



## A Covenant in Humanity

There were ten generations between Adam and Noah. During that time, from the moment Adam sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, humankind was on a spiritual and moral decline. By the time Noah's generation came around, humanity was in such a depraved state—steeped in sexual immorality, murder, and theft—that God had to intercede.

Jewish tradition teaches that if the generation alive during the flood would have repented—even as the rain fell and the waters rose—God would have accepted their repentance and saved them all. The rain could have served to turn the hearts of humanity back to God. However, the people refused to repent, and the flood cleansed the earth of all their evil.

In His infinite wisdom, God chose to begin the world again. For that, He needed a person and a plan. The person God selected was Noah, and the plan He put into place to ensure a better world was the covenant He made with Noah and all his descendants. Like any other covenant, this agreement would serve as a contract between God and humanity, where both parties had obligations to each other.

Interestingly, the symbol of the covenant is the rainbow. The rainbow can be seen as half of a circle, or half of a whole. Even when a rainbow is seen in its entirety from one end to another, it is still only a half a circle. This semi-circle placed in the sky reminds us of God's commitment never to destroy the world again. The other half—the part that would complete the circle—has to come from humanity on earth. It is our obligation not to destroy ourselves. As God told Noah, *"I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being..."* (Genesis 9:5).

Ultimately, this covenant was not enough. The ten generations between Noah and Abraham failed, and God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah before their way of life spread throughout the world. Later, God would create a new covenant with Abraham and then another with his descendants, Israel. However, the covenant with Noah—and, by extension, with all humanity—is an important step in this process, and is this lesson's focus.



*"But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you."*

— GENESIS 6:18



# Righteous in His Time

While many Christians consider God's promises to Adam as the first covenant (Genesis 3:15), Jews believe God's promises to Noah is the first covenant because it is the first time the word *brit* ("covenant") appears in the Bible. This raises the question, why Noah? Why was he spared from the flood that destroyed all humanity and nearly every other living creature? Did you ever consider that every person alive today owes his or her life to Noah? It's true! He is the second father of us all.

What was so special about Noah that he was given this tremendous privilege and significant position?

The Bible gives us the answer. In Genesis 6, we learn the human race had become utterly corrupt and evil. We further learn of God's plans to destroy humanity—except for Noah: *"But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD"* (v.8). The Bible tells us, *"Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God"* (v.9).

Noah was different from the rest of his generation. In a world of depravity, Noah was a beacon of righteousness. He resisted the culture of his time and remained steadfast to what was right and moral. No wonder God chose Noah to *"establish my covenant with you..."* (v.18).

Despite appearances, Noah might not have been so righteous himself. Based on the words *"among the people of his time,"* it's argued that had Noah lived in a different time, such as Abraham's generation, he would not have been considered particularly righteous. Yet, relative to the society in which Noah lived, he was the most righteous man alive.

Yet, despite these shortcomings, we find some remarkable behavior on Noah's part. Noah was completely obedient to all God told him to do—an obedience that spanned decades. When Noah is first mentioned in the Bible, he was 500 years old (Genesis 5:32); he was 600 years old when the rains began (Genesis 7:6; 11). During those years, Noah built the ark exactly as God instructed, gathered all the animals and birds, and took his whole family into the ark, just as *"the LORD commanded him"* (Genesis 7:5).

Noah is commended for his faithfulness and righteousness elsewhere in the Bible. In the book of Ezekiel, as God was telling the prophet Ezekiel of the certainty of His judgment against Jerusalem, God said, *"even if these three men—Noah, Daniel and Job—were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign LORD"* (Ezekiel 14:14).

In the Christian Bible, Noah takes his place among the great heroes of faith in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11: *"By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith"* (v. 7).

Noah had an unbreakable bond with God and an unwavering faith in Him. For that, Noah was chosen—chosen to enter into covenant with God, chosen to create a world founded upon righteousness, justice, and morality.



*This is the account of Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.*

— GENESIS 6:9

# A New World

After an entire year in the ark watching the rains flood the earth, then waiting for the waters to recede, Noah finally opened the doors and stepped into the sunlight. But the world Noah entered was a new one, fundamentally different from the one he had lived in before, one more intricately connected to a covenantal relationship with God.

Before the flood, it only rained once every 40 years. That was enough to sustain life on earth. In addition, before the flood there were no seasons. The temperature was always just right—never too hot and never too cold. The name Noah, *Noach* in Hebrew, literally means “comfortable.” The world before the flood was very *noach*, comfortable, indeed. But the comfort and ease of living caused people to forget God and to lust after their desires uninhibited. The new world would be different—both spiritually and physically.

God said to Noah, “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease” (Genesis 8:22). Now there would be seasons. When the heat beat down unbearably, people would turn to God and ask for reprieve. When the harsh cold set in, people would turn to God for a source of warmth. If a drought took place, people would pray for rain. If an early frost set in, people would pray that their crops survived. Humankind would still reap a bountiful harvest from the land, but it was no longer guaranteed.

More importantly, the post-flood world was founded upon a covenantal relationship between God and humanity. In the Creation story found in Genesis 1, the word *tov*, which means “good,” appears seven times. God created a world that would succeed because of the intrinsic goodness in every human being. But after God saw that humanity had become corrupt and clouded that goodness, there was a need for different guidelines.

In Genesis 9 Moses writes the word *brit*, meaning “covenant,” seven times. Instead of relying on the goodness in humanity, God put into place laws that would preserve that goodness. Under the Noachic Covenant, those universal laws are: Do not murder; do not steal; do not worship false gods; do not be sexually immoral; do not be cruel to animals; do not blaspheme God; and an affirmative command to set up a system of justice.

Noah and his family may have landed in a more demanding world—a place where sustenance would not come as easily, where weather would not always be comfortable and predictable, and where basic moral obligations were placed upon every human. But it was also a better world—a world that was more conducive to an awareness of God and the creation of a moral, just society.

The directives given to Noah were part of the everlasting covenant God entered with all humanity. This contract is just as binding upon us today as it was in Noah’s time. It is the founding covenant of humanity. It is the covenant upon which all other covenants would stand as God deepened His relationship with humanity and mankind’s partnership with God developed.



*Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you. . .”*

— GENESIS 9:8-9

# A Bow in the Sky

When it came time to seal the covenant made with Noah, God chose a rainbow to be the sign and symbol of the eternal agreement. Everyone agrees that rainbows are beautiful. However, Judaism has a conflicted relationship with the rainbow. On one hand, we embrace it. But on the other hand, we distance ourselves from it and count a generation who has never seen a rainbow as fortunate.

The rainbow is the sign that God will not destroy the earth again. But isn't it also a sign that humanity is deserving of destruction? As strange as this may sound to those not familiar with this perspective, the Jewish custom is to look at a rainbow, but not to gaze at it too long as it represents the degenerate state of our society. Because of this, some Jews refrain from telling others that there is a rainbow in the sky.

In Hebrew, the word for "rainbow" is *keshet*. *Keshet* is also the same word for a "bow," as in a "bow and arrow." It's not by accident that in English and in Hebrew the word for the colorful arc God created as a sign of His covenant is the same as the primary weapon of Noah's time. When God placed His bow "in the clouds," He was saying that He was putting His weapon away. It would be kept "in the clouds," away from the earth. The sages noted that when one sees a rainbow, the bow is facing away from the earth, its arrows are no longer aimed toward humankind.

The rainbow is also a manifestation of God's glory. That's why rainbows can take our breath away, and leave us feeling in awe of God and His creation. In Ezekiel 1:28 the prophet described God's glory in heaven like this: "Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell face down, and I heard the voice of one speaking." This is another reason why Jews have the custom not to gaze at a rainbow too long, as it is gazing at the holy glory of God.

In the Christian Bible, when John recorded his vision of heaven and God sitting on His throne in the Book of Revelation, he similarly described it: "before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne" (Revelation 4:2-3).

However we choose to look at it, the rainbow is a powerful symbol that reminds us God has not forgotten His promise to us. As Christian author and theologian Aaron Chalmers wrote in his article, "The Importance of the Noahic Covenant to Biblical Theology": "The sign of the covenant [the rainbow], which effectively guarantees God's faithfulness and willingness to act on his covenantal promises, is another feature that points to God's ongoing commitment to the world he has created."

The rainbow is a sign of human weakness, but more so a sign that, despite our failings, God still believes in us. It is a symbol of how far we have fallen, but also a symbol of hope for how great we are yet to become. With its seven colors, it is also a reminder of the seven directives given to all humankind so that we can create the just and moral society that God intended for our world.



Photo: John Martin, c. 1843

*"I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth."*

— GENESIS 9:13

# Think About It

1. In light of our study, what does the rainbow mean to you?
2. What do you think are the main values of the society around you? Do they conflict with your own? If so, how do you remain true to your values and faith?
3. Imagine what the world would look like if all humanity kept the seven laws God gave to Noah as part of the covenant. Is such a world possible?
4. God has kept His part of the Noahic Covenant for millennia. What can each of us do to uphold our end of the contract?
5. Re-read the account of Noah and the Great Flood in the Bible (Genesis 6-9). What lessons can we learn from Noah's character – both the positive and negative aspects?



# Apply It

1. **Pray for those in need.** If we only pray for ourselves and our loved ones, we are missing the point. God wants us to pray for all people in need. (1 Samuel 7:8; James 5:16)
2. **Be brave in faith.** While others may not agree with your faith-based values, be strong and proud to declare your faith and act upon it. (Joshua 1:9; 2 Timothy 1:7)
3. **Turn to God in all conditions.** If we have shelter over our heads, air conditioning, or heat, thank God for those provisions. If we suffer from extreme weather, turn to God in prayer. (Psalm 34:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:18)
4. **See God's image in others.** The Noahic laws beckon us to see the godliness in others, no matter who they are, and to treat them accordingly. (Genesis 1:27; Romans 8:29)
5. **Say a blessing.** When you see a rainbow, let it remind you of God's faithfulness. Take a moment to praise God for keeping His promise. (1 Kings 8:56; 2 Corinthians 1:20)

