

March 21, 2010

NOAH FOUND GRACE

Jeffery D. Woodhams

Critics of the Bible look at the story of Noah and say, “How could a loving God destroy all those people?” The answer to them is obvious: *a loving God couldn't do that*. On the other hand, you have the Calvinists, who state emphatically that this story just proves that God chooses only some people to receive His grace. The rest of the people are doomed, having no choice at all in the matter. You know what? Those two views fit surprisingly well together! If God simply decreed that all of humanity must perish because it suited His whims to destroy them—well, then, the atheists are right: *the God of the Bible isn't a loving God*.

That is not to say that God does not have the right to judge sin. He absolutely does; but He operates according to two principles. The first is that *His love is unconditional*. God unconditionally loves all mankind. The second is that *His judgment is final and absolute when it comes, but He withholds it as long as possible*. He cannot withhold His judgment for infinity, because that would violate justice. He does, however, restrain His judgment until He has exhausted every possible opportunity to avoid issuing a sentence upon the guilty.

When we look carefully at the Scriptural record, we will definitely find that God is both holy *and* loving. We will find that mankind was destroyed not so much by the force of the flood but by steadfast refusal to seek the safety God had provided.

In review, we discussed last week that the “sons of God,” those who called upon the name of the Lord, married ungodly women. The hearts of their children turned from the Lord to the point that they were called *nephilim*, the fallen ones. Yes, they fell from God's grace into great wickedness. Whether or not the *nephilim* were giants physically I cannot say, although I suspect they may have been; but they certainly became spiritually depraved to the point that, in every person, “*every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*.”

In spite of the growth of man's wickedness, we can see the grace of God at work. Remember Genesis chapter 5? In that chapter, we saw the continuation of God's promise of Genesis 3:15 to send a Redeemer through a line of godly men; we saw the reminder of the life hereafter in the example of Enoch; we saw the forewarning of judgment in the name of Methuselah, and yet the withholding of that judgment for as long as possible—969 years. Here in chapter 6, we are approaching the end of Methuselah's life. God made a remarkable statement as Methuselah's days began to run out:

And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years (Genesis 6:3).

The clock is counting down; and yet God will let man's wickedness continue for these last one hundred twenty years as an opportunity for men to repent. Notice that His Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is actively striving with men. What is the work of the Holy Spirit? *Conviction of sin in order to bring repentance!* God is not simply allowing men to walk to their doom as lambs to the slaughter; He is actively working on their hearts and minds. Despite His promptings, men continue to harden their hearts and to break the

heart of a loving God: “*it grieved him at his heart.*”

And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them (Genesis 6:7).

Did God admit here that He made a mistake? No. We simply need to understand the word *repented* as it is used here: “‘Repented’ does not suggest that God changed His mind, for He is changeless [Mal. 3:6]. Instead, it means that God was sorrowful.”¹ God breathed deeply. *He sighed*. God continued to reach down to man, and man continued to rebel. God continued to bring men back to reconciliation and repentance, and man continued to reject Him. God’s heart was broken.

Let’s continue the thread in Genesis 6:8:

But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.

This is a fascinating verse on several levels. You know, God is a holy God and He has the right to destroy all who rebel against Him. Noah was a sinner just as any of us are; yet the Bible records that Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Let me ask you a question: how do we find anything? Normally we find something by looking for it. Another question: where do find something? We find something in the place where it is to be found. I know it sounds simplistic, but think about this--Noah “found” grace. This suggests to me that (1) he was looking for it and (2) he was in a position to receive it. Noah did not deserve to be saved from God’s judgment. He did not earn God’s grace; rather, he found God’s grace. You see, *grace* means that *we receive a favor we don’t deserve*. Noah received God’s grace in that he was spared from the promised—but delayed—judgment.

The verse is also interesting in light of the next phrase:

These are the generations of Noah (Genesis 6:9a).

We’ve seen this before so I won’t belabor the point. This word *generations*, I believe, signals the end of one written record. It’s a colophon at the end of a tablet, sort of like the title and author on the spine of a library book. Moses took the written records and compiled them into the book of Genesis. Now, if that is the case, and Noah wrote the tablet that we see here in Genesis 5:1b to 6:9a, then Noah’s final word was that he was simply a sinner saved by grace! This is his testimony, and may it be ours as well: “I found grace in the eyes of the Lord; it’s not that I deserved it or earned it, but I surely did find it!” Friends, that’s not bragging. It’s a statement that I’m a sinner, saved by God’s grace.

Now, we know that Noah was from a family that had served the Lord father-to-son for generations, going right back to Adam; yet at some point, Noah personally responded to God’s grace. That is the way it is for all of us. It doesn’t matter how involved our family is with the church or how much our mother loved the Lord. What matters is our own, personal encounter with Him.

At this point, according to my understanding of how Genesis was constructed, the sons of Noah pick up the narrative. Let’s continue with verses 9 and 10:

1 John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), p. 37.

*Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God.
And Noah begat three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.*

When we understand that Genesis was likely constructed from tablets and then edited together by Moses, then the repetition in these verses and those that follow make absolute sense. With this understanding, we can view this almost as a memoir of the sons of Noah talking about their father. Noah's personal *testimony* was that of a sinner saved by grace, but his *reputation* before his children was that he was a righteous man. In other words, Noah lived what he believed. *He practiced what he preached!* If we are saved by God's grace, we should live as God's children.

Noah remained faithful to God. He was "a just [righteous] man and perfect in his generations." Here *generations* simply means among his contemporaries. Noah lived in a wicked world, and as you know, the wicked look for any fault, any flaw, any hypocrisy among the righteous; but they found none. No one could point at Noah and truthfully call him a phony. Let this be our reputation as well! If Noah had lived a sinful life, or had proven himself to be dishonest in any way, he would not have had the moral authority to preach against sin; but Peter calls him a "preacher of righteousness" (II Peter 2:5), and Genesis records four times that "Noah did all that God commanded him" (6:22; 7:5, 9, 16). Can that be said of us? Do we have the moral authority to speak God's truth to a world in danger of judgment, or are we known differently by our friends, family, and co-workers than we are by our fellow church members?

There's not much to say at this point about Noah's three sons at this point. They are not listed in birth order here, and we can't be exactly sure of what their names mean. We do know that they are of immense importance as the ones who will carry both the physical and spiritual heritage of their father, and that these three, along with their wives, will found a new world and will preserve what remains of the old.

We'll finish today with verses 11 and 12:

*The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.
And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.*

Again, this would seem to be repetitious, and needlessly so, unless we have two written accounts woven into Genesis here, one by Noah, and one by his sons. With that in mind, this makes perfect sense. We are told by both Noah and by his sons just how bad the condition of the world had become. Is it any surprise, then, that when we are told in verse 5 that "*every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*" that we would find that the "*earth was filled with violence*"? Man's heart without a respect for God is a truly frightening thing. The unrestrained heart is completely selfish. The irony is that we can be utterly wicked and yet feel we are pretty good people! That's another sermon, though. I'm sure, though, that if we went into that point in world history, interviewed the people, and asked them, "Is every imagination of the thoughts of your heart only evil continually?" not one of them would agree. I'm sure they'd all deny that, some by laughing, some by becoming insulted. "No, I'm not a bad person!" They might say that they're not perfect, but you know, they're not all that bad, either. People are people, in any time or place. We will almost always make excuses for ourselves. We saw this with Lamech back in chapter 4: "Sure I killed a man, but he had it coming. In fact,

everyone else had better watch out, too!” People generally like to think they’re good people—and that is exactly why they hate God. God tells the truth about us that we do not want to hear. God’s record against these people is clear: they were utterly wicked.

When we read the Bible, we discover that *all of us are sinners* and that *all of us face judgment*. In short, our experience parallels that of these folks we are reading about. We are sinners in need of God’s grace. We can discern this clearly in both the Old Testament and the New. We stand before God, deserving His judgment; yet He gives us opportunity after opportunity to repent.

We will see next week that God prepared a means of escape from the coming judgment. That means of escape was provided not just for Noah and his children, but for *anyone* who would believe God’s revelation. We will also see that God will sacrifice everything in order to preserve holiness; indeed, He must or else there is no absolute right or wrong in the universe. Let His saints take comfort: God is a holy God, and He *will* secure holiness—never doubt it!

In the meanwhile, we live in an evil, broken world. How are we to live in such a world? Just as Noah did!

But and if ye suffer for righteousness’ sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled;

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:

Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.

For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing. (I Peter 3:14-17)