

Needing Salvation (Genesis 6-9)

The story of Noah and the flood is the first major story of God bringing salvation. It also focuses on the covenant that God makes with Noah, his family and all the creatures of the earth. In this talk we see how Noah is a model for the better salvation that God brings through Jesus.

Do you need saving?

Do you need saving? Some people may take the question quite offensively. To need saving implies that there is something wrong with us.

And yet, perhaps the last couple of years have made us more open to the idea.

Before Covid most of us were probably reasonably happy with life. Things may not have been perfect, but life carried on as normal and there was no reason to think that it would not carry on in the same way. There was no felt need for salvation.

But, then the Pandemic hit and suddenly life was turned upside down. There was a real prospect of being seriously ill and even dying and much of what we counted on for as normality was snatched away from us to help stop the spread of the disease. Suddenly the idea that we needed saving became very real.

More recently we have been reminded of the serious concerns over climate change. If we carry on in the same way as we are now, the world will not be alright, in fact it could become a much worse place to live. We and our world need saving from climate change.

More positively, the birth of children can force us to think more fully about the world they are going to grow up into. We may feel that life is OK for ourselves, but when a child comes along, do we feel in some way that our family needs saving from some of the corruption and wickedness in the world.

Today we are looking at the story of Noah. It comes in the first few chapters of the Bible. These are chapters that want to show us a Christian understanding of what it means to be human. We've seen that we are created in God's image and in that sense we are amazing, beautiful creatures. But, we have also seen that we chose to reject God's rule in our lives and go our own way. As a result, our relationships with each other and with the creation we were meant to care for have been messed up. We need saving from the mess of our own creating and Noah shows us God's first great act of salvation.

The Problem:

The story starts in chapter 6. In verses 5 and 6, just before our reading starts, God has looked at his world again. He sees the corruption and destruction that human people have brought to his good creation. It actually says that he saw that, 'the human heart was only evil all the time.'

As a result God is grieved. He is sorry. God is not indifferent about what happens to his creation. He cares deeply and is affected deeply by the horrible way we treat one another and the world around us.

The result is that God decides a 'Total Wipeout' is needed. He is going to reverse the creation and destroy every living creature.

Although they did not realise it at the time, wicked humanity was in desperate need of some kind of salvation. The flood was coming.

But how was salvation possible?

Human Saviour

Back in Genesis 3, there is a promise that God would destroy the devil or the serpent through the work of a child of Eve. In other words, God was going to bring salvation through a human. God was going to use a human saviour.

In our story, Noah becomes the human Saviour. Noah is exceptional. First of all unlike everyone else at the time, Noah found favour with God. He was a righteous man and blameless.

It also says he walked faithfully with God. In other words, he had a special relationship with God. A closeness to God.

Here is a man of faith. He trusts God. When God tells him that the world is about to change radically, because of a flood he believes God. When God tells him he needs to build an ark to be saved, he believes God and so obeys God and builds the ark, exactly as God tells him. When God tells him that the flood is about to come, he believes God and goes into the ark.

Noah is the believing and obedient human, who has a special relationship with God. As a result he is saved.

But, he does not just save himself, he saves his family. We are not told that there was anything particularly good about Noah's wife, his sons or their wives. They are saved not because of their goodness, but because they are part of Noah's family and are willing to trust him.

More than that Noah does not just save himself and his family, he saves the animals too. His ark is big enough to take two of every kind of animal, so that when God sends them into the ark, they are saved from the flood. God's salvation is about far more than saving humans, it is salvation for the wider creation and it all happens, through Noah, the human saviour.

Faithful God

So, Noah, his family and the animals all go into the ark. The flood comes and there is a total wipe out. All that is left is Noah and those with him on the ark.

As they sat their on the ark and the floods continue for 150 days, imagine how Noah must have felt. Maybe your recent experience of lockdown was similar. Stuck in a small space, with just your family and pets. OK Noah had a lot more pets, but you perhaps get the idea!

No doubt, Noah had doubts? Had God forgotten all about him. Maybe through lockdown you had similar doubts, has God forgotten me? Perhaps through other difficult life experiences, you may have felt that you have been forgotten by God. It is an idea expressed in the Psalms. Psalm 13:1 says:

"How long, O LORD? Will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1)

Yet, God had entered into a covenant with Noah. In 6:18 it says:

"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." (Genesis 6:18)

It was God's commitment to a special relationship with Noah. A relationship sealed by a promise. So had God forgotten his promise to Noah, had God abandoned the covenant. Was God to prove faithless.

No. No. No.

In 8:1 it says, "But God remembered Noah." This is the turning point of the whole story. Up to this point the floods have risen, now they fall and eventually Noah, his family and the animals are able to leave the ark and return to dry land.

Because God remembered Noah, the total wipe out, becomes a new creation for Noah and the occupants of his ark to enjoy. Salvation, occurs because God is a faithful God.

New Covenant

But, God does not just save Noah so that things go back to the way they were before. Now, things are different, because God creates a new covenant. Not just with Noah, but with all of Noah's family, descendants and all the animals. This new covenant promises, that there will never again be a total wipe out.

They are not just saved through this flood, only to face the fear of another flood again. No, God promises that such a flood will never happen again. The descendants of Noah, the creation can be confident that such total destruction will not be repeated or allowed.

Not because humanity has changed, but because God has promised. Because of this new covenant between God and his creation. God's covenant brings security and peace.

And to seal the covenant, God introduces a sign, the rainbow. At the beginning of lockdown, we used the rainbow as a sign to remind us of all the hard work and sacrifice of the people in the NHS in the face of a pandemic.

Here, we are told it is God who uses the rainbow as a sign and a reminder. A reminder of his covenant with us, so that he will not forget what he has promised us, that there will be no more total wipe out. But it is also a sign for us. A reassurance of God's care and concern for his creation.

Continuing problems:

The new covenant for Noah is a wonderful assurance for him, us and all creation. But, a lot of problems remain. At the end of chapter 8, God says that 'every inclination of humankind is evil from childhood.' Human corruption remains. The curse of death and hard work remain. The oppressive way that humanity exploits creation remains.

There has been a change of sorts. The future of God's creation has been guaranteed, but we need more than that. We still need saving.

But Noah's salvation is God's first act of salvation. It is a pointer to us of a better salvation to come.

A better salvation:

Human Saviour: Jesus

This better salvation, has a human saviour: Jesus. Like Noah, he is righteous and blameless - only more so. Like Noah he walks with God, only this time he is God's own Son, the relationship is eternally special.

Like Noah, he is faithful and obedient. But for Jesus, the act of salvation is not building a boat, but dying on a cross. This is a greater sacrifice. A deeper rejection by the rest of humanity.

Like Noah, Jesus's act of salvation brings salvation to his family - those who decide to trust in him and follow him in their lives, will share in the salvation Jesus wins.

Faithful God: Resurrection

Like in the story of Noah, God proves faithful in the story of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He felt abandoned, he felt forgotten by God, as he seemed overwhelmed by his death and execution.

One interesting suggestion is that the dimensions of the ark create the shape of a giant coffin. In fact the Hebrew word for 'ark' is similar to the Egyptian word for coffin. Jesus did not enter an ark, but he entered the grave. He was not overwhelmed by a flood, but by death itself.

But, God did not forget Jesus, just like he did not forget Noah. Rather, God raised Jesus from the dead, to a new existence and a new creation.

New Covenant: Baptism

And so Jesus leads the way into a new covenant with God. A covenant that is far greater than the one with Noah. It is not simply a promise of no more total wipe out, but a promise of a new creation both now in this life as our evil hearts can begin to be transformed to be the kind of people God made us to be and a promise of an even better new creation in the world to come, when we will share in Jesus's resurrection from the dead and a new life to come.

And what is the sign that helps remind God of this new covenant he has with those who follow Jesus? It is baptism.

In 1 Peter 3 it says this about the flood:

"In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolises baptism that now saves you also-- not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience towards God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand--with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him." (1 Peter 3:20b-22)

Baptism is not about what we do to make ourselves right with God, it is a pledge of God's promise, a sign and seal of his covenant relationship with him. Like the rainbow it is a reminder and reassurance that God will not forget us. It is a pledge that he will save those who are part of Jesus's family.

How do we respond?

So, we return to the question: Do you need saving?

Noah's family needed saving. Jesus came to offer a better salvation to the whole world.

In baptism today, Chloe is being offered the guarantee of that salvation, if she remains part of Jesus's family.

So do you need saving? It was because they accepted that they needed saving, that Noah's family got on the boat. Everyone else thought they were alright and perished.

Unless we accept that we need God's salvation - help to lead a better life now, help to care for God's creation in a better way now, help to care for our families in a better way now and help to find a way through death itself, then we will not choose to become part of Jesus's family and accept his gift of salvation.

Do you need saving?