

## THE RAINBOW BRIDGE.

“Promises, like piecrust, are made to be broken.” So runs the cynical old proverb. These days we are quite used to the idea. We scoff ruefully to hear that the cheque’s in the mail: from our television sets we learn that we too, can have a wrinkle-free face, a body rippling with muscles, or a happy, fluffy little dog, if we just accept a plethora of promises.

How much is a promise worth? That of course depends on the worth of the one who makes it – either a reasonable hope of it being fulfilled, or sadly, nothing at all. But even the most reliable of us are sometimes forced to break a promise through circumstances beyond our control – the picnic gets washed out in a sullen challenge to the forecast, the birthday party has to be cancelled because chickenpox has put the whole family in quarantine. Our promises are limited by our own human frailty.

Fortunately for us, there is Someone much greater than us, who has never, and will never, break a promise, simply because He has the power, the wisdom, and the love, to make promises He is able to keep. I’m talking, of course, about God. In the Bible we read of several promises God has made with His creatures: they are called “covenants.”

A covenant is simply a promise, a binding agreement, between two parties. It may be between people of equal status, such as a business contract or a marriage. It may be between a powerful authority and those dependent upon it. Or it may be, as in the case of God’s covenants with His people, a “suzerain-vassal” conditional covenant between a great king and his subordinates, where the ruling king promises provision and protection in exchange for loyalty and service.

The covenants which God has made are always initiated by Him and on His terms. The astonishing thing is that God condescends to offer us any covenant at all: our Creator has the right to be our dictator, yet because of His amazing love, He chooses to treat us as friends. And, in contrast to the promises made and broken by governments anxious to keep the voters happy, God’s covenants are not ad hoc decisions made as circumstances dictate. They were all carefully planned before the beginning of time, each one growing naturally out of the preceding one. In fact, they are the ongoing revelation of Himself, and the ultimate expression of His love.

***Think of some of the well-known promises God made in His Word. How do they show His love for us?***

### The First Covenant.

The first covenant we read about is found in **Genesis chapters 6 to 9**. God made man and woman perfect, but within 10 generations from Adam, sin had so taken over the lives of people that God’s heart suffered grief and pain at what had corrupted His own creation. His judgement was to send a flood that would destroy all existing life. Yet even with this judgement, God showed mercy towards the man Noah, who had found favour in the eyes of God through his righteous and blameless walk with Him. God in fact told Noah in **Genesis 6:18**, “I will establish my covenant with you.” In this same chapter God gave Noah the blueprint for the ark that was to be the salvation of him and his family. Noah might have quailed at the enormity of his task, yet verse 22 tells us he did everything just as God commanded him.

***God could have saved Noah and family somehow without Noah having to go to so much trouble, couldn’t He? Why did He ask Noah’s cooperation in His plan?***

## Nuts and Bolts

The statistics of the ark are staggering. As long as one-and-a-half football fields and as high as a four-storey building, its length 6 times its width (the optimum ratio still used by shipbuilders) it has been calculated that it could house almost 45,000 animals. Made of buoyant cypress pine and covered with waterproofing tar, with compartments to make life tenable for all the different species that would be confined within it for over a year!

We wonder how Noah could possibly have accomplished this. We imagine him with his 3 dutiful sons slaving away and deduce that, considering the average husband takes 5 years to put up that extra shelf in the laundry, it would have taken at least 120 years to build the ark! Actually, the picture may have been rather different from that. Babylonian tradition says that Noah, a grandson of Methuselah and great-grandson of the godly Enoch, was a city-king of power and influence, well able to rally – and pay – hundreds of workers for his project.

Even so, it did take 120 years to complete – the warning time God granted to mankind before His judgement fell, as stated in **Genesis 6:3**. How did Noah feel during that interminably long time, as his preaching about the righteous, all-powerful God fell on deaf ears, or produced only derision and scorn? How much did his obedience cost Noah – in time, energy, money and social standing? Yet this godly man worked steadily on, with a perfect trust in his God.

***Noah gave witness to his faith in 2 ways – by preaching, and by his steady persistence in building the ark. Which way do you think is the more effective? Can we use one without the other in seeking to bring the Gospel to others?***

## Collecting the Zoo.

And then came more work – the ingathering of the animals and birds along with enough food to keep them all alive for over a year. It is interesting to speculate how Noah managed to assemble such a motley array. The Bible itself gives us a clue. In **Genesis 1:29** God had said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.”

Perhaps because all life was herbivorous, animals had no fear of man or of each other, and would have been amenable to being herded into an enclosed space. By contrast we look at **Genesis 9:2,3**, where after the Flood God expanded mankind’s menu to include meat, and so “the fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.”

There may have been another factor in this massive in-gathering of animals. Twice we are told, in **chapter 7:9 and 15**, that the animals *came to Noah*, rather than having to be rounded up. Did they, as animals have been observed to do before an earthquake or other disaster, sense the impending danger and gather fearlessly towards the ark as a means of shelter?

***Do you find it hard to reconcile “nature red in tooth and claw” with the God of love who created nature? At Creation God “saw all that He had made, and it was very good”(Genesis 1:31). When Adam sinned and brought death into the world, did that death fall on all nature as well? Consider what St. Paul says in Romans 8:20-22 – “The creation was subjected to frustration...by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”***

## What caused the Flood?

It is interesting to speculate on the geophysical factors involved in the Flood. Scientists wrangling over the years agree that while today the axis tilt of the Earth is 23.5°, that degree of tilt has changed periodically over the thousands of years of Earth's existence. One theory avers that in historical times an electromagnetic derangement of the solar system caused Venus and Mars to approach Earth closely, disturbing its rotation, axis inclination and magnetic field, claiming that some discoveries made by geologists and archeologists would seem to confirm this. Could this perhaps have caused the Flood?

In any case, we do wonder what life was like before the Flood, if indeed Earth was in a position closer to the perpendicular in relation to its poles than on the 23.5° slant it has today. We know that the degree of the slant affects the seasons; perhaps the seasons were far less pronounced than we know them today. In fact it could be inferred from **Genesis 8:22** that seasons were part of God's promise to Noah, initiated after the Flood - "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." If so how were years measured, without the present well-defined seasons? Were they the same length as years today? It seems there was no rain, as we are told in **Genesis 2:5,6** that "the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth .... but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground." Did a more even climate make for a healthier life-style and a much longer life as portrayed in the Genesis genealogies? We still have a lot to discover.

***Does God still control our weather? If so, how accountable are we for climate change, global warming etc.? How much can humankind affect this Earth given to us by God? Are disasters such as floods, earthquakes and hurricanes sent as judgements on the human race, or are they simply natural phenomena?***

## Down Came the Rain.

At last the time of judgement came: tradition marks this as about 2500 B.C. Noah had done everything just as God had instructed him: now was the time for God to respond with His great plan of salvation for His faithful servant. **Genesis 7** relates that God told Noah (by now 600 years old) to come into the ark with his family and a selection of animals enough to preserve each line. God gave Noah a precise timetable: in one week the rain would start, and it probably took that long to muster all the animals into their respective holding pens. Then there would be 6 weeks of rain, and that is precisely what happened. **Verse 11** says that "on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened" –which does sound quite cataclysmic! A look at a map of the Euphrates Valley shows it to be like a huge watershed, with almost as much water as land surrounding it. Any catastrophic collapse of land there would cause a massive inundation.

Yet Noah and his family were safe. **Verse 16** says "the Lord shut him in." In keeping His covenant, God saved completely those 8 faithful people – not *out* of trouble, but *through* the trouble, even as they were content to stay limited to His plan. All through the Bible we see this amazing condescension of God, the interweaving of His might with human effort, to bring about His great purposes. Outside the ark, there was total calamity, while inside the ark, there was total salvation. With God there are no half measures.

***In Noah's day there were only 2 choices – belief and preservation, or unbelief and destruction. Are there any other alternatives today?***

## Water, water everywhere ...

By the end of the 6 weeks even the high mountains were covered, and the ark was lifted up until it was afloat. Was the motion gentle? Or was this the first experience of sea-sickness? It must have been traumatic – a brand new experience of perpetual motion! We read that Noah had put a window in the ark, but how much could they see of their surroundings? Did God kindly keep the sight of the utter devastation from them? Did they all have enough faith to keep their panic at bay?

The waters flooded the earth for 5 months – **Genesis 7:24** – but it would be a year before the little company could leave the shelter of the ark. We wonder how Mrs. Noah and her 3 daughters-in-law coped, being cooped up together for so long. The mind boggles. Did they all bog in and help with the mucking-out of the animal pens, or the throwing out of the bilge-water? Or were the women too busy in the galley, trying to prepare appetising meals from the bland food in storage?

### **A long year aboard.**

But the longest year must end. **Genesis 8:1** tells us, “But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and He sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded.” The Hebrew word for “wind” is the same as that used in **Genesis 1:2** – “The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” Even in the process of evaporation we see the very movement of the Spirit of God!

Noah was not only remarkable for his obedience, but also for his patience. He had spent 120 years building the ark that was only needed for 1 year, just as Jesus spent 30 years in preparation for his ministry of 3 years. Once the waters began to recede, Noah had to wait another 5 months before the ground had dried out sufficiently to stand the trample of so many feet, until in fact God Himself told Noah to come out.

***Do you find years of training irksome, a waste of precious time? Nothing can ever be accomplished in a hurry, particularly when it comes to service for God. His view of time is different from ours!***

### **Glorious terra firma!**

And what was the first thing Noah did on that great day of liberation? He built an altar and worshipped God with a sacrifice! **Genesis 8:20-22** sums up the story of this first covenant with all mankind. “The Lord smelled the pleasant aroma and said in his heart: ‘Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.’”

**Chapter 9** elaborates on this covenant: it was unconditional, unilateral, everlasting, all the obligation on God and none on man. God, pro-active in creating and running the universe, said to Noah and his sons, “I establish my covenant with you ... a covenant for all generations to come. I have set my rainbow in the clouds” (perhaps a new thing caused by the new phenomenon, rain) “and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth ... I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.”

***God declared that He would never again destroy all living creatures even though man’s heart was evil from childhood. Does that mean He will overlook sin, or does that mean that He restrains Himself in applying judgement? Is judgement inevitable, considering the work of Christ in His death and resurrection?***

Centuries on, that rainbow still appears, like a bridge of mercy between the sun of God’s love and the clouds of our sin. In the rainbow we catch a glimpse of Jesus Christ, for just as the rainbow’s arch takes on the form of the circular earth, so we read in **Philippians 2:7** that Jesus “taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness,” became a man so that he might bridge the gap between man and God.

In **John 8:12** Jesus said, “I am the Light of the world.” From the rainbow we see that light is made up of 7 colours. **Revelation chapter 4** tells us there is a rainbow around the throne of God in heaven,

with 7 lamps blazing to signify the 7 spirits of God or, as it can also be translated, the sevenfold Spirit. Seven stands for the glory and completeness of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

***Prayer and Praise.***

***Next time you see a rainbow, remember that God can see it too, and in seeing it, He is remembering to keep the covenant He made with all mankind. Look again at the rainbow, and remember that God will faithfully keep His covenant with you as long as you are faithful to Him, simply because He loves you.***