

“GOD’S COVENANT WITH CREATION”

In the flood, God’s judgment upon human wickedness was unleashed, a judgment that stands as a perpetual sign for all generations. It warns us that this present age stands under the specter of a final judgment, that all the mini-judgments that people experience in this life point to an ultimate judgment, and that every human life will be weighed on God’s scales at the end of history.

But in this passage, God promises that there will never be another judgment-within-history on the same scale as the great flood. When the flood waters subsided, God established a covenant with the created order, promising to preserve it until the day of its consummation. This is the subject of our text this evening: God’s covenant with creation.

A covenant is an agreement that formally binds two parties into a relationship with each other. The concept of covenant is one of the main organizing principles in the Bible. And this is why it is the main organizing principle for Reformed theology. Part of the genius of Reformed theology is its recognition that God’s plan of redemption is set forth in two main biblical covenants: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. These are defined by our Westminster Confession of Faith as follows:

“The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” [7.2]

And then the covenant of grace: “Man, by his fall, having made himself uncapable of life by that covenant [the covenant of works], the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.” [7.3]

You can see the differences between these two covenants. The covenant of works was made with all mankind in Adam, while the covenant of grace was made with those who are ordained to eternal life in Christ. The covenant of works offered eternal life upon condition of Adam’s perfect obedience, while the covenant of grace promises eternal life to all who trust in Christ.

But what about the covenant described here in Genesis 9? How does it fit into the overall covenantal framework of the Bible? Other biblical covenants, such as those with Abraham, Moses, David, and the new covenant in Christ’s blood, should be understood as progressive unfoldings of the one overarching covenant of grace. But the covenant with Noah is somewhat different. It certainly relates to the covenant of grace, but it relates to it in a unique manner.

We can see the connection between the covenant with Noah and the covenant of grace by looking at what takes place after Noah comes out of the ark. The first thing that Noah does upon leaving the ark is to worship God. He builds an altar and makes sacrifices, burnt offerings. The Hebrew word used here refers to a whole burnt offering, in which the entire animal was offered up to God by fire. It signified the fact that Noah was dedicating the entire creation to God. But that is not its only meaning. The text says that the aroma of this offering was pleasing to the Lord. This does not mean that God likes the smell of roasted meat. It is the language that the Bible uses to describe the appeasing of God's wrath by means of a sacrifice, also known by the theological term propitiation. Such language is used throughout the Old Testament to point forward to the sacrifice that Christ would offer up on the cross, once and for all, as a propitiation for sin. Propitiation is absolutely necessary if we are to enjoy a relationship with God, because our sin arouses his wrath against us and that wrath needs to be removed. In the words of John Calvin,

“in order that we may appear before God's face unto salvation we must smell sweetly with [Christ's] odor, and our vices must be covered over by his perfection.” [*Institutes*, 3.11.23]

That is what was taking place when Noah made his sacrifice. God was pleased with Noah's offering because it pointed to the one true provision for forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.

It is important to understand that this sacrifice was not about Noah making propitiation for sin. Noah himself was a sinner. He stood in need of propitiation as much as the rest of us. This sacrifice was about God's gracious provision. We can see this by taking note of what is said in verse 4 about the connection between blood and life. God told Noah that he was not allowed to eat meat that still had blood in it, because the blood represented the life of the creature. This is further explained in Leviticus 17, where God says that the blood of the sacrifices is his gift to make atonement for his people. The blood is the life, and the life is only God's to give. This tells us that the sacrifice made by Noah had to be God's idea, not Noah's. Otherwise, God would never have accepted it.

But this sacrifice does even more than propitiate God's wrath against Noah. It also results in blessings for the entire creation. Right after Noah's sacrifice, God promises to never again send this kind of judgment within history. Now, why does God make such a promise? Certainly not because human beings have ceased to be sinful. On the contrary, man's condition after the flood is exactly the same as it was before the flood. We see this in verse 21, where God says that "the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth" - essentially the same thing that he said before the flood. And yet, even though man is just as sinful as ever, God promises not to send another judgment like this within history. What is it that causes God to make this promise? Verse 21 says that it was the pleasing aroma of Noah's sacrifice. Noah's sacrifice leads to a blessing upon the entire created order. In other words, God's covenant of grace, his promise to save all of those whom he has elected to salvation in Jesus Christ, this covenant of grace also results in common

grace blessings for all people. The reason why God is committed to the preservation of this world is because he is committed to his plan of redemption; he is committed to saving all of the elect. We often hear it said that the church exists for the sake of the world, in the sense that the church exists in order to extend the blessings of salvation to the people of this world. That is certainly true. But it is also true that the world owes its continued existence to the church. The Lord upholds this world because of his commitment to the salvation of the elect. Common grace serves the purposes of special grace.

The covenant that God makes with creation in this passage is not a redemptive covenant, even though it serves the purposes of God's plan of redemption. It is a covenant that extends to all people, both Christian and non-Christian. It is a covenant for all earthly life. It underscores the fact that it is God's will that life in this world should continue until the day that he has appointed as its end. This means that our cultural activity as Christians is important, even though it is not redemptive in nature. Even though our true and final home is in the new creation, we should care about the life of this old creation. We should care about the life of this world, for the simple reason that God cares about it. We should care about our communities, about business, politics, law, music, the arts, food production, the environment, international affairs, and all of the other aspects of life in this world. While our work in these areas is not kingdom-building work, because that work has been entrusted to the church, God does work through all of

the various aspects of culture to continue his providential care for this world. He works through them to uphold his covenant with creation.

The main reason why God is so committed to the preservation of this world is not because he is an environmentalist, though he certainly does care for the world that he has made. Instead, the main reason why God promises to uphold this world is because of his commitment to the preservation and propagation of the human race. We see this in this passage in the repeated command for man to be fruitful and multiply. God wants man to fill the earth. And God's concern for man is also seen in the verses that provide the foundation for capital punishment. Capital punishment has been a hot topic in our state in recent weeks, as Michael Addison, the convicted killer of Manchester Police Officer Michael Briggs, became the first person in fifty years to receive the death penalty in New Hampshire. While some Christians argue against capital punishment, the teaching of this text is very clear. In verse 5 God says that he will require a reckoning for the blood of man, and in verse 6 he says that man will be his instrument for executing justice upon those who shed the blood of man. And this is said in the context of a common grace covenant, a covenant with all creation. This is not just a law for God's covenant people, but for all people.

This passage teaches us that the only reason why this world, and all of the people in it, continues to exist is because of the covenant that God made with creation in the days of Noah. Though the world is under a common curse, it is also under a common blessing. This is far more practical than we might at first realize. It should transform the way we

understand the world and the way we conduct our lives in it. It teaches us to affirm that there is much that is good in this world. It reminds us that life itself is a precious gift. It affirms that there are many things to enjoy, experience, and celebrate in this life. But it also reminds us that the only reason why this is true is because this world is under God's blessing. The good things that people enjoy in this life come from the hand of God, whether people acknowledge him or not. And the reason why God grants these blessings is because he has not yet gathered in the full number of those whom he has appointed for salvation. Common grace serves special grace. This is why there will be no common grace in hell. And it is why we must enjoy the good things that this life has to offer not as ends in themselves, but as a foretaste of a life that is still to come. Earthly happiness must not be seen as an end in itself, or else it will seem like a cruel joke when we reach the end of our days. Instead, we must always remember that all of the good things that we enjoy in this life are an anticipation of something that is far better in God's eternal kingdom. We are not looking for an earthly city. By faith, we are looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.