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Genesis 7:1-24

26th Message

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SUPPORTED ON THE WHELMING FLOOD

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Every day we're getting fresh reports of the flooding in Pakistan and the devastation along the Indus River. Now there are reports of further flooding in China—it seems that every few months we hear of yet more flooding in China. On Friday there was dramatic footage of railway carriages being swept into a swollen river near Chengdu. This country has also experienced devastating floods in recent years. In May the Cumberland River flooded Nashville. In 1997 the Red River flooded Grand Forks, North Dakota. In 1993 there was extensive flooding along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. In all these cases the floodplains were doing what floodplains are supposed to do: they were flooding! That's what a floodplain is! The periodic flooding of a river used to be seen as a great blessing. It deposited fresh alluvial silt over the floodplain, enriching the soil for the following year's crops. The Egyptians celebrated the annual flooding of the Nile for rejuvenating their land. But now the flooding of floodplains is inconvenient.

Periodic flooding was part of my childhood. For almost forty years my parents served in Thailand as missionaries. For almost all that time they lived in the floodplain of the country's main river, the Chao Phraya. Every November the river would overflow its banks after heavy rains in the northern mountains. People lived in such a way as to accommodate these annual inundations. Houses were built on stilts, ten feet above the ground. For most of my childhood I was away at boarding school during the floods, but would receive full reports about them in weekly letters from my parents. I recall in my mid-teens when my mother was confined to the house for several weeks. My father would wade through the front yard, with the water up to his chin and his clothes in a bag on top of his head, out to the road, which was built on an embankment. There he would dress and go about his daily activities. This went on for several weeks. That was just 35 years ago. Nowadays that would be considered intolerable; within a day we would want something to be done. I think it was just the next year that it was decided that the flooding was no longer convenient. The mission fought the flood, bringing in hundreds of truck loads of dirt to build up the riverbank. Each week I would read my father's vivid report of working on the riverbank, of how they were just able to keep ahead of the rising waters. The success of this project generated much goodwill in the community.

Floods are a periodic part of life in many parts of the world. Until the nineteenth century it was generally believed that long ago there was a flood far more devastating than any of these floods. The Biblical account of a catastrophic world-wide flood was accepted at face value. But in the nineteenth century this Biblical account was attacked from several directions. I'll highlight three of them because they are still influential.

The Genesis flood account was attacked as being scientifically impossible, thanks in large part to the work of two Scottish geologists: James Hutton in the period 1785-95, followed by Charles Lyell in his influential book *Principles of Geology* (1830). They argued that the

processes we see operating today are those which have always operated and are sufficient to explain all geology. There is no room here for a catastrophic flood as described in Genesis.

A second avenue of attack came from the discovery of Mesopotamian flood stories. The first of these was found in 1872 in the British Museum among tablets excavated twenty years earlier in Nineveh from the library of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria. This turned out to be part of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Subsequent excavations in Nineveh unearthed more accounts. As a result of these finds it became widely accepted that the Biblical flood story was merely a later copy of older Mesopotamian stories.

A third avenue of attack was opened by those who argued that the Genesis flood story was a somewhat careless interweaving of different accounts, written much later by people with different ideologies. First proposed in 1753 by Jean Astruc, this idea reached its definitive form in 1876 when the German Old Testament scholar Julius Wellhausen gave formal shape to the documentary hypothesis. He proposed that the Pentateuch is a combination of four sources, JEDP (Jahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly), written in 950, 850, 620 and 500 BC respectively, with competing ideologies, competing views of God and of Israel, and finally put together by Ezra around 450. This view dominated Biblical studies in the twentieth century. Anyone who has taken any religion class at college will have encountered it. The crown jewel of the documentary hypothesis is the flood narrative, the unraveling of which into its J and P strands is a monument to critical scholarship.

The Genesis flood account was attacked from all sides: from science, from archaeology and from biblical scholarship. In the academic world the story of Noah and the Flood had no credibility. It was dismissed as mere fiction, and poor fiction at that due to the perceived inconsistencies of the different documentary strands. It was viewed as a late copy of Mesopotamian stories, which themselves reflected just the local flooding that regularly inundated the Mesopotamian floodplain.

But scholars have struck back in recent decades, countering each of these arguments. The documentary hypothesis, long seen as a great monument to Biblical scholarship, especially liberal German scholarship, has come under attack from literary scholars. They argue that the flood narrative, long viewed as the crown jewel of the documentary hypothesis, is a unity of great artistry and skill. The first solid defense of the literary integrity of Genesis 1-11 that I read was by two professors at UC Berkeley of all places!—*Before Abraham Was* (1985) by Isaac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, who taught Near Eastern Studies and Rhetoric, respectively. Many now accept that in the flood narrative we have a literary masterpiece.

While it is accepted that there are similarities with the Mesopotamian accounts, there are also significant differences. As I have argued throughout this series, these differences are far more significant than the similarities. The Genesis creation and flood accounts can be read

as polemics against, as deconstructions of, the accounts of the Mesopotamians and other surrounding cultures.

The principle of uniformity has come under attack. It's to be expected that creation scientists assume a catastrophic flood. In 1961 John Whitcomb and Henry Morris presented a comprehensive flood geology in their 500-page book *The Genesis Flood*, which I first read in college when I was studying geography. But even those who reject a world-wide flood accept that there have been catastrophic events in earth's past such as asteroid impacts that wiped out the dinosaurs. Within just the past decade or so it has been widely accepted that around 5600 BC the Black Sea, then a fresh-water lake, was flooded and turned into a salt-water sea by a breach of the Bosphorus. Some argue that this was a catastrophic event, certainly far more devastating and memorable than the annual flooding of Mesopotamia.

As a result of these counter-attacks, the flood narrative is taken more seriously than it used to be. This narrative covers 6:9–9:17. Today we'll look at chapter 7 in which the Flood arrives and reaches its peak. In chapter 6 God had told Noah to build an ark, describing the ark in some detail. But we didn't get to see Noah actually build the ark. We want to know how he did it, but the Bible covers all that in the short but profound statement, "Noah did everything just as God commanded him" (6:22).

Chapter 7 now describes two events: the entrance into the ark (7:1-16) and the first half of the Flood, from its arrival to its peak (7:17-24). Notice the great disparity in the relating of the various events. The building of the ark must have taken a long time, but it's covered in just a few summary words: "Noah did everything just as God commanded him." The entrance into the ark would have been much quicker, but the narrative pace slows way down, devoting 16 verses to this embarkation.

Embarkation (7:1-16)

The embarkation into the ark is given in three sections, each ending with the refrain, "just as God commanded Noah" or similar (7:5, 9, 16). In each section the embarkation is described in ever-increasing detail. Finally, when we're absolutely sure that everyone is aboard who should be aboard, we're given the climactic statement, "Then the Lord shut him in."

The first section is God's command:

The LORD then said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and one pair of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate, and also seven pairs of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth. Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made."

And Noah did all that the LORD commanded him. (Gen 7:1-5 TNIV)

The Lord gives Noah two commands, each backed up by an explanatory clause. The first command concerns Noah and his family: he is to enter the ark with them. From the KJV translation, "Come into the ark," many preachers have assumed that the Lord is already in the ark and is inviting Noah to come and join him. But the Hebrew verb just denotes entrance: Noah, who is outside the ark, is

to enter into it. The verb implies nothing about the Lord's whereabouts.

The Lord gives a reason for his command: "you I have seen, righteous before me in this generation." The flood narrative was introduced with the statement, "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generations, and it was with God he walked" (6:9). He was righteous because he behaved rightly in his relationships, notably his relationship with God. He showed this by his prompt obedience, as we'll be reminded three times in this chapter. As we saw last week, the focus of 6:9-22 is not the ark but Noah, showing why he should be invited to enter the ark.

The Lord's second command concerns the animals: Noah is to take them. The animals are divided into two categories, clean and unclean. Clean animals are those fit for sacrifice; after the Flood Noah will offer them up as the first burnt offerings recorded in Scripture. He is to take seven pairs of each of the clean animals and also of the birds, and one pair of each of the unclean. The purpose is to keep their seed alive upon the earth; twice in chapter 6 we were told that the purpose of the animals entering the ark was to keep them alive (6:19, 20).

For this command also a reason is given, though TNIV omits the conjunction. Seven days hence the Lord will cause it to rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and thus wipe away every living thing he has made.

Noah's response to these two commands is simple and by now expected: "Noah did all that the LORD commanded him." The narrator allowed the building of the ark to pass by with only a similar comment, but he will not allow the entrance into the ark to pass by so simply. No, he devotes the next 11 verses to a detailed portrayal of the entrance of Noah's family and the animals into the ark, a detailed portrayal of the fulfillment of this command. The entrance into the ark is far more important than the building of it, though it's the building of the ark that we usually want to know about.

Verses 6-9 show the fulfillment of God's command:

Noah was six hundred years old when the floodwaters came on the earth. And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives entered the ark to escape the waters of the flood. Pairs of clean and unclean animals, of birds and of all creatures that move along the ground, male and female, came to Noah and entered the ark, as God had commanded Noah. (7:6-9)

The section begins with a time marker: when Noah was 600 the Flood happened. The next three verses contain three verbs: "come" or "enter" is used twice, once for Noah's family and once for the animals. Noah and his family entered the ark. The animals came to Noah into the ark, two by two. The third verb is in the refrain: "as God had commanded Noah." We have a straightforward fulfillment of God's command. He commanded Noah to enter the ark with his family and to take the animals. He and his family entered the ark and the animals came to him into the ark. But the narrator isn't content to leave it at that. He now gives an even closer view of this embarkation:

And after the seven days the floodwaters came on the earth.

In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month—on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.

On that very day Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, together with his wife and the wives of his three sons, entered the ark. They had with them every wild animal according to its kind, all livestock according to their kinds, every creature that moves along the ground according to its kind and every bird according to its kind, everything with wings. Pairs of all creatures that have the breath of life in them came to Noah and entered the ark. The animals going in were male and female of every living thing, as God had commanded Noah. Then the Lord shut him in. (7:10-16)

The seven days of waiting are over, and the waters of the Flood come upon the earth. Again we're given a time-marker for the onset of the Flood; this time it's more precise, to the very day. On this day two things happen. "On this day" the Flood started. Here we have a line of poetry, though few English translations render it as such:

Split apart were all the springs of the great deep,
and the windows of heaven were opened.

Both verbs are passive; God is the unseen actor who opens the sluice gates above and below. The boundaries which God had made to divide and give shape to the formless world now collapse. He had divided the waters above from the waters below; now they reunite. The result is forty days and night of rain.

But on this same day something else happened, something even more important as indicated by the addition of the little word "very." "On this *very* day" Noah, his family and the animals entered the ark. Again the verb "enter" is used twice, once for Noah's family and once for the animals. A roll call is taken of those entering: they (Noah's family), and the wild animals, and the domesticated animals, and the creepy-crawlies, and the birds, each according to their kind. This is the language of Genesis 1 with its three categories of land animals each according to their kind.

Verse 16 concludes the passage with three important statements. The verb "enter" is used twice more: "the entering ones, male and female from all flesh, entered." Next we have the third and final refrain: "as God had commanded Noah." Only when all are aboard do we get the final statement that concludes the entire section: the Lord shut the door. Here we have another major contrast with the Mesopotamian stories. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* it is Utnapishtim, builder of the boat and hero of the flood story, who shuts the door.

Why are we given this extraordinary amount of detail about the embarkation? For one thing, it allows the narrator to use the verb "enter" exactly seven times. Is this intentional? Sometimes after sermons people ask me if I was being intentional in some of the things I said. We can't ask the narrator, but the way in which the verb "enter" is used seems very deliberate: once in the Lord's command (1), then fulfilled in three pairs: Noah and his family entered and the animals came to Noah to the ark (7-9, and again in 13-15). Then, in case we missed the point, he says that the entering ones entered (16). This is all rather redundant. But the narrator is making a point: everyone who was supposed to enter entered the ark, and only then did the Lord shut the door. This is a beautiful piece of writing, though it's difficult to capture in English. This is why you learn Hebrew!

When everyone is aboard the ark the Lord shuts the door and the Flood begins.

The Flood (7:17-24)

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. Every living thing that moved on the earth perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and the entire human race. Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; human beings and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days. (7:17-24)

This section has a rhythm though it can be obscured in English translations. We should feel the Flood flowing, increasing in intensity as it progressively covers the earth. In the first few verses the view alternates between the waters and the ark; the rising waters are described by alternating between the verbs "multiply" and "prevail" though TNIV does not preserve this.

- the waters *increased* and lifted the ark and it was raised above the earth,
- the waters *prevailed* and *increased* greatly upon the earth and the ark moved on the surface of the waters,
- the waters had *prevailed* greatly upon the earth and all the mountains were covered,
- 15 cubits the waters had *prevailed* and the mountains were covered.

In the battle between the rising waters and the earth the waters prevailed so mightily that they covered the mountains to a depth of 15 cubits, half the height of the ark, so that the ark could move freely across the waters. But remember that the ark has no sail or rudder; it is at the mercy of God.

The result of these prevailing waters is presented from two perspectives: life died (21-22) and God wiped clean (23a). All flesh moving upon the earth died. Again we hear a roll call: the birds, the three categories of land animals, and humans (21). For emphasis this is restated in the next verse (22) using a synonymous verb: everything perished...they all died. From a different perspective God wiped away all life. Again we hear the roll call, this time in the reverse order: mankind, livestock, creepy-crawlies and birds. And again this is repeated, this time with the verb in the passive: he wiped them all away...they were all wiped away.

But not quite all: there is something left; there is a remnant. Noah and those with him in the ark are left. And so it remained for 150 days during which the waters prevailed over the earth. God has undone creation, reverting it to the unformed water-covered state of Genesis 1:2. He has wiped the earth clean, blotting out the life which had ruined it. But there is a very important difference from Genesis 1:2. Atop the waters floats the ark containing Noah, his family and the animals, preserved as a remnant, kept alive to form a new beginning.

Chapter seven has presented us with two powerful images. The first image is of the grand procession of Noah, his family and the ani-

mals into the ark. We see this entrance again and again. Only when they have all entered does the Lord close the door. The second image is of the waters rising to completely cover the earth, but with the ark and its occupants floating atop it, supported on the whelming flood. To capture the full effect I'm going to leave the ark supported on the whelming flood for nearly 150 days until I pick up the story in early January.

In the meantime I want to explore some of the significance of the Flood which simultaneously wiped the earth clean and supported the ark. In our Scripture reading (1 Pet 3:18-22), Peter observes that the waters of the Flood, through which Noah was saved, prefigure baptism.

In [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 3:20-21)

It is often thought that baptism is the New Testament counterpart of Old Testament circumcision. But nowhere does the New Testament draw this parallel. But Peter does explicitly draw a parallel between baptism and Noah's flood. Noah was saved by being passed through the waters of the Flood. Similarly, Christians are saved by being passed through the waters of baptism. It is not that baptism itself saves, but what baptism represents.

This is not the only connection between baptism and the Old Testament. The Flood was a baptism which washed the earth clean, preparing it for service as a new creation with a new humanity. When Israel was constituted as God's people, his new humanity, Moses was commanded to make for the tabernacle a bronze basin to stand in the courtyard. As part of their ordination into the priesthood Moses was to bathe Aaron and his sons with water then clothe them in their priestly garments. This washing and clothing was an essential part of their consecration to priestly service. Subsequently, each time they entered the tent or approached the altar they were to wash their hands and feet in the basin. On the Day of Atonement the high priest was to bathe his body in water before putting on his sacred garments. After the day's service he was to put off his vestments and bathe again. Anyone who was unclean was to wash his clothes and bathe his body in water. This bathing in water marked the transition between levels of sanctity and purity: between unclean and clean, between profane and sacred, between sacred and more sacred.

When the temple was built as a permanent replacement for the portable tabernacle, the bronze basin was replaced by a much larger basin, larger because it no longer needed to be portable. It was 5 cubits (7½ ft) deep and 10 cubits (15 ft) across with a capacity of 12000 gallons. The purpose of this basin, called the Sea, was the same: for the priests to bathe prior to their priestly service (2 Chr 4:6).

This is surely the background for New Testament baptism. John the Baptist summoned Israel to a baptism of repentance, a washing that prepared them for God's kingdom. Jesus' ministry began with his baptism. He had no uncleanness that needed to be washed away, but he did need to be ordained into priestly, kingly and prophetic ministry. As he came up out of the waters God's Spirit came upon him, just as the Spirit-wind hovered over the waters at the earth's first baptism (Gen 1:2) and its second baptism (Gen 8:1).

What happens in our baptism? We are baptized into Christ, baptized into his death, symbolized by the waters that bring destruction. But then we pass through the waters and rise with Christ into new life (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:12). When we're baptized into Christ we put on Christ as if putting on a new garment (Gal 3:27). The waters of baptism are both destructive and renewing. Our sinful nature is destroyed but we are washed clean and ordained into service as priests. God's Spirit comes upon us to begin the work of new creation. The waters of baptism are just water, but what they symbolize is powerful indeed. Our sins are wiped away, our old self is destroyed, and we pass through the waters into new life, ordained as priests to God and renewed by God's Spirit.

Peter draws a further connection with the Flood, warning of scoffers in the last days:

They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. (2 Pet 3:4-7)

In Noah's day the earth was baptized by the Flood that wiped away evil. At the end of this age the world will again be baptized, and here Peter switches the metaphor from water to fire which is equally destructive and purifying. But the purpose is the same: to wipe away evil and cleanse the earth to be a renewed earth, fit for God's service. But just as God waited for all those entering the ark to enter the ark before sending the Flood, so God is waiting for all to come into Christ before he sends final judgment. He bids all come and enter into Christ, being baptized into him now before he finally shuts the door, to experience destruction and renewal now before it is only destruction that is experienced. The door is still open and God bids people, "Come!" This is why missionaries can go out to the ends of the earth with the gospel, God's invitation to come and enter into the ark that is Christ, to be baptized into him in death and in resurrection, being ordained into ministry in God's new creation as a renewed humanity. Come!

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, into whom we are baptized, sharing in his death and resurrection, the love of God who holds the door open, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit who makes us a new creation, be with us all now and evermore. Amen.

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