

In the beginning: God's Covenant

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[0 : 0 0] Let's share in our prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence. May your Word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your great glory our supreme concern.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. I wonder what the first thing you do in the morning when you wake up is. And there was a survey a while ago which said most people when they first wake up do their best to go back to sleep. I don't know if you can identify with that.

Maybe even just for another ten minutes. We have invented the snooze button. I think they did a good thing. Some people said in this survey that they exercise or they go and get their cat and pat their cat for a while. Or they get a cup of tea or coffee and go back into bed and drink it. You'd not be too surprised here. I'm not one of the people that go out and exercise first thing in the morning. But when you manage to get people to be really honest, leaving out calls of nature and drinks of water and so on, what people mostly do is look at their phone. Now I don't know, I don't want to ask for a show of hands. We all have our morning routines. And perhaps the first thing we do on waking up shows us what's important to us or at least is determined by whether we're a morning person or not.

At the start of our passage this morning we come to the end of our look at Noah's story and we get a clear indication of what's important to him through the first thing that he does.

We're perhaps familiar with Noah's story and of course we've been talking about it on Sunday mornings for the past two or three weeks I think. And that's given us, I hope, some sense of how momentous the events of his story are. Now there's a list from the Scottish Bible Society called the Ten Must Know Bible Stories for Children. And they're sort of a guide for people like me who go into schools, what stories do people really need to hear. And not surprisingly of course, Noah's Ark is one of these stories. And that can lead us sometimes to think of it as a Sunday school story, a children's story, and forget that in these chapters we have a renewal of the whole world.

[2 : 2 8] Noah and his family emerged from the Ark as the only humans in the entire world. They've lived through a worldwide flood and we couldn't blame them for being overwhelmed by their circumstances as he contemplated what their new lives were going to look like. That's the context in which we read in verse 20, then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. Noah's first thought is towards God.

Homage, dedication and gratitude are all expressed in that burnt offering. The boat builder now builds an altar. God accepted the sacrifice because, as you will soon see from the next verse, it was a pleasing aroma to God. But why did Noah sacrifice in the first place? Why did Noah save all these animals only to sacrifice some of them as soon as he left the Ark? Now any of you who are dog or cat or pet owners know that pets are very expensive. You need to feed them of course, get them toys, the groomers I suppose, things like that and most importantly or most expensively take them to the vet. But why do you do it?

You might be asking yourself that sometimes maybe. But you do it because your pet is precious to you. It's part of your family and your pet's well-being is of vital importance to you. Now imagine there was only two dogs or two cats left in the whole world. They would be really precious. But the animals Noah sacrifice were among a tiny number of their type. He probably didn't have only two of everything. Some things he had seven pairs of. But even so, that's not many. If there's even seven of any animal left in the world today, it would be right up the top of the endangered species list. David Attenborough would definitely make a film about them. But with all that in mind, Noah still sacrificed some of these precious animals.

Homage, dedication and gratitude. We know that God instituted a sacrificial system for his people, but that was over 2000 years in the future. So why was this sacrifice included in the account of Noah's story?

Of course, there are other examples of sacrifices in the early story of God's people. Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. Jacob sacrificing after leaving his father-in-law's land and heading back to his family and so on. I'm sure you can think of others.

[5 : 09] But the most significant was the sacrifices made by the people on the night of the first Passover. That night, God's angel moved across the land of Egypt in judgment and in every household there was a death.

But in every Israelite house, which was marked on the door frames by the blood of a lamb, the angel passed over and the people were safe.

The mark of security and the certainty of protection was that a lamb had been sacrificed. They saw that through a life laid down, life could flourish.

Each sacrifice we read about in Genesis looked forward to a greater sacrifice required by God. And they all pointed in one direction, and that is to the greater sacrifice carried out by Jesus on the cross.

Sin had come into the world through Adam and Eve and God's plan of salvation was in progress right from then. All the sacrifices we read about in the Old Testament led up to the once and forever sacrifice that opened up the way for each one of us to get to know God through Jesus.

[6 : 19] The writer of Hebrews talks about this in chapter 10 when we read that all sacrifices have to be repeated because they could never provide perfect cleansing. It's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away the sins as we read in verse 4.

But through Jesus, that one offering, we were made holy forever. Jesus' death on the cross was the greatest demonstration of God's love for humanity. When he willingly gave his life, he took upon himself the punishment for all our sins, the very penalty that we deserved.

Because of his sacrifice, the separation between God and humanity caused by sin has been completely removed. When John the Baptist first saw Jesus, he looked up and pointed at him and said, Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

Just as the blood of the Lamb saved the Israelites in Egypt, so we are forgiven, cleansed and made right with God. Not just temporarily, but forever through the blood of Jesus.

Jesus' death, Jesus' victory over sin and death meant that those who trust in him are given eternal life, free from condemnation and can live in the peace and joy of God's presence.

[7 : 46] His death opened the door for every person to experience God's love fully and to be secure in his mercy for all eternity. That's the reality for those of us who are here or those watching or listening if we know Jesus.

We are right with God and God's friends because of Jesus. When we were in the Philippians course just a couple of weeks ago, we were talking about chapter 3. I was joking with Gordon Kennedy later that I think he'd said the word Jesus about 100 times in about 15 minutes.

His message was clear. It's all about Jesus. And it's all about Jesus for all of us. We look to him because he has done all that was needed to bring us to the Father.

This is the message of encouragement to those of us who know Jesus. But it's a message of encouragement to those of you who don't yet know Jesus. Because everything we have just said about what Jesus did in reconciling us to God is true about you as well.

God's hand is held out to you to accept him and to know him. And the most important thing you will ever do is to reach out and take that hand. And that's where our next verse comes in.

[8 : 59] We read in verse 21. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, I will never again curse the ground because of man. For the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth.

Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. The Lord was pleased with the sacrifice because it was an acknowledgement of obedience and faith from Noah.

And God's pleasure indicated that his relationship with Noah and everyone he came after would be different. Specifically that he would not judge the world in this way again.

But God's pleasure did not disguise the fact that he knew people were still capable of evil. But he was still willing to restore the world and continue with his covenant with Noah.

And so as to that covenant we will now turn. But before we do that, there's just one other pointer in this verse which Paul picks up in Ephesians chapter 5 verse 2. Walk in the way of love just as Christ's love does and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[10 : 05] Paul considered the cross a fragrant offering because it was pleasing to God. Just as Noah's actions pleased God so much more, did Jesus' self-giving sacrifice please him and open up a way as we have already seen for us to know God.

And it also underlines what we were saying earlier about all the sacrifices pointing eventually to Jesus and his greater sacrifice. In the first few verses of chapter 9 God outlines to Noah the basis on which they are to now live their lives.

They're still in the world God created. God hasn't changed but their lives are going to be different. Having said that, the first thing God tells Noah and his family is the same thing he said to Adam and Eve.

In Genesis 1.28 God tells Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. And here God tells Noah to be fruitful and multiply. Now of course this is very important.

There are now only eight people in the world, four married couples. There are no mention of any of Noah's sons however, their wives having children. So any grandchildren for Noah and his wife were born after the flood.

[11 : 18] So a big part of being fruitful and multiplying is for Shem, Ham and Japheth and their wives to start having kids. God's purposes for humanity were not ended.

Creation had been renewed, not replaced. And God's image bearers were called on to fulfill their part in God's purposes.

But this is a new world, not Eden restored. The experience of Adam and Eve before the fall is not being reproduced as we see clearly here in verses 2 to 3.

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 hands they are delivered.

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. As I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Now we read back in Genesis 1.29 that the food Adam and Eve ate was entirely plant-based, but now we see a significant difference.

[12 : 21] Now humans are permitted to eat meat and all animals are going to fear them because of that. They are farmers, but they are also going to be hunters. Another significant change for them and for the world they now live in.

But in the passage God goes on to tell them that they must not eat the blood because the blood has the life of the animal in it. You see this in verse 4. For you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is its blood.

This gives us an understanding of why God has given them this rule. We remember earlier that God was going to give his people a comprehensive, sacrificial system to cover every aspect of their lives and especially of their relationship with him.

As we read through Leviticus and Deuteronomy, God lays out these rules. Prohibition of consuming blood is everywhere. And the fact that God gives this rule to Noah all these years before shows us how central this is to God.

But why is this so important to God? Remember we just said it's all about Jesus. Well, he is why this is so important to God.

[13 : 34] All through our look at these chapters in Genesis over the past few weeks, we have constantly seen that the important events point us towards Jesus and this is the same. We have already seen that the shed blood saved the Israelites in Egypt.

Nothing else could save them. A penalty must be paid to save us. In their case, it was the blood of a lamb. In our case, it's the blood of Jesus. The life in the blood is so important because it represents the cost of saving us and it's too important to just be part of our food.

It's way more important than that. It's life and it doesn't come for free. That brings us to the final part of our passage which deals with the covenant that God makes with Noah and his family.

From verses 9 to 17, just 9 verses, the word covenant is found 7 times. As you know, when a word or phrase is repeated like that, it's always an indication of its importance.

If we did a word association game, where I name a person from the Bible and you had to say the first thing that came to mind when you heard them. Maybe if I say Moses, you think of God parting the Red Sea and the people crossing.

[14 : 47] Maybe if I say David, you might think of how God helped him to defeat Goliath. And the first word we'd probably say after hearing the name of Noah is Ark. But think to yourself just now, what would be the second word?

I'm guessing perhaps for most of you in relation to Noah, the second word would be rainbow. God says he's making a covenant between him and Noah and his family and all future generations.

And that he will set his bow or rainbow in the cloud as a reminder and as a promise to never destroy the world by flood again. The rainbow is a sign and a promise.

The promise is not that a rainbow will be seen every day in every cloud so that it becomes ordinary in every day, but that when it is seen, God will remember his covenant.

Not that God could ever forget, but he shows his rainbow to remind us that he has not forgotten. This part of the passage is accommodated to our need for reassurance.

[15 : 50] The obvious glory of the rainbow against the gloom of the cloud seem enough to make it a token of grace, taken in the conjunction of the sun and the storm and mercy and judgment.

And mercy and judgment are important words for us when considering the fulfilment of this covenant in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Because although this covenant of common grace provides stability in creation, it does not solve the problem of sin.

That's clear from the start of our passage where God says the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. He knew that despite all he had done in leading Noah to build the ark, saving his family and all the animals, wiping out all the sinful generations who walked on earth, that one thing was true.

Sin had taken root in the hearts of all people and they would always act according to it. The person who would deal with sin once and for all was coming and he, as we read in Hebrews 8, 6, would mediate a better covenant.

The flood judged sin through water, but judgment fell on Jesus through his blood. The rainbow preserves creation, but the cross redeems it. The temporary cleansing of the world through the flood was perfected by the death of Jesus and his resurrection.

[17 : 10] The hope symbolised by the rainbow is seen in the true hope given to all of us in the resurrection of Jesus and the offer he gives us of a relationship with God and of eternal life.

That is the wonderful promise we take into our day. We, as followers of Jesus, live in the truth that we are reconciled to God and it's the wonderful promise held out to you if you don't yet know Jesus.

Everything you have done can now be seen through the love and mercy and grace of Jesus and the new life in him. And I pray that you will take hold of that outstretched hand.

Let's pray together. Lord God, we thank you for the mercy shown to all of us in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus. Help us to live lives of thankfulness and service as we share your message of love and help us to accept your offer of love and new life so that we can walk in your way.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's continue in our worship by singing our closing hymn and Christ alone my hope is found. Amen.