

God Versus Man

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July 28, 2024

Genesis 9:8-17 ⁸ Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: ⁹ "And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you, ¹⁰ "and with every living creature that *is* with you: the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, of all that go out of the ark, every beast of the earth. ¹¹ "Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." ¹² And God said: "This *is* the sign of the covenant which I make between Me and you, and every living creature that *is* with you, for perpetual generations: ¹³ "I set My rainbow in the cloud, and it shall be for the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth. ¹⁴ "It shall be, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud; ¹⁵ "and I will remember My covenant which *is* between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ "The rainbow shall be in the cloud, and I will look on it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that *is* on the earth." ¹⁷ And God said to Noah, "This *is* the sign of the covenant which I have established between Me and all flesh that *is* on the earth."

On Friday night many of us watched the opening ceremonies of the Olympics. In our text this morning we have God's opening ceremonies as he begins his plan of salvation. So here we have the opportunity to compare, man versus God. We saw the signs and symbols of the Olympics rising into the sky, here we have God's sign placed in the sky. We saw the ceremonies of the Olympics, here we have God's ceremonies. We heard the hopes and dreams that the Olympics are supposed to inspire. Here we have God's goals for men.

First, we have the comparison of the ceremonies and symbols of the Olympics versus the ceremonies and symbols of God.

The signs and ceremonies which we saw and heard on Friday night were received by the senses. We saw them, we heard them. They were very grand but without any real promise for the future. What we have here in our text is simple in comparison and is received by faith but carries the promises of God.

Without faith there is nothing to see. What can the unbeliever possibly see in our passage this morning other than a myth. To an unbeliever this will sound like a myth made up to explain where the rainbow came from. Yet those who know Christ see something very different. By faith we are able to see not a myth but the power and promises of God.

The purpose of the passage is not to tell us where the rainbow comes from but the promises of God. Whether the rainbow existed previously is ambiguous in the passage and immaterial. What matters is not the rainbow so much as the promise that God attaches to the rainbow. It may be that the rainbow already existed. It may be that God created it at this point. Regardless God attaches his promise to the rainbow and that is what matters.

This is what God does, he takes that which is a natural part of the world (although he himself created it) and he gives it promise and meaning. He does the same thing with baptism and the Lord Supper. He takes water and bread and add his word to give them promise and meaning.

That promise and meaning is received only by faith. So that without faith these symbols and ceremonies do not amount to much.

Just like the rainbow so also in baptism the unbeliever sees nothing except a ceremony, and not even a very good ceremony. If you want to see a good ceremony, you can watch the Olympics or things like that. These ceremonies are meant to show the strength and promise of men.

The rainbow and baptism are not like that. These things are not meant to display the power of men but the power of God. Therefore, the earthly part is something simple and mean and lowly, and to that is added the word of God and the promise of God.

The opening ceremonies put on full display the artistic and technological capabilities of man. The rainbow puts on full display the grace and promise of God.

"I will never again destroy the earth, even though man sin is great."

This is the grace of God because men deserve to be destroyed but in his grace God does not destroy them. This promise is seen only by faith. This word and promise mean nothing to those who have no faith, therefore the ceremony is little or nothing to them. But to those who know the power of God, this is everything.

This is what we see both in the rainbow and in the sacraments. God takes something simple and adds his word of grace. So that now it is something altogether far greater, the promise of God. The ceremonies of men are far grander but are without promise.

What about the goal? What about God's goal in the rainbow versus man's goal in the Olympics? When it comes to the hope and goals of God and man, they are at least on the surface agreed.

What is the goal of God? Both in the flood and in the giving of the sign of the rainbow his goal is the salvation of mankind. God's desire is above everything else that all men should be saved and perfectly united together.

1 Timothy 2:4 [God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

1 Corinthians 1:10 that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

It is God's desires to do away with all war and hatred as the prophet Isaiah reminds us.

Isaiah 2:4 He shall judge between the nations, And rebuke many people; They shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore.

In the Olympics we heard the singing of that song by John Lennon "Imagine" which apparently is sung at every Olympics. It expresses what many think is the hope and dream of the Olympic games: to stop war and unite all people together. The five rings symbolize the unity of the world. The Olympics also hope to promote peace and unity between all men.

On the surface at least they are united. The difference of course is the method.

God brings unity and peace the only way possible through the washing away of sins. The renewing and rebirth of the Holy Spirit. Peter points out in his first epistle that God used the flood not as a force meant to destroy, but to wash away sin and through the washing away of sin to save mankind. God uses baptism to wash away sin.

God's method is his covenant which does away with sin. Five times God repeats in our text "my covenant."

"I will establish my covenant."

"I will remember my covenant."

"This is the sign of my covenant."

What is this covenant of God?

He says, "I will never again destroy man."

No matter how great our sin God does not destroy us.

The Olympics also seek to unite men, but not by dealing with man's sin, but by ignoring it. Both seek to unite man, but one is doomed because it rests on the strength of men, the other cannot fail because it rests on the promise of God.

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men,

In this passage Paul is speaking primarily about the coming of Christ but the passage certainly applies also to the rainbow. The rainbow is the appearing of the grace of God, because it is a reminder that although God ought to destroy us all, nevertheless instead he has established his covenant that he will save us.

Man's ceremonies are much grander to the senses, but they accomplish nothing. God's ceremonies and signs, the rainbow, baptism and the Lord Supper appear mundane in comparison and without faith they are really nothing but in them the power of God is on display to those who believe and through them God accomplishes the washing away of sin, so that we should be renewed by his promises. Amen