

Genesis 8:1-22

The Flood Subsides

We have all had that experience of not knowing what God wanted us to do. Sometimes, to be honest, we do know and just don't want to do it, but at other times we genuinely cannot see our way clear to what God wants.

At other times, though, we do know what God wants. He has revealed it clearly and unmistakably. All we have to do is obey His loud and clear call. And when we do obey, we do so with the expectation that all will be well. And sometimes it is.

Let us consider Noah, though. He had obeyed God. More than that, he had obeyed God when God's commands seemed absurd. God had told Noah to build an enormous boat in the middle of the desert. He must have labored on it for months, even years. He did precisely as the Lord asked. He followed every detail of construction, despite not fully understanding why. And for all of his obedience and faithfulness, Noah found himself in the middle of a Flood. A year of his life (yes he lived to be 950, but still) was spent floating about the planet with a vast multitude of animals for which he had to provide care. We must remember that sometimes there is collateral damage from God's judgments.

God Remembered Noah

“But God remembered Noah” (v.1). This powerful verse reminds us of the sovereignty of God. It also marks a reversal in the narrative. When it suited His perfect timing, God began to reverse the processes of destruction that had overwhelmed the earth in the past five months. No doubt after five months of continuous rainfall, Noah must have wondered if it would ever stop raining. He had not seen land for weeks. Just gray skies and the incessant pounding of rain and waves on the ark. But, then, God remembered Noah.

This was covenant language. The word, *zākar*, does not mean a mere recalling to mind, but rather identifies fidelity to a promise. Consider, “remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). God was remembering His promise to Noah before the Flood, “I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall enter the ark - you and your sons and your wife, and your sons' wives with you” (Genesis 6:18).

This idea of remembering is worth attending to.

“Thus it came about, when God destroyed the cities of the valley, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived” (Genesis 19:29).

“²²Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. ²³So she conceived and bore a son and said, ‘God has taken away my reproach.’ ²⁴She named him Joseph, saying, ‘May the Lord give me another son’” (Genesis 30:22-24).

“⁴⁰If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me, and also in their acting with hostility against Me - ⁴¹I also was acting with hostility against them, to bring them into the land of their enemies - or if their uncircumcised heart becomes humbled so that they then make amends for their iniquity, ⁴²then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land. . . . ⁴⁵I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the Lord” Leviticus 26:40-42, 45).

We serve a God with a good memory. He remembers what He has said He will do, and He always is faithful to Himself.

Notice that the text does not say that God remembered Noah’s righteousness or obedience. Nor does the text imply that God *had* to remember Noah because of some previous commitment. God remembered Noah, because God chose to remember Noah.

“God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided” (v. 1). That word for ‘wind’ is *rûah* which is the same word used in Genesis 1 to identify the ‘Spirit’ that hovered over the waters. Indeed the language of chapter 8 replicates that used in Genesis 1 in many cases. The point is that God was recreating the earth with Noah as the new Adam. Even the later command by God to “be fruitful and multiply” would be given.

The consequences of God’s actions were immediate. “The fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky were closed, and the rain from the sky was restrained” (v. 2). Both the commencement and conclusion of the Flood were God-ordained events. The Flood was not a natural disaster, as we would use the term. “The water receded steadily from the earth, and at the end of one hundred and fifty days the water decreased” (v. 3). Note that the text does not say the water vanished. It simply returned to where it had been before the deluge.

Specifics are given as to the time taken for the waters to recede and the location where the ark finally came to rest. “⁴In the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark rested upon the mountains of Ararat. ⁵The water decreased steadily until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains became visible” (v. 4-5). Thus there was a period of one hundred fifty days from the beginning of the rain until the ark landed at Ararat (Genesis 7:11, 8:4). There was an equal period of five months from the sighting of the mountains until the earth was completely dry (Genesis 8:5, 8:14).

Curiously, while the timing is very specific, the location is much less so. Mount Ararat itself is some 17,000 feet in elevation, however, the text does not state that the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat, as so many have assumed. Rather, it reads the “mountains of Ararat.” This area was known in the ancient world as Urartu, and it reached its peak politically in the 9th-6th centuries BC. It is today in the eastern region of modern Turkey, where the countries of Armenia and Iran converge.

Attempts to discern the precise mountain on which the ark came to rest (and presumably where some archaeological remains may be found) is an ancient hobby. The Book of Jubilees (written about 120 BC) claims, “the ark went and rested on the top of Lubar, one of the mountains of Ararat” (Jubilees 5:28). By the 11th and 12th centuries AD Mount Ararat itself had become known as the traditional landing place of the ark. Searching for remains of the ark became a medieval passion, and explorers and scholars continue the quest today. It seems somewhat irrelevant, since sceptics are rarely convinced by such evidence, and people of faith do not require them.

Some commentators have struggled to reconcile verses 4 and 5. Verse 4 states that on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest. Verse 5 states that mountains became visible on the first day of the tenth month. I think the best understanding is that the ark came to rest on the mountain before it was visible. After more time, the waters receded until the land on which the ark rested was visible to Noah and the other occupants.

The Earth Dries

It seems that Noah was in no rush to leave the ark. Rather, he took it upon himself to determine whether or not the land is sufficiently dry for his family to disembark. But even while Noah took the steps he did to provide for the safety of his family, he waited upon the Lord for the final command to go forth. This is a lesson we would do well to remember. We must learn to clearly discern what our job is and what God’s job is. There is no clear rubric for such a process, but it seems attentive prayer is a good place to start.

“Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made; ⁷and he sent out a raven, and it flew here and there until the water was dried up from the earth” (v. 6-7). Scripture does not specifically state the reason for Noah sending out the raven, but we can safely assume that it was to determine the status of the earth. Ravens are strong birds and can remain aloft for extended periods of time. Since ravens feed on carrion, it could sustain itself on its journey with the dead carcasses of floating animals. Jewish tradition suggests that the raven was chosen because it was an unclean animal, and therefore good for neither food nor sacrifice.

In any case, the raven may have gone out from the ark on several occasions before the one time it did not return. Each time Noah saw the bird on the horizon, he must have been disappointed. He had hoped the bird would not return. That was the sign for which he hoped. The fact that one day the raven finally did not return meant that the bird had found sufficient food on which to feast.

Later, Noah sent out a dove, a bird that preferred lowlands and fed on seeds found on drier land. The process was similar to that of the raven.

“⁸Then he sent out a dove from him, to see if the water was abated from the face of the land; ⁹but the dove found no resting place for the sole of her foot, so she returned to him into the ark, for the water was on the surface of all the earth. Then he put out his hand and took her, and brought her into the ark to himself. ¹⁰So he waited yet another seven days; and again he sent out the dove from the ark. ¹¹The dove came to him toward evening, and behold, in her beak was a freshly picked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the water was abated from the earth. ¹²Then he waited yet another seven days, and sent out the dove; but she did not return to him again” (v. 8-12).

The dove was a clean animal, used in offerings for purification (Leviticus 12:6) and as a sin offering for the very poor (Leviticus 1:14). A dove would be offered by Abraham as his confirmation of his covenant with God (Genesis 15:9) and a dove was sacrificed by Noah when he disembarked from the ark (8:20). That the bird failed to find a place to rest when first sent out indicated that the stronger raven must have flown a greater distance to find dry land, and that the land in the immediate vicinity of the ark was still unsuitable for habitation.

After a week, a dove was sent out again and this time returned with a piece of foliage. This let Noah know that the land was beginning to be fruitful again. Such news must have been welcomed by Noah and the others, but it also must have taxed their patience as they waited for the time when they could finally leave the ark.

After another seven days, Noah sent out the dove a third time. When the dove did not return, Noah knew that the waters had fully receded from the earth and that plant life had begun to grow in such abundance that the dove could survive on its own. It is interesting to observe that though God told Noah to build an ark (and gave him great detail regarding its construction), told him why He was destroying all life on the earth, and even told Noah when all this would take place, it seems that once Noah entered the ark and God shut the door, all communication from God to Noah was terminated. Noah was on his own to determine if the earth was habitable. Yet, even when he had done so, Noah did not disembark until God specifically told him to do so. Noah was patient with God's apparent silence.

Finally the earth was habitable. ¹³Now it came about in the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first of the month, the water was dried up from the earth. Then Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and behold, the surface of the ground was dried up. ¹⁴In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry" (v. 13-14). Noah looked on a sight he had not seen in more than a year. Notice, also, that according to the text, the sun played no role in the drying of the waters. This was entirely the act of God.

The marking of the dates is significant in that from the commencement of the Flood until the earth was dry enough to be inhabited once again was twelve months and eleven days (Genesis 7:11, 8:14). Since the Hebrews used a lunar calendar of 354 days, the entire time from beginning to end of the Flood was one solar year of 365 days.

I think it is also worth noting that while the Flood came on in forty days, it took months for the waters to recede. Perhaps this is a metaphor for difficult times. Often, challenges and trials can come upon us quickly, but take a long time to go away. We would do well to find a model in Noah's obedience and patience during those times.

Exiting the Ark

Even though he knew the land was dry and ready for settlement, Noah patiently waited in the ark for God to inform him that it was time to move on. Despite his diligent efforts to determine the status of the earth's surface, Noah subordinated his own understanding of the circumstances to God's timing. There is

a lesson is this. Even when we can clearly see where God wants us to go, sometimes we still need to wait for God's timing to move forward. Life is often not about the events themselves, but the timing of them.

Finally, ¹⁵“God spoke to Noah, saying, ¹⁶“go out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and your sons' wives with you” (v. 15-16). Note that God always speaks to Noah, and not to his family. Again Noah is the responsible figure in the narrative. Also, note that the ark was never intended to be a permanent place of dwelling. It was a temporary refuge. Often, in times of crisis, we can retreat into a comfortable area from which we refuse to budge once the crisis has passed. We withdraw from the world and immerse ourselves in self-pity. We refuse to take chances because we have been hurt. We must remember that we are of no use to the kingdom of God unless we are in the world. Yes, that means we will have to ride out some storms, but it is the only way to be useful to our Lord and Savior.

God commanded, and again Noah obeyed. ¹⁷“Bring out with you every living thing of all flesh that is with you, birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, that they may breed abundantly on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth. ¹⁸So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him. ¹⁹Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by their families from the ark” (v. 17-19).

Once again the command was given to “be fruitful and multiply.” God's purposes for the earth had not been altered by the Flood. Neither had Noah's commitment to obey God.

Worship and a Promise

When Noah emerged from the Ark, his first recorded act was to build an altar and worship the Lord. “Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar” (v. 20). Can it be any wonder? It was clearly an indication that Noah realized Who had brought him through the Flood.

Worship was not invented by Noah. Abel and Cain had worshipped, though their heart were in different places as they did so. Although Noah's altar is not described, the audience to whom Moses was writing would likely have assumed that it resembled the altars they themselves used in worship. It is likely that, given the resources available, Noah would have constructed an altar much like that which would eventually be required of a temporary place of worship,

²⁴“you shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. ²⁵If you make an altar of stone for Me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it” (Exodus 20:24-25).

That is, Noah simply found some stones and used the nearby earth to make a mound on which he could offer sacrifices.

The burnt offering is one of the oldest forms of sacrifice known. It would eventually be performed on a continual basis,

³⁸Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two one year old lambs each day, continuously. . .

⁴²It shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the doorway of the tent of meeting before the Lord, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there” (Exodus 29:38, 42).

It was offered after times of crisis such as childbirth, bodily discharge, or defilement during a Nazirite vow. It was fundamental to making reparation for sin, “he shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf” (Leviticus 1:4).

The burnt offering was characterized by its completeness. It was entirely consumed by the fire. It was a holocaust, though that word has taken on a different meaning. It represented the sacrifice of the entire offering to God. Nothing could be held back. Nothing would remain. God tested Abraham’s devotion by requires such an offering from him in the form of his son Isaac (Genesis 22:2).

The burnt offering was also characterized by the fact that it was offered freely.

¹Now the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²‘speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, “when you enter the land where you are to live, which I am giving you, ³then make an offering by fire to the Lord, a burnt offering or a sacrifice to fulfill a special vow, or as a freewill offering or in your appointed times, to make a soothing aroma to the Lord, from the herd or from the flock”” (Numbers 15:1-3).

Finally, note that Noah offered one of every clean animal. His joy was overflowing, and so was his altar.

“The Lord smelled the soothing aroma” (v. 21). Such anthropomorphisms are not at all uncommon to Scripture, and occur frequently in the Pentateuch to describe God’s satisfaction with the worship He was being offered. After all, man must have some way of describing the indescribable. The Bible often states that God hears, sees, stretches out His hand, etc.

After receiving the offering, God made a pronouncement.

²¹the Lord said to Himself, ‘I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done.

²²While the earth remains,
Seedtime and harvest,
And cold and heat,
And summer and winter,
And day and night
Shall not cease” (v. 21-22).

Notice that God did not make the promise to Noah. He did not make it to anyone, in fact. It was a promise He made to Himself. The point was that God’s commitment to never again destroy the earth was

not induced from Him by Noah's sacrifice, or by any other form of compulsion. It was entirely an act of God's grace and mercy.

God promised that He would never again "curse the ground." This did not mean that the judgment of God after the Fall was lifted. Rather, God pledged not to add to the burdens already placed by that curse. This was true even though mankind remained depraved. The deluge had not changed human nature. It ought to remind us that this world will never be free from evil. Perfectibility is not a quality which is possible for humans to possess.

God also promised to "never again destroy every living thing." This does not mean, however, that God does not punish wickedness. He still holds individuals and even communities responsible for their sin. Instead, though, God promised that regular and predictable environmental patterns would emerge. The poetic language of this passage allows the writer to juxtapose opposites. Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night. Throughout, though, is the understanding that God has ordained all of this. It is not the result of man's worship, nor is it the typical ANE mythology of dying and rising gods that provide the seasons. There is no mother goddess in Scripture.

Takeaways

As we have studied the Flood, there are many things to take away from the narrative. First, we cannot miss the simple fact that God punishes wickedness. He may be gracious, and in His mercy grant us time for repentance, but He always holds us accountable for our sin. We should never mistake God's patience for His approval.

Second, we must mark the obedience of Noah. Given a seemingly impossible and ridiculous task (even though God told him what to do and why to do it), Noah simply obeyed. He did not offer counterarguments. He did not plead for a stay of execution for his friends and loved ones. Noah simply did exactly as God commanded.

Third, though Noah obeyed, he still had to suffer. Months upon months of bad weather, care for countless animals, and who can imagine what other difficulties he faced as he rolled along the waves for a year. He obeyed perfectly, and still did not have an easy path.

Finally, we can note Noah's patience with God's timing. We cannot envision how desperately he must have wanted to get off the ark once he had landed. To set all those animals loose and have them fend for themselves. To take a long walk. To feel the soil as he worked the land. Yet, he waited. Though he knew the earth was ready for him, he waited for God's perfect timing. Lessons for each of us to take to heart.