

Sermon

Dan Neary

My Covenant

I want to tell you that I get a bit *lost* when we're not in a series. I very much appreciate the discipline that a series affords. When we are in a series, the work of putting together a sermon is pretty straightforward:

- Go to the text
- Study it
- Pray about it
- Work it
- Apply it to today so that it is relevant



This approach serves us well, and it suits me as a pastor and preacher.

But in the summer we mix it up. We generally have a number of preachers in our pulpit, mostly from our own congregation. And so as not to *box in* our guests, we let people do their own thing... I've called it *potpourri*.

For me, the danger of this approach is that without the discipline of a series, I might get a little lazy... just *shooting from the hip* and spouting off about whatever comes to mind. I don't want to be a guy that preaches *fads* or preaches out of the newspaper. Undisciplined preachers get stuck in ruts, only preaching their favorite stuff, or that which comes most easily. I want to be better than that... and I think this series approach helps me be a good preacher, teacher, and pastor.

Here's the thing... I think we might be in a series after all.

Last month I brought a fairly simple message that I titled: ***I Give Up!*** It was a message about reliance on God. When we rightly realize that we can't make a religious life work on our own, when we realize that we can't earn right standing before God, we need to give up on our striving. We give up, and receive what God has given us through Christ. We live our lives, then, in response to the gift God has given us. Rather than vainly trying to earn God's favor, we receive the life only He can provide and we give that life back to Him. We worship with our lives... thus giving up.



When we Nearys returned from vacation, I brought another simple little message that I titled: ***People Pleaser***. This, too, was a message about reliance on God. The point here was mostly about where we would find our satisfaction: trying to please people, or trying to please God. With Jesus as our guide and example, we find that



we are at our best when we are relying on God for our priorities. When our goal in living our lives and serving others is to please God.

Then last week, Pastor Massoud Sadeghi encouraged us with the amazing stories of how he and his church are reaching and ministering to Iranians, both here in our communities and around the world. When we watch the news we might only think of Iran as an emerging enemy... but Pastor Massoud helped us see that there are growing churches among the Iranians.



He also brought us a solid message from Romans 4, reminding us that we can rely on God for the miraculous. God is our provider.

You might remember that I *broke in* a bit with a little *sermonette* while we were singing. The words of the song we were singing, *a song I like very much* by the way, had us singing: Jesus, I will never let you go.



I try to be careful to never say *never*... but here I was singing, "I'll never let You go!" I want to be able to sing that, "though my world may fall, I'll never let You go."

But I know how weak and unreliable I am... I want to say *never*, but do I have any right to say *never*? Especially if my world really was to fall apart? *Never*?

So as I was singing, and praying, and leading, and arguing with myself, and thinking, and... I caught a glimpse of Cindy and her grandson. I believe the Lord used that scene to put a picture in my mind that answered my questions. When we were finished singing that song, I talked to you all about it.

The picture in my mind was of a baby holding the hand of a full grown man. The baby's little hand does have a hold of the full grown hand, but if trouble were to come, it would be the grip of the grown hand, not merely the grip of the baby's hand, that would provide the strength. Any little thing could pull the baby's hand off, but the full grown hand, enveloping the baby's hand, would provide a secure hold.



And so it is with us. Our little baby hands take hold of God's all-powerful hand and we proclaim "we will never let you go." But it isn't our grip that provides the enduring hold, it is God's grip. I can say "I will never let you go" because as my hand grasps His, His hand grasps mine.

Again, it is a simple message on our reliance on God.

See what I mean... maybe we do have a series going!

Now I bring you this message from Genesis. The story is pretty familiar; Noah and the ark and the flood and the rainbow are common parts of our culture.

- God saw that humankind was evil
- Noah found favor with God
- God called Noah to a plan and work that would give humanity another start
- The ark saved Noah, his family, and the animals with them
- And then God promised not to do it again



That brings us to the text in Genesis 9.

I suppose there are all sorts of things that are extraordinary here:

- It is a cosmic, over arching deal for **all** of creation
- It was a deal that Noah didn't really ask for
- It was preceded by directions for a new way of life for Noah. It was a whole new world after the flood; weather would be different for ever. And there were new rules for what could be eaten (hence the BBQ we'll enjoy right after church)
- The rainbow seemed to be more of a sign to remind God than us



But the most extraordinary thing here is that God describes this as "My covenant."

My covenant... not **our** covenant or **your** covenant, but **My** covenant.

A few of you may recognize this point. On Monday mornings the folk in my office pull together for a quick update of what is going on, a short devotional, and prayer. I'll often read from Charles Spurgeon's *Morning and Evening*. On Monday I read the evening entry (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/morneve.d0813pm.html>)



Spurgeon has a way of picking up on one point in a passage of Scripture and, with great imagination and illustration, making something of it that opens up a whole new way to think about God and our relationship with Him.

Here in this passage he sees:

Mark the form of the promise. God does not say, “And when ye shall look upon the bow, and ye shall remember my covenant, *then* I will not destroy the earth,” but it is gloriously put, not upon *our* memory, which is fickle and frail, but upon *God’s* memory, which is infinite and immutable.

The rainbow is not a monument to remind us to keep our part of the deal. The rainbow is not even meant for us to use it to remind God. This covenant is not, in any way, contingent on any of our ability, but is wholly based upon God’s everlasting and unchanging memory.

Spurgeon notes that God says:

“The bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant.” Oh! it is not my remembering God, it is God’s remembering *me* which is the ground of my safety; it is not my laying hold of his covenant, but his covenant’s laying hold on me.

Spurgeon’s picture is very much like the picture of the small baby’s hand enveloped by the strong hand of the father. Spurgeon goes on to say:

Glory be to God! the whole of the bulwarks of salvation are secured by divine power, and even the minor towers, which we may imagine might have been left to man, are guarded by almighty strength. Even the *remembrance* of the covenant is not left to our memories, for *we* might forget, but our Lord cannot forget the saints whom he has graven on the palms of his hands. It is with us as with Israel in Egypt; the blood was upon the lintel and the two side-posts, but the Lord did not say, “When *you* see the blood I will pass over you,” but “When *I* see the blood I will pass over you.”

Are we beginning to see the point here? It is only God’s work that has the power. All we can do is believe and receive. I love the way Spurgeon brings this home in relationship to Jesus:

My looking to Jesus brings me joy and peace, but it is God’s looking to Jesus which secures my salvation and that of all his elect, since it is impossible for our God to look at Christ, our bleeding Surety, and then to be angry with us for sins already punished in him. No, it is not left with *us* even to be saved by remembering the covenant. There is no *linsey-woolsey* here—not a single thread of the creature mars the fabric. It is not *of* man, neither *by* man, but of the Lord alone. *We should* remember the covenant, and *we shall* do it, through divine grace; but the hinge of our safety does not hang there—it is God’s remembering *us*, not our remembering *him*; and hence the covenant is *an everlasting covenant*.¹

The stories of God’s grace and mercy, the stories of our salvation, are marvelous. Most are easy to remember, and are remembered. Like I mentioned before, arks and floods and rainbows, mangers and crosses, we’ve worked these into our culture, and we remember. But thank God that none of it is contingent on our work. The work is

¹C. H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening: Daily Readings* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995). August 13 PM.

God's. These are His promises that we enjoy, not because of our efforts (which would be measly efforts at best) but because of His work, His goodness, His faithfulness.

So what?

I believe that this is how the Holy Spirit works in our lives. God, by His Holy Spirit, speaks to us, bringing to mind through our study, prayer, experiences, reading, and the people in our lives, important messages.



It could be that the *so what* here is that this pastor of yours is in a season of being reminded to be entirely reliant on God. I suppose that this alone is pretty good news. You want to be in a church where the leadership is hearing from God and endeavoring to obey that voice. It could very well be that you are intended to be observers of this process in me.

But it could be, of course, that this is a message for all of us: **Reliance on God.**

Us church people find it pretty easy to offer this message into lives of confusion and pain. We use phrases like "people who are lost." Sometimes they might have a sense that they are lost and are happy to receive some direction as we point them toward reliance on God. In other cases we have to convince them a bit that they're lost before we can hand over this answer of reliance on God.



This is a good thing, mandated work of the church, and a chief work of the Holy Spirit. If you're here today and you haven't come to understand this message of grace, if you have yet to really hear and believe that Jesus is the way to fully rely on God for your surety for eternity before God... then make today your day. Take the step, pray a simple prayer, and put all your trust and hope in God through Jesus.

But most of us here have taken that step; it was a long time ago for many of us.

My concern for me, and a lot of us, is that we run the risk of thinking we have it all figured out. We know the right words, understand the right doctrines, act the right way... and I'm concerned that we might *crowd out* our reliance on God.

You know that I'm very much in favor of the right words, right doctrines, right acts... but we have to guard ourselves against self reliance in all of this. We have to be careful not to replace faith in God with our religion.

I have this conviction that God wants to do great things in us and through us. It is as if we are tools in His hands. We do well when we become the best, sharpest, most useful tools that we can possibly be (hence right words, right acts, right thinking, right

doctrines). But just as any tool relies totally on the craftsman's power and skill to accomplish anything, so must we rely entirely on God.

Father please remind us, remind me, that the work is Yours. Thank you that every good thing that you've done for us is entirely reliant on your power, your faithfulness, your goodness, your initiative. Help us to root out our self reliance, and rely entirely on You. Thank you that we stand before you not under our own strength, but with the strength of what you accomplished through Jesus our Savior.

