

# *God's Grief*

*Genesis 6: 5-8*

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The account of Noah and the ark is one of the best loved Bible stories. After all, you get all those animals piled together, a huge storm, and a big safe ark. It seemed so fun. Like playing “storm” on the bed with your parents and your stuffed animals.



But the reality of the Flood was much more like this lithotype for Gustav Dore's Bible in 1865. We're stabbed by the poignancy of the tiger with her cub sharing the last rock with the desperate humans. We feel the dangerous cold waters sweeping people into oblivion. It's a difficult story, and we all have to be prepared to be asked by a child the question we as adults learned to ignore: Why did God have to destroy the world with a flood?

In Genesis 6, we get a stunning vision of God's heart. A window opens and we see just how much this world and our part in it matters. We see how our intents and actions have affected him:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Genesis 6: 5-7).

Once again we see the uniqueness of the Hebrew-Christian worldview. Other faiths may have an indifferent force as the background for the universe. Other faiths may have a pantheon of little gods messing with humans for their own ends. Other faiths may have a remote god who can't be bothered to regard humans, but if he does, we're pretty sure he's mad. Others may see no higher power, no design, only cold space as what is beyond us. Only our faith describes a God who is both all-powerful *and* broken-hearted. A God who does not need us, but still gave his heart to us so that we could affect him by our words, deeds and intents.

We see this heart of God poignantly described in the book of the prophet Jeremiah. The LORD speaks to his people:

How I would have set you among my sons,  
And give you a pleasant land,  
A heritage most beautiful among the nations.  
And I thought you would call me, "My Father,"  
And would not turn from following me. (Jer. 3: 19)

We hear the heart yearning in God. He bestowed favor on his people in hopes we would turn to him in thanks, and speak to him intimately, calling him Father. But the result was very different. The passage goes on,

Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so you have been treacherous to me, O house of Israel. (Jer. 3: 20)

As children, we can think our parents are impervious to our words and actions. We think they are so strong we can never hurt them. They seem so powerful and settled and sure that we give no thought to how we might grieve them. It's a shock to discover in adulthood how much worry and pain we gave them. We realize that love makes even the strongest quite vulnerable to the loved one.

The LORD I AM was grieved by the way his created image-bearers treated him. And he was disturbed by the way we treated each other. Did God have wrath towards the people crushing each other with violence? Absolutely he did. Was God wrathful because he's *not* loving? No! Precisely because God is love, he has righteous wrath against the harm we do. Miroslav Volf is a theologian from Croatia who started out thinking that the idea of a God who has wrath is not compatible to the New Testament God of love. But when he saw the horrors of the ethnic wars in his own country, he changed his views. Volf writes, "Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful *because* God is love."<sup>1</sup>

The Triune God who created the world and all that is in it takes us so seriously that he experiences both grief at our rejection of him and wrath over the harm we do. He gives human beings a great deal of power both in the world and in

God's heart. He takes us seriously. And he will not let us get away with trying to be gods ourselves.

So in Genesis 6: 7, the LORD determined that he would not put up with human evil forever. "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." Enough was enough. God was going to call a halt to the whole business. Stopping our evil meant destruction to the rest of creation as well. That's a key point not to miss: my sin never affects just me alone. Even so-called private sin always has relational consequences. And human sin does not just affect humans. The whole created order suffers because of our disorder. We are taken so seriously that we both have and used the power to mess up everything. God determined that enough was enough.

It's here that the story turns. There is one exception to the pattern of wickedness. God regrets making humans, except "Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (6:8). This is a striking statement. Everything is falling into destruction, but one guy is keeping it together. One guy is holding the lifeline for the human race. It's all spinning down to judgment *but Noah* found favor. We read, "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God." These are extraordinary statements in a Bible that declares there is no one righteous, that our hearts are churning out evil all the time. Here is one man who trusted in the LORD, who looked to his God to save him. Not that he was perfect, but that he did not try to be independent man, self-sufficient man, his own god. Noah walked with God. He lived in relationship to his LORD.

So the plan was that God would start over with this one man and his family. He would tell Noah to build an ark big enough to hold pairs of all the animals. Then God would seal them into the ark as the heavens rained down and the springs shot up, forty days and nights of deluge. The whole earth was cleansed of all animal life so that God could start over with this one righteous man.

What do you think about that? I have to say it's a bit baffling to me. The first question I want to ask is, "LORD, didn't you know this would never work out?" Destroying all but 8 people surely meant a new start. But nothing inside us humans got changed. We repeated all the same mistakes. So why did you take us through this destructive flood? Why didn't you just annihilate us forever, or just fix us? Yes, the Flood is troubling because as a salvation strategy, it didn't seem to work. A lot of carnage for not much change.

As I've pondered those questions through the years, I've realized that God has gone to extraordinary lengths to teach us graphically and forever this truth: *it's not your environment that's the problem. It's you. Your heart.*

We may have a host of circumstances that explain our actions. We can find sources in our family history for what has made us like we are. Too much neglect. Too many expectations. Too much privilege. Too little of the necessities. Crazy. Lies. Infidelities and desertions. Alcoholism. Bad set of genes. Yes, without a doubt all these factors influence us. Without a doubt some people get dealt a bad deck of cards. Without a doubt we get screwed up by our families. Every single one of us is fighting an uphill battle against some form of people's mishandling the love of God. So we think, "If only. If only circumstances were different, *then* I'd be better."

But the story of Noah tells us that circumstances are not our deepest problem. God tried that solution for us. He started anew with the best person in the world in a totally pristine environment. But as we'll see, before the first year in the new world was over, Noah and his family had ruined it all. The human problem is the violence and corruption in the heart. It's not the world. It's me. How's that for realism?

The episode of Noah and the ark was never meant for a final solution. But it did become a type. It points us toward what God would one day do in Jesus. We need a faithful man who will gather us into himself and give us his own heart of right relationship to God. Jesus himself is the vessel, the ark, that takes us into a new creation, beginning from the inside out. We need to be carried into a salvation we cannot manufacture. We need a flood that will cleanse us. It will be like a death to our old nature, but then, safe in our ark, in Christ, we will pass into being a new creation. We need to pass through death so that our sinful nature will die. We need to pass into new life with new, changed hearts.

The passage we read from Jeremiah tells us how much God yearns for us to do this, "Return, O faithless children. I will heal your faithlessness" (3: 22). He calls us back. He calls us to have faith enough to admit our need. In Noah's day, the LORD's grief did not move the world to return to him. They carried on insisting they were their own gods. And so the flood came. But in the Jeremiah passage, the LORD's grief cracked open the hearts of his wandering people. They wake up and realize the delusion of their idols. They cry out, "Behold, we come to you, for you are the LORD, our God!" (3: 22).

What does that look like for us? It means realizing how much our heavenly Father longs to receive his children into his arms. Into deeper communion. When that touches our hearts, we cry out in faith, “Father, I can’t save myself from what is due my sin. No appeal to circumstances can cover the reality of my wicked heart. So please, take me into the ark. Cleanse my conscience and lead me through the judgment by placing me in Christ, my ark and my savior.”

In Genesis 7: 16, there’s a little detail that always stirs me. Noah led all the animals into the ark, two by two. Then, we read this: “And the LORD shut him in.” That little phrase cuts both ways. The first is comforting. God tucked him, safe and sound inside the vessel that would endure the flood waters of judgment. God determined when it was time that no more could get on the ark. Noah didn’t keep people out; that was God’s business. God protected Noah by sealing the door.

The second aspect is chilling. When the LORD sealed the door, it was too late for everyone else. The LORD God will call a halt to the way the world is now, just as he did with the flood. Since the coming of Jesus, it has been the age of the gospel. The church of Jesus goes forth and proclaims, “A savior has come. A righteous man has made a new way to God. We can live again in him. Come to Jesus! Be saved. Get in the ark! The doors are open and you are welcome.” But the age of the church as the ark will end. Christ will return. And the preaching of the gospel will cease. The door will be closed. After that, it will be too late.

Of course, our God does not want anyone left outside. Paul writes, “God our Savior desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (I Tim.2: 4) Peter tells us that God not wish that anyone should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3: 9). God was grieved in his heart that his creation would not look to him. He yearns to be our God and to care for us as his beloved people. He has made provision for us to be saved from the hell of trying to solve our lives on our own. He has made provision to save us from the hell of his loving wrath against sin. Psalm 95 tells us, “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Look, this is the day of salvation. While the ark door is open, come inside. Come to Christ. This could be the first time for salvation. Or it could be that you are a rebellious Christian, holding on to control and a cherished sin, and he calls you, “Get out of the flood waters of rebellion and get back into the ark that is Jesus.” We get in the ark of salvation as we take in Jesus Christ by faith. The door is open. The flood is coming. Dear ones, get in the ark!

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<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Volf as quoted in Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity* (IVP: 2012), p. 119.