Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Two of the most common features of a really good story are a **plot twist or a formulaic plot**. With a plot twist, the author throws something completely unexpected into the story line, such as the death of one of the lead characters, which shocks and surprises the reader. The author’s hope is that the reader’s response will be, Wow! Didn’t see that coming! With a formulaic plot, however, the author develops a formula through the story, which keeps repeating, so that when the climax of the story comes, you basically knew how it would end, even if you could not guess the exact details.

Well, the climax of the Bible is the life and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is where we see how God makes it possible for sinners to receive forgiveness and eternal life. And if you know the Gospels, you will know that for the Jews of Jesus’ day, including even His disciples and the Bible experts, He seemed to them to be a massive plot twist. The circumstances of His birth, how He performed His public ministry, *that* He died and *how* He died, and His resurrection, were, to them, shocking, unexpected and unbelievable. I am sure if we could have interviewed them back then, they would all have said, Pfff! Never saw *any* of that coming! And that is *really* sad. And it is really sad because God never designed the life and death and resurrection of Jesus as a plot twist. It was always and ever a formulaic plot. If you paid any sort of attention to the explicit promises and prophecies of the Old Testament, as well as to the implications of every account and event in the Old Testament, the who and the how of Jesus Christ should not have surprised anyone.

And it should not surprise us, today, either. And we have a perfect example of why that is so in our text today. For what happened here is that **Noah’s sweet-smelling sacrifice pleased God and brought from Him the promise to preserve the world**. And as we unpack this episode together, we will see that it is a preview of how the sacrifice of Jesus satisfied God’s wrath, making eternal life possible. And we will see this as we look at **Noah’s Sincere Worship** and then **God’s Heartfelt Response**. And we will finish by seeing how all this is a **Formulaic Gospel Preview**.

1. So, let’s begin with **Noah’s Sincere Worship**. In verse 20 we read that “*Noah built an altar to the Lord and took some of every clean animal and … bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar*.”
   1. And before we look at the details of Noah’s offering, I want to quickly return to the moment that Noah left the ark. Verse 18 simply says that “*Noah went out,*” as did his family and all the animals and birds. And when we looked at the details of the global flood, I mentioned the theory called **Catastrophic Plate Tectonics**. It is an attempt to explain the effect that the massive amounts of water from below and above, and then their receding away, would have had on the earth’s surface. And the result would have been that the one relatively flat super-continent that existed before the flood would have broken apart into the continents that exist now, with their deep canyons and tall mountains. And one of the results of this powerful upheaval would have been volcanic eruptions, spewing out lava and ash and gas, that lead, eventually, to a great ice age. And again, you can get more information about that theory at creation.com. But I hope that gives you some idea of the environment that Noah likely encountered as he stepped out of the ark. This was a *dramatically* changed world.
   2. So, what might you have done if you had been in the ark for just over a year, and you emerged into this new environment? Explore, perhaps? Look around for food? Start to think about putting up a tent or building a house? Or maybe just sunbathe for the first time in a year? There would have been nothing wrong with doing any of those things. But what Noah did was to build an altar and offer sacrifices to God. In other words, **Noah’s first priority was worship**.
      1. Question 28 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks about the right response of believers to God’s providence. And the answer says: “We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that nothing will separate us from His love.”
      2. Well, to say that things had gone well for Noah is perhaps the understatement of all human history! Just he and his family, out of the whole of humanity, had been spared. And Noah knew that this was because of the grace and faithfulness of God. For Noah was also a sinner. So, his deliverance was not deserved or earned, it was grace. And God, in His faithfulness, had remembered His promise to deliver Noah and his family. And so, Noah’s first thought upon exiting the ark was God; Noah wanted to thank God and worship Him.
      3. And we should ask the Spirit of the Lord to give us a similar attitude – that God would be first in our thoughts in the moments of providence that we encounter each day, rather than second or last or perhaps even non-existent.
   3. But let’s look now at the specifics of Noah’s sincere worship.
      1. This is the **first mention of an altar in the Bible**. The Hebrew word translated as altar literally means ‘the place of slaughter.’ And when we get to Leviticus and the design of the tabernacle, we see that there is no worship without an altar. Because God is holy and we are sinners, there must be blood sacrifice and death. That is the only way that sin can be taken away, and God’s justice satisfied. And this happens at the altar; it is the meeting place between God and man.
         1. And God taught Adam and Eve this when He killed animals to provide them with skins for clothes, as a symbol of covering sin.
         2. And in chapter 4, we read about Cain and Abel presenting offerings to the Lord. There is no explicit mention of an altar there, but there is here. So, it was now understood, perhaps by way of direct revelation, that meeting with God required blood sacrifice on an altar. And that is how it would be throughout the Old Testament.
         3. And remember that Noah had seen the whole human race wiped out because of sin. And Noah knew that he too, and his family, were sinners who deserved death. We can be sure that he trembled at the holy and righteous judgments of the Lord. And so, in thankfulness for being spared, he knew that animals must be offered to the Lord on an altar.
      2. And Noah knew this from the fact that the Lord had commanded him to take **7 pairs or 7 each of every kind of clean animal and bird into the ark**.
         1. Back in chapter 7, the reason for these extra clean animals was “*to keep their offspring alive on the face of all the earth*.” The Lord wanted there to quickly be large numbers of the clean kinds of animals and birds in the re-created earth.
         2. But Noah would also have known, again, probably, by way of direct revelation, that only clean animals and birds were acceptable as offerings.
         3. And so, it maybe that Noah offered just one or two of each kind of clean animal and bird at this time, so that there would still be large numbers of clean animals for food and offerings, going forward.
      3. And we see also that these animals were offered as **burnt offerings**. Later in Leviticus 1 God provided Israel with the rules for burnt offerings. Throats were cut or necks were wringed, blood was spilled, and the whole carcass was cut up and placed on the altar, and then all of it was burned by fire. It symbolized total devotion to God, and a substitute death for sin.
2. And this is where we switch our focus to **God’s Heartfelt Response**, the second part of this passage. For it is God’s heartfelt response that reveals the sincerity of Noah’s worship.
   1. Verse 21 tells us that “*the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma*” of the burnt offerings.
      1. Have you ever walked past a bakery and caught the whiff of freshly baked bread? Or meat slowly cooking on the BBQ? Mmmmh! It’s good, isn’t it! Well, God is a spirit, so He does not have a nose, or a sense of smell, like we do. We are not meant to understand from these words that God physically loved the smell of the burning meat. This is language designed to help us flesh and blood creatures understand our Creator God. The offerings were ***spiritually*** **pleasing** to Him, in a way similar to the way that we physically enjoy the smell of bread or BBQ or perfume.
      2. And this emphasizes **the heart attitude of the Noah**. You see, one of the common complaints of God in the Old Testament is that the people of Israel thought that just presenting an offering was enough to please God. They didn’t need to *mean* it, they didn’t need to *believe* God’s promises, and they didn’t need to strive to *obey* His commands; they just needed to burn animals on the altar. But God was very clear that an insincere offering was like the smell of rotten flesh or dung in His nostrils. He *despised* such offerings. So, the fact that Noah’s offering pleased the Lord reveals that Noah’s offering was sincere. He understood that he and his family deserved to die as sinners, so, he offered these animals in his and their place. And he believed God’s promise to send a son of Eve, one day, to crush the head of the serpent. And he was eager to obey the commands of God, unlike all those who had perished in the flood. And he wanted to enjoy the presence of God or fellowship with God. So, it was Noah’s faith that pleased God.
         1. And this is explicitly stated in Hebrews 11:6, where we read that “*without faith it is impossible to please [God]*.”
         2. And **do you know where faith comes from**? Did Noah produce it from within himself? Do you and I produce faith from within ourselves? No. Listen to **Ephesians 2:8-9**: “*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*.” So, even Noah’s faith, and your faith and my faith, is a gift from God! The faith that we exercise – our belief and trust in God and His promises concerning Christ and ourselves – is a gift from God, worked in us by the Holy Spirit!
         3. And this just further emphasizes God’s amazing grace in the life of Noah, but also in the life of all those who believe in Jesus Christ!
   2. And so, having seen and been pleased by Noah’s faith, we are told that “*the Lord said in His heart,* ‘*I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease*.’” And there are a few things worth considering from this promise of God:
      1. One is what the promise reveals about **the spiritual condition of every human being before they are born again**: “*For the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth*.”
         1. And we will only be brief here because we have addressed this topic in other sermons, but the truth expressed in this verse is why the view of the world that human beings are basically good is deluded and wrong. Our natural bent or inclination is toward evil. It is only the restraining grace of God to all, through His law, and the inward work of the Holy Spirit in His children, through the gospel and by the power of the Holy Spirit, that makes goodness possible. Evil and sin should never surprise us. It is the default position, if you like. What we should celebrate and praise God for is everything that is ‘common grace’ good, but especially that which arises out of true faith, conforms to God’s law, and is done for His glory – in other words, that which is *truly* good!
      2. But another thing to note in this promise is that **the heart of God is mentioned**: “*The Lord said in His heart*.”
         1. And again, God does not have a physical heart. This is God speaking to Himself, but sharing His thoughts and intentions with Noah and with us. He wants us to know that is from His heart, as it were. When you speak to someone and they say, with sincerity, “I mean this with all my heart,” that adds to what they are saying. And God *always* means what He says, but think of these words as Him highlighting and underlining this promise!
      3. And the promise itself is the third thing to note. And it is incredibly timely. Listen again: “*I will never again curse the ground because of man … 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*.”
         1. Our world tells us that we are in climate emergency and that if we do not reduce carbon emissions, the oceans will rise and we will all die, or that the temperature is rising, and it will get too hot, and we won’t have winter any more, and we will all die, or that we will not be able to grow crops to feed people anymore and we will all die.
         2. But God says, “*I will never … 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*.” And the phrase “*while the earth remains*” means until Christ returns to bring in the Day of Judgment.
            1. You know, when you and I say, Never, as in, ‘I will never do that again,’ it usually means until we do it again. Right? Or, I would never do that, is often followed by us doing that! Yes? Well, when God says, “Never,” He means Never!
            2. And this is not the place to go into the intricacies of climate change and pollution and farming, etc. But brothers and sisters, young people, and boys and girls, do not be afraid that we will all soon die because of climate change. Take comfort from God’s promise! Let this be your bottom line as you hear politicians and scientists speak about the ‘climate crisis.’
3. Well, we will have more to say about this promise of God when we come to chapter 9 and God’s covenant with Noah, but having seen **Noah’s sincere worship** and **God’s heartfelt response**, let’s wrap it all up by seeing how all this is a **Formulaic Gospel Preview**.
   1. We saw in the previous chapter that the global flood is a preview of the judgment of eternal hell that will come upon all who have not received Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. And we saw that the ark with its one door is a preview of how entering into union with Jesus Christ by faith is the only way to escape hell and enjoy eternal life in the new heavens and new earth. Well, in this passage we see the shedding of blood and the death of a substitute are necessary to remove the curse and atone for sin, and that the smell of the offering pleased the Lord. And Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of all these things:
      1. Of Jesus, **Hebrews 13:10-12** says, “*We have an altar …* [He] *suffered ... to sanctify the people through His own blood*.” So, Jesus is our altar.
      2. And He is our substitute sacrifice. **1 Peter 1:18-19** says that we were ransomed “*not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot*.” And **Romans 5:10** says, “*We were reconciled to God by the death of His Son*.”
      3. And **Galatians 3:13** says, “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us*.” The way to fellowship with God was restored by Jesus Christ.
      4. And in terms of how His work on the cross was received by the Father, **Ephesians 5:2** says, “*Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*.” The sacrifice of Jesus was a pleasing aroma to God.
      5. And it is all previewed here at Noah’s altar!The circumstances of the life and death of Jesus should surprise no one who has read the Old Testament!

People of God, there is a wonderful missionary video about the **people of the Mouk tribe in Papua New Guinea**. When the missionaries arrived, they first spent time learning the local language. They then began to teach them about God as the Creator of heaven and earth, and His attributes. They then taught them about the Fall and God’s promise to send a Saviour who would come to deliver us from sin. They then worked through the Old Testament, emphasizing, especially, blood sacrifice as a substitute for sin. And so, for example, when they told them the account of Abraham being commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac, they did not tell them how the story ended. They asked the people to guess what would happen. And during that day, four different men of the tribe came to the missionaries and said that Abraham would obey God because he was a righteous man, but God would spare Isaac, probably by providing a substitute lamb. Just 22 chapters into Genesis, they already understood much of the gospel! And the missionaries continued through the major Old Testament stories. It was only after 2 months of this that they finally began to tell them about Jesus, beginning with His birth, and then His ministry of miracles and teaching. Lastly, they came to His arrest and trial and crucifixion. And the people were horrified by what was done to Jesus – the betrayal by Judas, the denial by Peter, the crown of thorns. But they knew that it had to happen. And they knew that Jesus would rise again. Why? Because of what they had learned from Old Testament passages such as the one we have considered today. And the video concludes with the missionaries proclaiming that belief in Jesus is our only hope of salvation, and then one after another of the Mouk people standing up and saying, EE-taow! It is true. I believe! And you have heard this gospel preview today also. Do you believe? I pray that you do! Amen.