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The Problem Remains

Genesis 8:15-9:29

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A month ago we paused in Noah's story at 8:15. We saw his amazing patience. The rain may have lasted only forty days, but it took a year before the floodwaters had subsided and the land was dry. No doubt Noah was antsy and wanting to get out, but no one in the ark had any idea what things were like outside. Noah also knew that as God had shut him in, he needed to wait for God to tell him when to go out. But still he sent out a dove to get some idea of the state of the waters. The first time he sent the dove out it came back without having found any dry land. A week later he sent the dove out again and this time it came back with an olive branch. Things were getting better. There were trees in leaf again, but the dove still hadn't found a safe place to roost. And so a week later he sent the dove out and this time it didn't come back. That was Noah's cue. He "removed the covering of the ark" and saw that the land was dry. And so we read in 8:15-19:

Then God said to Noah, "Go out from the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—that they may swarm on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth." So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him. Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by families from the ark.

We can only imagine the flood of animals coming out of the ark. Not only were there the animals Noah had loaded a year before, but we can only conclude that in that year they had gone through a mating season. If there weren't a bunch of baby animals by this time they were certainly on the way! We don't know if it was organized or chaotic or some kind of organized chaos, but we can imagine this boat teeming with life spilling out into the world in which life had been destroyed.

In fact, the picture that the author of Genesis gives us is one of *recreation*. In the beginning God had separated the waters and called forth dry land, he'd caused plants to grow and had then filled that land with animals and human beings. When sin of those human beings became overwhelming, justice required punishment and so God had wiped out the life he had created and he did so by taking his sustaining hands off the waters; he stopped holding them back and in doing that he took away the dry land so necessary for life. Now, as the floodwaters subside we see God once again separating those chaotic waters and once again keeping them in their place with his sovereign hand so that life can flourish again.

When the Israelites, camped at Mt. Sinai, first heard this story it would have spoken loudly to them, because God had just done something very similar with them. He had separated the waters of the Red Sea so that they could escape the Egyptian army, passing through on dry land and then had taken his hands off the waters, allowing them to drown the Egyptians and their chariots. Through the Red Sea God had just *recreated*—had just given birth—to a people that would be his own. He promised to lead them to a land promised to their father, Abraham, and as he gave them his law, he called them to be a holy people.

Having come through the waters safely, the first thing Noah did was to

build an altar to offer burnt offerings to God. Then we're told that in response to Noah's offerings, God spoke and established a covenant with Noah and with every living thing on earth that would come after.

And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, 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." (Genesis 8:21-22)

The idea of a *covenant* was powerful in the Ancient Near East. For modern people like us in the West, the only place we're likely to run into the idea of "covenant" is in the Bible. The closest thing we can talk about in our culture is a legal contract. In the ancient world people entered into covenants as a way of making a promise or contract of some kind. When two people entered into a covenant, there were always three basic parts. First, they would specify what was expected of each party, then the penalty for breaking the covenant, and then they would establish a covenant sign. It could be as simple as a land or livestock negotiation between two men or a vassal or nobleman pledging his loyalty and support to a king. In this case God enters into a covenant with Noah and with the whole human race, promising that never again will he punish human sin by cursing the ground as he had in the flood. God acknowledges that human sin is and will always be a reality, but never again will he punish it as he did in Noah's time.

As we move into Chapter 9, God lays out the stipulations of this covenant in more detail. He starts by blessing Noah and through him the whole human race, but notice as we look at verses 1 to 4 that God blesses Noah by reiterating and then expanding on the

commandments that he first gave to Adam and Eve. It's a reminder that God's commandments are good. Look at verses 1-4:

And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. 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. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.

Just as God told Adam to be fruitful and to multiply, he now tells Noah and his family. And as he gave dominion over all Creation to Adam and Eve, he now reiterates that dominion. Again, there's a parallel here with Adam. As a result of sin Adam had to toil for his food. God didn't take away his sustenance, but as a consequence of sin, the earth wouldn't yield fruit without Adam's sweat. Now that carries over to the animal world. God gives to Noah all the animals as food, but he warns him that those animals aren't going to cooperate. They will fear human beings. Noah's going to have to hunt and some days he may come home empty handed.

Does this mean that human beings were vegetarians before the Flood? Some people have argued that this was the case. I don't think the answer is particularly important, but some cult groups make a legalistic point of this and insist that *real* Christians are vegetarians because vegetarianism was the pre-Flood ideal. The problem with this is that we've already seen in Chapter 4 that when Abel made his offerings to God, he offered the fat parts. Based on what we know from the rest of the Old Testament, this clearly suggests that other parts of the animal were eaten. In Chapter 6 we

read about Cain's descendants raising livestock. And while it's true that in those times people tended to use livestock more for milk and hair or wool than they did for food, we know that they did eat them. It helps to understand that the Hebrew words behind "everything that creeps on the ground" are actually very specific. The phrase doesn't refer to wild animals that hunt or scavenge or to domesticated animals. Depending on how it's used, it refers either to wild herd animals like antelope, deer, and ibex—animals that run away when you hunt them—or to prey animals—like rabbits—which also run away when hunted.

The best way to understand this seems to be to understand that God is giving Noah permission to eat not only domesticated animals, but wild animals as well. God does this with two restrictions: First, the animal must be living; it must be hunted. Human beings aren't allowed to scavenge for dead meat. And, second, the meat cannot be eaten with the blood in it. This drove home the fact that for human beings to survive, blood must be shed. Ultimately it points us to Christ, just as the skin clothes that God made for Adam and Eve pointed to Jesus. It also reminds us that life is sacred—even the life of animals—and that it shouldn't be taken frivolously.

God drives this point home even further in verses 5 and 6:

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.

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

God was forced to wipe out the human race with a flood because of sin. Specifically the sin is described with the Hebrew word for *violence*. God is

now promising that he will never gain punish sin with such drastic measures. However, he now places the responsibility for dealing with that sort of sin on human beings. Life is precious. As God says, whoever kills a human being defaces the image of God. And so to drive home the point God establishes that the punishment for murder is death and he places the responsibility for carrying out this punishment his creatures. The point isn't for capital punishment to be a deterrent to potential murderers. The primary point isn't even to remove murderers from the population to prevent them acting again. The primary reason for the death penalty is to drive home the value that God places on life. Life is *so* precious that the only adequate consequence of taking it is to have one's own life forfeit. And here God gives human beings the responsibility—the duty—to carry out this sentence on God's behalf, when necessary. When we fail to do so, we fail at living up to our end of the covenant that God has established.

And note that this is different than the death penalty as it was commanded as part of the civil law for Israel. In the law death was the penalty for things from dishonouring one's parents to homosexuality to idolatry. Those laws given for the ruling of Israel no longer apply—although they still show us that God takes such sins seriously. They no longer apply because the kingdom of God is no longer about a physical nation, but is about the Church, and the Church does not have authority to wield the sword. Her authority is spiritual. But this command given as part of God's covenant predates the law as it was given through Moses. It stands eternally. That means we have to think twice before we agree with those who argue that capital punishment is barbaric. God does not command barbaric practices. And it means that we have to think twice when people claim to be "pro-life" and yet

condemn the death penalty for murderers. Their value for life is less than God's.

Now, after explaining humanity's covenant responsibilities, God then reiterates his responsibilities—his promise and his end of the covenant—in verses 8 to 11. Never again will he destroy all life with a flood. And then in verses 12 to 17 he gives the covenant sign:

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: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 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. 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." 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."

In Hebrew the word for rainbow and the word for the sort of bow used by a warrior are the same. And in Ancient Near Eastern culture people often looked up to constellations like Sagittarius and saw that bow in the stars as God's divine weapon of wrath. God uses that sort of imagery as the covenant sign. He's poured out his wrath on sin, but now he declares his peace with human beings. He hangs up his bow in the sky. And he hangs it up not that it points menacingly down at us as warning that God's wrath might come again, but he hangs it up so that it points up into the heavens, away from us, a sign of God's peace. And the point isn't that somehow there

were no rainbows before the flood. God took something that everyone was familiar with—something especially appropriate in this case because it shows up in the sky every time it rains—and he turns it into a symbol of peace, a sign that his wrath has been turned away from his Creation.

So, everything ought to be all right from this point on, right? God has dealt with humanity's sin and saved Noah, the one righteous man and his family. He's even hung his bow up, never to do war with us again. And yet that isn't the end of sin. Look at verses 20-23:

Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness.

One night Noah got carried away with his wine. His son, Ham, wandered into the tent and saw him exposed. Based on how this same language about being uncovered is used later in Leviticus, it seems safe to assume that it wasn't just that Noah fell asleep with his tunic disarrayed, but that Ham walked in on Noah *and* Mrs. Noah and saw them together suffering the aftereffects of too much wine and in a delicate situation. Some people have even seen this as suggesting that Ham may have taken incestuous advantage of his drunken mother. It's possible, but I don't think we need to read that much into the text to understand Ham's sin. Our problem is that we don't place as a high a value on honour our parents as ancient people did. Remember that in the Old

Testament law, dishonouring one's parents was punishable by death. That should give us some sense of Ham's offense. The bottom line is that he did the opposite of what he should have done. Out of respect for his father, he should have simply covered him up, restoring his dignity. Instead, he runs out to find his brothers, Shem and Japheth. "You guys won't believe what I just saw! The old man and the old lady got wasted and are in the tent. You've got to come see this!"

Shem and Japheth, out of respect for their father, instead go to the tent, pick up a cloak, and, walking backwards so that they don't see anything, cover up their father (and mother, assuming she was there too).

When Noah woke up he was furious with Ham.

When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers." He also said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant." (Genesis 9:24-27)

Noah's blessing of Shem and Japheth for doing the right thing makes perfect sense. What's interesting is that he curses Ham's son, Canaan, to be a servant to his brothers. We can't know for sure, but the most likely explanation is that the author of Genesis simply didn't preserve the entire curse. Noah may have cursed Ham and all of his sons, but the curse on Canaan was what was important to the Israelites. Remember that when this story was given to them they were poised to march on the land of Canaan, not only to take it as the land

that God had promised to Abraham, but as God's judgement on the idolatry and gross sexual immorality of the Canaanites. That Noah curses Canaan specifically give some historical background to what was to come; the Canaanites were evil all the way back to their grandfather, Ham, who shamed his own father.

Now we have to ask: What does all this mean for us? The important thing in the story is obviously God's covenant with Noah, and through him to all living things that would come after, including us. We've already touched on God's instructions to us as part of that covenant. He calls us to uphold the sanctity of life. Even when it comes to eating animals he warns us to eat the blood, not to eat the very thing that represents their life. And since he promises not to wipe violence from the earth with another flood as he did in Noah's time, he now gives human beings—or our civil rulers—the responsibility of punishing murderers with capital punishment. Despite all the rhetoric about capital punishment being inhumane and its being abolished because we supposedly value life as a society, what such abolition of capital punishment really shows is that as high as we think our regard for life might be, we have a lower regard for it than God does. But we can be thankful that even when we as a society fail to uphold our end of the covenant, God will never fail to uphold his. We see the rainbow in the sky every time it rains and are reassured of God's grace and his promise never to destroy the human race again.

This is what Noah's story underscore for us: that God is always faithful in his graciousness and blessing, even as we human beings continue to sin and reject his goodness. The Old Testament is the story of humanity's sin problem in light of God's holiness. He lovingly created human beings and in Adam and Eve we see his people

reject his loving care as they willfully disobey the only command he gave them. And yet when they hid in shame, he covered their nakedness with animal skins. Cain murdered his brother, and yet even as God cast him out to be a wanderer, he provided for Cain's safety from those who would lynch him. When the entire human race fell into violence, God spared the one righteous man from the flood and preserved his beloved creatures that he might continue to work out his plan of redemption.

Soon we'll begin looking at the lives of the Patriarchs. God called each of them, but at some point—some more than others—they all still fell into sin. And finally with Moses, God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, he met them and lovingly wooed them in the wilderness and gave them his law so that they could know what it looks like to be a holy people. And repeatedly they failed.

Brothers and sisters, all these events and stories of God's blessing and humanity's sinning point us to Jesus Christ. In him God sent his own Son to be a perfect and once-for-all sacrifice for sin. The blood of Jesus did what the blood of millions of bulls and goat could never do. It truly washes God's people clean. We receive the benefit of his blood through our own flood experience. As Noah was saved by sailing through the great flood in the ark and as the Israelites were saved as God led them through the waters of the Red Sea, you and I are saved as we step out in faith through the waters of baptism. But the waters of our baptism are so much more powerful than the baptismal waters of Noah or Moses. The baptismal water through which Jesus calls us washes away our sin and pours into us the Holy Spirit. Noah came through the waters of the flood, but he was still the same old Noah. And when the Israelites came through the Red Sea, they may have been made God's own people, but they

were still the same old Israelites. But when you and I pass through the waters of baptism, Jesus makes us new. He does what no Old Testament sacrifice could ever do: he not only forgives our sins, he takes our sin away; he makes new men and women of us. Old habits and patterns die hard; sometimes we're tempted to take up our old man or our old woman again. This is why St. Paul reminds us in Ephesians, saying, "Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and...be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and...put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24). Adam and Noah and Abraham and Moses could only look forward to our day in anticipation as they struggled with sin. Dear friends, that new self is our reality in Christ Jesus. Let us live the reality of new life we have been given by baptism. And when we look up into the sky and see the rainbow—and living were we do, God certainly gives us a lot of them—let us remember that he has hung up his bow and made peace with us through Jesus Christ. Every time the rain falls, let it be an opportunity to praise God for his grace and mercy and let it be an opportunity to renew our faith in the blood of Jesus, sacrificed for us at the Cross. Let every rainbow be a reminder to live the new life he offers, putting off our old bodies of sin, putting on the new, and being renewed by his Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Almighty God and Father, thank you for your promise never again to destroy the world because of our sin. Give us grace to uphold our end of the covenant and help us always to be thankful your mercy. Let us never presume upon your grace or take it for granted. And help us always to understand the depth of your love in Jesus Christ that we might give you praise by truly living out the new life he gives us, by faith, through our baptism. Amen.