

THE WAY OF ESCAPE

by Ray C. Stedman

Surely interest quickens as we come to the subject of the Flood, but I am sorry to note that it is probably interest aroused by the possibility of controversy. Whenever the Flood is mentioned a dozen questions come rushing to our minds. Did the Flood really occur? How widespread was it? Was it universal, or only partial? Was there really an ark, and was it large enough to hold all the animals? Where did all the water come from? These and a dozen more like them seek an answer when we come to this subject.

But we must note right away that Scripture does not focus on these things. We shall try to answer these questions as we go along, but we must not miss the emphasis of Scripture. Doubtless Hollywood would turn this story of Noah and the Flood into an extravaganza of terror. The cameras would zoom in on weeping mothers, crazed animals, crashing buildings and other fantasies of horror. But, in Scripture, the Great Flood is not the center of attention; it is the story of one man and his family. This is not an account of world disaster, essentially, but it is the story of survival. Why did Noah survive the Flood? That is the supreme question; not why or how did the Flood occur, but why did one man and his family survive? Thus the account of the Flood opens with an answer to that question, given to us in Genesis 6:

These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. {Gen 6:9-10 RSV}

Here is the sort of man whom God reckons worthy to survive a world disaster. Let us remind ourselves at this point of the words of Jesus, "As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the coming of the son of Man," {cf, Matt 24:37, Luke 17:26}. Every one is well aware of the imminent possibility of worldwide destruction that hangs over our present society. We know that our human race has come to the place where it is trembling on the verge of self-extinction. The more we go on in time the more the possibility looms, and the less likely it seems that we can find some way to escape it.

If this be true, then we are living in days similar to the days of Noah, the days before the Flood. At such a time the eyes of God are not upon Washington, or Moscow, or Peking. Not that these cities are outside the scope of God's interest, but they represent events which are mere finger exercises in the divine providence. But Scripture tells us, "The eyes of God run to and fro upon the earth to show himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is right toward him," {2 Chr 16:9}. That is where Scripture focuses its interest. So the center of attention of this whole story is the man Noah, and the family that accompanied him into the ark.

Now there are three things given here about Noah that we must note. First, he was said to be righteous. Whenever we say that, most of us read it as though it said, "Noah was good." We are tempted then to say, "Well, that explains everything. God saw that Noah was good and therefore he chose him to be saved." Obviously, you choose the good man to be saved. But that is not what it says. The actual fact is that God made Noah righteous and then he became good. It was because he was first righteous that he became good. God made him righteous because he believed. This is what the book of Hebrews tells us, that Noah, by faith, was warned of God of things not yet seen, and he believed God, constructed an ark, thus condemned the world, and became the heir of that righteousness which comes by faith {see Heb 11:7}. That is the only kind of righteousness the Bible knows anything about. It is a righteousness which is not a result of our working, not a result of our best efforts put forth to try to please God, but a righteousness which comes by believing God. That is the kind that Noah had.

Once when I visited a college fraternity house, a boy asked me what he considered to be a difficult question: "If there are two men who do the same deed, exactly the same thing, but one of them is a Christian and the other is not, are not the deeds they do equally good in the eyes of God?" My answer of course was, "No, they are not." He anticipated that answer, I think, and went on to point out that Christianity therefore must be

unrealistic and impractical. It presumes to judge the quality of identical deeds as being different in their character and thus is totally unrealistic. I tried to point out to him that it was he who was being unrealistic, for he was merely judging from the effects the deeds had upon the persons benefited, but that he was taking no consideration of the effect the deeds had upon the persons who performed them, or that the motives of the heart would make considerable difference. I have known many deeds that were good in the common usage of the term, but they were really very evil deeds because of the motive from which they were performed.

We are told that, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart" {cf, 1 Sam 16:7}, not only in the realm of motive, but also, more precisely, in the realm of the origin of deeds. Who is acting within the individual? God knows that man is incapable of doing anything in himself; he can only give himself to another power to operate through him. God's great question of mankind is: Whose power is it to which you give yourself to operate and to work? I went on to point out to this lad that Jesus had said to the rich young ruler, "Only God is good," {cf, Luke 18:19}. Therefore the only good deeds in God's sight are those which he himself does. God's great question of man is as to the origin of his deeds, whether they are the result of the activity of God in human hearts, or some other power. That is the question we are facing concerning Noah. Noah believed God, and because he believed him, God was at work in Noah. Therefore he was righteous, because only God can be righteous. Noah had received that righteousness which is God's righteousness, not man's which is imparted not by works, but by faith, by believing the Word of God. The first chapters of Romans speak much of this.

Second, we are told that Noah was blameless in his generation. The nearest English equivalent to the Hebrew word translated "blameless" is the word "whole." To borrow a book title from Dr. Paul Tournier, Noah was, *A Whole Person In A Broken World*. How descriptive that is of this man. He lived in a world filled with violence, with cruelty, with sexual perversions. When these are evident in history they are always signs and manifestations of inner turmoil, of tensions and frustrations within, of fears, anxieties, worries, wild urges and impulses. In what way, therefore, was Noah blameless? Why was he whole when the rest of society had gone to pieces? The answer is, because he was righteous. God always begins at the heart of the matter. Surely this is the problem with society today. It is because we refuse the righteousness which God offers by faith, the basis of human operation which he alone can give, that man cannot be good. But the man who receives that righteousness becomes good. This again the Apostle Paul makes clear in the opening chapters of Romans. So Noah found the secret of control. It was an inner peace imparted by the indwelling of God, the righteousness which comes by faith. Therefore he was blameless; he was a whole person, well adjusted, able to handle the situations that came his way, at peace with himself internally.

Third, as a result of the first two factors, he walked with God. This means a daily experience of contact with God. Noah did not look back to his conversion and rely on that as his contact with God. He had a daily contact. He was in continual communication with God. He talked with God about the building of the ark. Not only did he get the original blueprints from God, but I am sure he discussed with him the whole detail of the building of the ark as to just how it was to be constructed. He walked and lived with God from day to day. This is the secret of a man who survives the disaster of his age. This is the life that wins.

Now there is a fourth thing mentioned concerning Noah here, interjected into this account, but not without reason: "Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth." He was head of a family. He did not turn aside from the normal enterprises and occupations of life; he was a normal individual. Here is the first of many passages in the Bible which speak of the relationship of a head to his family. It is apparent that, through Noah's faith, these three also were saved. I do not want to press this unduly, but there are other passages in the New Testament that describe how the faith of the head of a family affects the whole family. I do not mean to imply that Shem, Ham, and Japheth did not also believe in God. I think they did. But the point that is suggested here is that they believed in God primarily because their father did, and that a head of a family exercises a unique relationship and control over the rest of his family in the eyes of God. There is much more that needs to be explored in this respect. Certainly we Americans have lost many family secrets. We do not understand how families operate. We need to learn again how God views a family, and the unique responsibility and control that a head of a family can employ. It was not due to Shem, Ham, and Japheth that they entered the ark; it was because of Noah.

The second major emphasis in this account moves from focusing upon this man, who is a picture and

prototype of the kind of people who can survive a world disaster, to emphasizing the character of the age in which he lived:

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth." {Gen 6:11-13 RSV}

Note the number of times throughout this account we have the diagnosis of an age given: corruption and violence. We have already seen the detail of this corruption and violence. They are always the mark, in any civilization, of an impending disaster. When they become widespread and intense in character, they mark the imminence of collapse. History confirms that this is always the way God acts in society. Here is the pattern man follows. Man is by nature and creation a fully dependent being. He must depend upon God for his life, his breath, his activity, his intelligence, his power of choice and everything he does. He is the most dependent of creatures, even more so than the animals. He lacks even the instincts which animals have. Yet, fallen man denies this most important point of his life and is forever trying to assert his ability to do everything himself. This is even reflected in our television ads. "Please, Mother! I'd rather do it myself!" That is the slogan of humanity and always has been. But when man attempts it, he soon has everything in such a terrible state that it can no longer be controlled. He lacks the rationale, the intelligence, the knowledge to control. He deludes himself into thinking that he has the ability to control his life and, as a result, it soon gets into a state beyond control. Nature (including human nature) goes out of control. The delicate balance of life is tilted beyond the critical point, and then a collapse occurs. This has proved again and again to be true in the history of civilization and, occasionally, as we have in this account, of nature itself. It may well be that the Flood was brought about by man's intemperate misuse of elemental forces, that he misused his power over nature and tripped the balance in a delicate scale, which resulted in the collapse of certain elemental forces that brought about the Flood.

This, of course, is exactly what is threatening today. It is in line with the Apostle Paul's revelation of the way God moves in human affairs. He revealed that God gives man over, gives him up to exercise the folly he insists upon, in order that he might see from the results how foolish he has been. I do not think this has ever been put better than by Helmut Thielicke in his book, *How The World Began*. I would like to quote a paragraph or two from that, because he has put it so well.

The powers of destruction are still in the midst of creation. The atoms -- did not God create them? -- need only to be split, the bacteria let loose, hereditary factors monkeyed with, genes tampered with, and poisons need only to be distilled from the gifts of creation -- oh yes, the powers of destruction are still with us and the heavenly ocean is still heaving and surging behind its dams. We live solely by the grace of God, who has fixed the bounds of destruction. The dreadful secret of the world revealed in the first chapters of this old Book is that man is capable of renouncing and cutting himself off from this very grace which holds in check the power of destruction.

No sooner does [man] worship his own power -- no sooner does he regard flesh or atomic power as his "arm" and surrender to the illusion that he can hold the world in order and balance by military potential and political intelligence [how appropriate that is to this day] -- then he has already renounced God's grace and breached the dam that holds the heavenly ocean. When he imagines that he can free men from need and fear by means of the welfare state he is already declaring himself independent of this sustaining grace and pressing the buttons which set off the secret signals of catastrophe.

Above all, when we are people who calmly tolerate the routine business of the church's baptizing, marrying, and burying, but otherwise go on stubbornly worshipping our anxieties and succumbing to prosperity and its self indulgence and superficiality; when therefore we are people who do not see their neighbor in his need and thus lose our souls, then and precisely then, we too are playing fast and loose with that grace which guards the dikes of rum.

And therefore this world, which we think we govern by our own power, may one day come crashing down upon us, because the thing we play with so presumptuously has gotten beyond our control, and because God is not to be mocked. He may suddenly cease to hold the ocean in check and the unleashed elements will sweep us

into their vortex.

Those eloquent words describe exactly what happened in the days of Noah, and we face the same chilling possibility in our own day.

The third emphasis in this account is therefore most timely. God moves immediately to present to us a description of the way of escape. It is found in the description of the ark.

Make you an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its breadth fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof [or window] for the ark, and finish it a cubit above; and set the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. {Gen 6:14-16 RSV}

Obviously this is not a mythical account. The instructions that are given here are precise, matter-of-fact, and explicit. This whole account is of that character. There is nothing vague, nothing mystical about it. There was an ark and it did save Noah and the animals, and all of Scripture is confirmation of the fact. We may discount the rumors that still exist that the ark is still somewhere around. Perhaps it may yet be discovered high on the shoulders of Mt. Ararat, for there have been some rather strange accounts of men who have allegedly seen it there. But our faith does not rest upon rumors. We can discount these rumors, at least until they have been established as facts, but the historicity of the ark remains unimpaired. This story of the Flood is also supported by flood legends from primitive peoples all over the earth.

But God's way, as we have seen before in these stories in Genesis, is to hide wheels within wheels. Not only was the ark a literal boat which was literally used in that early day to save a civilization, but it is also a symbol or type, pointing to something else. The Apostle Peter hints very strongly that the ark is a type, a shadow, of the Lord Jesus Christ. See how every detail of the ark checks in that direction. We are told, first, that it was made of gopher wood. I do not know what gopher wood is and apparently no one does. The nearest guess of Bible scholars is that it is cedar wood. But the word "gopher" is an interesting one. "Gopher" and the word "pitch" which occurs in this passage, (and also the Hebrew word used later on in the books of Moses for "atonement") are all from the same basic Hebrew root, which means "to cover." Thus the ark was made from "atonement wood," "redemption wood," and it was pitched, made water-proof, with "atonement." This word for atonement speaks of expiation of sin and oneness between God and man. It is the prominent feature of the Bible and its use here hints strongly of the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus who was sent as an ark of safety for the people of God, to carry them through the floods of God's judging vengeance. You can see how beautifully it fits.

Furthermore, Noah was told to build rooms in the ark. Now this is the common word for "nests," such as bird nests, and it is strongly suggestive that the ark was intended to be not only a place of safety but of rest and comfort. Thus in Jesus Christ we not only find safety against the floods of vengeance, but also rest and comfort in him. Of further significance are the dimensions of the ark: three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high. A cubit is a little short of two feet. This would make the ark something like four hundred and fifty feet long, and therefore a very large vessel. No wonder it took almost one hundred and twenty years to construct. It was built on dry ground, a long way from any lake or sea, and built in obedience to the command of God, and, to be sure, against the mockery of the age in which Noah lived. These dimensions are pointed out by St. Augustine to be, "the dimensions of a man." Of course, no man is three hundred cubits long, but Augustine means the ratio between length, height, and width is exactly that of a full grown man. So again we have a picture of a Man, our ark of safety, the Lord Jesus Christ, the second Man, who came to redeem us.

There is also a window in the ark, but it is not placed in the side where Noah can look out upon the destruction around him, but in the top, where he can only look up. If this is a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is suggestive of that upward look which he manifested throughout his lifetime. He took his orders from his Father. His eye was forever fixed upon him. He came to do the will of his Father and walked in obedience to him. He did not take his motivation from that which was occurring around him but from that which came from above, as he himself said again and again. There is only one door in the ark as there is only one way into

Christ, by faith. There is not a door for the elephants and another door for the mice, and another for the insects; they all come in one door. It is placed in the side of the ark. It is suggestive of the very words of Jesus, "I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved," {John 10:9 KJV}. Finally, we are told there were three decks to be built in the ark. I do not want to stress this unduly, but this is highly suggestive of the humanity of our Lord -- body, soul, and spirit. The whole man was given up for us. Also there is provision in Christ for the completion of the whole man -- body, soul and spirit -- we are to be redeemed in him. It is this ark, then, that is to bear us as the ark bore Noah, through the flood of judgment that is to come.

Yet I think there is more here. God not only is picturing for us the crisis that comes upon history, but also those mini-crises that come in all our lives from time to time. Remember in First Corinthians 10:13 the Apostle Paul tells us, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will make a way of escape [an ark, a place of refuge] in order that you may be able to bear it." This strikes me as greatly needed in this day. I am occasionally reminded by some that I have not been available when they needed me. They had tried to reach by and could not locate me when they needed help. I am always desirous of being available when anyone really needs help, but I never feel bad when someone tells me that. I know that oftentimes that is God's way of turning our eyes away from human help to the only help that is always available and which we so frequently fail to avail ourselves of: the way of escape that is in Jesus Christ. This is what he is for. He is a refuge, a place of safety. He is a place of security, of rest and comfort in time of pressure. The whole of Scripture urges us to avail ourselves of him, not some other human being. In the greatest floods and testings of life human help is unavailing anyhow. What real good does it do? We must eventually turn to this ark that is provided for us, our way of escape. I am convinced that more of us would find ourselves living stable, sensible lives in the midst of the most amazing pressures if we would but find our way to the ark of safety, the way of escape which is in Jesus, and take refuge within him in the hour of pressure.

Now the final emphasis of this account is given.

"For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every sort shall come in to you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them." Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him. {Gen 5:17-22 RSV}

We shall leave until our next message the question of the extent of the Flood. The emphasis here, again, is not upon that; it is upon the fact that, when Noah came into the ark, God said to him, "I will make my covenant with you." It was not merely the ark that saved Noah. That was the means by which his salvation was accomplished, but what really saved Noah was God's agreement with him. The word of God, the promise of God, that is what saved him. Therefore we too must look beyond the means by which we are saved, the cross and the resurrection, to the great motivation that brought Christ to earth, to the promise of God which underlies everything else and makes covenant with us, a covenant, a new arrangement for living. Whenever you see this word "covenant" in Scripture, do not think of it as a contract that God makes with man. It is that, in one sense, but it is primarily a new basis for life, an arrangement for living. This covenant here goes further than simply saving Noah; it is to govern his life and the life of the world after the Flood is over. It requires but one attitude on Noah's part, that of obedience.

The reason I bring this out is because I am disturbed today by the ease with which many -- young people especially -- seek to use the Lord Jesus as a Savior to save them from going to hell when they die, but they have no intention of allowing him to govern their lives while they live. But here the story of Noah is very clear. It was not merely the fact that God brought Noah into the ark that saved him; it was that Noah was obedient to a new arrangement for living. Noah obeyed God, he did all that was commanded. God undertook therefore to regulate his life on a totally different basis.

This is what saved Noah, and this is what saves us. It is not the fact that we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, thus agreeing that we belong to him and will be saved when we die. I do not believe that for a moment. It is the fact that we have received him as Lord. We recognize his rights over us, his right to rule, his right to regulate, his right to command us and for us to obey. The heart is to respond immediately in obedience to all that God commands, as Noah did here. That acknowledgment of Lordship is the basis of salvation. That is the basis on which we not only will survive the disaster that hangs imminently over our age, threatening to strike at any moment, but also the individual disasters of every life, that can cut the ground out from beneath the house of life and demolish it, washing away the sands upon which we build.

We must, rather, establish it upon a rock which cannot be moved, which rests upon the most unshakable thing in all the universe -- the Word of God. After all, that is what created the universe. That is the most solid thing there is. There is nothing more dependable than the Word of God. Ultimately, everything that is present in this room and in all the universe around us has come from that source. When we rest, therefore, upon the word of God, the covenant of God, we rest upon the most certain and sure thing the universe knows anything about. "Heaven and earth," Jesus said, "shall pass away, but my words shall never pass away," {cf, Matt 24:35}.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for turning our eyes from transitory and ephemeral things, passing things, unto the permanent, the sure, the unshakable. What a restive world we live in. How uncertain and confused is the generation around us. How restless are the voices we hear on every side. But we thank you, Lord, that you turn us to that which remains solid, secure, and unshakable. You invite us to enter the place of safety, the one Person who can take us through all that life can throw at us and bring us safely out on the other side, the ark of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.

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