gospel, it doesn't begin at the New Testament, right, you know? And God's covenant doesn't begin with the New Covenant. It begins all the way from the book of Genesis all the way to Revelation. This is perhaps one of the greatest symbols of God's perpetual, eternal promise: the rainbow.

Why is that important? Because of John's vision and revelation. If you have your Bibles with you, you can certainly open there. If not I'll be happy to read. It says this in Revelation 4. Not

only is the perpetual nature of God's covenant established here, we also see it is done so by symbol. Listen to this. Revelation 4. I'll just read verses 1-3.

After this. I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald.

And that even we can say of the throne in heaven itself, what encompasses it is a rainbow. Because a rainbow is not just a throwaway natural occurrence between water clouds and sun. It is meant to be God's creative beautiful, visual, physical something that we can tangibly point to and say: This is the sign—not of just this moment of storm, of dark clouds and rain and sunshine peeking through. No, the Christian can say, indeed, that this is the sign of God's eternal covenant promise of grace. Indeed, the greatest of rainbows is like an emerald which surrounds the throne of all thrones, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

Isn't it interesting. Young and old alike. And as a photographer enjoying that medium of art, I continue to marvel at rainbows: partial, double, full—no matter where they are. But I'm thankful that I'm not alone in that. Young and old alike continue over and over again, with iPhones and cameras, to capture rainbows, and we continue to put them on social media as if nobody's ever seen a rainbow. Right? You know, you would think that the Internet would get tired of kitten videos, but they don't, do they. We still look at them and say they're cute (most of us do, right?). But the truth is why do we keep showing pictures of rainbows? Why? I mean, they are just water and sunlight and color and how that works together, right? I mean, big deal. The reason why we still marvel at it is because that's God saying to us—whether you're a believer or not—we were made to marvel. We were made to worship. Young and old and everyone in between still stops and says, *Did you see that rainbow?* Amazing.

God says there's a lot more going on in the rainbow than amazing. I will remember my covenant with you and all creation. So in some sense, Christian—if you are—the next rainbow you see, sing "Hallelujah, Hallelujah," because what we're seeing is not a moment in time, but we're seeing as if through a window into eternity of God's perpetual, eternal, faithful, unchanging, immutable will to redeem.

But finally we see that not only is the covenant story of God's work in Noah's life as embracing and perpetual, it is also **unconditional**. It is unconditional because note: when he ratifies this covenant and tells Noah. . . Verse 16. he says, "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'" And when I first read that to you, I said, you know, 'This is the Word of God,' and you said, 'Thanks be to God,' you know what we're saying thanks to? We're saying thanks to God's unconditional grace. Because in this establishment of the unconditional nature of God's covenant it doesn't say, *Hey, Noah. This is what I'm doing, so you gotta do this to hold up your end of the bargain.* It is unconditional, unilateral. We know this

because this is foreshadowed just a couple of chapters before. In Genesis 6 we hear of these words, and I'll read it for us briefly. It says that

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. [Genesis 6:5-8]

Now that phrasing in English—"But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord"—often carries within it in English the sense or the implication that somehow, as God was announcing his judgment, that he was looking around and Noah was just a good guy and he had done some stuff and he's found favor with God. It's kind of the way it works. We find favor in someone else's eyes. But the wonderful, magisterial work of an Old Testament Hebrew scholar, J. A. Montier, said this: in Hebrew it works backwards. It's not as if Noah found favor in God's eyes because of anything Noah did. No, it works backwards. It's that God in his grace found out Noah. It is his grace that sought Noah out. It is His grace. While it doesn't use the word election, and the covenant with Noah doesn't explicitly talk about election, it does, nonetheless, point to the fact that Noah did nothing. In fact, as Moses writes this he goes to great pains. We never hear of anything that Noah does except that God's grace found him out first, and only then do we see Noah respond. Trust me, Noah must respond, but it's God's grace that acts first. And once God's grace acts first, Noah is brought close, and then Noah received the commandment, 'Build me a boat.'

It's not that Noah was doing anything. Indeed, no human can do anything, as Paul would say. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." There is nothing, no, nothing that you or I can do that will ever find one whit of favor in the eyes of God. Our most obedient, our most righteous, our most pure of moments fall short of the righteousness and holiness of God. Thanks be to God, because not only is he the one who establishes holiness, he's also the one who provides the holiness. It is God's grace, Christian. Remember that this week when you're up in the morning and you have no more energy. It's God's grace. "Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin."

And it is therefore that grace—that is not only unconditional, that draws Noah to himself and Noah responds—it is also that grace that upholds God's promise. What do I mean? It's not like, you know, God gave this call to Noah and Noah just kind of went off with his own ingenuity. All along the way God not only announces his unconditional grace, he also gives Noah grace each day to withstand the torrent of accusation and ridicule. It is God's grace that upheld Noah to do his work. It is God's grace that upheld Noah in the ark. It is God's grace that brought Noah to a landing place. It is God's grace that upholds us from beginning to end. God's grace does not begin to draw us to himself, and then the rest is left to our own energy. God's unconditional grace is more than unconditional; it is unrelenting and upholding and unyielding in its power. God does not do 60% and we do the rest. Yes, God calls us to obedience. Yes, God calls us to read this word.

And if you're not a Christian you probably look at the story of Noah and go, *Really? You still believe this?* The only way one can receive this as authoritative from God is that God's grace has enabled us to receive it as such. And yes, we are called to have our lives formed by the truths that are commanded here. But as our confession says—right in the middle of it, Chapter 14—it says that the principal acts of saving faith—you ready?—they are accepting, receiving, and resting in Christ alone. Yes, we are called to obedience, just as Noah was, just as Abraham will be, just as David was. But that obedience is always preceded by the initiation and unyielding and upholding power of God's grace.

But even more beautiful than that. . . Christian, what are the principal acts of saving faith in this covenant of grace? It is accepting, receiving, and resting in Christ alone. Christian, are you running under your own strength and are tired. Are you like a couple I met in Athens, who the husband said, 'I find it easier just to forget my sins in hopes that I will not remember them.' Are you trying to uphold your faith by trying to just do a little bit more, in hopes that maybe your faith will be strong enough? The principal act of saving faith is to rest. Do you need rest? Jesus says, "Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Not just so that you can receive the grace, but that through you grace might flow in all things: where you live, work, and relate. May God do this in us.

And may the covenant story of Noah not be one that is left for Sunday School or Vacation Bible school, but may it be a place where we find the deep things of God's embracing, perpetual, and unconditional grace. Let's pray. Now Heavenly Father, we ask that by the work of the Holy Spirit, through your word, that we would be able to accept and receive and rest on Christ alone. We thank you, Father, for this covenant story of Noah, the picture of the covenant of grace. And Lord, we ask that you would indeed—indeed, oh Lord, demonstrate to us this day that you are the one who upholds us. You are the gracious one in that you are, indeed, restoring all things. May we receive it and rejoice. So help us as we continue to worship and respond to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.