

Genesis & A Biblical Worldview

Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, September 23, 2012

Introduction

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God

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Creation

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Man

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Sin

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Grace

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Culture

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Purpose

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A Gracious God's Perpetual Covenant

After the devastating judgment of the flood--and after Noah, his family, and all living things left the ark--it may be that Noah was apprehensive for the future of humanity. Noah was still an offspring of Adam, and he knew that Mankind was still fallen. And so, he built an altar and made a burnt offering of the clean animals and birds. This, perhaps, reflected his faith in God's gracious provision of atonement through sacrifice of a 'substitute' (Genesis 3:21; 4:4).

In response to this offering, God declared a covenant in the hearing of sinful Mankind. It's something that we're told that the LORD--in response to the burnt offering of Noah--said "in his heart" (Genesis 8:21; that is, in terms of His own set purpose): "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. . . While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease."¹ This is the first hint of the covenant God made with Mankind and all of Creation after the flood.

Ordinarily, a "covenant" is an agreement between two parties that defines what they both will do. But in this case, God is entering into a "covenant" that is not conditioned on what sinful man will do. It may be best thought of then as a "pledge" or a "promise" of what God would do--or better, what He would never again do. And thus, in this Old Testament story, we see a glorious picture of God's grace. Our worldview declares a God who judges sin; but who also enters into gracious covenant with His sinful creatures.

I. THE COVENANT GOD MADE AFTER THE FLOOD (vv. 8-11).

- A. God establishes this covenant with Noah and his sons, "and with your descendants after you" (v. 9). That makes this a perpetual covenant. But note too that it is not with Mankind alone; God said, "and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth" (v. 10). All of creation fell because of Mankind's disobedience in the case of the covenant that God made with Adam (2:15-17; 3:17-18). But now, all of creation is included in the blessing of this new, unconditional covenant.
- B. The pledge God made in this 'Noahic Covenant' is this: "Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (v. 11). 2 Peter 3:5-7 tells us that "by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men." God promises that judgment will again come in the future. But it will not be by flood. The evidences on the earth of the flood of the past, then, stand as a current call for Mankind to turn to God in repentance in the present, in light of a promised judgment in the future.

II. THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT (vv. 12-17).

- A. Just as is true of covenants between men, and pledges that they may make toward one another, God Himself established a "sign" by which His unconditional covenant would be remembered--by Man certainly; but most of all by He Himself. God Himself, of course, does not "forget" things that

He promises to do. But that Man may be assured that God will never forget this promise, we read; “This is the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; and I will remember My covenant which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (vv. 12-16). It may be that this was intended very deliberately to assure Noah and his family; thus we read in verse 17; “And God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth.’”

- B. The phenomenon of a rainbow in the sky may have already existed before this time. And perhaps it was even frequently seen in association with the terrible judgment of the flood. But in establishing this covenant, God gives the rainbow a new significance as a covenant “sign”. We today who see a rainbow can be assured that God Himself remembers His unconditional covenant--and can also be assured of His character as a God of grace.

III. THE SINFUL NATURE OF MAN STILL EVIDENT (vv. 18-28).

- A. That “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (8:21), and that God’s grace will always be needed in the remembrance of this covenant, is shown clearly to us in the strange story that follows. We’re told of the sons of Noah--Shem, Ham, and Japheth--who went out of the ark with their wives and populated the earth. And special attention is given to Canaan--the son of Ham--who would have been born after this time (vv. 18-19). Apparently, Noah--the greatest spiritual giant of humanity at that time (but let’s remember that he’d been through more than any other human had been through!)--took up farming, planted a vineyard, became intoxicated on wine, and “became uncovered in his tent” (vv. 20-21). Ham (the youngest of his sons; see v. 24) “saw the nakedness of his father” (v. 22). The nature of this act has been variously interpreted; but it is probably best understood in light of the fact that he then “told his two brothers outside” (v. 22; calling attention to his father’s condition), and that Shem and Japheth took measures to cover their father in a dignified manner so as not to see what Ham had intentionally looked upon (vv. 23). It’s probably best, then, to understand this as an act on Ham’s part of open disrespect to his father--one in which he sought to cause his brothers to join him in his act of disrespect. This tiny remnant of humanity had been given, as it were, a new beginning; but it was proving to be sinful and fallen as ever.
- B. We’re told that when Noah became sober and knew what Ham had done (v. 24), he then issued forth a curse--surprisingly not a curse against Ham, but against Ham’s son Canaan: “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants he shall be to his brethren” (v. 25). Why Canaan? It’s may be because Ham’s son--who would have had to have been born sometime after his father and mother left the ark--was involved in his father Ham’s act of disrespect in some way. Perhaps he was even an instigator of it. Noah goes on to bless Shem (the ancestor of the Semitic peoples) above the other brothers, and Jephath as one who would enjoy the protection and blessing of Shem. To both human families, Canaan offspring would be servant.

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This last story may seem like a small thing in the story overall; but in actuality, the blessing or cursing of nations hung upon it. The people of Canaan later proved to be great antagonists to God's people in the Biblical story that would follow; and their cursedness remained all the way to the prophetic end of the Bible's story (see Zechariah 14:21).

But in spite of the fact of Mankind's sinfulness--still so clearly in the picture--God's gracious covenant remained. He did not immediately cast away His covenant with fallen humanity; but proved to be then--and still proves to be today--a perpetual Promise-Keeper in His grace toward sinful man.

¹All Scripture readings are taken from *the Holy Bible, New King James Version*; copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.