

## New Beginnings

### *In the Beginning: A Study on Genesis 1-11 Sermon 10*

Genesis 8:20-9:17

May 15, 2022

A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

---

We have just passed through the flood. In our sermon series on Genesis 1-11, we've now come with Noah through the waters of God's judgment. We've learned that sin and violence will be met by God's perfect justice. And we've learned that even in the midst of judgment, we can find grace: through Noah and the ark, God mercifully preserved His creation.

Today the waters have subsided, and we meet Noah leaving the ark. The man plants his feet on solid ground for the first time in roughly a year and looks upon a wet earth where everything has just been wiped out. God wastes no time. With words nearly identical to what God said to Adam and Eve when they stood before a spotless creation, God calls Noah to start again, to build again, to begin again: God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1, see Genesis 1:28). After such failure on man's part, after such judgment from God—after the flood!—, from where will Noah find the confidence and courage to begin again?

It's not easy to start over after things fall apart. After things have collapsed—plans, dreams, a life—it's hard to find the confidence to begin again. I recently was reading about the legal settlement that has followed the collapse of the Surfside Condominium in Florida a year ago. Can you imagine being someone who lived next to the building when it fell? To be sure, builders will build again, and new safety measures will be set, but for a family to buy, make a condo their home—for people to *begin again*, there—, what will that take?

*When things fall apart, as they did in Genesis 6-8, where do people find the courage and confidence to begin again?*

The Jewish writer, Martin Buber, worried about his young granddaughters following all the horrors done to Jews in the twentieth century. These young women represented the future of his people, but how would they go into the world and begin again after such cruelty? Words in his article, *Die Kinder* (the children), touch us: "For its spirit to grow, a child needs what is constant, what is dependable. There must be something that does not fail."<sup>1</sup>

Buber is exactly right: to go back into life, after things have fallen apart, and to begin again, requires something that is constant, dependable, something that does not fail. I can't imagine that something of these sentiments didn't weigh upon Noah. As Noah stood there—before a desolate earth that bore witness to the depravity of sin and reality of its consequences—he represented all of us. Noah is like a second Adam; this is a new start to creation. Only Noah, like us, is Adam when all innocence is lost. Noah is man fully aware that things fall apart, sin speeds their course, and around the corner may be the flood.

*What could possibly give Noah the courage—that sense of constancy and dependability—to begin again?*

I believe this question is answered powerfully in the events immediately following the flood. The constancy and dependability humanity needs to begin again is set before us with a single idea. It's an idea that comes to form the backbone, the plotline, of the entire Bible. *What does man need to begin again, to face his and his world's fallenness with confidence and courage?* Man needs to be met by a radical commitment from God, which the Bible calls...**a covenant.**

Seven times in verses 9:8-17 the word "covenant" appears. It is the unmistakable point of our passage. God's covenant is His constancy set beneath our feet, His purposes set before our eyes, and His heart beckoning us into a future, together. And notice that God calls Noah into a world enshrouded by this covenant—it touches everything:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "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" (Genesis 9:8-10).

God is not casting Noah into the unknown. He is inviting him into His covenant—God's radical commitment to this place, this project, this people. Covenant is not an idea we are terribly familiar with in our day. So, with the rest of our time, I want to be sure we grasp the significance of God's covenants in general, then ask what the covenant with Noah is, and is not, and finally, draw out a few truths to live by, which arise from life with the covenant-making God.

# I. The Significance of God's Covenants

There are several covenants in the Bible—they do in fact make up the biblical plotline. They're not all the same, but rather, they often build on each other, the one setting the stage for the next. Following this covenant with Noah and creation, God makes covenants with Abraham, Israel (at Sinai), King David, and, finally, God establishes the New Covenant in Christ.

We don't use the term covenant much today, but it was common in biblical times. It carried the idea of a binding agreement. Sometimes covenants were between equal parties, and sometimes a covenant was made when a more powerful person, like a great king, entered into a covenant with a less powerful person. The covenants that God makes with humanity are like this latter scenario: a Great One promising to protect and provide for a person in return for their own faithfulness.

Some people compare biblical covenants to modern-day contracts, mainly to show how they differ. A modern-day contract between two people is typically about business and benefits. If you contract with someone to paint their house, you write up a contract ensuring mutual benefits: one party gets the house painted, and the other gets compensated. Once that transaction is over, the two parties go their separate ways. A biblical covenant shares elements of a contract—there are expectations and benefits—but it aims at something much deeper. Biblical covenants are more personal than business, they aim not at short-term benefits but a lasting relationship, and in the case of God's covenant making, they are not simply mutual, but we, the lesser party, stand to receive so much more. In the Bible, covenants make people family who were not formally tied by blood or kinship.<sup>2</sup>

A helpful illustration is marriage. Marriage is a covenant. And the man and woman who commit in this covenant are after more than a temporary business deal; they are aiming at a life together, marked by a common purpose, loyalty, and love.

When a covenant unfolds in Scripture, we should be alert to the following dynamics going on:

- (1) God is moving towards man for relationship—He wants a to bind us to Himself in love and loyalty.

(2) God is sharing with us His plan for the future—He invites us to be part of what He is building.

(3) God is giving us the dignity of duty—He calls us to be faithful to Him, His ways, and His purposes. His covenant faithfulness to us elicits our faithfulness to Him.

*What does all this mean for Noah and for finding the constancy and courage to begin again?* It means that humans are never asked to go into an empty world and work according to a fruitless endeavor. Everything we do on this planet connected to this project called life, we do in response to God's radical commitment to it.

I was reading in Haggai this morning, where God is calling Israel to rebuild the temple after it was destroyed by the Babylonians. Israel is being called to *begin again*. And they lack courage and confidence after all they've seen. And what God says to strengthen them fits perfectly with what we're seeing about the power of His covenant. God tells Haggai to say to the leaders and remnant in Jerusalem:

Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? Yet now be strong ... declares the LORD ... Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not (Haggai 2:3-5).

God's covenants mean that we venture into a world and a task—not alone—but where God already is at work, already has a plan, and is more committed than we ever could be. Let's turn now to consider more specifically the covenant with Noah, noting what it is, and what it is not.

## **II. Understanding the Covenant with Noah, What It Is and Is Not**

Covenant of Common Grace: *Preservation and Protection*

The covenant with Noah is sometimes thought of as the covenant of common grace. It is common because it's made for everyone, not just Israel or the church. And it's common because humanity doesn't need to undergo a sign to enter it (such as circumcision or baptism), but rather, God brings everyone into it by a sign God makes in nature, the rainbow. Notice that the covenant covers all things, Noah, his offspring, and all creatures:

I establish my covenant with **you** and **your offspring after you**, and with **every living creature that is with you** ... it is for every beast of the earth (Genesis 9:9-10).

And notice that it is for all time.

It is an "**everlasting** covenant," God says in 9:16, and will endure "**as long as the earth remains**" (Genesis 8:22).

This means that if you are a living creature on planet earth this covenant is relevant to you—right here, right now. That's who and how long, but what's the covenant entail? The covenant with Noah is chiefly about *preservation* and *protection*.

First, it promises protection from God's judgment through the form of another global flood. God explains:

I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth (Genesis 9:11).

Humanity would need to know this because although the flood cleansed the earth, it did not transform man's heart. After the waters subsided, God makes the following observation about the human heart: "the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth" (8:21). God is covenanting not to destroy the earth by flood, not because humanity is not sinless, but because they are still sinful. This is not because God is lowering His standards of justice. But, as we'll see more in a moment, it's because He is mercifully patient, and has a plan for how to save man from their sinfulness, while also preserving the life He's created.

Aware that humanity is still sinful and violent (consider the next chapters of Genesis, i.e., the rest of Noah's life than the tower of Babel!), God's covenant sets in place certain structures to shield—though not completely remove—life from the destructiveness of sin and violence.

- Animals are protected from human cruelty: “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (Genesis 9:1-4). God tells Noah that the animals are under human care and can be a source of food (9:2-3). But they are not to be treated with cruelty.
- Humans are protected from animal cruelty: “And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it” (Genesis 9:5). Apparently in the fallen world animals had grown outside their role of subservience to humans and were known to attack. God will require a reckoning of animals who harm humans.
- Finally, humans are protected from humans: “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” (Genesis 9:5-6).

God is setting in place the basic building blocks for systems of justice and civility. And they are all anchored upon two things: (1) God's valuing of His creation; and (2) the sanctity of human life. Humans are created in the image of God, and therefore no one can mistreat a human without being accountable to God. God delegates a temporal responsibility for caring for human beings to human beings. God calls us to be part of how God requires a “reckoning” for murder. This does not mean a license for harm, but rather, it is a cornerstone for each person's rights. No matter the color of their skin, their age, or whether they are months into life in their mother's womb or months before death—God says to each one of us, “You are your brother's keeper; and every fellow image bearer is your brother.”<sup>3</sup>

This means God's people should always care about the well-being of the world around them and the rights of the people around them. Why? Because God does. To work for the common good of our neighbors and world, to care about fair systems of justice, to honor the animal life that fills the world, is to live according to the basic contours of the covenant with Noah. In summary, the covenant with

Noah is a covenant of common grace. And it is God's promise to *preserve* and *protect* the sacredness of life on earth and to do it despite our sinfulness.

## Covenant of Redeeming Grace: *The New Covenant*

It's also important, however, that we recognize what this covenant is not. There is no provision made in this covenant to forgive sins or fix the human heart. The covenant with Noah preserves and protects, but it does not redeem.

The covenant of common grace makes room for the covenant of redeeming grace. And just a few chapters after this, that covenant plan begins to unfold in the covenant with Abraham that promises a special blessing to the world, and continues to build in the covenant with Israel and David—and it finally culminates in the New Covenant, made through Christ.

This means that Christians can never settle *merely* for securing our neighbors under the covenant of common grace. Even when we work for the common welfare of the world, we are doing so knowing that this is only a prelude, a context, where God would invite people into the covenant with His Son.

I want to turn to a final question: *what are some truths emerging from this covenant that are uniquely helpful and applicable to us today?*

### **III. Helpful Truths Derived from the Covenant-Making God**

1. Wherever you go, God's already there, at work, committed.

We've already made this point above but as a reminder: the covenant with Noah covers every part of creation. So, there is no place you can go, no calling too large or small, no place too bleak, where God is not already there, claiming things as His own, at work, committed. This does not mean we always understand what God is doing, or why things are as they are. But it does mean we never enter into anything where God is not already there: This is a covenant "between me and you, every living creature, for all generations" (Genesis 9:12).

2. Feel the touch of God's kindness in His incredible patience.

The covenant with Noah is about God's *merciful patience*. He holds back judgment now because He desires that we would turn and be healed. Saint Paul explains that when God put Jesus forward to

pay the penalty for sin, God was showing that He was “righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (Romans 3:25). God is showing His patience, one of the many faces of His tender kindness. This theme rings throughout scripture like a great cathedral bell, echoing on through time:

The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,” (Exodus 34:6).<sup>4</sup>

One of the hardest things in life is when someone we love leaves the faith. Like the prodigal son from Luke 15, they run off into the world. We can feel as though they are utterly lost to God, outside of His care, outside of His love. But this covenant with Noah says otherwise: there is no place in the world they can venture outside of this covenant; and every time the sun comes up upon them it is a reminder from God that He is patiently waiting for them, loving them, desiring for them to come home. As long as the earth endures (Genesis 8:21), no one can wander outside of the patient love of God, a love that desires them to come home.

### 3. Evaluate today, based on what God has planned for tomorrow.

The covenant-making God is present in the Bible as the God who not only knows the future but has determined it. As we read in Isaiah:

I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,” (Isaiah 46:9-10).

This is why God can make covenants that foretell what will happen in the future. Here with Noah, God speaks about “future generations” and calls this covenant an “everlasting covenant” (Genesis 9:12, 16). God can only do this because He controls the future. These are not empty promises or wishful thinking. And the only way to understand God’s actions in the covenant with Noah is in light of what His future plan involves. God can establish a covenant to hold back judgment against man’s sin because the Son of God has already covenanted with the Father to come and die for man’s sin.



The practical implications of this are important to grasp. We tend to try and understand our lives based on what's happened before, or what's happening in the present. We think we've ended up in the current scenario we are in solely due to decisions in our past. But according to the biblical view, God's work in our present is based on His plans for our future. So often, we will only be able to make sense of the curve in the road today based on the destination God has determined for us in the future.

*How can Noah have the confidence and courage to begin again?* By stepping into God's covenant and living upon the trustworthiness, the purposes, and loyalty, of the God who is the creator and sustainer of this world.

In his article for his granddaughters, who were to walk back into a world that had failed them so horribly, Martin Buber said, "For its spirit to grow, a child needs what is constant, what is dependable. There must be something that does not fail."<sup>5</sup> This is true for all of us, and it was true for Noah. What he needed to begin again was something that is constant, dependable, that would not fail. He found that in God, the God who made a covenant with Noah, and even Noah's ancestors, you and me.

---

## Endnotes

1. Cited in Os Guinness, *The Magna Carta of Humanity: Sinai's Revolutionary Faith and the Future of Freedom*, (IVP, 2021), 145; Os is referring to Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent* (Yale University Press), 183-84.
2. As one historian writes, "The fundamental image behind each of the applications of [the word for covenant in the Bible] is the use of familial categories for those who are not bound by ties of natural kinship." See John A. Davies, *Royal Priesthood*, 177.
3. The term used in Genesis 9:5 is "brother." As Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, explains, "From each man his brother's life." "How much more so shall I require a reckoning for the blood of man in this instance, seeing that the slain person is the *brother* of the slayer" (Cassuto, 2:127). "Not the animal, but man is the brother, the relative, of man. Humanity is a family" (Gispén 1:295). This is the first time *nx* "brother" has been used since Gen 4 (cf. 4:8–11), where the term is

harped on to highlight the incongruity of Cain's action, so it seems likely that here this story is being alluded to."

4. "But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Ps 86:15)
5. Cited in Os Guinness, *The Magna Carta of Humanity: Sinai's Revolutionary Faith and the Future of Freedom*, (IVP, 2021), 145; Referring to Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent* (Yale), 183-84.