

God's justice and mercy

Genesis 6-9

Leaders' notes

The situation has become very bad. We don't know who the Nephilim are, or their sin (6:4), there is really not enough information to know. However it's a very great wickedness: "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." This wickedness moved God to action.

Consequently, God resolves to do two things: to "wipe out" life on earth (6:5-7), and to save righteous Noah (6:8-21). "Righteous" is a comparative and relational expression: Noah trusts God and walks with him, and he is clearly different from his fellow-humans. But later events will show that he is not perfect or sinless.

God's response is to be expected. Every time humanity sins God shows his justice by bringing judgement. He also shows mercy in some way. His justice, while fair, is tempered with grief and sorrow (see 6:6).

Through Noah, God saves people. In this way, he frustrates the serpent's evil desire to destroy mankind, and brings relief from the curse in the form of rescue. Noah is, in one sense, the saviour of all of humanity.

God's mercy is clearly shown in the face of overwhelming disobedience. The penalty for sin was spelt out in Genesis 2:17 as death. The fact that men and women continue to be fruitful and multiply, and exercise some degree of rule - even that they exist at all - is evidence of God's goodness. Even though Noah and his family are saved, it's clear from Genesis 8:21 that they are still sinful. The fact that God has saved even a handful of people through the flood shows his grace.

It is good to point out the various details of the story that show that Noah is in no way able to take credit for his rescue: for example, the fact that God reveals his plan ahead of time (7:13); tells him to build an ark (7:14); tells him how to build it (7:14-16); shuts in the inhabitants of the ark (7:16); remembers him (8:1); and so on.

To finish

God's character doesn't change, and the flood story reinforces the message that God is both just and merciful. The New Testament picks this up and applies it to the reality that the Lord Jesus will judge the earth (compare Luke 17:27). We should repent of sin, put our trust in God and look to the one he has chosen to save and judge the world - Jesus Christ.

Genesis 6-9 Bible Study

Since being banished from Eden humanity began to multiply and fill the earth. Genesis 6:5-6 describes God's feeling towards humanity. Genesis 6:5-8:22 describes God's response.

1. How bad have things become? How is the evil of humanity described in 6:1-13?
2. What are the two main things God resolves to do?
3. From what you've seen in previous chapters, would you say God's response is expected or unexpected? Fair or unfair? Why?

God's justice and mercy for you

Given what we know of God's character, how is the flood a warning or an encouragement to us? (Compare 2 Peter 3:3-13)

Discuss the warning and encouragement of 2 Peter 3:2-13. Where do you see God's mercy and judgement expressed towards human sin in this passage?

What effect do you think a knowledge of the coming judgement of God might have on our lives?

The Historicity of the Flood

For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased they lifted the ark high above the earth. The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the water. They rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered. The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than fifteen cubits.

Genesis 7:17-20

We can be confident the flood occurred. Firstly, because Jesus confirms it as an historical event. Jesus expresses that the flood serves as a prelude to the coming judgement at his second coming. The reality of that future judgement is certain, it is as certain as the reality of the flood.

Secondly, a quick Google search will show plenty of evidence of mega-floods occurring across the ancient world in Scandinavia, Egypt, Babylon, China, South Asia, North and South America. There is no doubt gigantic floods have occurred.¹

The controversy surrounds the event of the Biblical flood, whether or not the flood of the Bible was global or local.

Is there enough water on earth to cover the planet? And, where did the water drain to after the flood? Science suggests there is enough water and it could be hiding 660 km below the crust of the earth.²

The hypothesis that the flood of Noah was global faces many obstacles.

How could so many animals fit into a limited space? How could enough food be stored to feed the vast array of life for over a year? How could such a catastrophe leave no worldwide evidence of ever taking place?

Science aside, I think it is extremely unlikely that the flood of Noah was global. However my thinking is shaped, not by the science but by the way the Bible uses language.

As Christians, the possibility or probability of the flood are not the primary questions. These questions belong to science to answer. The question, what does the Bible teach, and what does the Bible require us to believe? These are the important questions for us. And the Bible does not require us to believe in a global flood.

It is true in Genesis 7:19 the Bible says: *They [the waters] rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered.* It is also true in 7:21 the Bible says: *Every living thing that moved on land perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all humanity.* And for some people, that puts an end to the issue, but it shouldn't!

¹ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/ancient-chinese-megaflood-may-be-fact-not-fiction/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/jun/13/earth-may-have-underground-ocean-three-times-that-on-surface>

Scripture often uses universal language like that, not in an absolute sense, but relative to the horizons and perspective of the speaker. I will give you three examples.

In Genesis 41:57 we read: *Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.*

In 1 Kings 10:24 we read: *And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind.*

In Acts 2:5 we read: *Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem devout Jews, from every nation under heaven.*

There is nobody who takes these verses as historically literal. We don't believe American Indians came to Egypt to buy grain. We don't believe the Chinese crossed Asia to listen to Solomon. And we don't believe Australian Aboriginals were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. In fact Luke tells us what he means when he writes *every nation under heaven*. He lists 15 regions around the Mediterranean that were part of the Graeco-Roman nation at the time. From his perspective, every nation under heaven was represented, but it was a relative universality and not an absolute universality. And so we have good Biblical reasons to believe the flood was universal from the perspective of the narrator.

Was the ancient narrator lying? No. History shows that the Mesopotamian Basin, the flood plains of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers where Noah lived, was susceptible to flooding, and the geography of the land made it possible for it appear, from the perspective of Noah, that the entire world was covered.³

³ <https://ncse.ngo/yes-noahs-flood-may-have-happened-not-over-whole-earth>