

God's Two-Part Covenant with Noah

Scripture Readings: Genesis 6:17-19; 9:8-17; 2 Peter 2:5

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Dear Congregation of Christ: In 1983, Roman Catholic Cardinal Bernardin wrote, “We have also opposed the death penalty because we do not think its use cultivates an attitude of respect for life in society... The principle is at the heart of Catholic teaching on abortion; it is because the fetus is judged to be both human and not an aggressor that Catholic teaching concludes that direct attack on fetal life is always wrong.” Then in 1995, Pope John Paul II said, “The direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral.” What is remarkable in the Pope’s statement is he included the word “innocent” in “The direct and voluntary killing of an *innocent* human being...”

Then last Friday, six of the nine Justices of the Supreme Court made one of the boldest decisions in its history. It was courageous because they knew that the reactions of many pro-abortionists might be violent nationwide protests for weeks or even months. It was fearless because these leftists have been illegally protesting in front of their homes for several weeks now.

These two things, abortion and capital punishment, will be a part of today’s meditation on God’s covenant with Noah. The two most well-known narratives about Noah are the great flood and the rainbow after the flood. These two narratives reveal to us God’s two-part covenant with Noah. The great flood reveals to us the first part of God’s covenant with Noah: his special saving grace to Noah and his family through the ark. And the rainbow reveals to us the second part: God’s common grace towards all human beings.

The doctrine of *special grace* as distinct from *common grace* arose out of some of the most frequently asked questions in Christianity: Why is it that even unbelievers enjoy the benefits of God’s providential care? How is it that the earth still produces good harvests and unbelievers still do good works and are gifted in the arts and sciences and even justice, if all creation is now under God’s curse because of sin? These gifts and blessings given by the Holy Spirit to all human beings and to the whole creation encompass what is known as “common grace.” Jesus teaches in simple terms in Matthew 5:45, “For [God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” God gives these gifts even to undeserving, unrepentant sinners.

However, in addition to this common grace, God blesses all his chosen ones with his *special saving grace*. This grace is given by the Holy Spirit to all whom God wants to redeem from their slavery to sin and Satan. God’s grace is his unmerited favor towards undeserving sinners to save them from his wrath. The Apostle Paul defines this special saving grace implicitly in Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (ESV)

So, our theme today is, “**God’s Two-Part Covenant with Noah,**” under two headings.

“But I Will Establish My Covenant With You”: Special Grace

In Noah's days, we read in Genesis 6:1-4 that man fulfilled God's mandate to Adam to “be fruitful and multiply.” However, this population explosion had disastrous effects. Because man is inherently sinful, wickedness also multiplied. The godly line of Seth, the “sons of God,” intermarried with the evil line of Cain, the “daughters of men,” producing “mighty men... of renown.” These mighty men were the ancient celebrities of war.

God grieved that the wickedness of man was so great that *“every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”* (Gen 6:5). He then decreed to destroy all humanity after 120 years (Gen 6:3). But there was one little good news in verse 8, *“But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.”* God remembered his first gospel proclamation in Genesis 3:15 where he promised a Seed from Eve who would crush the head of Satan the ancient serpent. In his mission, however, the Seed who is Jesus the coming Messiah, would suffer a “bruise” on his heel. Note that Noah is the only one whom the LORD favored, but his whole family was saved from the flood.

The LORD then commanded Noah to build an ark to save his family and all the known creatures of the earth at the time. Note that all the creatures brought into the ark were male and female of every kind. Clearly, Adam and Eve, male and female, and every sort of creatures, male and female, were for the purpose of reproduction to multiply and fill the earth again. From creation, therefore, there is no institution of same-sex marriage or union of any creature.

After giving his instructions to Noah for building the ark, God promised him, *“But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you”* (Gen 6:18). Noah alone found favor with God, but God included his whole household in his salvation plan. Therefore, Noah was the head of God's covenant with him. This covenant is a covenant of grace, grace that God gives only to those whom he had chosen from eternity past before he created the heavens and the earth. God's grace given to Noah is special grace, amazing grace that saves sinners who do not deserve anything from God, much less, any grace from God. This was special grace since no one else in the whole world received such grace that Noah received.

In the words of the Canons of Dort I:15, “not all people have been chosen but that some have not been chosen or have been passed by in God's eternal election... to leave them in the common misery into which, by their own fault, they have plunged themselves; not to grant them saving faith and the grace of conversion.” God left the rest of mankind who perished in the flood in their totally depraved sinful condition. He did not grant them his special grace of saving faith.

And how do you know that the Spirit has granted you his special saving grace? Again, God promises, *“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved”* (Rom 10:9-10). Publicly declare your faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior and wholeheartedly believe that he was raised from the dead. This is your assurance that the Spirit has granted you his special saving grace, the first part of God's covenant of grace with Noah. And the

sign of this covenant of grace with Noah is the ark that saved his family, a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ who saves his people from all their sins.

“I Have Set My Bow in the Cloud”: Common Grace

The second part of God's covenant of grace with Noah is expounded by God in Genesis 9 after the floodwaters subsided. Back in the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve a cultural mandate: as husband and wife, to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth; as stewards of creation, they were to have dominion and subdue all creatures; and as God's workers, they were to till and guard the garden. After the flood, God repeated the same cultural mandate to Noah. It was as if God redid his creation.

But there was a significant difference between God's covenants with Adam and Noah. With Adam, God's covenant was a covenant of works. If they disobeyed God's one commandment not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they will die; if they obeyed, they will be given eternal life. However, Adam disobeyed, so his perfect image of God's righteousness and holiness and communion with God was corrupted by sin. Because he was the covenant head of all mankind, his sinful nature is inherited by the whole human race. All mankind has become slaves of sin. This sinful nature then caused his son Cain to murder his brother Abel.

Therefore, because of sin, God's covenant with Noah was of grace. When God promised Noah that he will establish a covenant with him, it was of grace, since he was an undeserving sinner. God saved him from the flood only because he was faithful to God and walked with God as a result of his faith. In this covenant, God made two promises to Noah that included not only Noah and his family, but the whole human race. This is why we say that this is a part of God's common grace.

God's first promise is that he will protect the sanctity of human life. Cain already murdered his brother. Lamech boasted to his two wives that he killed a man in excessive revenge for striking and wounding him. In protecting human life, no one must eat any flesh with blood because blood represents life. Then God declared to Noah, *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image”* (Gen 9:6). This is a clear statement from Holy Scriptures that capital punishment is God's penalty for murder and homicide. The Law of Moses provides example cases of murder and homicide that deserve the death penalty, and manslaughter or unintentional killing that do not deserve the death penalty. However, even after sin, all human beings still carry the image of God, though corrupted and tainted by sin.

Most nations today have eliminated the death penalty even for the most heinous murderers and serial killers. This is not justice. Christians who are against capital punishment argue that only God the Creator of life can take life. They argue that God's law in Genesis 9:6 and in the Law of Moses have been made obsolete by the law of love, mercy and forgiveness in the New Testament. However, God's statement to Noah and the Law of Moses are strengthened by Paul's teaching in Romans 13:4, *“[A governing authority] is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.”* The civil authority imposes capital punishment on murderers because he is the instrument of God's

vengeance and wrath on murderers. In addition, since the penalty for sin is death beginning from Adam, all human beings bear God's death penalty for even a single sin (Rom 6:23).

Many people argue that being pro-capital punishment and anti-abortion is inconsistent. If anti-abortionists protect the sanctity of human life, why do they support the death penalty? But this also is an inconsistent argument. The Bible is clear: abortion is the murder of a human being in the womb. The life in the womb is a human being at conception, not when there's a brain or a heartbeat in 20 days. David says that he was already a sinner at conception (Psa 51:5). He confirms this in Psalm 139:13, "*For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.*" From the moment of conception, God begins his creating work. In Exodus 21:22-25, God protects the unborn child in the case of a pregnant woman being struck accidentally by men who are fighting. In Jeremiah 1:5, God told the prophet, "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you.*" In the New Testament, we read that John the Baptizer in the womb recognized Jesus his Savior in the womb of Mary (Luke 1:39-45). In God's word, abortion is murder. And in human conscience, abortion is murder, because there is always guilt after the deed.

The second promise by God to Noah and all human beings after him is found in Genesis 9:9-17. In this covenant of common grace, God will set a rainbow in the clouds whenever it rains. This is his covenant sign that he will not destroy all human beings and living creatures again by a flood. A pastor-theologian noted that perhaps the rainbow is a bow with an invisible arrow pointing upwards to God himself. Together with his promise is his assurance that he himself would suffer the death penalty if he violated his covenant promise, which of course is impossible. When Jesus the Son of God was pierced on the cross, it was not because God violated his promise to Noah. He was pierced to save his chosen people for violating God's covenant laws.

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, after Noah and his family disembarked from the Ark, they offered burnt offerings to thank and praise God for saving them. Then God declared to him, "*While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease*" (Gen 8:22). God sends rain, snow, good harvest, and seasons of the year. He is the good Providence of all mankind.

However, it is also God alone who determines when the earth shall cease to exist. Man cannot destroy the earth with carbon emissions from oil and gas and belching cows. Only God can and he alone knows the day when his patience will run out on all wicked mankind as in the evil days of Noah. Then, he will punish all evildoers, but not by flood. When that day comes, God will exact vengeance on those who hate him, those who do not repent of their idolatries, murders, sexual immorality, greed and lies. But how will God exact his vengeance? He will purge the earth with fire, not by flood. Only those who are faithful and endure sufferings and persecution to the end will be saved.

But this is not the end of the story. God will not completely destroy the earth and its wicked people. He also promises that he will restore the earth to its pristine and perfect state, a better Garden of Eden, a better paradise restored (Rom 8:21). It will be the new heaven and new earth where God will dwell with his people whom he will restore to his image of perfect righteous and holiness.