

“By Faith Noah,” Genesis 6:11-22, 7:17-24, 8:15-17, 9:8-17 (Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost, November 12, 2017)

Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. <sup>12</sup> And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. <sup>13</sup> And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth. <sup>14</sup> Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. Make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. <sup>15</sup> This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark 300 cubits, its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits. <sup>16</sup> Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and set the door of the ark in its side. Make it with lower, second, and third decks. <sup>17</sup> For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. <sup>18</sup> But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you. <sup>19</sup> And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female. <sup>20</sup> Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground, according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to you to keep them alive. <sup>21</sup> Also take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up. It shall serve as food for you and for them.” <sup>22</sup> Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

<sup>17</sup> The flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. <sup>18</sup> The waters prevailed and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the face of the waters. <sup>19</sup> And the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered. <sup>20</sup> The waters prevailed above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. <sup>21</sup> And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, livestock, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all mankind. <sup>22</sup> Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. <sup>23</sup> He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark. <sup>24</sup> And the waters prevailed on the earth 150 days.

<sup>15</sup> Then God said to Noah, <sup>16</sup> “Go out from the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. <sup>17</sup> Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—that they may swarm on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.”

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” And God 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: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I 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. When 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.” “God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

## PRAY

We are working our way through the early chapters of the book of Genesis on Sunday mornings and today we come to the account of Noah, his ark, and the flood. If there was ever a classic Bible story, a classic Sunday school, flannel board-ready part of the Bible to teach the kids, this is it. You’ve got Noah with the long white beard in his big boat, waving at us from the side, and you have cows and horses looking over his shoulder at you. We love this story so much in church that we often paint the walls of our children’s ministry with the scenes from the ark, as if Noah and all the animals are on a cruise.

But they’re not. Instead, they are on the ark to avoid a catastrophic flood sent by God to judge the earth. “For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die.” Genesis 6:17.

One of the big questions often asked about this flood is “did it happen?” It may be surprising to some of you that there’s actually broad agreement, among both religious and non-religious people, that yes, an incredibly widespread and destructive flood did occur in the ancient world. You of course have the biblical account recording this event, but then you also have flood stories from other cultures: Babylonian stories, stories from the Americas, Australia, and the Pacific Islands. I’ve read scientists who argue there’s evidence that a sudden flood poured through a wall that once existed at Gibraltar and then filled the Mediterranean basin (which was inhabited at the time). The overflow and the storms that followed, they say, covered the Middle East for a time. When I was in college a couple of scientists published a best-selling book called *Noah’s Flood* and put forward the same theory except they changed the location to the Black Sea. They found plenty of evidence that people once lived on what is now the bottom of the Black Sea, until flood waters poured through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus in what is now modern-day Turkey and, again, overflow and storms would have inundated the Middle East.

But of course it doesn’t really matter to Bible-believing Christians whether or not there are records of the flood in other ancient literature or what the scientists say. It’s not up for debate, because of Genesis 6-9. If we are to be faithful to the Scriptures we must say, “Of course, the flood happened.” However, I do think the *extent* of the flood can be debated. We can disagree on whether the flood was universal, whether it covered the entirety of the surface of the earth, or not.

At first glance that seems impossible because of verses like Genesis 7:19: “And the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that *all the high mountains under the whole heaven* were covered.” If the “all” in that verse must be taken to refer to a worldwide event, then that’s the end of the discussion. Mt. Everest must have been under water. The problem, however, with that view is that it’s just about impossible to conceive of where the water for a flood on that order of magnitude would have come from, nor, just as importantly, is there any explanation about where all that water could have gone after the flood. One estimate is that the oceans would

have had to triple in volume in 150 days, then shrink back to their current size in another 150 days. No scientific theory even begins to explain how that could have happened.

Again, if that's what the Scriptures teach, then it doesn't matter than we can't come up with a scientific theory to understand how it would have happened: we must affirm it. However, it's at all not clear that the Bible does teach a global flood. In the Scriptures, the "all" used in Genesis 7:19 doesn't always mean "universal." In fact, it *frequently* doesn't.

Just to give one example, we read in 1 Samuel 16 how Absalom, when he ran his father King David out of Jerusalem and temporarily usurped the throne of Israel, gathered all his father's concubines on the roof of the palace, and in a play to consolidate his power "went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel." Now, no one argues that every single Israelite saw this happen. The "all" there was representative that the fact was known all over Israel, not actually witnessed. In Deuteronomy 2:25, we read that God said to Moses to encourage him as he was about to lead the people of Israel into Canaan: "This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you on the peoples who are *under the whole heaven ...*" That's the exact same phrase as in Genesis 7:19, but no one argues that this refers to all people all over the globe. No one contends the Eskimos were frightened of Israel. In the context, it seems clear that it's referring to the nations that lived in and around the Promised Land.

Therefore, I think there is room for debate on whether the flood was universal or regional in scope. It could be that Moses, as he's writing this account, wrote about the world *as it was then known*. The world, to an ancient Israelite, meant what we would call the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East. So we don't have to draw a hard line, because both be found faithful to the plain reading of the Scriptures.

That's the flood. The flood means God's judgment on the sin of the world. But as we talked about that at length last week, I want to spend the rest of our time this morning looking not at the flood, but at Noah. Hebrews 11:7: "By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." When the New Testament talks about Noah, the emphasis is on his faith.

My hope is to examine his faith to learn more about how we can have our own. If you want to have faith in God as the Bible describes it, you need to do three things: first, admit you are a sinner. Second, trust in Jesus to save you. Third, die to yourself.

First, admit you are a sinner. Hebrews 11:1 gives the best definition of faith I know of in all the Scriptures: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In Noah's case, he had a conviction that God would bring the flood and he was assured in his hope God would indeed save him and his family. So Noah built the ark.

The ark, by the way, was an enormous structure. The ESV tells us its measurements in cubits, but in feet the ark was 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet tall. It would have covered one and a half football fields. I think it's safe to assume it would have taken Noah years to build the ark, and it seems reasonable to me that over that period of time he had to wonder if this was

really necessary. Here he is, presumably nowhere near any significant body of water, yet he's building a gigantic boat three stories tall because God told him too. Clearly Noah was a man of faith.

However, that Noah had faith does not mean Noah was perfect. We read in Genesis 6:9, "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God." He was righteous and blameless, *but that does not mean Noah was sinless*. That's an important distinction.

I grew up going to church. My parents had me in Sunday school virtually every week, VBS every year. So like many of you I've heard the story of Noah and the flood hundreds of times, and I just assumed for a long time based on a misreading of Genesis 6:9 that God sent the flood to cleanse the earth from sin and basically start over with this one righteous guy named Noah. The flood, I used to think, was God's do-over. He was going to get mankind right this time.

But then as I got older I actually read the flood account, and I noticed something in Genesis 9. As soon as Noah gets off the ark he gets drunk! Then he passes out naked. There's drunk, and then there's passing out naked drunk. Two totally different categories of drunkenness. In his drunken, naked, unconscious condition, Noah causes one of his sons to stumble and do something hurtful, and when Noah woke up he cursed that son. That doesn't sound very righteous or blameless to me.

Why did that happen? Kathy Keller, wife of Tim Keller, once wrote a children's Sunday school curriculum, and in the lesson on Noah's flood she included the most brilliant discussion question I've ever heard on any Bible story. She would ask the children, "What did Noah take into the ark with him?" The kids would say, "Giraffes." She'd reply, "That's right. What else?" "Elephants." "That's right. What else?" And the kids would go all through the animal kingdom and she'd keep saying, "What else?" and the kids would be stumped until finally one kid would say, "Oh, I know. Noah's family went into the ark with him." And the kids would think it was over. But then she'd say, "That's right. What else?" They wouldn't know, and then she'd say, "Noah's took his sin into the ark with him."

If the flood were God's do-over, an attempt to start the world all over again without sin, then it was a failure. But it wasn't, because the flood was God's judgment on sin, not an attempt to rid the world of sin. For God to rid the world of sin, he would have to rid the world of not just all but eight people, *but all people*.

Noah was a man of faith, but he was also a sinner. This is what we must understand: before you can have faith in God, you must see that you are a sinner. And I don't just mean admitting it in principle. Everyone does that. Everyone says, "No, I'm not perfect, I make mistakes, I have some things to work on." That's not enough. To really have faith in God you must believe the biggest problem in your life is your sin.

If you don't view your life that way, if you just superficially admit you are a sinner, then what you really saying is the biggest problem in your life is *other people*: what other people are doing to you or what they aren't doing for you. If that's the case, you don't really need God. *You just need them to change*. And that's where you'll spend all your time and energy. Not crying out to

God for him to work in your life, but nagging, complaining, arguing, manipulating, withdrawing, yelling at those people.

Many people say, “Sure, I’m a sinner,” but where the rubber meets the road it’s their wife that’s the problem, or their kids, or their employees, or their siblings. If they would change, everything would be fine. And that takes no faith. But if you are the problem, if the biggest problem in your life is you have a sinful, unbelieving, untrusting heart that can’t help itself but continually gets you in trouble, is continually selfish and prideful and lustful and fearful – if you see your biggest problem is not your circumstances but how you react to them, then you know you need help. You need faith that God will work.

If you don’t see your sin as your biggest problem then you haven’t done what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” Matthew 7:3. When you don’t see your sin as your biggest problem, all you’ll see is your brother’s sin. You’ll never be aware of the log in your eye. Nor will you have done what the apostle Paul did. Paul said, “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” 1 Timothy 1:15. A lot of scholars want to debate whether Paul was actually the foremost, the worst, sinner in the world. That’s not what Paul is doing there. He’s only saying that’s what his sin looks like to him. To Paul, Paul’s sin was far bigger and nastier than anyone else’s. Paul knows the biggest thing in the way of his happiness and peace and joy is not anyone else’s sin, it’s his. If you are going to have faith in God, you must admit that about yourself. You’re a sinner, and your sin is your biggest problem.

Second, faith in God means trusting Jesus Christ to save you. God is a just God, so he will punish sin. He won’t let anything slide. When there is evil, when people are wronged, God sees and there will be a reckoning. The flood was the first of God’s reckonings. But there will come another. We read this in 2 Peter 3:5b-7: “[T]he earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished [that’s Noah’s flood]. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”

There will be a second reckoning, Peter says, where God will bring not water but fire in judgment on sinners. And if you’ve admitted that you are a sinner, then you’re also admitting that you deserve that fire. You deserve to be judged by God for your sins.

But we see a ray of hope in Genesis 9. Noah, his family, and the animals get out of the ark, and we read that God’s makes a promise to them beginning in verse 12: “And God 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: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I 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.’” Genesis 9:12-15.

That’s a ray of hope, but at first glance it sure is a thin ray of hope. Yes, God promises not to judge the world again for its sin. That’s good news. But there’s a pretty big loophole there.

God only promises never to destroy the world again *by flood*. Presumably everything else is still on the table: God can still bring destruction by plagues, droughts, or comets. He could even send the Stay-Puft Marshmallow man from Ghostbusters. And of course the fire that Peter writes about in 2 Peter is still on the table. For a long time I looked at that promise and thought, basically, it was an empty promise because look at that loophole!

But then I learned two things: first, God doesn't just promise Noah there won't be another flood. *He makes a covenant with Noah*. A covenant is not just some empty promise. A covenant means God is binding himself to Noah and all his descendants. God is saying, "No matter what happens, I'm going to be on your side Noah. I'm going to be for you. I'm going to take care of you, even if once you get off the boat, get drunk, get naked, and pass out." The God who makes a covenant with Noah is not the kind of God who writes loopholes into his promises.

The second thing I learned was the rainbow. In these verses, we read that God set his bow in the clouds as a sign of the covenant. But note that the ESV doesn't call it a rainbow. It just says "bow." Why? As all the commentators point out the Hebrew word doesn't literally mean "rainbow." Instead it must mean an archer's bow or a bow you would take into battle.

God sets his battle bow in the clouds. Now imagine an arrow on this bow. Which way would the arrow point? Not down to earth toward us, but up into heaven! In the rainbow, God is prefiguring the lengths to which he will go to bind himself to us in this covenant. Even though we deserve judgment, he's not going to send the judgment down on us. Instead, he's going to take the judgment we deserve, as if it were an arrow to the heart. How's he going to do that?

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." In Jesus Christ on the cross, God took the judgment we deserve for our sins into himself. And if you are ever going to have real faith in the God of the Bible, then you will trust that Jesus Christ and him alone can save you from the judgment you deserve from your sins.

Now, again, it's all too easy in a very religious state like Mississippi for someone to say, "That's nice – the preacher is reminding me that Jesus died for my sins. Isn't that sweet?" Many of us have heard that hundreds of times before and it's lost its impact.

But if you know you are a sinner – if you know that your biggest problem is not what anyone else has done to you or refuses to do for you, but that your biggest problem is your sin! – then you can look up at that rainbow and not say, "Oh, how sweet," but "Oh, praise God – he really does love me. He really has bound himself to me. He really has made a covenant with me because he didn't spare his own Son but gave himself up for me. He will rescue me from my sin, and one day he'll take it all away from me forever," and you'll rejoice. You'll rejoice because one day you know you'll be free. You'll hear lyrics like "O Joy, that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to Thee; I trace the rainbow through the rain, And feel the promise is not vain that morn shall tearless be," and want to give your life to him all over again.

And that gets us to the third point: third, faith means dying to yourself. I've already mentioned the dimensions of Noah's ark – 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet tall. But hundreds of

years it's been pointed out by pastors and scholars that the proportions of the ark fit almost perfectly the proportions of a coffin. The ark would not have been shaped like a regular ship, but more like an elongated, three-dimensional rectangle. In fact, the Hebrew word translated as "ark" probably derives from an almost identical Egyptian word that literally means "coffin."

So Noah, in order for him to be saved from the judgment coming on the earth and to enter into this covenant relationship with God, he had to build for himself and his family a big coffin, climb in, and then we read this in Genesis 7:16: "And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in [to this coffin] as God had commanded him. And the Lord shut him in." Now if that's not symbolic of death, I don't know what is.

If you really have faith in God through Jesus Christ, then you must die. "And he said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.'" Luke 9:23-24. That doesn't mean that you physically die, but it means you give up control of your life. Real faith in God means that you search the Scriptures to find out how you are supposed to live as a follower of Jesus and you try your best by God's grace to do it.

It just makes sense, doesn't it? If you admit you're a sinner, if you admit the biggest problem in your life is not what anyone else is doing to you but what you're doing to yourself, then of course, in your sane moments, you do not want to be on the throne of your life! You want to get off and give God control.

And every time you do that, it hurts. When God's Word clearly says to do something, and everything in you says, "No," but you do it anyway, it feels like death. *But on the other side is life.* On the other side is blessing, on the other side is peace, love, and joy in the Holy Spirit. And you can trust God with your life, you can walk into the coffin and give God control, because Jesus gave his life for you.

I want to be clear about this: it's not that you don't have faith if you fail to obey God when he calls you to, it just means you have weak faith. But weak faith in Jesus Christ is still saving faith. You're still a Christian. Salvation is by grace and not by obedience. But it's really hard to *know* that you're a Christian when you disobey. It's hard to have assurance when you disobey.

Friends, the way you know you have faith in God through Jesus Christ is when you obey him when it's hard. It could be that everyone in this room says, "I have faith in God. I'm a Christian." But are you obeying God when it's hard? Are you obeying him in your relationships? Are you obeying him when it comes to your money, or when it comes to how you're raising your children? Are you obeying him when it comes to loving the difficult people around you?

Calvin said: "Christ has so ordered the world that death is the way to life and the cross is the way to victory." You'll know your faith is in God when it's hard to obey him, when it feels like a death. But Jesus didn't just feel like he died – he actually died to save you. God loves you so much that he came into the world and sacrificed everything for you. He is relentless in his covenant faithfulness to us. Will you trust him?

I love the old hymn: “If thou but suffer God to guide thee, and hope in him through all thy ways, he’ll give thee strength, whatever betide thee, and bear thee through the evil days: who trusts in God’s unchanging love builds on the Rock that naught can move.” Friends, if you’ll build your life on the Rock of Jesus Christ, nothing will move you – no circumstances in your life, not death, not even all the angry powers of hell will be able to budge you an inch. Will you put your faith in him today? AMEN.