

June 6, 2010

## GOD'S BOW

Jeffery D. Woodhams

When we take a field of blue cloth, sew fifty white stars on it, and attach thirteen stripes, what have we created? Most likely, if we had any skill at all, we would have created an American flag. Let me ask you this morning, *“What makes that flag so special?”* Is it the cloth? Is it the color? Is it the shape? Let me suggest that the reason the American flag is special is that it is symbolic of something greater than cloth of a certain color and shape. It is symbolic of a nation governed by an unique and marvelous system of laws and freedoms. It is symbolic of what men and women of integrity and hard work can accomplish when left to govern themselves. It is symbolic of the blood and sweat of those who have fought and continue to fight to preserve this freedom. It is symbolic of the liberty that for most of the world is only a dream. It is the symbol of a great and mighty covenant that binds American to American.

Because the nation of America is based upon a covenant of men, it can be brought into jeopardy. The United States Constitution, which is the embodiment of that covenant, will not be able to bind together a nation of liars, cheats, and narcissists.

God, however, has given us certain covenants which can *never* be broken. He has made these covenants based upon His own character, and He has given us tangible reminders of those covenants.

The night that Jesus was to be betrayed, He took something familiar and infused it with new meaning. Maybe a better way to say this is to say that He revealed a meaning that was already there but was hidden. You know the event—we call it the Last Supper, the basis for our ordinance of communion, which was given to the Hebrews as the Passover. The Passover was both a memorial of their historic deliverance from Egypt, and a symbol of God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. Whenever we observe Communion, or the Lord's Supper, we remember in tangible form the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior. Do you remember the Lord's words about the bread and the wine? They are the new testament—the new covenant—in His blood! Communion is a memorial of God's covenant to us.

What other memorials has God given to humanity as a whole? Two come to my mind: one is baptism, and the other is the rainbow. Both of these are memorials of God's world-encompassing covenants. The Lord's Supper and baptism are covenants to which anyone can “opt-in”; but the rainbow is a memorial of a covenant into which you are automatically enrolled. Let's talk about this today, starting in Genesis 9:1:

*And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.*

*And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air; upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered.*

*Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things.*

*But flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat.*

I want to make mention of a few things here. First, God repeats to Noah and his family a portion of the command He had given to Adam and Eve much earlier: they were to fill the earth with their descendants. He does not, however, repeat the part about the dominion over animals. Instead, they are told that most animals would avoid them whenever possible. The designation of cattle is left out of the list because these are the domesticated animal. The rest of the animals, though, will generally avoid human contact.

In fact, God now expands the human diet to include meat. It may very well be that, in this new world, protein will be harder to come by without meat. God does not at this point limit what animals may be consumed. Later, God gives the Jews very specific guidelines about what animals are “clean” for consumption, and those dietary standards are still observed by many Jews today. But for the rest of us, there is no limit on what kind of meat may be eaten, which is good because I like bacon and ham which are forbidden under Jewish dietary guidelines.

I should also point out that we are not required to eat meat. It’s totally fine to discriminate against eating the meat of some animals or even all animals. There is no prohibition against being totally vegetarian. I think for many vegetarians the hang up is that they believe we evolved alongside all of our “brother and sister” animals, but that’s another issue. I just shrug at that.

There is only one prohibition: the blood must not be consumed. God explains here that the blood is equated with the life of the animal. That word *life* in Hebrew is *nephesh*. We often see it translated as *soul*. “Now wait a minute, Brother Jeff! I thought animals didn’t have a soul!” Please understand that God Himself uses the term *nephesh* for human and animal life, but *ruach*, meaning wind or spirit, of human life. It would be more accurate to say that animals have a soul but not a spirit, which is unique to mankind and allows us to fellowship with God and to understand morality.

In any case, the life of the animal is equated with its blood. God expands this later in Scripture and gives His reasoning for it, which is a very important theological truth. In Leviticus 17:11, we find these words:

*For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.*

Here we have more clearly what was hinted at in the sacrifices of Cain and Abel, and in the coverings that God made for Adam and Eve: God values blood in a way that we cannot fully understand. The blood of animals was to be made periodically as a covering for sin. The life of the animal would cover the life of men; the *soul* of the animal would cover the *soul* of men. The blood of animals could only make a temporary covering, but the entire sacrificial system pointed to a final, permanent sacrifice in which God’s Son would be a sacrifice for us once for all: “*For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect.... But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins*” (Heb. 10:1, 3-4).

This is the truth of the sacrificial system. It was a “shadow of things to come” because “it is not possible for the blood of bulls and of goats” to take away sins. Now listen to what the author of Hebrews quotes Jesus as saying next in Hebrews 10:7-10:

*Then said I [Jesus Christ], Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God.*

*Above when he said, Sacrifice and offering and burnt offerings and offering for sin thou wouldest not, neither hadst pleasure therein; which are offered by the law;*

*Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second.*

*By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*

Here in Genesis we have yet another hint of God's overall plan for humanity. The life, the blood, is sacred. It must not be consumed. The blood of animals covers sin and points to the final sacrifice of Jesus Christ, once for all.

As we continue here in Genesis 9, we see a very significant origin: the origin of human civil government.

*And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man.*

*Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.*

This is the origin of capital punishment. Remember, the reason for the Flood was that the earth was "filled with violence." Crime and abuse were rampant and unchecked. God therefore told Noah and his sons that they and their descendants were to punish murderers. You know, liberals claim that capital punishment doesn't work as a deterrent, but that is simply and clearly wrong. They say, "You can't get rid of violence with more violence." Capital punishment does act as a deterrent.<sup>1</sup> But there is more to this. Someone is going to have to be designated to investigate, consider, and carry out a verdict in cases of murder. In short, this is the establishment of human government. God says, "Human life is important to me. Do not allow men to get away with killing other men. Stop the violence at its root." I'd like to further note that this is a reference to intentional murder, not accidental killing. Later in Scripture, within the code of laws of the nation of Israel, God makes provision for cities of refuge for those who accidentally or through negligence kill another human being. We also are made to understand that we are allowed to defend ourselves and our nation from violence; but we are never to engage in murder. We must let the law follow its course in the case of capital offenses.

Let's consider God's final words to Noah in Genesis 9:

*And you, be ye fruitful, and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein.*

*And God spake unto Noah, and to his sons with him, saying,*

*And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you;*

*And with every living creature that is with you, of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth with you; from all that go out of the ark, to every beast of the earth.*

---

<sup>1</sup> See David Muhlhansen's June 27, 2007, before the Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Property Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate. Published as "Death Penalty Deters Crime and Saves Lives," August 28, 2007. Available at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Testimony/The-Death-Penalty-Deters-Crime-and-Saves-Lives>.

*And I will establish my covenant with you, neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.*

*And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations:*

*I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth.*

*And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud:*

*And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.*

*And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth.*

*And God said unto Noah, This is the token of the covenant, which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth.*

God established a covenant for all men of all time, and the everlasting memorial of that covenant is the rainbow. God's promise is that He will never destroy the entire earth with a flood again. He will never destroy mankind and the animals with a flood again. God promises to act in accordance with this covenant: "And I will remember my covenant." Remember, this does not imply that God might forget! When we see that God "remembers," it means He *moves on behalf of* or *acts in accordance to*, in this case, His promise.

Whenever we see the rainbow, we are to see the token—the memorial—of God's covenant. This is a symbol for all men everywhere and *everywhen*, if I may be permitted to use the term. As we said at the beginning, you don't have to "opt-in" to this covenant, nor do you have to do anything to keep it. All of the promise and responsibility is on God; and until now, He has faithfully kept this covenant. Will there be local floods and other disasters? Certainly, because the world is broken. There will be natural calamities; there will be warfare, and famine, and abuse; but never again will the whole world be flooded.

God has given us His sign, the rainbow, as an everlasting memorial of His covenant. Let me share with you a purely speculative thought concerning the rainbow: do you notice that God's bow points upward, away from the earth? Perhaps we can think of this as a sign that God's wrath will be directed upward, away from the inhabitants of the earth. God's wrath will be poured out upon His Son, whose shed blood will provide salvation "once for all."

I want to offer you a poem in closing that was written by William Wordsworth. Wordsworth and his colleague Samuel Coleridge Taylor began what is known as the English Romantic movement in 1798 with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of their poems. Part of their goal was to get man to reconnect with nature and natural beauty in an age of cold rationalism and scientific study. We should not be surprised then to find a wonderful poem about the rainbow written by Wordsworth with which to close this sermon.

“The Rainbow”

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!

The Child is father of the Man;  
I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.

—William Wordsworth