

9. THE COVENANT WITH NOAH

We mentioned how the first world came into the grip of terror, and was “full of violence” (Gen 6:11). The violence and bloodshed became so severe upon the earth that the LORD decided to take strong measures. “So the LORD said, I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth – men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air – for I am grieved that I have made them” (Gen 6:7). The LORD had shown much patience and awaited a change of heart among people, but now judgment was imminent. It was to be complete and thorough: mankind would be wiped from the face of the earth. This was the mighty judgment of old by the water of the great flood.

This judgment would affect people and animals. Although animals are morally innocent of man’s wrongs, they were still affected by the judgment that came over the earth, for they lived under man’s dominion.

It is also possible that the nature of the animals on the earth had become so violent that none could be tamed and they were a growing threat to people; that both men and animals had become predators. In that case the LORD was making a new beginning.

Covenantal profile

The LORD will not, however, destroy mankind and the animals completely. He remains true to his covenant of love and shows his grace to Noah with whom he will continue into the future. In Genesis 6:9 we find an important profile of a faithful covenant child: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God.”

The word righteous has here the same implication that it has later, when the Bible speaks of the righteousness that is by faith. The element of righteousness by faith is never lacking in the covenant relationship. Noah believed God and trusted in his promise, and – as with Abraham later – this was credited to him as righteousness. See Hebrews 11:7: “By his faith he [Noah] condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.” The covenant has always been built on the justification that comes by faith.

If the word righteous denotes the status that Noah had before God, the word blameless tells us of his reputation among people. It specifically says in Genesis 6:9 that he “was blameless among the people of his time.” They could allege nothing wrong against him. To be blameless (and righteous) does not mean being without sin. It means that Noah put into practice what God wanted; he lived a life filled with the fruits of faith. This, too, has from the beginning been a demand of God’s covenant.

And then we find the expression, “he walked with God” (as is testified also of Enoch, Gen 5:24). “Walking” means here the totality of daily life. Noah lived close to the LORD God in deep love. In the covenant we live by faith alone, publicly show forth the fruits of faith, and all this results from a close, deeply personal fellowship with the LORD himself. This is *in all ages* the profile of a true covenant child.

In this covenantal profile we must include one more important element. The text adds immediately, in Genesis 6:10: “Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth.” This is not just a biographical note, but has to do with the very nature and extent of God’s covenant. It is made and continued with believers and their children. These sons were already adults and even married (Gen 7:13) at the time of the flood, but they are included with Noah and his wife as belonging to the covenant line.

There is no mention of their righteousness or spiritual condition, not because this is unimportant, but because their status at this time is determined by Noah’s position as head of this household. God says to Noah: “Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you (singular, not: you and them) righteous in this generation” (Gen 7:1). In the covenant God does not deal with individuals only; he is gracious also to their households.

I mention this to show how Scripture can speak in a very uncomplicated manner about the manner in which God applies his covenant of love to believers and their seed. The attitude of the sons comes to the fore later, after the flood, and is described specifically in Genesis 9:18-27. We then find that there was not with each son a true love for the LORD and his service; and this has great consequences.

Saved in the ark through water

This first great judgment was one by water, by a great flood. Water cleanses and purifies as well as destroys. The only way to escape this judgment is through the use of an ark. Only in the ark will Noah, his family, and the animals be safe, and able to enter into a new world. We must keep in mind that the elements are not, as in the final judgment, melted down and renewed. But the great flood does point to the certain judgment that will come at the end of time. “By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (2 Pet 3:6, 7). In both instances, there is escape only in the way of God’s covenant.

The water and the ark receive in Scripture a special significance and illustrate the *way of salvation*. The apostle Peter writes, “In [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him” (1 Pet 3:20-22).

Just as Noah and his family had to go through water (to be cleansed, as it were, in the flood), so we also must go through water, namely the water of baptism, which is now the sign and seal of God’s covenant. Noah had his “baptism,” and so do we. The water depicts both death and life, judgment and salvation, and directs us, as Peter writes, to the saving work of Christ, who died, but then rose and ascended into glory. We are not saved by rituals or signs, but only by Jesus Christ.

Just as the flood implied the leaving behind of an old world and the entering into a new one, so baptism marks a decisive transition: we have died with Christ, been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we, too, may live a new life (see Rom 6:3, 4). The flood points to baptism, and baptism directs us to our cleansing and renewal by the blood and Spirit of Christ. There is unity and progress in the history of redemption.

Special assurance required

In Noah and his sons God makes a new beginning. But it is made through the same covenant as that which God originally established. God says to Noah that everything on earth will perish, “but I will establish my covenant with you...and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you” (Gen 6:18, 19). The flood does not mean the end of God’s covenant dealings with man; it indicates a new beginning which is at the same time a continuation. God still works in the line of Adam and Seth, in the faithful generations, according to his promise of old.

This is the first time that the Bible uses the word *covenant*. As I have shown, this does not mean that before this there was no covenant. The LORD God now uses this word and speaks in strong terms (“I will *establish* my covenant with you...”), because never before has such a far-reaching judgment on the human race been announced. All other people will be destroyed by God’s just wrath. Noah must have absolute certainty concerning the divine purpose, so that he may trust in God’s work of salvation. In this certainty, he must build the ark and speak to all as “a preacher of righteousness” (2 Pet 2:5). Noah goes into that dark night assured of God’s covenant promises.

For if ever assurance was needed, it was when the ark was being built. But also: just as God remained faithful to his word then, so he will be faithful to his covenant people when the time comes for the world to be dissolved by fire.

A covenant with nature?

We read in Genesis 9:9-11, after the flood has subsided, that God says to Noah and his sons, “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.”

Since this covenant appears to include more than just mankind and emphatically is made with “all life on the earth” (Gen 9:17), it has often been called the *covenant with nature*, and is seen by some as a different covenant from the one made previously with Adam and Seth.

H. Bavinck (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, III,196ff.) sees in this covenant with Noah a special form of *common grace*. Through the flood God cleanses the old world, which had become violent, and begins a period of expanded grace. Bavinck sees this “new” covenant, which he believes is related to the covenant of grace but not identical with it, as having the following important consequences: grace is now more powerful in restraining evil, the curse is restricted, animals fear man instead of attacking him, and (the power of) nature is generally brought under control. In comparison to those of the “first world,” the world of before the flood, people are softer in character, less strong and less violent, and they do not live as long as their ancestors. Human life – of such little value before the flood – is now protected by capital punishment to curb the constant bloodshed evident before the flood (Gen 9:6), and life is more regulated. Bavinck also believes that there were changes in climate and landscape, and he sees the disappearance of the large pre-historic animals (dinosaurs) as part of this covenant. God took all these measures in order to ensure the continuation of life and prevent the further (self-) destruction of mankind.

S.G. de Graaf writes, “The Noahic covenant is commonly called the covenant with nature. There’s nothing wrong with this characterization, provided that we regard man as a part of ‘nature.’ This covenant was established not only with the earth and the animals, but first of all with man” (*Promise and Deliverance*, I, 60).

De Graaf makes an important point. The covenant is made with *man*. Indeed, it has consequences for all creatures, and for all the earth, but man is its prime beneficiary. God makes clear that he will not again bring about such massive judgment until the church of Christ has been fully gathered. All things in creation must serve this purpose. All creatures will benefit from this decree. In that sense we should not speak of a covenant with nature, for nature (this world) benefits from God’s way with mankind. This present world exists for the gathering of Christ’s church, and when that has been accomplished, it will pass away (see 2 Pet 3:7: “the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire...”). All creation will be renewed not by water, but by the fire of the last judgment.

Meanwhile, the LORD, in his covenant with the faithful generations of mankind, will restrain evil, and control and protect nature, so that the earth may again be filled with people (and other creatures), and the church may be gathered. We have here not a new or different covenant, but the same covenant of love, which at that specific moment gave guarantees to Noah and his descendants. Therefore it is best not to speak of a covenant of nature, but simply to see this covenant declaration as a special application of the existing and ongoing covenant of love.

The sign of the rainbow

We read that God instituted a special sign at this point. “I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth” (Gen 9:13). Why this sign? A rainbow results from the interaction of sun and water. There will still be many storms on the earth, even localized floods, but the rainbow indicates that the sun is breaking through the clouds.

The question may be asked for whom this sign is meant. The animals obviously cannot rationally appreciate this sign or connect it to God’s goodness. It is therefore a sign meant for mankind. Dark clouds may gather and storms break loose, but the colourful brilliance of the rainbow reminds everyone that the storms will surely pass. I have seen how people look up in fascination and wonderment when such a rainbow appears in the sky. Those who know God’s word are reminded of his promise.

It is remarkable that the LORD also says, “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” (Gen 9:16). Does the LORD really need to be reminded of his own promises? Of course not. But this is God’s goodness to us, his people. He binds himself by this sign to postpone final and complete judgment until the covenant has reached its purpose: to bring forth all God’s children for the new heaven and the new earth.