

WHY DID GOD FLOOD THE WORLD?

BY ANDY PATTON*

The story of the flood is found in **Genesis 6-9**, but it really begins a bit earlier. We can't forget that this story is part of a larger literary unit from **Genesis 1** to **11**. After Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (**Genesis 3**), things began a downward spiral. Humanity multiplied and violence reigned. Cain killed his brother Abel. One of Cain's descendants, Lamech, became a man renowned for violence, boasting his exploits (**Genesis 4**). Sin and evil were only intensifying. How would God react to this state of humanity?

Just before the story of the flood begins, we learn that "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**) and it grieved God "to his heart" (**Genesis 6:6**).

So God sent the floodwaters as a judgment, a block in the way of humanity's wickedness that rose out of the grief of his heart (**Genesis 6:5-6**). Genesis describes the flood as the de-creation of the world—the earth sinks back into the chaotic waters that God cleared away on page one of the Bible (**Genesis 1:6-10**). In the ark, God carries Noah's family through the flood unharmed to start afresh in a world returned to innocence. It is a new beginning and a chance to have a different end.

If you're like us, you might be saying, "But no matter how you tell the story, God still wipes out all of humanity except one family!" How does the flood reflect the goodness of God when he sent such disaster on the earth? Let's make three observations from the context of the Story.

...and he has not hidden his face from him,
but his heart, when he cried to him,
from you comes my praise in the great
congregation,
my voice, I will perform before those
who hear him.
The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the
Lord!
May your hearts live forever!
Praise be to God forever and ever.

The Lord is My Shepherd
A Psalm of David
23 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall
not want.
He makes me lie down in green
pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

JUST MERCY

The story of the flood is one of God taking merciful action to restrain humanity's ever-increasing evil. Genesis tells us that God saw that "every intention of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually" (**Genesis 6:5**). In the Bible, context means everything. Genesis firmly anchors the meaning of the flood in the context of God's intervention to stop humanity's headlong slide into evil.

GRIEF, NOT VENGEANCE

God doesn't take pleasure in the flood. Rather, Genesis highlights how the wickedness unleashed by the Fall caused him sorrow and grief. God made the earth to be a place where humanity could flourish, but instead they turned it into a theater of violence and disaster (**Genesis 4:8, 4:23, 6:1-7**). And God's heart was broken.

THE CURIOUS CLIMAX: COVENANT

Later on, when Isaiah the prophet remembers Noah (**Isaiah 54:9**), he doesn't think of the flood but the covenant God made with Noah afterward. In that covenant, God promises that nothing like this will ever happen again. This points to the key meaning of the story: the flood is about God's mercy and commitment to the goodness of what he has made.

A NEW BEGINNING?

So what have we learned so far? The flood wasn't an act of wanton destruction by a capricious God. God was acting to restore the goodness of his creation. God preserves one family through the flood and elevates Noah as a new Adam, placed once again in a garden on a high mountain paradise with the commission to be fruitful and multiply. Of course, just as in Eden, instead of spreading God's goodness, Noah and his family begin again to spread the disaster of human evil (**Genesis 9:18-29**). All of this begs the question: how does Noah's story further God's plan of redemption?

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JESUS AND THE FLOOD

All of the Bible is a unified story that points to Jesus, and the story of the flood is no exception. Noah becomes a paradigm for the kind of leader we are awaiting—the righteous one in a wicked age who enters the waters of death and comes out the other side into a new creation, bringing about a new covenant of peace and life. The gospel authors use allusions to the flood story to confirm Jesus is this leader.

There is a curious moment in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus talks about a future baptism he must accomplish (**Luke 12:50**). What was Jesus talking about? Hadn't he already been baptized earlier in the story (**Luke 3:21**)? As the story unfolds, it becomes clear—Jesus' death on the cross was his submersion under the dark waters of chaos. But this flood story has a different ending.

In the flood account in Genesis, the wicked died and the righteous one was spared. With Jesus, the wicked were spared and the righteous one sank beneath the waters of death. Unlike Noah, Jesus did not escape the flood alive; the waters of death rose and drowned him. Noah survived the flood by taking shelter in the ark. But in his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus became a shelter, not just for his own family but for all of creation.

The ultimate consequence for sin wasn't expressed by the flood; instead, it fell on Jesus on the cross. The flood was violent, but it wasn't the work of a violent God. Rather, this God took on flesh and died a violent death at the hands of violent men, a death that became the very means he would use to save his enemies and usher in an eternal kingdom of peace.

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MAKING SENSE OF THE FLOOD

You may have questions about difficult passages in the Bible, but they don't have to be enemies of faith. Rather, as we engage them with diligence and humility, troubling questions can lead us to deeper faith. Though we may be tempted to skip over difficult passages like the flood in Genesis, those are exactly the places we should give extra attention, pray about, and explore.

When we read the story of the flood as part of the ongoing narrative of redemption, it points beyond itself to the goodness of God. This violent event in history turns out to be one step along the way of God restoring broken creation. Turns out this isn't a story we need to skip over.

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and stand in awe of him, all you
offspring of Israel!
For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard when he cried to him.
From you comes my praise in the great
congregation;
my vows I will perform before those
who fear him.
The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the
Lord!
May your hearts live forever!
All the ends of the earth shall remember

• I can count all my bone
they stare and gloat over me;
they divide my garments among

The Lord Is My Shepherd

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A PSALM OF DAVID

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green
pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
3 He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

• I can count all my bone
they stare and gloat over me;
they divide my garments among

who is the generation of those who
seek him.
who seek the face of the God of
Jacob.

Lift up your heads, O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle!
Lift up your heads, O gates!
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory!

Him will he instruct in the way of
peace,
he should choose.
13 His soul shall abide in well-being,
and his offspring shall inherit the land.
14 The friendship of the Lord is for those
who fear him,
and he makes known to them his
covenant.
15 My eyes are ever toward the Lord,
for he will pluck my feet out of the
net.
16 Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
17 The troubles of my heart are enlarged;
bring me out of my distresses.
18 Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.