

Leadership And Covenants (Part Ten)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "Personal," July-August 2017

Questions about God—whether a Creator God even exists and whether He is the Author of the Bible—are being asked with increased intensity as we approach the time of Jesus Christ’s return. The attempt to undermine His sovereign place in the existence of all things and His continuing purposes is led by His and our invisible archenemy, the one whom the apostle Paul calls “the god of this world” in II Corinthians 4:4:

For the god of this world has blinded the unbelievers’ minds [that they should not discern the truth], preventing them from seeing the illuminating light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ (the Messiah), Who is the Image *and* Likeness of God. (*The Amplified Bible*).

What do people mean when, in justifying their behavior, they say, “Even if there is a God, He is following no plan, so no purpose is being worked out”? What?! Did God have nothing better to do that day, so He just threw together this amazing complex of systems, including all its lifeforms, on a mere whim? Such thoughtless drive!

The true God *is* the Author of the Bible, and He used His sovereign authority to determine the revelations it contains and the sequence in which they are given. Since Adam and Eve, believing in the existence of the true God and His Word has been the principal challenge affecting the quality of life mankind thinks it must have for happiness and prosperity. These beliefs have eluded human understanding—not because God has hidden Himself, but because men refuse to accept the clear evidence He provides in the creation.

Imagine that the Creator God sat us down in a room by ourselves and presented a short film summarizing the Bible’s first ten chapters. What would we see? What would it teach us about His character, purpose, and plan?

Authors and filmmakers are creators in their own way. They prepare an outline, a story flow, they wish to follow either to entertain or to educate their readers or viewers. Have we ever wondered why God began the Bible as He did? Consider this simple overview as a factor of utmost importance to our well-being in relation to life’s purposes.

Have we ever consciously noted that the Bible begins in Genesis 1 with God creating order from what appears to be the result of either a destruction of a previous system or an array of disparate parts, fashioning them into a form appropriate for His next step? Either way, as the story unfolds, the role He plays emerges. The primary point is virtually impossible to miss: Supreme order and direction in what He will reveal originates in and from Him. Though normally invisible to humanity, He is clearly in control, initiating what will happen and also continuing to completion what He began.

The orderly progression of time and activity continues as God arranges, piece by piece, the environment in which later events will take place. Created elements appear in a natural progression. First, there must be light. From this point on, everything coming into view is made new and in sparkling, showroom condition. Last of all, the two humans are designed in the image of God

Himself. They, Adam and Eve—who will set in motion the human side of the action—are created, given life, and presented gifts, which are examples of His grace: earth and all it contains for their use within the boundaries He set. They immediately begin to use what God freely gave them as gifts.

What has God chosen to show us thus far? First, He is the Author of all that is. Second, He brings order out of lifeless chaos. Third, perhaps our Lord's flesh-and-blood brother sums it up best in James 1:17-18:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

What has God revealed of Himself to this point without saying a word except for what He commanded to bring into existence? It is purposefully instructive. Genesis 1 shows that He is a God of order and that He has a distinct purpose for each step He takes. He is a God of awesome powers, moving mountains, seas, rivers, valleys, and vast oceans of atmosphere into place. Greenery and animal life appear. Nothing happens randomly. Every step proceeds as He directs. He is in control as He purposefully establishes His sovereignty over everything He has brought into existence.

As His revelation continues, what mankind produces neither improves nor even maintains what God gave them. Instead, gradual degeneration begins to tarnish and even destroy the gifts. Adam and Eve have children, and the first one murders his younger brother. The destruction increases as time moves forward and the population grows. God appears again onscreen in the story, giving Eve a child to replace the one killed. Adam and Eve name him Seth. A new—and much better—family line begins with that gift, producing conduct and lives that use God's creation gifts to Adam and Eve more worthily.

At the same time, the family line produced by Cain, the one who murdered his younger brother, grows ever more violent. God uses Seth's family line to provide a witness to the original family line, warning them about where their behavior will lead. God then raises up an outstanding leader from Seth's family line, giving him abilities as a preacher of righteousness (II Peter 2:5) to make humanity's plight so clear that the original family line has no excuse for not repenting. What that leader, Noah, predicted occurs, and an entire world disappears from view except for eight people and the animal life God ordered them to save from the massive, devastating Flood.

Greater-Than-Normal Importance

As the first ten chapters of this most important Book ever written come to a close, a new beginning occurs with an outstanding leader, Noah, as its head. In just these chapters, thoughtful and careful readers can discern an outline and summary of God's entire purpose and plan. They provide a brief preview of things to come even in the end time, as God continues to provide details of events within His purpose.

Here again is a brief summary of the events of Genesis 1-10 to reinforce this on our minds for our well-being now. Why? Because what happened in Genesis is happening again; we are living as a portion of it transpires. As William Strauss and Neil Howe, the authors of *The Fourth Turning*, showed from the last several centuries of American history, events tend to repeat themselves roughly every 80-100 years. Locations and personalities change, but the same basic events recur. The

historical events involving God and His purpose are far more critical, though, and also far more spread out in time.

Initially, God creates mankind and gives gifts to enable right behavior and productive lives. Humanity, though, proceeds to choose to live violent, destructive lives, determined to destroy itself. God then mercifully raises up a leader to warn about punishment from Him that looms on the horizon. At the same time, the warning provides mankind sufficient time and opportunity to repent.

However, mankind, rejecting God's mercy, fails to change, and the punishment dramatically descends. Humanity has nearly destroyed itself. But then, a new day arises with new leadership and true teaching that enables mankind to reach the potential that He purposed from the beginning. God is indeed the merciful Savior of His creation!

With this article, we will conclude our study into Noah's life and the Flood. As we begin to see what God is working out, we will emphasize why the events covered in overview here are of a greater-than-normal importance to us right now.

The first reason is that Jesus directly names the Flood in His important, end-time Olivet Prophecy (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21) as being a preview, a pattern, for the times we live in now. His prophecy provides us with a general listing of events that signal the approach of the return of Jesus Christ, the Great Tribulation, and the Day of the Lord.

Therefore, since his time is a kind of preview of major events that we may have to face, Noah's conduct and accomplishments during his lifetime should be of particular interest to us. His calling and the manner of his life in his relationship with God as he was preparing for the Flood contains helpful understanding for our immediate use.

Because of his faithful conduct during those stressful events, Noah becomes one of the Bible's great heroes of faith. It will help our spiritual wellbeing to ask, "What does God say about how Noah conducted himself? What spiritual characteristics did Noah exhibit that we should strive to emulate?"

Consider why the Bible is organized as it is. We barely get past the first few chapters of God's revelation, and living conditions are already so violently bad that they become a model of the times we are living in, those days leading up to Christ's return. How evil is this carnal heart that we contend with every day? Can we not learn lessons from Noah's life to help us, not merely endure, but overcome during these worsening times?

A second reason is that Noah is a superior example of living by faith, especially taking into consideration what he and his family accomplished within the unusually difficult times they lived through. He can be a considerable source of encouragement for us to push on in faith.

People refer to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as being the "Fathers" of Israel. They are rightly dignified with high honor for being the faithful progenitors of God's people. How does this compare, though, with Noah, who is literally the father, not merely of Israel, but of all of the Gentile nations as well—all of mankind? This was not a mere chance occurrence! Genesis reveals from the beginning that the merciful and faithful God is the Originator and Power that accomplishes events within His purposes.

Consider Noah. First, God selected Noah as the human leader to accomplish His purpose in the time leading up to the Flood, enduring with his family during the Flood and getting humanity started once

again after the Flood. All by itself, this résumé is astounding. Second, so much hinged on what he and his family accomplished. Did any of Israel's later great leaders spend 120 years building something for God as Noah did with the ark? What he built became the very means of saving his and his family's lives. Third, during the time he was building the ark, he also preached God's truth to the world. How many others of Israel's greats were also preachers of righteousness during the turmoil of their times? Fourth, it is established by the Creator Himself that Noah was righteous and faithful.

This man was not the typical, bumbling, clod-busting caricature the world tries to make of the biblical ancients. Noah is a person to admire and use as an example to follow.

Noah's Character Plainly Described

Genesis 6:22 plainly states, "Thus Noah did; according to all that God commanded him, so he did." If a single verse catches the essence of Noah's character and the quality of his relationship with God, this is it. Even if we consider only a general overview of his lengthy life, this verse provides an extensive amount to ponder.

Though the verse offers no details, it suggests how he dealt with the times and carrying out his tremendous responsibilities. It is not intended to imply that he was absolutely perfect in his conduct at all times and under every circumstance. However, considering the times he lived in, his life was undoubtedly tumultuously stressful, yet he obeyed God.

He certainly was not of the stature of Jesus Christ. The verse, though, is intended to convey an essential truth: Noah was an unusual and distinctively godly person, one among billions. In short, he was humble before God and faithful, dependable in carrying out his responsibilities. He could be trusted.

The wording indicates that he did not deviate from what God charged him to do. He did not add his own thoughts about God's commands in a sort of "here is the way I see it" manner. He humbly did as God instructed him despite the social pressures against him, and what he accomplished he did with determined class.

What Did the Flood Accomplish?

We can easily reach a conclusion about humanity by comparing the Bible's overview of mankind's pre-Flood activities with our more detailed daily news reports. Together, they suggest that we are experiencing times increasingly similar to those just before the Flood. This leads us to an unavoidable conclusion: What God did through the Flood proves that the cataclysm did not solve the problems that reside in the hearts of human beings. What is in man's heart created the necessity for humanity to witness that major disaster as part of its history. The internal stain was still there after the Flood waters drained away. God clearly shows the massive execution of earth's population did not erase the evil motivations of man's self-centered nature. That must be accomplished by another means.

By putting them to death, the Flood did clear the population of a vast number of troublemakers. However, only God's merciful and generous grace, as Noah and his family received, changes a person's heart and thus his or her conduct. Our hearts are changed by God initiating our calling,

revealing Himself, granting repentance, giving His Spirit, and then personally working with us in a close, personal relationship. By this means, we are created in the image of God. This is the only permanent solution.

This fact should have the effect of causing us to resolve to follow through by willingly cooperating with God within the relationship created by His merciful calling. What practical, spiritual counsel will enable us to negotiate these times, which are so similar to what Noah went through?

In short, our salvation is to yield to God's guidance, as seen in Noah's story. His attitude and conduct become our practical, human example and spiritual guide. Just as he persevered in building the ark and trusting God to preserve his family through the Flood, we should put the same effort into preparing for God's Kingdom.

Genesis 7:1 provides us with a simple but meaningful instruction: "Then the Lord said to Noah, 'Come into the ark, you and all your household, because I have seen that you are righteous before Me in this generation.'" Noah did not hesitate when God commanded him to do this, as his labors in building the ark were ending. This command states the qualification to meet our time's spiritual challenges. Noah faithfully lived righteously within the difficulties of the times.

The biblical record shows that God oversaw and provided safety for Noah and his family during those challenges beyond their control. He will do for us as He did for them. The Flood of our times is not one of water but an overwhelming "flood" of deception combined with threats of violence against us. It is already upon us to some small degree. As far as can be determined, nothing of this world will turn it aside. In fact, it is already named in the Bible—our Flood is called the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord.

God Is Ever Faithful

Take note of what God does in Genesis 7:7, 13, 16:

So Noah, with his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives, went into the ark because of the waters of the flood. . . . On the same day Noah and Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons with them entered the ark. . . . So those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the Lord shut him in.

God sealed the door to protect them from the ravages of the Flood. His oversight did not end with that act of protection.

Genesis 8:1 carries His watchful care another step further: "Then God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the animals that were with him in the ark." This statement translates into English rather awkwardly, but in Hebrew, it expresses God's continuous awareness of Noah and his family. He did not suffer lapses of memory; God was always aware of them. This should offer us significant reassurance. His character remains ever the same. He is the faithful God, providing meaningful support for our faith.

It will help us to grasp with more understanding what God's sanctification of Noah means to us personally. Our gratitude to God and our faith toward Him is strengthened when we realize that we share similar times with Noah and can learn so much by understanding the interaction between him and God.

Genesis 6:5-8 leads up to God's calling of Noah:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the Lord said, "I will destroy man who I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.

It was the Creator God who initiated a work through Noah. He and his family did not volunteer. Within this is an awesome truth: Those who received grace in this context were also the only ones who were set apart from the violent, churning mass of humanity on earth, becoming the only ones to survive the Flood. Take note of when they received this grace.

Did the grace they received place them in a favorable, in fact, an enviable position? There is absolutely no question it did! Grace, then, including its direct connection to God's gift of sanctification, becomes the starting point for some encouraging, stimulating thoughts since this particular grace appeared in the midst of a life-threatening situation.

As the Flood story unfolds and the devastating Flood actually comes as God said it would, it becomes clear that our Creator *specifically* sanctified Noah and his family for deliverance *before* the Flood occurred. They were specially set apart to be saved from certain death in the Flood.

Do not misunderstand, though. The apostle Paul admonishes in Philippians 2:12-16:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

The grace God gave them was not a get-out-of-jail-free, do-nothing ticket to life. Paul's warning is not presented in the sense that we must work for salvation but that we must continue what we have begun as a result of God's calling. We must be witnesses before others of what we have received. Noah and his family had to faithfully carry out responsibilities that God's grace enabled them to accomplish. They built the ark, testifying by it to those around them. They carried out their responsibilities because they lived by faith.

In like manner, as time and God's purpose have moved on, we now understand that we, too, have received grace and are, like Noah and his family, specifically sanctified by God for our calling into the church and for deliverance from what lies ahead. We, too, have not received a free ticket to

everlasting life but bear responsibilities within our calling. We, too, must faithfully live God's way of life, glorifying Him by our conduct. God knows how to deliver us out of temptations (II Peter 2:9), but He will not necessarily draw us away from them. We are already facing such temptations, which are gradually intensifying in the pressures they apply as time moves toward Christ's return.

Noah Did Not Forget Either

What does this mean to us practically? Recall the reassuring encouragement of Genesis 8:1, when God remembered Noah in the midst of the devastating Flood, even as it was killing everybody not in the ark. This is written to reassure us, not Noah, as his trial was over when this was written. Despite circumstances, God never forgets us. This is what is essential to exercising our faith. He is the faithful God who is our support!

The marvel in this is not that God remembered but that Noah remembered. Through the 120 years of building the ark, then after entering the ark when the rains came, and the fountains of the great deep erupted with gigantic earthquakes, spouting huge and powerful gushes of water, still Noah did not forget God. A boiling sea pitched him and his family about like a cork. For a year and ten days, their every view was only of incessantly lurching water. How quickly would that get old?

It is truly one of the amazing realities that, in the midst of this churning maelstrom of wind and water, Noah remembered. How easy it would have been for him to be focused entirely on his own safety! In addition, the first thing he did upon leaving the ark was to sacrifice in thanks to God (Genesis 8:20). Like God, he had not forgotten.

The lesson for us is that God was right there with them as they bore the events He was accomplishing through them. Because of His presence, they were saved. It thus becomes clear that grace given in the process of sanctification is the first step toward salvation because God is with us the entire way.

Can we believe that? Briefly, here is a summary vital to strengthening our understanding, our faith, and our will to move on in submitting to God: Sanctification leads us directly to Jesus Christ and salvation—but not merely to Him, but also to repentance, justification, baptism, receiving the Holy Spirit, overcoming, producing fruit, glorifying God through living by faith, and finally, resurrection. Thus, we see a chain of events in our spiritual creation.

The church needs to expound on grace because everything—everything!—in God's plan of salvation for us hinges on His loving and merciful generosity. Grace must be greatly appreciated to help establish and strengthen humility within us. And never forget: *A lack of humility ruined Satan.*

Genesis, indeed the entire Bible, reveals that everything in God's purpose begins with Him. He is the Initiator, the Source. In its biblical usage, the term *grace* essentially indicates either "a freely given act by God on our behalf" or the gift itself. What we need to appreciate is that, within God's spiritual purpose, *everything* we have ultimately comes from Him as an enabling gift, that is, gifts that empower us to carry out our responsibilities.

We Are the Clay

In blunt terms, God's purpose is the increasing of His kind that He might share with others what He has to give. He is the Creator, and He Himself is the model He is following. For us to become a completed product, He must add to what we presently are. He creates and prods by mercifully gifting

us. Never forget for even one second that He is the Creator, and we are the clay. So, for us to be in His image, for us to be enabled to respond by faith, He, our Creator, must first give us the power to fulfill our responsibilities.

Despite all His gifting, there remains for us a small part in His purpose: We must respond by using the gifts He has added. Yet, sometimes it seems that what we must do is a challenging task. However, recall the promise in I Corinthians 10:12-13:

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

Our great God is not in the business of making us fail. He does not want us to fail. He is a Creator, and as He builds, He must test to ensure a quality product.

Has clay ever shaped itself into a thing of beauty? The artist must add certain elements to the process for the clay to become what he or she envisions. Therefore, God's gifts, the powers, the graces that enable us to do what is right and good, always precede what His human creations do in terms of what is righteous.

What Noah did that is truly noteworthy is that he believed God and yielded. Thus, he walked with God and was blameless and righteous—but only because God gifted him first. This is why Genesis 6:8 tells us that “Noah found grace.” The powers to accomplish what he did were not in him by nature. He found grace, and it changed his life.

Hebrews 11:7 comments on Noah's accomplishments:

By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

The Bible does not explain how Noah became aware of the grace he had been given. Even so, it enabled him, first, by sanctifying him and giving him the spiritual faith to respond properly to the warning God gave. Hebrews 11:7 reveals that Noah reacted by moving with godly fear, that is, with a deep reverential respect, indicating that, though he was awed by the complexity and size of what God had charged him to do, he nonetheless immediately accepted the task and began doing what he could.

Genesis 6:9 adds detail to Noah's character, describing him as “just,” “righteous,” or “godly,” and saying that he “walked with God.” The latter phrase suggests that, despite all the conflicting corruption surrounding him, he moved through life in step with God, doing his work alongside Him.

It also says he was “perfect in his generations” or “blameless among his contemporaries.” “Blameless” is a kind of code word that indicates he was justified by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ. He was a converted man.

Notice that the verse does not say Noah received grace as a result of already conducting his life with all those good attributes. Instead, he was leading his life righteously *because* he had first found God's grace, the gifting by which God enabled him. The way he lived his life is the proof that he had found

God's favor and *then* began conducting his life as Scripture describes. The favor, the grace, empowered him to accomplish what is recorded. God follows this pattern with everyone He sanctifies.

James 2:17-18 tells us that true faith will reveal itself by what it produces. The product will be in agreement with God's righteousness, and it will separate, set apart, that person from those around him who do not have the same faith. The grace, the favor, the gifts of God, always precede anything produced within the purpose and calling of God.