

Genesis 9:17-28

An Established Covenant

Introduction

In this text, God tells Noah about a covenant that He, God, is making, a contract God makes with us upon penalty of death, not again to destroy all flesh by a flood. And in this text, two main things come out: God's covenant is as strong as His own strength, and God's covenant is as stable as His own faithfulness.

As Strong As His Strength

There are at least four ways in which God communicates in vv8-11 that this covenant is as strong as His strength.

First, our text literally begins, "And I, behold I" to emphasize that this is something God is taking upon Himself; this falls upon Him, and the force with which it is done is limited only by the strength of God. Think about what this would have meant to Noah, fresh from the ark. Could you doubt the strength of God after the flood—a flood so great that so-called scholars at even supposedly conservative seminaries doubt that it actually happened?!

This is exactly what God wants us to think, because this is the same construction that began 6:17, and there He tied the certainty of His purpose and strength to perform the flood to the certainty of His purpose and strength to establish the covenant.

Second, to drive the message home that much further, He calls it *My* covenant—not a covenant between Me and you, but *My* covenant with you. There is a subtle difference; this covenant is not co-owned by us and God. It stands upon God and is made with us. How strong is this covenant? It belongs completely to God.

Third, God identifies Himself both as the maker and keeper of this covenant. You cannot see it in the English, but v9 and v11 actually begin a little differently from each other. v9 uses a verb form that means, "I *am causing* to stand My covenant." v11 uses a verb form that means, "I *cause* to stand My covenant."

The slight shift in the meaning is that in v9 God initiates this contractual relationship, making it to stand for the first time, and in v11 He is declaring that He continues to make it to stand, sustaining it into the future.

Fourth, the construction behind the first "never again" in v11 in the English, there is a particularly strong Hebrew construction with the absolute negative "Not!" [I will cut off] "All" [flesh]. When this "not" is tied to this "all" in Hebrew, it is expressing an absolute prohibition and impossibility

Also, it is probably noteworthy that although the word *covenant* has only appeared once so far in Genesis—in chapter 6's prediction of this evening's text—now it appears seven times in this text, a number of divine completeness.

God's repetitive introduction of "I, behold I"; God's referring to it as "*My* covenant"; God's saying that He will both start it standing and keep it standing; and this extremely strong form of "never again" in the first half of v11 all say this to you this evening: the covenant that God is making here is as strong as God's own infinite strength!

And how important is that for you, dear believer, who are marked by your rather impressive *weakness*? Oh we cannot by force of will change our natures, our souls a single particle, and even if we could, how could we even begin to stay the tide of the just and fierce wrath of God? How impotent we are! Like a child on Galveston beach attempting to hold back the hurricane of the wrath of God by extending our arms. And so if we are spiritually impotent, what good news this is: God's gracious commitments toward His people rely completely, completely, completely, completely upon His strength, not ours!

When you realize the peril of your sin and cry out, "who will save me from the body of this death?," remember that God's covenant commitments are as strong as His strength and declare, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord!" Only His mighty arm and strong hand can stay His own wrath.

As Stable As His Faithfulness

In the second place this evening, we learn that God's gracious commitments toward His people are as stable as His faithfulness.

In v12, God calls the rainbow a sign, a visible object that shows a spiritual reality.

Before the flood, there were no rain clouds, and therefore no bows in rain clouds. Now, there will most certainly be rain clouds. In v14, the word for "bringing clouds" is almost the same word as the clouds that are being brought. When the Hebrew says, "I will

cloud you with clouds,” the effect is to express an absolute certainty: I will surely bring rainclouds on you. But just as surely, the bow will be seen in them—the sign that God has made this covenant.

Think again about what it would have been like for Noah the first time the clouds began to gather after he got off the ark. There had never been clouds before the flood. “Is this one to destroy me? I have been so unfaithful!” He might have lived in constant fear that God was now justly judging him. But God will not have His people to live in such fear.

Perhaps you are a believer who has committed some sin or even have some sinful habit, and you live in constant fear of it being found out. Perhaps you even have this idea that God intends to punish you for it eventually. You wouldn’t think that out loud, but you fear it. Every time the storm clouds of your life begin to gather, you think, “Oh no! Here it is! God is finally giving me what I deserve.”

Now, secret sin is a great cancer to the soul, and it grows stronger and more aggressive the longer it is secret. Quite often, God mercifully finds us out to others for the purpose of excising the cancer as He prepares us for glory. BUT we must never permit the subtle fear of our hearts that God intends to punish us. There is therefore now NO condemnation—none, not at the judgment, not now, not ever—NO condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

So God knows that Noah will be thinking this every time he sees a cloud for the rest of his life, and God stoops to the fickle, weak, doubting character of His servant and puts a sign in the very clouds that otherwise would have brought fear.

Again, the verbs pile up to remind us that though Noah may be fickle, God is not. Just as God makes the covenant, God sets the bow, God remembers, God sees the bow, God remembers. Seeing is an anthropomorphism—God doesn’t have eyeballs. Remembering is an anthropopathism—God cannot forget. And that’s exactly the point. It doesn’t rest upon human eyeballs and human faithfulness. It rests upon the infinite, eternal, unchangeable goodness and mercy of God.

And so when Christians come to days when you cannot see the bow, He sees it! And when Christians come to moments—how treacherous we are in our love to God—when they are not acting in covenant toward God, God is yet remembering and acting in covenant toward them. The sign, after all is not for God. He doesn’t need the rainbow.

And He doesn’t need the supper. And He doesn’t need baptism. They’re for us. They tell us that God’s covenant with us is as stable as His faithfulness.

Conclusion: Covenant in Christ

But though God is strong and faithful and will not again in this universe destroy all living creatures, that’s not so much a concern to us who remember from this morning that this entire age is but a breath. As brief as Carlos’s 7 year long life, or my unborn child’s few weeks in the womb, would seem to us now, so brief will this entire age have seemed in eternity! What God commits Himself to in Genesis 9 is nice in itself. I’m sure the birds and the animals appreciate being included in this covenant with Noah as mediator. And even for us, the Noahic covenant is nice when people in Europe are building 17 mile particle colliders; but, it becomes absolutely wonderful when we realize that it is a shadow, a foretaste of a better covenant to come, a covenant as strong as He is that will cover us on the judgment day, a covenant as stable as His faithfulness that will endure beyond even the second death!

Even when these foreshadowings seem obvious from the text, we should be careful—many have made errors by drawing parallels that are not there. But, as the children told us this morning in catechism class, God is His own best interpreter. Turn to Isaiah 53-54 (read them). Listen again to Isaiah 54:9-10 “This is like the days of Noah to me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you.”

I hope you weren’t overly impressed by all that Hebrew. It’s really quite easy to interpret a text if in Isaiah 54 God has told you, “the primary meaning of this passage is how strong and stable this promise is.” And when we read Isaiah 53 and 54, we find that our Genesis 9 text this evening applies to us by teaching us the power of God and faithfulness of God upon which lie our forgiveness, reconciliation, love, and peace... and that these are bought for us—Isaiah 53—with the precious blood of Jesus. In Jesus, the promises of God all find their YES. In Him, we are able to say “Amen” to promises that go beyond death, beyond judgment, forever.