**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**GENESIS-010. THE SIGN FOR MAN AND THE REMEMBRANCE FOR GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"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. 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."*

*Genesis 9:8-17*

The previous verses of this chapter lay down the outlines of the new order which followed the flood. The blessing and the command to be fruitful are repeated. The dominion over animals is confirmed, but enlarged by the permission to use them as food, and by the laying on them of the terror of you and the dread of you. The sanctity of human life is laid down with great emphasis. Violence and bloodshed had brought about the flood. The appalling destruction effected by it might lead to the mistaken notion that God held man's life cheap. Therefore the cornerstone of future society is laid in that declaration that life is inviolable. These blessings and commands are followed by this remarkable section, which deals with God's covenant with Noah, and its token in the rainbow.

**I.** The covenant is stated, and the parties concerned in it enumerated in verses 3-11. When Noah came forth from the ark, after the stupendous act of divine justice, he must have felt that the first thing he needed was some assurance as to the footing on which he and the new world round him stood with God. The flood had swept away the old order. It had revealed terrible possibilities of destruction in nature, and terrible possibilities of wrath in God. Was any knowledge of His intentions and ways possible? Could continuance of the new order be counted on? The answer to such questions was--God's covenant. Now, as then, when any great convulsions shake what seems permanent, and bring home to men the thinness of the crust of use and wont roofing an infinite depth of unknown possibilities of change, on which we walk, the heart cries out for some assurance of perpetuity, and some revelation of God's mind. We can have such, as truly as Noah had, if we use the Revelation given us in Jesus.

In God's covenant with Noah, the fact of the covenant may first be noted. What is a covenant? The term usually implies a reciprocal bond, both parties to which come under obligations by it, each to the other. But, in this case, there are no obligations on the part of man or of the creatures. This covenant is God's only. It is contingent on nothing done by the recipients. He binds Himself, whatever be the conduct of men. This covenant is the self-motived promise of an unconditional mercy. May we not say that the New Covenant in Jesus Christ is after the pattern of this, rather than after the manner of compacts which require both parties to do their several parts?

But note the great thought, that God limits His freedom of action by this definite promise. Noah was not left to grope in dread among the terrible possibilities opened by the flood. God marked out the line on which He would move, and marked off a course which He would not pursue. It is like a king giving his subjects a constitution. Men can reckon on God. He has let them know much of the principles and methods of His government. He has buoyed out His course, as it were, on the ocean, or pricked it down upon a chart. We have not to do with arbitrary power, with inscrutable will. Our God is not one who giveth no account of any of His matters. To use a common saying, We know where to have Him.

The substance of this covenant is noteworthy. It is concerned solely with physical nature. There is nothing spiritual or religious about it. There are to be no more universal deluges. That is all which it guarantees. But consider how important such an assurance was in two aspects. Note the solemn light which it threw on the past. It taught that the flood was an exception in the divine government, which should stand unrepeated for ever, in its dread pre-eminence testifying how awful it was as a judicial act, and how outrageous had been the guilt which it drowned out of existence and sight. A wholesome terror at the unexampled act of judgment would fill the hearts of the little group which now represented mankind.

Consider the effect of the covenant in encouraging hope. We have said that the one thing needful for Noah was some assurance that the new order would last. He was like a man who has just been rescued from an earthquake or a volcanic eruption. The ground seems to reel beneath him. Old habitudes have been curled up like leaves in the fire. Is there to be any fixity, any ground for continuous action, or for labour for a moment beyond the present? Is it worth while to plant or sow? Men who have lived through national tempests or domestic crashes know how much they need to be steadied afterwards by some reasonable assurance of comparative continuity. And these men, in the childhood of the race, would need it much. So they were sent out to till the earth, and to begin again strenuous lives, with this covenant to keep them from falling into a hand-to-mouth style of life, which would have brought them down to barbarism. We all need the same kind of assurance; and then, when we get it, such is the weakness of humanity, we are tempted to think that continuity means eternity, and that, because probably to-morrow shall be as this day, there will never come a to-morrow which shall be quite unlike to-day. The crust of cooled earth, on which we walk, is thick enough to bear man and all his works, but there comes a time when it will crack. The world will not be flooded again, but we forget, what Noah did not know, that it will be burned.

The parties to the covenant must be noticed. Note how frequently the share in it, which all living creatures have, is referred to in the context. In verse 10 the language becomes strained (in the original), in order to express the universal participation of all living creatures; and in verse l3 the earth itself is spoken of as one party. God recognises obligations to all living things, and even to the dumb, non-sentient earth. He will not causelessly quench one bright, innocent life, nor harm one clod. Surely this is, at least, an incipient revelation of a God whose tender mercies are over all his works. He doth take care for oxen; and man, with all the creatures that are with him, and all the wild ones that come not near him, and all the solid structure of the world, are held in one covenant of protecting and sustaining providence and power.

**II.** The sign of the covenant is described at great length in verses 12-17. Note that verses 12, 13 state the general idea of a token or sign, that verses 14-16 deepen this by stating that the token to man is a reminder to God, and that verse 17 sums up the whole with emphatic repetition of the main points. The narrative does not imply, as has often been supposed, that the rainbow was visible for the first time after the deluge. To suppose that, is to read more into the story than is there, or than common sense tolerates. If there were showers and sunshine, there must have been rainbows. But the fair vision strode across the sky with no articulate promise in its loveliness, though it must always have kindled wonder, and sometimes stirred deeper thoughts. Now, for the first time, it was made a sign, the visible pledge of God's promise.

Mark the emphasis with which God's agency is declared and His ownership asserted. I do set My bow. Neither Noah nor the writer knew anything about refraction or the prismatic spectrum. But perhaps they knew more about the rainbow than people do who know all about how it comes, except that God sets it in the cloud, and that it is His. Let us have the facts which science labels as such, by all means, and the more the better; but do not let us forget that there are other facts in nature which science has no means of attaining, but which are as solid and a great deal deeper than those which it supplies.

The natural adaptation of the rainbow for this office of a token is too plain to need dwelling on. It fills the sky when storms prepare to part, and hence is a natural token that the downpour is being stayed. Somewhere there must be a bit of blue through which the sun can pierce; and the small gap, which is large enough to let it out, will grow till all the sky is one azure dome. It springs into sight in front of the cloud, without which it could not be, so it typifies the light which may glorify judgments, and is born of sorrows borne in the presence of God. It comes from the sunshine smiting the cloud; so it preaches the blending of love with divine judgment. It unites earth and heaven; so it proclaims that heavenly love is ready to transform earthly sorrows. It stretches across the land; so it speaks of an all-embracing care, which enfolds the earth and all its creatures.

It is not only a sign to men. It is also, in the strong anthropomorphism of the narrative, a remembrancer to God. Of course this is accommodation of the representation of His nature to the limitations of ours. And the danger of attaching unworthy ideas to it is lessened by noticing that He is said to set His bow in the cloud, before it acts as His remembrancer. Therefore, He had remembered before it appeared. The truth, conveyed in the childlike language, is that God has His covenant ever before Him, and that He responds to and honours the appeal made to Him, by that which He has Himself appointed for a sign to men. The expectant eyes of the trustful man and the eye of God meet, as it were, in looking on the sign. On earth it nourishes faith; in heaven it moves to love and blessing. God can be reminded of what He always remembers. The rainbow reminds Him of His covenant by its calm light. Jesus Christ reminds Him of His grace by His intercession before the throne. We remind Him of His plighted faithfulness by our prayers. Ye that are the Lord's remembrancers, keep not silence.