

September 3  
Lesson 1 (NIV)

# THE RAINBOW

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 54:1-10

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Genesis 8:20-9:17

## GENESIS 8:20-22

<sup>20</sup> Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. <sup>21</sup> The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.

<sup>22</sup> “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”

## GENESIS 9:8-17

<sup>8</sup> Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: <sup>9</sup> “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

<sup>12</sup> 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: <sup>13</sup> I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup> Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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.”

<sup>17</sup> So God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”

## KEY VERSE

*I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.—Genesis 9:11*

## LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List elements of the covenant God made with Noah and all living creatures on the earth after the flood.
2. Compare and contrast the Noahic covenant with other covenants God made.
3. Write a statement of commitment to honor the covenant relationship he or she enjoys as a believer in Christ.

## LESSON OUTLINE

### Introduction

- A. It's a Sign!
- B. Lesson Background

### I. Noah Worships (GENESIS 8:20-22)

- A. First Altar (v. 20)
- B. Final Curse (v. 21)
- C. Continual Seasons (v. 22)

### II. God Promises (GENESIS 9:8-11)

A. Covenant Participants (vv. 8-10)

B. Covenant Promises (v. 11)

*On Being “Under Water”*

III. Bow Confirms (GENESIS 9:12-17)

A. Symbol (vv. 12, 13)

B. Significance (vv. 14, 15)

C. Summary (vv. 16, 17)

*Preparedness*

Conclusion

A. I Promise

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

## Introduction

### A. It’s a Sign!

A quick glance at an object, image, or document can give us information in an instant. When we see a diamond on the ring finger of a woman’s left hand, we immediately know that a proposal for marriage has been accepted. The presence of a license plate on an automobile indicates that the vehicle is allowed to operate on public roads. That framed diploma in our doctor’s office assures us that he or she has completed a course of study in preparation for treating our ailments.

By these and many other visual devices we communicate. It should not surprise us, then, that God does the same. Today we will look at a sign from God that communicates not only an important promise but also a fact of history.

### B. Lesson Background

The biblical account of the great flood is but one of at least five ancient flood stories. The existence of the latter leads some to believe that the biblical account used them as sources, and that the flood is a legendary myth of an ancient and ignorant people. But if there truly was a great flood in ancient times, then stories of the event would be passed down from generation to generation.

As people spread over the earth and formed distinct cultures, these stories would take on the characteristics of those cultures. It would be strange indeed if accounts of the actual great flood were absent altogether from ancient writings! So the existence of the nonbiblical stories actually serves to confirm that there was indeed a great flood at some point in history. The Bible’s account of this flood is the accurate one. The Bible’s unerring track record on other historical matters and the divine inspiration of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16) assure us of this fact.

The biblical account of the great flood is detailed in giving specifics for the beginning of the flood, the length of time the rain fell, how long the floodwaters covered the earth, and how long it took for the waters to recede. The total amount of time adds up to a little more than a year (Genesis 7:11; 8:14).

## I. Noah Worships

(GENESIS 8:20-22)

One can only imagine the joy and relief that Noah and his family experience on leaving the ark and stepping once again on solid ground. Noah’s first act thereafter is to worship, to give thanks to the Lord for his providential care in bringing his family safely through this experience.

### A. First Altar (v. 20)

**20. Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it.**

This is the first altar mentioned in Scripture—though it is not the first blood sacrifice (see Genesis 4:4). When Noah was commanded to save pairs of animals in the ark, more clean animals were spared than unclean ones (Genesis 6:19, 20; 7:2, 3). Perhaps the act of sacrifice noted in the verse before us has been intended from the beginning, provision for it having been made by keeping more of the appropriate animals alive. We are not told what differentiates clean animals from unclean ones at this point in history, but Noah somehow knows the difference.

#### *What Do You Think?*

What are some ways to express thanks to God for a deliverance or other special blessing?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

In acts of private worship

In acts of corporate worship

In acts of worship that witness to unbelievers

Other

### B. Final Curse (v. 21)

**21. The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.”**

The writer (Moses) uses figurative language to describe God’s response to the sacrifice. Since “God is spirit” (John 4:24), we need not assume that God smells things the same way we do or has a literal, physical heart. Nevertheless, we understand such language. The same manner of figurative language is used when Scripture speaks of the “hand” and “arm” of the Lord (Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; etc.). This kind of figurative language is known as *anthropomorphic*.

The point being made is that God accepts the offering. Moses will use the same kind of language later to describe the sacrifices and burnt offerings that the new

nation of Israel will be commanded to present to the Lord (see [Exodus 29:18, 25, 41](#); compare [Philippians 4:18](#); contrast [Leviticus 26:31](#); [Amos 5:21](#)).

But we may wonder to what end God accepts Noah's offerings. In later times, burnt offerings will atone for sin ([Leviticus 1:1-9](#)) and to ordain the Aaronic priesthood ([Exodus 29](#)). Some suggest that Noah's offerings are for atonement for the sins of all who perished in the flood, but that is not likely. Ordinarily an offering of atonement is made in lieu of punishment, but those who have perished have already been punished.

More likely, Noah's sacrifice is to purify the earth. Aaron and his sons will offer burnt offerings to purify themselves for the new priesthood centuries later; similarly, Noah offers sacrifices to cleanse the earth as home to new generations.

Up to this point in the Bible, the ground has been spoken of as being under a curse only twice. The ground was cursed in [Genesis 3:17](#) because of sin. Only with difficulty would humanity be able to make a living from it ([3:18, 19](#)). Much later, Noah's father, Lamech, prophesied Noah to be the one to bring relief from the burdensome toil because of the ground "the Lord has cursed" ([5:29](#)). The question that arises, then, is whether the statement *never again will I curse the ground* here in [8:21](#) refers to the flood itself or to the original curse of [3:17](#). If the latter, then the prophecy of [5:29](#) is fulfilled—but then we have to ask why thorns and thistles still interfere ([3:18](#)) and why agriculture still involves sweat-producing labor ([3:19](#)). If the reference is to the punishment of the flood, then the promise to *never again . . . curse the ground* is another way of stating the promise never again to flood the earth (see [9:11](#), below).

The reason given, because *every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood* fits better with the concept that the flood itself was the curse of the ground that will not be repeated. Time will reveal that the flood is not the permanent solution to sin, so repeating it will serve no purpose. The sacrifice of Christ will be needed to address the heart need and sin guilt of people.

### C. Continual Seasons (v. 22)

**22. "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease."**

Days and years and seasons come about by the rotation of the earth and the tilt of its axis as the planet moves around the sun. These are constant and unchanging. But sometimes weather can block awareness of those constants. In a strong storm, the sun can be obscured to such an extent that daytime seems like night. One can imagine that the 40 days of rain Noah experienced were difficult to count. The cloud cover needed to produce such rain probably blocked sunlight almost totally during much of that time.

In addition, the months that passed with water high enough to cover the mountains ([Genesis 7:20, 24](#)) surely resulted in climate change. Evaporation of the floodwaters would have caused significant cloud cover once again. The earth would have cooled during this time. Perhaps Noah and his family were able to discern a significant change in climate by the end of their time on the ark. This could have caused concern about where such climate change would lead.

This promise in the verse before us allays any such fears. Even when storms are strong enough to obscure the sun for a time, *day and night will never cease*. Climate change may occur, but there will still be *summer and winter*. In one area the winter may bring snow, but in others the winter is more of a rainy season. Still the seasons change with regularity as the earth continues on its course around the sun.

## HOW TO SAY IT

Aaronic Air-ahn-ik.

anthropomorphic an-thruh-puh-more-fik.

Lamech Lay-mek.

Noah No-uh.

Noahic No-ay-ik.

Even so, the Lord does allow for cataclysmic change—even outright destruction. The constant change of seasons that allows *seedtime and harvest* will continue only as long as the earth itself does so. Peter refers to the Noahic flood as an illustration that God is able to judge the world and that there is coming another destruction, one by fire ([2 Peter 3:6, 7](#)). But until that time of judgment, the cycles of the seasons will continue. Perhaps we should spend more time warning of the coming judgment because of sin rather than worrying about predictions of climate change because of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere!

#### What Do You Think?

How can we use [Genesis 8:22](#) to comfort someone after a disastrous weather event?

#### Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Considering the person's familiarity with and/or acceptance of Scripture
- Regarding the danger of trivializing a situation
- Other

## II. God Promises

([GENESIS 9:8-11](#))

[Genesis 9:1-7](#) (not in today's text) begins with God's instruction for Noah and his family to increase the population. Humanity is to multiply anew over the face of the earth. Hand in hand with this instruction is a covenant that God expresses between himself and the earth.

### A. Covenant Participants (vv. 8-10)

**8, 9. Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you"**

This is the fifth time the biblical record reports on God's speaking to Noah. God spoke to him alone on the first three occasions ([Genesis 6:13](#); [7:1](#); [8:15](#)). Beginning at [9:1](#), Noah's sons are addressed as well. There is no explanation for the change, and it would be reading too much into the text to suggest the sons were not true believers before the flood and only afterward were proper candidates for inclusion in the covenant.

Even before the flood, God indicated his intent to make the covenant that is now under discussion ([Genesis 6:18](#)). All those who came through the flood, as well as their descendants (*your descendants after you*), are included. Therefore all people for all time who live after the flood are part of the covenant.

*What Do You Think?*

How can the fact that we are included in a covenant God made first with Noah encourage us?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

When we are spiritually or emotionally “down”

When we are spiritually or emotionally “up”

**<sup>10.</sup> “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.**

The covenant includes animals as well. This is not to be understood that animals have equal value in God’s sight. Jesus specifically rejects that notion ([Matthew 10:31](#); [Luke 12:7](#)). The fact that animals are permitted as food for humans ([Genesis 9:3](#)) further reinforces that humans are of greater value than animals.

Even so, *every living creature* shares in the covenant. They have their place in God’s creation, and even those permitted as food are not to be eaten with their blood still in them, which is their life ([Genesis 9:4](#)). Animal life has value and is entitled to a certain measure of respect. Human superiority is not a license to abuse animals (see [Proverbs 12:10](#)).

## B. Covenant Promises (v. 11)

**<sup>11a.</sup> “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood;**

As important as what the covenant promises is what it does not promise. It does not promise there will never be another flood of any magnitude, nor does it promise that there will never again be loss of life by means of flooding. Floods have occurred many times since the days of Noah. The covenant promises instead not to repeat a flood like the one just experienced. From now on, floods will never be so severe as to leave only eight survivors ([1 Peter 3:20](#)).

**<sup>11b.</sup> “never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”**

The second part of the covenant promise reinforces the first part. Any understanding of the Noachic flood to have been merely localized must deal with this promise. If the promise is never to repeat a local flood, then the promise cannot be believed because there have been many local floods since the promise was given.

*What Do You Think?*

How would you respond to someone who says that floods today prove that God has not kept his promise?

*Talking Points for Your Discussion*

Answering a new believer who is uncertain about the authority of Scripture

Answering an unbeliever who is seeking answers sincerely

Answering a hardened atheist

## ON BEING “UNDER WATER”

The Great Recession of the first decade of this century found many homeowners “under water.” That terminology describes a situation in which a homeowner owes more money on the property than its market value. Much of the problem was traceable to a large increase in the issuance of so-called subprime mortgages; these were mortgages issued to people who wouldn’t have qualified under traditional lending guidelines. When the economic climate worsened and such mortgages couldn’t be paid due to job losses, one result in the ensuing chain reaction was massive declines in property values.

Governmental agencies responded with laws and regulations designed to prevent recurrence of such a crisis. Whether these efforts will be successful, who knows? On the other hand, God’s promise never again to destroy the earth by flood is 100 percent certain. The God who makes the promise to all humanity also wants to help us personally. We all end up “under water” in various ways at various times—sometimes due to our own foolishness or sin, sometimes through no fault of our own. Either way, the solution begins with looking to the God who restores. No matter how far “under water” our lives seem to be, he stands ready to help. Think of how much he already has done so by giving his Son to die for our sins!

—C. R. B.



Visual for Lesson 1. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, “In what ways have you found this statement to be true in your own life?”

### III. Bow Confirms

(GENESIS 9:12-17)

Promises backed with a confirmation are especially powerful. An example from real estate transactions is *earnest money*. This is a deposit that confirms a buyer’s intent to follow through on an offer to purchase (compare [2 Corinthians 5:5](#); [Ephesians 1:14](#)). The confirmation of God’s promise in today’s text is of a different kind but no less strong.

#### A. Symbol (vv. 12, 13)

<sup>12, 13</sup> 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 the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

God offers the rainbow as the visual symbol (*sign*) that guarantees he will keep his promise. Some Bible students believe that this is the first appearance of a rainbow ever; others believe that God simply adds significance to the phenomenon that already exists.

The word used to refer to the rainbow here is the same word in both English and Hebrew as the bow that is a weapon of war (examples: [Genesis 48:22](#); [1 Samuel 18:4](#)). This overlap may simply be a reference to the shape they have in common, the long arc typifying both the rainbow and the archer's bow. Some suggest a greater significance in proposing that God is laying aside his bow (weapon) and will not again exercise the kind of wrath the world has just experienced.

## B. Significance (vv. 14, 15)

### 14. “Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds,

The rainbow's spectrum of color is created as sunlight passes through atmospheric moisture. We generally do not see a rainbow during a storm, when sunlight is blocked by clouds. So this symbol of the covenant is not seen each and every time there are rain clouds *over the earth*, but when the sunlight is not obscured by clouds.

#### *What Do You Think?*

How does knowing the science of a rainbow affect your appreciation of it as a covenant symbol from God?

#### *Talking Points for Your Discussion*

What it suggests about divine and human knowledge

What it suggests about why God uses symbols in the first place

Other

### 15. “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.

Note that the Lord does not say we should see the rainbow and remember his covenant; rather, he says *I will remember my covenant*. We may find it odd that the all-knowing God needs to be reminded of anything. Once again the text uses figurative language. While we need reminders, God does not; but we understand that a reminder is assurance that something important will not be forgotten. God is giving assurance that he will not forget or forsake his covenant. And in that regard the rainbow is a symbol for us as well.

## C. Summary (vv. 16, 17)

### 16, 17. “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.”

These two verses essentially repeat what has already been said. In so doing, they summarize the covenant. The phrase *everlasting covenant* repeats a concept from [verse 12](#), where God says this covenant is “for all generations to come.” But neither the word *everlasting* nor the phrase *all generations* should be taken to mean that the covenant extends into eternity. The time limitation of [Genesis 8:22](#) is that the covenant is in force “as long as the earth endures.”

That observation is not to be taken as a warning of possible flooding in our eternal abode! Rather, it sheds light on the significance of the word *everlasting* as it is occurs in other contexts regarding God's covenants (examples: [Genesis 17:13, 19](#); [Leviticus 24:8](#); [2 Samuel 23:5](#); [1 Chronicles 16:17](#)).

### *PREPAREDNESS*

One of the most famous photos of a rainbow is that of nature photographer Galen Rowell (1940-2002). His photo shows a rainbow with one end appearing to rest on a palace in Tibet. When Rowell first saw the rainbow, it wasn't near the palace. But his artistic sense could “see” that it could be. So he ran more than a mile to get the building and rainbow lined up properly. His physical and aesthetic preparedness resulted in an artistic triumph.

We recall that “faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” ([Hebrews 11:1](#)). In that regard, “by faith Noah . . . became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith” ([11:7](#)). He did not need to foresee a covenant that would result in being symbolized by a rainbow. What Noah needed—and had—was prepared faith. It was a faith that trusted God. It was a faith that led Noah to obedient action. The blessing signified by the rainbow resulted.

For Noah, it was all about preparedness. Building the ark was vital, of course. But the basis of God's choosing him to do so was spiritual in nature ([Genesis 6:9](#)). And so it is with us. If we do not sense God's calling for a task, perhaps the issue is our own spiritual unpreparedness to receive such a calling.

—C. R. B.

## Conclusion

### A. I Promise

Being something of a grammar purist, I chafe when I hear people say “I promise” when they really mean “I assure you.” Sometimes the two are interchangeable, but sometimes they are not. An example of the latter is when someone says “I promise you, I was not the one who did that.” A promise always looks to the future. I can make assurances about the past, but I can promise only for the future, as in “I promise I will never do such a thing again!” God promised that “never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life” ([Genesis 9:15](#)). The rainbow assures us that he will keep his promise.

### B. Prayer

Father, as the rainbow comforts us with your promise never again to destroy the earth by flood, may we also be moved to action by the coming destruction by fire. Empower us to share Jesus as the way of escape. We pray in his name. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember



Nothing is more certain than a promise  
from the God who cannot lie!

## VISUALS FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (example: page 14) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the *Adult Resources* packet for the Fall Quarter. That packet also contains the very useful *Presentation Tools* CD for teacher use. Order No. 1629117 from your supplier.

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

### Into the Lesson

Before class, write each of the following words or phrases on separate index cards. (Each word or phrase is followed by a suggested gesture that you will not write on the card.)

*It's OK* (touching thumb with forefinger)  
*Come here* (flexing pointing forefinger)  
*Great job* (fist bump or high five)  
*Be quiet* (forefinger to lips)  
*Good-bye* (wave hand)  
*Get out* (extended arm and forefinger or pointing thumb over shoulder)  
*I didn't like it* (thumb pointed down)  
*Peace* (forming a V with index and middle fingers)  
*It's a deal* (handshake)

Start class by having a class member take an index card and communicate the word or phrase with a simple gesture. The class members who will make the *great job* and *it's a deal* gestures will need to do so with another person.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Sign Scramble” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in pairs.

After either activity, lead into Bible study by saying, “We use different symbols, gestures, and signs to communicate without words. Today we will look at a sign from God that communicates an important promise.”

### Into the Word

Divide your class into three groups, giving each one paper and pens. Each group should be assigned a section of the lesson text. Each group should try to summarize the lesson text with a couplet, two rhyming lines of poetry.

Scripture assignments and sample couplets follow:

#### Group 1—Never Again (Genesis 8:20-22)

*Though humankind is prone to sin,  
 God won't destroy all life again.*

#### Group 2—I Establish (Genesis 9:8-11)

*God's solemn promise has been made  
 From Noah's time up till this day.*

#### Group 3—My Token (Genesis 9:12-17)

*When seeing a rainbow, everyone should  
 Remember that God's promise is good.*

Allow time for groups to share their couplets and summarize their Scripture assignments.

*Option.* Write both the Scripture assignments and the sample couplets on the board. Read each section of the text together as a class. Then discuss the content of each section, referring to the couplet and to the commentary.

### Into Life

On the top of the board or on two large posters, write these two headings: *Ways I Show Dependence on God's Promises* and *Ways I Show I Doubt God's Promises*. Take time to brainstorm items to add under either heading. Sample ideas follow:

*Dependence:* prayer, regular church attendance, personal devotional Bible reading, participation in a small group, a disciplined plan for giving to support the work of the church, volunteering for ministry such as a short-term mission trip, finding an accountability partner.

*Doubt:* workaholicism, substance abuse, worry, fixation on entertainment and escapism, unhealthy focus on money and possessions, neglecting church attendance and prayer and Bible study, behaving differently around believers than around unbelievers, dishonesty

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “Prescribed Promises” activity from the reproducible page. Have students choose the need they have today and memorize the corresponding prescribed promise from the Bible this week.