

May 25, 2014

The Covenant of the Bow

Genesis 9:1 – 17

This morning we come to the story of Noah and as you have noticed we have not read the whole account of the flood, starting in chapter six; rather we are focusing on the aftermath as it were. Not that chapters six through eight are not important or compelling parts of the narrative, they are. But as we are going through Genesis, we are not going line by line, rather story by story, seeing how the gospel is illuminated and fleshed out in the narrative, and we're not spending a lot of time on each story. Just to be fair to the text however, I will say that Genesis six through eight spells out the gospel story of sin, grace and salvation much as we saw in Genesis four.

But there is a big difference here. Where sin was crouching and hiding in chapter four, in chapter six the writer tells us that sin was out of the shadows. Sin was open and rampant: *Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.* Sin had not only corrupted mankind – here it tells us that the earth itself had been corrupted. We'll get to that in a bit. But grace was there as well. Verse 8 tells us that in the midst of this corruption and sin, *Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.* Now I know most of your translations say favor – so does mine, but the word is grace. And just as we saw last week, the subtle streams of grace are flowing right in the middle of the mess.

And then we see the promise of salvation as Noah and his family and lots of animals are carried safely through the death waters in the ark, and brought again to dry land – to a cleansed and renewed earth, to begin life all over again. And we could talk about the incredible corrupting influence of sin, or who the Nephilim were, or the mighty men of renown. We could talk about the God of second chances and the incredible picture of baptism and God's faithful provision. But those are not the main point of the story of Noah. I think the main point comes here in chapter 9. And what we see in chapter nine are three relationships spelled out in the Covenant of the Bow. This covenant defines three relationships – our relationship to the earth; our relationship to all other people on the earth; and our relationship to the Lord of the earth. This covenant tells us about stewardship of the earth; it tells us about justice toward the people of the earth; and it tells us about grace from the Lord of the earth. **Stewardship, justice and grace.**

First of all it talks about our **stewardship of the earth**. Notice the language of this covenant: *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth"* in verse one; and *"you, be fruitful and multiply, teem on the earth and multiply in it."* It is fundamentally the same thing God told Adam in the beginning. *"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."* However there are a few differences between the two. Now, because of sin, our relationship with the earth has changed somewhat.

Look at verses two and three here in chapter nine: *The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.* Before sin came into the world, the animals didn't fear us – now they do. It probably has something to do with the fact that now they are on the menu. And back in chapter three we found out that sin introduced thorns and thistles and weeds into the earth and we now have to deal with those. But even though sin and brokenness has changed some aspects of our relationship with the earth; fundamentally it has not changed. We are still stewards of the earth.

But there is something very remarkable about this covenant that we see for the first time. We see it several times in this chapter beginning with verse nine: *Behold, I establish My covenant with you and your offspring after you, 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.* God is not only making a covenant with Noah and the rest of humanity, He is making a covenant with every living thing on the earth.

This is the only place where God enters into a covenant relationship with every living thing on the face of the earth. If He had only said it once, we might pass right over that. But God repeats this remarkable covenant five more times. In verse twelve He says, *This is the sign of the covenant that I make between Me and you and every living creature that is with you*, and in verse 13, *I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth*. And in verse 15, *I will remember My covenant that is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh*. And 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.*" And then He closes with *"This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth."*

I think God did not want us to miss this. And you might be asking yourself, 'What's so important about this?' In the Bible, **a covenant relationship is a saving relationship**. God already has a Creator relationship with every living thing on the earth – He created them, He sustains them, He holds them up. But now God is making a covenant relationship with every living thing and a covenant relationship is always a saving relationship. He's not just their Creator, He's making a covenant to be their Savior. God is saying in effect, 'Earth, you are in danger because of sin and I am going to save you from it'. And you might be saying at this point, 'I didn't realize the plants and the animals have sinned against God'. And you're right. They haven't. John Piper said it best, **"God didn't die for frogs...They have not sinned. They have not rebelled and treated God with the contempt of being inconsequential in our lives. God did not have to die for frogs. They are not bad enough. We are."**

The earth is in danger from our sin, our rebellion, our contempt of God. And it needs a Savior too. Because we turned out to be really bad gardeners. God tells Adam, 'Multiply, fill the earth and rule it'. And the number one job of every ruler is to have the good of his subjects at heart – to rule with compassion and care for the well-being of his subjects. In other words, **we are to be good stewards of the earth**. God renews that charge with Noah, only this time it's a bit more difficult because of the thorns and thistles and the fact that all the animals live in fear of man. But the charge is there nonetheless. And to that charge God adds His own pledge as Savior of the world. *"This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between Me and all flesh that is on the earth."*

Creation, Paul tells us in Romans 8:19-22, is waiting with eager expectation and longing for the revealing of the sons of God. Because all of creation, through Adam's sin, was subjected to what Paul called 'futility'. The word in Greek is **ματαϊοτες** and it means a condition contrary to the norm or the original purpose of the thing. Sin changed how things worked. Instead of working together in harmony, shalom, things break down, systems fight each other, it's a dog-eat-dog world out there, and creation is groaning under the weight of our sin. Oh you can see flashes of the harmony that once existed, but inevitably, things tend toward disorder, not order. Paul goes on to say however, that there is hope for creation as one day it will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God – **when they are revealed**. What he's saying is that the salvation of creation is inextricably linked to our salvation. One day a perfect earth will be restored.

In the meantime, we are to be good stewards of the earth God has given us. And Christians should understand this better than anyone. We ought to be ahead of anyone else when it comes to taking care of the earth. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not a wild-eyed, tree-hugging, whale-loving vegetarian. I used to cut trees down for a living. In fact I worked with guys whose motto was, 'The only good tree is a stump'. I also happened to work on a crew that specialized in low-impact logging because these guys believed they were responsible for the healthy growth of the forest and worked hard to make that happen. As Christians we ought to be more concerned for the state of the environment than non-believers.

If you ask most people why we should be good stewards of the earth, why we should care for the environment, why we should take care of the water and the air, they won't say it's because God told us to. If you talk to westerners they'll give you a practical reason, 'Well if we don't take care of the earth, where can we go? It's all we've got'. In the non-western world, the answer is a little more spiritual – 'Well the earth is sacred – everything in the earth is sacred – the rocks and the trees, the water and the animals, the air we breathe – we have to treat everything as sacred' But if everything is sacred, is anything sacred? I mean if you and I are no more sacred than a cow or a termite or a tree, is anything really sacred? As PETA founder Ingrid Newkirk has said, **"A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy."**

But the most compelling reason to care about good stewardship of the earth is because **God loves His creation**. Remember how a few weeks ago we saw that God created in nature a whole community of beings, all of whom can reflect the glory and majesty of God? Psalm 19 tells us *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork*. In fact every living thing, every bird, every animal and every plant are created to sing the glory of God. In fact they sing the glory of God better than you or I because they are doing just what God made them to do. And as His stewards of the creation He loves **our job is to help them sing**. God loves His creation and He will not let sin ruin it forever but one day all of creation will be restored. So what we should understand from this covenant of the bow, is that God's concern for His creation is deep and all-encompassing; and we ignore it at our peril.

The second thing this covenant talks about is justice. It tells us about **doing justice toward all the people of the earth**. Look at the language. *And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image*. Now we look at this passage and our minds immediately run to the implications for self-defense, just wars, and capital punishment; but that isn't the main point here. Both pacifists and just war advocates use the same passage to bolster their arguments. Both capital punishment and non-capital punishment factions use these same passages for their respective arguments. This passage is **not** a definitive proof text for either side.

God is revealing a deeper truth here. What He is saying is that the life of humans is so valuable that He will not only hold men accountable for the blood they shed, but in some way He will even hold the animals accountable for the same. See the phrase *'...for God made man in His own image'*? The image of God is so sacred, so holy, so precious, that we should understand that all our interactions with the people of the earth whom God created should be characterized by a keen sense of justice. That is, all our dealings with people should be righteous, fair, evenhanded and moral, **because the image of God is at stake**. God is saying, **'Every human being is precious because every human being is made in My image'**. Therefore every human being should be treated as something holy.

The basis of justice, the root of justice, is not law – it's this – God made man in His own image. Imago Dei. Law reflects this notion of justice, not the other way around. Why is there a law against murder? Because to murder another human being is, in some sense, to murder God. Why are there laws against lying, stealing, sleeping with someone else's spouse and so on? The reason there are laws like this is because all those things are ultimately sins against God. Sin by definition in the Bible is not wronging another person. It is assaulting the glory of God, rebelling against God and what God has said.

In Psalm 51, King David has been confronted by Nathan the prophet over his murder of Uriah and adultery with his wife, and David's confession rings with this truth: *Have mercy on me, O God...Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You may be justified in Your words and blameless in Your judgment*. David wasn't saying that he hadn't sinned against Uriah and Bathsheeba, but that the essence of his sin was an assault on the glory of God. Murder, rape, the death of a baby, are all wrapped up in this. It's horrific and wrong (and it's not wrong to call it sin). But the thing that makes it sin is its vertical dimension. It is disobeying God's law. It is sin in that it is an assault on God's authority and His right to tell you what to do. When Nathan comes to David, he doesn't say, 'Why did you kill Uriah and commit adultery with his wife?' He points the finger at David and says 'Why have you despised the word of God?'

And the word of God tells us that God will hold every man and even all the animals accountable for injustice done to people because they are made in the image of God. John Calvin puts it this way in his Institutes: **"The Lord commands all men without exception "to do good". Yet the great part of them are most unworthy if they be judged by their own merit. But here Scripture helps in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider that men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love...Therefore, whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him...Say, "He is contemptible and worthless"; but the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image...Say that he does not deserve even your least effort for his sake; but the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions."**

The basis of justice is that human beings image God – every one. Christians ought to be those who are in the forefront of caring for the weak, the dispossessed, the helpless, the hungry, the poor, the ill-treated, the marginalized and the oppressed. It all goes back to the image of God. It was Sister Teresa who said, *'I see God in every human being. When I wash the leper's wounds, I feel I am nursing the Lord himself. Is it not a beautiful experience?'* The people of God have a far stronger mandate and far stronger foundation to be a force in the world for justice than any other group of people. The people of God in the Old Testament were forever getting in hot water precisely because they ignored this word. In Isaiah, much of the complaint of God against His people was that *'...He [God] looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; [He looked] for righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress'*.

The word of the Lord came to Micah, another Old Testament prophet, concerning God's people in Israel and Judah, warning them of the calamity to come if continued to act unjustly - *They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance...you strip the rich robe from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war. The women of My people you drive out from their delightful houses; from their young children you take away My splendor forever.* And then in the middle of the warning He reminds them of their mandate: *He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* Micah 6:8

The funny thing is lots of people are doing justice in the world without understanding grace, without understanding the gospel. They're not Christians, they're not loving people because they've been made in the image of God, they don't have a proper Biblical worldview – but they're doing it. They don't understand grace; they don't understand the gospel – and yet they're doing justice. And the unfunny thing is that lots of Christians aren't doing it. In Jesus' day, there was a class of do-gooders called the scribes and the Pharisees. And Jesus looked at them and told His followers that unless their righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees, they wouldn't enter the kingdom of heaven.

And He was saying that if these guys, these scribes and Pharisees, not understanding grace, not understanding the gospel, were motivated to do good and do justice; then you who do understand grace, who do understand the gospel will be held much more accountable than they. If all you do is lead quiet, sheltered, comfortable lives, concerned only about yourself, your family, your career, your retirement, your stuff, not deeply engaged and concerned about your fellow image bearers, no matter their status and condition, you cannot suppose that you've really gotten hold of the gospel. The covenant of the bow speaks to us of mission; it speaks to us of treating everyone we meet as someone made in the image of God; it speaks to us of doing justice.

But if that is all we had, we would have a big problem. If God had simply told us to be good stewards of the earth and do justice to every person, we might do that for a bit, but eventually we'd question the value of the thing and stop. We would revert to the motivation that inhabits every heart – self – what am I getting out of this? You hear about the first two relationships and you're motivated to get out there and be a good steward of the earth and love people and do justice. But without the third relationship you'll be crushed. You won't be able to sustain it. But the covenant of the bow solves that problem for us. It shows us something that makes those first two relationships possible. It makes living like that a reality. It shows us the gospel, it shows us salvation. It shows us **grace**. **God puts His bow in the sky as a sign of the covenant of grace.**

God tells Noah here, *"I have set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. 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 of all flesh.* Genesis 9:13-15 A sign is the symbol. The covenant sign here is the symbol of salvation, of grace. When you see the sign, you recognize that it symbolizes something. And here it symbolizes the grace that saves us. That means the bow, or as some translations have it, the rainbow, **will tell you everything you need to know to have a relationship with God.**

First of all it shows us **the background of God's grace**. This covenant calls us into a personal, intimate, covenant relationship with the Lord of the earth based on grace. And we need to first see the background of grace. You don't see things very well unless there is a vivid, contrasting background. I was out one night last year with Pastor Shadrack in Kenya and we were walking somewhere in the dark. And at one point, he said to me, 'You know Pastor Mike, at night, you can only see me when I smile'. And he was right. He was three feet away and I only really knew he was there when he smiled and showed me those pearly white teeth. And so it is with grace. **God always sets His bow in the sky against a background that brings out its brilliant colors.**

You know, you'll never see a rainbow in the sky on a completely sunny day. There is always some nasty, dark, stormy weather in the background. And I think it is always true that we don't experience the grace of God unless the storms are threatening. We never know the beauty of God's grace unless circumstances and situations conspire to show us our weakness, our insufficiency, our failures, our flaws, our sin and neediness. You'll never find the grace of God on sunny days. It's not until trouble comes into our lives to show us our need and our weakness that we see the grace. The rainbow highlights the background of God's grace. And the background is always dark with trouble and sin.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn gives a moving account of his religious awakening through the dark clouds of suffering. The love, patience, and long suffering of persecuted Russian believers had always impressed him. One night, as Solzhenitsyn lay in a prison hospital bed, a Jewish doctor, Boris Kornfeld, sat up with him and told the story of his conversion to Christianity. That same night, Kornfeld was clubbed to death while sleeping. Kornfeld's last words on earth, writes Solzhenitsyn, "lay upon me as an inheritance." In another place he says, "It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good... **Bless you, prison, for having been my life.**"

Secondly, the rainbow shows us the incredible **promise of God's grace**. This is astounding. Look at the rainbow. What is it? Science will tell you that what we're seeing is light refracted through raindrops from the storm clouds and it actually is a circle when view from the air. But from the earth, we can only see half of that – in other words, a bow. **It looks like a big bow in the sky** – arching over us to touch down in two points. And that is why the translators here have it right – it's a bow. And the word is used to describe the big war bows men carried into battle. And what God is saying is '**I have laid up My war bow. No more judgment. No more wrath. No more condemnation**'. This goes beyond telling Noah that he's got a second chance at this thing.

God is not sitting up there in heaven saying, 'I'm giving you another shot at this – better do it right this time!' If nothing else, verses three and four tell us God is not as naïve to think that there won't be anymore sinning. **The flood wiped out sinful man, but it didn't wipe out sin**. Noah carried it with him in the ark. Something else was needed for that. But here God is saying, 'You can have a relationship with Me that is personal and intimate, one that is free from wrath, free from judgment, free from condemnation'. But how can there be a relationship when we are still hostile to God? How can there be peace when one side is still at war?

And the bow again points to the answer. It show us the **story of God's grace**. **Look at the bow** – which way is it pointed, which way is it aimed? If we imagine an arrow on the bow, which way would it go? The bow is aimed at the heart of God. The arrow of His judgment goes up, not down. The reason God can say to Noah, 'I'm laying My bow aside. You can have a relationship with Me that is free from wrath, free from judgment, free from condemnation' and not be unjust or unholy is because He aimed the bow of His wrath at the Son of His love. He aimed it at Jesus. Spurgeon puts it like this: **The rainbow, yet again, is a token that vengeance itself has become on our side. You see, it is an unbroken "bow." He did not snap it across his knee. It is still a bow. Vengeance is there, justice is there; but which way is it pointed? It is turned upward...!**

You always find the rainbow at the intersection of darkness and light, storm cloud and sun. You find the rainbow where judgment and mercy meet. God says, 'When you look into the heart of wrath, that's where you'll see the rainbow'. And where was that? It was at the cross of Christ. It was there, the gospel writers tell us, that darkness covered the place for three hours, and the light of God's grace blazed in resurrection and the promise of the rainbow in the sky was fulfilled. The storm of God's wrath over sin broke on His Son who died in our place, His blood poured out instead of ours. And again, the covenant of the bow points to this reality as we read earlier in verse four: *But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.*

This is the first time this is mentioned in the Bible; but as we go through the Bible we see it over and over again. What is God saying here? He was beginning to show us that the life of the sacrifice was accepted for the life of the sinner; that blood must be shed, somebody must die, and it is the blood of the coming Perfect Sacrifice that will take away sins once for all. Therefore, blood must not be looked upon as a common thing, but sacred – not eaten but poured out before the Lord. God was not only making a statement about the sacredness of life, but was pointing to the blood of Christ that would be shed on the cross that made atonement for our sins.

And one last thing, this sign of the covenant shows us **the glory of God's grace**. Turn to the end of the story of God's grace and what do you see? Look at chapter ten of the Book of the Revelation where John records: *Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over His head, and His face was like the sun, and His legs like pillars of fire. He had a little scroll open in his hand. And He set his right foot on the sea, and His left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When He called out, the seven thunders sounded.* Look at the picture John shows us – He sees a mighty angel, and if you compare this description with that of the mighty angel in chapter one, it is clear that this is the resurrected and glorified Jesus – His face shines like the sun and His legs appeared to be pillars of fire – He's wrapped in a cloud and crowned with a rainbow.

What an incredible picture! We see the cloud that wraps Him and it speaks to us of the judgment of God and we see the rainbow that crowns Him that pictures the mercy that triumphs over judgment. Again, we're looking at that intersection of judgment and mercy in the person of Christ, and He spans the globe with the glory of God's grace as He stands with one foot on the land and one foot on the sea and declaring that the mystery of God will be fulfilled – God's purpose will be accomplished – *the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea* and the glory of God's grace will be on display for all to see.

As we come to the table this morning, again another sign, another symbol of the covenant of grace that God makes with us, let the background of His grace, the promise of His grace, the story of His grace and the glory of His grace work in us to savor the sweetness and the sureness of this covenant. Let it remind us that He is not only our Savior, but the Savior of the earth and all creation, and one day all that is wrong in creation will be put right. And let it work in our hearts to stir us to help, not hinder, creation to sing His praises. And let this table remind us that every human being is made in the image of God and is precious in His sight, and His blood was shed for them as well as you and that everyone is worthy of giving oneself and all our possessions.

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

Thank You for Your constant reminder to us of Your love and faithfulness we see in the sky after every storm passes by. We revel in that divine intersection of judgment and mercy where all our sins were laid on Jesus and Your love is forever displayed. We thank you that for those who trust in the saving work of Your Son there is no more judgment, no more condemnation, no more wrath laid up for them. Help us to steward Your creation because You love all that You have made. Let justice be the foundation of our relationships with all who have been created in the image of God. Let the glory of Your grace compel our hearts to love and our lips to praise; to love You with a passion that does not cool; to believe in You with a confidence that never staggers; and delight in You with a rejoicing that cannot be stifled; and glorify You with all our lives, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.