

THE EARLY WORLD

Noah and the Flood, Tower of Babel

Genesis 6-11

STUDY AND REFLECTION

The Flood and God's Covenant with Noah (*Genesis 6-10*)

What was the lifespan of Adam and Eve? What is the lifespan of humans at the time of the flood?

Adam lived 930 years upon the earth and then he died (Gen 5:5). At the time of the flood, God reduced the lifespan of human beings to 120 years. The Lord said, "My spirit shall not abide in man forever for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years" (Gen 6:3).

However, Noah lived a total of 950 years before he died (Gen 9:28).

What had happened to the human race? Why was Noah different?

The wickedness of human beings had become great upon the earth. They willfully refused the help of the Holy Spirit (God's grace) and thus were overcome by sinful passions. Eventually, the Spirit of God leaves them, and God grieves over man's condition. Murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, and every manner of sin become rampant everywhere. The human race is in danger of disappearing from the face of the earth (Athanasius the Great).

Noah was different from the rest. He remained faithful to God, by remaining humble and dependent upon God for His help (grace) to overcome the passions. Thus, the Spirit of God does not leave him. With the grace of God he lives a righteous life in accordance with his faith. Through Noah, God would preserve a remnant; and through the genealogy of Noah, God the Word would become man.

In Scripture, water is a powerful symbol of the Holy Spirit and the action of the Holy Spirit. What do the waters in Gen 1:3 tell us about the Holy Spirit? What do the waters of the Flood tell us about the Holy Spirit? What happens during Baptism, i.e. what is the Holy Spirit doing?

In Gen 1:3, the Holy Spirit moved over the waters, because all living creatures would be born of the water, brought to life by the Spirit. Water becomes the source of all life upon earth. Where there is water there is life. Where there is no water, there is desert. Although water is life-giving, it can also drown, destroy and cleanse. The waters of the Flood are used by God to drown the old sinful way of life, to destroy evil and to cleanse the earth.

In the Mystery of Baptism, all three things are happening at the same time. The Holy Spirit moves through the baptismal waters, because new life will emerge from them. The person is immersed into the waters as if into a womb, to be spiritually re-created and born again as a child of God.

In baptism, the Holy Spirit is also drowning, destroying and cleansing. The person baptized is immersed into death, the death of Christ upon the cross. The old self dies with Christ and the sins of the past are destroyed and washed away. The person then rises up from the baptismal waters to live a new life, in union with Christ's resurrection.

What sign is given to Noah that the Flood is over and that the waters are receding? Why is this important and what does it mean? What symbol or symbols of the Holy Spirit do we find here? What happens during Chrismation?

To see if the waters had receded from the face of the ground, Noah first sent out a raven. Then he sent out a dove, which returned to him. The third time, he sent out a dove again and it returned to him with an olive branch in its mouth. Noah then knew that the waters had receded from the earth (Gen 8:6-11).

The olive branch carried by the dove (a symbol of the Holy Spirit) brought joy and peace for Noah and his family. It confirmed God's protection and restoration: The Flood was over and that they would soon return to the earth. It was also a sign of peace and reconciliation between God and mankind.

Thus, the oil made from the fruit of the olive tree would in time become a fitting symbol of the Holy Spirit and the pouring forth of God's gifts and blessings upon his people. In the Old Testament, kings, priests, and prophets are anointed with chrim oil (made from olive oil) as a sign that God's Spirit is upon them

In the New Testament, prior to Baptism, candidates are anointed with blessed olive oil as a sign of joy, peace and gladness, a sign of God's protection from the evil, and as a sign that their preparation for baptism and a new life in Christ is complete.

In the mystery of Chrismation, every baptized person is anointed with holy chrim oil and sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit as king, priest and prophet. The person is marked by the Holy Spirit and consecrated to the service of God.

The ark is a great vessel that rides above the deathly waves of the Flood and carries the righteous to safety. Can you think of a New Testament parallel, of which the ark is a type? What do the ark and the flood signify? (What do they point to?)

The Ark signifies several things. First, the Ark signifies or points to the mystery of BAPTISM. It is immersed into the waters of the Flood, which bring death and destruction to the old sinful life, but is not destroyed by it. It passes through the waters of the Flood to bring the birth of new life upon the earth.

Secondly, the Ark is a symbol of the CHURCH, the KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH and the BODY OF CHRIST, which bears Christians above the waters of sin, death, and destruction in the world. It saves them and carries them to their ultimate destination:

The Kingdom of God in Heaven. Just as Noah and his family enter the ark through the opening in its side, so those who are baptized into Christ enter into His Body (the Church) through His pierced side, out of which flowed water (a symbol of baptism) and blood (a symbol of Christ's divine life).

Noah was saved because of his faithful obedience. *“By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household” (Heb 11:7).*

Noah is also a type of Christ, a foreshadowing of the Saviour that is to come.

After the Flood, what is the first thing that Noah does once he is on dry land? What solemn promise does God make to Noah, and with what sign did He seal that covenant?

The first thing that Noah does when he is on dry land is to construct an altar and to offer a sacrifice to God (Gen 8:20-22). Seeing this act of gratitude and love, God blesses Noah. He makes a solemn covenant with Noah and his family (and all the nations that will descend from them), and with all living creatures, to never again to destroy all life on earth as He did with the flood. He seals His covenant promise with a sign, the rainbow, which would be a perpetual reminder of His promise.

What's the difference between a contract and a covenant?

A covenant is a solemn promise, confirmed by an oath concerning future action. The oath might be expressed in words or in a symbolic action. Covenants are irrevocable.

A contract is basically an agreement between two parties regarding certain actions. Contracts are meant to be fulfilled, but they can be broken with certain legal implications.

What are the terms of the new Covenant which God establishes between Himself and Noah?

God established a covenant with Noah, his descendants, all the nations that would arise from him and re-populate the earth, and with all the living creatures of the earth. This covenant with Noah would remain in effect with all the Gentiles of the earth – until the time of the coming of Christ the Saviour, and the universal proclamation of the Gospel.

On His part, God promised never again to destroy mankind and all living things, as He had done by means of the Flood. In His Divine plan of salvation He would first establish the nations of the earth, peoples grouped in their own lands, with their own language and customs. This division into nations (under the guardianship of angels) would limit the pride of humanity. In time, God would then save mankind part by part, family by family - nation by nation.

For their part, Noah and all the nations were called to fulfill the original command given by God: “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and have dominion over it.” To make life easier, God gave permission for humans to kill animals for food; but not to eat

meat that still has blood in it. Further, God commanded that man shall not take human life. Every human life, created in the image and likeness of God, is precious. Anyone, whether man or beast, who willfully takes the life of another human being, calls upon himself the curse of dying in the same way. (Jesus will also one day say, *“Anyone who lives by the sword shall die by the sword.”*)

The Tower of Babel (Genesis 11)

Review the events following the flood and God’s covenant with Noah (Gen 9:18-11:9). Do you see any change in man’s behavior? What is the new civilization like? Did the “flood solution” to evil work?

Getting rid of the bad people does not seem to have gotten rid of the bad. Almost immediately, Noah got drunk and his sons took advantage of him. Great cities were built and mighty hunters ruled. There is no record of people walking with God or calling upon His name. Instead they strove together to make a name for themselves by building a tower to the heavens, a challenge that God met by confusion their languages and scattering the people throughout the earth. If the Flood was meant to make a permanent change, it does not appear to have worked.

Have you ever wondered why God doesn’t just reach down and eliminate all the bad people”? He did this once and promised never to do it again. Why not? Why was this not the solution?

What does the fact that the Flood seemingly failed in its intent mean about God? This is worth pondering. We have seen already in Genesis 3 that God’s first punishment of man’s disobedience was remedial. God is not intent on vengeance, as we tend to be. We must look for a deeper lesson in the Flood.

How often have you heard someone ask, “Why doesn’t God just wipe out all the bad guys and leave us to enjoy our lives?” Guess what – He already did. The aftermath of the Flood shows clearly that the problem lies deep within human nature and affects all of us. Good behavior isn’t enough. Whatever change was wrought in man’s nature at the Fall persisted even in the offspring of the righteous Noah.

Full restoration will require a far different solution. Under the New Covenant in Jesus Christ, the Church and baptism will do in fact what the Ark and the Flood only pointed to. They will drown sin itself within people, purifying them and restoring them to new life in Jesus Christ, and place them in the family of God, which is the Church.

Having this new nature does not mean that every baptized person is automatically forever without sin. Temporal consequences of the Fall (suffering, death, and what is called concupiscence – the inclination to sin) remain and must be wrestled with, with the help of God’s grace and the sacraments.

In Genesis 11:1, it says that there was only one language and one speech. A large population of humanity came to dwell in the land of Shinar. What part of the covenant were these people not keeping? What commandment were they not fulfilling?

God had said to Noah and his family, *“Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and have dominion over it.”* But this was not happening!

Instead of spreading, multiplying and filling the earth, the descendants of Noah had remained in one general area. A single large concentration of population, with one language and culture, gave them an exalted sense of confidence, pride, security, and stability. Contrary to God’s plans, they were creating “one nation” and not the “many nations” that were to fill the earth.

What the people trying to achieve by building a tower? What does it tell us about their relationship with God?

The people who built the Tower of Babel intended to make “a name for themselves;” meaning to build their reputation. They were proud, full of themselves. They no longer needed God, they had knowledge and science. By building a Tower, they believed that they could join earth to the heavens thereby reaching God and attain His level, becoming “like God” by their own means.

Somewhere along the way, they lost their sense of what it means to be a “created being” in relationship to the Creator. Human beings once again overstep the limits of creature-hood and play God.

By confusing their tongues, what message is being given by God? What is God really trying to say?

First, a unity of the human race that is not based on God is a false unity. These people sought to build their unity on the basis of making a name for themselves. They cared nothing for the name of the Lord God. Man’s true unity must be a union and communion with God.

By confusing their tongues, God disrupted their plans and forced them to spread in different directions and to form the nations that would fill the earth.

In the New Testament, something happens that is in effect a reversal of the Babel event. What is this event? What is the difference?

The reversal of the Babel event is the FEAST OF PENTECOST and the Descent of the Holy Spirit.

At Pentecost, when the Spirit of God fell on Jesus’ disciples, they began speaking in other languages so that people from every corner of the earth understood them. This is the opposite of the Tower of Babel incident. All that was scattered on that day is now brought together into unity by the Holy Spirit, and into communion with the Holy Trinity.

In the Church, the BODY OF CHRIST, God gathers into ONE all His lost children from every corner of the globe, every nation of the earth. Through the Church, all nations of the earth enter into a new relationship with God and are re-integrated into the family of God.