

Followers of the Way

God's redemptive plan to restore humanity

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Genesis 3:20-24; Genesis 9:9-17

We heard last week how a covenant in the ancient near East was formed by binding promises made between two parties, and how it was a permanent agreement, with everlasting consequences. Philip, in his sermon, focused on what we call the Abrahamic covenant, because it most clearly shows and is founded on the ancient near Eastern understanding and practice of Covenant, involving sworn vows, sealed by blood sacrifice – which, once made, indissolubly bound the parties to each other in never-ending pledge.

But today, we're going to go back a bit, to what's called the Noahic covenant and, before that, to Eden. And I think it can be quite helpful here for us to look briefly at English law, with its definition of covenant. Not, of course, because our laws apply. They clearly don't. But because it helps deepen our understanding of what was going on. Why and how God pledged Himself, right from the beginning, to our redemption.

Under English law, a covenant is an agreement or promise to do or provide something, or to refrain from doing or providing something, which is meant to be binding on the party giving the covenant. It does not need or depend on reciprocal promises or undertakings on the part of the person or persons benefitting from the covenant, unless such a clause is explicitly written into the covenant itself.

Now why this is interesting is because you can see that this is precisely what God was setting up in Eden. Right at the dawn of creation, we read that God made Adam and Eve in His own image, and He gave them authority – He made them priest-kings, if you like. Genesis 1:28, God said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground ...". Then, in the next chapter, He lays out the conditions. vs.15-17, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

And when Adam and Eve disobey that and do eat from the tree of knowledge, then, just as God warned, there are consequences. As result of their actions, the pair can no longer live in the Garden, but the important thing to note is that God's binding promise of blessing remains and, even though under a curse and expelled from Eden, Adam and Eve are still tasked with caring for creation. In other words, their failure to obey has not cancelled the Covenant. God still loves them. But now He has somehow to restore them and get them back.

It's very important that we understand God's promise of blessing and protection still remains. But Adam and Eve's failure to observe the condition God laid on them has put them under a curse, so that the blessing can no longer be directly operative. Instead, the blessing becomes a commitment on the part of God to our redemption. But at that point there could

be no possibility of agreement on the part of Adam and Eve and it's not conditional, because the pair were under bondage to sin and, to put it bluntly, lacked capacity.

I guess we could say that the years that followed for humanity were a bit of a learning curve. From the moment they fell, Adam and Eve, and the whole of creation, were separated from God and came under bondage. So, first and foremost, to begin to put His plan in place, God had to make Himself known. He had to break through the suffocating cloud of darkness that was blinding men and women to truth and life, and help them once again see and know Him ... and to be obedient.

Not easy. Separated from God, as it was, mankind did not cooperate. With the exception of Noah – who is described in Genesis 6:9 as being righteous and walking with God – everyone else seems to have become totally corrupt and violent. Feels a little bit like today maybe, but the situation became so bad that God decided the only way to deal with it was to destroy men and women completely, saving only righteous Noah and his family.

As we know, He tells Noah to build an ark for himself and his family, and to take them and two of every living thing inside, as the waters rise. And rise they do, though not immediately. In fact, while he's building the ark, Noah suffers quite a bit of ridicule, but he still obeys – and eventually, of course, he's justified. The rains come, and the flood gets deeper and deeper, and eventually the menagerie ends up staying in the ark for around 10 months ... while the rest of life is blotted out (8:3-5). When they finally emerge, after the waters have receded – and probably by then there were a lot more than went in – God tells Noah that He is from that moment establishing His covenant with him and every living creature, promising that He will never again send a flood to destroy the earth. And as the sign – the confirmation – of His oath, God sets His bow in the clouds, and tells Noah that whenever He brings clouds over the earth and sees the bow, He will remember His everlasting covenant.

The important thing to note here is that, once again, God's promise is absolute and unconditional. There is no action required on the part of Noah, and no action that Noah or his descendants may take that will affect its enforcement. Which is perhaps just as well, because a few verses further on we find that sin has once again reared its ugly head, after Noah gets drunk and lies naked in a stupor. But this is all actually part of the learning process.

We need to remember that integral to the Covenant God made with mankind back in Eden, was His promise to rescue and redeem us. In our fallen, blinded state, as mankind slowly learnt more about sin and the nature of God and separation, so God gradually revealed Himself as Creator and Sovereign, teaching men and women – that's those who listened – to trust Him and be faithful. And vital to this slowly-evolving revelation, that would both allow and enable the plan for redemption, were the Jews – the people uniquely chosen by God for the implementation of His master plan.

It's because of this that God went on to make subsequent covenants with them. To Abram, in Genesis 15 as we heard last week, He promised that Abram's descendants would be more in number than the stars; to Moses, Exodus 19, He promised that as the people kept His law, they would be His people. But as God has revealed Himself, the Covenant now is explicitly framed in terms of obedience. It's subject to a condition. Exodus 19:5 "... if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all peoples." It had to be this way, because, if God was to redeem us, it was vital that men and women understood the difference between holiness and sin – that they cannot co-exist.

There were maybe occasions when the Jews perhaps wished they weren't quite so 'chosen', because time and again their disobedience brought them under judgement – but all of this was a part of their preparation for the birth of Christ, God's own Son, who alone, as a man, could go head to head with Satan and break evil's hold.

This is God's covenant. His absolute promise to redeem us from sin and restore us to direct, unclouded, relationship with Himself. This is God's covenant – to bring us home. With the birth of Christ, the first part of His plan for the redemption of the whole of mankind was begun. Now we await only Christ's return, for that plan to be completed.