

The Greatest Story Ever Told

A Back-to-Basics Catechesis

The Great Flood

In the Story of Cain and Abel, we saw how easily sin causes more sin. Adam and Eve's sin wounded our nature and made us strongly inclined to sin. While God teaches that we can master sin, the Scriptures tell the sad legacy that we are now inclined to indulge our sins, more than master them. Cain yielded to his envious anger and killed his brother. The poison of sin is multiplying! We have much to learn in what God does in response.

The Wages of Sin is Death

By the sixth chapter of Genesis, we are told that sin had so multiplied among the children of men that God found it necessary to take severe actions. Before the great flood, people lived to be very old. It is said that Adam lived to be 930 years old. Most of the other patriarchs and people before the flood lived well into their 900s as well. Methuselah lived 969 years and Noah 950. While many scoff at these ages as unlikely, we need not doubt that Scriptures record their ages accurately just because it is not our current experience. Indeed, the Scriptures also record that God put an end to such lengthy lives due to sin. We read: *So the LORD said, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days shall be 120 years."* (Gen 6:3). Recall that God had warned Adam and Eve that if they ate the forbidden fruit, suffering and death would be their lot. Prior to this they were immortal. Hence, we see that as sin multiplies, age spans decrease. St. Paul says, *The wages of sin is death* (Rom 6:23). Hence, while the first generations of humanity lived long lives, life spans soon grow

dramatically shorter, and God links this to our contentious sinfulness. 120 years eventually shortens even more. While Moses lived to be 120, King David records that, by his generation, *Our years are seventy, or eighty for those who are strong. And most of these are emptiness and pain. They pass swiftly and we are gone.* (Ps 90:10)



Yes, the wage of sin is death. Sin weakens us, multiplies our sorrows and we grow quickly old in our sins. Many of the Saints and theologians of the Church have remarked that shortening our lifespans is actually a mercy of God given the pain and sorrows of this life and our wearying expose to sin and Satan. God limits our sorrows and grief in this vale of tears.

The Great Flood.

But limiting lifespans is not alone sufficient. God decides that He must wash away the increasingly horrifying effects of sin. We read the following description of God's observations and resolve: *Then the*

LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was altogether evil all the time. And the LORD regretted that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—every man and beast and crawling creature and bird of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them." (Gen 6:5-7)

To speak of God as “grieved” and regretful is said by a form of analogy called “anthropomorphism” wherein we ascribe human qualities to God. God does not have regret and grief like we do. Rather, He sees the need to intervene given our stubbornness. His “regret” is His will to restart things and set them right. He will use a great flood to accomplish His purposes: *And behold, I will bring*

floodwaters upon the earth to destroy every creature under the heavens that has the breath of life. Everything on the earth will perish. (Gen 6:17)

However, despite this wording, God qualifies His plans and will save a small remnant of mankind and living things. In this way He will establish a new covenant and restore the earth.

But Noah...

Despite almost complete human wickedness, God does know of one righteous family. Scripture says, *Noah, however, found favor in the eyes of the LORD.... Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.*

And Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Gen 6:8-10). Add to these Noah's wife and the wives of his three sons and there are eight righteous in all the earth.

The Lord therefore says to Noah: *The earth is full of violence. Now behold, I will destroy both them and the earth. Make for yourself an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark and coat it with pitch inside and out. And this is how you are to build it: The ark is to be 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high. You are to make a roof for the ark, finish its walls a cubit from the top, place a door in the side of the ark, and build lower, middle, and upper decks. (Gen 6:13-16)*

The "ark" was not really a ship. It was a large box, indeed a very large box! A cubit is the length of an average man's elbow to the tip of his middle finger, about 18 inches (1.5 feet). Hence the ark was approximately 450 feet long (1.5 football fields), 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high.

And the ark needed to be big since God also said: *You are to take with you seven pairs of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate; a pair of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate; and seven pairs of every kind of bird of the air, male and female, to preserve their offspring on the face of all the earth. (Gen 7:2-3)*

And Noah did all that the LORD commanded him.

It is unclear in the account how long it took to build such a massive ark. One might be safe to conclude that it took decades! One can see by this the great obedience and fortitude of Noah and his family. As for the gathering of such a multitude of animals, the biblical text says that the animals came to Noah at the designated time. (see Gen 7:8,15) Hence, the gathering of all the animals and human beings was a work of God alone.

When the ark was completed, and seven days before the flooding rains began, *The LORD said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and all your family... 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 thing I have made."* (Gen 7:1ff)

And the Lord Shut Them In.

An interesting detail that many miss is when Noah, his family, and all the animals were aboard the text says, *Then the LORD shut him in (Gen 7:16).* This is God's work in which Noah has cooperated. The ship has been made according to God's design, but it is not the ship that will save and protect them. It is God and God alone.

For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and the waters rose and lifted the ark high above the earth. So the waters continued to surge and rise greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the waters. Finally, the waters completely inundated the earth, so that all the high mountains under all the heavens were covered... to a depth of fifteen cubits. And every living thing that moved upon the earth perished...and only Noah and those with him in the ark remained. And the waters prevailed upon the earth for 150 days.

There are some who dismiss the flood story as a mere legend. However, most ancient cultures have similar stories and, while much debated, there does seem to be geological and anthropological evidence as well. This all points to some historical event commonly remembered as a great flood by all humanity. You decide if every detail is literal but do not miss what God is teaching.

What do we learn?

Sin had taken a devastating toll on the earth. Since the restoration needed is not only for humankind but included all life on the face of the earth, it

would seem that man's wickedness included ecological harm and ruin as well. Thus, note first the devastating toll of sin.

But the keynote in the Greatest Story Ever Told, is God's abiding love. God does a deep cleansing, to be sure, but he takes a remnant and with that remnant renews the face of the Earth. The human family will continue, along with all the living creatures he has made. God renews, he purifies and prunes, but he does not utterly destroy what he has made. God never fails to offer mercy and renewal.

And thus, we see: *But God remembered Noah and all the animals and livestock that were with him in the ark. And God sent a wind over the earth, and the waters began to subside. The springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens were closed, and the rain from the sky was restrained. The waters receded steadily from the earth, and after 150 days the waters had gone down. (Gen 8:1-3)*

God Put a Rainbow in the Sky

And God established a new covenant with Noah and the human family: *And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. (Gen 9:1).* There is an end of sin and a new beginning for righteousness. This is a symbol for Baptism. God puts a rainbow in the sky as a sign of his covenant and of his enduring love. And while God says he will not use a flood again, mankind will still stand in need of ongoing purifications. St Peter teaches that God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water, but the fire next time! (see 2 Peter 3:10) Yes, having purified us in the waters of baptism, we who are now in Christ Jesus will experience the fiery but thrilling purification of God the Holy Spirit. These old stories point forward in the Greatest Story Ever Told. God will not leave us in sin's grasp. Call to him now, He awaits your "Yes!"