

Last April a 9-year-old African-American lad named Willie was kidnapped from his driveway in Atlanta, Georgia. After the man grabbed him, Willie explained later, and threw him in the back of his car, Willie just kept “praising God” with a song he learned in Sunday school. It was a song by Hezekiah Walker titled “Every Praise.”

While he was singing, Willie said, his kidnapper yelled expletives at him.

“He told me, shut up you [blankety-blank] boy,” said Willie. Willie, however, kept singing until his kidnapper got tired of it and threw him out of the car. The kidnapper ordered Willie not to reveal what happened.

Willie’s mother said she realized what had happened to her son after he called her from a phone belonging to a woman who lived near the spot where Willie was thrown out. His mother broke down in tears because she remembered God’s promise to her to never leave her nor forsake her. She believed God definitely lived up to His promise in bringing back her son to her unharmed. She’s a very fortunate mother.

God does live up to His promises though not usually as dramatically as He did for Willie and his mother.

Today we want to look at the promise God made to Noah and, indeed, to all humankind. It is one of the best known stories in all of literature. And recently it was made into a major motion picture which some of you undoubtedly saw.

In the time of Noah, the whole human race had become wicked, their hearts had waxed cold. The Lord’s heart was deeply troubled. He regretted creating human beings. So God said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground for I regret that I have made them.” Let’s pause here for a moment. **This is not a comfortable story for Christians. How could a loving God destroy all human beings, except for one man and his family?**

I read recently a true story about a couple who enrolled their little girl in a private Christian school. They were so excited about their daughter going to this school that taught positive values. One day when the daughter came home from school, the parents asked her, “What did you learn in school today?”

When the little girl told them the story of Noah and the Ark about how God destroyed everyone except for Noah and his family the parents were outraged. They could not believe that their little girl had been exposed to such an awful story. They were so outraged that they withdrew their little girl from the school with this parting comment, “Our God wouldn’t do that.”

If we are honest with ourselves, says pastor John Bugg, that is not a surprising response to the story of Noah and the Ark. The story of Noah is truly disturbing. (1)

God sends a great flood. Have you ever been caught in a flood? It’s a terrible thing. Water can be amazingly destructive. Bridges wash out, homes fall and then are carried away. You’re on the road . . . you come to a place where water covers the road . . . it looks like perhaps the water will only come up to your hubcaps. So you drive on through. But it’s deeper than you think. Your car stalls out and suddenly you discover that you are at the mercy of the water. Over the years that is a scenario that has played out many times in almost every flood situation sometimes with tragic results.

Imagine that same situation, only this time there is no escape. There is no high ground to move to. You and all your family are going to drown. God is doing a system reboot and starting all over. Only one family in all the world will be left. It is a tragic story if you are not part of Noah’s family.

[By the way, if climate scientists are anywhere close to being right, we will probably see something akin to that scenario in low lying nations in the near future. Few people question anymore whether the snow cap covering the South Pole is melting. I won’t argue with you whether warming is caused by human activity. But what will it mean when oceans rise several feet? Obviously many millions of people will be displaced, particularly in poorer countries. How many will die? No one knows. But at least, there will be somewhere to run if neighboring

nations will even take them in. Considering our own response to immigrants fleeing oppression, that is questionable. In the biblical story, there was nowhere to run.]

Only one man and his family were spared in this holocaust by water. A man named Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. Noah was a righteous man, the writer of Genesis tells us, blameless in the sight of the Lord. Does this mean that he was without sin? No, but it means that Noah at least tried to live in accordance with the Lord's commands and this is why the Lord saw fit to save him and his family. God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out."

God told Noah to build this enormous ark and to take into the ark all the animals and birds on earth, two by two. Most of us are thinking, what a mess. Aren't you glad you weren't Mrs. Noah? Who was going to clean the ark in those semi-enlightened times? Probably not Noah. He was too busy fishing. It probably fell to his wife.

The earth was flooded for one hundred and fifty days and all that God said would happen did happen, says the writer. But God remembered His promise to Noah and the Ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. And when the earth was dry again God instructed Noah to come out of the ark. Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and he sacrificed burnt offerings. Then God made a covenant with humanity.

The covenant God made with Noah is our lesson for this first Sunday in Lent: "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 destroyed 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 the 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."

**This is not a comfortable story, but it contains a wonderful promise:** God says, "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."

What exactly is a covenant? A covenant is an agreement, a contract, a pledge or a promise. When some of us think of a covenant today we might think of marriage. Marriage is one example of a sacred covenant. At least that is what it is intended to be. Sometimes it deteriorates into something else altogether. But here we see the Lord making this promise to Noah, without conditions.

It is interesting that this covenant is unilateral. God makes this covenant with no input from Noah. He doesn't say, "If humankind does this or if humankind does that." Nothing humankind can do will affect this covenant. Never again will God destroy the world by water. Period. Exclamation point.

In the delightfully anthropomorphic way in which the Bible is written, God says, "Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant . . ."

So the rainbow is there not to remind us, but to remind God of His promise, as if God might be tempted to forget. Let's talk for a moment about promises.

Dr. Wayne Dyer, wrote a book, along with his wife, Marcelene, called *A Promise Is a Promise*. It is the true story of a mother who has cared for her comatose daughter for over twenty-eight years, feeding her every two hours around the clock, turning her, giving her insulin every four hours, raising the money to pay all expenses, and sleeping in a chair every night next to her daughter's side.

Twenty-eight years ago, Edwarda, then sixteen years old, pleaded, “You won’t leave me will you, Mommy?” as she was slipping into a diabetic coma.

Kaye, her mother, responded, “I will never leave you, darling, I promise. And a promise is a promise.”

In the ensuing twenty-eight years Edwarda O’Bara has moved from a stage one coma wherein she was catatonic and had to have her eyes taped shut, to a stage nine, where she appears to recognize voices, smiles, and cries when saddened. She voluntarily closes her eyes and sometimes appears to react to stimuli in the room.

But the most amazing part of this story concerns the effect that Edwarda has on those who have visited her. Some claim to have experienced miraculous healings, and everyone feels the unconditional love Edwarda radiates from her immobile body. (2)

We are all inspired when someone keeps a promise against uncompromising odds. Promises are sometimes difficult to keep. The late comedian Phil Silvers, who some of us may remember as television’s beloved Sgt. Bilko, said that once his small daughter woke him up when he was taking a much-needed nap. He scolded her. “Didn’t you promise to be a good girl and not make any noise?”

She responded, “Yes, father.”

And he said harshly, “And didn’t I promise you a spanking if you weren’t a good girl.”

“Yes, daddy,” said his daughter softly. Then she added, “But since I’ve broken my promise, you don’t have to keep yours.”

Well, sometimes a promise of deserved punishment can be modified by mercy. And there are times when a promise may be broken if it’s the wrong kind of promise. Sometimes there are extenuating circumstances. Still we are inspired when anybody makes a promise and sticks by it.

Some of us are still inspired by the promise that the late actor Danny Thomas once made. It occurred during his early years in show business when he was suffering setback after setback. During one of his darkest moments, he was cornered in Detroit by a man who handed him a pamphlet telling about Jude, patron saint of the hopeless.

“When St. Jude does you a favor,” Danny Thomas explained, “you’re supposed to tell people about it, spread his name, and carry pamphlets,” Then he added, “I’m sure this is a legend, even fiction, but that’s how the tale goes.”

The setbacks continued. Finally, Danny went to church to pray for direction. Should he try another profession? Contrary to popular legend, he didn’t offer any deals to God. He merely prayed for the ability to take care of his family. But when success came, he felt a sense of obligation to give back for the good fortune he had received. And the result was St. Jude’s Medical Center for Children in Memphis, a center that has performed many miracles. Over many years Danny Thomas served not only as its founder, but also as its chief fund raiser, and number-one flag waver.

One of my favorite stories about the result of the covenant Danny Thomas made with the children of St. Jude’s concerns the year he was able to delete Christmas from the St. Jude’s calendar. It seems that the St. Jude staff used to celebrate Christmas in December and also in July because many of the terminally ill youngsters couldn’t survive until the traditional date. But the work at St. Jude’s resulted in adding months and then years to the children’s lives and the time came when they could delete Christmas in July. It was no longer needed. (3)

The power of a promise. Some of you know about the power of a promise kept. You saw it in your parents’ marriage. You’ve seen it in your own spouse. You’ve seen it in the faithfulness of good friends. Some of you have experienced it in those dark hours when you most needed God’s power and you discovered God was there. God is a promise keeper. Willie’s mother was right when Willie was returned to her unharmed. God keeps His

promises. And He doesn't need a rainbow to remind Him of His promise: "I will never forget you nor forsake you. I am Abba, Daddy, and I love you more than any earthly parent ever could."

That is what the cross is all about. The rainbow may be a reminder to God, but the cross is the reminder to us that God so loved the world that He gave His son for us.

Prolific author Lewis Smedes once wrote something that ought to be engraved on every Christian's heart. It goes like this: "Somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God. "What a marvelous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty. When you make a promise, you take a hand in creating your own future." (4)

What are the promises you have made in your life? Have you kept them? If you haven't God's grace is sufficient for you. That is His promise and that promise will never fail. But I hope you are working on being a promise-keeper, just as God is a promise-keeper. I guarantee you that if you will, the world will be better for it.

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1. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/how-could-a-loving-god-destroy-the-world-john-bugg-sermon-on-god-the-father-36513.asp?Page=2>.
2. Wayne W. Dyer, *Wisdom of the Ages* (New York: Quill, 1998).
3. Robert A. Schuller, *The World's Greatest Comebacks* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), pp. 77-78.
4. Tom Long, Editor, *A Chorus of Witnesses* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).