

## **The Long and Winding Road Floods: Judgment and Salvation**

Almost two thousand years ago, in the Mediterranean world around modern Egypt, a sermon was written. The sermon has made it into the Christian Bible in a “book” called “Hebrews.” The sermon starts with a provocative statement.

Over and over, in different ways, long ago, God spoke to the fathers through the prophets. But in these latter days, he has spoken to us through his Son (Heb. 1:1).<sup>1</sup>

One God, one message, but different methods. Seeing that God’s message to humanity in the “latter days” of the writer was given in Jesus, allows us to go back into the days “long ago” to find that same message.

That is the point of this series. I will walk through many examples of God speaking the message found in Jesus through prophets that walked the earth in the millennia before Jesus. The journey will feature a myriad of ways God spoke his message. Sometimes, the wording was direct. Often it was in images and types. In many different ways, today gives the blessing of hindsight, illuminating the message by knowing its ultimate form in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

### **Floods: Judgment and Salvation**

The flood story is well known to most everyone, although the Hebrew is rife with texture and subtlety often lost on modern readers. There is a tendency in modern times to read the story with an eye toward how it meshes with modern geology and other hard sciences. Those questions need answers, and I give some thoughts to them in other writings.<sup>2</sup>

Here, however, the focus is more specific. The prophet is not using the Noah account to relate geological history. The purposes are much grander and sweeping. This is a prophetic account that lays more of a foundation to understand the Messiah Jesus. Noah and his

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<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, the translations in this series are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Two particular problems arise for modern readers of this story. First, how should one understand the fact that there is a remarkably similar tale of flooding from Mesopotamian sources that predate the writing of the Genesis account? Second, does the Hebrew dictate an understanding of a truly worldwide flood, or could the Hebrew reference a regional flood? I deal with both of those questions elsewhere (see lesson four, “[Genealogies, Floods and Towers](http://www.biblical-literacy.org/lessons/old-testament-survey/)” at <http://www.biblical-literacy.org/lessons/old-testament-survey/>), and they are not the focus of this exposition.

storyline are referenced repeatedly in the Bible, often by name and occasionally by more subtle means. These are worth considering as part of the larger storyline. They help explain the role of the flood narrative in light of its purpose in Scripture.

## The Storyline

Over a span of three chapters, Genesis relates a storyline familiar to many. Humanity had grown more and more evil since Adam and Eve sinned and were expelled from the Garden of Eden. For generations, humanity seemed to spiral downward in wickedness. People were made to fill the earth and subdue it (Gen. 1:28), but instead filled the earth with violence and self-interest, giving new meaning to ideas of evil and wickedness.

Using anthropomorphic language, the prophet put God’s reactions into words that people could best understand. God “regretted” making people, and decided to blot the evil and wicked from the face of the earth. This is the prophet explaining God’s righteous judgment on sin and evil. It is not simply a judgment that comes one time in the Garden of Eden. It continues on as humanity continues in sin.

The storyline indicates that this sin is going to produce destruction for many, but not all. There is a remnant of people who know God and seek him. In this story, it is Noah and his family.

Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:8).

There is a subtlety in this Hebrew verse that is lost on English readers. The Hebrew shows a deliberate turn on Noah’s name. “Noah” is only two letters in the Hebrew, *nun* (an “n” sound) and *chayt* (a “ch” sound). The Hebrew pronunciation of “Noah” is more of a “No-ach.” “Favor” (which is what Noah found in the Lord’s eyes) is the same two letters, but backwards: *chayt* (“ch”) plus *nun* (“n”). This passage is placed on the heels of the statement that God was sorry he had made man. Noah found favor with God in a way that turned things around!

God doesn’t always see things as we do. In this instant, it was God who saw things aright, and the world that saw them backwards. God straightens things out in the end, however. He instructs Noah to build an ark for him and his family, and load it with animals necessary for earth to repopulate. Noah does so, and they enter the ark. God closes the door, and the rains begin.



Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (Gen. 6:8)

The rains fall for forty days and nights, and once they cease, Noah finds himself and crew alive, floating above everything else, with the earth wiped clean from the evil and corruption that was pervasive. After a time, the waters recede enough for a dove to bring an olive leaf back, indicating that the time to disembark was near. A week later, the dove doesn't return at all, and Noah knows it is safe to disembark.

Noah is not a perfect man, and his family is not perfect either. They are devout, and sacrifice to God as thanks for his provision and protection, but Noah also gets drunk, and there is some sexual impropriety that occurs. In the midst of those events, however, God makes some important statements that the prophet sets out.

God promises not to destroy the earth again through a flood, even though humanity still lives in a sinful state. God will continue to hold humanity accountable, and sin will continue to bear a consequence. Even though humanity lives after the sin in Eden and expulsion, and even though the curse of sin is real, people are still made in God's image. That means that the standard for human life is different than for animals. It also means the consequences of sin are different.

In the midst of the discourse on humanity's sin and the need for judgment, God declares a covenant to Noah and the future generations. God will bring mercy and not judgment. People should think of that with every rainbow seen, and know that God does as well.

### **A Closer Look**

The story of Noah gets great attention by writers in the Old Testament and New. These references give a greater insight into how this story fits into an early message about Jesus.

#### *Moses*

Noah was saved from the judgment of the wicked world. The means of his salvation was two-fold. First, he had an ark God instructed him to build. Second, the waters lifted the ark, while washing clean the earth. Both of these elements are at play in significant passages of the Bible. The first is found in Exodus 2.

To see this best, one needs to know that an obscure Hebrew word was used for Noah's ark. The common word for "ship" or "boat" (*anniya*) is not used. (That is the word used in the story of Jonah, among other places.) Instead Noah builds an "ark," using the rare Hebrew word *tevah*. This word is used in only two stories of the Bible – Noah and Exodus 2.

In Exodus 2, the Israelites are in bondage to Egypt's pharaoh, and are subject to a most violent and hideous imperial decree. All newborn Israelites that are males are to be slaughtered. The Noah storyline already repeated God's command not to needlessly take

life because humanity bears God's image, but pharaoh doesn't live by God's code. His violent order reminds one of the wickedness and violence in the earth at Noah's time, but rather than send a destroying flood, God in his covenant uses a different kind of ark to bring judgment to the wicked while rescuing a remnant.

The "ark" or "*tevah*" in Exodus two is the reed basket into which Moses' mother placed him so that he could float from judgment into a place of safety and salvation. Ultimately, Pharaoh's daughter finds Moses in the "ark," and rears him to become the man that God will use to bring judgment on pharaoh, and to lead his children out of slavery and bondage into the Promised Land.

Moses himself becomes a picture of Jesus, but that storyline will wait for another day. Here, the point is simple. God keeps his covenant and doesn't bring destruction upon all, but God limits destruction to pharaoh's house and people, while bringing redemption to his remnant.

#### *Isaiah 54*

Isaiah 54 contains one of the most haunting passages in the Old Testament, speaking to loneliness, desolation, and seeming abandonment. Yet the words are also encouraging. For in the midst of the strident judgment and harsh destruction pronounced on Israel comes God's affirmation of love and covenant loyalty.

The chapter begins,

Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married," says the LORD (Isa. 54:1 ESV).

God doesn't permanently abandon his loved ones, even though circumstances may make it seem so at times. The passage continues,

For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you," says the LORD, your Redeemer (Isa. 54:7-8 ESV).

The prophet Isaiah confirms that this is part of the message we should read in the story of Noah. God brings judgment, but with a covenant promise to bring peace and salvation to his remnant.

This is like the days of Noah to me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you. (Isa. 54:9-10 ESV).

The prophet Isaiah reinforces God’s message through Noah that God redeems his people from judgment and evil. Israel is told to wait and trust that God’s redemption will come forth. The Noah storyline is used to project forward in time to what God will do for redeeming his people.

It is worth noting that in the compilation of Isaiah’s prophecies, this passage comes on the heels of Isaiah 53, one of the great Messianic prophecies that will get a full treatment later.

#### *Ezekiel 14*

Ezekiel 14 uses Noah to teach and warn the Israelites about their idolatry and unrighteousness. People are ignoring God and his commands and God brings judgment on them. The words of Ezekiel 14 are coming to the sinful generation that is about to be sent into exile in Babylon. The prophet uses Noah and others to reinforce the truth that judgment on willful disobedience isn’t removed simply because God’s mercy was shown to others like Noah. Judgment is real, and this world is not simply a playground where rules can change when and if the players wish it. Ezekiel explained,

Son of man, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it and break its supply of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it man and beast, even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness, declares the Lord GOD (Ezek. 14:12-14 ESV).

Judgment is real, and Noah teaches that truth. No one should forget it. The salvation and redemption God offers, are also real, but they don’t come to everyone, just to God’s remnant who walk with God.

#### *Matthew 24 and Luke 17*

In Matthew 24 and Luke 17 we read two authors’ accounts of Jesus speaking of God’s coming judgment and the future. Matthew’s version reads,

But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood

they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man (Mt. 24:36-39 ESV).

Jesus warns the people that God's future judgment and redemption will flow at a time when people do not expect it, just as it did in the days of Noah. In Noah's day, people lived normal lives, unaware of the coming judgment. Having read/heard and known the Noah story, no one needed Jesus to elaborate that people were doing so with wickedness and disregard of God. That is a given in the Noah story.

God had patiently watched the world spiral to its state in Noah's day, but then in God's timing, the rain started. Noah was prepared, because he had heard God's word and acted out of faith and trust that God knew best. Noah went into the ark, but it was God who shut the door, and began the rain in God's timing.

So, Jesus appropriated the story of Noah and explained that in similar manner, God would bring future judgment and redemption at a time that seems like "just another day" to people. The judgment and redemption are not going to be physical rain and an ark. It will be the second coming of Christ!

### *Hebrews 11*

In the sermon typically called the "Epistle" or "Book" of Hebrews in the New Testament, there is a listing of people in the Old Testament who exemplified the life of faith in God that should be a hallmark of Christians today. In verse seven, it says,

By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith (Heb. 11:7 ESV).

Faith is a marvelous thing. It is not simply an intellectual belief that something is real. It is a conviction that motivates one to action. It is a trust that serves as fuel to give motion to life.

Noah was warned by God that something was coming. Noah was told to build an ark and make necessary preparations to survive and find rescue from the judgment of sin. Noah did as he was instructed, but not because he was bored. There is no indication that Noah thought it might be fun or a nice hobby to take up ark and menagerie building. Noah believed God was serious, and that faith compelled him to obey.

This lesson that the writer of Hebrews offers is one that again, understands the story of Noah as something more than an interesting geological or meteorological construct. It is prophetic of God's judgment and salvation for those who respond in faith. The reality of the judgment and redemption coming in Jesus remains unseen at the point of Noah, but the promise is no less real. Noah's story proclaims that those who respond in faith to God will see the redemption he brings when judging the sin of the world.

### *1 and 2 Peter*

The two letters of Peter near the end of the New Testament both reference Noah. The first passage is found in 1 Peter 3:18-22. While the passage has some difficult things to consider, like Christ preaching to spirits in prison, the message of Noah is not so hard to understand. Peter explained that in Noah's day, a remnant was saved through water, and that in the same way the believer's baptism brings salvation.

Noah was stuck in a world of wickedness and terror. The sin was repugnant, and humanity had devolved into a deep pit of evil. Noah was saved from that world, however, by the flood waters. In the sense of Peter, the judgment of the water is not the emphasis. It is the way the water separated Noah and his family from the sin and judgment of the world.

Peter equates this to the waters of baptism. The follower of Jesus, believing and acting in faith, has an experience in baptism unlike that of the world. The world may bathe and remove dirt, but the believer's baptism is a direct obedient response to the Lord, and as such, it means much more. It separates the believer from sin and judgment as water did for Noah. The difference maker isn't the water; it is the resurrection of Jesus that is symbolized in the water. Here the prophet's message in Genesis gets a fuller explanation. The ark of redemption is Jesus. The judgment on this world and its sin is real. But just as baptism sets apart a believer who seeks God, so the judgment will set apart a believer who can ride away through the resurrected Jesus to an eternity with the covenant-seeking God.

God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him (1 Pet. 3:20-22 ESV).

In Second Peter, chapter two, there is another reference to God not sparing even the angels who were disobedient. Looking back in Noah's day, Peter shows that God's judgment is real and should be expected for all who are not walking in relationship with God.

## The Prophet's Message

In the Noah story, the prophet gives a good illustration of a truth for the ages. Sin breeds sin. Evil breeds evil. Left to its own devices, it doesn't improve itself, but gets worse. God will judge sin and bring destruction upon it and its consequences, but not without providing a redemption for people of faith. It is part and parcel of God's covenant. It should serve as a daily reminder, but also as an image of the redemption God will unfold in his Messiah.

Still this story has a long way to go...

## Points for Home

1. *"Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord"* (Gen. 6:8 ESV).

Noah is Favor spelled backwards. I like this subtlety. It speaks to me. God can take those who follow him, turn them and their names around, and use them to change the world. God can and will do that with you and me. We need to conscientiously pray to put ourselves into his hands. I want to be more concerned about living for him than about anything else in my life.

2. *"Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming"* (Mt. 24:42 ESV).

Judgment and redemption are coming. It will come on an ordinary day. The believer has no fear for that day, however, for we are watchful. We know what is coming and the implications in our lives. We can live in Jesus, confident that judgment on the world, is salvation for those in his care. I want to be in relationship with God in Jesus. It will be my ark when this life is done.

3. *"By this Noah condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith"* (Heb. 11:7).

Noah's actions were prompted by faith. Paul illustrated this same concept in his prayer for the church at Thessalonica, when he wrote, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your *work of faith* and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 1:2-3 ESV)." I want my faith and trust in God to be reflected in how I live and what I do!



