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Trust and Obey Genesis 6:1-22

Fr. William Klock
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What images run through your mind when you think of “Noah and the Ark”? I remember thinking about this one night as I was rocking Alexandra to sleep when she was a newborn. Her initials are “ARK” and you can only imagine the multitude of Noah- and ark-themed gifts and baby paraphernalia we were given. I sat looking around the room at blankets covered in cute animals, mostly in male/female pairs; at a ceramic ark nightlight, and at a wall hanging not that unlike the picture on the wall in the playroom upstairs here at the church: a traditional wooden boat with Noah standing on the deck wearing his yellow rain-slicker, surrounded by lions, zebra, and alligators and with a couple of smiling giraffes poking their heads out through hatches in the roof. Those are the sorts of things we think about when we think of Noah and his ark. The story is a staple for Sunday School and Bible story books for kids. Kids love animals and what could possibly be more fun than a whole boat full of them? The Bible story books and flannel-graphs are full of bobbing boats and smiling animal pairs. They remind us how God saved Noah and the animals from the floodwaters, but have you ever noticed what’s conspicuously absent, whether from the cutesy kids’ version or from our own popular ideas? It’s the death, the destruction, the utter carnage, and the fact that God caused the flood to happen as his judgement on human sin.

Some of the older Bible story books actually do show men and women frantically beating on the ark as the flood waters rise, but too late. I’ve only found one modern book that

shows anything like that. As modern Christians we’ve watered down the Flood, if that makes any sense, in the same way we’ve watered down the Gospel. Too many Christians and too many Churches no longer talk about sin and no longer talk about God as a just judge who punishes sin. No, we’d rather present the culture with a God who is only loving and merciful, and so we present a partial gospel that Jesus saves, but we don’t really say what he saves us from. We tell people that God loves them and wants them to have wonderful lives and for them to go to heaven when they die, but we’re too often unwilling or afraid to tell people that sin cuts us off from all that. We encourage people to love Jesus because Jesus loves them, but that’s not the Gospel. The Gospel is that Jesus loves us and died for us so that we don’t have to die on account of our sins. That partial gospel appeals to our fallen human nature: I’m okay; you’re okay. The real, full Gospel calls us to admit our brokenness; it calls us to put faith in the work of Jesus instead of in our own work; and ultimately it calls us to repent and to live a new kind of life. If the Church waters down the Gospel, it’s going to water down the Flood too, because the story of Noah and the Flood declares the Gospel.

And so to have an accurate idea of what the Flood was all about, we need to look at a few verses at the beginning of Genesis 6. Remember that since Chapter 3 we’ve been following two lines of people: the seed of the serpent, descended from Cain and the seed of the woman, descended from Seth. Cain’s line walked apart from God and with each generation its sin grew and became worse. Seth’s line walked with God and culminated with Enoch who walked so closely with God that God took him straight to heaven. How do we get from Enoch to the entire human population being mired in sin? Look at verses 1-4:

When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw

that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. Then the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.” The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.

Let me say first that these verses are generally acknowledged to be some of the most difficult to interpret in all of the Old Testament. The best way to understand language is to look at how it’s used. The problem is that these verses are full of difficult words and phrases that are only used a very few times in the rest of the Old Testament and, in some cases, when they are used, they’re used in very different contexts that don’t shed much light on their use here.

Up until the Second Century everyone agreed that the “sons of God” talked about here were angelic beings or demons who took human women, “daughters of men”, as their wives. This explained where the “Nephilim”, the giants and heroic men, came from: they were sort of demi-gods, not all that different from the half-human sons of the gods that we read about in Greek mythology. There are two problems with this interpretation: First, what we read of angels in the rest of Scripture seems to indicate that they are asexual spiritual beings who are incapable of reproducing with humans. Second, this kind of interpretation simply puts the Bible too much into the realm of myth. Both Jews and Christians set aside this interpretation about the same time. The rabbis then taught that the “sons of God” were the great rulers and kings. There is a lot of cultural precedent and some biblical precedent for connecting the phrase “sons of God” with kings or rulers and. In contrast, the Church Fathers saw the “sons of God” as the righteous and

godly descendants of Seth and the “daughters of men” as the unrighteous descendants of Cain. Saint Augustine took this interpretation in his writings and it became the norm amongst Christians until the Nineteenth Century. The problem with this traditional Christian interpretation is that it finds very, very little support from linguistics or from ancient culture and literature. The rabbinic interpretation holds up better in all these areas.

Bruce Waltke gives one possible interpretation¹ that acknowledges the angelic beings *and* the idea that these were rulers or kings. He argues that this is a reference to demon-possessed kings, which explains why they might be seen as mighty men of renown as well as the compounding of sin in the human race as the righteous descendants of Seth began to intermarry with these extremely evil men. John Walton gives what I think may be an even better interpretation.² He argues with the rabbis that the “sons of God” were kings and rulers who claimed the “right of first night” amongst their subjects. This has been the reprehensible practice of many of the worst and most oppressive rulers in history: the right to spend the first night with any woman who is to be married. There are few practices more oppressive than the right of first night and we know from Mesopotamian literature that it was not unknown in that culture. It was this practice that was presented as evidence that Gilgamesh was a tyrant. This interpretation fits the language we have in verses 1-4. It shows the corruption of the rulers and people in authority and it fits in well with the picture we’ve been given of the progression of sin: first with individuals as we saw with Adam and Eve, then a spreading of sin as it takes

over an entire family when Cain murdered Abel, and now here sin spreads to the rulers of the people. From there it’s no stretch to see everyone fall to the power of sin. As go the rulers, so goes the nation. In this interpretation the mighty and renowned men of old is simply an historical marker that puts these events on a timeline, putting all this in the heroic age that took place long ago. We see this throughout the other literature of the time.

Even if we can’t iron out the details with certainty, I hope you can see the point of this, regardless of which interpretation we take. *Sin is permeating the human race.* God’s first step is to limit human life. We saw in Chapter 5 that the men listed there lived hundred of years, possibly the aftereffects of Adam having eaten from the Tree of Life when he lived in the Garden. Now God chooses to limit human life to 120 years. If human rulers are going to be tyrannical despots, then God will graciously limit the amount of time that they can consolidate power for themselves and oppress the people. In that sense, God’s choice to limit human lifespans is not unlike our requirement that a General Election be held at least every five years. Sometimes the people make mistakes in whom they elect to represent them and that five-year limit can be an opportunity for a gracious reprieve from bad policy on the part of our rulers.

As we go on in the text we see that there’s no stopping the effects of sin. Even limiting the life of human rulers doesn’t stop sin from permeating all of human society. The text doesn’t say how much time has now passed, but we’ve gone from a sinful individual, to a sinful family, to sinful rulers, and now a whole sinful race. Even the righteous line of Seth has been consumed with sin. Look at verses 5-6:

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. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

These verses describe a truly evil people. As bad as things are today, as great as the sin is in our world, I don’t think we can say that every intention of every heart is only evil all the time. In light of that we might understand why God would regret having made human beings, but what does it actually mean here when it says that he did? As much as we think of this as Noah’s story, the Bible is God’s story and it’s his revelation of himself to us. God caused his Word to be written so that we could know him and this is one of those passages that tells us something very important about God. It’s a passage that tells us something about his just character and it offers a corrective to the pagan ideas that surrounded the Israelites.

The pagans had their own flood stories, but in those stories the floods were caused by the gods in fits of anger. In the Mesopotamian flood story, the gods became angry because human beings had overpopulated the earth and their constant noise kept the gods from getting any sleep. As a human being might throw a rock at a barking dog in a fit of anger, the gods opened the windows of heaven to drown their noisy creation. But not so in Genesis. No, here we read that God looked on the wickedness of his creatures and it grieved his heart. He had lovingly created them to be in fellowship with him, so that he could share himself with them, and they rejected him. The ESV says that he “regretted” that he’d ever made our race. This isn’t the best translation, because it implies that God made a mistake. The problem is that the Hebrew word here is complex and has no equivalent in English, but we need

¹ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 115-118.

² John H. Walton, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 291-295.

to get it right, because it explains why it was that God was so grieved. It wasn't just our rejection of him that made him sad, it was the knowledge of what he had to do next. The best way to put this in English is to say that the time had come for God to audit the account of humanity. Because he is holy and just, God cannot allow sin to go on forever; the scales of justice can only be tipped so far before something has to be done to correct it. God grieved in large part because, as he saw humanity's sin, he knew he had to deal with it and that dealing with it was not going to be pleasant. He knew humanity had to be punished and he grieved the way a parent grieves in spanking a beloved child.

Remember that for God to see is for God to provide. He saw the needs of humanity as he created and so he provided the things that would sustain our life and he called it good. Now human sin has turned everything upside-down. God looks out and sees evil has consumed the human race. This is *not* good. And again we see God provide the good. In this case, the good is to wipe out the sin.

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.” (Genesis 6:7)

And yet, as a just judge, God will not punish the righteous. In all this sinful mess, there was one man who was an exception. Verses 8 and 9 tell us:

But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.... Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.

Noah stands in stark contrast to the rest of humanity. This is the first time that we see “righteous” and “blameless” used in the Bible. To be righteous is to know what is right and to live it out; it's to understand God's

character. It's to understand how he rules his Creation and to then live life in accordance with God's rule. And to be righteous is to have integrity; it's to do what's right even when the cost is high. To be blameless literally means to be “whole” or “complete”. Noah was whole-heartedly committed to righteousness. Now, this doesn't mean that Noah was perfect. It does mean that his heart was in the right place, so to speak, and that he was committed to God and to godliness. Think of David, even though he was an adulterer and a murderer, he could still claim, “I was blameless before [God]” (2 Samuel 22:24). So Noah wasn't perfect—no human being is—but his clear desire was to please God and to walk with him. In fact we see this same phrase again: he “walked with God”. That's exactly how Enoch was described in Chapter 5. So Noah lives in stark contrast to the rest of the world, which was “corrupt” and “filled with violence” (v. 11).

Practically speaking, what does it look like to be righteous and blameless and to walk with God? What we've seen so far in Genesis is that to walk with God means to walk by faith and not by sight. It means to live your life trusting in God's promise to provide what is good. Adam and Eve fell into sin when they decided to choose what was good for themselves. That God rejected Cain's sacrifice points to his tokenism; he trusted in himself and gave back to God only what was left over. Even when God promised to protect him from those seeking revenge for his murder of Abel, Cain trusted not in God, but in himself and built a fortress to hide in. In contrast, Noah trusts God. The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us:

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*.

It's easy to read about Noah and get the idea that God spared him because of his good works. He was at least comparatively more righteous than everyone else, but friends, we need to remember that the wages of sin is death—even when it's just a little sin. In light of God's holiness, even the least sinful of us are revealed as horribly, dark sinful blots. In light of God's holiness there's little difference between a mass-murderer and a comparatively righteous man like Noah. It's not because there isn't a real difference in the comparative “badness” of truly horrible sins, but because of the perfection of God's holiness. So Noah wasn't saved because of his works. He was saved because of his faith. He trusted God to provide a way of redemption from his sins. He was saved the same way we are: by faith in the Saviour. He walked with God. That's an Old Testament way of telling us that he lived by faith.

Faith shows itself as we walk with God in the ordinary things, but it *really* shows itself when God asks us to do something crazy and we still choose to follow him. Look at verses 13-22:

And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark 300 cubits, its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and set the door of the ark in its side. Make it with lower, second, and third decks. For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life

under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground, according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to you to keep them alive. Also take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up. It shall serve as food for you and for them.”

God went to the one righteous and faithful man left and laid out his plans. It's interesting that when God says he's going to destroy all flesh, he uses the same word that describes the corruption of the earth in verse 12. Noah could see for himself that all flesh has become corrupt—the Hebrew word is *šāhat*—and so he could understand the justice in God “corrupting” that corruption. Noah understood; he was sympathetic with God because he was the only man left who understood his Creator. God then goes on to give Noah this list of instructions: make an ark; make it this big; make it this way; fill it with two of every bird and animal; fill it with food for you and the animals.

Now think about just how crazy those instruction sound. The ark is half again as long as a football field. It's 135m long, 22m wide, and 13m high. I imagine that Noah had to hire a good-sized crew to help him build something that large even if his sons were helping him. And yet it's not just the ark. Noah has to provision it with a year's supply of food for himself and who knows how many animals and he does this all in faith with the understanding that God is going to actually bring all these animals to him, that God will get them

all into the ark, and that a flood the likes of which no one has ever seen is actually going to happen. We've all had times in our lives when God has presented us with something to do and we've walked away because it was just too crazy. Brothers and sisters, nothing that God has ever asked us to do can top the craziness of the ark. And yet in verse 22 we see Noah's response:

Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

In the midst of a world filled the violence, Noah devoted himself to a gigantic, expensive, all-consuming project. It didn't make any sense by human standards. And yet God spoke, and Noah obeyed. And Noah obeyed, because he knew that God's word is life. Noah obeyed, because he walked by faith. Again, how often does God give us things to do that are so much smaller and that we refuse, not even because they're crazy, but simply because they interfere with our plans. Friends, Noah had to give up his life to build a giant boat to save his family and some animals from a flood that no one could even imagine. When I think of Noah, I think of the hymn “Trust and Obey” and especially the last verse:

*Then in fellowship sweet
we will sit as his feet,
or we'll walk by his side in the way;
what he says we will do,
where he sends we will go,
never fear, only trust and obey.
Trust and obey,
for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus,
but to trust and obey.*

Brothers and sisters, like Noah, let us “walk by his side in the way”. Let us live out the faith we have in Jesus, let us set aside our own works and trust in him for our redemption. And let us set aside our lives and our priorities that we might be faithful in the work he calls us to do. “What he says we will

do, where he sends we will go” as we look forward to that day when “in fellowship sweet we will sit at his feet.” We may live in a fallen world, but by faith we are kingdom people and as we walk by faith in Jesus we bring his new life into a world sick in sin and death. The Church is our ark and Jesus calls us to reach out to those perishing in the sea who have made shipwreck of their souls.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, give us grace each day to walk with you in faith and to stand before the corruption and sin of the world as righteous and blameless men and women. Help us to turn our backs on sin and to trust you to provide what is good, and as you call us to service and ministry, let us be as faithful as Noah. Even when your commands make no earthly sense to us, even when they seem impossible or undoable, let it be said of us that we did what you commanded. Let us be your instruments as you build your kingdom. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.