

A Covenant in a Fallen World: Genesis 9:1–17

Main Idea: God preserves His purposes and calls His people to faithfulness in a world still corrupted by sin.

I. The Calling | Genesis 9:1-7

Genesis 9 begins with words that should sound very familiar. God blesses Noah and his sons and says, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (v.1). This is nearly the same commission God gave Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28, but the setting is vastly different. Adam and Eve received that calling in a world untouched by sin; Noah and his family received it after the fall, after generations of violence, and after the judgment of the flood. Even more importantly, Genesis 8:21 has already reminded us that the human heart is still wicked. God recommissions humanity because His purposes for creation have not changed. Humanity is still to fill the earth, exercise responsibility within creation, form families, and live before God according to His design. We can sometimes treat our fallen nature as an excuse for lowering the expectations of faithfulness. The world being filled with sin does not excuse unhealthy patterns of behavior as just being “how things work.” **God calls His people to faithfulness in the world that actually exists, not the world we wish existed.** The conditions in which obedience takes place may have changed, but God's authority over our lives has not.

Verses 2–4 begin showing us what life under that calling looks like in a world now shaped by death. Animals respond to humanity with fear and dread, they are given into humanity's hand, and God now explicitly permits them to be used for food. But God places a boundary around this: “But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (v.4). Humanity has been given genuine stewardship over creation, but humanity doesn't have dominion independent from God. Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” **The Creator remains the owner; humanity remains the steward. God may give us responsibility but he still retains the right to tell us how it is to be used.** Fallen humans naturally turn stewardship into possession. But Scripture continually reminds us that whatever authority we possess is received authority. Paul will say of the believer's body, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:19–20). The blood prohibition teaches humanity that even when God grants permission to use life for food, life itself remains His gift and must be treated according to His authority.

Verses 5–7 move from life generally to the unique value of human life. God declares that He will require a reckoning for human blood, and He grounds that demand in one fact: “for God made man in his own image” (v.6). Even after the fall humanity still bears God's image. Human beings are sinful, morally corrupt, and capable of terrible violence, but none of those things remove the dignity God gave humanity in creation. Our culture regularly appeals to human dignity, but it often struggles to explain why every human being has dignity. Genesis places human worth outside the individual. **Human dignity rests upon what God has done in creating humanity in His image, not upon what an individual is capable of doing.** But Genesis 9 also connects dignity to justice. God requires a reckoning because the victim whose life was taken bore His image. Justice is therefore not the opposite of compassion; properly exercised, it is one consequence of taking human worth seriously. Scripture distinguishes this from personal vengeance. Romans 12:19 tells believers not to avenge themselves, while Romans 13:1–4 describes governing authority as responsible for restraining wrongdoing. And James brings the image-of-God doctrine even closer to home when he condemns using our tongues to curse people “who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9). Most of us will never murder anyone, but we can still deny, with our attitudes and words, the very dignity we affirm doctrinally. The person we mock, dismiss, stereotype, despise, or decide is beneath us still bears the likeness of the God we worship.

To Ponder:

1. Where are some areas that you have seen Christians use “the way things are” as an excuse for disobedience or a lack of faithfulness? How does scripture challenge these excuses?
2. What is a biblical understanding of stewardship? How should that affect some of the ordinary decisions you make every day?

3. Does the way you think about people reflect their God-given dignity? Where might that sometimes not be the case?

II. The Sign | Genesis 9:8-17

Beginning in verse 8, the focus of the passage shifts from humanity's calling to God's commitment. Again and again God says, "I establish my covenant." The covenant includes Noah, his descendants, and "every living creature" that came from the ark, and its promise is specific: never again will all flesh be destroyed by the waters of a flood. It cannot mean that everyone included in it is spiritually reconciled to God, because animals are included as well as future generations of unbelievers. The covenant preserves the world without regenerating the human heart. This is a clear example of common grace: God's universal kindness towards the world. Jesus says that the Father "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). Common grace must never be confused with saving grace. A comfortable life is not evidence that a person is reconciled with God. Romans 2:4 asks whether sinners presume upon "the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience," not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead them to repentance. **God's temporal kindness is meant to direct creatures toward the Giver, not convince them they have no need to be reconciled to Him.** The Noahic covenant preserves a world in which sinners continue to experience God's kindness while His redemptive purposes move forward.

God then attaches a visible sign to His covenant: "I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (v.13). The rainbow does not add anything to God's promise. God had already spoken clearly that He would never again destroy all flesh by a flood. Instead, the sign gives a visible reminder of what He has said. That is significant when we consider where God places it. The bow appears in the clouds, the very place Noah might naturally associate with the judgment he had just survived. Clouds gathering over the earth no longer needed to leave Noah wondering whether another flood was beginning. God takes something that could remind him of judgment and attaches to it a reminder of His covenant faithfulness. **The assurance does not come from the rainbow itself, but from the promise God has connected to it.** This is an important pattern throughout Scripture: God does not ask His people to put their confidence on feelings or favorable circumstances, but on what He has spoken. Visible signs serve the promise; they do not replace it. For Noah and every generation after him, the rainbow directs attention back toward the certainty of God's Word.

Verses 15–16 say that when God sees the bow, He will "remember" His covenant. The important thing here is not to imagine that God needs help remembering. Divine remembrance means that God acts consistently with the commitment He has made. Noah's confidence therefore does not rest in the faithfulness of Noah or his descendants, but in the faithfulness of God. Genesis will quickly show us that surviving judgment has not made humanity righteous. Noah will sin, his descendants will rebel, and Babel will soon demonstrate again what sinful humanity does with God's world. God's preservation of the world continues because His covenant depends upon His character. At the same time, preservation must not be mistaken for permanence. Peter looks back to the flood in 2 Peter 3:5–13 and says that the present heavens and earth are being kept by God's word for a future day of judgment. **We live in a world that is both preserved by God's patience and moving toward God's appointed conclusion.** Peter asks, "what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness" (2 Pet. 3:11). The time God gives the world is purposeful mercy. There are sinners who need to repent, children who need to be disciplined, churches that need to be strengthened, neighbors who need to be loved, sins that need to be put to death, and a gospel that needs to be proclaimed. Christians are responsible for faithfully living in the portion of history He has entrusted to us while waiting for the new heavens and new earth "in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13).

To Ponder:

4. Why does God give a visible sign if His spoken promise is sufficient?
5. At what point can enjoying the gifts of God's common grace begin to distract a believer from the God who gave them?
6. Peter looks to the flood and asks what kind of people believers ought to be while God patiently preserves the world. If the time we have is purposeful mercy, what should change about the way you use it?