



## WHEN GOD FLOODS IN

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This morning we come to one of the most famous and favorite stories in the Bible, the story of Noah's Ark. If there's one part that people everywhere remember from the Bible, this is it.

I've always loved this story, partly because of my Grandma and Grandpa Peabody's driving habits. They bought their gasoline at the Arco station in Sunnyside, and back in the 1970s, Arco gave away plastic Noah's Arks and the animals to go with it. With each fill up, you could go in to the gas station and get another two animals for the ark. You might end up with 10 giraffes and no elephants, depending on what the station had in stock, but my grandparents had a pretty good collection. That was always one of my favorite toys to play with at their house.

If I had been smart, I would have snuck it into our car on one of our trips, because those arks have become collectibles. They're just cheap plastic, but now they go for a lot of money on ebay. They're hard to find. I could have made a fortune. I had no idea back then that the children's plaything I held in my hands could one day help fund my retirement.

But that's really how we treat the whole story of Noah's Ark in general. We think of it as a children's plaything – a kids' story with cute animals and pretty rainbows and a big boat. We don't really know what it is we're holding in our hands. There's a much deeper meaning to the story, and it's priceless.

### **Genesis 6:5 - 7:12**

*The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth — men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air — for I am grieved that I have made them."*

*But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. This is the account of Noah.*

*Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth.*

*Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high. Make a roof for it and finish the ark to within 18 inches of the top. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle and upper decks. I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it.*

*Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark — you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive. You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them."*

*Noah did everything just as God commanded him.*

*The LORD then said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation. Take with you seven of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and two of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate, and also seven of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth. Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made."*

*And Noah did all that the LORD commanded him.*

*Noah was six hundred years old when the floodwaters came on the earth. And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives entered the ark to escape the waters of the flood. Pairs of clean and unclean animals, of birds and of all creatures that move along the ground, male and female, came to Noah and entered the ark, as God had commanded Noah. And after the seven days the floodwaters came on the earth.*

*In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month — on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.*

Since the beginning of the year, we've been considering some of the big ideas about God and humanity that Genesis presents for us. Right out of the gate, the Bible jumps into

some of the most important concepts about who God is and how we relate to him. So far, we've looked at God as creator and people being made in his image. We've talked about sin becoming a factor in the human condition, and last week we looked at how it impacts relationships. We're created for community, but staying connected to each other is hard work. God provided such a model for us in his dealings with Cain. He demonstrated an incredible amount of grace and patience.

He's had to show quite a bit of that in the last couple chapters of Genesis. Noah's the first baby born after Adam died, so not all that much time has passed. But humanity had already gone from bad to worse, spinning out of control.

Listen to these descriptions again:

*The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.*

When I wash my car (which is at least twice a year), after I'm done I'll take the sponge and squeeze it under some running water. What I want to see is clear water coming out of it, but for a long time, all I get are black greasy bubbles, because the sponge is just full of soap and road grime.

Like giant sponges, people in Noah's day had soaked up all kinds of evil, and that was all you got when you squeezed them. Everything they imagined, everything they dreamed about, everything they worked toward. Grimy, gritty evil permeated whatever they did or thought. The Message version of the Bible translates the verse this way: "evil, evil, evil, from morning to night."

Then a couple verses later, the author gives us some additional color:

*Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways.*

Here, we move on from the intent to the effects. The evil in people's hearts was producing violence. In fact the earth was FULL of violence. It had taken as much as it could take. Then the verse says the earth had become corrupt. Three times in one sentence the author uses that word corrupt. That means it was rotten and decaying. It's a very graphic description, and I want to come back to it in a minute. For now, what we're trying to establish is that things were really, really bad.

The effect of all this on God was significant.

*The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.*

I think about Alfred Nobel, who invented dynamite, among other explosive devices. His desire was to see it be used for tunnels and roadways and making life better. He even

thought it could be a deterrent in war, once people saw how deadly it was. Instead, his inventions were put to use in all kinds of military applications. One morning in 1888, he woke up to a mistaken report in a Paris newspaper, saying that he had died. The article portrayed him as this horrible, war-mongering monster, and it said, “The merchant of death is dead.”

It pained and horrified him. He was deeply grieved. Alfred Nobel was a pacifist! So he set about trying to change his legacy. He established the Nobel peace prize and left almost all his money to be given to people who were promoting the welfare of society.

God had seen his creation at the start and had called it good. Now he sees it again and how it's become so destructive and ugly, and God is deeply grieved at what he sees. It pains him to see what has become of humanity. God gave people the ability to choose – he did not create robots – and since leaving Eden, people had consistently, fiercely chosen evil over God.

So he decides to step in and do something drastic. God the creator becomes God the judge, handing down a devastating sentence. Everything is going to be wiped out. All life will be ended with the flood – men, women, children and even animals.

It's so far reaching that it's troubling for us to think about it as being the same God who loved us enough to send Jesus to die for us. We don't know how large the world's population was at the time, but it was a significant number. How could a loving God wipe out all those people at one time?

When we see evil in the world, we wonder, “How could a good God allow that?” Then, when he does something, we wonder, “How could a good God do that?” His judgment shocks and offends us as much as his silence.

How do we come to terms with a God who is a judge? I don't know that we will ever fully understand his reasoning or his choices. But in cases where his actions don't match our expectations, sometimes it helps to reevaluate our expectations and see if we were off. When it comes to God's dealings with sin, we can often be caught off guard because

### **We underestimate the gravity of sin.**

God's forgiveness is so freely given that we can easily forget how bad our sin really is. We treat it as if it's no big deal for God to pardon us. So when we see an example of the full force of his judgment, we can't even believe it. But everyone, including Noah, had been on borrowed time since Eden. God had told Adam and Eve that sinning would result in death. He's been bending over backwards to postpone and prevent that inevitable day. Now the volume and effects of sin have reached a point of no return.

Let's go back to that word corrupt, or rotten. If I've got some rotten hamburger in the fridge, I don't say, “Well, I'll just cook it up a little more thoroughly and it will be fine.” You have to get rid of something that's rotting. The same way with a beam supporting a

house. If I find dry rot, I can't just say, "Well I'll paint over it with some really nice paint," and build on top of it. The rotten piece has to be cut out.

The cutting out part isn't what destroys the wood – the rot is what's to blame. The author of the Noah story wants to make it very clear that God isn't the one to be blamed for the flood. Humans caused their own ruin and chaos before the flood ever arrived. David Atkinson once wrote, "For what God decreed was to be destroyed had already in truth destroyed itself."

In addition to underestimating the gravity of sin, **we underestimate the agony of God.**

Somehow, when I envision God unleashing the flood, I can picture him as cold and heartless. In my mind, I imagine that he would have to be.

That's a sad view of God. And that's not how Genesis portrays him. The text says he felt great pain over the human condition. He grieved over it. He's not a bored child knocking down blocks in frustration.

J.K. Rowling has said that she cried when she had to kill off one of the Harry Potter characters. The people she had created had become so real to her, she knew them so intimately, that it was painful for her to end their imaginary lives. And that's with fiction! God's creation is no less an expression of himself than J.K. Rowling's work is of her. And he was dealing with flesh and blood people. To say that God was in any way callous to what happened in the flood is to say that he isn't the author of life. But he is so closely connected to what he has made that he could never casually destroy it.

We have some friends whose teenage son went through a period of serious rebellion. It spiraled further and further out of control. He had even moved out of the house for a while and was making worse choices all the time. It was just killing his parents, until finally it reached a point where they felt they had to do something drastic. So they got on a plane with him and flew him to Western Samoa to an intervention program for hard core kids. At the time, the son saw his parents as being harsh and cruel, but anyone who knew them knew how brokenhearted they were at having to do something so severe.

Is it any less excruciating for God when his children get way out of line? John tells us that God is love. God described himself to Moses as the God of compassion. I like to think that I'm sympathetic with people and that it's hard for me to hurt someone's feelings. Imagine if your very essence is love and compassion. How painful would it be to cause something as drastic and far reaching as the flood?

Just like Jesus showed on the cross, when God deals with sin, it is at great personal cost. We shortchange his character when we portray him as being uncaring or a hothead. God agonizes over our condition and feels a deep sadness over sin.

Despite the agony and the pain, God feels compelled to act. And here is a third area where we tend to go wrong, because **we underestimate God's reasons for judgment.**

I associate judgment with punishment. You do the crime, you do the time. It's as if God is looking for wicked people and zapping them for their evil ways.

When we talk about the flood, we see God destroying everything in response to the horrible conditions he found. We think of it in terms of reaction. But it's more than that. It's also preparation. God is getting ready to do something new.

In the corruption and violence that was happening, you find a reversal of God's creation process. Instead of giving life, it's bringing death. Instead of order, people are causing chaos. You have this un-creation going on. The flood God sends takes things clear back to the beginning, when you have the Spirit of God hovering over the waters of the earth. God used the flood to pave the way for a second start of creation.

This means God's judgment is much more proactive than reactive. He's removing the debris so there's room for something better. The waters of the flood have as much cleansing power as they do destructive power, and they give the world a good washing before God does a new thing.

We've been talking about God's judgment on a global level, but if I'm being truthful, I'm more likely to make these underestimations in my own life. I underestimate the gravity of my own sin. Do you ever do that? It's easy to downplay just how wrong wrong can be. I don't want to feel God's judgment, so I rationalize my bad behavior and try to focus on his forgiveness. When I do that, I can start to feel entitled to grace instead of thankful for it. Our entire culture feels entitled.

I can also underestimate God's care for me and his agony when I'm not doing what I should. I might occasionally think that God is mad at my attitude or actions, but I haven't thought of my choices as twisting a knife in God's heart. He sighs and grieves over our sin, and he loves us enough to intervene.

When he does intervene, we can interpret it as just plain punishment, and underestimate his intentions. God has far bigger plans for us than simply calling us to task for our bad choices. He does that to clean house for something new. **You can't be a hideout for sin and expect to have room for God to do his work.**

The flood stands as a reminder that God's judgment is no joke. Sin is serious, it grieves God, and he wants it out of the way.

That's a strong, sobering message. Then right in the middle of it, we find one little ray of hope as a single man is held up in a different light:

**Genesis 6:8**

*But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.*

In the movie, *Evan Almighty*, Evan Baxter is building a big ark in the suburbs because he believes God told him to. He's attracting all kinds of media attention and it's a huge embarrassment to his family. His wife, Joan, doesn't understand what's going on and she's planning to leave him. So she takes the kids and they drive away. But then they stop in a restaurant. Morgan Freeman, who plays the role of God in the movie, is their server. He strikes up a conversation with Joan and she tells him who her husband is and what's going on. Morgan Freeman says, "Oh, I love that story -- Noah and the ark. You know a lot of people miss the point of that story. They think it's all about God's wrath and anger." Then he says, "But I think it's a love story."

I was shocked that such good theology could be found in a comedy about the ark. He's right. This is a story about love – God's love for us. The focus is not on God flooding in to wipe out the planet – it's on God flooding in to save Noah. It's about God finding a way to preserve humanity beyond his judgment. It's about a chance to start over. There is great hope and joy in this story when we see it in that light.

Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. Favor can also be translated as grace: Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. As the story unfolds, we catch glimpses of what that grace looks like. And it's almost as surprising to us as what we saw of God's judgment. Many of our preconceived ideas of God's grace don't look anything like the ark.

So what do we take away? First, we discover that

### **Good people need grace.**

By all accounts, Noah was a nice guy. He's described as righteous and blameless. Not to say he was perfect. We see after the flood he was completely human and flawed like the rest of us. But in comparison to what was going on around him, he looked good. He had a desire to do what was right. And we tend to attribute his rescue to the fact that he was so much better than everyone else. He deserved to be the one.

But the first thing we learn about Noah is NOT how good he was – it's that he found favor with God. That comes before the high praise of his character. And that makes God's view of Noah the most important note about him in this chapter. All Noah's gold star behavior wasn't what saved him from the flood -- it was the fact that God looked on him with grace and compassion and chose to love him. Noah would have been swept away with everyone else if God hadn't singled him out. Undoubtedly, Noah's heart attitude made him more receptive to God's compassion than his neighbors, but it still didn't mean God owed him anything.

This is the center of grace that we have to return to over and over again. God doesn't love you and me because of the good things we do – he just loves us. God doesn't save us from the flood because we're so great – he saves us because he chooses to have compassion on us and show us his favor.

Grace is almost easier to understand when we know we've been terrible failures. We have no choice at that point except to depend on God's mercy. It's when we're doing relatively well, living mostly decent lives that we start to think maybe God is on our side because we're doing so great. We think maybe we're worth more to him because we're doing what we're supposed to.

Philip Yancey wrote, "By instinct I feel I must do something in order to be accepted. Grace sounds a startling note of contradiction, of liberation, and every day I must pray anew for the ability to hear its message."

Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord, and that was his salvation. We find favor in God's eyes and that's our salvation as well.

The shape of that salvation may have caught Noah off guard. Instead of God saying, "I'm going to destroy everything and spare you," he said "I'm going to destroy everything, and I want you to build an ark." We can be somewhat surprised to discover that

### **Grace needs boatbuilders**

Why wouldn't God just say, "There's a cave up on top of Mt. Ararat. The water shouldn't reach that high. You'll be safe there." That seems like it would have been a simpler plan.

Instead, he gives Noah detailed instructions for this boat. What kind of wood to use. How many decks it should have. How high to spread the pitch to waterproof it. God has obviously put a great deal of thought into this, and it is going to take Noah a long time to get all the work done. Couldn't God have just created a boat for him out of nothing, like he made everything else?

God seems to want to involve Noah in this process. Being favored by God apparently means more than just being the one singled out to be saved – it means being invited to join him in his work. And Noah did exactly that.

### **Genesis 6:22**

*Noah did everything just as God commanded him.*

A few verses later we're told the same thing: Noah did what God said. I'm sure there were times in the process when the whole idea seemed crazy. Noah was a farmer – not a sailor. There had never been a boat like this in the history of the world. There were all kinds of reasons to object, but Noah stuck with obedience. He took it one step at a time and concentrated on following God's instructions all along the way. No doubt it meant keeping in close communication with God as he reached each new task.

As a result of his obedience, Noah became the key to rescuing all the animals as well as his own family. It was his obedience to God's instructions that resulted in more than just him making it through the flood.

God's desire for Noah was not only to survive the catastrophe, but to bring others with him so that life could continue. He wasn't the end in himself – he was one piece in a plan to extend God's salvation to people who wouldn't have made it otherwise.

God doesn't save us just to save us. He saves us to become boatbuilders – people who make room for other people to also experience God's grace and salvation. We join him in his rescuing work. Jude says that our job is to snatch people from the fire.

That can sound intimidating. You might be thinking, "I'm no missionary." God isn't asking you to change your personality and start wearing a sandwich board saying the end is near. All he asks is that like Noah, we learn to follow the instructions he gives us. Like Noah, we build a boat one step at a time. Like Noah, we stay in close communication with God. He'll give us all we need to do whatever he asks. Oswald Chambers said, "If we will do the duty that lies nearest, we shall see him."

Noah did everything God asked him to. Then he rounded up his family and got inside that big floating zoo. God closed them in. Then it started to rain. And it kept raining. And it kept raining.

And the rain was only the beginning. Noah may have thought, "I can survive anything for 40 days. That's just a little over a month." But I doubt anyone foresaw that the water would take another 150 days to slowly recede. Then it took another several weeks before there was enough land to actually get out and walk on. All told, Noah and his family spent nearly a year cooped up in that box.

That's a long time with thousands of smelly animals. No doubt there was endless work to do the whole time. Even if some of the animals went into hibernation for the trip, there would be non-stop chores just to keep the boat afloat.

I imagine by around 6 months into it, when the drama of the rains was long gone and the shock of the flood worn off, that gratitude would start to wear thin. Noah's family might have begun to wonder if they would live long enough to see dry land again. This was the big rescue God had offered? A quick, merciful drowning in the flood might have sounded a lot easier than the torture the boat ride was turning out to be.

### **Grace is a long voyage.**

We don't expect that, do we? We turn to God, we cry out for his salvation. He says he saves, so why does it take so long? We find this journey with other Christians to be filled with struggle and heartache, and we go, "This is grace?"

Yes. It is.

The ark wasn't like a normal boat. It didn't have a rudder or sails or oars. There was no way to steer or direct it. It was just a big wooden box. But it floated. It was warm and dry and lifted Noah and his family up out of the waters. They had no control over where they were going or how long the journey would take, which meant that the whole time, they were in complete dependence on God. And as uncomfortable as that can be, that's living in a state of grace.

Grace is a long voyage. When we put our trust in God, life doesn't suddenly turn around. Difficulties still surround us. His grace is not an instant fix.

But it's still a fix. It's still the only fix. God is the only one who lifts us up out of the waters, he carries us safely through all the storms. In the long stretches of time grace seems to take, we wonder why so much of our life is out of our control. The longer we're in the ark, the more we discover how to depend completely on God.

In the height of the flood, when the voyage had been going on for a long, long time, we see this one bright note of encouragement:

*The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days.*

*But God remembered Noah...*

Noah was not forgotten, and neither are we. God knows the length of the journey. He knows what we can take. We are burned in his memory, and he knows how fragile we are.

#### **Psalm 10:14**

*But you, O God, do see trouble and grief;  
you consider it to take it in hand.  
The victim commits himself to you;  
you are the helper of the fatherless.*

God floods into our lives, bringing just what we need. Judgment and correction and help and support.

#### **What needs to be flooded out of my life?**

Maybe a better question would be "What am I NOT wanting flooded out of my life? Getting back to a quote I read earlier, if there's something that needs to be destroyed in my life, chances are it has already caused destruction. So why am I holding on to it? If you want God to do a new thing, you can't be a hideout for sin. He needs to purge it, to clean it out for a fresh start. What am I willing to see swept away?

#### **What's my step of obedience?**

God is looking for boatbuilders, people who will join him in his rescue efforts. What has he put on your heart to do as an act of following him?

**Where has God “shut me in”?**

Is there an area of your life where it feels like God has closed the door behind you and trapped you in a big floating box? Maybe his grace doesn't feel like grace right now, and you need to know that he remembers you. Ask him for strength and for eyes to see how he is sustaining you and keeping you afloat in the middle of it.