“Messages from Genesis"

“After the Flood”

We're continuing this series of messages from the Book of Genesis. Last week we looked at the story of Noah, and the great flood - God's judgment on a world that had gone wrong. After months on the ark, the rain finally stops, and the flood waters start to recede: "God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded. Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed, and the rain had stopped falling from the sky. The water receded steadily from the earth" (Genesis 8:1-3).

What happened after God pushed the "reset button" on human beings and His creation?

According to Genesis, the first thing Noah did was to build an altar and offer burnt offerings to the Lord: "Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humans, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done'" (Genesis 8:20-21). Get the picture here?The Lord smells a barbecue cookin’. It smells good! Just the pleasant odor of it puts God in a better mood, and He mellows a bit! Even though He recognizes that people are still evil, He vows never again to wipe out the world with a flood.

Would you agree that this is a rather questionable understanding of God! This portrayal of the Almighty can hardly compare with the brilliance of Paul’s theology in the Book of Romans, or the lofty understanding of God revealed in the person of Jesus.

I see this as a reminder that the revelation of God given to us in the Bible is a *progressive* revelation - that throughout the stretch of Bible history, our human understanding of God’s character and purpose develops and matures.For instance, many people - even devout Christians - have problems with OldTestament Scriptures that say God commands His people to completely exterminate an enemy - kill not just the men, but women and babies and animals. It’s hard to say that *this* God is the same God revealed in Jesus, who told us to love our enemies, and forgive those who hurt us. It's not like God changed between the Old and New Testaments, and became more humane! Rather, *our understanding of God changed as God revealed Himself in stages to us.* And the clearest and most accurate picture of God we get is Jesus. Jesus is the fullest revelation of God we’ve been given - *and everything the Bible says about God has to be interpreted in light of the God we see revealed in Jesus.*

The story of God smelling the sacrifice represents an earlier understanding of God. But does this mean it’s worthless? Of course not! It’s still God’s Word, divinely inspired truth.

We see in this story something of the heart of God! How patient and merciful God is with us humans! He recognizes that people are still evil, even after the Flood, but He promises not to destroy every living creature again! How often I’ve thought, “If I were God, I wouldn’t put up with the awful stuff people do in this world! But then I think, “How does God put up with *me?*”

God promises: “Never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As

long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, will never cease” (Genesis 8:21b-22). Those words describing God's mercy and faithfulness inspired these words of the hymn, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness":

“Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,

sun, moon, and stars in their courses above

join with all nature in manifold witness,

to thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see;

all I have needed thy hand hath provided;

great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!”

Hasn’t God been faithful to you? As you look back over your life, hasn’t God somehow faithfully provided for you, even in the worst of times?

God’s faithfulness is also visually demonstrated in the rainbow covenant. God says to Noah: “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that was with you…never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth. And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Genesis 9:8-13).

This is the first “covenant” mentioned in the Bible. A covenant is an agreement – God makes this pact with all of humankind. God agrees not to destroy all of humankind again. And the sign of this covenant is the *rainbow.* Rainbows are awesome, aren’t they! Who isn’t taken in by the beauty of a rainbow! Most of us probably have a “rainbow story”. One of my favorites is when

I was serving a church in Easton, PA. I was driving near my home - I think it was late on a Friday afternoon, when I saw this car go off the road, travel a ways on a grassy area, and come to rest by a bush. I stopped my car, and rushed to the now stopped vehicle, and an elderly couple were sitting in the car - obviously shaken up. They were taken to the hospital, so I drove my car to the hospital to be with them. They told me they lived out of the area, perhaps an hour or so away. They were checked for injuries, and appeared to be okay, but they were without their car. So, I drove them to their home. And on the way, we saw this gorgeous double rainbow. I said maybe that was a sign of good fortune for them.

One interesting thing about the rainbow narrative in Genesis: God says when He sees the rainbow, *it will remind Him* of His promise not to destroy humankind. *Like* *God needs a reminder!* But here’s the thing: *Every time* ***you******and I*** *see a rainbow, let it remind us of God’s promise to watch over His creation, to be faithful to us unworthy children!*

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This amazing faithfulness and mercy of God is going to be a theme that carries through the Book of Genesis and the rest of the whole Bible. God’s faithfulness is going to be contrasted with man’s unfaithfulness…with our human fickleness and frailty.

Good case in point is Noah. "Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent" (Genesis 9:20-21). This is *Noah*! The righteous man. The man who walked with God, who was spared from the flood. Now he's drunk, lying naked in his tent!

This is one of those distasteful stories in the Bible that you wish weren’t there. One you don’t teach children in Sunday School! Now some people say since Noah was the first one to plant a vineyard and to drink wine he didn’t realize that if you drank too much, you’d get woozy!

Even if you give Noah the benefit of the doubt, it still kind of spoils our image of Noah, doesn’t it!

See, the writers of Genesis could have omitted this story of Noah getting stoned! But they didn’t. *One of the great things about the Bible is that it portrays life as it really is. And even some of the greatest women and men in the Bible are presented, warts and all.* The heroes of the Bible are not stained-glass window saints, but flesh and blood mortals like us – with strengths and weaknesses – sinners in whom God’s grace is nevertheless revealed! We're going to see that as we work our way through Genesis, but it's there throughout the whole Bible. The Bible doesn’t celebrate the goodness of us humans, but the mercy of God, who works out His promises and purposes even through very imperfect people!

Isn’t that the way it is today? When we put our faith in Christ and become followers of Jesus, just like Noah we are blessed, and counted as righteous before God. But Christians aren't perfect! *Need I tell you that?*

We’ve all probably had instances of a respected Christian, maybe a Christian leader, whom we held in high regard, leaving us down. Years ago I became acquainted with a Christian man. I got to know him a little, and saw him from time to time at church events. I was thrilled when I was appointed pastor in the church where he had a leadership position. Soon after I came to the church, a man in the church who was a real estate agent told me that my friend was involved in a real estate transaction where he was showing prejudice towards a black couple. The real estate agent said to me, “You just can’t do that. It’s illegal.” I was disappointed in my Christian friend.

Sandi Patty is a well-known Christian singer. Some years ago I heard that she was involved in a serious moral indiscretion. Losing respect for her, I found it difficult to listen to her sing, or watch her on Christian programs. Sometime later a read a book she wrote. In it she talked honestly about her sin, and took full responsibility for it. And how she made a wholehearted effort to make amends, and rebuild her life. She told of her continued struggle with shame

and guilt. After reading that, I gained a new respect for her.

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Truth is, we’re all like Noah. Good in us, bad in us. Even if we're devoted Christians.

This isn't to excuse evil, or get us off the hook. We are commanded in the Bible to strive for holiness. But it’s helpful if we can have a realistic estimate of ourselves and others.

There is this interesting word about Jesus: "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person. (John 2:23-25). Jesus had a realistic understanding of people. So should we. Acknowledge our strengths and our goodness. Admit our weaknesses and sins. Don’t make an idol out of any human being – for we all have feet of clay.

So in Genesis, and throughout the Bible, we see this contrast between God’s faithfulness and man’s fickleness. This theme and reality culminates in the story of the Tower of Babel. This is found in chapter 11 of Genesis. The people of the world get together and decide they want to build a city and a tower that will reach the heavens. This cooperative project looks good on the surface, but behind it is an attempt to storm heaven and *get God out of the way.* "Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth"

(Genesis 11:4). Note: “Let us make a name for ourselves.” This is kind of a replay of what Adam and Eve did. They wanted to push God aside and live life *their way.* Be their own god.

The Tower of Babel is human pride pounding its chest in the face of God!

According to the story, the Lord comes down to inspect the tower and concludes: "This is only the beginning of what they will do” (Genesis 11:6). So God scatters the people and confuses their language. Thus, “Tower of Babble” – or babbling.

What’s the point of this ancient story? The unity of the human family is destroyed – splintered by our pride and sin – when we leave God out of the picture. A number of years ago Dean Rusk was Secretary of State. He once attended an international conference in Geneva, where as he got off the plane, he was met by his British counterpart. Rusk asked, “How are we doing?” The Englishman replied, “We’re keeping our fingers crossed.” Isn't that a fairly good description of the world situation – we’re keeping our fingers crossed. Because we are a world fractured and divided – teetering and unstable.

*Is there any hope? The answer is "yes"!* Next week we're going to look at one of the most important sections of the Bible!What we're going to find in Genesis, chapter 12, sets the stage for what happens in the rest of the Bible! It's the key to understanding the New Testament, *and Jesus*!The first 11 chapters of Genesis describe the early beginnings of humankind, and the evil that invades the world and the human spirit, and spoils God's good creation. Genesis, chapter 12, describes how *God acts decisively in human history to provide a remedy for the broken, fractured world, and broken, fallible human beings.* God shows up in a rather obscure location on this planet, and reveals Himself and His purposes to a little-known individual named Abram.

That sets in motion the greatest story ever told - the story of salvation. Don't miss it!

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