Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

One of the most beautiful things in all creation is a **rainbow**. Just the other day, my daughter-in-law sent us a video of a spectacularly bright *double* rainbow near their house in Christchurch. And I am sure you boys and girls know that for there to be a rainbow, two things are needed – rain and sunlight. And the colours of a rainbow are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. And did anyone here learn a mnemonic to help remember the colours? Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain? And the reason rainbows always have *those* colours is that light is made up of various wavelengths, with red being the longest wavelength and violet being the shortest wavelength. And the water droplets split the light into all its various wavelengths, with the result being the seven colours that we see.

Well, despite the best efforts of a small part of modern society to give a new meaning to the rainbow, our passage explains the meaning that God has assigned for the rainbow. Verse 17 states it is “*a sign of the covenant that [God has] established between [Himself] and all flesh that is on the earth*.” And we began our consideration of this covenant last week. We saw that it was made with Noah, that animals would now fear humans, that humans were now allowed to eat meat, and that murderers were and are to be put to death. But today we look at this new covenant as a whole. We want to consider a definition of covenant, then see the elements of the definition in this covenant. And this covenant is not given a specific name in Scripture, but it is typically referred to as the Noahic covenant, for obvious reasons, or **the Covenant of Preservation**.

And as was stated last week, understanding covenant really helps us understand God’s plan of redemption and recreation in Jesus Christ. So, this is a big-picture-of-the-Bible topic. And as believers, we want our understanding of God’s grace in Christ to expand and deepen. But there is also a very real gospel challenge here for those among us who are not yet believers.

1. So, let’s begin with **a definition of Covenant**. And again, I am lifting this definition straight out of O. Palmer Robertson’s book, ‘*The Christ of the Covenants*,’ because it is biblical, and it has proved useful to the church ever since he proposed it. It is that a covenant is **a bond in blood, sovereignly administered**.
   1. A very old missionary diary tells of a time when five missionaries in West Africa were surrounded by local tribesmen, who were threatening to kill them. And they were threatening to kill them because one of the young boys from the village who was attending the missionary school had disappeared. And the tribesmen, who were cannibals themselves, suspected that the missionaries had eaten the boy. But the missionaries denied the charges and protested their innocence. So, the tribesmen withdrew to decide on their fate. But later that evening, the boy returned to the village, safe and sound. He had just gone for a wander. And so, King Tho and the other leaders returned to the mission school and begged the missionaries to overlook what they had threatened in anger. And after making their apology, the throat of a small white bird was cut. The blood was then sprinkled first on the missionaries and then on the tribesmen. And the king then declared that a blood covenant had been made between the two parties. Never would they shed the blood of the missionaries and never would the missionaries shed the blood of the locals. And all future generations were bound by this covenant.
      1. Well, this tribal custom is pretty much an exact copy of the covenants in the Bible. Over and over again, God made a binding covenant and sealed it with blood. And that is because blood is a powerful symbol of death and cleansing, which is why it is connected throughout Scripture with the forgiveness of sins. And so, ultimately, when Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, He took up the cup of wine and said, “*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*.”
      2. Now, we don’t typically use blood for our ‘covenants’ today. When we are making a **contract to seal a purchase agreement**, for example, we may get the signatures witnessed by a Justice of the Peace. And this makes the signed contract legally binding. And to break such a contract brings severe penalties.
      3. Well, in the covenant moments of the Bible, a solemn and binding oath was made. And it is God who made the oath. And that is what is meant by *sovereignly binding*.
         1. You see, when humans make covenants or contracts, they do so as equal parties. But that is not how it is with the covenants God made. It is always He that established the covenant. And this needed to be so for two reasons: First, He is the Creator and we are creatures, and second, He is holy and we are sinners.
         2. So, just making covenant is already a gracious act of God. It is not something that sinful human beings deserve. He would be perfectly entitled to stay far off and condemn and destroy us as sinners. But He doesn’t. He draws near to make covenant. And with each covenant, He says, “I will be your God and you will be my people.”
   2. And so, a covenant is **a bond in blood, sovereignly administered**. As Robertson puts it: “It involves commitments with life-and-death consequences. At the point of covenantal inauguration, the parties of the covenant are committed to one another by a formalizing process of blood-shedding. This blood-shedding represents the intensity of the commitment of the covenant. By the covenant, they are bound for life and death.”
   3. Now, we will come to our consideration of these elements in the Covenant of Preservation in a moment, but I want to repeat a point I made last week before we do that. And that point is that **there is really only one covenant in the Bible, the covenant of grace**, which God established after the Fall in Genesis 3. What we might call the other covenants or the ‘covenant moments’ of the Bible, such as this one in Genesis 9, are not completely new covenants, but development of, or more revelation of, or a greater unfolding of the covenant of grace. How can we know this for certain?
      1. Well, for example, I am sure you boys and girls remember when the people of Israel made the golden calf? That episode came after the covenant God made with Moses and Israel. But when God threatened to destroy the people of Israel and begin again with Moses, Moses appealed to God’s promise to Abraham to raise up a people and bring them to the Promised Land. So, the Covenant with Moses and Israel was connected, or grew out of, God’s covenant with Abraham.
      2. And after God made covenant with David, David brought the ark to Jerusalem and identified that event as a fulfilment of God’s covenant promise to Abraham.
      3. Another evidence for the unity of the divine covenants is the genealogical links in God’s people. A direct line can be traced from Adam to Noah to Abraham to Isaac and Jacob and then down through the nation of Israel to the Lord Jesus.
      4. **Psalm 105:8-10** says this: “*[The LORD] remembers His covenant forever, the word that He commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant that He made with Abraham, His sworn promise to Isaac, which He confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant*.”
      5. And **Galatians 3:16** connects the person and work of Christ with the promises made with Abraham, and **1 Corinthians 15** connects the federal or representative work of Christ with the federal or representative failure of Adam.
      6. **Hebrews 9:15** says of Christ: “*Therefore He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant*.” And those words connect Christ to the promise of Genesis 3.
      7. And as we noted earlier, the unifying theme of all the covenants is God’s oath: “*I will be your God and you shall be my people*.” And this is always and only through faith in Christ. In Old Testament times, it was looking *forward* to the Messiah who was prophesied and promised and symbolized in the ceremonies and sacrifices. And since the cross, it is faith that looks back to Christ, who came to set His people free from their sins.
      8. So, one covenant, progressively unfolded, is a good way to think of the various covenants of the Bible.
2. But let’s try and unpack the definition of a covenant now in terms of this covenant - the Covenant of Preservation. So, let’s first see that it is **a covenant of grace**.
   1. To start with, **is this a covenant**? And the answer is clearly ‘yes.’ In verse 9, God said, “*I will establish my covenant with you*.” And He said the same in verse 11. And then in verses 12 and 17, God speaks about the bow or rainbow as a sign of the covenant. So, this is *definitely* a covenant.
   2. And we have already noted, repeatedly, that while Noah is spoken of as a righteous or obedient man, he was a sinner, just like you and me. And we will see clear evidence of that in the last part of chapter 9. So, Noah did not deserve this special relationship with God, and neither did Adam, or Abraham, or Moses and Israel, or David. It is a covenant **of grace** – undeserved favour. You see, covenant has Christ at the centre, not Noah, or Abraham, or you and me, for that matter. Covenant is about the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is through faith in Christ that we get to be in relationship with God. And even faith is a gift from God! And so, for Noah, this meant believing God’s promise to never again destroy the world with a flood, and God’s promise to Adam to send a son of Eve who would crush the serpent’s head.
   3. And in terms of new information about the covenant of grace, God said in verse 9, “*Behold, I establish my covenant with you* ***and your offspring after you***.” And we have noted this principle in earlier sermons about Noah. The whole flood narrative is about Noah. He is the one identified as righteous and blameless. But he is told to take his whole family into the ark; they too are to be delivered or saved. And now, God establishes His covenant with Noah *and his offspring*.
      1. And again and again in Scripture, we read about God promising to bless believers *and their children*, or a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments.
      2. And so, it is no surprise that on the Day of Pentecost, we hear Peter instruct believers to “*Repent and be baptized … in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins … For the promise is for you and for your children*.” And then we read about household baptisms.
      3. And this is because there is a family aspect to God’s covenantal dealings with mankind. God delights to save believers *and their children*. And this is not to say that God saves *every* child of believers. Each of Noah’s children had to believe in the promises themselves. And each of our baptized children must believe in Jesus Christ for themselves. But God does ordinarily or typically save the children of believers. And we see this in the covenant of preservation.
   4. Now, God did not just mention Noah’s offspring. He also mentioned “*every living creature that was [with Noah], the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with [Noah]*.” In other words, this covenant had “*every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth*” in view. And His promise was to never again destroy the earth by a flood. And what this new information teaches us is that **the world is the stage of salvation**.
      1. A couple of months ago, I went to watch a play. And we call the place where the play is performed the stage. It doesn’t happen in the stairwell, or on the ceiling, or where the audience sits; it takes place on the stage.
      2. Well, before the flood, it looked like this world was coming to an end. And it very nearly did with the flood. But with this covenant, we learn that the world is the stage where God will unfold His plan of salvation. God will keep a world and a people through which the Messiah will come. And although Messiah has come, still the Lord preserves this world to work out His salvation plan.
   5. So, the covenant of preservation is a covenant of grace. It was made with Noah and his family, and it reveals that there had to be a world for Christ to be born into.
3. Well, we can be brief with these next two section, which are that the covenant of preservation is **a bond in blood** and that it is **sovereignly administered**.
   1. At the end of chapter 8, having exited the ark, we saw that Noah’s first act was to worship God by sacrificing burnt offerings. So, the blood of animals and birds flowed. And Noah did this because he knew that as a sinner he deserved to die in the flood, just like the rest of the people of the world. And he had learned the principle that is taught in Hebrews 9:22: “*Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins*.” So, blood had flowed; a substitute sacrifice had died in place of Noah. And we saw that the Lord was pleased with Noah’s offering. And this led Him to promise or vow or bind Himself to never again destroy the earth with a flood.
   2. And as to the covenant of preservation being sovereignly administered, it’s all God here, isn’t it! He blesses Noah and his sons. He commands them to be fruitful and multiply. He instills the fear of humans into animals. He permits a new diet. He forbids the eating of blood. He requires murderers to be put to death. He establishes covenant. He promises to never again destroy the world with a flood. And He give the rainbow as a sign. In other words, He gives the promises, and He prescribes the obligations on Himself, and Noah and his offspring.
      1. And this further reinforces the **glory and goodness of God**. And it a bit of an aside, but I find those two words so helpful when I think about God.
         1. Glory speaks of power and majesty and sovereignty! But if it were a bare glory, He would be utterly terrifying to us. Indeed, unbelievers will one day bear witness to the glory of God. But to believers, God is also good. And goodness speaks of grace and compassion and mercy and patience and kindness.
         2. And it is glory and goodness that we see most beautifully in the Lord Jesus Christ – true God and true Saviour!
4. And that brings us, finally, to the **Sign** of the Covenant of Preservation – the rainbow.
   1. God said that He had set His bow in the clouds and that it was a sign of this covenant. He would see the rainbow and remember His promise to never again destroy the world with a flood, and it would serve as a reminder to us, also, of His promise.
      1. Now, we have been discussing at home **whether there were rainbows before the flood or not**? Well, we have no reason *from Scripture* to believe that there were no rainbows before the flood. They are a naturally occurring phenomenon and there would have been clouds and sunlight. What is new is the sign that God attached to the rainbow. A New Testament parallel would be the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, to which Jesus attached a sign. But I should add that there are many Christians who believe that this was the first rainbow. And this is not a matter of essential unity, either way.
   2. But in terms of what the rainbow signifies, would you please turn with me to **Psalm 7:11-13** (p. 450). Here is what we read: “*God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day. If a man does not repent, God will whet His sword; He has bent and readied His bow; He has prepared for him His deadly weapons, making His arrows fiery shafts*.” So, the judgment of God is pictured here as a like a bow and arrow. And the flood was a vivid illustration of God firing an arrow of judgment at the unrepentant world. Well, the word for bow is the same word used here to describe the bow in the cloud or the rainbow. And so, it is right for believers to picture God as choosing to hang up His bow in the clouds rather than to unleash an arrow of judgment at us. So, boys and girls, you remember this next time you see a rainbow. God has hung up His bow and arrows. He will not shoot me, because Jesus Christ died for my sins!
   3. Earlier in the service we read from **2 Peter 3**. False teachers who were saying that the Lord Jesus would not return. And to correct this false teaching, Peter reminded believers that just as God judged the world in Noah’s day with the flood, so the current heavens and earth will be purified by fire when Jesus comes again, and unbelievers will be condemned to eternal hell. And in terms of how over 2000 years seems to us to be a slow fulfilment of His promise to come back quickly, Peter said, “*The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repenta*nce.”
      1. And when we looked at this verse in our 2 Peter sermon series, we saw that the “*all*” in view is **all God’s elect ones**. It started with Adam and Eve. It includes Noah. It includes each Old Testament believer. It includes the 3000 who were added to the church 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead. It includes all those who came to faith in the year AD 61 and 234 and 1572 and 2023, which might include some of us. And it includes each believer whom He brings to faith, today, August 20th 2023, all round the world. And so long as there is one more person, on one more day, whom God has predestined to bring to salvation in Christ, He will not return. He will only come when all those whom God has chosen to salvation have come to repentance and faith.
      2. And this truth arises from the covenant of preservation.
   4. And the passage in 2 Peter reveals something else that has its origins in the covenant of preservation. Verse 13 says: “*But according to His promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*.” Noah’s father hoped that Noah would bring about the new or restored creation. And he did, in a sense. But as we saw last week, the new creation was still under sin’s curse. And you and I still experience that curse every day. And it is only when Christ comes again that what we read in **Romans 8:21** be true: “*The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God*.” And this will be the new heavens and new earth. And the promise of a new heavens and new earth is further unfolded in the covenant of preservation.

Now, congregation, they say that what many people want to hear in church today is four tips for a happy marriage sermons or three lessons about overcoming anxiety sermons, or stuff like that. And this has not been a sermon like that. And there are times to talk about marriage or anxiety, etc, but I trust that what we have seen together has expanded and deepened your appreciation of God’s grand covenant plan to save a people in Christ. And we need this in our ADHD world. We need to soak in a salvation bath, as it were. We need our eyes opened to what is cosmic and eternal and glorious and good.

And for those among us who are not yet believers, I pray that the Lord would use what we have seen to cause you to turn to Christ in repentance and faith, while there is yet time! And this includes you children who have received baptism as a sign of the covenant. Take hold of Jesus. Commit yourself to follow Him. Believe His promises. For one day Christ will return. And any who have not yet received Him as Saviour and Lord will be on the receiving end of His bow of judgment. Amen.

Let us pray: