

### 3. The Noahic Covenant

After taking note of Adam and Eve's expulsion from God's garden-sanctuary, the Genesis narrative chronicles the progress of human estrangement through subsequent generations. What it reveals is that, while the principle of divine-human alienation remained unchanged from the point of the Fall, the effect of it on mankind did not. The sin nature remained constant; its impact on human existence and culture, however, is a tragic story of rapid descent into ever-greater and more expansive evil and destruction. In the space of only two chapters the narrative moves from Cain's murderous pride to a state of human wickedness in which "*every intent of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually*" (Genesis 6:5). In the outworking of his independence, God's image-son had now become, to the fullest extent, the obedient son of his new "father."

As God scanned the face of the earth he saw only evil and corruption and therefore determined to destroy mankind (6:6-7). But that destruction wouldn't be absolute: In a marvelous prefiguration of what He would later do in another son of Eve, God set apart one righteous man to carry His earthly creation through a time of judgment and, as a new Adam, stand as the fountainhead of a new humanity (cf. Isaiah 59:15-21).

At the time of the Fall, God promised the final destruction of the serpent by Eve's descendent, and His work of purging and renewal in the Flood made a significant contribution to that revelation. It indicated that God's promise to destroy the serpent was equally the commitment to destroy his works through judgment and restoration, thereby bringing an end to the curse. Moreover, Noah's role as God's instrument of judgment and deliverance (ref. 2 Peter 2:5) and progenitor of a new humanity provided foundational insight into the promised "seed" and how it was that He would overcome the serpent.

Together, Noah and the deluge served to fulfill the ancient promise of purgation, but not in the absolute sense. God had purged and restored the earth, and His reissuing of the creational charge (cf. 1:26-30 and 9:1-2) shows that Noah represented a new Adam presiding over a quasi "new" creation. And yet, the narrative leaves no doubt that this restoration was merely typological: It contributed to the developing portrait of what God would do in fulfillment of His promise; it wasn't itself that fulfillment.

- This is evident first in the fact that the postdiluvian world had not been purged of sin. Noah enjoyed a unique status and privilege before God as His chosen righteous deliverer and second Adam, but in his fallen human nature he, along with all his descendents, shared full solidarity with the race of men destroyed in the Flood (9:5-6, 20-25).
- But it is also attested by the fact that sacred space had not been restored by the Flood. Noah – the new Adam and fountainhead of a new humanity – continued to worship God just as his forefathers had, employing sacrificial ritual to mediate the distance between them. In an act of notable irony, Noah departed the ark and entered into the renewed earth only to immediately build an *altar*. God's new Adam had not led mankind back into the garden-sanctuary (8:18-22).

- a. The earth had been purged, but not the human soul: The intent of man's heart continued to be "evil from his youth." The promise of Genesis 3:15 had not yet been fulfilled, and this gives perspective to the covenant God made with Noah. At first glance that covenant appears to make the Flood God's last act of destruction, but all it stipulated was that He would never again destroy the earth *with water*. The mere fact of sin's continuance – and therefore the need for God to yet fulfill His protoevangelium – implies future judgment. The deluge served as a prototype of a great purging to come, and all too soon that purging would become a core theme in the mouths of God's prophets.

Men's worship of God would continue in the new earth, but in the same essential form as before. In the context of divine-human estrangement, worship means mediated distance, and that means symbols and sacraments.

- 1) The fact that this passage contains the first biblical reference to altars has led some to suppose that they had not been used in worship before this time. But the truth is that sacrificial offerings are most often presented in connection with sacred altars, not only in the biblical text but throughout human religious practice. The reason is that the worshipper presents his offering to a deity, and altars – in whatever form – serve as symbolic places of interface between the human and the divine.
  - 2) The use of altars most likely predated Noah, which lends support for the argument that the writer introduced the concept of altars at this point in the text because of what it communicates about Noah and the postdiluvian world. This conclusion is further substantiated by the narrative's emphasis on the continuance of sin after the Flood as it moves toward the episode at Babel. In other words, as the Genesis account introduced the concept of offerings immediately after the Fall to show its profound implication on man's worship, so it similarly introduces the concept of altars immediately after the Flood to emphasize that that act of natural purging did nothing to remedy the fundamental problem of human estrangement. Sacred space – the realm of divine-human encounter – continues to be a temporal and symbolic phenomenon, and from this point forward altars will play a central role in man's interaction with God.
- b. It was seen that the parallel sacrificial episodes involving Cain and Abel provide the Scripture's first consideration of human worship subsequent to the Fall and the introduction of the defining principle of divine-human estrangement. In that context, Cain's offering displays the pseudo-worship characteristic of the natural man, whatever particular form his religious thought and practice might assume. Abel's offering, on the other hand, provides a portrait of acceptable worship, revealing that the determining issue in an acceptable approach to God is the disposition and motivation of the worshipper. At the same time, this passage importantly emphasizes the fact that the Fall brought an enduring alteration to sacred space, so that even authentic worship occurs in the context of distance.

The Cain and Abel episode, then, introduces three key truths pertaining to the reality and operation of sacred space in the context of the Fall and its curse:

- 1) The first is that sacred space has become a physical, time/space phenomenon ordered by tangible symbols and rituals.
- 2) The second is that worship was rendered a matter of mediated distance. This is true *in every instance*, regardless of whether a person's worship is acceptable or not. This is because of the principle of estrangement that had now come to define the relational status between God and men.
- 3) Finally, the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable worship is not found *per se* in the symbols and sacraments that are employed. True worship acts to spiritually and psychologically bridge the distance between God and the worshipper, and thus is a matter of inward attitudes, motives, and orientations. Both Cain and Abel sought to encounter God in the same way externally, but their "heart approach" was vastly different.

#### **4. The Tower of Babel**

The contrast between Cain and Abel finds an interesting parallel in the accounts of Noah's personal worship (8:15-21) and the Babel incident that soon followed on the plain of Shinar (ancient Babylonia) (11:1-9). After recording God's new creational covenant with man and the earth (9:8-17), the Genesis narrative immediately lists a table of people groups descended from Noah (10:1-32). This table first of all emphasizes that the renewed Adamic commission to multiply, fill, and subdue the earth was indeed being fulfilled through Noah, the new Adam. But it also introduces the concept of *nations*, which development provides an historical and salvation-historical foundation for God's subsequent calling of Abraham and His promise to make him a great nation (12:1-3).

- a. Noah's descendents were greatly multiplying in the earth, and yet this multitude remained one people united by a common language and culture (11:1). Thus the tenth chapter of Genesis recounts the outcome of 11:1-9; that is, the Babel episode explains how Noah's descendents came to be separate nations distinguished by language, culture and geographical boundaries (cf. 10:2-5, 20, 31-32). But in the period immediately following the Flood mankind remained unified as one people, and this solidarity provides the human context for what transpires next.

The Fall didn't eradicate the divine image in man, and therefore the need to encounter God continued even in the midst of human estrangement and autonomy. As noted previously, worship had become a matter of conflicted duplicity: While seeking to satisfy their need to interact with the divine, people yet insist upon maintaining their own independence and self-significance. Cain's approach to God was ultimately an exercise in self-interest, but it nonetheless reflected his innate urge to connect with his Creator. The account of the tower of Babel expresses the same dynamic, but at the level of the whole human race.

Adam's grasp at autonomy resulted in alienation, and his oldest son's offering provided the first glimpse into human worship in the realm of consuming self-interest. Man had become his own "god," believing himself to be a self-sufficient being capable of making his own way in the world – even his way back to the true God. Cain's act of worship reflected this delusion, as did his later construction of a city dedicated to his son. Interestingly, both of these enterprises are reflected in the Babel incident. Acting in solidarity, it seemed that nothing was impossible for mankind: As a unified force, men could resist God on the one hand (11:4b), and effectively restore themselves back into His presence on the other (11:4a).

- b. Cain had originated the "city of man" – a sociological and cultural construct testifying to human greatness and sufficiency. Carrying the curse into the newly purged creation, Noah's descendents were now perpetuating Cain's megalomania and adding to it another testimonial to human resourcefulness and power: a tower reaching to the heavens. *The city and tower signify mankind's attempt to redress its humiliating expulsion and exile from God's garden by constructing a new city-sanctuary where man is lord – a new "Eden" from which he could display and exercise his dominion, not as man without God, but as independent from God.*
- c. The arrogant irony of this endeavor is highlighted in the reason given for it: The human race sought in solidarity to make a *name* ("Shem") for itself by fulfilling the creational mandate of dominion, but in the pseudo-communion of autonomy. But this was in open defiance of God's previous declaration that *He* had ordained a man – Shem – through whom He would restore mankind to His presence and accomplish His overall creational purpose (9:26-27). Fokkelman comments: *"Implicitly they want, perhaps as yet unconsciously, to make impossible the salvation-history, which according to the biblical message is essentially the thrilling dialogue between God and man. Implicitly they want to penetrate the strictly divine and become divine themselves. What drives them is hubris."*
- d. Being the realm of divine-human encounter, sacred space is both a divine creation and subject to divine prerogative. It belongs to God alone to establish communion with His image-bearers, and, in just recompense for Adam and Eve's quest for independence, God had driven them from His presence. If sacred space were to be recovered and God's purpose for His creation were to be realized, it would not come through human effort, even the collective effort of a unified human race.

Cain intended his offering to close the distance between himself and God and thereby gain advantage. His effort failed, and now the collective race of men had attempted the same thing, only to realize the same outcome. God "scattered" Cain, making him a wanderer in the earth, and He likewise dispersed the rebels who had converged at Babel (11:7-9). Never again in the present scheme of things would there be a unified humanity; human estrangement had taken on a heightened dimension. Let men conceive and aspire as they will, God will neither be mocked nor resisted (11:4); Adam's race would indeed fill the earth as charged – not in the blessedness of regal image-sons, but as forcibly scattered exiles.