

The Covenant Renewed

I. INTRODUCTION

When you read the account of the Flood, realizing that everyone except Noah's family died because of God's judgment, did you ever question whether God's judgment was fair?

After all, if some human civilizations developed without knowledge of God, and had no contact with those who remained faithful to the covenant, thus becoming intensely evil, we may be tempted to say that they didn't know any better. Maybe we think they never really had a chance to live their lives the way Noah did.

St. Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, helps us to understand better just exactly what was going on among men whose lives were given over to wickedness. It is worth examining what he has to say in the first chapter of that letter:

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

20 Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse;

21 for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened.

22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves,

25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Here we see that St. Paul says that anyone who lives on the planet Earth, whether he lives among covenant-keeping people or not, knows enough about God to live in the right way. Why?

- Because God has revealed Himself in His works.

Looking around at the world in which he lives, a man is capable of recognizing three things about God:

- there is a God;
- He is powerful; and
- He deserves to be honoured and thanked (Rom. 1:20-21).

When a man chooses not to act on what he knows to be true, he suppresses the truth. It isn't that he has been deprived of it - he simply refuses to live by it.

When that happens, things go downhill fast, as St. Paul tells us in Romans:

28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct.

29 They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips,

30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

32 Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.

This is a description of what happened in the early history of man and what continues to happen when men, like Cain, know what is right to do but refuse to do it. When that happens, the most merciful thing God can do is to punish man.

It is often only when men are faced with suffering and death that their autonomy crumbles to ash, and they are willing to cry out to God, Whom they are finally ready to acknowledge as the only One who can help.

The Flood was just such an occasion. It was the just, merciful response of God to the mess man had made for himself.

St. Peter, in 1 Peter 3, tells us more about the Flood, lest we still have any misgivings:

18 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit;

19 in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison,

20 who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

The people swept away in the Flood were not necessarily eternally lost.

Their death was a temporal punishment until Christ preached to them the message of redemption they needed to hear.

- Those who were merely ignorant surely responded with great joy.
- But those who, like Cain, had hardened their hearts through sin, might well have had the same reaction to Christ as Cain had to God - "Thanks, but no thanks."

We should never doubt the justice and fairness of God (see CCC 632-635).

A. Was the Flood an Act of God?

To help us understand the devastating nature of the Flood, and why God would permit it, it is important to keep in mind that there are two aspects to God’s will; his positive or perfect will, and his permissive will. Since sin does not come from the positive will of God, punishment doesn’t come from there either.

God permits sin to take place, and God permits the punishment. **Neither is imposed by God.** Being excluded from human life by sin, God is not there to prevent the disaster [see *Come and See Catholic Bible Study* pg. 51].

B. Is there Evidence of a Great Flood?

A catastrophe as large as the flood described in Genesis would leave traces behind in addition to the Biblical account. It is interesting that scientists now present the catastrophe hypothesis to explain the disappearance of many species during pre-historic times.

For a more detailed discussion of the physical evidence of the flood see *Come and See Catholic Bible Study on Genesis* page 51-54.

The Flood Subsides

I. RE-CREATION

Read: Genesis 8

A. The Wind of God

But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided;

A wind from God blowing over the earth makes the waters subside [Gen 8:1]. What other scene from Genesis is this kind of language meant to evoke?

"In the beginning," the earth was without form and void, and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2). To read in Genesis 8:1 that "the wind" of God, which is His breath, the Holy Spirit, is blowing over the earth helps us to recognize the beginning of the re-creation.

The repetitive use of language from the original creation story teaches us that God's original plan for the universe and for man was a perfect plan.

That is why the re-creation scenes in Scripture, wherever they appear, always use language from the original one. God doesn't keep trying out new ideas until

something works. He is determined to make His original plan work, no matter what rises up to derail it. No fault can be found with the plan. Human history will reveal where the problem lies.

B. The Dove with the Olive Branch

Read: Genesis 8:8-12

[8] Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground;

[9] but the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put forth his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him.

[10] He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark;

[11] and the dove came back to him in the evening, and lo, in her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth.

[12] Then he waited another seven days, and sent forth the dove; and she did not return to him anymore.

The Church helps us to see the Holy Spirit as the dove that looks for habitable ground. In the days of Noah, it was dry earth that the dove sought and finally found. The appearance of the dove with the olive branch was a sign that a new life for man on the earth was about to begin.

At the baptism of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descending on Him in the form of a dove is a powerful sign that finally the soil of the human soul will be fit for the presence of God's Spirit once again.

C. Leaving the Ark

God gives the order to come out of the ark, which makes it clear that it is not man who is taking the initiative. God is presenting man and the animals with a rejuvenated and renewed earth. From now on God will never abandon man.

Read: Genesis 8: 14-22

[14] In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry.

[15] Then God said to Noah,

[16] "Go forth from the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you.

[17] Bring forth 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 breed abundantly on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply upon the earth."

[18] So Noah went forth, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him.

[19] And every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves upon the earth, went forth by families out of the ark.

[20] Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.

[21] And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

[22] While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

D. A Renewed Earth

The earth has been purified of sinful men and women, and is embarking on a new stage, populated by Noah and his children. The waters of the flood were the means of purification through which Noah was saved in the ark.

E. A Sacrifice of Thanksgiving

The very first thing Noah did when he got off the ark was to offer a burnt offering to the Lord. This was the first animal sacrifice that mankind offered God after emerging from the flood.

By this sacrifice – an act of worship – Noah is acknowledging God, and God is pleased to accept his offering.

And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odour, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man . . .

It pleased the Lord greatly to see a man live this way - putting the private faith in his heart into his public act of making an offering – his public worship.

And God makes a promise never to curse the ground again because of man.

Never again would they have to fear a return to chaos on the earth. This is the first account of God's people being saved through the faithful obedience of a human being.

- It will not be the last.

F. Baptism – Saved through Water

The waters of the Flood are doubly symbolic: they stand for destruction and purification from evil, on the one hand; and as a means of salvation and the start of a new creation, on the other.

Christians see the Flood as a “type” of Christian baptism. The story in Genesis tells us in a symbolic way what happens when a Christian is baptized.

- Our old world of sin is washed away, and we are created anew, reborn in the waters of baptism.
 - Like Noah, we still carry the potential of sin with us after baptism, but we have received God’s blessing and his promise that he will not destroy us. {See 1 Peter 3: 18-22 above}.
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God’s Covenant with Noah

I. INTRODUCTION

The spread of wickedness throughout the earth, and the profound sadness that comes from knowing how all this grieved God makes us want to cry out for an end to it all and for a fresh start.

In the account of Noah, who was a human being who still loved God more than he loved himself, we had reason to breathe a sigh of relief and hope. Perhaps with the earth washed clean of violence and with the continuation of human life through a righteous man and his family, we can expect better things.

Surely the scene from Genesis 8 in which God was once again pleased by what He sees on earth, evident in his delight in the aroma of Noah's sacrifice, gives us some basis for this hope.

Chapters 6-8 of Genesis, with their frequent use of language which reminds us of the first creation, prepares us for what we are about to find in Chapter 9 – a renewal of the original covenant that God made with Adam and all creation.

We expect that He will make it clear how He wants life on the renewed planet to be lived.

And because God is Goodness Itself, we are counting on some demonstration of His deep, abiding, persistent love for man - the kind of love we have already seen in our study, which reaches down to man in his dependent, helpless condition and gives so much more than he deserves.

We will not be disappointed. That is, we won't be disappointed in God.

But what about the humans? It's hard for us to forget that the problem in Eden was man's doing. Have men's hearts been washed clean by the Flood?

II. THE NEW ORDER

Genesis 9 now describes the new order of things that emerged after the flood.

- First, Noah and his sons receive from God the same blessings that Adam and Eve were given after they were created – fruitfulness and dominion over the earth.
- Second, God says the beasts will now serve man as food. Prior to the fall, in paradise, Adam and Eve only had plants available to them [Gen 1:29].

Finally God makes two prohibitions:

- Man must not eat meat with blood in it and
- Life is sacred – murder is prohibited.

Read: Genesis 9:1-7

[1] And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.

[2] The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the air, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.

[3] Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.

[4] Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.

[5] For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; of every beast I will require it and of man; of every man's brother I will require the life of man.

[6] Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.

[7] And you, be fruitful and multiply, bring forth abundantly on the earth and multiply in it."

A. Fruitfulness

Associated with God’s blessing on human beings is the command to be fruitful and multiply.

We must not miss this fact. When men are pleasing in God's sight (which is what it means to be "blessed" by God), His desire for them is to reproduce themselves. Why? It is because the earth was empty? No, it is because man is created in the image and likeness of God. Since He is the author of human life - the One Who thought of it and created it - then man's clearest reflection of Him will be to continue to love and create other human beings, which is a divine power he has from God.

B. Dominion

As with Adam and Eve, God grants man dominion over every living thing. But this dominion has a new dimension - fear. The harmony of the first creation has been broken; now the living creatures will fear man as he exercises dominion over them. The fear of creatures for man will be a reminder to him that he is not who he thinks he is and not at all who he was meant to be.

As painful as it is to experience this dread in animals, it is a great mercy to us. In our spiritual blindness, we can look very good in our own eyes. With the loss of grace in Eden, we simply cannot see the truth about ourselves. We have an amazing capacity to minimize our sin, forgetting our true destiny.

A little bird hopping away from us in fear gives us a moment to see ourselves reflected in its eyes - we are not the holy creatures we were meant to be. In fact, we are scary. We need help.

C. Animals as Food for Man

In paradise, Adam and Eve and the beasts ate what grew out of the earth as described in Genesis 1.

[29] And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.

[30] And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food."

Now, it will be acceptable to eat not only the plants but also the fish and animals as well (another reason for dread!). This is an intensifying of the break in the harmony of creation because of sin.

[Once the earth could easily have grown all the food that was necessary to sustain life; now, perhaps as a result of the judgment of the Flood, which may have wiped out much of what grew in the ground, man will eat the animals as well to stay alive].

D. Life is Sacred

The prohibition against taking life, which is to be penalized by death, indicates the direction of human civilization. It reflects the reality of wickedness and the power of evil over the human heart. It is a response to the fact that violence and corruption spread so thoroughly in the human community at the dawn of history that God had to send the Flood to purge it. God cannot trust men to curb their appetite for violence.

Now, in the renewed earth, He will use laws with drastic penalties to curb it. We are to interpret this as a sober sign that whereas God left Cain to his own conscience, without requiring his life for his act of murder, now He must act with laws to preserve safety on earth.

As sin increases, laws multiply!

E. Blood: the Source of Life

Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.

This taboo on blood reflects the value of all life, both human and animal. Even though God permits man to eat animals, he is not thereby to be callous towards animal life. He is to continue to show respect for life, since it comes directly from the hand of God.

Man, in his spiritual blindness, is subject to pride, in which he sees himself as the center of the universe. It is a short step from there to abusing elements in that universe to serve his own purposes. Prohibitions such as this keep that impulse in check.

F. Murder and its Penalty

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed . . .

The Catholic Church's teaching on capital punishment has undergone development throughout the centuries of her history. At the time of Noah, after wickedness and violence had become widespread because there was no way to contain it, God ordered capital punishment as a way to deter sin and wanton disregard for life.

Yet earlier, before there was a large human community on earth, He had prevented anyone from taking Cain's life, even though he was a murderer. The Church teaches that for much of human history, killing certain kinds of criminals was the only way to protect society against them. Now, however, in the modern era with its penal institutions, societies are capable of curbing violence without killing those guilty of it.

Pope John Paul II has been a strong voice speaking out against capital punishment because of his unwavering commitment to the dignity and sacredness of human life, even when men sin greatly.

If, by imprisonment, we can protect society and prevent danger from a criminal, we should not take his life.

Governments should respect life, not taking it unnecessarily. Further, they can aim to rehabilitate criminals to live a more productive life, while the Church prays for their repentance, conversion, and reconciliation with God.

Summary

1. Over time, and possibly as a result of intermarriage between men who called on the name of the Lord and women who didn't, great wickedness spread throughout the human community on earth. There was unchecked violence everywhere.
2. God decided to judge this wickedness by sending a great flood to blot out all living things. There was, however, one man who still lived the way God intended men to live-Noah. He found favour in God's sight.
3. The righteous man, Noah, was to build an ark to preserve some life-that of his family and of the animals God instructed him to carry into it. He obeyed and prepared for the onslaught.
4. The earth returned to a time of watery chaos as a result of God's judgment. Because of language evocative of the first creation story, we recognized in this account that God was re-creating the earth and man's life in order to cleanse it from the great evil that pervaded it.
5. When God caused the waters to subside, a dove became the symbol that the earth was ready to receive renewed life upon it.
6. As soon as he was off the ark, Noah made an offering to the Lord. This act deeply pleased God (as the wickedness had deeply grieved Him). He made a promise never to repeat this kind of judgment on the earth in the history of man.
7. When Noah and his family got off the ark, God blessed them and gave them a command to be fruitful and multiply. Although the earth and life on it underwent a renewal, there was still evidence that men were not as they had once been in Eden. The dread that animals would experience toward man would be a sign of the loss of that harmony.
8. Man was to respect the blood of every living thing, even that of animals, because it is a sign of life, a gift from God. God instituted a law of capital punishment for murder in order to keep in check the violence in man's nature that too easily overwhelms the good.

Preparation for Week #9

Read:

1. Genesis Chapters 9 -10 - RSV Catholic Edition;
2. ***Come and see Catholic Bible Study – Genesis 8-10: God’s Covenant of Peace***
3. The Navarre Bible: Genesis – Chapters 8-10