

NOAH BUILT AN ARK



Hebrews 11:7
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SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

After Darren's series on the OT book of Haggai, we turn to the NT to continue my series on Hebrews. But really we remain in the OT, because we are in Hebrews 11, which is all about heroes of faith from the OT.

The word *faith* occurs 24 times in this chapter. On 18 occasions it is as the phrase *by faith*, always at the beginning of a sentence. This chapter is therefore often called the Hall of Faith. We think, with good reason, of Abraham as the father of faith. His response to God's promise is the first reference to faith in the OT: Abram "believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6).

But Hebrews 11 begins with three exemplars of faith who lived before Abraham: Abel, Enoch, and Noah. Their faith was manifested in quite different ways, but in their shared faith each lived a life centered on God. We could translate *faith* as *allegiance*; indeed, this is becoming an increasingly-popular option to express a major aspect of the meaning of faith. Abel, Enoch, and Noah each lived in allegiance to God.

"Abel brought God a better offering" (11:4). He brought the best of yield of his flock. His allegiance was to God, not maximizing his own yield. God attested that he was righteous, in right standing with him.

"Enoch walked faithfully with God" (Gen 5:22, 24). His allegiance was to God not the world. God attested that Enoch was pleasing to him.

God desires that we draw near to him, but "anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Heb 11:6). Abel, Enoch, and Noah each believed that God exists. Though they could not see him, they lived their lives oriented onto him. Their allegiance was to the unseen God. But God "rewarded" their faith with three quite different outcomes.

Abel lived in allegiance to the Lord, and he died—murdered by his brother Cain—but Abel still speaks as his blood cries out. Enoch lived in allegiance to the Lord, and he did not die, but was taken by the Lord unto himself. Noah lived in allegiance to the Lord, and everyone else died.

Today we consider the third exemplar of faith, Noah:

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. (Heb 11:7 NIV)

Noah has just one verse in this Hall of Faith, but he has a prominent place in the early chapters of Genesis. His story covers four chapters (Gen 6-9). If you want an in-depth look at Noah, I preached twelve sermons on these four chapters in 2010–2011. This included five on Noah and the Flood.

By faith Noah... In the days of Noah world history reached a tipping point. In the beginning God created first an ordered cosmos, forming and filling in seven creative acts. Then he created humanity in his own image, with a dual-facing role. He created humanity for

the cosmos, to rule over the earth and its creatures. He also created humanity for himself, to dwell in his presence. So he placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, where the Lord God strolled in the cool of the day.

But the early chapters of Genesis tell of the progressive banishment of humanity from God's presence, further and further eastwards. He banished Adam and Eve eastwards, outside the garden, placing cherubim as guards at the entrance. After murdering his brother Abel, Cain departed the Lord's presence and settled east of Eden. From Cain developed civilization, but without any reference to God.

Ten generations after Adam humanity descends further into crisis. The sons of God *saw* that the daughters of men were *good* and they *took* them for themselves as wives (Gen 6:2). Their behavior echoed Eve who *saw* that the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was *good* and she *took* and she ate (Gen 3:6).

The offspring of this union were the Nephilim. They were the mighty men of old, the men of renown (Gen 6:4). They had power and they had a name. These were the ancient heroes, the famous men. These were the men written about in Ancient Near Eastern mythology, similar to the heroes of ancient Greek mythology. These were the men in the room where it happened, and they made it happen.

The sons of God *saw* that it was *good* and *took*. But the Lord also saw and he made the opposite evaluation:

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. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. (Gen 6:5-6)

The verb translated *regretted* is a very hard word to translate and to comprehend. But it is also an important word to comprehend in developing a good, robust theology of God. We could render it *he was sorry*, or *he changed his mind*. But can God really change his mind? Is he fickle, like human beings? Does he go back on his word? He was deeply grieved, pained in his heart. Humanity had frustrated the purposes for which he created it. So he resolved to act differently. He determined to wipe the earth clean.

But there was one man who was different. He was not like the mighty men, the world's heroes, the famous men, who pursued power and name.

But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (Gen 6:8)

The world was full of leaders pursuing their own desires, taking whatever was good in their own eyes and consuming for their own satisfaction, using and abusing, chasing power and name. But Noah... Noah faced towards God. He was oriented onto the Lord. He walked to the beat of a different drum. He was not afraid to be different. He was not envious of the power and fame of mighty men. In a generation facing away from God he faced towards God. Noah

was the Lord's hero. How was Noah different?

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God. (Gen 6:9)

He lived by faith. He lived in allegiance to God. He did not give his allegiance to power or fame. His allegiance was to God and to God alone: he walked faithfully with God. Indeed, the text is emphatic: it was with God that he walked. As a result, Noah had access to the room where it really happened. The Lord privileged him with access to his will. Noah was "warned about things not yet seen" (Heb 11:7). Here we have another so-called divine passive: it was God who warned him.

Hebrews 11 began:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. (Heb 11:1)

Faith and hope are closely bound together. We hope for things we do not yet see, and in faith we have confident assurance that those things will materialize. Things may be unseen for two reasons: because they lie in a realm beyond human perception, or because they are as yet future. God warned Noah about things the world had never yet seen. First God stated his general plan, then gave Noah a task:

"I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark." (Gen 6:13-14)

"Make yourself an ark." Some of you who are old enough may remember Bill Cosby's famous comedy piece about the imagined dialogue between God and Noah. "What's an ark?" Noah asked. We might ask the same question. We are so used to the word, whether in art, or in children's storybooks, or in children's songs, that we rarely wonder what the ark actually was.

So what is an ark? The English word *ark* is simply a transliteration of the Latin *arca*, meaning a chest in which you put something for safekeeping. This in turn is the translation of a Greek word that means the same thing. Hence the term, in both Greek and Latin, is used also for the ark of the covenant in which the two tablets of the Law were kept.

But the Hebrew word is never used for the ark of the covenant. It is used only for Noah's ark and one other thing. But it is a chest in which things are put for safekeeping. What the ark most definitely is not is a boat or ship. It had no means of propulsion or steering: no rudder, and no sail or oars. I doubt that it looked much like Ken Ham's ark at the Creation Museum in Kentucky. God gives very few details, and several of the terms are obscure and of uncertain meaning. What is clear is that the ark had a door; this is its most important feature. The only other object in the Hebrew Bible that has the same name is Moses's basket (Exod 2:3). A Hebrew reader would have certainly drawn the parallel. So we should not think of Noah's ark as a big boat. We should think of his ark as a very big version of Moses's basket, and the basket as a very small version of Noah's ark.

But why is Noah to build an ark? God next announces his specific plan whereby he will destroy humanity: "I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth" (Gen 6:17). Floodwaters were not something "not yet seen." Ancient civilizations developed in Mesopotamia between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, and in Egypt along the Nile. These rivers flooded every year. The floodwaters were a great blessing. They brought fresh alluvium, and they watered the fields. The

arrival of the annual flood was celebrated.

I grew up in a floodplain, alongside the Chao Phraya River in central Thailand. In flood season the land along the river would be covered in up to ten feet of water. We lived in houses on stilts. My sister was born during a flood and we brought her home in a little boat—I say we, but I was only 19 months.

But for modern society floods ceased to be a blessing; it became inconvenient to bring your newborn home in a little boat. Society fought the floods and controlled them. Floods still happen. They are more rare but when they do happen they are major disasters, as we continue to witness.

Noah's society would have rejoiced at the annual "floodwaters on the earth." But what God announced to Noah was no ordinary flood. It was The *Mabbul*, a word used only of this event. The Lord explains what it is: waters upon the earth—totally covering the earth. This is a cosmic Flood. This was indeed something the world had not yet seen. The Greek OT calls it a *kataklysmos*, and Latin a *diluvium*. Both mean a washing. God would give the earth a thorough wash.

God made a promise to Noah:

"But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—" (Gen 6:18)

Who is to enter the ark? You, and your family, and bring in the animals "to keep them alive with you." They "will come to you to be kept alive" (Gen 6:18b-20). This why the door is the most important feature of the ark.

Noah was warned. He obeyed: in holy fear he built an ark. This does not mean that he was afraid. Rather, *fear* here, as elsewhere in Scripture, implies a reverent response to God. He took God at his word. He built an ark. The world had never seen such a thing. In Genesis we don't actually see him building the ark. This is all covered in the summary statement:

Noah did everything just as God commanded him. (Gen 6:22)

Genesis does not describe the building of the ark, but devotes much attention to the entrance into the ark. The Lord commanded Noah, "Go into the ark" (Gen 7:1). The word *enter* is used seven times in 7:1-16. Three times this entrance is described as fulfillment of God's command (7:5, 9, 16). Again, the Flood Narrative is much more interested in the entrance into the ark than in its construction.

The animals went in two-by-two,
Hoorah! Hoorah!
The animals went in two-by-two,
The elephant and the kangaroo,
And they all came into the ark,
For to get out of the rain.

Finally they had all entered:

Those that entered...entered just as God had commanded him. Then the LORD shut him in. (Gen 7:16 CSB)

The Lord shut the door. All were aboard who were supposed to be aboard. God did not shut the door until they were all aboard. Again, the emphasis is on entering into the ark.

The rains came down and the floods came up...

Oops, wrong song: that's the song for *The wise man built his house upon the rock*. The rains did come down and the floods did come up. But no house could stand against these, for these were no ordinary rains, no ordinary floods. These were cosmic—quite literally!

all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. (Gen 7:11)

The carefully-ordered cosmos of Genesis 1 collapsed. The living space between the waters above and the waters below, created on Day Two, disappeared. The land in the midst of the gathered waters, created on Day Three, disappeared. God undid his cosmos. Humanity was further banished, into death and non-existence. The exile of humanity from God was total and complete. Almost complete:

Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark. (Gen 7:23)

Life was saved and safeguarded in this chest floating on the waters.

Noah built an ark for the salvation of his household. (Heb 11:7)

God remembered Noah (Gen 8:1). He sent his spirit-wind over the earth, the same spirit that was present at the beginning of the first creation (Gen 1:2). The fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, and the waters receded.

Noah and everyone and everything else came out of the ark. Then Noah approached God.

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done." (Gen 8:20-22)

Noah was not the first person to bring offerings to the Lord. Cain and Abel had presented tribute offerings to the Lord. Noah offers a different offering: an *olah*. This is usually translated as *burnt offering* because the whole animal is incinerated on the altar. But *olah* means something that goes up, and the verb here translated *sacrificed* means *cause to go up*. Noah caused to ascend the ascension offerings. The entirety was transformed into smoke and transferred into God's presence where the Lord received it as a fragrant aroma, an aroma that put him at rest. He promised never again to send The *Mabbul*, the cosmic Flood. Even though the human heart had not changed. Every inclination of the human heart was still evil from childhood, just as it was before the Flood (6:5). But God's heart changed: he was willing to accept Noah's ascension offering and be put at rest.

Our call to worship asked,

Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD?

Who may stand in his holy place?

The one who has clean hands and a pure heart. (Ps 24:3-4a)

Ascension offerings, the most fundamental of all Israel's offerings, symbolized this ascension into God's presence. When God filled the newly-constructed tabernacle with his glory, he invited his people to draw near. They did so by bringing their ascension offerings to the courtyard entrance. On the altar these offerings were transferred into God's presence where they were received as a pleasing aroma. God delighted in the one who drew near. He wanted his people to draw near. He had put his presence in the midst of his people to be with them. Noah was the prototype, the forerunner. He was the first to ascend an ascension offering into God's presence.

There is still more in our Hebrews verse:

By his faith [Noah] condemned the world. (Heb 11:7)

It was God who condemned the world and brought judgment on the world. But Noah showed that there was a different way of living

life. It was possible to resist the quest for power, for a name, for influence, for sex. It was possible to live differently. His life was a rebuke to the mighty men of renown who pursued power and name. It was with the Lord that Noah walked. He lived differently. Therefore the Lord considered him to be righteous:

Noah...became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. (Heb 11:7)

Noah was in right relationship in the relationship that most mattered. He had integrity; he was a whole person. Inheritance is an important theme in Hebrews. It is an important component of Abraham's life. So this thought of Noah being an heir serves as a hook into the next example of faith, that of Abraham, whom we will consider next week.

The waters of The *Mabbul*, the cosmic Flood, were both destructive and purifying. They destroyed life and they saved life, holding up the ark and its residents. The only other thing that is called the same name as Noah's ark is Moses's basket. Pharaoh had ordered that every baby boy born to the Hebrews be thrown into the Nile and drowned (Exod 1:22). But Moses was preserved alive in a little ark that floated on the waters—waters that were otherwise destructive. He was brought safely through those destructive waters. Later God would bring his people safely through the Red Sea but the same waters would destroy Pharaoh's army. The waters were both destructive and saving.

The NT suggests that God will again cleanse and purify the earth, this time using fire. Like water, fire is both destructive and purifying. Even though water and fire seem like complete opposites they can have the same double purpose or effect. The end will be not a destroyed earth but a purified earth ready for the new creation.

But in Christ we already enter into the new creation. Given the symbolism of waters that are both destructive and purifying, it is not surprising that a parallel was drawn to baptism (1 Peter 3:20-21). Passing through the waters of baptism symbolizes the death of our old nature, and purification with a new nature. We go down into the waters and die to our old self. We rise up out of the waters into our new self which is putting on Christ Jesus.

God has provided Jesus for our salvation. God sent his beloved Son into this world to become one of us, to do what we are unable to do: to live a faithful human life. Jesus lived a life of faithful obedience to his Father. He resisted those around him who were pursuing power or name or influence. He was loyal to his Father to whom he gave his allegiance. At the end he offered up himself. The Father looked down on his Son on the cross. I am confident that God looked down with pleasure. Not pleasure in the painful suffering of the cross. But pleasure that his beloved Son absorbed all the worst that humanity could throw at him, and still remained faithful. Jesus's faithful life even unto death ascended to his Father as a fragrant aroma.

On the third day he was resurrected into the new creation, in a new creation body with the power of an indestructible life. He ascended into God's presence, taking his humanity with him. In which humanity he was received in God's presence as a fragrant aroma. He is the true ascension offering.

God now invites all to come and give their allegiance to this one. The door is open. Jesus himself said, "I am the door" (John 10:9). He has provided for our salvation. In Christ Jesus we find our salvation. When we live our lives faithfully in Christ we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ. Our lives ascend as a fragrant aroma and are re-

ceived by God and he is well-pleased.

We are those “who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us” (Heb 6:18). We have fled to Jesus for refuge. He is our anchor within the veil. That anchor holds firm through all the storms of life (6:19-20).

Noah, like Abel and Enoch before him, is a worthy member of the Hall of Faith. All those in this Hall of Faith are the positive counterpart to the wilderness generation that God brought out of Egypt (3:7-19). He had brought them safely through the otherwise-destructive waters. But they ceased listening to God’s word. They were afraid. They all fell in the wilderness and failed to reach the end of their pilgrimage to God.

The Book of Hebrews is a word of exhortation (13:22). It is a word of encouragement to keep going in the Christian life. The writer wants his beloved readers to persevere so that they cross the finish line. Don’t be like them, the wilderness generation that stopped listening to God’s word. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...as in the rebellion during the time of testing in the

wilderness” (3:7-8). Keep going! There is the danger of apostasy, the outright rejection of Jesus. But often a bigger danger is of slowly drifting away. But “how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?” (2:3). We have entered the door that is Jesus himself.

All these faithful people of Hebrews 11 form the great cloud of witnesses that surround us as we run our race. They are at the finishing line, cheering us on. And there at the finishing line is the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we see before us. This is why I have called this series *Christ Before Us*. He has run the course ahead of us, has been faithful, and has entered into God’s presence. As we fix our eyes on him we will faithfully run the course ourselves.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses [—Abel, Enoch, Noah, and many more—] ... let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (Heb 12:1-2a)

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