

# Climbing Rainbows

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*O Joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to Thee:  
I climb the rainbow in the rain and feel the promise is not vain,  
that morn shall tearless be.— G. Matheson 1882*

*Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: “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 cut off 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. 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.”*

– GEN. 9:8-16

It was a sight I will never forget. My son and I were visiting the Western Islands of Scotland in July. We were in the town of Stornoway on the island of Lewis. After the Sunday evening service at the Free Church, we were invited to the home of some church members for “tea” and a second service of family worship. Again we sang the psalms, read scripture, and prayed. And then we walked out into the late evening, at ten o’clock still quite light in those northern latitudes. And there it was – a splendid rainbow with great ribbons of color arching through the Hebridean sky, one end extending down into the sea and the other upon a hill dotted with the Scottish sheep.

When sunlight strikes the upper walls of a raindrop at just the right angle, the light is bent, or refracted, and escapes at the bottom of the raindrop. When this happens to millions of raindrops at the same time, there is a rainbow with multi-colored layers: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

The rainbow I saw in Stornoway had a secondary rainbow – more delicately colored arches rising slightly above the primary rainbow, with its colors reversed, now from violet to red, the result of more refracting and reflecting going on among the raindrops – the reflection of a reflection.

Rainbows do not occur after every rain. The presence of a rainbow is determined by the size of a storm's raindrops. Larger raindrops are more spherical in shape and do not reflect the light as do smaller, oval-shaped raindrops, each of which becomes a tiny reflecting mirror.

Extremely small raindrops produce the rarest of all rainbows – white ones. White rainbows resemble a great stream of rising fog – intense, white light, sometimes with smudges of orange dressing their upper edges and a blue sash below.

Now that I've told you more than you really wanted to know about rainbows, I want to tell you – or rather remind you – of one more thing. This, of course, is by far the most important thing of all. Not only are rainbows a fascinating scientific phenomenon and one of the most majestic and luxurious spectacles in nature, but rainbows make a theological statement, setting forth one of the most important truths of the Bible.

Rainbows tell us about God, and they tell us something very specific about God. Do they tell us about God's majesty? They certainly do cause us to realize God's greatness and the wonder and beauty of His creation. But according to Genesis, the rainbow has another message. It tells us that God made a covenant with every living creature for all generations that never again would "the waters become a flood to destroy all life." The rainbow tells us – in the words of an ancient Jewish book – that God's "mercy is as great as His majesty" (Ecclesiasticus 2:18). Every time we see a rainbow, we have a sermon in color stretched across the sky with the proposition: His mercy is as great as His majesty.

The rainbow, God said, was the sign of the covenant that He was establishing with Noah and his sons and with every living creature for all generations. Throughout the Old Testament, God develops and enriches His people's understanding of His covenant. In Genesis 9, God makes a covenant in which He sets forth what He will not do. He will not destroy all life with floodwaters. Then, in Genesis 12, God makes a covenant with Abraham and with his descendants in which He sets forth what He will do. He will bless them and all people on earth through them.

The covenant in Genesis 9 promises that we will not receive what we deserve. Our sins say "death." God's rainbow says "mercy." The rainbow tells us that sin is not the end of the human story. It should have been the end of the story. Eve's sin, Adam's sin, the sin of mankind in Genesis 6 – it would have been right for this to be the end of the story. But the rainbow promises that there is more to come. In Genesis 12 God tells Abraham and his descendants of faith that we will receive what we don't deserve – as grace is added to mercy.

What does the rainbow promise? It does not promise that there will be no clouds and no rain; it does not even promise that there will be no floods. Remember the great flood of 1993? Shirts were sold in this city with the words "St. Louis – A River Runs Through It, and Around It, and Over It!" The rainbow does not promise that there will be no floods; it promises that "never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

There will be clouds and rain and floods – in the world and in our lives. Rainbows do not happen without rain. A storm is the prerequisite for a rainbow. There is darkness before light; there is gray dullness before triumphant color. The darkness and the storm may temporarily obliterate the sun, but the light will prevail, the sun will come out again, and there will be a rainbow. That's the divine order: rain, then rainbow. It's never the other way. The rainbow doesn't tell us that a storm is coming; it tells us that it's over – or almost over.

So it is in our lives. God doesn't promise us that there will be no storms. He does promise us that the storms that strike our lives – as devastating as they sometimes are – are His storms. "Whenever I bring clouds over the earth (and into your

lives), look for the rainbow,” He tells us. Not all meteorological storms produce rainbows; but every storm that strikes our lives will have its rainbow, reminding us that God’s mercy is as great as His majesty.

The hymn “O Love that Will Not Let Me Go” was written on a summer evening in 1882 by George Matheson. During his studies at the University of Glasgow, Matheson’s poor eyesight failed and he became totally blind. Despite this handicap, he graduated from the university and, assisted by a devoted sister, completed ministerial studies and became a pastor. Seventeen years later, while serving the church at Innellan, Matheson wrote his famous hymn. He tells the story in his own words: “It was composed with extreme rapidity; it seemed to me that its construction occupied only a few minutes, and I felt myself rather in the position of one who was being dictated to than an original artist. I was suffering from extreme mental distress, and the hymn was the fruit of pain.”

Many conjectures have been made concerning the cause of the “mental distress” from which George Matheson suffered. Because of the opening line – “O Love that will not let me go” – it has been suggested that Matheson had been bitterly disappointed in his hopes of marrying a young woman to whom he had become deeply attached. It was said that her refusal to marry him was because of his blindness.

In our hymnals, the third verse of Matheson’s hymn reads:

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to Thee:  
I trace the rainbow through the rain  
And feel the promise is not vain,  
That morn shall tearless be.*

But this is not what George Matheson originally wrote. He wrote:

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to Thee:  
I climb the rainbow in the rain  
And feel the promise is not vain,  
That morn shall tearless be.*

Sometime later a committee was choosing hymns for a church hymnbook and read the words of verse three as Matheson wrote them. I can see them as they smiled and said in effect, “This will not do, Mr. Matheson. This will not do at all. We cannot possibly ask dignified Presbyterian elders and proper ladies in their Sunday best to stand up in church and sing about climbing a rainbow. Children, perhaps, would like it and think it a glorious adventure, but with mature people we must avoid the ridiculous at all costs. No, this won’t do, Mr. Matheson.”

So, we are told, they wrote to the blind minister pointing out their very reasonable objections to his fanciful line, and suggesting that he might agree to change the words to “I trace the rainbow through the rain.” With regret Matheson agreed to cut out his powerful image and substitute the tame line that we find in our hymnbooks.

You see, of course, the great difference. You understand what was lost. It’s one thing to be in a safe and secure place and “trace the rainbow through the rain.” It’s another thing altogether to be out in the storm – as Matheson was. He was not sitting by the window in a cosy house. He was out in the greatest storm of his life. O God, he was out in the storm! And the storm hit him with full force and the rain mingled with his tears as they ran down his cheeks.

But he was not overwhelmed because he saw the sure promises of God. When he could not see anything else, the blind poet saw, as never before, the spiritual and the invisible. He saw the rainbow. He saw it not as something interesting and beautiful; he saw it as something real. He saw it as a promise of mercy, and he believed the promise. That is why he wrote the line that made the hymnal committee squirm. He was not safely inside tracing the rainbow through the rain. He was in the storm, stumbling on, groping for something to hold. And he felt that his only hope was to touch the rainbow with his fumbling fingers – and to take hold of it, and to climb and climb and climb!

There are two ways in which we can approach the promises of God. We can, as in the committee's version, trace God's promises through the rain. We read them, memorize them, copy them in beautiful letters, and frame them. But we may come far short of actually grasping them, believing them, casting ourselves upon them. The other way is Matheson's way. We can believe that God's promises are no less real than God Himself. We can boldly reach out in faith and take hold of the promises and grip them and grasp them and never let go – and climb.

Whenever the rainbow appears in the sky, God says, "I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant." God doesn't need the rainbow to remind himself of His promise, but we need it. And so God accommodates Himself to our weakness and makes us a rainbow. When we see a rainbow, we can know that Someone else is looking at it. God sees it. He remembers His covenant. He will never forget it. And whenever we read a promise in the Bible, we can know that God already has seen it. We can stake our lives on it, because God already has staked His life on it. "For no matter how many promises God has made," Paul tells us, "they are 'yes' in Christ" (1 Cor. 1:20).

Go out into the thunder and lightning and rain (it is a dying storm anyway) and seize the rainbow.

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