Genesis 8:13–22 — The Waters Were Dried Up from Off the Earth

Noah's Birthday, The Sweet Savour, Three Administrations, God Knowing the Time, and Seedtime and Harvest Until the End

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Scripture Reading: Genesis 8:13–22

> *"And it came to pass in the six hundredth and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from off the earth: and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dry."*
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> *"And the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake… while the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease."*

The 601st Year, the First Day: Noah's Birthday

Verse 13 situates the drying of the earth at the very beginning of the 601st year of Noah's life — its first month, its first day. That is Noah's birthday. It is worth comparing this birthday with the other birthdays recorded in Scripture: Pharaoh's birthday, on which the chief baker was hanged; and Herod's birthday, on which John the Baptist was beheaded. What happened on Noah's birthday? He removed the covering of the ark and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dry. He looked upon what the grace of God had done. Of the three birthdays in Scripture, this is the happy one — not a feast of self-indulgence, not a spectacle of power, but a quiet gazing upon the work of God's preserving grace.

The marking of his birthday points also to a broader pattern. Six centuries of Noah's life had passed; now the seventh begins. Six great spans of human history, and the seventh is the rest toward which all is moving — the millennium, the rest of God's people. Six days of work and the seventh God rested. The text does not press this comparison, but it is the kind of numerical structure with which the word of God is woven.

Noah and His Wife: Drawn Closer Together

Comparing how they went into the ark (Genesis 7:13) with how they came out (Genesis 8:16) yields a small but beautiful observation. Going in: Noah, and Shem, and Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife, and the three wives. Coming out: thou, and thy wife, and thy sons, and thy sons' wives. Noah and Noah's wife are closer together in the second passage than in the first. It is a lovely thing when the circumstances that a husband and wife pass through together — the storms, the enclosures, the long waits, the preserved emergence — draw them closer to one another rather than apart.

The Sweet Savour and the Altar: God's Rest Found Only in Christ's Sacrifice

The first thing Noah did on coming out of the ark was to build an altar and offer burnt offerings of every clean beast and every clean fowl. The Lord smelled a sweet savour — or as the margin of J.N. Darby's translation has it, a savour of rest. This is the seventh century of Noah's life, and there is something of rest in it. Just as on the seventh day God rested, here God finds rest in the sweet savour of the sacrifice.

But this rest was not found in the cessation of the flood, or in the drying of the earth, or in the fact that Noah was safely out. It was found in the sacrifice. The flood itself, as strong an action of God as it was, did not change man's heart —

the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth is stated after the flood just as before it (compare 6:5 and 8:21). Nothing about the catastrophe improved the old nature. Only in what the sacrifices pointed to — the death of Christ, the burnt offering wholly consumed to God — does God find his rest. The Lord said, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work. The rest of God spoken of in Genesis 2 was broken by the fall and has not yet been recovered. But God has it before him, and it is in virtue of the sacrifice of Christ that it will be brought in.

The Imagination of Man's Heart Is Evil from His Youth

The statement in verse 21 that the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth is essentially a repetition of 6:5, which provided the basis for the flood. Yet here it is the ground for God's decision not to bring the flood again. This is not a contradiction but a revelation of grace: God could have said, since man's heart has not improved, since the flood did nothing to change what is within him, I will curse the ground further and smite every living thing again. But instead God says, I will not do it again. Not because man has improved — he has not — but because the sweet savour of the sacrifice has provided a basis for grace. This is grace, not condoning sin or pretending man is better than he is, but finding a way to deal with man's incorrigible condition on the ground of an accepted sacrifice.

This also confirms the teaching about the two natures. The old nature is not improved by external events, however severe. The flood did not improve it. The law will not improve it. No circumstance changes it. Romans 7:25 makes this clear even of the believer: with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin. The two natures are fixed in their respective principles of operation: the new nature loves what God loves; the old remains what it always was. To suppose that the new nature modifies the old is against both our text and the teaching of the New Testament.

Government Dispensed to Noah: Three Administrations

The new order that begins with Noah's emergence from the ark includes the dispensing of government to man. Noah had not possessed government in the 600 years before the flood; it was not acquired in the fall, and it was not created with him. God now gives it. He puts into man's hands the administration of justice, with the power of capital punishment for murder. This is a new and specific act of God.

This helps to identify the three great earthly administrations in Scripture. The first is the government dispensed to Noah, applying to man on this side of the flood in general. The second is the administration under Moses, where calling and government were combined in Israel — God's called people also constituted a nation under his governmental law, with priesthood, judges, and kings all within that single Mosaic order. The third is the millennial administration under Christ, in which calling, government, and the law written in the heart under the new covenant will be combined in Israel, and Christ will head up all things. These three are the earthly administrations; each involves government; and in each the first man fails, until Christ takes everything up and makes it good to God's glory.

Paul's administration of the mystery is of a different order and should not be added to this list as a fourth. It is a heavenly thing, not an earthly one. Its subject is the head in heaven and the body joined to him. Government — the administration of earthly justice — is not part of it. The danger of conflating Paul's administration with the three earthly ones is that it leads to making the church an age rather than what it is: a heavenly people formed by the Spirit of God, distinct from the earthly peoples and their governmental history.

Seedtime and Harvest: The Constancy of Natural Order

While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease. The reason the sun will rise

tomorrow is not that it has always done so — natural law as a self-sustaining mechanism is a fiction. The sun rises because God has promised it here in verse 22, and because the Son of God, by whom all things cohere (Colossians 1:17), continually exercises his will to maintain the creation in its course. What men call natural law is the regular expression of the immediate will of the Son of God. There is nothing autonomous about it.

What will end the present regularity is not the failure of natural law but the coming dissolution of the present heavens and earth by fire (2 Peter 3:10–12), which is itself a divine act. And the covenant of verse 22 is co-extensive with the present order. It promises no more universal flood while the earth remains. When the earth no longer remains in its present form, the covenant has accomplished its purpose and a new order begins.

While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.