

Leadership And Covenants (Part Eleven): Signs

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Amid the prevailing violence of the pre-Flood world, God singled out Noah, called him, and began giving him the grace he needed to complete what likely seemed like an impossible assignment. He spent one hundred and twenty years preaching, undertaking the hard labor to build the ark, and enduring the mockery of his neighbors. When the Flood came, he faced torrential rains combined with earthquakes that produced frighteningly huge waves on an endless sea, making him fear for his family's survival. While never knowing a period of absolute calm, he cared for the animals, including the birds sent out to reconnoiter conditions outside. When one did not return, and the ark settled into the soft but stable soil, the lifesaving voyage ended, and the reestablishment of life on earth began in a world of absolute calm dominated by silence.

From beginning to end, Noah's story has the sense and appeal of a fantastic fictional tale. Within it are events that may remind us of a superhero conquering every challenge devised by a mysterious villain to keep him from accomplishing his mission, and saving his family despite the sacrifices. Since God Himself reports Noah's work through Moses, his story is not fiction; one man lived the entire experience. Moreover, every person born on earth since descends from this one man and his wife.

The events and challenges Noah faced were not concluded until God sealed a covenant with post-Flood humanity:

Then God said to Noah and his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."

So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth." (Genesis 9:8-17, *New International Version* [NIV])

Some massively destructive events have occurred on earth, but except for the Flood, they have all been localized events, despite affecting millions of people: volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, hurricanes, and extremes of weather. The Flood is by far the most devastating event ever to occur on Planet Earth since God created Adam and Eve. Except for the eight people God sanctified before

Noah began his work, it executed the population of the entire earth in one massive judgment determined and accomplished by the sovereign God. No destructive event comes close to matching it.

Searching for Signs

This article will not provide detailed documentation that the Flood occurred, but it will cover the obvious messianic revelations—signs—that God gave to His people through the centuries. By them, He kept them informed and encouraged that He had not forgotten His promise to supply the Savior and Redeemer whom we desperately need to free us from bondage to sin and death.

We do not have to search long to find the cause for God's judgment: man's unending determination to fill his life with every vile form of sin he could imagine. Humanity needed to be saved from itself before millions of minds became so set on sinful ways of living that they could not repent. The step God took—sentencing almost all of mankind to death—was, in reality, an act of divine mercy before humanity reached that point of no return.

This current generation of humanity is living in an atmosphere of widespread violence, which Jesus warned in His Olivet Prophecy would be similar to the state the world was in as Noah was finalizing the housing of the animals God brought to him. The beginning of the Flood was only days away.

How much time do we have before God gives the signal for Jesus to return to earth to establish the Kingdom of God? Before His crucifixion, even Jesus did not know the time of His departure from heaven, so we do not know either. He admonishes us to be ready at all times.

Searching for signs plays a role in the measures we take to be ready. Sometimes our looking for signs causes anxiety, as events between the nations make us uncertain. Everyone desires to live with far less anxiety. Everybody wants life to be “better” than it presently is, leading many to look hopefully for indications that things are turning in their favor. Some may refer to these indications as their hopes, but they are really looking for *signs* that what they believe is necessary for happiness or a sense of well-being is about to be met. Thus, the pressures to meet each day's needs will lessen to some extent.

“Sign” is used 76 times in Scripture. *The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* contains twenty-one applications for the word in English. Some of them have no relevance to our lives in Christ, and others are used only in technical circumstances. However, some of them apply to daily situations in almost everybody's life. Notice these six usages:

- » A motion or action indicating a thought, desire, or command.
- » A board, placard, or representation of any sort, generally bearing an inscription conveying information of some kind, as in a street sign.
- » Any arbitrary mark, symbol, or token used to indicate a word, etc. or having its own specific meaning, as in a sign of mourning.
- » Any indication, trace, or evidence of a state, or condition, as in a sign of poverty.
- » Any evidence of a recent presence; a vestige; trace.

» Any omen, portent, or miraculous occurrence indicating a change of circumstance.

In the Scriptures

All six of these applications appear in the Bible. As one would expect due to the appearances being in Scripture, their usage denotes “an outward indication of an inner or hidden purpose, usually that of God Himself” (*Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, p. 346). The same source suggests, under the heading “signal,” that the corresponding term in Hebrew can be used interchangeably with “sign” because signs frequently indicate the nature of a forthcoming divinely purposed event (p. 345). Frequently, the word “sign” is used in the Old Testament when a prophet of God is asked to interpret a puzzling circumstance that appears to be a signal from God—a sign.

However, in the New Testament, the usage of the term is somewhat different. Signs tend to be given to identify personages so they can be recognized, as well as to provide descriptions of the times so that members of God’s Family can be alerted to make the best use of them for their own spiritual and physical protection, growth, and glorification of God.

A clear example is the Israelites’ prolonged expectations of the appearance of the Messiah. The first mention of Him appears in Genesis 3:14-15, within God’s judgment against Satan:

So the Lord God said to the serpent: “Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; on your belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”

Six thousand years later, the Israelitish people and modern-day Christians living by faith are still anticipating the Promised Seed’s second coming in glory. When God gave this judgment, there was little information within the sign to use as an identifier except that Eve was the only female at that time, and she had as yet no children. However, her first child was a son, and the anticipation began. She probably assumed that he was the Promised Seed. She was wrong—he was a murderer.

She had a third son, Seth (Genesis 4:23-25), and he was not the Promised Seed either, but he did become an ancestor of the Promised Seed. The Promised Seed’s lineage can be traced from Seth through Noah to Abraham, Jacob, Judah, King David, and finally, Joseph and Mary when He was born in Bethlehem, Judea. The sign took around 4,000 years to come to pass after God’s judgment of the Serpent in Genesis 3.

As the centuries slid by, God occasionally added reminders and more precise descriptions of the Promised Seed so that, if the Israelites believed Him, they could more accurately identify the Messiah’s appearance when God sent Him. God kept His word. He did send Him, and He performed His responsibility admirably.

The first sign given after God’s judgment in the Garden of Eden appears in Genesis 12:1-3 in the midst of God’s promises to Abram:

Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that *I will* show you. *I will* make you a great nation; *I will* bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. *I will* bless those who bless you, and *I will* curse him

who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Emphasis ours throughout.)

The part of these seven-fold “I will” promises that applies most directly to the Promised Seed is the final one. Abram was a mere man, though he would live to become 175 years of age. However, in no way could he be called a blessing to all nations, so he understood that the promise would be fulfilled by a descendant. When to this is added that the descendant will be a blessing to all nations on earth, he understood that the promise applied, not only to one generation, but to all nations for all time. Therefore, the last promise included that the Promised Seed, an eternal being, would be born from his family.

Another divinely inspired expansion came through Jacob, Abram’s grandson. It appears in Genesis 49:8-10:

Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father’s children shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion’s whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion, who shall rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people.

God is clear. The Promised Seed, who will be a king, will come from the tribe of Judah.

God inspired Moses to add this detail to the resume of the Promised Seed:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear, according to all you desired of the Lord your God in Horeb in the day of the assembly saying, “Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die.” And the Lord said to me, “What they have spoken is good. I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him.” (Deuteronomy 18:15-18)

In this, God adds honor to the life and reputation of Moses as both the governing leader and legislator of Israel. Moses is a clear type of Jesus Christ in both of these offices. However, in this case, the passage emphasizes the office of prophet. True believers have respected Moses to a degree few other leaders of any nation have been. The Promised Seed, the Messiah, will be like Moses but far greater still.

The next bit of information appears in regard to King David’s response to God’s rejection of his desire to build Him a “house” (Temple) by which God would be honored. That rejection contains a promise:

When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your

kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever. (II Samuel 7:12-16)

David's humility about himself and his deep respect for God are clearly shown in his response. He, a converted man, was stunned by what God promised, understanding the expanse and depth of God's words as few others who have ever lived. His response is clearly juxtaposed with God's promise so we can perceive a distinct picture of the personality of a person who truly pleased God:

Who am I, O Lord God? And what is my house, that You have brought me this far? And yet this was a small thing in Your sight, O Lord God; and You have also spoken of Your servant's house for a great while to come. Is this the manner of man, O Lord God? Now what more can David say to You? For You, Lord God, know Your servant. For Your word's sake, and according to Your own heart, You have done all these great things, to make Your servant know them. Therefore You are great, O Lord God. For there is none like You, nor is there any God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears. And who is like Your people, like Israel, the one nation on the earth whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people, to make for Himself a name—and to do for Yourself great and awesome deeds for Your land—before Your people whom You redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, the nations, and their gods? For You have made Your people Israel Your very own people forever; and You, Lord, have become their God. Now, O Lord God, the word which You have spoken concerning Your servant and concerning his house, establish it forever and do as You have said. So let Your name be magnified forever, saying, "The Lord of hosts is the God over Israel." And let the house of Your servant David be established before You. For You, O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, have revealed this to Your Servant, saying "I will build you a house." Therefore your servant has found it in his heart to pray this prayer to You. And now, O Lord God, You are God, and Your words are true, and You have promised this goodness to Your servant. Now therefore, let it please You to bless the house of Your servant, that it may continue before You forever; for You, O Lord God have spoken it, and with Your blessing let the house of Your servant be blessed forever." (II Samuel 7:18-29)

Expanding the defining attributes of the Promised Seed, God sanctifies the family of King David within the tribe of Judah before all others.

Revelation through the prophet Isaiah provides further definition to the responsibilities the Promised Seed will eventually hold. Isaiah lived at the time the Assyrian Empire crushed Israel as a nation between 722 and 720 BC. Notice Isaiah 9:6-7:

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

This revelation does little to define Him in His appearance as a human to crush the god of this world and free humanity from the serpent's spiritual grip. However, it describes the greatness of His

leadership that will be reflected in the wisdom of His works before being enthroned as the ruler of the World Tomorrow. As King of kings, He will be the Mighty God who rescues and then endlessly rules humanity in the peace it has always desired but could never achieve.

Micah is the next prophet God used to identify the promised Messiah. He was a contemporary of both Amos and Isaiah, and he and Isaiah both came from towns not far apart within Judah. They may have spoken to each other on occasion and shared their views. Micah 5:1-5 reads:

Now gather yourself in troops, O daughter of troops; he has laid siege against us; they will strike the judge of Israel with a rod on the cheek. But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting. Therefore He shall give them up, until the time that she who is in labor has given birth; then the remnant of His brethren shall return to the children of Israel. And He shall stand and feed His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God; and they shall abide, for now He shall be great to the ends of the earth; and this One shall be peace.

This prophecy does not necessarily state where the Messiah would be born but that the home base, town, or city of the family of the Promised Seed would be Bethlehem Ephrathah. He was indeed born there. David's particular family line (see Ruth 4:18-22) begins with a son, Perez, that Tamar bore to Jacob's son, Judah. Five generations later, Salmon was born into that family line, and his son was Boaz, who married Ruth the Moabitess. These two, who made their home in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:1, 19; 2:4), produced Obed, who fathered Jesse, David's father. Jesse and David were also from Bethlehem (I Samuel 16:1, 4, 18).

The signs of identification are becoming more evident. When the Promised Seed began His public works, He stood out clearly to those who truly believed.

People Searching, God Revealing

In the New Testament, each of the four gospel accounts explicitly begins to identify Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. God most certainly did not hide the arrival of the Promised Seed. God used angels to reveal plainly and directly to Joseph and Mary the unique occurrence of the virgin birth. When Jesus was about to be born, God employed a light beaming from the sky to pinpoint the location of His birth. By means of angels, He announced it to nearby shepherds, and they also publicized it to others within the area of Bethlehem. An angel clearly proclaimed that the One born was the long-awaited Savior. Matthew and Luke provide lengthy genealogies, given in reverse order of each other, showing that the newborn Babe's family lineage aligns with the Old Testament prophecies.

In the account of His birth and early life, Luke 2:12, 34 use the term "sign" purposely: In verse 12, an angel uses it to identify to the shepherds how He would be dressed ("in swaddling cloths"). In verse 34, after the elderly Simeon calls the Babe "Your [God's] salvation," he prophesies to Mary that He would be "a sign which will be spoken against."

After traveling a long distance following that mysterious star, the wise men arrived in Jerusalem, inquiring of King Herod about the birth of the King of the Jews. A divine warning in a dream told them not to return to his palace before going back to their native land. The appearance of an angel

propelled Joseph into fleeing to Egypt with Mary and Jesus, triggering the fulfillment of another prophecy: calling God's Son out of Egypt even as He did with Israel (Hosea 11:1).

Though Matthew did not use the word "sign" in recording these incidents, each of them was indeed a sign that distinguished Jesus from other newborns. They all appeared in a relatively short period of time to ensure His birth was well known within Judea by the time His ministry began. Even the sign of His intelligence and unusual depth of understanding on biblical subjects at age twelve was noted by experienced, adult religious figures. More important is that He, too, was aware and referred to God as His Father in the presence of His physical parents (Luke 2:41-52).

John Purposely Gave Clear Signs Too

We must not overlook Jesus' cousin, John, whose responsibility to God was to prepare the way for Christ's ministry. As Luke 3:15-17 shows, John's ministry was a sign as well:

Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire."

Shortly after this pronouncement, John baptized Jesus. On that day when he baptized many, he baptized Jesus last, focusing all attention on Him:

When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him and a voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21-22)

No sign announcing His identity could be more clear. The long-awaited Promised Seed, Messiah, Redeemer, Savior, and Creator—all in one living, divine Being—had arrived on earth to do His work and was duly announced as no other had ever been.

Familiarity Breeds Contempt

Soon thereafter, He was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. After passing these tests, He returned to His hometown where a different type of test awaited Him:

So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in Your hearing." So all bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious

words which proceeded out of His mouth. And they said, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “You will surely say the proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal yourself! Whatever is done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country.’” Then He said, “Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country.” (Luke 4:16-24)

First, note the sign He gave them and all those who claim to follow Jesus: Our Savior keeps the Sabbath. Second, the more arresting sign, everyone in the synagogue understood His reading from Isaiah 61:1-3 to refer to the Messiah’s responsibilities, and Jesus boldly stated, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” By this, He claimed divine anointing (*messiah* means “anointed”), and He declared that He would set them free from what held them in bondage, another sign of the Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph and Mary—the Man who lived next door, as it were—announced with beautiful words and great conviction that He was the Messiah.

For this reason, the townspeople quickly turned against Him and attempted to kill Him by casting Him off a cliff. To them, His words were blasphemous, making Him deserving of death. God spared Him, but three-and-a-half years later, the Jews insisted that Pilate crucify Him on the same basic charge.