

Genesis 9:1-17¹
Life & Hope Anew!

Introduction

After WW II, many Jewish survivors of the Holocaust decided to go to Palestine. However, the British government, which was then governing Palestine, severely limited immigration.

Between 1945 and 1948, around 70,000 Jews attempted to reach Palestine. They left on overcrowded boats from European ports. The British, because of their immigration quota, stopped most of the ships. They sent the survivors to detention camps on Cyprus, which was also controlled by Britain at that time.

The most famous ship of all was the *Exodus*. On 11 July 1947 the *Exodus* left France with 4,500 survivors on board. The British captured the ship. Instead of sending the survivors to Cyprus, the authorities sailed them to Germany.

Despite the British efforts, the majority of Jewish refugees still saw Palestine as their best chance of a future. As Britain continued its detention policy of refugees, world opinion turned against the British position.

When the situation in Palestine became very difficult for the British government, the issue was finally referred to the United Nations, which voted in November 1947 to partition Palestine into two new states—one Jewish and the other Arab.

The British mandate on Palestine terminated on 14 May 1948. David Ben-Gurion, then Chairman of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, announced the formation of the state of Israel.

This announcement opened the door for Holocaust survivors from Displaced People camps in Europe and from detention camps on Cyprus to enter the country ... and to look forward to life and hope anew in a place they believed they could call home.

(<https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/survival-and-legacy/rebuilding-lives-case-studies/>)

It is often not easy to start life and have hope anew after going through a time of calamity. To be able to come out of that traumatic experience, and have life and hope anew in a land of promise is indeed a blessing from God.

¹ 1984 NIV

This is where Gen 9 begins with verse 1 when God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.”

This is indeed a declaration of blessing in view of what is said in Gen 7:21-23 – “Every living thing that moved on the earth perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind. Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; men and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds of the air were wiped from the earth ...”

Have you wondered how you would react when you come out of your safe shelter, only to smell and see human corpses and animal carcasses all around you?

At the sight of this horrendous scene, the blessed words of God came to Noah and his son in Gen 9:1 – “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.”

Ah! When did we first hear these same words? It was in the Garden of Eden (in Gen 1:28) where God blessed Adam and Eve, and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it ...”

Remember that Adam and Eve sinned and were banished from Eden. Here in Gen 9:1, we hear again these same words that God had earlier uttered to them – “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.”

You know the significance of this repetition? The significance is that God is giving humanity another chance—another experience of His grace.

And that's the message we find in our text today. After the floodwaters receded, after the animals left the ark, and after Noah and his family stood on dry land again, God blessed Noah and his family with the opportunity for life and hope anew.

There are some vital truths embedded in our text today that can lead us to life and hope anew in God.

I. The Call to Start Afresh (vv. 1-3)

1 Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.

2 The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands.

3 Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.”

God commissioned Noah and his family to spread out across the land and re-establish human civilization. Noah was to become the patriarch of a vast clan that would eventually branch out to form all the various tribes and nations on earth. Just as Adam was head of the human race in the beginning, Noah would now be the head of the reconstituted human race after the flood. And God gave a significant permission—humans were given permission to eat animals for food. Before the flood, everyone apparently was a vegetarian. Today, there are people who still observe a vegetarian or meat-free diet because of various reasons. But suffice to say that after the flood, God would permit humanity to have meat for food.

Now, we do sense something had gone wrong between humanity and the animal kingdom. Remember in Eden, humanity and the animal kingdom lived in peace and harmony. But here in Gen 9:2-3, we read that fear and dread had fallen on the animals of the ground, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea towards humanity. Why? This is because man would now treat them not as his pets, but eat them as part of his diet.

Later in Lev 11, God made a distinction between clean and unclean animals. This was more than just a dietary law. The clean animals listed were not merely nutritionally clean to be eaten, but more importantly, spiritually clean to be sacrificed to God in worship. In this way, the Law in Lev 11 served as a reminder to the people of Israel then that they were set apart to serve and worship the one, true God Himself.

The Flood was an event of mega destruction. But after that, God blessed Noah and his family as they came out of the ark. He did not let them go hungry, but provided for them with food on a revised menu.

There is a vital spiritual truth here: *Sin will bring about certain consequence(s), but God cannot be defeated by sin and will continue to work out His righteous purposes.*

Human sin may seem to hinder God's plan. But in the end, the will of God would prevail. What God has spoken must come to pass. No evil done by men can thwart the plans of the Almighty. Has God not spoken? Will God not do it? Who dares to stand against God? Some may dare, but none can succeed.

This truth is hugely encouraging because it gives us hope when we/others have messed up thoroughly, like what Adam and Eve had done in Eden. We may lament that God is through with us/the world because of gross sin—"I've (or the world has) sinned too greatly. God will never give me (or the world) another chance." Those who say that perhaps have looked too much at sin, but too little to God.

When everything seems dead and barren before you, the voice of God comes and says, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."

There is a wonderful invitation to those who feel their sin is too great to be forgiven in Isa 55:7 - “Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.” The King James translates the last phrase—“he will abundantly pardon.”

When I stray, when I fall, when I make a mess of my life, I need a God who will “abundantly” pardon me. With God there is always life and hope anew in Him when we repent and return to Him.

II. The Command to Value Human Life (vv. 4-7)

4 “But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it.

5 And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

6 Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.

7 As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it.”

If God was going to start over again in, through and with Noah, Noah would need to know what new rules to follow. These verses tell us there is basically only one rule—i.e. “value life”. Everything flows from that. This rule is applied in two sub-rules.

- The first sub-rule: Don’t eat animals that are pulsating with life. That’s the meaning of verse 4. In order to understand it, we should perhaps add the word “pulsating” after the word “lifeblood”. Since God now gives permission to eat animals for food, He adds the restriction that they must first be put to the death and the blood drained from them. This would seem to be good advice. I mean it’s very difficult to eat a piece of chicken drumstick while it is still part of a chicken running around. This text points to the biblical instruction in Lev 17:11 where it says that life is in the blood. In other words, the blood carries the pulse of life. When paramedics arrive at the scene of an accident, one of the first things they do is to check for a pulse. If they get a pulse, they know the person is alive. The point of first killing the animal, draining the blood, and then eating it is to show respect for life and reverence for God who is the Giver of life.
- The second sub-rule: If a man intentionally sheds the blood of an innocent man, his own blood will be shed as well. The reason given for this life-for-life rule is spelt out in v. 6—it is because man is made in the image of God. God made humanity in His image. God stamped His

divine image on all and each of us. Thus, we're each created with the ability to know God, to love Him, to worship Him, and to serve Him. That separates us from God's other creation in the animal kingdom. Humans are made in God's image. And that makes each one of us unique and valuable; worthy of respect, honour and protection.

That's the biblical basis for capital punishment for murderers though there are now ongoing debates about the validity of the death sentence (especially as it applies to crimes like drug pushing). But we will have to put aside the debates on this topic till another time, Lord willing.

For today's purpose, we want to be clear that since God is the Source of life, He alone has the right to give life or to take it away. In this passage, God delegates to human authority the right to take life in certain circumstances. That's why Romans 13:4 tells us that when a God-assigned authority (e.g. a judge) acts to uphold justice and righteousness by punishing evildoers, he does not bear the sword in vain. That sword of punishment—which includes capital punishment—is God's judgment against those who do evil, and especially those who take innocent human life.

So God will demand an accounting from anyone who would take the life of an innocent human. Interestingly, God will likewise demand the same accounting from every animal who would take the life of an innocent human (Gen 9:5). So if my dog fatally attacks an innocent pedestrian and the court orders my dog to be put to sleep, I would have no moral right to appeal on grounds of cruelty to animals.

Taking an innocent human life is indeed a blatant violation of God's command to value the sanctity of human life.

There is another form of devaluing human life that is common today. It is how one group would marginalize others on bases such as skin colour, social background, and intellectual ability. E.g. prejudice, discrimination, and antagonism directed against those with physical or intellectual disabilities are based on the belief that such people are inferior. Also prejudice, discrimination, and antagonism directed against prisoners or the economically disadvantaged based on the belief that they are a burden to society is another violation of God's command to value human life.

When people are categorized in this manner (whether openly or subtly), the effect is always dehumanizing. All human beings are not merely created, but created in the image of God. The image of God in human beings is what imparts worth and dignity to every human life.

This doesn't mean that we deny cultural and ethnic diversities as wonderful gifts from God. This is because we can still extend worth and dignity to one another as we are all in God's image, even if we acknowledge our differences

in culture or ethnicity. But practicing or condoning evils such as segregation, discrimination, and racism is an assault on the image of God in each person.

Some examples of how we devalue human life, and thus, dishonour the image of God in each person, have to do with how we view ourselves as better than others:

- I am better because I am taller.
- I am better because I am more attractive.
- I am better because I am smarter.
- I am better because I am more successful.
- I am better because I am more gifted.

Indeed, the boastful pride of life in us can affect the way we treat other people.

But God gave a command to Noah (and to us) to value human life. The underlying truth is this: *We honour God's image in every human when we accord worth and dignity to one another in our relationships.*

And when we so accord dignity and worth to one another by way of appropriate appreciation, affirmation, help, protection, reconciliation, and forgiveness in our relationships, we can always experience life and hope anew, resulting in peace with God and with others.

III. The Covenantal Promise of Grace and Mercy (vv. 8-17)

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him:

9 "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you

10 and with every living creature that was with you - the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you - every living creature on earth.

11 I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

12 And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come:

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

14 Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds,

15 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.

16 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."

17 So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth."

We read here of:

- A covenantal promise from God that He would never again flood the entire earth.
- A sign from God to seal this promise—i.e. a rainbow in the sky.

This is the Noahic Covenant. It is important for several reasons:

- First, it is an unconditional covenant—i.e. this isn't a two-way street where we do something and then God does something in response. This is a promise made by God in spite of the fact that the world had just been destroyed because of sin, and His full knowledge that the world would soon plunge back into the pit of sin. E.g. God said in Gen 8:21 – "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done." In spite of us continuing to sin, God promises never again to destroy the entire human race with a flood. This is God's grace and mercy blended together into one word—LOVE.
- Second, it is a covenant guaranteed with a sign—i.e. that of a rainbow. Rainbows are beautiful, and it's easy to think that this is just a cosmetic touch on the part of God. But it's far more than that. Rainbows occur all over the world, thus making the sign global to the same extent as the flood itself. Rainbows are always eye-catching—when you see a rainbow, the natural response is to point it out to others and exclaim, "Look ... a rainbow!"

As we meditate on the rainbow promise, notice what the text does not say. Nowhere does God say, "I will never send a storm again." Nowhere does God promise that life will be free of storms, trials, troubles, and difficulties. Most rainbows appear only after the storm has come and gone. If there were no storms, there would be very few rainbows.

The message to us is obvious. God never promises a life free from pain and suffering. As the song says, he never promised us a rose garden. Or if he did promise us roses, then the roses come with thorns. That's life in a fallen

world. There are floods, fires, and tornadoes. And there are wars, famines, earthquakes, and viruses.

The rainbows come after the rain, not before. We say that all things work together for good, and we know that the “all things” must include tears and suffering; unanswered questions; moments of anger, terror and sadness. And even when we quote those famous words of Joseph in Gen 50:20, where he tells his brothers, “You meant it for evil but God meant it for good,” we must realize that you can’t get to the last word “good” without first going through the word “evil”.

The rainbow tells us of God’s promise not to send another worldwide flood to punish the human race. But there will still be many storms along the way, tears aplenty, and much sadness. But if we look up, we will see God’s rainbows, the signs and tokens of His love, here and there along the way, reminding us that the storms of life do not mean that things are out of control.

Today, the rainbow means different things to different people:

- To the people of South Africa, the rainbow is an expression of their hope and dream for their post-apartheid homeland—i.e. to embrace multiculturalism and the unity of people of diverse tribal and racial backgrounds in a country once bitterly divided between white and black. They call their country the “Rainbow Nation” even though the reality is far from that.
- To the LGBT community, the rainbow is symbolic of their rights to social equality, identity, and individuality. Thus, they would carry the “Rainbow Flag” in their marches to demonstrate their rights around the world.

But the truth embedded in the rainbow sign as God originally intended in Gen 6 is this: *The rainbow reminds us that even in chaotic times, God is still in control.*

Even in His wrath towards human evil and sin, God still remembers His mercy. When He judges, it is to purify and to discipline. And sooner or later, His mercy will be seen. And it is only after His wrath is over that His mercy is most clearly displayed.

Thus, God allows us to have life and hope anew because after the storms of life have come and gone, the rainbow of His grace and mercy will remind us that He is still in control; that nothing can separate us from His love for us.

Conclusion

Two closing thoughts as I bring this sermon to an end:

- First, judgment and mercy both come from God. It’s not as if the devil sent the flood and God sent the rainbow. No—God Himself sent the

terrible judgment of the flood; He's also the one who after the flood guaranteed His mercy with the sign of a rainbow.

- Second, without judgment, mercy would not appear as merciful. The rainbow is always beautiful, but the promise is more glorious because of the flood that preceded it. Mercy shines even brighter, like stars set against a dark sky, when seen against the backdrop of God's righteous judgment.

How then shall we live?

- First, there is good news for those who feel so sinful that you believe God will not accept you. Your sin, no matter what it is, has already been judged. This happened 2,000 years ago when Jesus died on the cross for you. His blood is so powerful that it paid in full the price for all your sins. Your sins were judged at the cross where Jesus died and shed His blood for you. Today is the day of grace and mercy. If you come to Jesus, you will not be turned away. The rainbow promise guarantees that God's grace and mercy is for you. But there is an important caveat—i.e. God's grace and mercy is only ever present as long as you are still on your earthly pilgrimage. So accept His blessing of grace and mercy to you while you still have the earthly breath of life in you. And if you want to know how you can claim this “rainbow promise” from God to you, I encourage you to talk with a Christian whose life has impacted you.
- Second, there is a word here to believers who have grown cold in their faith life for various reasons. You still love the Lord, but the cares of this world and the temptations of life have put you in a place far from a conscious presence of God. Today you feel like under the dark clouds of judgment, guilt, and deep unhappiness. Things are not right and you know it. Perhaps you feel so frustrated that you wonder if things can ever be different. Here is good news. If you would return to the Lord, the clouds will part, the sun will shine, and overhead you will find the rainbow of God's grace and mercy.
- Third, for all of us who labour under heavy burdens and deep personal sorrows, there's a God-sent comfort for us too—i.e. look up and see God's rainbow for us, the sign that God has not forgotten you and me. So we press on and persevere, and allow the Lord to carry us through it all.

The song “Over the Rainbow” was written for the 1939 film “The Wizard of Oz”, and sung by actress Judy Garland in her starring role. It won the Academy Award for Best Original Song and became Judy Garland's signature song.

The lyrics of the song were written by Yip Harburg, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants and grew up in New York. The music was written by Harold Arlen, a Jew whose family immigrated to America from Lithuania.

The first stanza of the song goes like this:

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*Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high
 There's a land that I've heard of once in a lullaby.
 Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue
 And the dreams that you dare to dream,
 Really do come true.*

These lyrics were written in 1939 at a time when the Jews in Europe were coming under increased and intensified hostility. Their freedom was being taken away, and many of them were feeling trapped and unable to break free.

This song is about hope that the bad times will one day be over. It is this feeling of hope within the song that we can all relate to.

Yip Harburg did not know what the future held for the Jewish people when he wrote this song. They as a people went through some of the darkest days in the history of WW II. But it was less than ten years after the song was written that perhaps the most powerful words of the song were fulfilled—"There's a land that I've heard of once in a lullaby".

The Jews dreamt of a homeland of their own. They believed this was realized in 1948 when the nation of Israel was reborn. Indeed, for them "dreams that you dare to dream really do come true".

It seems that our world today is once again overcast with dark clouds amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The rainbow in Noah's time reminds us that though we face very uncertain times today, we can still look forward to life and hope anew in Him ... and see His rainbow above in due time.

(<https://www.cufi.org.uk/spotlight/the-powerful-message-behind-over-the-rainbow>)

Let's claim God's promise of life and hope anew as we look out for the rainbow of His grace and mercy over our lives each day. Amen!