

Lesson 50: Chapter 7: Overview of the Covenants: Part Two: Common Grace

Is it sinful for Christians to live in the city? Can we make political, legal, and economic deals with unbelievers? Does God demand that all governments everywhere be Christian governments? If a Christians house falls down in an earthquake is it a punishment from God, if an unbeliever is rich is it a reward from God? Is non-Christian music unholy? These are some of the questions that Christians wrestle with that are answered by our investigation about what the bible says about common grace. What is common grace? Here is a definition by Dr. Miles Van Pelt, “Common grace is that principle whereby God allows the offspring of the woman (those in Christ) and the offspring of the serpent (those in Adam) to remain together in this world until final judgment, the consummation of the age, and the advent of the new heavens and new earth. During this period of delay, agriculture, culture, and procreation continue in a fallen world, though now under the curse of sin. And so there will be agriculture but now in pain and frustration, culture but corrupt and perverted, and human reproduction but only with great pain.” Think of common grace as the ordinary way that God sustains a fallen world full of believers and unbelievers. The best way for us to understand what common grace is, is to compare the Garden of Eden before the fall, and the way God sustains His creation after the fall.

There was no common grace in the Garden of Eden because there were no sinners yet. God did not have to promise not to destroy because there was no sin to judge. God had made all things good and they were sinless. Adam was upright and given a task to subdue the earth, and to tend and keep the garden. He was in the role of prophet, priest, and king. The Garden was to be a holy place where all things were to do the will of God, where creation would be shaped to fulfil God’s will, and if there were any rebels against God’s will, it was Adam’s job as God’s appointed Vice-Regent to put them to death, to cleanse the Garden to be a holy place. The Garden of Eden was a theocracy where the law of the land was the law of the Lord, here church and state were one and it was good and right that the sinner be treated as a criminal and be put to death. Religious law and state law were one.

Then the fall came where Adam failed in his duties and plunged the human race into sin and its consequences. It is at this point that we have our first surprise. God had said that the day that he ate of it Adam would die. We expect a full reckoning for sin and for Adam and Eve to get their full reward for sin, judgement, death and hell. We would expect the devil to be taken and cast in there with them, and for God to restart afresh. Instead God does not pour out His judgement day justice, but there is a stay of final execution. There is justice but it is mixed with mercy and a new state of affairs different to that in Garden comes into being which we call common grace. Gen. 3:14-19, ‘The Lord God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.” And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring

forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

We see evidence of this new state of affairs in the curses that God pronounces, in v14 we see that the devil is granted his life and not instantly put to death; in v15 we see the possibility of Adam and Eve bearing children; in v17-19 we see that man’s task of working the ground will continue. True there will be pain in childbearing, true there will be a battle between the sexes; true it will be difficult to make a living in a cursed world full of thorns and thistles, but life will go on and not be instantly snuffed out in final judgment. This new state of affairs continues as we see that God does not put Cain to death for killing Abel; Cain is able to build a city 4:17, is blessed with children who develop animal husbandry, the arts and engineering, 4:20-22. We see that this stay of execution enabled the godly line through Seth and the ungodly line through Cain to dwell under the same sun. This stay of execution also resulted in abuses where we see Lamech murdering someone and engaging in polygamy. Human sin was not punished but was allowed to exist. Human sin continued to intensify until God intervened suspending His common grace with the flood.

This brings us to Noah and the Noahic covenant. Noah is presented as a second Adam type figure where his father names him ‘Rest’ supposedly in the hope that he would fulfill the promise of Gen. 3:15 and take God’s people into God’s rest. 5:29 is interesting because it reverses the order of the words ground and cursed and pain as they are found in Gen. 3, ‘and called his name Noah, saying, “Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.”’ Noah like Abraham is an old man when he fathers children, this template in Noah where the seemingly weak progress God’s plan is repeated in Abraham; Isaac; Jacob; Joseph; Samson; Samuel and John the Baptist, culminating in the virgin birth.

Gen. 6:1-7 paints a sordid picture of the world Noah lived in. God decides to suspend His common grace and pour out His justice. But we see that there is Noah, the only other person described like Enoch to walk with God. He is righteous v8-9. What is important to note about Noah is that there are two distinct covenants that God makes. There is the covenant in 6:18-21 which is a covenant with Noah, his family and some animals are included in this covenant, and the promise is to save him through the flood. V18-21, ‘But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you. ¹⁹ And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female. ²⁰ Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground, according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to you to keep them alive. ²¹ Also take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up. It shall serve as food for you and for them.” It is highlighted that there are 8 occurrences of ‘you’ in the singular that indicates this covenant is with Noah. The second covenant which is the common grace covenant we are working towards is found in 9:8-17, there the language is ‘you’ plural as the covenant is with all of Noah’s offspring, the creation, and the animals. 9:8-11, ‘Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all

flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

In the first covenant Noah is commanded to build an Ark, and he is obedient 6:22, 7:5. In this covenant Noah’s righteousness like many others in the bible points us forward to the one whose obedience will save us. Dr. Miles Van Pelt in a footnote commenting on Noah’s obedience writes this, ‘With reference to individuals like Noah, Abraham, Phinehas, and David, Kline states, “But it pleased the Lord to invest their exemplary righteousness and outstanding acts of covenantal devotion with special significance so that with reference to a typological manifestation of God’s kingdom they prefigured Christ as one who received the kingdom of glory for the faithful performance of the messianic mission stipulated in his eternal covenant with the Father.” God, Heaven, and Har Magedon, 79. Niehaus correspondingly argues, “In other words, God is telling Noah that he and his family can be saved in the ark because God has found Noah singularly to be righteous. By the righteousness of one, many are saved—a salvific arrangement that clearly anticipates the saving work of Christ.” Biblical Theology, 1:179. It is important, however, to understand that “their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And, that they may be enabled thereunto, besides the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit to work in them to will and to do of His good pleasure.” WCF 16.5.’¹ This particular covenant is bilateral in nature, Noah’s works secured the reward, but his works are typological they are not truly meritorious.

The second covenant is different. Now we must remember that God had given the promise for a saviour to overcome satan, but the flood puts this promise in jeopardy. God gives the covenant with Creation after the flood as a way of securing this sinful world not destroying it, so that believers and unbelievers can live together side by side, until the Saviour comes and until the final judgement is executed. Until then God will keep the earth spinning, the seasons changing and not pour out a world extinction event until the final judgement. We must note the particular characteristics of this covenant. Firstly, it is universal, where the first was with Noah; it is unilateral, there are no conditions to be met, where the first was secured by Noah’s typological obedience; it is a non-redemptive but gracious covenant, in other words it does not save anyone, but rather preserves the stage upon which the drama of redemption will unfold. And it is gracious because God is not dealing with sin as it deserves but is patient towards a sinful world.

What is interesting about the way both covenants are described, where you would usually begin a covenant by ‘cutting’ a covenant, and then any follow up would be called ‘confirming’ that covenant. In both Gen. 6:18, and 9:9 the Hebrew word used is the word to confirm not cut a covenant indicating that there is a covenantal arrangement that came before both. The ESV use of ‘establish’ is misleading at this point. The theory is that the redemptive covenant with Noah is based on the promise already given in 3:15; and the covenant of common grace is a continuation of the grace given when God did not kill Adam and Eve but allowed them to continue to live, marry, produce offspring and fulfil their roles as men and women, Gen. 3:14-19. What this helps us see is that the flood is not God’s regular way of dealing with a sinful world, in fact it makes clear He will not do it again until the end. Rather the norm that we should expect in this

¹ Guy Prentiss Waters. “Covenant Theology.” Crossway, 2020-10-27. Apple Books. Footnote 30, p66.

world is the seed of the serpent and the woman living together, cohabiting a joint space. Unlike Eden and Israel there is no holy land or holy place. There is no theocratic arrangement where state and church are combined and the unbeliever is put to death according to a set of blasphemy laws. God pours out His rain on the just and the unjust alike.

The flood event is described as a decreation and recreation event, I will not bore you with all the little details that paint this picture. But like the first creation the waters have parted, the dry ground is now populated by God by image bearers intended to do His will, and 9:1-7 reminds us of the Creation Mandate given to Adam and Eve, 'And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. ² The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. ³ Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. ⁴ But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. ⁵ And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

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

⁷ And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it."

What we have here is what is called a refracted cultural mandate. It is like but unlike the original commands given to Adam. Adam was in a CoW and the cultural mandate would have played a part of his obedience by which he would have fulfilled the CoW and won righteousness for himself and his offspring bringing all of creation into the sabbath rest of God. The original purpose of these commands no longer stand, but these creation ordinances continue to shape life for image bearers nonetheless. We are still men and women; we are still to marry; we are still to have children. We will not be able to take creation and subjugate it to the glory of God our relation to creation we see by the terror the animals have of us is not a happy one. What we do not see here is the repeating of the command to subdue, the so called 'dominion mandate'. Christ will have to come and finally subdue the earth to the glory of God not us. But the tasks of working, and marrying, and multiplying, along with the common grace tasks of agriculture, animal husbandry, art, science, they all continue as with before the flood as the normal state of affairs for sinful humankind. We see that apart from the command not to eat blood, probably because of its use for sacrifice, there is no law between clean and unclean foods; we can eat every living creature.

We see the addition of capital punishment for anything or anyone that kills someone made in the image of God 9:6. Many see here the seeds of government, where God gives man the right to rule over other men. Many see here a rudimentary law that should govern all of life on earth, but which is not a full set of laws like the Mosaic law. We see laws that agree with the second table of law as we see God establishing norms for marriage, family, and protecting one's labour; property and life. What we do not see are religious laws of a Sabbath day or blasphemy laws or the death penalty for idolatry. The Noahic covenant can be appealed to in order to establish general principles of equity but not a full set of religious laws. Unlike Eden and Israel the period of common

grace was not a time when religion and state were one. For those Christians who in their capacity as private citizens want to love their neighbor with the political opportunities available to us in a democratic context, looking for a set of principles to appeal before their governments for the upholding of human life against abortion, euthanasia; or as a guide against laws which go against marriage, the family, or biological sex; or laws which allow for the freedom of religion without forced proselytism, we do not need to reinstate the Mosaic law, but have natural law established in the Noahic Covenant. Today we are seeing people wanting the church to embrace Christian nationalism; Postmillennialism; theonomy; Christendom and any other number of ideas that wants to use Israel as a blue print for how government ought to function in a sinful world. Here we need to remember that God has established His common grace conditions and we see no mandate or warrant to insist on a religious state or state religion.

This common grace reality helps us understand the lives of the patriarchs where we do not see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob taking up the sword and leaning on God's grace to provide victory in battle in order to set up little holy city states all over the place. Rather we see believers in the world but not of it; living as exiles not engaged in holy war. We will see a contrast between living in the land of Israel under a theocracy and living as an exile like Daniel. As Christians we have been sent to the nations to take the good news of Jesus Christ as Saviour to all nations, making disciples from every nation not to make nations into Christian states. The Noahic Covenant gives us the grounds for a two kingdoms ethic. God is king over all but rules His church differently to how He rules over a sinful world. We are citizens of this evil age and do so by loving our neighbor, being good citizens, allowing our Christianity to shine in the public square. But we are also citizens of heaven and as part of the church we have been given a mission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, not make this world into a perfected Eden. We must be careful not to marry the great commission to the cultural mandate and get off mission as the church.