

Going in Circles

Introduction

The Text

¹³ In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried from off the earth. And Noah removed the covering of the ark and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dry. ¹⁴ In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth had dried out. ¹⁵ Then God said to Noah, ¹⁶ “Go out from the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. ¹⁷ Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—that they may swarm on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.” ¹⁸ So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives with him. ¹⁹ Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by families from the ark.

²⁰ Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ²¹ And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. ²² While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

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⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷ God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.” (Gen 8:13–22; 9:8-17)

Making the Claim

- A. The title of this morning’s message, you may have noticed is “Going in Circles.” I understand that may not make sense to you straightaway, but I hope in a few moments you shall see what it is I’m referring to.
- B. The background for this sermon is actually a Home Group Leader training I recently finished up with some of our leaders. We ended on the subject of mission and evangelism. And in the manual I provided, I try to give a few suggestions for how we might do this and examples of what it might look like. And really the last thing I had to say on the matter concerned this idea of going in circles.

- C. If you'll permit me, I'm just simply going to read to you some of what I wrote in that manual as a way of setting up this sermon: "Go in circles. With this I simply mean to say: Persevere with those you are trying to reach with the gospel!

Often we think of evangelism as a line. We get into relationships with people in an effort to bring the gospel to them. We will put up with the typical relational niceties. We will talk about the weather, go to the dinner parties, and so forth . . . but we will only go so far. There comes a point where we must get to what we've really been after all along. We must share the gospel. So we share and, to our dismay, they are uninterested. They push back. We quickly counter. Things get awkward. What now?

We often don't know how to proceed. Our whole purpose in this relationship was to share the gospel and we didn't "close the sale." Evangelism was a line. It was point A to B to C and things didn't progress as planned. So the relationship ends. But should it?

Now, don't misunderstand me, certainly it is not wrong to pursue relationships with unbelievers in hopes of bringing the gospel to them. Such efforts can be the very essence of love. And, what's more, there certainly are times when Jesus calls us to move out on His mission in straight lines. We might think of the time where He sends out the seventy-two and instructs them to stay and minister in those towns that receive them but to move right on past those towns that reject (Luke 10:1-12). We might think of those seemingly harsh words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs . . ." (Matt 7:6a).

So I know that there are certain missions that call for lines. And I know that there are certain relationships that must eventually be moved on from. But I also think that most of our everyday evangelistic efforts will play out like circles. We will draw near to people, ask to hear more of their story, listen and engage, serve them as best we are able, share the good news of Jesus with them . . . and they will reject it.

But the relationships, the friendships we are forming, don't have to end. In love, in patience, in perseverance, we simply bend that line back and go around again. We continue to draw near, we ask for more, we listen and care, we love and serve, we pray and pray, and, as God opens doors, we share the hope of Jesus once more.

We go in circles. And we get somewhere."

- D. Are you with me on this? Do you know the sort of thing I'm referring to here? Evangelism as a line. I move toward you. I get to know you. I share the gospel. You reject it. I move on. I don't know what else to do with you.
1. But evangelism as a circle says: "Hold on a minute. It doesn't have to be over. Let's bend that back around and start again. Let's just go around again and again. Okay so you reject my faith. Well, I still love you. Tell me more about your story. Let's go grab coffee next week, or hit up that hike, go catch that movie. I'm going to be here. I want to be with you."
 - a. And, of course, we're praying, that God would open up more opportunities to speak of Christ in time. But there's a patience to it. There's a commitment to the person. There's a willingness to go around in circles.
- E. Now, there is something I need to make abundantly clear from the outset: I am certainly not opposed to the line—if by the line we're talking about more direct forms of evangelism: knocking on doors, passing out tracts, preaching on street corners, and so forth.

1. I was able to share the gospel with the lady sitting next to me on the plane on the way to The Gospel Coalition Conference. I know her name, I'm praying for her, but I may never see her again. It was a line, not a circle, you might say. And that's fine, it's important, that we open our mouths and share.
- F. I'm simply saying with this circle idea that, especially in our post-Christian culture—where most people already have bad associations with and preconceived notions about Christianity—we need to be ready and willing to go around in circles with people, to be patient and longsuffering with them in their rejection and skepticism.
1. The first couple go-rounds, we may just be breaking through stereotypes and baggage from childhood experiences or whatever. And then, only later, perhaps, they will open more to it as they see we are the real thing, that we love them, that Jesus has really transformed us and He's here for them.
- G. In typical idiom, the idea of “going around in circles” means we are wasting our time, we are going nowhere.
1. It's interesting, I saw that a scientific study had actually been conducted with people dropped off in the desert and wilderness and they found that, if it's a cloudy day and we don't have any clear external reference-points like the sun or whatever, we really do walk in circles. They tracked these people with GPS and they just kind of spiraled around.
 - a. We see this sort of thing in the movies and it's always a terrifying thing because it means you're lost and you're not going anywhere. You're spending all this effort and gaining no ground.
- H. But the surprise of the gospel is that it is often going around in circles with people in love for them, patiently persisting with them, even through initial rebellion and rejection, that actually moves them forward along the line towards repentance and faith!
1. In other words, going around in circles with people is one of the best ways to move them on down the line towards Christ.
- I. So already in the introduction, I've laid out the claim, the thesis, if you will. But now with the rest of our time, I simply want to look at two things: (1) The Basis for It; and (2) The Outworking of It.

(1) The Basis for It

It's in His Name

- A. So now we do need to ask, then, what is the basis for such a claim? What does this idea of going around in circles with people have to stand on, biblically speaking?
- B. Well, I think in one sense the answer is quite simple. This idea is built into the very nature of God, it would seem. That's why when God proclaims His name to Moses in [Exo 33:6-7](#) He puts it like this: “⁶The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and

faithfulness,⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

1. What does this mean but that, while surely there is a time where God will have to cut off evildoer, He is so patient and slow to get there. He is ready and willing to go around in circles with His creatures in hopes that they come to their senses and return to Him.
- C. This being who God is in Himself, of course it's what we see worked out in the unfolding of Scripture. With [Gen 3](#) and the fall of Adam and Eve, He promised death to them and yet the ultimate punishment is held in abeyance. The ground should have just opened up swallowed them whole. But it doesn't. Instead, He covers their naked shame and sends them out of the garden with a promise of a coming Redeemer.
1. He takes their sin seriously, no doubt. But He is willing to go around in circles with them. This whole thing is not a line for Him. He is slow to anger and abounding in love.

Put in Covenantal Form

- A. And this idea really is what He puts into covenantal form with Noah in that text we read together at the beginning.
- B. You remember, perhaps, the context for this covenant with Noah. God had abided with man through however many centuries of rebellion and rejection and, finally, it reaches a boiling point: "⁵ The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.⁶ And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.⁷ So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them'" (Gen 6:5-7).
1. But one man found "favor" [or "grace"] in His sight: Noah (v. 8). So He preserves the human race in Noah and He washes the rest of the world out.
- C. Our text picks up at the end of that flood, as the waters are abating, and the earth is drying. And God brings Noah, his family, and the animals that were with them in the ark out, and He enters into this covenant with them.
1. Now, there are three things I want you to bring out for us from this text:

(1) Man Is Still Sinful

- A. In [Gen 8:21](#) we read of God saying: "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth." This, of course, recalls what He said back before the flood in [Gen 6:5](#). It is this evil inclination of man's heart that led to the flood of God's judgment in the first place. And yet here now, after the flood, from God comes this clear admission that the waters really didn't accomplish all that much.

1. What a sad day that would be. It's like, have you ever stained one of your favorite shirts or whatever and you're pulling out all the tricks. You're sprinkling the powders, rubbing in the gels, doing whatever to get this thing out. And then you throw it in wash. Then the moment of truth comes, and you pull the thing out, unfold it, and the stain is still there.
 - a. That's the sort of thing that's happening here. "[T]he intention of man's heart is [still] evil . . ."
- B. I mean, even Noah, right? There's that ridiculous scene that follows after our text there in [Gen 9:18ff](#), where Noah this new Adam figure, who has been shown favor by God and commissioned to bear fruit, multiply and fill the earth—the one whom we're supposed to see as a sort of do-over since things went wrong in Eden—well, he is seen here planting a vineyard, getting smashed, and he's passed out buck-naked in his tent. It's embarrassing. It's a joke. It's a tragedy. It's the same naked shame of Adam and Eve recapitulated now even after the washing of the flood.

(2) God Gives Time

- A. So what is God going to do with this? Is it over for us? Obviously not. In spite of these things, God gives time, and even blessing. Keep reading from [v. 21](#): "^{21b} I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done.²² While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."
- B. And then, it's interesting. In [Gen 9:8ff](#). God takes this commitment and seals it with a covenant. But what I want you to notice is that He makes this covenant, not just with Noah in particular, but with creation in general: "⁹ Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you,¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth" (vv. 9-10).
 1. Every other covenant God makes from this point in the biblical narrative is with His chosen people, with Abraham, Israel, David, Jesus, the church. But here we have a covenant that He makes with all people—whether good or evil, whether interested in following Him or resolutely opposed.
- C. He is essentially saying in this covenant: "I will keep you all going in circles round the sun." "I will give you stability and blessing." The changing of seasons, the agricultural cycle, the ongoing interchange of day and night, the good gifts of God in creation—while the earth remains, God has covenanted Himself to keep that going for us.
 1. But what we can really conclude at the end of all this is that, while God is keeping us in circular motion round about the sun, He is, in that, showing His commitment to go round about in circles with us in love—though our hearts are evil, and our intentions are against Him, and we deserve nothing but His wrath.
- D. This is what stands behind Jesus' discussion in the Sermon on the Mount regarding love for enemies: "⁴⁴ I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" ([Matt 5:44–45](#)).

1. Think of it. It's not as if because we are Christians we get the sunshine, but then across the street, because my neighbors are atheists or whatever, there's just like this cloud that sits on their house and keeps them in shadows.
 - a. No! He brings the sun up over both. Why? Because He loves both! And He wants my unbelieving neighbors to come to know His love in Christ.

- E. In [Acts 14](#), when Paul and Barnabas are ministering in Lystra and they heal a man crippled from birth, and the people there, seeing this, take them to be gods and set out to worship them and offer sacrifices to them. But then in [vv. 15-17](#), Paul and Barnabas respond: "¹⁵ 'Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.'"

 1. Did you catch that? Part of the way God gives "witness" to His glory and grace is by giving good gifts to evil people. In so doing, He is attempting to woo them back to Himself.

- F. Can this be abused. O certainly. Will people take it to mean that He doesn't care, that God is lax, that judgment isn't coming on the last day? Sadly, yes.
 1. But that doesn't change the fact that, as Peter puts it in [2 Pet 3:15](#): We are to "count the patience of our Lord as salvation" ([2 Pet 3:15](#)); or as Paul puts it in [Rom 2:4](#): "God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" He is patient not because He is lax, but because He wants none to perish and all to reach repentance ([2 Pet 3:9](#)).

- G. In other words: God commits Himself to patience, longsuffering, to going around in circles with us, actually, as a way of moving things forward. The circle and the line come together. The circle is the way God moves us down the line.

(3) Jesus Is Coming

- A. That His patience is salvation becomes clearer when we consider what happens as a result of this covenant with Noah. It is because of God's commitment to not deluge the world again that makes room for the unfolding of redemptive history. If God had ended things, washed the world out every time men's hearts were inclined towards evil, well, history would have gone nowhere. There would be no Abraham, no Israel, no Moses, no David, no Christ, no cross, no church, no salvation, no mission, no heaven.
 1. What He's doing here, then, is not only making room for us to come to the cross, He's making room for the cross to come to us.

- B. It's no wonder, then, that, even here in our text, we have pronounced and moving foreshadows of the Savior's work. I'll just give you two.

- C. I wonder if you noticed what initiated this whole covenant-making ceremony in the first place? Sacrifice. Burnt offerings. “²⁰ Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ²¹ And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said . . .” (Gen 8:20-21a).
1. These offerings, of course, are a picture of the coming One who would be offered up for sinners on the cross. In fact, Paul uses the Greek equivalent of this idea of a “pleasing aroma” in Eph 5:2 when He writes: “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”
 - a. How is it that God is able to be patient with and have mercy on sinful, fallen creatures? Christ and the cross!
- D. But there is something else here. And I think it’s even more profound. Consider for a moment the sign of this covenant God identifies there in Gen 9:12-17: namely, the rainbow.
1. I don’t know how, but somewhere along the way, perhaps because of the commonness of the term, I just considered “rainbow” its own idea, its own thing. I missed the correlation between this bow God sets in the clouds and the typical use of the word to refer to a warrior’s bow, a weapon. I just thought, rainbow, nice, cute, pretty, you know, I’ve got little girls, they’re both going to be My Little Ponies for Halloween, Chloe’s going to be Twilight Sparkle and Bella’s going to Rainbow Dash. The rainbow is cute, and ponies and Care Bears slide down it and stuff.
 - a. I missed the fact that a bow is a weapon of war. In fact, if we look at how this word (qeshet) is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the association is unmistakable—that’s all that it means.
- E. Because of this, when God says, “I have set my bow in the cloud” (v. 13), many commentators take it to mean that God is hanging up His war-bow, as it were—that He is going to refrain from making war on us, that He is going to be patient with us even though our hearts are still inclined to evil.
1. This is a perfectly fine interpretation, but, I think, perhaps, the meaning is intended to advance just one more step. Perhaps, it’s not just that God has hung up His bow, that He is no longer aiming it at a fallen world. Perhaps, we are to see that He is, in fact, aiming it now up at Himself! For that is the direction of the bow is it not?!
- F. The idea of the rainbow then would be this: After the flood, when God sees that humanity is still in rebellion against Him, He does the most unthinkable thing: He turns the bow of His righteous anger on Himself! He will let the arrow of His wrath sink deep into His own heart, if it means saving us.
1. And, of course, that is what we see ultimately worked out at the cross. Where God pulls back the bowstring and lets fly the arrow towards His Son, His only beloved Son. He will remain faithful, patient, kind towards us even to His own hurt!
- G. You and I owe our salvation to that bow, to our going-in-circles God. Can we just stop and revel in that. You are so loved. He is so patient.

1. Recall a day when you were at your absolute worst, whether you were a believer at the time or an unbeliever, it doesn't matter. Maybe you were loitering in the back alleyways of sexual sin, maybe you were drowning in booze or some other substance, maybe you were just in a rage against someone for what they did to you, maybe you went through with that abortion, maybe you slept with that guy, maybe you lied on that resume.
 - a. Whatever you at your worst looks like, let me tell you something: God is sad, but He is not surprised. And here's how He responds—He takes His war-bow out, loads it with an arrow, draws it back, and aims it at Himself. He loves you to His own hurt. And He will keep on loving you.
- H. But then, of course, we must ask the question: If God has shown us such patience and love, if this is the way He has, in fact, drawn us to Himself, brothers and sisters, are we showing such things to others? Is our evangelism a line, merely, or a circle? Are we willing to round and round again with people who reject Jesus and maybe even reject us, to our own hurt, but for their good?

(2) The Outworking of It

- A. So here we come, then, to the outworking of this idea, and all I really I have time to do is share a bit from my own story. I cannot share all of it with you, but there is a part, I think, that is particularly relevant on this point.
1. I came to college, rejecting Christ, but at the same time interested, or at least open. I wanted to know God, but Catholicism had left such a bad taste in my mouth concerning Jesus, I wasn't so sure God could be found in Him.
 2. Nonetheless, Campus Crusade was huge there in SLO at the time, and they had Bible studies in every dorm. So naturally I often found myself invited and, indeed, I rather liked going. But I would go, in many instances, with the intention really of stirring up controversy, of asking questions and getting into arguments.
 3. It got to such a point, after months of this, that my Bible study leader, Chuck McBride, spoke with one of the staff at Cru, and he later told me that the staff guy recommended he ask me to leave. If I was causing too much trouble and keeping the whole group from being edified and things, well, it's probably best for all that I be kept out of it.
 4. But this didn't sit well with my Bible study leader, and he prayed on it. And again later he told me that He felt strongly from the Lord that I would come to repentance and faith and that I should be allowed to continue.
 5. I often wonder what would have come of me had he truly cut me off the Bible study at that point. Would that have just reinforced my suspicion that Christians were all talk—they teach and preach and sing of a God who loves the world to death, but when it gets hard for them they bail on you, they're just as selfish as the next, maybe even more so.
 6. But he didn't bail. To put it in the terms we've been using: He didn't see evangelism as merely a line, he kept going around in circles with me. I remember Chuck grabbing lunch with me. I remember him introducing me to his favorite bands. I remember him including me with his friends. I remember him taking me surfing for the first time. This is an upper classman. I'm a nobody freshman. That affected me.

7. He didn't cut me off from that study or from friendship. And in the providence of God, when suffering struck, and I was in need, that Bible study was there to lead me to Jesus. Going in circles is how I fell in line!

- B. Think about how you got saved. I bet for 9 out of 10 of us, it's the same kind of story—it's the circle that got us. Someone loved you enough to stick it out. Someone loved you to their own hurt, and you saw Jesus there.

- C. So, again, let me ask you: Are you that for anyone right now? Am I that for anyone right now? At work? In the neighborhood? In the living room? With extended family? Are we patient and loving to our own hurt? Are we going in circles?