

THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT (1)

A Meditation on Genesis 9:8-17

The rainbow is the sign of the covenant that God established with Noah—which is why it's called the Noahic Covenant—but the covenant wasn't only made with Noah, it was also made with his sons, and with all future generations, including all living creatures, such as birds, livestock and every beast of the earth. God has promised to never again destroy the whole world with flood waters. So after it rains the sun comes out and the rainbow appears in the sky, as a reminder to whom of the covenant? It is a reminder *for God*. God says, "When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant... When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant" (Gen. 9:14-16).

We could look at it this way: It's nice that we remember the covenant, since it reminds us of what God has promised to do. However, it's absolutely crucial that God remembers His covenant, because He is the One who sends the rain, and He could easily destroy the world in the same way again. Now it's surprising how many people don't know that the rainbow is to help God remember. When I ask people who the rainbow is a reminder for, most people say us. Why is that, given the fact that most Christians are acquainted with this story? It's because our presuppositions (or assumptions) hinder us from seeing the plain and simple explanation for the purpose of the rainbow that is given, not once, but twice in the text. Our presupposition is that God's knowledge is perfect, that His memory never fails; therefore God is not an absent-minded deity who is dependant upon memory aids to remind Him of the covenant that He Himself established.

The idea that God would ever think "Oh yeah, that's right, I made a covenant with creation to never again destroy it with a flood, I almost forgot" is preposterous to us. Consequently, we read the story of the rainbow, which says twice that it's for God, and it doesn't compute to our way of thinking—it fails to penetrate our presuppositions. By the way, our presuppositions are correct, albeit incomplete. They are right in that God's doesn't need a reminder. However, they fail to take into account that God nevertheless *likes to be reminded*. Many minds are unable to put these two ideas together at first, due to the resulting cognitive dissonance.

A similar jarring juxtaposition results when one is first introduced to divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The truth of each is seen individually, but not when they're placed side by side. It doesn't harmonize with many Christians' presuppositions. Over the years, many of us have discovered that our presuppositions were wrong, and needed to be realigned to square with the teaching of God's Word.

Allow me, if you will, to digress just a little more to address presuppositions. This is important, because you and I read the Bible and interpret it in light of our presuppositions. In fact, all of life is interpreted via presuppositions and we scarcely give them a second glance. This means that total objectivity is a misnomer and an impossibility. Everybody has presuppositions. The question is whether one's presuppositions are correct and biblical or wrong and unbiblical. You'll recall that centuries ago the general presupposition was that the earth was flat. Therefore, if you traveled too far you could fall off the edge of the earth into oblivion.

Another example of how presuppositions influence our interpretation comes from Acts 2:38-39: "And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.'" Reformed Christians, who read this passage through a covenantal framework (presupposition), see this as further support for infant baptism. Baptism, like circumcision, they reason, is God's promise to our children, therefore the sign shouldn't be withheld from children, just as circumcision wasn't withheld from children. Conversely, Baptists, operating with an individualistic understanding (presupposition), fail to see the relevance of this passage for the baptism issue. When you realize that it's one's presuppositions that underlie the out-come of the interpretation, you see that exegesis alone will not solve the conflict; you'll have to dig a little deeper and ask, "What presuppositions are clashing in this debate, and which one is the biblical one?" By the way, Peter's Jewish audience, undoubtedly, would have heard this promise through covenantal categories, not individualistic ones.

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THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT (2)

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Interestingly, from one perspective, we could say that many of the Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah, due to false presuppositions. It was assumed by many Jews in the first century, including Jesus' own disciples, that the Christ would destroy the Romans; they were anticipating a Jewish Alexander the Great or Napoleon Bonaparte. It was inconceivable that the true Messiah would suffer and die at the hands of his enemies, especially such a degrading death as that of the cross, which was reserved for only the worst criminals in Rome.

If we're perplexed or confused by a verse or doctrine because it doesn't fit with the rest of our neat and tidy theological system, then we most likely have presuppositions that needed to be adjusted. But, be forewarned, when one's presuppositions shift it's liable to register quite high on the Richter scale, and it will upset your comfort, your family and your ministry. However, the only alternative is to turn your back on the truth, and that's certainly not acceptable for God-fearing Christians.

Returning to the Noahic Covenant, we must come to grips with the fact that God likes to be reminded of His covenant promises. The Jewish mind, steeped in the OT Scriptures, understood this. Theologian Louis Bouyer cites example after example of Jewish *berakah* ("blessing") prayers that call upon God to remember and therefore act on behalf of His people. "Our God, and the God of our Fathers, may the remembrance of ourselves and of our fathers and the remembrance of Jerusalem, thy city, and the remembrance of the Messiah, the son of David, thy servant, and the remembrance of thy people, the whole house of Israel, arise and come, come to pass, be seen and accepted and heard, be remembered and be mentioned before thee for deliverance, for good, for grace, for lovingkindness and for mercy on this such and such a day. Remember us, JHWH, our God, on it for good and visit us on it for blessing and save us on it unto life by a word of salvation and mercy, and spare, favor, and show us mercy, for thou art a gracious and merciful God and King" (Jeff Meyers, *The Lord's Service*, p. 218). Thus, we have what will be a new thought for some: We should help God remember—and again, this is not a denial of God's omniscience, rather this is simply a recognition that He likes to be reminded by His people.

Question: Why did God deliver the Israelites out of Egypt? Answer, according to Exodus 2:24: "God *remembered* his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob." After the idolatrous worship of the golden calf the wrath of the Lord burned hot against Israel and He was ready to wipe them off the map. But Moses had the audacity to implore the LORD his God, "Turn from your burning anger... *Remember* Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever'" (Ex. 32:12-13). How did God respond to Moses' bold reminder? "And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people" (vs. 14). God wasn't insulted by Moses' reminder of the covenant He made with the patriarchs; God wanted Moses to remind Him of the covenant. And He wants us to remind Him of His promises to us as well, so our prayers should be peppered with reminders of what God has promised to do in His Word (2 Chr. 6:42; Neh. 1:8; Ps. 74:2).

When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, which is a sign of the New Covenant, He said after both the distribution of the bread and wine, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:24-25). However, the Greek could literally be translated, "Do this as my memorial." Jeff Meyers writes, "Where should one look in the Bible to find out what a memorial is? Answer: the Old Testament. The Old Testament forms the context, the background against which the new must be interpreted.

"When we look at the memorials instituted by Yahweh for Israel and ask how they functioned, we discover something startling: most of them were designated to remind the Lord of His covenant! The Old Testament memorials were erected or enacted for the purpose of reminding God of his covenant with His people" (Ibid., p. 218). The Passover is especially relevant, since it's fulfilled in the Lord's Supper. God said, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you" (Ex. 12:13). Likewise, when we partake of the bread and wine, which represent the body and blood of Christ, we remind ourselves and God of the New Covenant, so that His wrath is averted, and His blessings enjoyed.

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