

GOD REMEMBERED NOAH

by Steve Zeisler

There's a man named Al Niño who lives in San Jose. I heard him interviewed on the radio the other day. He's in the phone book, and he said half a dozen or more people he's never met or heard of have called him up in the last few months and yelled at him, saying things like, "You've ruined my life!" or, "You're responsible for this miserable weather!" or "My roof leaks and it's your fault!" Thankfully, he had a good sense of humor, at least on the radio. These people who were calling had a firm grasp of the reality that they had a problem, but they hadn't yet very thoughtfully figured out why.

Thinking of how poor Al Niño had the responsibility for our unwanted rainfall laid at his doorstep is a good way for us to pick up the story of Noah in Genesis 8 and 9.

WHEN GOD IS SILENT

The story of the deluge begins with an awful roar and ends with an awful silence. Genesis 7:11-12 is a powerful statement of the beginning of the awful event: "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." Downpour and darkness and the thundering of rushing water shook the earth for forty days and forty nights of awful, frightening uproar. Then it ended with silence. Look at 7:23-24: "Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; men and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds of the air were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark. The waters flooded earth for a hundred and fifty days."

The statement at the end of verse 23 is instructive: "Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark." The text could have read, "Only Noah, Shem, Ham and Japheth and their families were left." The statement as written declares something about how it felt for Noah. Everything was gone. Death was everywhere. Now there was only silence. Noah was left with the awful difficulty of no movement, no answers, no word from God.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is another watery salvation story. He talks about the ship being becalmed in these famous words, and we can imagine Noah speaking them as well:

"All in a hot and copper sky,

The bloody sun at noon

Right above the mast did stand,

No bigger than the moon.

Day after day, day after day

We stuck, nor breath, nor motion;

As idle as a painted ship

Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, every where,

And all the boards did shrink;

Water, water, every where,

Nor any drop to drink."

As Noah floated on the water in this great wooden structure, there was no explanation, no prompting, no voice of hope from God. Noah faced what so many face in their spiritual life: the period of wilderness and struggle that comes after the great salvation, the great act of God, the great beginning, the powerful word of release and hope.

Let's review a couple of things. First of all, the giant wooden boat in which Noah found himself was closed in everywhere. Perhaps it was more like a coffin than anything else we can imagine. It was forty-five feet high and covered with pitch. Genesis 6:16 has an ambiguous phrase that is probably describing a small window. It was covered over during the storm. The door through which the animals and people entered the ark was closed by God and covered over with pitch. Noah couldn't see out, or if he could see out, it was probably only through the window that was near the top, so he could look only upward from himself. In fact, one of the problems of this text is how Noah would discover whether the ground was dry. He couldn't see down to what was beneath this floating edifice.

The other thing we can note is that Noah was told very little about what would happen to him as he began this adventure. In 6:18 God spoke to Noah and said he was the only righteous one in all his generation, the only one who had a heart for God. So God gave him this word: "But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark--you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you." The ark was the source of salvation for him; he would be protected from the storm. But what Noah didn't hear was any word about getting out of the ark, about the end of the story. Would he ever be allowed out? What would be the conclusion of this adventure in following God?

So now Noah was in this period of silence, encased in a place where he couldn't see out or get information. He wondered what was going to happen next, but he had no word from God as to what the end of the story would be. Time went by. Noah was in a period of self-discovery.

One of the important questions to ask at this point and at similar points in the Scriptures is why God allows for these silences, these periods in the wilderness. Why does he set us on our way and then seem to withdraw his hand from us? Why are there times when he gives us no answers? What are we supposed to learn in those kinds of times?

Why was the nation of Israel allowed to experience the powerful, miraculous salvation of God in the exodus through the Red Sea, and then wander in the wilderness, obediently for three years and then disobediently for 40 more? Why was David anointed king and then driven into the wilderness by Saul? Why was Jesus driven to the wilderness after the dove descended on him at his baptism, and forced to undergo that time of testing and temptation? Why did the apostle Paul, after his conversion, spend months in Arabia? Why this pattern? What does God achieve in the silence when he doesn't seem to be doing anything, and we're not sure that he remembers us?

THE BEGINNING OF HOPE

We're going to come back to that question, but that's exactly where Noah was in this story. That's why 8:1 is so powerful:

But 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.

There are a number of points in this account where God is described in human terms. The Bible does that frequently. In fact, the Lord had not forgotten Noah. But Noah's experience was that he had been forgotten, and so he described what appeared to be God's renewed interest in him as a remembering. The same thing will happen later in the story when we read of God's smelling the aroma of the sacrifice that Noah offered and making a decision based on that. That again is a human way of describing something much more complex--God's decisions and actions. But we can observe important truths about God in human language.

Verses 2-12:

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. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the water had gone down, and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to recede until the tenth month, and on the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains became visible.

After forty days Noah opened the window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find no place to set its feet because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him.

The region in Turkey where Mount Ararat stands has a number of hills and peaks. Presumably the ark landed on the promontory

that had higher peaks available around it, which Noah could see out of the window of the ark. After floating silently for 110 days without being able to see where he was going, having no idea of the conditions outside the boat, wondering if it would ever come to an end, the hope began to come in stages. The first thing God did was send a wind. Just the simple facts that the wind was blowing (which the Spirit of God uses as his own image in the New Testament), the boat was beginning to move again, and the water would eventually recede, were reminders to Noah that God had not forgotten him. As the water receded, the boat came to a place where it rested. The boat moved by the breath of God, and then stopped by the purpose of God. And Noah realized that indeed God hadn't forgotten him, that there was going to be an end to this story, he didn't know what.

In trying to discover what the world outside was like, Noah sent these two birds off as an experiment. He was using them to get information, and reading that information. But this is also a parable. Bible students, both Jewish and Christian, have always seen the story of the two birds as instructive of spiritual things. The raven was probably a member of the family of birds that were carrion-eaters, perhaps a vulture. It was at home with dead things. Noah wondered whether death and destruction still reigned. The raven went out, and there were enough carcasses floating in the water that it could survive outside the ark. The death bird didn't tell Noah anything about what was out there. So he sent out a bird that needed life to survive, a living tree to set its feet on, fruit growing from the earth to eat. It came back with no information, but at least it came back. Then the second time, it came back with a leaf in its beak.

The dove of Noah with the olive leaf in its beak has been one of the most profound symbols of peace in every place and every age where the Bible has been known. Something good was going to happen. You can imagine Noah's relief to know that the end of the story was not destruction, and that the ark was not going to be his home forever.

LESSONS LEARNED IN THE WILDERNESS

Verses 13-22:

By the first day of the first month of Noah's six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry.

Then God said to Noah, "Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. Bring out every kind of living creature that is with you--the birds, the animals, and all the creatures that move along the ground--so they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number upon it."

So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. All the animals and all the creatures that move along the ground and all the birds--everything that moves on the earth--came out of the ark, one kind after another.

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 man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And 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."

There are two important comments about Noah's behavior that we ought to look at, and then we'll try to answer the question of why God had required this period of silence, why he appeared to forget Noah.

The first thing that Noah did was remove the covering, or open the door, and see that the ground was dry. That was on the first day of Noah's 601st year, ten-and-a-half months after the flood began. He opened the door and saw that the ground was dry, but he didn't come out. Then a month and twenty-seven days later, he could see that it was growing increasingly dry. But what he saw, I believe, was devastation. The result of the flood was not a cleansed, beautiful, green, thriving world. It can't have been green again that quickly. He sat in the ark and realized that the lessons he had been learning gave him no information about what would happen next. Noah would not come out of the ark until God invited him out.

The second thing Noah did, upon disembarking, was worship God with a sacrifice.

We're going to cover 9:1-22, but we won't read it all here. I encourage you to read it in your own Bible. In this passage we hear language that recalls the creation to us. Noah knew that as Adam his great forefather had been, now he too was the man whose family would populate the earth. Now he too was the one who was caring for animals as Adam had been told to care for the living things of his day. Noah knew on some level that what God had done in Adam, he was going to do another time through Noah's family. But Noah knew, too, as he examined himself in the dark, repetitive, quiet, forgotten days that he had nothing of the innocence of Adam. His flesh, his sinfulness, his capacity for anger and lust and lies, became increasingly apparent to him.

Think about what it must have been like as Noah built the ark. He was the only righteous person on earth, the preacher of righteousness, as 2 Peter 2:5 says. And as long as he had all his wicked contemporaries to compare himself to, he would never see his own heart. He must have felt that there was something special about him. He was also busy building a huge boat. It was difficult, and it required attention. So he didn't discover anything about himself during that period. But when he floated in the boat with nothing to do except the repetitive work of feeding animals, when he seemed forgotten by God, he realized the tensions that existed between him and his sons and their families. He realized all his capacity for anger at God, for feeling sorry for himself. The awful realization dawned on Noah that the world was going to be started again by him, and his heart was as much in need of grace as anyone else's. He was not a good specimen from which to build a new earth. He was as capable of tawdry and angry and embarrassing and godless behavior as anyone else.

Doesn't God often teach us that lesson about ourselves when he's quiet? As long as we can compare ourselves to other people, we can fool ourselves. And as long as we can be active in God's work, we don't have to discover anything about ourselves. But when we are put in some kind of wilderness and there's nothing but the spiritual reality of who we are on the inside to occupy our thoughts, the awful discovery begins to take place: "I'm capable of anything. I'm not as great and courageous and godly as I thought I was." We discover weakness and inadequacy.

When the day finally came to break the seal, open the door, and see the world, Noah was a man who had discovered his own inadequacy; and he was looking out on a world that was still suffering the effects of a terrible destruction. This had to be an extraordinarily low point for him.

He would not come out until God invited him out. There wasn't presumption in Noah. He didn't leap into the arms of his Lord, because his own failures were ringing in his thinking. He didn't dance around on the newly dried earth, because it was still reeling from the destruction, and it was not a place of beauty and splendor.

So Noah sacrificed to God. It may have been a thank offering or a sin offering; it was probably both. At the invitation of God Noah walked out into his presence and said, "I need help. Thank you for saving my life. Now please save me from the sins I've discovered in my heart." He was the man on whom God would rebuild human experience, and he was a man who was not up to the task in his own strength.

GOD'S LOVING COMMITMENT

The Lord had been silent but now we hear him speak again. At the end of chapter 8 and in chapter 9 there's a speech God made to himself and another speech he made to Noah and his sons. Chapter 8, verse 21: "The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.'" This speech was God's description of the human predicament. He had judged them and brought Noah, the only righteous man, with his family into the ark, and now as Noah offered a sacrifice for his own sins, it was clear that there was no fixing the human race. Time wasn't going to fix them. They weren't going to educate themselves to become righteous. Each generation would repeat the problems of the previous generation. In the context of the sacrifice, the Lord made a promise: "I won't destroy them again." But he didn't say how he would answer the problem. What could God do for a race like this?

This counsel of God with himself is instructive. The problem of a righteous God and a sinful population and his refusal to destroy them completely leaves him ultimately with only one choice. It's not outlined here, but it's the greatest story of all, the story of how God would take their punishment on himself.

The speech God made to Noah and his sons is in 9:1-17. God said in verse 1:

"Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."

He was using the same language that he had used with Adam. He was deliberately saying, "We're starting over now. You be masters of the earth as the first human pair were." But it's an awful dimming down of vision. In the first case, when God made everything he saw that it was beautiful. At the end of every day of creation he said it was good or very good. God delighted in the things he had made. Here he would only say, "I refuse to destroy the things I've made." He told Noah to be the master of the animal kingdom that was coming out of the ark, but he gave him permission to eat animals, whereas he had required Adam to care

for them. And he assumed that human beings were murderers; it was impossible that this race would not be; so laws were required to deal with killing. And so we have the re-establishment of human life, but with a broken heart. This is a broken people who will live far below the beginning point of the first human couple.

Then, contrary to all the discouragement, the bad news, Noah's discovery of his sinfulness, the blight on the earth, the need for an animal sacrifice to atone for Noah's sins, and the unfortunate commentary about the human beings who would replenish the earth, eat the animals, and kill each other; God interposed this promise in 9:8-10:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you--the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you--every living creature on earth."

The promise of God, standing in marvelous and immense contrast to the hard news and the struggle, is the basis on which we live our lives. That is the way every generation has survived since, not deserving God's mercy but being given God's mercy. The covenant with Noah was only the first one. God would restate in better and better terms his unwillingness to destroy us, his compassion, and his insistence on love. It contradicts all expectations. He shouldn't have acted this way, and yet he did. What he had to work with wasn't worth it, yet he had fallen in love with us. He cannot and will not act destructively toward human beings again. We can choose destruction for ourselves, but he means good to us.

Though this account doesn't tell us what will come after, it's the beginning of the story that leads to the cross. God would take on himself what we deserved. He made a promise with a beautiful witness (the rainbow) because the story was going to be beautiful. His refusal to judge us meant that in the long run he was going to bless us. The promise of the love of God is the extraordinary thing in this story. The dove flew back with a leaf in its beak, and it was offering a hope that has inspired people ever since. The rainbow repeats the theme of hope.

Peter refers to "His precious and magnificent promises" (2 Peter 1:4, NASB). Do you reflect very often on God's word to you? Do you read the announcement of his love and believe his commitment to people who are broken? Are they love letters to you? Do you believe God can intend good even when you don't deserve good, that he can bring blessing in the lives of people whose self-discovery is of tragic insides? Are the promises of God believable to you, though they contradict everything you know about yourself?

The prophet Isaiah, speaking about the coming of the Messiah, says this in 54:9-10:

**"To me this is like the days of Noah,
when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth.
So now I have sworn not to be angry with you,
never to rebuke you again.
Though the mountains be shaken
and the hills be removed,
yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken
nor my covenant of peace be removed,'
says the LORD, who has compassion on you."**

This love story of God for failed people began as Noah disembarked the ark. God made a promise. It was only the promise of God, not the beauty of the earth, that Noah had to cling to. It was enough. And we have the same promise.

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Sixteenth Message
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March 22, 1998

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