

The Noahic Covenant

¹ So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. ² And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move *on* the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand. ³ Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. ⁴ But you shall not eat flesh with its life, *that is*, its blood. ⁵ Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a *reckoning*; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man’s brother I will require the life of man. ⁶ “Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man. ⁷ And as for you, be fruitful and multiply; Bring forth abundantly in the earth And multiply in it.”

⁸ Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: ⁹ “And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that *is* with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth. ¹¹ Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹² And God said: “This *is* the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that *is* with you, for perpetual generations: ¹³ I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. ¹⁴ It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; ¹⁵ and I will remember My covenant which *is* between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that *is* on the earth.” ¹⁷ And God said to Noah, “This *is* the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that *is* on the earth.” (Genesis 9:1–17)

Modern life no longer thinks in terms of covenants; we think in terms of contracts. We sign contracts for employment, for large undertakings. When we accept the Terms and Conditions and sign, we've entered into a contract. Contracts are legal documents with penalties for breaking them.

Covenants are more personal, and in some ways, more binding. One of the only remaining covenants in the world today is marriage. Church membership is considered a covenant.

You cannot understand the big story of the Bible if you do not understand the importance of covenants. The meaning of a covenant, and the meaning of the five major covenants of the Bible really explain how the story of redemption unfolds.

What is a covenant? A covenant is something that existed in Ancient Near-Eastern culture. In that culture, covenants were legal documents that created two things

1. relationship – they established a bond between two or more parties
2. obligation – they defined how the relationship worked between the parties: the responsibilities.

Sometimes a covenant was bilateral: both parties had to do something. Some covenants were unilateral – only one side promised to do certain things. Whenever a covenant was struck, there were usually four components attached to the making of the covenant. First, some kind of sacrifice was made. Second, a meal was often prepared and the ones entering the covenant ate together. Third, some sort of outward sign or token was used that symbolised the covenant and showed that the people were under it. Fourth, an oath or vow was sworn.

The five covenants of the Bible are the Noahic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12), the Mosaic or Israelite Covenant (Exodus 19), the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7), and

the New Covenant (Promised in Jeremiah 31, and then begun at the Cross). In many ways, they show us the big story of Scripture and divide it up.

The Noahic covenant is an unconditional covenant that ushers in a new order of life post-Flood, a time where human government now replaces the chaotic, violent era before the Flood.

The second one, the Abrahamic covenant, introduces the era of the Patriarch, or what Paul calls the era of Promise, where God unconditionally chose Abraham, set him apart, and unilaterally promised him land, descendants and blessing.

Four hundred years later, we have the third covenant: the Mosaic or Israelite covenant made with Israel as a nation. This conditional covenant introduces the economy or dispensation of Law, when God's nation was under the Law.

The fourth covenant is made during the Law, and it is made with David: an unconditional covenant that one of David's descendants will sit on the throne of a worldwide kingdom. It looks forward to the time of the kingdom.

The fifth covenant is the new covenant, also called the eternal covenant. It is promised to Israel, but then invites all nations to become part of God's people through the death and resurrection of Messiah. The new covenant ushers in the time of the church, and extends into the time of the kingdom. It replaces the Mosaic covenant, so it is also conditional. Those five covenants give us, along with the time before and after the fall, seven economies or dispensations through which God has worked with mankind.

Today we consider the first covenant ever mentioned in Scripture. Some theologians talk about a covenant of works that God made with Adam and Eve, but God's commands to Adam and Eve are never called a covenant. This appears to be the first covenant in Scripture. It's a covenant, as we'll see made with all of Noah's descendants, and all living creatures. That means this covenant was made with you, and its promises and provisions still stand.

It affects some very important parts of life: food, human population, the natural world, human government, the death penalty. So this passage describes the new arrangement for mankind after the Flood under this first of the biblical covenants. The text gives us three aspects of this covenant life: covenant life, covenant oath, covenant sign.

I. Covenant Life

In the preamble to the covenant, the first seven verses describe what life is going to be like in this new world. One thing stays the same, and two things change.

First, God reiterates the command to be fruitful and multiply.

¹ So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth

⁷ And as for you, be fruitful and multiply; Bring forth abundantly in the earth And multiply in it."

Just as God commanded Adam, Noah and his descendants are commanded to have many children, to multiply in the earth. To properly tame and steward the world, the children of Shem, Ham, and Japheth will have to multiply to where they can spread to every corner of the world. There is no warning here about overpopulation, about there ending up being too many people in the world. The command is to have many more children. A new world, beginning with just eight individuals needs to multiply quickly.

And that can happen quite quickly. Starting from eight people after the Flood, the population would have to double only 30 times to reach 8.6 billion. Interestingly, this is another argument for a younger earth. If the earth is indeed billions of years old, then with the rates of growth we've seen in the last 4-5000 years, in just 50,000 years, there would have been 332 doublings, and the world's population would be a staggering figure—a one followed by 100 zeros.

The doomsday prophecies that were given about overpopulation are now starting to look sad and foolish. Current projections have the world's population reaching a maximum by 2080 and then beginning to decline from there, because of the low birth rate in so many countries. One report said, "We've already hit peak child – there will never again be more children alive than there are today, with fertility rates plummeting across the globe."

The first aspect of life under the Noahic covenant is the call to populate the world.

Second, there is a change in relationship to animals.

And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move *on* the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand. ³ Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. ⁴

God placed fear into them. Apparently this was not the case before the Flood. Animals perhaps were tamer, or obeyed humans more easily. Now fear is there, partly to balance out the relationship, for now they will also be wild, violent and vicious to each other. If animals had no fear of man, they would quickly have overrun the human population and destroyed it.

But this is also for the animals' preservation. Because now, the eating of animals is permitted. Perhaps this was happening previously, but rebelliously; now God sanctions it. Notice, here there are no restrictions on the kind of animals that can be eaten. The later prohibition of certain kinds of animals belongs to the Mosaic Law, not to the Noahic covenant. While Christians may become vegetarian or vegan for specific health reasons or conditions, no one should despise the eating of meat for religious reasons.

1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, 3 forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. 4 For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; 5 for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. 6 If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed. (1 Timothy 4:1–6)

The only restriction is this: But you shall not eat flesh with its life, *that is*, its blood.

What is meant by this restriction? And is it permanent?

It is interesting that when the Jewish apostles decide whether to ask the Gentile churches to observe the Law or not (with all of its dietary restrictions), they simply say “²⁸ For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: ²⁹ that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and

from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 15:28–29)

Now much of this had to do with enabling Jewish and Gentile Christians to eat at the same table. They were asking Gentile Christians to refuse some of the more extreme Gentile food practices. Now I think the best way of summarising this has to do with the whole animal/human distinction. Humans are now allowed to eat animals, but not the way animals eat animals. How do animals eat animals? They kill and then eat them raw. We see an example of this in 1 Samuel 14.³¹ Now they had driven back the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon. So the people were very faint.³² And the people rushed on the spoil, and took sheep, oxen, and calves, and slaughtered *them* on the ground; and the people ate *them* with the blood.³³ Then they told Saul, saying, “Look, the people are sinning against the LORD by eating with the blood!” (1 Samuel 14:31–33). Some pagan cultures would kill animals and then immediately eat some of the heart raw or drink some of its blood to supposedly absorb its life-force. Another way animals eat other animals is to tear off limbs. Matthew Henry comments, “That they must not be barbarous and cruel to the inferior creatures. They must be lords, but not tyrants; they might kill them for their profit, but not torment them for their pleasure, nor tear away the member of a creature while it was yet alive, and eat that.”

All of this the Noahic covenant forbids. It says: you may eat animals, but not as if you are an animal. You are an image bearer. So kill animals humanely, prepare the meat to be eaten.

The ceremonial aspect of blood needing to be poured out belonged to the Law, and being fulfilled in Christ, that aspect no longer pertains. In reality, most modern meat contains almost no blood; the red liquid on your medium-rare steak is not blood, it's myoglobin, a protein that is responsible for the colour of meat.

What is forbidden is drinking blood for ceremony, devouring raw animal flesh after killing it, in the manner of a predator, or eating a creature while still alive.

This is all a change in the relationship to animals.

Third, capital punishment for murder is instituted. Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a *reckoning*; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man.⁶ “Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.

Now God is clearly not endorsing or legitimising personal revenge, or blood feuds between families, clans, or tribes. Instead, God is setting up a lawful form of justice in the world. The basis is that man is made in God's image. Man has inherent dignity, and is a miniature effigy of the Creator everywhere he goes. To murder one of these is to spite the image of God; it is like vandalising a sculpture of God. If an animal kills a human, the animal is to be destroyed. If a human murders (not just kills) but murders another, he is in debt to God. God will require from the fraternity of man, from every man's brother, the life of the murderer.

In saying *from every man's brother*, God is showing that the death of the murderer is to be done by the organised society, the fraternity of mankind, who must agree to put to death the murderer. In contrast to the time just after the Fall, when people were led by nothing other than their conscience, now God sets up the right for mankind to organise law and order, mankind can corporately execute justice. In other words, God legitimises human government.

Martin Luther said of this verse: “Here the right to punish is established. It is not God who Himself always punishes the murderer; rather, He commits this function to the magistrate.” Luther goes on, “If God concedes to man the power over life and death, assuredly this carries with it the authority over that which is less than life, such as goods, family, wife, children, servants and land.”

But doesn't capital punishment pass away with the new covenant? Some argue that capital punishment is unchristian because it ignores God's forgiveness through Christ's death. This objection is evidence of a misunderstanding of grace and forgiveness. Forgiveness does remove the divine penalty of sin, but not always the consequences of sin and its legal and civil penalties. God may forgive a drunk driver for his sin, but He won't necessarily give him back his driver's license or heal an injury that resulted from his drunkenness. Thus God may forgive a murderer (as He did in David's case), but the natural consequences of the sin remain (as they also did in that case).

“Capital punishment is barbaric, inhumane, and has no place in civilized society. We should be more interested in rehabilitation than in vengeance.”

That kind of statement is simply a rejection of biblical morality and justice. The person who committed the crime was barbarous, not the justice system that makes the criminal pay for his crime. In fact, the death of the criminal is good for society. While experts disagree, studies show that capital punishment is a deterrent to some criminals. If nothing else, at least the criminal won't commit any more crimes. Also, modern methods of execution, such as lethal injection, are a humane means of taking a life. Capital punishment implies a very high regard for innocent human life. Man is so valuable as an individual that anyone who tampers with his sacred right to live must face the consequences of losing his own life.

I should mention here the false teaching that non-Jews only have to obey the seven laws of Noah to go to heaven. This is a rabbinic teaching from the Babylonian Talmud, which claims that Gentiles must observe these seven: Do not worship idols, Do not curse God, Do not murder, Do not commit sexual immorality (e.g., incest, adultery), Do not steal, Do not eat flesh torn from a living animal, Establish courts of justice. But of course, you cannot extract those seven from the passage we're in. And the Bible is clear, only those declared righteous by God can enter His kingdom. And He declares righteous those who trust in Him.

Genesis 9 is the new arrangement of life under the Noahic covenant: the continued command to be fruitful, a new command regarding animals as food, and a new command regarding justice for murder.

This brings us to the actual covenant and the oath that is made.

II. Covenant Oath

¹¹ Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.

¹⁵ and I will remember My covenant which *is* between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

God's undertaking: He will never again flood the entire earth, and thereby destroy all living land creatures. Until the very end of history, this earth may experience many catastrophes and

devastating natural disasters, but there will never again be the global catastrophe of a universal flood that wipes out everything.

Why does God make this promise? It seems to be an act of pure kindness. It is a promise that God will not only hold back the judgement of a global flood, but He will also restrain the evil of men and angels enough that a second Flood is never needed. Perhaps here is even a veiled prediction of the coming of Messiah. The reason why evil will never again reach those levels is because of the coming of a Saviour who will always have a people on the earth. And just as God promised not to destroy Sodom if there were at least 10 righteous in the city, so God will never again destroy the whole earth if some of the righteous still dwell on it.

Of course, this promise makes it very hard to hold the idea that the flood was merely a local flood, restricted to a small section of the Middle East. If the flood was local, then God has broken this covenant again and again, because there have been many, many local floods in history. Yes, there have been no floods that wiped out the whole earth's population, but I think that concedes the point – you need a global flood to wipe out a global population.

I mentioned at the beginning that every covenant tended to have some or all of four elements. The most essential is the oath, as we've just seen. Usually there was sacrifice and a meal. There was a sacrifice in chapter 8:20; quite possibly Noah's family ate a meal here too.

But then comes the sign or token of the covenant. The sign or token of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision. The sign of the Mosaic covenant was Sabbath keeping. The sign of the Davidic covenant was the resurrection. The sign of the new covenant is the Lord's Supper. And now God announces the sign of the Noahic covenant.

III. Covenant Sign

And God said: “This *is* the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that *is* with you, for perpetual generations: ¹³ I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. ¹⁴ It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; ¹⁵ and I will remember My covenant which *is* between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that *is* on the earth.” ¹⁷ And God said to Noah, “This *is* the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that *is* on the earth.”

The sign of the covenant is the rainbow. The fact that God announces this as the sign suggests that something changed in the atmospheric conditions of the earth where rainbows were not present before the flood. We also know that there had been no rain on the earth until the flood, so it appears there had not been water droplets in the atmosphere. But now there is a new hydrological cycle in place and the rainbow appears. Fittingly it appears before or after rainstorms, reminding us that however hard or destructive the rain, it will never again be used to wipe out the world. God will restrain evil, and reserve judgement, and send the Saviour.

Why does God say, “I will remember when I see the rainbow”? Does God need reminding? Clearly, it does not mean that God sees as we see. Indeed, a rainbow will only be seen by some people at some angles. You could say that God sees all rainbows all the time from all points. Instead, the idea is in verse 14, “when the rainbow shall be seen” (by humans), that

God's commitment to this covenant will be remembered by us, and come up to God as thanksgivings and prayers.

But consider how Satan has corrupted and counterfeited this covenant sign.

But the rainbow is a glorious symbol of the Noahic covenant. It is also mentioned multiple times in connection with the throne of God in Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4, and with the angel in Revelation 10. The glory of God appears like a rainbow.

So Christians would do well to reclaim the rainbow. Don't allow a counterfeit to destroy what is original with God, and is His beautiful creation with beautiful meaning.

We now live in this post-Flood world. God says to all of Noah's descendants: Fill the world, steward the animals well, protect human life through human government. And the glorious sign of Noahic covenant, the rainbow reminds us, this world will never perish again under water, because God is a gracious, saving God.