

Chapter 10: Covenant of Preservation

Genesis 8:20–9:17

Graciously, God deals faithfully with Noah, Noah’s family, and all the animals on the ark to bring them through the judgment of the Flood to dry ground. Still, the Flood sets a frightening precedent. What happens the next time a storm rolls over the earth? Do human beings need to keep an ark at the ready for extreme storms on the chance that God may again wipe out the earth? Will the human race advance in fits and starts, expanding for a time only to be decimated the next time their iniquity rises to a certain point? Also, what exactly is the minimum requirements for avoiding annihilation that God expects from the world? As human societies grow, what should their cultures and laws look like?

These are all real questions that linger after the Flood. If God simply dismisses Noah, his family, and the animals to start new lives without any further guidance, then it will only be a matter of time before God sends another Flood. Instead, God *promises* that he will never again send another Flood to destroy the world. Additionally, God goes a step further by swearing a *covenant* with all creation as a confirmation of his faithfulness to that promise. From the outset, we should understand something very important about this covenant: its terms are still in effect to this day. This text has perpetual relevance for our understanding of God’s ongoing relationship to creation, as well as understanding God’s requirements for societies in the world.

The Sacrifices for Atonement (Gen. 8:20–22)

After Noah and his family disembark from the ark, Noah builds an altar and then takes “some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird” to offer as burnt offerings on the altar (Gen. 8:20). We have nothing in the text of Genesis up to this point to explain to us the purpose of burnt offerings. Still, it is helpful to remember that Moses compiled, wrote, organized, and edited the whole Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy). So, the later law of Moses can help us to interpret what is not explained fully in the text of Genesis, including the law about burnt offerings.¹

The Law of Burnt Offerings

In this light, we find that burnt offerings are the regular sacrifices for atonement that God commanded his people of God to offer. The worshiper transfers his sins by laying his hand on the head of the animal given for the burnt offering. By this act, the animal is accepted to make atonement for him (Lev. 1:4). This atoning sacrifice appeases God’s wrath against the worshiper’s sin (propitiation) and cleanses the worshiper’s sin (expiation). In the sacrifice, the fire of the altar entirely consumes the burnt offering, which indicates the worshiper’s complete dedication to Yahweh, and Yahweh’s complete acceptance of the worshiper.²

Furthermore, the burnt offering provides a “pleasing aroma to Yahweh” (Lev. 1:9, 13, 17). This

same phrase appears in Genesis 8:21; however, Genesis 8:21 is the only place in the Bible where we read that Yahweh actually “smells” a sacrifice.³ The language is anthropomorphic, written as though Yahweh were a human being. So, we do not learn something about Yahweh’s literal olfactory senses, but rather about Yahweh’s *attitude* toward the sacrifice.⁴ Saying that Yahweh smells the “pleasing aroma” of the sacrifice means something far more theologically significant than to enjoy the aroma of a good barbecue. As Kenneth Mathews points out, the phrase “pleasing aroma” (*rēaḥ hannîḥōaḥ*) is closely related to the word “rest” (*nūaḥ*), which also has close similarities to Noah’s own name (*nōaḥ*). Mathews writes:

Through the “soothing” offering (*nîḥōaḥ*), God is brought to “rest” (*nūaḥ*) by “Noah” (*nōaḥ*). Thus by “Noah” (*nōaḥ*) the divine “grief/regret” (*nḥm*) over human creation (6:6) and his decision to “wipe out” (*mḥh*; 6:7) all humanity is transformed into his “compassion” (*nḥm*) for postdiluvian humanity.⁵

These same verbal correlations were in the speech of Noah’s father Lamech back in Genesis 5:29: “Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed, this one shall bring us relief (*nḥm*) from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.” As Yahweh accepts Noah’s sacrifice, Lamech’s prophecy finds its fulfillment.

Pledge of Preservation

In response to the pleasing aroma of the sacrifice, Yahweh says 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. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (Gen. 8:21–22). We should note the two paradoxical elements of Yahweh’s statement: (1) Yahweh pledges that he will never again curse the ground or strike every living creature for as long as the earth remains, and (2) Yahweh acknowledges that “the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” This is odd, since the thorough corruption of mankind was the entire motivation for sending the Flood in the first place: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). If Yahweh now cites the perpetual evil of humankind as he swears never to destroy the world again, then why did Yahweh need to send the Flood at all?

First, the Flood serves as an righteous act of judgment against severe wickedness on the earth. We cannot think that Yahweh overreacted by sending the Flood, so that he now recognizes his mistake. This passage underscores Yahweh’s long-suffering, patient grace moving forward. Yahweh is not pledging to work harder to avoid losing his temper, as though he had acted irrationally; here, he promises to withhold the judgment that all of humanity *continues* to deserve. Yahweh is just and righteous to judge, but he now graciously promises to be merciful to refrain from judgment for as long as the earth remains.

Second, the sacrifice that Noah offers helps us to understand that the problem of sin will not find a quick solution. While the Flood may have wiped away the wickedness that existed in the days leading up to it, sin will continue in every subsequent generation of humanity. Preserving the human race will require Yahweh’s ongoing mercy toward his creatures in spite of their wickedness.

Yahweh promised in Genesis 3:15 that humankind's final redemption for sin will come when the offspring of the woman will bruise the head of the serpent. In the meantime, Yahweh must appoint methods for human beings to seek provisional atonement as they look forward in faith to the ultimate fulfillment of Yahweh's promise. Even so, in order to accomplish this promise to *redeem* his people, Yahweh now makes a promise to *preserve* them.

Third, the Flood offers a typological shadow of the judgment that will come again some day. While God promises that he will never again destroy the world with the waters of the Flood (Gen. 9:11) for as long as the earth remains (Gen. 8:22), the rest of the Scriptures testify that the earth will not always remain. Judgment will not come in the form of water, but judgment must nevertheless come. Wickedness will *not* tarnish God's creation forever. One day, Jesus Christ will return to judge the living and the dead, bringing a baptism of fire (Matt. 3:11) that will consume the heavenly bodies to purify them for the rest of eternity (2 Pet. 3:1–13).

Noah as Mediator

Noah's sacrifice, however, has broader implications that we will see in the next section of this passage. As Noah offers this sacrifice, he does so as the representative head of all humanity. Noah alone found grace in the eyes of Yahweh (Gen. 6:8), and Yahweh saves Noah's family only because of their connection to Noah. Noah therefore becomes the *spiritual* head of the new human race. Furthermore, Noah also becomes the *biological* head of the new human race, since only Noah's sons and their wives remain to repopulate the planet. After the Flood, Noah becomes the new father of all humankind, similar to Adam in many respects.

Therefore, Noah offers this sacrifice not only for himself, but for all subsequent generations that will descend from him throughout all ages. He acts as a priest to mediate between Yahweh and all humankind from that point onward. Because Noah found grace in the eyes of Yahweh, Yahweh graciously continues to accept Noah's sacrifice all the way to the present day.⁶ This does not mean that Noah has secured perpetual forgiveness of sins. Instead, this means that Yahweh has graciously accepted Noah's priestly mediation in such a way that we do not have to fear God's wrath each time storm clouds form in the sky. Of course, what Noah does is only provisional. By offering this sacrifice, Noah anticipates the eternal, once-for-all sacrifice that Jesus Christ offered in our place. In his death, Christ not only atoned for the sins of the world, but he also justified the mercy of God's divine forbearance in passing over humanity's sins until the day of judgment (Rom. 3:25).

Still, Noah does more than simply to act as a priest by offering a sacrifice. Noah also mediates a long-term agreement with God, which God calls a "covenant."⁷ Certainly, Noah does not secure this covenant because of his own righteousness, or even his negotiating skills on behalf of the human race. God unilaterally declared to Noah his intentions to establish a covenant after destroying the world with a Flood (Gen. 6:18). Even now, and up through the entire narrative of the establishment of the covenant, Noah does not say a word. Nevertheless, Noah serves an important function as the mediator of this covenant. Yahweh not only chooses to establish this covenant, but he chooses to do so through Noah, beginning by accepting Noah's sacrifice.

The Sanctity of Human Life (Gen. 9:1–7)

The actual language of "covenant" does not appear until Genesis 9:8. Nevertheless, the section of

Genesis 9:1–7 clearly serves as a list of covenantal obligations that correspond to the extensive covenant promises that God will make in Genesis 9:8–17. In Genesis 9:1–7, God orders and regulates his creation in light of the fact that “the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen. 8:21). The world after the Flood is a new creation, and the disembarking of all the animals in Genesis 8:16–19 corresponds to the *filling* of creation in Genesis 1. In the same way, Genesis 9:1–7 corresponds to the *forming* of creational order from Genesis 1.

Essentially, God restates, modifies, and even *replaces* the creational ordinances from Genesis 1:26–29 here in Genesis 9:1–7. This point is extremely important for understanding the significance of the covenant that God makes here with Noah. The human race no longer lives under the original creational ordinances that God gave *Adam*, but under the restated stipulations and promises of the covenant that God makes with *Noah*. In this way, God preserves many of his original intentions for creation, while also modifying them to accommodate the reality of sin in the world. This new template gives us a pattern for life that extends throughout all generations, for as long as the earth remains.

God’s Blessing

To see how this works, notice first that the language shifts from speaking about “Yahweh” (Gen. 8:20–21) to speaking about “God” (Gen. 9:1, 6, 8, 12, 16, 17). *God* was the title used in Genesis 1 to describe the universal relationship between the Creator and all his creation, in contrast to the particular relationship between *Yahweh God* and his covenant people that we saw in the zoomed-in creation story of Genesis 2. Accordingly, Genesis 9 follows the pattern established by the creation story of Genesis 1. So, just as God blessed the man and the woman, telling them to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28), God now blesses Noah and his sons, telling them to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1). God repeats this word of blessing again in Genesis 9:7, saying, “And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it.” Even though God destroyed all humanity apart from this remnant, God still intends on seeing the earth populated with his image-bearers, since “God made man in his own image” (Gen. 9:6). Noah’s sons and their wives will begin the process of multiplying to fill the whole earth, and we will read more about their descendants in Genesis 10.

The Fear and Dread of Animals

While there is continuity with the original creation story, there is also discontinuity. Originally, God instructed the man and the woman to “subdue it [the earth] and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). Here, God says something slightly different to Noah and his sons: “The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, and upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered” (Gen. 9:2). This new language is military terminology that likely reflects “the animosity between man and the animal world that followed the fall (3:15).”⁸ While the original creational ordinance described a dignified co-existence of human beings with animals. The animals joyfully obeyed humans, and the humans exercised benevolent dominion over the animals. This new reality, however, will be much more strained.

Still, God also promises to keep animals away from humans through fear. In Genesis 6:12, we

read that “all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth,” and the phrase “all flesh” included animals (e.g., Gen. 6:19). This suggested that animals were beginning to rebel against their human rulers through violence. This new provision in the Noachian covenant addresses that corruption of animals by instilling fear and dread upon animals to protect human beings from them generally.⁹ John Calvin rightfully describes this promise as a “secret bridle” upon animals:

Savage beasts indeed prevail and rage against men in various ways, and no wonder; for since we perversely exalt ourselves against God, why should not the beasts rise up against us? Nevertheless, the providence of God is a secret bridle to restrain their violence. For, whence does it arise that serpents spare us, unless because he represses their virulence? Whence is it that tigers, elephants, lions, bears, wolves, and other wild beasts without number, do not rend, tear, and devour everything human, except that they are withheld by this subjection, as by a barrier? Therefore, it ought to be referred to the special protection and guardianship of God, that we remain in safety.¹⁰

This is not a mandate for humans to go out of their way to incite fear and dread in animals. Rather, this is a provision of protection. In some ways, this language is similar to the oracle of judgment to the woman in Genesis 3:16. While the oracle of judgment acknowledged the tragic reality of creation under the curse, God was not directing wives to dominate their husbands, nor was he instructing husbands to rule harshly over their wives. In the same way, the Noachian covenant recognizes that our relationship with animals is fractured; God is not telling us to behave cruelly toward animals.

Animals for Food

God continues, giving more information about the change in the relationship between humans and animals: “Into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything” (Gen. 9:2b–3). Here, God directly restates the former terms of the creational ordinance when he gave human beings “every green plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food” (Gen. 1:29). This time, however, in addition to the green plants, God now gives humankind “everything” for food, which includes the meat of animals. Giving animals to humans to eat is a stark departure from the original vegetarian food of the garden of Eden. Still, God adds one major restriction to this new freedom: “But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (Gen. 9:4). In the law of Moses, this prohibition is repeated and expanded, but with essentially the same idea: “Only be sure that you do not eat the blood, for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh” (Deut. 12:23). What exactly does this mean, and why was this so important?

To start, we should recognize that some ancient peoples deliberately ate animal blood in an attempt to ingest the life force of the animal. While God freely provides animals to his people for food, he does not give the animals for his people’s conquest and domination. Food has been a preoccupation of Genesis up to this point (Gen. 1:28–29; 2:16–17; 3:1–19, 22; 4:12; 6:21), and this new permission should be read in light of that context. So, while the nature of the relationship between humans and animals is now changing, God is only giving animals to humans for food; their

lifeblood still belongs to God.

Some have suggested that this prohibition only prevents eating living “animal flesh with the blood still pulsating through it,” but this interpretation is probably too narrow, since “numerous passages [insist] that blood should be drained out of the animals before they can be eaten (Lev 3:17; 7:26–27; 19:26; Deut 12:16–24; 1 Sam 14:32–34).”¹¹ On the other hand, it is probably too strict to view this prohibition in absolute terms that would forbid you from eating your steak cooked rare. As Walton writes, “The prohibition does not require that no blood at all be consumed, but only that the blood must be drained. Ritually speaking, the draining of the blood before eating the meat was a way of returning the life force of the animal to God who gave it life.”¹² The emphasis in the Old Testament prohibitions falls on draining the blood in deference to the life of the animal, which belongs to God; suggesting instead that this provision forbids any blood from slipping through the cracks is probably too rigorous.¹³ Modern butchers drain the blood before you get meat from the grocery store, already fulfilling these covenantal obligations. Unless you slaughter your own meat, you probably do not need to do more.

And yet, this passage also demands that we take time to think through the ethics of how we interact with animals. In our society, deliberately eating the lifeblood of animals probably is not something that you have ever been genuinely tempted to do. Still, we encounter all kinds of opportunities to act in either cruel or kind ways toward animals, even though Genesis 9 acknowledges that sin has distorted the full goodness of our relationships with animals. God rejects the idea that animals have the same dignity as human beings; however, God partially defines the dignity of human beings in terms of how we treat animals.

The Dignity of Human Life

The larger principle underneath the stipulations of the Noachic covenant, then, protects the lives of human beings above all, since “God made man in his own image” (Gen. 9:6). While we may have worried that the image of God was entirely destroyed in human beings because of the Fall, God reasserts twice that his image continues in human beings. The first reassertion came in Genesis 5:1–3, when God makes Adam in his own likeness, and then Adam (in turn) fathers a son in *his* own likeness—that is, in the likeness of God. The second reassertion comes here in Genesis 9:6 as God explains the unique value of human beings as creatures made in the image of God. We may have lost the full purity of God’s image at the Fall, but that image endures nonetheless to exalt the human being above all the rest of God’s creation.

Because of this, God sets a protective boundary around the “lifeblood” of human beings: “And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man” (Gen. 9:5). Surprisingly, the first stipulation is that animals should be held accountable for shedding the lifeblood of a human being.¹⁴ Not only does God place a general sense of dread (the “secret bridle”) upon the animal kingdom to keep them from harming humans, but God also demands (“I will require it”) that animals be put to death if they transgress that boundary. Accordingly, the law of Moses will later mandate that any ox who gores a human being to death must itself be put to death by stoning, and its flesh must not be eaten (Ex. 21:28–32).¹⁵

This principle also applies to a human being who would shed the lifeblood of a fellow human being through murder. In such cases, God “will require a reckoning...from man. From his fellow

man I will require a reckoning for the life of man” (Gen. 9:5). To clarify, God mandates the use of capital punishment in cases of murder, adding, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” (Gen. 9:6). God specifically appoints other human beings as the agents of putting a murderer to death (“by man shall his blood be shed”). Obviously, this is an important and complicated subject in today’s society. If the stipulations of the Noachian covenant continue in effect today, does this mean that God mandates the use of capital punishment in modern societies? The answer is a bit more complicated than it might appear at first glance, so let’s work through the principles of what we read here.

Death Penalty in the Bible

First, we must wrestle with the question of *why* God mandates capital punishment here. God says nothing about using the threat of capital punishment as a deterrent to murder, or for the family’s ability to gain retribution for the crime. If we would advocate *for* capital punishment in our society, we have no biblical mandate to use such arguments either. Instead, God’s stated purpose for capital punishment is for the sake of *honoring* human life, since human beings are created in the image of God. Thus, capital punishment is not mandated for the sake of *preventing* the crime or of *paying* for the crime, but to acknowledge as a human society the grave depravity of murdering another human being. In other words, God mandates capital punishment not for the sake of the murderer or the victim or the family, but for the sake of upholding the value of human life in the world. Therefore, if we would advocate *against* capital punishment in our society, we cannot say that capital punishment diminishes the value of human life through executing a murderer. Such an argument cuts directly against God’s own stated rationale for capital punishment as a means of exalting the value of human life.

Second, we need to distinguish between the reasons for capital punishment in the Noachian covenant, versus the reasons for capital punishment in the Mosaic law. The Noachian covenant is a universal covenant with all flesh, whereas the civil laws of the Mosaic law were given to the old covenant people of Israel alone. Therefore, the Mosaic law prescribed capital punishment for a variety of crimes, including striking one’s father or mother (Ex. 21:15), kidnapping (Ex. 21:16), cursing one’s father or mother (Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9), sexual immorality (Ex. 22:12; Lev. 20:10–16; Deut. 22:13–27), and acting as a medium or necromancer (Lev. 20:27). While God’s law through Moses is just and holy and without fault, the New Testament teaches that Christ has fulfilled the civil and the ceremonial law, so that we do not need to continue these civil regulations in order to remain in covenant with God any more than we need to continue the old covenant sacrificial system.¹⁶

The Noachian covenant, on the other hand, precedes the Mosaic law. Furthermore, the Noachian covenant continues in effect for as long as the earth remains. So, Jesus intervened to prevent the execution of a woman caught in adultery in John 8 (mandated by the law of Moses; Deut. 22:22), but we never see Jesus intervening to prevent the execution of a murderer. Just as the rainbow continues to be the sign demonstrating that God will not destroy the world again with a flood (Gen. 9:12–17), so the law for capital punishment against murderers continues to regulate how societies ought to work.

Third, we must never pit the “love of Jesus” against the “wrath of the God of the Old Testament” in an attempt to say that Christ’s example of mercy overturns the requirement of capital punishment for murder. At best, such an argument is a misunderstanding of the life and ministry of Jesus, who

insisted that he came first to serve, but that he will come again to judge in wrath (e.g., Matt. 24). Such an argument also mischaracterizes the character of the God revealed in the Old Testament, who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6). In fact, the greatest act of God’s wrath is recorded for us not in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament, when Jesus Christ endured the full force of the wrath of God against sin on the cross out of love for his people. At worst, such an argument falls into the ancient heresy of Marcionism, named after a man named Marcion who taught that the God of the Old Testament was a different God from the God of the New Testament. In this case, we dare not suggest that the New Testament Jesus is a different god from the god who speaks in Genesis 9. Instead, we must affirm that the God who commanded that murderers be put to death in Genesis 9 is the same God who became incarnate and endured capital punishment himself at the cross.

Death Penalty in Modern Society

Still, capital punishment in modern society is not a straightforwardly obvious issue. The application of capital punishment for murders in America is profoundly inconsistent, with some of the most horrific inconsistencies happening along racial lines. In one study analyzing the application of the death penalty from 1976 to 2003, the number of black and white murder victims were roughly even; however, 80% of those who received the death penalty had murdered a white victim, while only 13% had been convicted of murdering a black victim.¹⁷ Another study analyzing the application of the death penalty in the state of Washington discovered that juries are three times more likely to impose the death penalty when the defendant is black than in similar cases involving a white defendant.¹⁸ At an institutional level, our society has enshrined the worth of white murder victims above the worth of black murder victims. Additionally, our society more frequently allows white people to escape the full consequences of a murder than black people. In both of these directions, we demean the value of the image of God in black people. Let us be absolutely clear: *this is an abomination in the sight of God*. Far from *upholding* the value of the image of God in all people, the death penalty in its current application unfaithfully testifies to the value of the image of God in all people of all races. It is a serious question for Christians to consider whether this system of injustice actually undermines rather than establishes what God intends in Genesis 9:6.

Furthermore, our judicial system does not have the same level of evidential requirements for applying the death penalty required in the Old Testament. In the Mosaic law, a murder conviction would automatically trigger the death penalty, but a conviction required two or three eyewitnesses, and the law explicitly rejected murder convictions in cases that only had a single witness (Deut. 17:6, 19:15). Although the American justice system is strong in many respects, murder convictions do not require the Bible’s high threshold for evidence. More than that, the Mosaic law considered false witness in a death penalty crime as the equivalent of attempted murder. Therefore, anyone found to be giving false witness in a murder case was put to death: “you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst” (Deut. 19:19). The American justice system, on the other hand, does not mandate the death penalty for perjury in a murder case. Finally, the death penalty is often something bartered and brokered in the American legal process. So, murderers might avoid the death penalty by cooperation in the trial or providing testimony against other criminals. In such cases, the high value of the image of God is ignored in favor of judicial expediency.

This is why the question of capital punishment is so complicated in American society. My intention in laying all of this information out is not to bind your conscience about a precise course of policy for today, but to help you to think Christianly about the many factors involved in setting a just policy. God continues to give the sword to the state as an avenger of God’s wrath against evildoers (Rom. 13:4), but there are deep injustices built into the American justice system that we must prayerfully evaluate as we engage in public policy.

The Surety of Covenant Promises

In Genesis 9:8–17, God establishes his covenant by adding his promises to the stipulations that he put forward in Genesis 9:1–7. In these ten verses, God designates the membership of his covenant (that is, who will be involved in his covenant), the promise of his covenant, and the sign of his covenant. Since this is the first explicit covenant that God makes, what we find here will set the benchmark for the covenants we will see through the rest of the Bible.¹⁹

Covenant Membership

In a covenant, one of the first questions we must ask is, Who are the members of this covenant? This is extremely important, since we must never appropriate for ourselves covenant stipulations or covenant promises that are not given to us. For example, the point we discussed earlier about the distinction between the civil, ceremonial, and moral laws of the Mosaic covenant is critical for understanding which laws to appropriate into modern society and the church today, and which laws we must leave behind. Because the covenant God made with Israel foreshadowed the coming of Christ through establishing a theocratic nation governed directly by God through his word, the civil laws and the ceremonial laws are not necessarily still binding for us today now that Christ has come as the reality toward which those shadows pointed (Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1). That covenant was fulfilled in Christ, and we live under the terms of a new covenant (Matt. 5:17–20; Heb. 8:6).

Intriguingly, the range of membership that God appoints for this Noachian covenant is broad, encompassing all creation:

[8] Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, [9] “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, [10] 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.” (Gen. 9:8–10)

This is not a covenant limited to the human race. Along with Noah, Noah’s sons, and their offspring after them God also includes every animal as well. This observation helps to explain why God gave stipulations to govern the animal kingdom in Genesis 9:3–5. Here, God explicitly includes the animal kingdom within his covenant. Also, this helps us to see that God is essentially restarting and reorganizing all of creation after the Flood. The covenant with Noah marks a new beginning for creation, even though this new beginning will endure the ongoing presence of sin (Gen. 8:21).

Covenant Promise

Second, God issues the promises of his covenant: “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” (Gen. 9:11). God stated something very similar in Genesis 8:21–22, which helps us to understand the nature and significance of God’s covenant. There, God said, “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 strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease.” In the earlier text, God was even more explicit about his intentions never to destroy the world with a flood for as long as creation remains, even in spite of the perpetual reality of sin. Why, then, does God restate this promise to preserve creation in the context of a covenant?

Throughout the Scriptures, God’s covenants formalize God’s promises. Although God’s word is always trustworthy and true, God helps our feeble, weak hearts by solemnizing his promises in the form of an unbreakable covenant. We have a clear, frequent analogy to this principle every time we attend a wedding. Although the groom has already asked his bride to marry him, and although she has already agreed to do so, the couple is not actually married until they make those promises again to embrace the stipulations of covenant marriage: lifelong, monogamous faithfulness to each other. The covenant adds clout to the promises.

Still, one important distinction stands between the covenant that God makes here with Noah and the covenant that a man and woman make to each other in marriage. In God’s covenant here in Genesis 9, he makes the covenant unilaterally with Noah, Noah’s sons, and every living creature who had accompanied them on the ark. No one other than God speaks through this entire section; God alone institutes the stipulations and swears the promises. At a wedding, by contrast, both parties swear the covenant oaths of marriage in turn. No man can unilaterally take a woman to be his bride, nor can a bride unilaterally take a man to be her husband. God, on the other hand, has the prerogative to create a covenant with his creation by virtue of being the Creator.

Covenant Sign

Third, just as God enhanced his promise with a covenant, God now enhances his covenant with a sign to remember the covenant:

[12] And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: [13] I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. [14] When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, [15] I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. [16] When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” [17] God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.” (Gen. 9:12–17)

Clearly, God gives the sign of the “bow in the cloud” (the rainbow) to enhance the surety of his covenant promises. Still, this passage raises two important questions: (1) What exactly does the sign do? and (2) Why should the sign of this covenant be a rainbow?

Thankfully, we can glean information about the purpose of covenant signs from the many other

covenant signs that we find through the rest of the Bible. For example, God appoints circumcision as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:10), and Paul tells us that the sign of circumcision was “a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11). In other words, the sign of circumcision testified to Abraham and his offspring after him that righteousness comes by faith. Then, in the case of the “sign” of the Sabbath day, God insists that he gives the Sabbath to his people as “a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD sanctify you” (Ex. 31:13). Resting on the Sabbath day, then, reminds the people of God that they cannot sanctify themselves by their work. Instead, they are dependent upon God to sanctify them. And again, the covenant of marriage provides a useful analogy, since the man gives a ring to his wife as a sign to confirm the marital promises that he has made to her (and *vice versa*). Signs testify to and confirm the validity of the promises made in a covenant.

In this case, God explains that the sign of the bow in the cloud will cause him to “remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh” (Gen. 9:15). This does not mean that God is apt to forget what he has promised. Instead, the word “remember” means more than mere reminding to include the idea of God’s acting on the basis of his promise.²⁰ When human beings see the rainbow, we can be confident that God is continuing to be faithful to the covenant promises he made so many thousands of years ago.

Why, then, should this sign be a rainbow? There is some plausibility in the suggestion that the “bow in the cloud” could refer to God’s hanging up the bow of his own warfare of wrath against all flesh by sending the Flood.²¹ The war is over, and God hangs up his bow as a pledge of his cease-fire against creation. Or, one author suggests that the beauty of the rainbow testifies to the “grace-in-judgment” nature of God’s covenant in the midst of a still broken world.²² But while these suggestions might be possible, there is not much textual evidence to confirm that this is what God means here, other than describing the rainbow as a “bow.” Nowhere does God speak of the Flood in terms of his own warfare.

Instead, we are on much more solid exegetical ground to confine our appreciation for the sign of the rainbow to the context of the storm, since “There can be no bow unless there is a storm.”²³ In other words, God accompanies storms with rainbows as an assurance that he will not allow that rainstorm to destroy the earth. As Geerhardus Vos writes, “The sign here is connected in its character with the ominous force of nature from which it pledges protection. It is produced against the background of the very clouds that had brought destruction to the earth.”²⁴ In this way, the sign of the rainbow is closely related to the covenant promises made.

Covenant of Preservation

And yet, we should conclude our study of this passage by recognizing the limitations of this covenant. This covenant is an “everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (Gen. 9:16) that will endure for as long as “the earth remains” (Gen. 8:22). Even so, the promises and stipulations of this covenant only deal with preserving the world *as it is*. Indeed, God makes this covenant with every living creature of all flesh on the earth in light of the fact that “the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen. 8:21). Undoubtedly, this is a gracious covenant for God to preserve his creation from the judgment that it deserves; however, this covenant promises nothing in the way of *improving* or *redeeming* creation from its brokenness and

corruption.

Indeed, the absence of any provisions of redemption in the covenant points forward to a need and a necessity for another covenant where God will provide for the redemption of his people. God made a promise to redeem his people back in Genesis 3:15, and this covenant preserves creation long enough to allow the offspring of the woman to come into the world in the fullness of time to bruise the head of the serpent. Nevertheless, the Noachian covenant promises nothing further toward the fulfillment of that promise. From here, we will see creation continue, but God has not yet provided any means of redemption, so humankind will deteriorate into further sin that culminates at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). Only after that point will God raise up one man to establish another covenant through which God will ultimately bless the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3).

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Noah need to offer sacrifice after disembarking from the ark? What does our need to offer sacrifices say about the severity of our sin and the holiness of God? If God did not accept sacrifices as atonement for our sins, what would happen? How much of God's forbearance do we take for granted (cf. Rom. 2:3–5; 3:25)?
2. What did God originally intend for the relationship between human beings and animals? What has changed in our relationship with animals since the Flood? How does God protect us from animals? Why does God require accountability for animals who shed human blood? What applications does this text have for any settings where we interact with animals?
3. Why does God require the death penalty for human beings who murder other human beings? How does God's rationale relate to what our society typically talks about in our debates about the death penalty? What surprising factors does emphasizing the value of the image of God drive us to consider? Has God's word modified your thinking on this subject?
4. Why does God add a covenant to his promises? Why isn't God's word enough for us? Why does God add a rainbow as a sign of the covenant? In this case, what does God's covenant promise to us? Why should we classify this covenant in terms of *preservation* rather than *redemption*? How does this covenant relate to God's work in redemption?

Notes

1. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 392.
2. For more on the significance and theology of the burnt offering, see Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the LORD: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 85–97.
3. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 189.
4. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 308.
5. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 393.
6. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 190.

7. Sailhamer points out important similarities between God's covenant with Noah and God's covenant with Israel at Sinai: "Just as significant as the associations of this passage with the Creation account, however, are the several close associations between Noah's altar and Moses' altar at Mount Sinai following the Exodus (Ex 24:4–18). A brief list of some key parallels gives a sense of the verbal and thematic similarities: (1) The building of an altar in both accounts follows a major act of God's salvation—God's rescue of Noah from the Flood and God's deliverance of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt; (2) the altar and the offering in both accounts mark the establishment of a 'covenant' with God (Ge 9:9; Ex 24:7); (3) the outcome of both covenants is God's 'blessing' (Ge 9:1; Ex 23:25); (4) the central provisions in both covenants are protection from 'wild animals' (Ge 9:2; Ex 23:29) and human enemies (Ge 9:5–6; Ex 23:22); (5) both accounts mention specifically that the 'land' will be preserved from destruction (Ge 9:11; Ex 23:29); (6) in Genesis the visible 'sign' of the establishment of the covenant is the rainbow in the 'clouds' (9:13–17), and in Exodus the conclusion of the covenant making is marked by the appearance of the glory of God in the 'clouds' (Ex 24:15) that cover the mountain; (7) both covenants give stipulations which the people must obey (Ge 9:4; Ex 24:3).

These observations suggest that the author intentionally draws out the similarities between God's covenant with Noah and the covenant at Sinai. Why? The answer that best fits with the author's purposes is that he wants to show that God's covenant at Sinai is not a new act of God. The covenant is rather a return to God's original promises. Once again at Sinai, as he had done in the past, God is at work restoring his fellowship with humanity and bringing humanity back to himself. The covenant with Noah plays an important role in the author's development of God's restoration of blessing. It lies midway between God's original blessing of all humankind (1:28) and God's promise to bless 'all the families of the earth' through Abraham (12:1–3)." (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 128–29.)

8. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 192.

9. But, this protection is *only* general, since God will often remove the "secret bridle" in order to send animals to inflict judgment on sinful human beings. For a list of examples, see earlier comments on Genesis 6:11–12.

10. Calvin, *Genesis*, 290. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xv.i.html>>

11. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 193.

12. Walton, *Genesis*, 343.

13. Contrast the detailed procedures for removing leaven from Hebrew homes for the seven days during the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover (Ex. 12:14–20; Deut. 16:1–8) to ensure that "For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses" (Ex. 12:19). In the case of leaven, the emphasis is on strict removal of leaven from the home; in the case of blood, the emphasis is on ensuring that blood is drained from an animal, and not on strictly ensuring that absolutely no blood be found whatsoever after the draining.

14. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 314–15.

15. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 403. The passage also mandates that the owner will be put to death if the ox had been known to gore people in the past.

16. See *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 19.3: "Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the New Testament." Also, 19.4: "To them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging under any now, further than the general equity thereof may require."

17. Amnesty International, "United State of America: Death by discrimination - the continuing role of race in capital cases," April, 2003, p. 5. <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AMR51/046/2003/en/>> Accessed November 30, 2016. One might reasonably quibble with the reasons suggested to explain why race skews the statistics so much, but I am more interested in the fact that the death penalty is inconsistently

administered across races than in this study's (or the next study's) explanation for it.

18. Katherine Becket and Heather Evans, "The Role of Race in Washington State Capital Sentencing, 1981–2012," January 27, 2014, p. 2. <<http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/documents/WashRaceStudy2014.pdf>> Accessed November 30, 2016.

19. Hosea 6:7 suggests that God made a covenant with Adam: "But like Adam they transgressed the covenant..." If so, this covenant is not explicitly identified as such in the text of Genesis.

20. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 207.

21. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 206.

22. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 123.

23. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 318.

24. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 55.