

# THE COVENANT WITH CREATION

*being the substance of a sermon preached by Rev. Ronald Hanko*

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## INTRODUCTION.

### Genesis 8:15 through 9:17

In our study of God's covenant we have on previous Lord's Days spoken of different matters. We have seen that the covenant is not a contract or agreement, but a relationship; that the origin and source of God's covenant with His people is in the Divine Trinity and in the relationship between the three Persons of the Trinity; that Christ in our flesh is the Mediator of the covenant; that there is only one everlasting covenant of God; and that the one covenant of God has different revelations or dispensations throughout history.

We have also seen that the first revelation of the covenant was to our father Adam in paradise, a dispensation of the covenant that is sometimes referred to as "the Covenant of Works." When Adam fell God revealed His covenant faithfulness to Adam and Eve and their descendants in His dealings with them and in the promise of Genesis chapter 3 verse 15. But after that there was not another significant revelation or dispensation of the covenant until the time of Noah.

**Genesis chapter 8 verse 15 through Genesis chapter 9 verse 17 record the revelation of the covenant that God gave to Noah.** That covenant with Noah has some unique features, so much so that it is sometimes difficult to see how it can be a revelation of God's one everlasting covenant of grace. It seems at first glance to be, as dispensationalism teaches, a separate covenant altogether, especially because God speaks of this covenant being established with "every living creature of all flesh" (Genesis ch. 9 v. 15), "of the fowl, of the cattle, and of every beast of the earth."

*I will, therefore, be speaking of this revelation of God's covenant as His "Covenant With Creation".* In speaking of that covenant, I wish to show you three things. **First**, I want to show that there is such a covenant of God with the creation and that it is part of God's one everlasting covenant of grace. **Secondly**, I would like to point out some of the unique features of this covenant of God with creation. Especially I want to connect this revelation of the covenant with the work of Christ as the Mediator and Head of the covenant. And, **thirdly**, I want to answer the question, "Why does Scripture speak of that

covenant?” It might seem to you and me, that even if there is such a covenant of God with the creation, that it has nothing to do with US. But if you keep this question in mind throughout our study, you will not only see that Scripture has an answer for it, but perhaps you will even come to the answer before I do.

In our study, then, we will be looking not only at Genesis chapters 8 and 9 but also at some other Old and New Testament passages that shed God’s light on Genesis chapters 8 and 9. Those passages are Jeremiah chapter 33 verses 19 through 26, Romans chapter 8 verses 19 through 22, Colossians chapter 1 verses 19 through 21, and Revelation chapter 21 verse 1. May God speak His Word to us in them.

## **EXPOSITION. . . .**

**First:** Turning to **Genesis chapter 9 verses 9 and 10**, we read there what God said to Noah:

“And I, behold I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you.”

That is not much different from what God said to others with whom He established His covenant, to **Abraham**, (**Genesis ch. 17 v. 7**), to **David** (**Psalm 89 v. 3 and 4**), to **Israel** (**Exodus ch. 6 v. 4 and 5**), or to **us** (**Acts ch. 2 v. 39**).

However, in **Genesis chapter 9 verse 10**, God adds:

“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. . . .”

God is saying: “I will establish my covenant with the birds, with the cattle, and with all the beasts of the earth.” *That is what we are referring to as God’s “Covenant With Creation.”* And God speaks of that covenant with creation again in the verses that follow, especially in verse **13 (of Genesis ch. 9)**:

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

And again in verse 15 God shows us plainly that the covenant referred to is not only His covenant with Noah and Noah’s descendants. His covenant embraces “every living creature of all flesh.”

The rainbow is the sign of that covenant. When you see a rainbow in the heavens, it

arches over the whole earth embracing, as it were, the whole order of created things. Arching over God's world it is a sign that He has a covenant with the creation.

**Second:** We should see, that even though that this covenant is established with every living creature, it is not a different covenant from the covenant that God establishes with His people. In Genesis chapter 9 verses 9 and 10 God does not establish one covenant with Noah and His descendants and another with the creation. **It is all one covenant.** Not only that, but it is the same covenant that God established with Abraham, with Israel, with David and with us in Christ. The same language is used here in Genesis 9 that is used with every revelation of God's covenant in Scripture, "I will establish my covenant with you and with your seed after you" (cf. as above, Genesis ch. 17 v. 7, Exodus ch. 6 v. 4 and 5, Psalm ch. 89 v. 4 and 5, and Acts ch. 2 v. 39).

That language, "I will establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you," is the usual language of the covenant, and identifies this revelation with every other revelation of God's covenant in Scripture. Only, here in Genesis chapter 9 the covenant is also "with every living creature that is with you." That makes this revelation of the covenant unique. It is not the revelation of a different covenant, but it is a new and different revelation of that one everlasting covenant of God.

**Third:** Nor is Genesis chapter 9 the only passage that speaks of this covenant of God with the creation. **Jeremiah chapter 33 verses 19 through 26** also refers to it. In turning to Jeremiah chapter 33, I want to remind you of that question I asked at the beginning; "What does this covenant of creation have to do with us, and what profit is there for us in speaking of it?" To some extent Jeremiah chapter 33 answers that question and so we will be coming back to Jeremiah chapter 33. Now, however, I want to show you that Jeremiah does speak of such a covenant.

In **Jeremiah chapter 33 verses 20 and 21**, God speaks of His covenant of the day and of the night:

"Thus saith the Lord, if ye can break my covenant of the day, and my covenant of the night, and that there should not be day and night in their season, then may also my covenant be broken with David my servant, that he should not have a son to reign upon his throne."

God refers to that covenant again in verse 25.

There is, then, a covenant of God with day and night - a part of God's creation. What is more, the Word of God tells us in the rest of Jeremiah chapter 33 that the covenant with

day and night involves God's appointing the ordinances of heaven and earth (vs. 25). In other words, when God appointed the law (ordinance) that sets the sun in its place in the heavens, and the moon and stars also, then He was making a covenant with the day and night. And so it is with all the so-called "laws of nature." They all belong to God's ordinances of heaven and earth and are part of His covenant with creation, just as His moral laws are part of His covenant with His people (Deuteronomy ch. 5 v. 2 and 3).

We see, too, from Jeremiah chapter 33 that this covenant with creation was not first made with Noah, but goes all the way back to the beginning when God first appointed those ordinances of heaven and earth. It was to Noah, however, that God first revealed this part of His covenant, and He revealed these things to Noah because at the time of the Flood He changed some of the ordinances of that covenant, sending the seasons for the first time, giving the animals to man for meat, lifting the curse from the ground, but promising that He would not again change these ordinances "while the earth remained."

**Romans chapter 8 verses 19 through 22** also speaks of the covenant with creation, but it takes us a step farther. These verses do not use the word "covenant" but the idea is there. The covenant comes into Romans chapter 8 verses 19 to 22 when the Word of God in those verses speaks of the final glory of believers in terms of sonship. In glory we will be "manifest as the sons of God" and will "enter into the glorious liberty of the children of God." The manifestation of the sons of God is the final realization and perfection of God's covenant, the highest glory of that covenant relationship in which God is our God and we are His people.

But if you read Romans chapter 8 verses 19 through 22 you will see that the creation also shall participate in that glory of God's people: "The earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God!" The "creature" here refers to what we sometimes call the "brute creation" - sun, moon, stars, planets, flowers, trees, grass, beasts and birds. The brute creation "was made subject to vanity (= emptiness, uselessness)" (v. 20), that is, it no longer served the purpose for which God had created it, and that as a result of man's sin. This happened, "not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope." In other words, this did not happen to the brute creation by its own act of wilful disobedience, but came about as a result of Adam's sin (cf. Genesis ch. 2 : 17 and 3 : 6 - 7).

Nevertheless, even the creature is not without hope. Its hope is, as Paul says in Romans 8 verse 21, that "the creature also itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God." That will be the final realization of what God was talking about when He spoke to Noah in Genesis chapters 8 and 9. The creature itself also shall be renewed and glorified with God's people. Then God's

covenant with creation will be consummated! That covenant, too, is sure and everlasting!

**Colossians chapter 1 verses 19 through 20** takes us even further into this truth. Verse 19 tells us that it is the eternal good pleasure and purpose of God that “in Him (that is, in Christ) should all fulness dwell. Verse 20 makes it clear that the all fulness does not only include the fulness of God’s elect people, but the fulness of all things on earth and in heaven:

“And, having made peace, through the blood of his cross, by him (by Christ) to reconcile ALL things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.”

Now, you might say, Is not that a reference to God’s elect people and to the elect angels? Are not they the “all things” to which the Word of God refers? But the next verse makes it clear that God’s elect people are not even under discussion in verse 20! It is not until verse 21 that Paul begins to speak of God’s elect people: “And you,” he says, “that were sometimes alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled. . . .” You too! but not only you! God’s purpose encompasses all things in heaven and in earth!

And that this purpose has to do with His covenant we see from the word “reconciliation.” That is very much a covenant word in that it implies a relationship, first established, then violated, and finally restored again. So, when God speaks of reconciling all things to Himself by the blood of Christ’s cross, He is no doubt speaking of the fact that He will keep covenant with them forevermore.

**Revelation chapter 21 verse 1** also speaks of these things. In the last chapters of Revelation the Word of God takes us beyond the history of this present world to those things that “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard” (1 Cor. ch. 2 v. 9), things that God has prepared for those who love Him. In speaking of such things Revelation 21 speaks first of a new heaven and a new earth. When John sees the new Jerusalem (according to verses 9 and 10, the Church, the Bride, the Lamb’s wife) he sees also a new heavens and earth. The purpose and covenant of God, you see, have to do not only with the church, that holy city in which God dwells with His people and is their God, but with all things. His covenant embraces not only the new Jerusalem and all those who dwell therein, but the whole of the created order, cleansed, renewed and glorified!

Revelation chapter 21 verse 1 is an important verse because it explains something that puzzles a lot of people and leads them astray. They look at passages from the Word of

God, especially in the Old Testament, passages like Isaiah 11 : 6, that speak thus : “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and fatling together...” and they conclude that there must be some future earthly kingdom which we are still waiting for - a kingdom in which some of the effects of sin will be overcome in this present world. But Revelation chapter 21 reminds us that such passages are not talking about this present earth, but about the new heaven and the new earth - that heaven and earth “wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2 Peter ch. 3 v. 13). In that new heaven and earth the wolf will indeed dwell with the lamb, for “the creature also shall be delivered . . . into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”

That, very briefly, is a review of what the Scriptures teach concerning God’s covenant with creation, first revealed in all its splendour to Noah in Genesis chapters 8 and 9 - not a second or third covenant, but part of the one everlasting covenant of God, a covenant that embraces the whole created order.

So then, by way of continuing to look for an answer to the question, “Why does Scripture speak of this covenant of creation?” we must see first several other truths that Scripture teaches concerning this covenant. We begin by going back once more to Genesis chapters 8 and 9.

From the last verses of Genesis chapter 8 we learn that this covenant is most emphatically in Christ. You would expect that, of course. If this covenant is simply another facet of the one everlasting covenant of God, it must be in Christ. We learn that this is so from Genesis chapter 8 verses 20 and 21: “And Noah builded an altar unto the Lord; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man’s sake. . . .” And please understand that everything that God says and does in revealing this covenant of creation follows from the fact that God smelled a “sweet savour” in those sacrifices of Noah.

I hardly have to tell you that the sweet savour God smelled in the sacrifices of Noah was not the savour of burning flesh, but the sweet savour of Christ who was pictured in those sacrifices. All the promises and revelation of God concerning this covenant result from that. This covenant of God with creation is, therefore, as firmly established in Christ, as those aspects of God’s covenant that concern us.

Colossians chapter 1 says the same thing. I did not say much about those verses when they were under discussion earlier on, but Colossians chapter 1 verse 20 says something that is not only difficult to understand but most amazing. Remember now that Colossians chapter 1 verse 20 is not talking about God’s elect people, but about all other

things in heaven and in earth. Only in verse 21 does Paul begin to talk about us. In verse 20 he is talking about everything else, angels, the brute creation - everything else but us, and he says, (please notice this) that all those things, too, are reconciled to God by Christ and by the blood of the cross! Not an easy passage to understand, is it?

It must, however, refer first to the fact that sin has dragged all things out of their proper relationship to God. The sin of Satan certainly affected the whole heavenly order (especially if Satan, as some believe, was the chief of the angels before his fall). The sin of man, too, had consequences for the whole world in which he lives, so that even the ground was cursed for his sake (Genesis ch. 3 v. 17). If you ever doubt the horror of sin, then you should remember that. For the sake of Adam's sin even the very ground on which he walked came under the terrible curse of God. That was true, of course, because Adam was Head and King of the earthly creation (Genesis ch. 1 v. 26).

Only through Jesus Christ and through the blood of the cross are all things brought back into their proper relationships to God and to the place God created for them. They are all reconciled to Him through Christ. That does not mean, of course, that Christ had to make atonement for birds, beasts, trees, and angels. The word reconciliation is not the same as the word atonement. It only means that because of man's sin and God's curse all things needed to be brought back into a proper relationship to God - they needed to be reconciled to Him and are reconciled in Christ.

We should notice, too, in this connection that "all things" in these passages has to be understood in the same way as the references in Scripture to "all men." In neither case does "all" mean "all without exception" but means "all without distinction." In other words, the "all" of Colossians chapter 1 verse 20 does not mean every individual thing that God created. In fact there is no ground at all in Scripture for believing that the individual trees and animals we have around us now will be in the new creation. But the "all" does mean that all things that God has created will be represented in the new heavens and earth.

There is a hint of this in Revelation chapter 4 verse 8, where John sees the throne of God in heaven in the midst of the four and twenty elders (the church), the seven spirits, the four beasts, and the angels. Those four beasts, the first like a lion, the second like a calf, the third like a man, and the fourth like a flying eagle suggest the same thing as Colossians chapter 1 verse 20. Wild beasts (the lion), domestic beasts (the calf), man himself, and flying fowls (the eagle) are all symbolically represented before the throne. It must be so in order that God may be ALL AND IN ALL for the glory of His Name.

All of this reminds us that God who created all things and put the whole earthly order under man's dominion, does not allow man, by his sin, to take ANYTHING away from Him. All shall be renewed and have its place in the new heavens and earth. All, in the end, will serve the purpose for which it was created. "The creature also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans ch. 8 v. 21) and in hope of this it groans and travails together even until now" (v. 22).

**This, by the way, is true Biblical universalism.** Not every person shall be reconciled to God and glorified, but God will gather "together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in him" (Ephesians ch. 1 v. 10). Thus, God's world, His Cosmos, will be saved, even though not every individual person or every thing in it will be saved.

That brings us to our last point and to the question we asked at the beginning.

Why does Scripture speak of these things to us? What does all this have to do with you and with me? Is there any profit for us in knowing these things? Is not our only concern our own place in God's covenant and in the new heavens and earth? Why should we care that God has made a covenant with His creation and that in fulfilment of the covenant all things will be gathered in one in Christ?

Starting with Colossians chapter 1 verse 20, we see that Scripture speaks of these things to humble us. Colossians chapter 1 reminds us that we are not everything in the covenant of God. We have a place in that covenant, a very high place as God's own children, but we are not everything and must not think we are everything. God is so great, so high in glory, that His glory is revealed finally in the ingathering of all things. He must be ALL AND IN ALL. That, then, is first reason for speaking of these things, that by them we may learn humility before God.

The second is to assure us of God's covenant faithfulness.

Turning from Colossians back to Jeremiah chapter 33, we learn from that passage that God reveals His unchangeable faithfulness in His covenant with creation! Jeremiah tells us that God is faithful in His covenant of the day and night. Day and night have come in their turn for thousands of years because God is faithful. He keeps His covenant with the day and night so that those ordinances do not cease. Genesis chapter 8 verse 22 tells us the same thing: "While the earth remaineth," God said to Noah, "seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night, shall not cease."



So, in Jeremiah 33 the prophet says to us, “Do not you see that if God is faithful in such things He will also be faithful to you? How can you doubt the unchangeable faithfulness of your covenant God if He is faithful even in His covenant of the day and night? Do you not understand that though you are often unfaithful to Him, He will never be unfaithful to you? No more than you can break His covenant of day and night can you break His covenant of grace with you!” - “If ye can break my covenant of the day, and my covenant of the night, and that there should not be day and night in their season; then may also my covenant be broken with David my servant. . . .” (Jeremiah ch. 33 v. 20 and 21). That is the second reason why we must know these things, that we may be assured of and trust in God’s faithfulness and grace and not in our own works or strength.

In Romans chapter 8 Paul looks at the matter a little differently. There Paul wants to show us how great the glory that shall be revealed in us really is. In verse 18 he says: “I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” Not worthy to be compared! It is not, however, always so easy to believe that, is it? We have only heard of and not seen that glory? How can we be sure it is really so great - worth everything? It is not so easy to believe that all “the sufferings of this present time, added up and weighed together, are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is coming - not when you think of all the suffering that is in the world at this moment!

Knowing our doubts, therefore, Paul sets out to prove that the glory God has prepared is indeed as great as he says. To prove it he speaks of a three-fold groaning. Beginning with verse 23 he speaks of our own groaning in hope as we wait for the “adoption” and “redemption of our body.” That is one evidence or proof that the glory is very great. By the grace of God we desire that glory so strongly we groan while we must wait for it. You do desire and groan for it, do you not? The grace of God which makes you groan is one proof of the greatness of that glory that shall be revealed in you! In verse 26 Paul also speaks of the groaning of the Spirit as further proof of the greatness of that glory. Even the Spirit of God prays for that glory for God’s people with unutterable groanings!

But here in verses 19 through 22 Paul gives another evidence of that great glory, the groaning of the creation. Speaking as though the creation is alive like we are, he describes it as groaning and travailing in hope for that glory that shall be revealed in US. That glory is so great that even the creation shall have a part in it and now groans for it. That is the proof, therefore that the glory to be revealed is indeed incomparable. You believe that, do you not? You must if you are to have hope in this life and patience in suffering.

Finally, and above all, the purpose of this revelation of God’s covenant with the cre-

ation is to magnify our Lord Jesus Christ, to exalt Him, and to show (as Paul says in Colossians chapter 1) that He has the preeminence in everything. He is the One through Whom the whole purpose of the Father is realized. He is the for whom and by whom all things were created, the One in Whom all fulness must dwell, and the One in Whom all things are gathered in One. Who, then, is like HIM? And being so exalted can we doubt that He also accomplishes the Father's purpose with us? Will we not also someday dwell in Him in whom all things must dwell? He who reconciles all things to God, is He not able also to reconcile us? Doubt Him not. He is exalted as a Prince and a Saviour also by those Scriptures that we have studied in this sermon. Put your faith and trust in Him and you shall not be ashamed!

But it is not only Christ who is exalted and magnified by this covenant of creation. His blood is also - that blood of the cross of which Paul speaks in Colossians chapter 1 verse 20. If you understand what Paul is saying in that verse - that His blood is the means of reconciliation and peace for ALL things, for you also who believe in Him, then you will understand that there is NOTHING so precious as that blood of Christ. It is, as Peter says (1 Peter ch. 1 v. 18 and 19), more precious than gold and silver. Understanding that, you will see what power and value there is in the blood of Christ to reconcile all things unto God, and you also! Seeing that, you will smell what God smelled in the sacrifices of Noah, the sweet savour of Christ crucified, and that savour will never cease to be sweet to you.

**That blood of Christ, the "blood of the cross" stands,** therefore, as the focus and centre of everything, not only of our redemption, but of the reconciliation of all things to God, to Whom alone be glory. May that blood be the focus of our faith, that upon which we depend today and always for life in the midst of death and for the hope of glory that eye hath not seen nor ear heard!

**AMEN**

(The Apostle) shows how the creation has in hope been made subject to vanity; that is, inasmuch as it shall some time be made free, according to what Isaiah testifies, and what Peter confirms still more clearly.

It is then indeed meet for us to consider what a dreadful curse we have deserved, since all created things in themselves blameless, both on earth and in the visible heaven, undergo punishment for our sins; for it has not happened through their own fault, that they are liable to corruption. Thus the condemnation of mankind is imprinted on the heavens, and on the earth, and on all creatures. It hence also appears to what excelling glory the

sons of God shall be exalted; for all creatures shall be renewed in order to amplify it, and to render it illustrious.

.....for as creatures are subject to corruption, not through their natural desire, but through the appointment of God, and then, as they have a hope of being hereafter freed from corruption, it hence follows, that they groan like a woman in travail until they shall be delivered. But it is a most suitable similitude; it shows that the groaning of which he speaks will not be in vain and without effect; for it will at length bring forth a joyful and blessed fruit.....By saying that they groan together, he does not mean that they are united together by mutual anxiety, but he joins them as companions to us.

*John Calvin.....Commentary on Romans 8 verses 20 - 22.*

