

Foundations: The Promise Keeper
By Jason Huff
June 6, 2021
Psalm 105:1-8; Luke 22:19-20; Genesis 8:20-9:17

Our final Scripture reading is Genesis 8:20-9:17. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.” Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man. As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it.” Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you – the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you – every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.” So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.””

Nothing in this world comes for free. Many of us have gotten very good at spotting scam emails because we know that no Nigerian prince is going to give us \$40 million dollars. But we still get tripped up. Several weeks ago, I gave my information to a service to find out more about some cars that were on the market. I thought it would help me get a better deal. All it did was fill up my voicemail, my texts, and my email with people begging me to talk to them about cars without getting any information I actually needed!

Not only does nothing come for free, people are really bad about keeping their promises. A recall affected all our Ford-made vehicles three years ago. I called in trying to get information, trying to get them fixed, was told all sorts of things. “Don’t worry, Mr. Huff, we’ll get you a loaner car.” “Don’t worry, Mr. Huff, we’ll call you as soon as the parts come in.” “Don’t worry, Mr. Huff, you won’t have to pay anything to get your recall work done.” Last week, I got a call back from a Ford representative asking how our repairs went and checking back in to make sure that the local dealership had held up their end. That was the first callback I’d gotten in three years’ worth of promises. It should be no surprise that our latest car is a Chevy and not a Ford. I’m sure you have stories just like this one with your cell phone company, your cable company – we all know how hard it is to get a company to keep its promises, especially if it seems you’re getting a good deal.

That’s why this passage stands out to me. God is a promise keeper. Unlike so many people we deal with, He is faithful to keep His word. And God is also in the position to do something for us that requires nothing on our part. Many of God’s covenants come with commands for us to keep...just in this passage, we hear echoes of God’s original command to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. God’s covenant with Israel that comes later in the book of Exodus has stipulations; God is generous with His people, but He expects them to follow His commands to the letter. But today’s covenant places no burden on us. It is wholly a promise God keeps out of His goodness. And that’s what we’re going to look at today in a moment.

In our last passage from Genesis, the danger has passed. God gave the command to Noah to disembark. The flood was over, the ground was dry, and it was safe for his family and the animals to once again roam the earth. But the story’s not done. The first thing that Noah does is build an altar and sacrifice some of the extra animals God brought on board the ark for that purpose. And while God is not surprised by the sacrifice, God doesn’t change His mind, God’s appropriate response to the sacrifice is to never again flood the earth. Despite all the evil humankind has done and will do, despite that our hearts are set against God, as long as the earth exists, God will never do that again.

And it made me start thinking today: *what might God do with your offering?* Because interestingly enough, while God provided the clean animals that could be sacrificed, the story makes no mention of the need for a sacrifice. We don’t know Noah’s thought process, either. Maybe after this great flood, Noah felt the need to pacify God. God had been upset with the great evil in the world, so that would be understandable. But that’s never said. Instead, what seems to be happening is that Noah sacrifices to God what he has out of gratefulness. The only thing he has, the only thing he has raised, these animals, he returns to God. And God’s response is to make a one-sided covenant, a promise, that He would forever keep with all humanity.

We are in a unique time in history, living after Jesus Christ. We no longer need to make animal sacrifices to God as an appeasement for our sin. In Jesus, we have not only appeasement but reconciliation, true atonement made on our behalf that never needs to be repeated. And even under the covenant made with the Israelites under Moses, God didn’t want endless sacrifices made out of obligation. God wanted offerings given out of grateful hearts and thankfulness.

That's why, I believe, God responded the way He does. God does not respond to Noah's offering as something made from Noah's fear or Noah's obligation but Noah's gratefulness to God for sparing his family and keeping them safe throughout the storm. But what's also interesting is that God never tells Noah himself that his offering triggers God's response. God makes the promise, Noah knows the promise, but only to Moses, writing the book of Genesis, does God reveal that the covenant was made due to Noah's faithful offering.

God blesses your offerings. I can tell those of you who have given to Church of the Covenant and CrossWay over the years that your offerings have not just kept me preaching each Sunday. Those offerings have provided people food and clothing; those offerings have made a way for 1,500 children around the world to have experienced the love of Jesus. Your offerings have helped Tonia and Gracie in Peru and their villages. Your offerings have supported missionaries; have fed people in here in town; have been used to welcome people back into the church, back into God's Kingdom, and encouraged others to find their place in the Kingdom too. Your offerings have helped our youth serve hundreds of people over the years with our youth mission trips. It is stunning what God has done with the resources of a tiny congregation.

At the same time, though, we have to think: how many people went un-evangelized because of our stinginess with our resources? How many people haven't been fed, haven't had a listening ear, haven't been welcomed into the Kingdom because we didn't give back to God? Statistics are interesting to me, and what I found this week is that in the average church, giving averages out to \$884 dollars per adult per year. Guess what? Outside of my family, we have 16 active adults in the congregation -- $\$884 \times 16 = \$14,144$. Our expected budget for the year? \$14,200. We are dead center in the average.

But what's also true is that Christians, on average, give 2.5% of their income. During the Great Depression, that number was 3.3%. Now either things are worse than they were during the Great Depression, or somewhere, we messed up. And I think we messed up two things. First, we forgot to teach that offering thanks to God is not an obligation but a privilege for His children. Second, we forgot to teach that God actively responds to our offerings in ways that we often never see or expect. Noah certainly didn't expect that his sacrifices would in some way help bring about God's covenant promise to all of creation, and yet it did. We can't tell what some of our offerings have done, but they have had an impact.

And this morning, I want to be clear that we're not talking primarily about financial offerings per se. Yes, we need those to run, but we really need sacrifices of time and your specific talents. The simple fact is, I need help. I need help to make sure the live broadcast works smoothly, because I can't do that and preach and lead music all at the same time. I need someone with their ear to the ground about a possible future location for CrossWay that might work out for everyone involved. I need someone who can take minutes at our Session meetings. We need folks who are willing to step out in faith and lead a Bible study or lead a project to feed the needy or lead a team on a walk for our local pregnancy center. If you offer that time to God, if you offer your skills and service to God, I know He will bless it. My encouragement for us all this week is to think, *what might God do with my offering?*

So that's the hard part, the heart part, the stuff we need to really consider. But the second half is the stuff that I really love. God makes a promise and He puts the rainbow in the sky as a sign of it, a reminder of it, for both us and for Him, He says. Never again will the earth be flooded. Never again will God destroy all humanity or even all the creatures. And something I'd missed before is that God says He will not curse the ground again. Remember, it was cursed twice before – once under Adam's fall, then again specifically against Cain. While the Adamic curse is on all work becoming toil, which remains, this seems to be a decision to avoid curses like Cain's – the ground will never be cursed because of an individual's wickedness. The ground will provide for the saint and the wicked alike.

And this is the beautiful point, one to always remember – *God's unconditional promises show His special love for us*. God makes covenants with His people. In fact, there are at least seven covenants in Scripture. These are commitments that God makes; they are His long-standing promises. There is a covenant at the beginning of Scripture with Adam and Eve, the covenant of works which promises them life as they follow His commands. There's the Noachic covenant we have here, where God promises never to flood the whole earth again. There is a covenant with the Israelites at Mount Sinai, when God gives the Law to Moses. He makes them with Abraham, with Aaron, Moses' brother the high priest, and with King David. And most importantly, He makes a covenant with all people who will believe in Jesus Christ.

But some of these covenants are conditional. And you know what happens with the conditional covenants? They break down. Not because of anything God does or any promises God doesn't keep, but because of human sin and failing. God promised Adam and Eve life through obedience, and Adam and Eve fail. God promises special status to the Israelites, and while God keeps His end of the covenant, the Hebrews rarely do, which is why eventually they are exiled and the temple destroyed. Whenever the promise is dependent on us, we fail.

But thankfully, many of God's covenants are only dependent on His faithfulness and not ours. His promise not to flood the earth is not contingent on our obedience. And neither is God's promise to save those who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We are not saved because we are good; we are not even saved because we "chose" Jesus, because our belief is planted in us by God's grace. When Paul writes his second letter to Timothy, his son in the faith, he says this: "Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself."

We don't want to misunderstand the grace that God has given us. We obey Him not to earn our salvation but because we have been adopted as God's children. When we act in godly ways, we act like a son or daughter of the King of Heaven. We can't truly disown God in our actions or words and expect salvation. Salvation is not a pass to do whatever we want; the gift of salvation to lead us towards God and His righteousness. But when we are faithless, when we fail, when we fall, we do not fear. God will pick us up and restore us. The promise isn't on our shoulders. It's on God's. And His shoulders are big enough to carry those promises.

And promises like those of the covenant with Noah, symbolized by the rainbow in the sky, they show God's special love because He doesn't have to make any of them. God doesn't owe us anything. God doesn't have to love us. God has no debt of obligation to us. Think about creators in our world, even back to the situation I mentioned earlier. The only reason Ford replaced the airbags in our cars is because we paid Ford for our cars. They were obligated by the government not to sell a dangerously defective product, and it took them three years to fix. If they weren't forced to do it, you know they wouldn't, just by the number of recalls car companies fight each year. And love has nothing to do with it.

God doesn't need our love; He is perfect and perfectly content in Himself. And yet, God loves us. It is His nature to be loving to His creation, patient with our weakness and failings and even our rebellion. God obligates Himself to us because His love for us is immense. He makes the promise of the rainbow despite the wickedness of humanity. Because while God's perfection includes perfect judgment and perfect anger against sin, it is weighted by His perfect mercy and perfect love for us. So now, whenever it rains, there's a chance we'll spot God's grace to us.

We're going to take just a moment to address the final topic in the sermon. God gives humanity all the animals for food; until this point, it seems that humans were vegetarians. God approves the animals for food as well as putting the fear of us in the animals. But more importantly, God establishes the prohibition against eating blood and the accountability we have for one another. There will be justice against those who shed the blood of other humans, because, as God reminds us, we have been made in His image.

So here's our last thought for the day: *bless those around you, for they bear the image of God.* God has shown His love for all of us and His love for you through His covenants. If you are a Christian, He has shown His special favor and love to you by declaring you not guilty through His Son and lifting you up spiritually to Himself. He has spared us from the disaster He brought upon the ancient world. And He has made each one of us in His image – an image we have marred and tarnished, but nevertheless God's image is still there and still visible in us.

So bless others. Cain claimed that he wasn't his brother's keeper, but God here establishes that we have a basic accountability for one another. In the most simple sense, we aren't to harm one another. But Christ teaches us in Luke 6:28, "Bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you." Everyday, every person you meet, they are made in the image of God. In as much as it depends on us, we are to bless others, to look out for one another. Our era is incredibly self-centered and self-focused; eyes are glued to phones and hearts are wired to pursue our pleasures. But when we treat those around us with genuine love and grace and mercy, where we are selfless and honor the image of God in each person, it stands out. It reflects God's love to those who don't know Him. It could even be the lynchpin God uses to bring them into His Kingdom. Bless the image-bearers around you.

We'll get the last of Noah's story next week, which is a doozy. But for now, remember this: we are so loved. God has made incredible promises and covenants with us. So offer yourself to Him, and He will use your gifts for His glory and your gain. Bless the image-bearers in your midst, and you will see more of God's handiwork all around you. Follow in God's steps, and just like Noah, you will see and witness His grace to you.