

Prayers

To God

Tell the Lord how much you appreciate His help and guidance. For a few moments, try to do this using as natural language as possible, as if speaking to a friend, but being duly respectful.

For myself

Weekly theme: Pray for joy

What is it that blocks joy from remaining in your heart? Think about this and submit whatever this is to the Lord in prayer. He will know what to do with it, so wait on Him.

For others

Father God. Your world is beset by problems, but it is also full of enormous potential and amazing prospects. You have created a world with much to discover that we have not yet found, a world with novels yet to be written, art yet to be painted and produced, and buildings yet to be designed that will challenge our skill and technical ability; there is so much yet to come! Enliven our hearts, we pray, to both see Your solutions to human problems, and perceive Your hand in the greatest challenges faced by humanity. Then, may we make our contribution to this world that You have created, and do it for You. AMEN

Meditation

Listen carefully;
hear the voice of the Lord,
and determine to walk forever in His ways.

Learn intelligently;
know what God requires of you,
then let His light shine ever on your pathway.

Plan realistically;
measure yourself against the best,
the righteousness of God, as found in Christ.

Work diligently;
give all for the Kingdom of God
and live to see its fruitfulness here on earth.

Evaluate shrewdly;
seek to discern right from wrong,
good from evil, and learn to act accordingly.

Share liberally;
for the Lord has charged His people
to love one another without any exception.

Speak boldly;
preach the Gospel every way you can
and you will soon find out what blessing means.

Bible Passage

Genesis 9:8-17

⁸ Then God said to Noah and also to his sons,

⁹ 'Take notice; I am founding my Covenant with you and your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with all living creatures with you; everything living that came out of the Ark with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every wild animal. ¹¹ I now set up my Covenant with you; never again will all flesh be destroyed by the waters of a flood. Never again will a flood wipe out the earth.'

¹² God said,

'This is the sign of the Covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you for all future generations: ¹³ I have put my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the Covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my Covenant between me and you and every kind of living creature; and the waters will never again destroy all flesh by turning into a flood. ¹⁶ Whenever the rainbow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting Covenant which is between God and every kind of living creature on earth.'

¹⁷ God said to Noah,

'This is the sign of the Covenant that I have set up between me and all life on earth.'

Review

This passage concludes the story of the Flood, and yet it is the beginning of something else. It describes the setting up a Covenant agreement between God and all humanity, through Noah, something that was promised at the very beginning of the story (6:18). Before the Flood, God told Noah that if his family proved to be obedient, by building the ark, entering it and following God's instructions, then He would save them from the disaster (6:18-22). Now the whole event had taken place and Noah had proved faithful in all God had told him to do, we read that God did indeed formally 'set up' a covenant agreement (9:9), and our passage today gives us a further description of what this means.

It begins with an announcement by the Lord, *'take notice ...'* (9:8), and He formally sets out the participants in the Covenant. On the one hand there is God Himself, and on the other hand, all living things that had come out of the ark (9:9,10). Then in verse 11, the conditions of the covenant agreement are explained, and this contains the promise of God that He will *'never again destroy all flesh by the waters of a flood ...'* Initially, we might think that this is not too much of a promise because it appears to leave open to God the possibility of showing His wrath in other ways. But if we think for a moment about the 'world view' of ancient people, this promise surely has a much greater significance than we imagine.

To understand this, we must remember that in their minds, 'waters' existed above and below the earth and sky; they were the substance of the universe as we think of 'space' today. They believed they lived in the separated space between the *'waters above'* and the *'waters below'* in which the earth and the heavens existed (Gen 1:3-6). For them, the Flood was the epitome of total destruction, as if the waters below had met the waters above and the whole world had been destroyed! It was a total reversal of creation and the destruction of all things! Now, to return to the covenant, we notice that God's covenant promise is that He will not destroy His whole creation again on account of human sin. Without a doubt, to those who recorded this part of Genesis for us, the covenant was a promise of God's faithfulness, and the origin of what is meant throughout Scripture by the much repeated phrase, God's 'loving faithfulness'. This theme of God's covenant loyalty runs throughout the Old and New Testaments of Scripture.

In ancient times, covenant promises were formal agreements made with solemnity, and often signed off with some kind of gift or visible statement of what had been agreed for the benefit of all future generations. Of course, this is the meaning of the rainbow God now set up in the sky. Everything from verse 12 onwards is a powerful passage full of Hebrew poetic features including repeated words and phrases, emphatic themes and much more. It all focusses on God's beautiful rainbow, and it transports us away from the world of the Flood and the sin which caused it, to the world of God's eternal love and compassion for His creation, and people in particular.

The rainbow is not just a pleasant sign of God's favour, to be used primarily as a starter story for children or a symbol of worldly peace. It signifies a new start for God's people, and the beginning of scripture's most important theme; the Covenant relationship between God and humanity. This theme will play out in Scripture through the story of God's people Israel and their strife with both the world and with their God (Old Testament). It then plays out significantly in God's own coming into the world as Christ Jesus (New Testament). He was the man who was God, and who died for all so that God's wrath against human sin could not fall on us; it fell on Him, and he has therefore set us free! The story of the Flood echoes the very first part of this salvation story, but only that first part. We must read more of Scripture to discover how this covenant relationship with God develops and works, in practice.

For this and other reasons, the first 11 chapters of Genesis are frequently referred to as a 'prologue' to the Bible; they set the scene for all that follows. The Flood marks a crucial and initial turning point in the relationship between God and humanity. Through Noah's obedience, God was able to begin His salvation plan not just for a few people, but ultimately, for all.

When we teach young people about the rainbow, or use it as a sign of God's benevolent presence in the world, we should also remember that this sign is intended by God to be something far more. It was placed in the sky to remind Noah and His generations (us) of our salvation, calling us to respond to Him in worship and praise. The remarkable thing about the story of the Flood is that although Noah had to be obedient for the whole process to work, everything that happened was God's plan and God's initiative. Nothing was required of Noah apart from this obedience, which was itself a reflection of Noah's 'righteousness' in God's

sight. It seems that God has gone before Noah, guiding him in this righteousness and making him an obedient man willing to do His will. God knew that sin was endemic in the world and would affect Noah as any man, he created the conditions in this great man of old whereby His will could be done. It is what today we call the '*prevenient grace of God*'.

So God always has the priority in our relationship; He is the one who has made the plan by which we are saved, and he guides us towards this. There is no point in our following our own ideas about religion and God; this is mere human vanity and wishful thinking. If we want to have a relationship with the God who made the world, then we must seek to find out what He has done for us, not what we can do for Him; moreover, we must accept that the process starts in the heart of God, not in our own minds, emotions or spirituality. This remains a hard lesson which many find difficult to accept, but it is the starting place for the history of salvation in the Bible.

Discipleship

Application

The love of God, the rainbow, the covenant, and salvation

The sign of the rainbow is there to remind us of the very first phase of our Covenant relationship with God, in which He takes control of our relationship. He has promised not to destroy us and our world completely, and implicit in this agreement is also the promise that God will eventually save us, for the rainbow reminds God of His own decision to do this (9:15,16). The sign of the rainbow should therefore be at the heart of our Faith, and all else in scripture follows from this Covenant. It is the foundation stone for God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ.

This conclusion is important, for we should be aware of what this Covenant means for us now, even those of us who know our salvation through Jesus Christ. It is too easy to assume we know what the Gospel of redemption and salvation means and jump to the conclusion that because we are Christians and have been 'saved' we can now do do what we want; after all, we have found a route out of trouble! The apostle Paul was incensed that anyone should think this (Romans 3:8). We still live in a fallen world and our own actions remain tainted (see Paul's extensive discussion of this in Romans 6/7). We have not yet entered the '*new heaven and the new earth*' (Rev 21:1f.)!

The evidence of sin and God's graciousness

The first covenant of God made with Noah therefore still has something to teach us about the basic nature of humanity, which remains fallen, despite the assurance of faith and salvation through Jesus Christ. God's promise at the Flood is that he will not destroy us because of our sin, and if we can accept this, we get a glimpse of the divine purpose for salvation and ultimately of the work of Jesus Christ.

This is important. For Christian people are not always be successful in their ventures of faith; not every counselling technique works perfectly, we are not always healed through prayer, no great leaders or preachers are perfect, and no church is ever really 'good enough' for all who wish to worship the Lord! All these things and many more are true because we still battle with sin and its consequences today; we battle with them as long as we live, but as God's people we do with with the assurance of victory on Him, not a certificate of perfection!

In an age when the Christian Church still struggles with issues such as these, it is good to have our attention drawn to the sign of the rainbow in the sky. It reminds us of the

foundations of our Faith and our salvation. God has promised to save us, and we are dependant at all times upon His gracious and sovereign will.

Ideas for what to do

- *In what ways do you seek God's will before doing something? Is there anything in your life which happens at God's command, rather than your own will? These are tough questions, but as you consider them, you may find that God will bless you with a deeper knowledge of His will for you.*
- *Pray for those who struggle to believe that God is 'looking for them', and attempting to help them, particularly those who feel that God has abandoned them.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *Which part of the verses of today's text have the most meaning for you and why?*
2. *How does the idea of the Covenant help us understand salvation? What does the word 'Covenant' mean to you?*
3. *In the light of this study, what does it mean to you to look at a rainbow in the sky? What do you think God does when He sees the rainbow?*

Final Prayer

When we are unsure of ourselves, Lord God, encourage us by Your presence. May we see Your compassion in the deeds of others, hear Your words in their speech, and feel Your love through their care. May we then find hope, both in others, in ourselves, and in You. **AMEN**