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The Flood

Genesis 7:1-8:14

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In Chapter 6 we saw that the human situation had gone from bad worse. We started out with two lines, two families. The righteous family of Seth and the unrighteous family of Cain. And yet by Chapter 6, even Seth's righteous line had been sucked into sin. "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*" (Genesis 6:5). That's a pretty damning assessment. And yet we're told that there was one righteous man who still walked with God, who still had faith in God's promise to one day send a Redeemer to conquer sin and death. That man was Noah.

We also saw that justice required God to deal with humanity's sin. Because he is just and holy, God could not simply let that kind of evil run rampant, and so he determined to wipe it from the earth in a massive flood. But because Noah was righteous, God also determined to save him. God shared his plans with Noah and gave him instructions to build an ark, to stock it with food, and to fill it with animals so that he and his family would be saved from the flood. It all sounds crazy. And yet Noah had faith that what God said is what God would do. And as is so often the case, we see whether faith is true or false, whether it's strong or weak, when our faith has to turn to action. To build the ark and to fill it with all the food necessary required Noah to set everything else aside. The project would have taken years of his life. We can only imagine the hard labour that went into it. And whatever riches Noah might have had, were certainly consumed by the cost of supplies and labour. Noah truly did

walk with God. He didn't give up when God asked him to do something difficult. And so we left Noah last week with the words of verse 22: "Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him."

We don't know how long it took Noah to build the ark and gather his supplies, but finally it was complete and the day came to go inside. Look at 7:1-5.

Then the LORD said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and his mate, and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and his mate, and seven pairs of the birds of the heavens also, male and female, to keep their offspring alive on the face of all the earth. For in seven days I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground." And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him.

Again, in faith Noah does "all that the LORD had commanded him". At God's command he and his family finally go into the ark, taking with them the animals. That he takes seven pairs of clean animals looks forward to the need for sacrifices. If human beings are to live before the face of God, something has to be done about our sin, and so God had commanded his people to offer him sacrifices: the offering of the life of an *innocent* animal for the sake of *our* guilt. Noah's taking these clean animals—animals suitable for sacrifice—into the ark would not have been lost on the Israelites who first heard this story as they were gathered at Mt. Sinai. At God's command they had just built the tabernacle: the place where they came to meet with God. More importantly, *the tabernacle was Israel's ark of salvation*. And yet they couldn't enter the tabernacle—they couldn't enter God's redeeming presence—without

bringing a clean animal for a sacrifice. And here Noah goes into the ark—into the place that God has set aside as a means of salvation—and in order to enter, he takes with him seven of every clean animal. Brothers and sisters, you and I also can enter the presence of God only by means of a sacrifice for our sins. Jesus is that sacrifice. The long robe of his righteousness is what covers us as we come symbolically before God at his Table each Sunday and it is what will cover us in eternity as we sit before his throne in the New Jerusalem. Jesus is our spotless offering; Jesus is the lamb of God. The Church, his Body, is our ark.

When the time came, Noah and his family—his wife, his sons, and their wives—herded the animals into the ark. We're told it took them a week, then in verse 11 we get a pretty dramatic picture of what happened next.

In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights. (Genesis 7:11-12)

The image is one of the undoing of Creation itself. Think back to Chapter 1 where we read that before God began to create, the earth was formless and void. The earth was a dark and chaotic sea; it was hostile to human life. And yet God spoke into the abyss and separated the waters. First he created the firmament—the dome of the sky—to separate the waters above from the waters below and then he separated the waters below and brought forth dry land. Ancient people, including the Israelites, thought of the earth as something like an inverse snow globe: a bubble of air and dry land surrounded all around with a great sea. Now as God's judgement on human wickedness, we have this image of him withdrawing

his restraining hands from the waters. The waters below come crashing back in on the land and the windows in the firmament meant to let through the rains so necessary for human life now open like floodgates to let the waters above pour down in a massive deluge. As the waters began to flood the earth, we're told that Noah and the animals went into the ark as God had commanded. And in verse 16 you can almost hear the loud "thud!" of the ark's door as we're told: "And the LORD shut him in."

Verses 17-24 show us what it looked like outside the ark: waters rising, everything dying, and—when put in perspective—this little ark riding out the storm in the midst of enormous destruction.

The flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters prevailed and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the face of the waters. And the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered. The waters prevailed above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, livestock, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all mankind. Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark. And the waters prevailed on the earth 150 days.

With Noah safely in the ark, let's look now at the flood itself that was raging outside. It's interesting that both verses 6 and 11 give this story an historical anchor in relation to Noah's

life. He was 600 years old and it even tells us that the flood began on the seventeenth day of the second month of his six-hundredth year. Unfortunately, we don't know when exactly Noah lived; Genesis simply puts him at the midpoint between Seth and Abraham. That does, though, help us to establish a range on the timeline of history in which the flood happened.

Chapter 5 tells us about the developments of Cain's descendants: domesticating livestock, making musical instruments, and forging bronze and iron tools. That establish a bracket on the early end of the genealogies we've seen of about 9000-10,000 B.C. Abraham lived on the other end, around 2000 B.C. Again, Noah is somewhere in the middle. In Chapter 9 we're told that Noah planted a vineyard after the flood. That also helps us with a date as well, because we know that grapes were domesticated about 5000 B.C. What we end up with is a rough window somewhere between 5000 B.C. and 3000 B.C. This is helpful on one hand, but it poses a problem on the other. There's simply no evidence for a global flood in that period, not even if we look at the whole period from 10,000 B.C. to 2000 B.C. Nothing in the geological strata, nothing in polar ice cores, nothing at all supports a global flood in the time period we're looking at.

So what do we do about this? First, we accept that the Scriptures were divinely given to us by the Holy Spirit and are true. That's non-negotiable. If the evidence we've gathered from our observation of the world contradicts Scripture, the problem isn't Scripture; the problem is either that we've interpreted the scientific data falsely or that we've been interpreting Scripture the wrong way. As we saw in our look at Genesis 1, we run into the same kind of problem when we impose our modern

materialistic way of looking at things on a text that was written to address origins in non-material terms. We need to remember that the text of Scripture is inspired by God, but that it is given through human beings and spoken in human language so that we can understand it. And remember that human language isn't just a question of the alphabet and vocabulary of the people to whom it was given, but also of their cultural and philosophical language—their worldview and their way of thinking. We need to see the text from their perspective. This means that we first need to do our best to understand what the text meant to the people to whom it was originally spoken by God; only after we've done that can we apply it to ourselves and our situation. If our modern reading or understanding of the text would have been meaningless to the original audience, it's safe to say that we're probably reading it wrong.

If we keep this in mind, it goes a long way toward solving our problem. So, first, the text tells us several times that the flood was to destroy all the people and that it was to cover all the earth. The text is obviously meant to convey a global scale flood, but we need to ask ourselves what "global" looked like to the ancient Israelites. Just think of that the word "global" itself. When we want to talk about something all-encompassing in an earthly sense we talk about something being global. We talk about global economies and a "global village", for example, but think about what the word "global" actually means; it refers to a *globe*, to the earth as a round planet running its course around the sun. This is our concept of the earth; it's very different from the understanding of the earth that people had in biblical times. For them the word, let alone the idea of, "global" didn't exist. As we saw back in our look at Genesis 1, they understood the earth to be a flat landmass, basically encompassing the area they could see between the mountain ranges around them. It was

surrounded on all sides, below, and above with a great sea and the great mountains on the horizon—like the Mountains of Ararat—were the pillars that held up the firmament, the dome of the sky, which itself held back the great heavenly sea. Their understanding of the extent of “the whole earth” was drastically more limited than ours. We’ve been to the moon; human beings have seen the earth as a round globe; we’ve travelled to all seven continents. People in the second or third millennium B.C. had little or no experience outside the Mesopotamian flood plain. To them that was the whole earth, because they didn’t know of anything else.

This helps to give us some perspective when we read later about Joseph during his time governing Egypt. Genesis 41 uses this same language when it describes the great famine that encompassed the whole earth. It says that at that time all the peoples of the earth came to Egypt to buy grain. All the people of the earth did come to buy grain...from a limited ancient perspective. People from the Americas or Australia, China or Europe aren’t included, because they were unknown to the people who recorded the story and to whom God spoke. Similarly, after the flood we’re told how the descendants of Noah’s sons populated the whole earth. Genesis 10 is often called the “Table of Nations”, but what it describes is the peoples of the greater Near East. Again, God speaks to his people in the language they understand. His concern wasn’t to correct their science or cosmology, their understanding of the human body or to expand their scope or knowledge of world civilisations; his concern was to make himself known and to give his people hope in the future Redeemer.

The scope of the flood isn’t the only thing at issue. Our traditional interpretation of a global scale flood is also reflected in how we translate other parts of the story. The ESV

talks about the waters covering the “high mountains” to a depth of fifteen cubits or almost 7 metres. These aren’t the only accurate ways to translate the Hebrew. First, Hebrew doesn’t make a distinction between “hill” and “mountain”. The word *har* is used for both and, actually, most often refers to hills. The high mountains, like Ararat, would not have been covered, because from the people’s perspective, those mountains were the pillars that supported the firmament. And the language so often used to describe the waters rising above the hills or mountains, can just as easily be understood to describe the depth of the waters as they rose from the plain up the hillsides. The text can be validly read either way. I say this to underscore the point that the problem is not the Bible. If we have a problem or if we have a conflict with the text and what we know of the physical world, the problem is our *interpretation*; we may not have the grasp we need of the language and the mindset of the original audience.

That original language also applies to the cultural context in which these people lived. Remember that Abraham came from Ur and so the Mesopotamian flood stories were part of his cultural and religious background. Those stories became part of the cultural and religious background of the Israelites. In fact, the two most powerful stories or legends or myths that told the Mesopotamians about their gods were the stories about the creation of the cosmos and about the great flood. And yet those stories taught the people about gods who were capricious and immoral, who created human beings as slaves, and who drowned their creation in anger when it got out of their control. In the Mesopotamian flood story we read about the sole survivor who escaped not because the gods wanted to preserve a remnant of humanity, but because he outsmarted them. The gods were angry that he had done so.

Now consider that these stories in Genesis were given by God to his people after he had rescued them from Egypt. Not only were the Mesopotamian stories of creation and the great flood part of the Isrealites’ background, but they’d also been steeped in Egyptian paganism. God chose to speak to them in the language and in the religious vocabulary they knew—using ancient cosmology and ancient flood stories—to teach them about himself and his Creation and to correct the pagan ideas they had. And so he spoke to them about Creation using the ancient religious language of temple building, and he showed them what he was like—a holy, just, righteous, loving, and merciful God—by recasting the story of the flood. We have good reason to believe that the Mesopotamian flood story has historical roots in a great flood that took place about 2900 B.C. And yet whereas the Mesopotamians explained it in terms of capricious and immoral gods angrily destroying humanity, God now takes the flood as an opportunity to explain his obligation to punish sin while also showing that there’s nothing capricious or immoral about his character. Utnapishtim, the Babylonian “Noah” angered the gods by outwitting them by building an ark. In contrast, God deliberately spared Noah and his family, giving him instructions for an ark, and then, when the day came, sealing his people inside, shutting the door himself. God gives us a very different picture of himself in comparison to the pagan gods.

With that in mind let’s go back to Noah. In 8:1 we read:

But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark.

This doesn’t mean that God had forgotten Noah. In Hebrew, in this case, “to remember”, describes God’s faithfulness to the promise he’d made

to Noah. For God the mission wasn't accomplished until Noah and his family had their feet back on dry ground. The flood had wiped out human wickedness, but God's goal wasn't simply the destruction of evil. God's goal was to restore righteousness and live out his covenant with those who walked with him by faith. Judgement on sin was only half of the story; the other half was God's faithfulness to those who had been faithful to him.

Now think of this in terms of the Jewish people in exile in Babylon. They were the ones who pulled all these earlier stories and genealogies and histories together as they tried to make sense of why God had removed them from the land he'd promised them. Think of what God's faithfulness to Noah told them. It reminded them that God punishes sin; it reminded them that even the faithful sometimes have to deal with the fallout from the punishment, just as Noah did; but it also reminded them that God *always* preserves a faithful remnant and through them he ultimately brings about his salvation. We can look back from our vantage point and see how God allowed that faithful remnant to return to Judah and we can see how it was through that faithful remnant that the Messiah finally came. And, brothers and sisters, as we live today in a world filled with sin and wickedness, in a time where we may often feel like that small remnant, we know that God will not simply destroy all humanity in judgement, but that he works through his Church to bring salvation and to share with the world the knowledge of his Son. He has promised that judgement will come on that Last Day, but as we wait, he's given us a new ark. Jesus laid its keel 2000 years ago and now we, his Church, labour to build the rest of it as his Spirit gives us strength and we go out into the world to proclaim the good news that through Jesus, God offers salvation from the judgement to come.

In the verses that follow in Chapter 8 we read how God closed the windows of the heavens, stopped up the fountains of the deep, and caused a wind to blow. Over the next year the water dried up until the ark came to rest, probably in the foothills of the Mountains of Ararat.

Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent forth a raven. It went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days and sent forth the dove, and she did not return to him anymore.

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. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth had dried out. (Genesis 8:6-14)

Noah had walked with God in faith. Now he waits on God—in that cramped, noisy, smelly ark—in faith. For a year he waits, confident that God had not forgotten him. This was the story that the Israelites so desperately needed to hear. For 400 years they had waited in Egypt for God to save them. Again, for seventy years, the faithful remnant had wept by the

waters of Babylon, waiting for God to save them. And, brothers and sisters, for almost 2000 years we have lived with one foot in the kingdom of God and another in the kingdom of the world praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Friends, we need to be patient; we need to wait on God and on his timing. But to wait means that we have to walk with God in faith, just as Noah did. When we start getting impatient, when we want to pull the roof off the ark before the rain stops, when we want to force the coming of God's kingdom before he's ready, it points to our need to walk all the more closely with God; it means we need to stop trusting in ourselves and instead give him every aspect of our lives and trust wholly in him. Mature faith only comes as we walk with God. You can never trust someone you don't know and it's awfully difficult to follow someone you don't trust. Like Noah you and I need to take the gift of faith that God has given us and invest it in spending time with God. We need to steep ourselves in his Word. We need to read these stories he's given us, stories like the one we read about Noah, so that he can teach us about himself, about his faithful, merciful, loving, and gracious character. We need to invest in looking for his blessing all around us. And we need to step out in faith as he calls us to commit to him; as he calls us to build his ark, to build his church; and as he calls us to minister and share the Gospel with the people around us.

Let us pray: "Gracious Father, we praise you for your unfaltering faithfulness. Teach us to live by faith that we might walk with you more closely each day. Give us the faith we need to do the work you have called us to do. Let our light shine brightly to draw men and women out of darkness and let us bring glory to your name. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."