

Floodwaters

*By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen,
in holy fear built an ark to save his family.
By his faith he condemned the world and became
heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.*

Hebrews 11:7(NIV)

The Blessing of Rain

One summer when I was a young teenager, my family road tripped from Ohio through the southern United States to California. As was typical of our family, we pulled our pop top camper behind us and set it up every night at a different campsite.

I remember one campsite in Arizona, as we were pulling in, I asked my father, “Where is our campsite?” All I could see was open space vaguely marked out by picnic tables and fire pits – though what we were going to burn for a fire was questionable because there wasn’t a tree in sight!

The ground at our campsite was cracked, dry, dusty. And it was hot. It was as if it hadn’t rained in months. There, in the middle of the desert, we set up our camper. And that night, when it finally rained, I saw how much rain was a huge blessing here. Not only did it cool off the air temperature a little bit, but it also watered the earth, which was sorely needed on the cracked ground.

Of course, too much of a good thing can be catastrophic. A gentle rain waters the earth, but a torrential downpour rips the earth apart. You’ve seen it on the evening news – houses submerged under the waters that breached the banks of a river, cars floating downstream, people torn away from loved ones and washed away. Sometimes the storms of life are devastating. Other times we can pick up the pieces and start over. The story of Noah shows both of these outcomes – many people were literally washed away, while Noah and a small remnant were saved, left to pick up the pieces. In the story of Noah, it was evil that was cleansed by the flood.

As we study the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, we come to Noah, who experienced a catastrophe. He spent years building the ark, 40 days of constant rain and flood, and months without dry land in sight. But God remembered Noah. The waters did recede – eventually. The story is about God’s faithfulness to Noah, and Noah’s faithfulness through suffering. But that’s not quite the lesson that you would get from the Hollywood accounts of the story.

Noah In The Movies

Noah's a pretty popular guy, when you think about it. There have been at least two big-ticket movies made based on the story: *Evan Almighty*, and the Hollywood version of *Noah* produced in 2014 starring Russell Crowe. Veggie Tales even made a version of Noah – a musical, of course, starring Pa Grape as Noah.

Evan Almighty paints a comical picture of the flood, where a congressman gets a visit from God (Morgan Freeman, of course), who tells him to build an ark. Evan doesn't exactly listen the first time God tells him to build the ark, and animals start following him around. He spontaneously grows a beard, which he tries to shave off, but it just keeps growing back. Once Evan actually gives in and starts to build the ark, the people start to think he's gone crazy. Evan tells the people there's going to be a flood, but everyone just laughs at the crazy strangely-dressed congressman. Eventually, the ark is completed and a dam breaks, causing a flood. Evan urges everyone to get on the boat with him, his family, and the animals, and the ark comes to a stop just outside of the Capitol building. The end result of the flood is that Evan gets everything he wanted – his job, a promotion, no beard or strange clothes, and time with his family. He has a perfect life, and Morgan Freeman assures him that his life is perfect because of the flood. The Ark simply reminds Evan that one act of random kindness at a time can change the world.

The dramatic version of *Noah*, starring Russell Crowe, begins with Noah watching his father being killed by a descendent of Cain. Many years later, he has a dream of a great flood, prompting him to visit Noah's grandfather Methuselah. Noah ends up being hunted by the man who killed his father, and finds refuge with the Watchers, fallen angels. Noah's grandfather gives him a seed from Eden, which grows into a forest, with which the Watchers help Noah build an ark. The flood comes, taking with it almost all of humanity – except for the man who killed Noah's grandfather, who manages to get into the ark to safety. As the flood is ending, Noah and his sons get into a violent fight with the man, killing him as the ark comes to rest on a rock. After the waters recede, Noah blesses his family to begin a new human race and there is a rainbow in the sky.

While the Hollywood renderings of Noah may be entertaining, the point of the story is lost along the way. In the Genesis version of the story, Noah is a righteous man surrounded by wickedness. God decides to destroy the wicked and to save a remnant through Noah, who has to build a HUGE boat. Noah gets his instructions to build the ark directly from God, and he does it with

good old manual labor. After years of work and months of floating on the watery grave, only Noah, his wife, and his son's wives survive the flood, along with the animals God had sent to join them. Noah does not get his dream job and a nice big house when the floodwaters recede.

The Real Story

Let's take a look at the Biblical account. Today's text is pretty long, so we're going to break it up into chunks to make it a little bit more manageable.

Read Genesis 6:5-6:8

Why was God ready to wipe men and animals from the Earth?

I cannot begin to imagine how grieved God's heart was when He saw the wickedness of the people He had created. How disappointed He must have been in His Creation that He had called very good (Genesis 1:31). And so He decided to wipe it all off the face of the Earth and start over with the one man whom He found righteous: Noah.

Read Genesis 6:9-6:22

Just as Enoch had walked with God, so Noah walked with God, and is referred to in Scripture as blameless. However, blameless does not mean that he was perfect. Noah's faith, however, compelled him to obedience. The Scriptures do not record complaining or grumbling or doubt on Noah's part, but he was human.

If you were Noah, what excuses or complaints might you have voiced when God told you to build the ark?

But despite his doubts and fears, Noah obeyed.

Read Genesis 7:1-7:5

A second time the Scriptures record that Noah did all the Lord commanded him. It must have been quite a sight to see two of every living animal coming into this ark. And can you imagine the smell? Noah was one brave zookeeper.

Read Genesis 7:6-8:14

Seven days of getting the animals into the ark and then God shuts the door. And then it rained for forty days. One-hundred-fifty days of floating. Now, I love water. I was a swimmer. But I'm pretty sure that being on a boat, surrounded by water and animals, in tight quarters with only a few other people would have been pretty stressful. Some annoying little bug would have died (oh darn, no more mosquitoes).

What animal do you wish God had left off of the ark?

Read Genesis 8:15-9:17

When you feel abandoned by God, what Scriptures do you hold on to? When you are going through difficult times, what memories of God's faithfulness can help you get you through?

This passage begins with four wonderful words: *But God remembered Noah*. He didn't just leave Noah out to dry (literally). He remembered him. It was not an accident that the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat, or that the floodwaters receded. And when Noah stepped off of that boat over a year after the flood began, I can imagine that he knelt down and kissed the mud before he built that altar. I imagine, though, that there was a long period of time where Noah might have felt forgotten. Sure, God had given him instructions to build the ark. Sure, he had filled it with animals and shut the door. But five months of floating without land in sight! I think I would have felt forgotten. *But God remembered Noah*.

What was God's promise to Noah?

Read Hebrews 11:7

Noah's faith moved him to obedience, even though it didn't make sense to him. He lived in a landlocked region where water to float the ark was not only unlikely, it was impossible. And yet God told him to build a boat, and he did. Noah was commended for his obedience in faith, his action inspired by surrender, just as our faith must move us to conduct and obedience.

Take a moment and look at your life right now. Are you faced with a desert where you feel that the blessings of God will never rain down upon you? Has God prompted you to do something that seems impossible? Are you in the midst of a torrential downpour in which everything is going wrong and you feel forgotten by God? Are you waiting for the floodwaters to recede? God has promised that rain will come in this life – the gentle rain of His blessings, as well as the torrential rain, the catastrophes. But He has also promised never to leave us or forsake us, just as He never forgot Noah.

A little bit more...

The Epic of Gilgamesh

In many cultures, there are tales of a cataclysmic worldwide flood that have been passed down through generations. Most tales can agree that there was a flood that destroyed the whole earth, most have a saving of the human race by one family, and have a boat, but little else is similar between the accounts. The neighboring Babylonians to the Israelites have a tale that is strikingly similar to the Genesis account. The Babylonian culture was one that worshipped many gods, while the Israelites served only the one, true God. There are a few very notable differences between the two accounts that make the Biblical account unique, demonstrating the character of God and His sovereignty to His people.

In the Babylonian tale, a man named Utnapishtim (I'm going to nickname him Ut) is told by one of the gods, Ea, about the gods' plan to destroy humanity because they had become too numerous upon the earth. Ea tells Ut to tear down his house and build a boat to save himself and some others from the wrath of the gods. Ut builds the boat and loads it with his silver and gold, animals, relatives, and the boat's craftsmen.

When the storm comes upon the earth, the flood and wind lasted for six days and nights, and all humans not on the boat were turned to clay. The boat lodged on Mount Nimush for six days and nights before Ut sent out the inhabitants of the boat. Ut makes a sacrifice to the gods, and Enlil (another god) smells it. Enlil is enraged that man survived the flood. However, the sacrifice Ut made satisfies Enlil's appetite, and Enlil gives Ut immortality as a reward.

The gods of the Babylonian tale, though they seem to run the world, are not all-knowing, for they do not know when one of the gods breaks their oath and tells Ut of their plans. They don't know, even after the flood, that man has survived until they smell the sacrifice that Ut makes. Clearly, they don't have the power that they think they have if a man can be tipped off by a god and undermine them all. In contrast, the Biblical account confirms that God is all-knowing, for He is the one that shuts the door of the ark, brings the rains that flood the earth, and He remembers Noah after the ark comes to rest on the mountain. God is all-knowing, and all-powerful. Not only does He have the power to flood the earth and destroy everything in it, He has the power to save a righteous man and to remember him in the midst of the display of His power.

The reason for the flood in the Babylonian tale is that the people were too numerous. Later in the Babylonian tale, the gods invent infertility and miscarriages to prevent their problem of

overpopulation again. The Biblical account records that God saw the overwhelming corruption and sinfulness of humanity and was grieved, causing Him to flood the earth. Interestingly, when the waters have receded, God knows full well that humans are inherently evil and will continue to do evil, yet He promises never to flood the earth again to destroy humanity.

The sacrifice that Ut brings after the flood ends appeases the gods' appetite, leading to Ut gaining immortality; while Noah's sacrifice appeases God's wrath against humanity, leading to His promise that He will never again flood the earth.

The character of the hero of the story is also different between the two accounts. In the Babylonian tale, Ut is randomly chosen by Ea to be saved, while in the Biblical account, Noah was found righteous among those who were evil. God knows who is righteous in the midst of all of the evil of the world, and in His sovereign will, He saves the one who is righteous and faithful. God's omniscience shines through in the story of Noah, as does His power. And Noah's faith is a huge part of the story as well, which is why it ends up in Hebrews 11. Noah's faith is what saved him, and his faith is what he is commended for.

New Bible Commentary; edited by GJ Wenham, JA Motyer, DA Carson, and RT France. IVP Academic, 2010.

Tablet XI The Story of the Flood, translated by Maureen Gallery Kovacs, Electronic Edition by Wolf D Carnahan, 1998.