

The Flood and the God of Creation

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a five-part series

May 22, 2011

©2011 Scott L. Engle

Genesis 6:5-8; 9:8-17 (NRSV)

⁵The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. ⁶And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷So the LORD said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” ⁸But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD.

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹²God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

A flood inundates the earth. Death and misery follows. But so does hope and renewal.

What could this story tell us about the nature of God and his creation?

The too well-known¹ story of Noah and the flood is a bit of a trap. It is easy to get caught up in questions like: Could it really be *all* the animal species? How could the ark be large enough? Did water really cover the whole planet? Wouldn't it have to rain 15 feet each hour for forty days to cover even Mt. Rainier, much less Mt. Everest?

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? Why a second chance?

As the community of believers, we've always affirmed that the Bible is “God-breathed,” inspired in a way unlike any other writings -- God's word for the people of God. Thus, another good question to ask of all Bible stories is this, “Why does God want us to have *this* story told in *this* way?” The answers are often surprising.

“People thought evil, imagined evil — evil, evil, evil from morning to night”²

Once Adam and Eve, desiring to be like gods themselves, had 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, as Peterson renders it, “God saw that human evil was out of control” (6:5a). It is hugely important

¹This isn't as odd a notion as you might think. Believing that we “know” a story from the Bible gets in the way of our reading it carefully and seeing other viewpoints.

²Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Genesis 6:5b in *The Message*.

that we comprehend God's response to the evil wreaked by his children. Indeed, a close reading of the story of Noah and the flood might reshape your understanding of the God you worship.

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 experiment has gone tragically wrong, and pour out his creative energies 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.³ In essence, it seems that God will "uncreate." Or will he?

A God Who Grieves and Remembers

There is not only one portrait of God in the Bible. On my shelves, there is a book that looks at eight portraits of God; e.g. God as loving father, good shepherd, and righteous judge.¹ None of the portraits are sufficient in themselves; all are important to grasping the fullness of God.

It is easy for us to bring to each a portrait of an all-knowing, all-powerful, changeless God to the story of Noah. But when we do, we miss so much of what is here.

In the story, God is sorry that he ever made the humans in the first place. In this, his grief is so sharp that it hurts God's heart. God is not an angry and vengeful judge, but a grieving and pained parent. Despite the flood that "blots out" nearly all humankind, God is not remote or indifferent. God is no absentee landlord, he is deeply involved in all of creation, always caring, always loving.

1. *Portraits of God* by Allan Coppedge. Interspersary Press. 2001.

Uncreation?

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 ship 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; but he is now turning his attention back to Noah.⁴ Later, Israel would sometimes think that God had forgotten them (don't we?) and the biblical emphasis on God's remembering ought to assure us of God's constant care for us.

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

³ It is worth noting that God uses creation itself as the instrument of justice. It rains, a lot, but it is still only rain.

⁴ There are several occasions in the Old Testament when we are told that God "remembered." In each, case it isn't saying that God somehow forgot; instead it is a Hebrew way of saying that now the time has come for God to take action.

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.

The Rainbow

When God gives new significance to the rainbow, it is a sign of the covenant that God makes. In this case, the covenant is simply a promise; nothing is asked of Noah or his family. The rainbow is a symbol of peace and goodwill. Never again will such devastation be brought upon humanity and the rest of God’s creatures.

As Terence Fretheim writes, “The covenant will be as good as God is. God establishes it in goodness and love and upholds it in eternal faithfulness. It will never have to be renewed; it stands forever, regardless of what people do. Humans can just rest in the arms of this promise.” After the flood, God knows that evil still lies in the human heart (8:21), but God cares so much for creation that God heads in a new direction.

What is God like?

Given that the story of Noah follows on the heels of the creation stories, Terence Fretheim⁵ 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. This is the consistent biblical witness and, so far as I can see, the only reason so many people envision a remote emotionless God is because they have been too heavily by Plato and certain philosophical notions of God. But there is nothing “remote” about the God depicted in the story of Noah.

Second, God *regrets* he made the humans in the first place! “And the LORD was sorry that he made humankind on the earth” (6:6). 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. Here, we gain a deeper understanding of why God had to enter into that suffering in order to accomplish the rescue of humanity and all of his creation.

⁵From his 2010 book, *Creation Untamed*.

Memorizing Scripture Verses – a review

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

(Leviticus 19:18b)

This should look familiar. It is the second commandment from the Law of Moses that is quoted by Jesus when asked for the greatest commandment. For Jesus, this teaching is integral with the commandment to love the LORD God with all our heart, soul, and might. The natural question raised by this commandment is to ask “Who is my neighbor?” To which Jesus replies with the story of the Good Samaritan, who grasps that the person in need is his neighbor, irrespective of any social or economic barriers we raise.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

(John 3:16 NRSV)

This is certainly one of the most famous verses in the Bible and one of the most beloved among believers. It is Jesus’ one sentence explanation of what God’s rescue plan was all about and the extent that God was willing to go to make it happen. It is out of love that God sent us his Son. It is out of love that Jesus went to the cross. It is out of love that God desires eternal life for us all.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 4:6-7 NRSV)

We live in anxious times, fed by a 24/7 news cycle that stokes our fears and drives us to worry about much over which we have little or no control. What can we do? How can we break the shackles of worry? Here is a bit of advice from the apostle Paul to the Christian in Philippi. These are good words to place in our hearts and carry with us each day.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

(Micah 6:8 NRSV)

Too many Christians see the Old Testament as little more than a portrait of a vengeful God busy smiting all those who cross him. But the ethic of Jesus is woven throughout the Hebrew scriptures. You only have to look a little harder. What does it mean to love God and neighbor? How about doing justice and kindness and walking humbly with God. A great place to start!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Many Christians embrace the notion that in the Old Testament, God is largely a god of blood and wrath while in the New Testament we learn that God is a god of love. Certainly, God blotting out all humanity with the exception of a small family seems to reinforce this notion. What portraits of God do you see in the Old Testament? How might the picture of a grieving, pained God reshape the way you see God in this story? How might this picture of God’s suffering relate to the New Testament story of Christ and his death on the cross?
2. The creation stories tell of humanity’s rebellion and sin. Though God starts over with Noah, the flood doesn’t fix everything. Humanity is sinful before the flood and sinful afterward. After he emerges from the ark, Noah fails just as miserably as did Adam. We don’t talk much about “original sin” and it is probably very misunderstood. What do you think the writer of Genesis is trying to say to us about human nature? What is wrong with us? How is that humans could kill tens (hundreds?) of millions of fellow humans in the last century alone? How will this ever be put right? How can we be reconciled to God? In considering these questions, we ought to remember that the story of Noah is set before the choosing of Abraham. God’s promises to Noah are promised to all humanity – they are universal. How might this influence our understanding and appreciation of other religions?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Genesis 6:5- 8:22 The flood	Tuesday, Genesis 9:1-17 God's covenant with Noah
Wednesday, Genesis 9:18-29 Curse and blessing in Noah's family	Thursday, Genesis 10 The table of nations
Friday, Genesis 11:1-9 The tower of Babel	Weekly Joys and Concerns

