

The Storms of Life

Genesis 9:8-17 (February 21, 2021)

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⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹²God 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: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶When 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.” ¹⁷God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

Historical Context

In the ancient Near East, covenants were legal documents, cementing a relationship of mutual obligation, usually between a greater power and a lesser power. For example, a conquering kingdom might covenant not to destroy a losing kingdom, as long as the losers promised to fight against the conqueror’s enemies and to support the conqueror with troops and supplies. The obligations are indeed reciprocal, but the power dynamics are not often equal.

Theme: The Storms of Life

This story shows that God changes the divine way of relating to the world. God’s eternal promise is more than simply promising to bring no more floods. God must find a new way of dealing with the problem of sin and evil.

For God to promise not to do something again entails an ongoing divine self-limitation regarding the exercise of freedom and power. God thereby limits the divine options for dealing with evil in the life of the world. The route of world annihilation has been set aside as a divine possibility. And, given the fact that God will keep promises, divine self-limitation yields real limitation. Sin and evil will be allowed to have their day, but God will work from *within* such a world to redeem it, not overpower the world from without.

Notice also what the text does not say. God does not say, “I will never send a storm again.” God never promised that life will be free of storms, trials, troubles and difficulties. Most rainbows appear only after the storm has come and gone. If there were no storms, there would be very few rainbows. The rainbows come after the rain, not before.

But there will still be many storms along the way, tears aplenty, and much sadness. And if we look up, we will see God’s rainbows, the signs and tokens of his love, here and there along the way, reminding us that the storms of life do not mean that things are out of control. The rainbow teaches us that everything is under God’s control.