

## **Climbing Rainbows** **Genesis 8:1-9:17**

### **Scripture Introduction:**

When I was a child before I understood any physics I became fascinated with a paperweight in our home. But this was no ordinary paperweight; it was also a prism. I discovered that when I lifted the prism up to the light out would flash the colors of the rainbow. Since then, I've learned that a rainbow is created by raindrops serving as a kind of prism. Towards the end of a storm when the light from the sun penetrates the storm's rain a giant rainbow will ark across the sky. A full rainbow spreading across a rain-darkened sky is truly a beautiful sight.

This morning I want to talk to you about rainbows—that carefully designed and beautiful expression of nature. However, I don't want to talk about how they work; I want to talk about what they mean. You see, rainbows do not simply illuminate the light of the sun in a summer storm; they illuminate the light of God in the winter storms of our life. And that is what Genesis 8-9 is all about.

### **Reading:**

#### **Introduction:**

The whole city was in shock. This was not supposed to happen. The church was too successful, too big and too conservative. He was too sharp, his family too perfect and he was too good of a preacher. Nevertheless, he decided to end his life. Tara and I were informed during the evening worship at the church we attended which was a sister church. While I did not know this pastor, I had heard him preach and I knew his reputation. To a young and impressionable seminary student he seemed to possess and embody all that I thought a solid preacher and compassionate pastor should.

Yet, his suicide note said, "God forgive me for not being any stronger than I am. . . . It feels as if I'm sinking farther and farther into a downward spiral of depression. I feel like a drowning man, trying frantically to lift up my head to take just one more breath. But one way or the other, I know I am going down." (Richard Winter, "In Covenant," V. 12, n. 5, 1997, 4) What went wrong?

At the same time another tragedy was unfolding in the seminary community. David Calhoun, professor of church history at Covenant Seminary, had just learned that cancer had returned to ravage his body. I was struck by his comments regarding his painful struggle. He wrote, "If I did not have cancer, my life would be a failure forever. Whatever comes, the Christian doesn't despise this life. There are green valleys and quiet waters. But even in the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord is with us. He is our joy and comfort." (David Calhoun, "In Covenant Magazine," V. 13, N. 3, 1998, 7) In other words, even in the storms of life our God is with us.

What was the difference between these two men? Even today I know that I will never have all of the answers. I know that I must guard against simplistic and naïve answers to the tragedies that overwhelmed them and confront each of us. Yet, the question remains. Both had remarkable testimonies to the Lord and his grace. Both had wonderful and effective ministries. Both had supportive families. Yet, there is no denying their different reactions to the storms in their lives? Is there a difference?

**I would submit to you that the difference was this: One man only saw the story while the other knew God was with him in the storm.**

What about us? How do we find God in the midst of the storm? How do we find God when our hopes our washed away? What about when disease ravages us or when danger races to meet us. What about when friends leave us and children forsake us?

I know many of us cling to a kind of “gut-it-out” perfectionism, naïve optimism or just plain stoic acceptance. Others of us resort to anger, anxiety and despair in our attempts to change our circumstances. However, all of these solutions reduce to one: when I am in the storms of life I am alone, left to fend for myself.

How important, then, it is for us to understand what God’s rainbow means for us. The Rainbow is the sign of God’s presence amidst the storms that assault us. It is a sign of his mercy, faithfulness and grace? For Noah and for us the rainbow means God is with us in the storm.

In fact I would say it this way,

**In the midst the storms of our lives the rainbow beckons us to climb it and search out its end. But we are to climb to its end not for a pot of gold, but for God himself. Are you ready to climb some rainbows?**

### **1. What God Won’t Do – A Sign of Mercy**

**8:20;21; 9:11-15**

To do this we must first understand that the rainbow is a sign of God’s relationship to humanity. The Bible calls that relationship a covenant. It is a covenant with many installments, but with one purpose—the glory of God in the salvation of his people. One of those installments is God’s relationship to Noah. The rainbow is the sign of the covenant God made with Noah, his sons and all flesh. Amazingly, that covenant promise remains with us to this day. And, first and foremost it is a sign of mercy—**what God won’t do.**

- **We Haven’t Changed:**

In the beginning of chapter 6 we learn why God sent the flood—the hearts of men and women were evil. As a result, God punished humanity with the flood. Yet, since the flood the hearts of men and women haven’t changed. We are still the same people that God wiped out in the flood. Look at verse 21 of chapter 8.

- i. **Just look around:**

- ii. **Just look within:**

- **God’s Promised Mercy:**

So, if we have not changed, what has changed? God’s relation to man has shifted. God will never again punish all flesh with a flood of such devastation. So, we may suffer 100 year floods and 500 year floods, but we will never suffer a trans-continental flood. In spite of man’s wickedness God is not going to punish mankind ever again like he did in the flood. This is God’s word, which is powerfully Our promise of this is found in the rainbow—a sign of the mercy of God, what He won’t do.

Interestingly, the word in the Hebrew for a bow can also refer to a warrior’s bow in battle. While it is hard to say this is a specific point being made, it seems like God is saying, “I’ve laid down my bow. His bow is aiming away from the earth; no longer is God’s wrath aimed at humanity. Instead, it is aimed at the stars.

### **Application:**

Every time we see a rainbow arched across the sky we should be reminded that God has laid down his battle bow. His mercy his great for he is not giving us what we deserve. Therefore, as we encounter the storms of this life we must first remember that we deserve far worse. Indeed, even our struggle is born of God’s mercy.

## Climbing Rainbows B/C of His Mercy

### 2. What We Can Do – A Sign of Opportunity

8:22

An amazing thing happened after the flood. God restored the normal rhythm of life. Surely coming out of the ark Noah and his family wondered, “God, now what guarantee are you giving us that in another 200 years you are not going to do this again?” To remind them that he would be faithful to his promise, he gave us the rainbow. It was a sign, that as long as there was life there would be opportunity. Yes, storms, tragedies, even floods like the one this past month would come, but total devastation would never take place again.

In doing this God has given us an amazing thing—opportunity to make a difference in two important ways. The Rainbow means that we have:

- **Time for work:**

We often think the grind of life is boring because it is predictable. But what God is doing is giving us time to build into our lives regular activities which make life worth living—marriage and family, home, vocation, education, technology, exploration, recreation and worship.

**Application:**

What is your perspective as you struggle with the rhythm of life? Don't we often wish that God would magically take away our circumstances? If our circumstances would change then life would be different. And so we pine for something miraculous to happen. As a result, we fail to understand that something miraculous has already happened—we have time to work, struggle and learn. **God's covenant with Noah is the miracle.**

- **Place to work:**

To be under the rainbow is to be in God's protected place. The earth now is a protected sanctuary from such worldwide devastation. It is worthwhile to set ourselves to making this place our home. As Jeremiah instructed the exiles in Babylon to make a home for themselves, the Rainbow reminds us to make this place, wherever it is, our home.

**The rainbow reminds us that there is time and we have a place.** The rainbow does not promise there will be no more storms. It only promises there will never be a flood that destroys the earth. We can count on the storms. They are going to come. In fact, rainbows do not happen without rain. But they also don't happen without the sun. What the rainbow reminds us is that there will be a tomorrow and there will be dry land.—a new day and a new place wherein we can struggle to learn to know who God is and understand what his purposes are for my life.

**Illustration:**

There is one very important thing you need to know about me. I love college football. I sometimes count the months off in terms of when college football begins. And as you might expect, the last five years in Waco have something of a struggle. After all, how many adjectives can you use to describe the poor, poor Baylor Bears? Yet, I think to myself, “You know, they aren't so poor after all.” In fact, everyone knows that if you are going to put a winning team on the field you cannot worry about all of their failures along the way. What keeps them at it is the belief that hard work pays off—it makes a difference. It is possible to become a championship football team. But why, because God has promised that life makes sense. We have opportunity.

**Application:** In fact, there is opportunity for each of us in the manifold areas of life to which we have been called. Therefore, the next time you are complaining and depressed about the storms in your life, rejoice in the Lord instead. Thank God that he has given you time and a place to work, struggle and

learn. Thank him that he has promised you these things by placing the rainbow in the clouds. Opportunity is part of the miracle of the rainbow.

### **Climbing Rainbows B/C of Opportunity**

#### **3. What God Will Do – A Sign of Purpose**

**8:20; 9:16**

As we have seen the rainbow is a wonderful sign for God's people, but the sign is not for God's people alone. In verse 16 we learn that the sign is for God's purpose, "Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures or every kind on the earth." **In other words, God has placed the bow in the sky not just for us, but also for himself—to remind him of what he will do.**

To be sure, the flood is a testimony to the wrath of God. It is a demonstration of God's holy hatred for all sin. Yet, if all we see in the flood is judgment we will have misunderstood God and his purposes. The rainbow is evidence of God's primary purpose which is not judgment but grace. What God is telling us is that judgment cannot bring about all of his purposes. The rainbow tells us that the flood is not the end of the story. Judgment cannot bring about the redemption of humanity's problems and destructiveness.

In fact, we see the beginnings of that redemption in Noah's sacrifice recorded in verse 20. Here, we are reminded of the reason why God will not punish all mankind again—a sacrifice is made. When God smelled the sacrifices we learn that he was pleased and decided to stay his wrath. Yet, even this sacrifice was but a shadowy image of the supreme sacrifice which alone removes the wrath of God.

*For it is impossible to the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins...(Heb. 10:4)*

This alone was accomplished through the work of Jesus Christ. He has become the object of God's wrath so that we might become the objects of his love. **Therefore, in the rainbow we see grace added to mercy.**

Perhaps our greatest struggle in life's storms is not with the storms themselves but with the thought that the Lord has somehow abandoned us or is judging us in the midst of them. We forget that the Rainbow means that God is not giving up on us, but rather is persevering with us.

That purpose culminates in Jesus Christ. I want to invite anyone here who has never known of this grace or heard of that favor to embrace Jesus today. He alone can stay the wrath of God on your behalf. When we climb rainbows, we are embracing God's promise in Christ.

#### **Conclusion:**

There is a hymn that we sometimes sing in church, "O Love that will not let me go." It was written by George Matheson on a summer's evening in 1882. During Matheson's studies at the University he lost his eyesight. Despite his blindness he finished his studies and entered the pastorate. Seventeen years later he wrote the hymn. He relates that he wrote it very quickly and he also notes that he was "suffering from extreme mental distress." In fact he says the hymn was the "fruit of pain."

Many people have guessed as to what was bothering him. Some have said it was because a young lady refused to marry him because of his blindness; we will probably never know.

In our hymn books the third verse of Matheson's hymn reads:

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to Thee:  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not in vain  
That morn shall tearless be.*

But this not what Matheson originally wrote. He wrote:

*O Joy that seekest me through the pain,  
I cannot close my heart to Thee;  
I climb the rainbows in the rain,  
And feel the promise is not in vain  
That morn shall tearless be.*

It seems a committee was choosing hymns to include in its hymnal and came across Matheson's hymn. While liking the hymn, they took issue with that verse about climbing rainbows. They thought it too graphic and undignified for uppity and proper Presbyterians. And so, they convinced him to sign off on the change, "I trace the rainbow through the rainbow."

Tragically, there is a great difference between those verses. It is one thing to trace the rainbows from the comfort of my home—safe and secure. It is another thing to be out in the midst of the storm—as Matheson was and like we sometimes are.

When you are out in the midst of the storm there is no time for tracing. When we are out in the storm we are looking for something, anything, to hang onto and get us out. That is what the rainbow is. It is not just for enjoying; it is for climbing when your tears mingle with the rain, with the pain. Matheson knew this, do you?

And so we climb; we climb on the steps of God's mercy, opportunity and grace. These are the wavelengths of the rainbow which remind us of God's strength amidst our weakness. And as we climb we come to the end of the rainbow. However, we don't discover there a pot of gold; we discover God in the midst of the storm. Therefore, "Take hold of the promise. Go out into the thunder and lightning and rain and seize the rainbow." (David Calhoun, "Climbing Rainbows," V. 11, N. 5, 1996, 9-11) In seizing the rainbow you are seizing God.