

A Bigger Boat

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a five-part series

August 5, 2018

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Genesis 6:5–8, 13–14, 17–22 (CEB)

⁵The LORD saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up was always completely evil. ⁶The LORD regretted making human beings on the earth, and he was heartbroken. ⁷So the LORD said, “I will wipe off of the land the human race that I’ve created: from human beings to livestock to the crawling things to the birds in the skies, because I regret I ever made them.” ⁸But as for Noah, the LORD approved of him. . . .

¹³God said to Noah, “The end has come for all creatures, since they have filled the earth with violence. I am now about to destroy them along with the earth, ¹⁴so make a wooden ark. . . .

¹⁷“I am now bringing the floodwaters over the earth to destroy everything under the sky that breathes. Everything on earth is about to take its last breath. ¹⁸But I will set up my covenant with you. You will go into the ark together with your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives. ¹⁹From all living things—from all creatures—you are to bring a pair, male and female, into the ark with you to keep them alive. ²⁰From each kind of bird, from each kind of livestock, and from each kind of everything that crawls on the ground—a pair from each will go in with you to stay alive. ²¹Take some from every kind of food and stow it as food for you and for the animals.”

²²Noah did everything exactly as God commanded him.

[So Noah builds the ark and loads it with the animals and the flood comes, he and his family ride it out until the waters receded.

Genesis 9:7–13 (CEB)

⁷As for you, be fertile and multiply. Populate the earth and multiply in it.” ⁸God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“I am now setting up my covenant with you, with your descendants, ¹⁰and with every living being with you—with the birds, with the large animals, and with all the animals of the earth, leaving the ark with you. ¹¹I will set up my covenant with you so that never again will all life be cut off by floodwaters. There will never again be a flood to destroy the earth.”

¹²God said, “This is the symbol of the covenant that I am drawing up between me and you and every living thing with you, on behalf of every future generation. ¹³I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the covenant between me and the earth.

Death. Floods. Destruction. . . . a kids’ story?

We come to the last of the “kids’ stories” that we will look at through adult eyes. On the surface, it seems like a child’s story – the big boat, the animals, a rainbow. Yet it is a tragic story that begins and ends in darkness. There are questions about the story that will lead us astray if we let them. Could it really be *all* the animal species? How could the ark be large enough? Did water really cover the whole planet?

In the end, such questions are futile. Better questions are these: What does this story tell us about God? Why such destruction? Why not just do away with humankind entirely? Did this fix the problem created by Adam and Eve?

“Evil, evil, evil from morning to night”

Once Adam and Eve made their choice to turn away from God, things went downhill quickly. Eve gave birth to two sons, Cain and Abel. Foreshadowing the darkness that is with us still, Cain envied his brother and murdered him. As the generations proceeded, the darkness grew until “The LORD saw that humanity had become thoroughly evil on the earth and that every idea their minds thought up was always completely evil” (6:5).

When God surveys the horrors being visited on his creation by those made in his image, God is neither angry nor vengeful. Instead, God's heart is broken (6:6b). God grieves. The pain cuts into God's heart like a knife. This is a portrait of a loving parent whose much-loved child has done something so heinous that, in her suffering, the parent regrets giving birth in the first place. The biblical portrait of a God who suffers is not limited to Jesus on the cross.

The writer paints such a stark picture of human evil that one might think God will simply wipe out humanity, admit the project has gone tragically wrong, and pour out his creative energies and love elsewhere. Indeed, God's judgment is swift and sure. A flood will cover the planet and every living creature on the land will be destroyed. In essence, it seems that God will "uncreate."

Nonetheless, God's act of "uncreation" is not complete. Yes, water again covers the entire planet, but God chooses Noah to carry on. Noah is to build a large wooden box (an ark, as in the Ark of the Covenant) and load up a male and a female of every species. It is through Noah that God's work will go on. God desires a people that will live in right relationship with him and if that takes a second try, then so be it.

"But God remembered Noah" (Genesis 8:1)

Today's scripture passages bracket the story of Noah and the flood. But 8:1 is the pivotal verse – God *remembers* Noah. That seems an odd choice of words. After all, how could God forget something? God has not forgotten Noah; it is a wonderful Hebrew way to speak of God's readiness to act.

So God remembers and recovery begins. The waters subside. Noah, his family, and all the animals disembark. It is a fresh start, but things are not as they were in the Garden of Eden before the fall. The present is still burdened with the past. When Noah builds an altar and offers pleasing sacrifices, we get a peek inside God's heart. God knows that the human heart is still inclined toward evil. As we'll soon see, the flood doesn't "fix" the problem of human sin. Still, very significantly, God promises that he will never again "destroy every living creature." What a remarkable promise. Have you ever stopped to consider how this promise limits God's actions from that point on? What can't God do if God is to remain faithful to his promise?

Third chances?

We might think that the story of Noah ends happily. It does not. God knows the human heart. God must explicitly warn Noah's family against murder and its consequences. Noah's son, Canaan, sins and is cursed by his father. Just as Adam and Eve desired to be as gods, Noah's descendants will build a great tower at Babel so that they could "make a name for themselves." God will smash the tower, scattering the people and diversifying the languages.

Beginning in Genesis 12, God will choose yet another person, Abraham, and a people, Israel, through whom God's work will be done. God will be relentless in pursuit of his people and, in the end, will do the work of reconciliation himself, in the person of Jesus Christ.

What is God like?

Given that the story of Noah follows on the heels of the creation stories, Terence Fretheim lifts up several aspects of the story that challenge the notions of God held by many.

First, God is deeply and emotionally bound up with us and all of his creation. God can be hurt. God grieves. There is nothing remote or distant about the God depicted in the story of Noah.

Second, God *regrets* he made the humans in the first place. This seems to imply that God couldn't have been certain that Adam and Eve would rebel. Perhaps we are to

grasp that though God knows all that can be known, there is an uncertainty to the future that even God must deal with. Further, God *changes his mind* about blotting out humanity (6:7-8). This is another common, but surprising, theme in the Old Testament depictions of God.

Third, it seems obvious from the story that God has chosen to put limits on the exercise of his power. God is in charge, but will not always be in control. God has taken the option of “uncreation” off the table. And we know that humanity is just as prideful, violent, and rebellious after the flood as before. But God is committed to the rescue of humankind and must do so *through* the suffering created by humankind. If God is to be faithful to God’s promises, it can be no other way.

Not really a kids’ story is it!

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the story of Jonah.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Ten things you don’t have to believe to be a Jesus-lovin’, Bible-believin’ Christian*. This is a trip through some of the non-essentials of the Christian faith.