

## The Covenant with Noah: The Four Seasons

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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After the great flood and the story of Noah in the book of Genesis, the Lord announced a tremendous covenant with the people of the earth. In short He promised that He would never again curse the ground or destroy living things as He had done in this flood – no matter how selfish people might become. So He said,

“During all the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (Genesis 8:22).

Now if you check your Bibles you’ll see that they have “cold and heat” followed by “winter and summer,” but that is a loose translation. The text actually has summer first, and then winter, for reasons we’ll explore in a moment. For now let’s just note that this whole story is not so much about the natural world as it is about the spiritual world of our thoughts and affections. It’s all deeply symbolic. So what we’re really seeing is that as long as WE live, the Lord will provide for the changes of state that allow us to flourish and grow in His Word. This is important to understand, as it can bring us a lot of comfort in some of those seasons of life when we may feel deep confusion or despair, and it can keep us from getting too cocky when things are going well.

There’s a wonderful prophecy in Isaiah that reminds us of the Lord’s providence in all the seasons of life:

“For as the rain comes down,” the Lord said, “and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (Is 55:8-11).

The point is that natural things represent spiritual things, or the things of the earth the things of heaven. So, going back to Genesis, we can see how the natural seasons and daily cycles reflect spiritual states, specifically states of seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night.

But what are these states, and why is it so important to understand them?

Seedtime and harvest are often referred to in Scripture, obviously referring to the cycles of life, but in particular the cycles of *spiritual* life, from the first principles of truth we learn from the Word to the production of the “good fruit” that is the life of charity. The parable of the sower in *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke* leaves no doubt about this. There the Lord Himself said that the seed was the Word of God and the various types of ground on which it fell were the various states of reception in human minds: – some shallow, some hard, some “choked with the cares, riches and pleasures of life,” and some well prepared and ready to bring forth fruit in a good life.

So it may be that any one of us, in a given season of our lives, may not be very receptive of the love and wisdom that the Lord showers upon us, but as surely as the sun shines and the rain falls on the earth, that love and wisdom will continue to flow in to us so that there is always an opportunity to receive it and start fresh. The ground may not be ready *at that moment*, but there will always be a seedtime and a potential harvest.

Let’s think about this. It’s the first part of the Lord’s promise to Noah, which is a covenant with the whole human race. In a sense it means that there is no such thing as a last chance, no such thing as total devastation in spiritual life. Rather as long as we live in this world there is always another chance: we will always have the opportunity to start again, to put our hands on the plow

and go forward, to take those simple grains of truth that the Lord casts in our minds, and nourish and protect them and help them grow until they bring forth – some thirty-fold, some sixty-fold, and some a hundredfold. We can't stop the seasons, and it doesn't help to despise or try to ignore them. The thing is to capitalize on them, and we can do this in a spiritual seedtime by co-operating with the Lord when He plants a good or true thought in our minds... reflecting affirmatively on it, committing it to memory, putting it to some use. There will be no end of such occasions, for the Lord's work to improve and perfect us is unceasing. There will also be times when we feel like giving up on ourselves, but the Lord never gives up on anybody – ever – and these, too, can be useful times if we apply ourselves to the task of understanding what we need to do differently come spring.

Now besides seedtime and harvest the Lord promised Noah that there would be seasons of cold and heat, and notice: – in that order. Then He promised summer and winter – in that order. And then day and night.

The reference to cold and heat is important because it represents our attitudes toward the Lord and His Word. And it's true, isn't it? Our first reaction to a new awareness of spiritual things can be quite cold. Why? Well, our natural state is to be suspicious, even resentful of any authority outside of ourselves. So it is no special insult to note, as the Word itself does, that our first state of reception of truths that really affect our lives is often chilly, sometimes even icy. "What? You mean I have to change? You mean I can't keep doing things my way? I have to let my own loves go...?"

Well, yes, actually, that is what the Word teaches, and it does take a while to get used to it – to "warm up" to the idea. But if we receive it in our minds and let it rest there awhile until the cold passes so it can germinate and take root, eventually we can begin to see the potential in the truth, from seed to full growth and harvest.

It may be helpful to think of the Word as *winter wheat*, the hardiest of wheat with low moisture content so it doesn't spoil or turn to mush, high in protein and fine qualities for baking. This is the wheat western farmers plant in the fall so that it sits in the ground all winter under a thick blanket of snow and then in the spring the moisture from the melting snow makes it shoot right up. The Lord's Word is like that with us most of the time. And the Lord knows that the cold we feel one day will give way to heat another day. So He plants His heavenly ideas – intuitions, perceptions maybe, tiny little intimations of the changes that may come, hard grains of wisdom the significance and potential of which we could hardly be aware except from previous experience – and He just lets them rest there in our minds until the cold passes. Sometime, if we are really willing, our frozen feelings about the Lord will thaw and spiritual growth will begin. This is what the church calls "regeneration" – that is, *new growth*: we don't make it happen; that comes from the power within, from influx, but we do share in the responsibility, and as it takes place we notice the change in ourselves from cold to heat.

So we come to "summer," a time of fulfilment, a culmination of the growth process. When we are in the summer of our spiritual lives we feel comfortable, happy, free and expansive. But most of all we feel warm: warm in our relations with other people, warm toward the Lord and His Word, warm within from the presence and love of the Lord. It is an idyllic state, peaceful and blessed.

But then what happens? "As sure as the world," whenever we reach a new level of regeneration and peace the next thing we know there is a change of state and we go back again to a winter season of doubt, temptation and, yes, discontent. These states are inevitable because, as someone said, you can't erase the tape of your life. Evil that was once active is still there as a latent memory and a potential reality. In the life of regeneration it is simply covered over and displaced by good. And if the good for any reason loses its hold with us those old issues immediately rise up to haunt us. We know this happens; we grieve and complain about it just as we grieve and

complain about old man winter, but we can't change it. We have to learn to live with it – in ourselves and in others. It's just part of the long, slow process that keeps us going and eventually results in better, stronger people.

The growth of any tree might serve as an illustration here but the New Zealand Kauri tree is one of the best. Season after season this hardy conifer endures the changes of cold and heat, summer and winter, for maybe 12 years, and then it goes through a striking transformation, taking on such different characteristics that botanists once thought the young trees were an entirely different species from the older ones. Regeneration is like that – a slow, gradual process which, if we stick with it, results in some dramatic changes, but not so you notice them day by day. Yet when the tree is cut, harvested perhaps for lumber, all the rings of all the annual cycles are there, and we can see how all the changes have contributed to the quality of the wood.

“During all the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease” (Genesis 8:22).

Now we come to the phrase, “day and night.” Whereas the cold and heat of summer and winter refer to states of the WILL, that is, affections, emotions, or attitudes, the variations of *light* in our world refer to states of the understanding. That's why we talk about being “enlightened” or “unenlightened” according to our degree of understanding, and why we talk about “seeing” how to solve problems. And it is true, just as we go through alternations of state as to affections, we can expect to go through alternations in our thought process. Now this seems true, now that, and yet they contradict! Now a thing seems very clear, as if we see it up close in broad daylight, and now it seems obscure, so obscure we grope as in the darkness of night to try to comprehend it.

Actually, the difference between day and night vision is interesting for a number of reasons, one of which is that we lose perspective in the dark. Now isn't that amazing? Just as we lose our visual perspective in the dark, so we lose our spiritual perspective when we don't look at things in sufficient light from revelation. Clear thought is impaired; we are easily distracted and misled by shadowy appearances, and if we move too fast we stumble and fall. Yet for all this, and in spite of having reached a certain level of regeneration, we are told by the Lord that we will have our spiritual nights.

Why? And what can we do about this challenge?

The reason is the same as that for the changes of season, only in this case with the understanding notice that the changes are more frequent and don't last as long as they do with the will. Day gives way to night and night to day in a matter of hours (not months), illustrating how our thoughts can change – very quickly – based on seeing new information or a new point of view.

So what can we do for stability and safety in our spiritual nights? Well, of course we can turn on artificial lights. And these – the lights of our own experience and worldly judgment – may help some, but they can't dispel the general gloom, or if they do they may consume a great deal of spiritual energy, leaving us exhausted and confused.

Another thing we can do in our spiritual nights is just what we normally do for the most part in our worldly nights: sleep! Just shut down the analytical, anxious, worrying part of our minds and give it a rest; turn our lives over to the Lord so that He can refresh and rejuvenate us for another day. Normally speaking we don't often start some big new project at night, although we may work late to finish something. Rather we seek rest and shelter, maybe reflecting a little on the events of the day, and setting things in order for the morning.

Our spiritual nights can be like that, too. We don't have to be fearful, lonely or depressed when the light of heaven departs; this can be a time of peaceful reflection on our dependance on the

Lord, on the fact that He's the one getting us through each day even though it seems as if we do it ourselves. It can be a time of rest and quiet recuperation while we allow the Lord to work inwardly, secretly, setting our minds in order for the next day. There's no point in fretting about the darkness; it will go soon enough, even though it may seem darkest just before the dawn. But one thing is certain: this is no time to undertake some big program of self-criticism and reform! Even with all the bright, glaring and frequently deceptive lights of self-awareness, in a spiritual night-time (a state of obscurity as to revealed truth), we just can't see well enough to make any new or sudden moves with confidence. This is no time for big decisions or cavalier judgments. Just think of trying to identify some shadowy figure late at night without the benefit of real light: would you be wise to go out and cheerily greet this stranger, leaving your door unlocked and your children asleep unattended? Of course not. Or you campers, think of arriving at an unfamiliar campground late at night: you do the best you can but this is no time to try to analyze your whole territory: you find a decent spot and pitch your tent, settling down in the knowledge that the morning light may reveal a better spot.

The Lord said, "During all the days of the earth ... day and night shall not cease." Night comes for many reasons, not all of which we understand. Certainly contrast is one of them. Rest is another. Feeling humble in the acknowledgement of our darkness is another. We might well reflect on many other uses of the daily changes in the rotation of the earth. But let's remember that *spiritual cycles don't necessarily coincide with nature*, for time is not measured by factors outside of people but within them. One night may be longer than another; one winter may be milder than another, and shorter. Through it all, though, we can take comfort in the Lord's wisdom, for as the hymn says, "His steady counsels change the face of each declining year..." He is in charge of our spiritual world just as surely as He is of the natural world, and if we will co-operate and take advantage of the uses of each successive state He will guide us unerringly to the full harvest of life in the promised land.

It's interesting, too: animals, insects, even the plants and flowers of the field know how and when to prepare for the changes of the cycles of nature. Only people do **not** know. Yet from revelation we can know *and in freedom choose* what isn't given to any other living things: how to prepare for, survive and even benefit from all the changes of state that are indispensable for **spiritual** life. This knowledge is not intuitive, it is not instinctive; but we can conscientiously, deliberately and faithfully learn it. So the Word is given to us, along with the doctrine to understand it, so that we may enter into the covenant of spiritual life with confidence and in peace.

The Lord said, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done." *But He also said there would be regular cycles and changes of state.* Let us be thankful for the Lord's wise mercy in all of this, and pray that we may take full advantage of every state, that we may grow and that His Word may not return to Him void but accomplish what He pleases, and prosper in the thing for which He sends it, namely, our salvation, blessing and delight.

For "during all the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease" (Genesis 8:22).

- Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis 1:14-19 & 8:20-22*  
Children's Talk on What we Learn from the Changing Seasons

*Daniel 2:20-23 & Matthew 16:1-4*  
*Arcana Caelestia #935*