

Noah. Bethesda Bible Teaching. Lord's Day, 21 June 2009.

As most of you know, this is the second in our series of Old Testament characters to whom God spoke. And this morning we are considering the life of Noah.

And there is certainly no shortage of material. Apart from one sad lapse recorded at the close of Genesis 9, Noah is known only for the all-important role which he played through what we know as the Great Flood – the account of which occupies the best part of four chapters of the Book of Genesis – 82 verses to be precise. On top of which you will find that Noah is mentioned in eight other books of scripture, five of which are in the New Testament.¹ So, as I say, there is no shortage of material.

But in our study this morning we focus on the five recorded occasions on which God spoke to Noah.²

Let us therefore read from the Book of Genesis, first from chapter 6, taking up the story at verse 13 ...

And God said to Noah, 'The end of all flesh has come before me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood ...'

Chapter 7 verse 1 ...

And the Lord said to Noah, 'Come into the ark, you and all your household ...'

Then chapter 8 verse 15 ...

And God spoke to Noah, saying, 'Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing of all flesh that is with you' ...'

And, finally, chapter 9 verse 1 ...

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth ... '.

Verse 7 ...

Be fruitful and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth and multiply in it'.

And God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying, 'And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you ...'

Verse 11 ...

'Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth...'

Verse 13 ...

'I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token (a sign) of the covenant between me and the earth'.

You may have noticed that, on the first four of the five occasions on which God spoke to Noah, His message took the form largely of commands, whereas on the final occasion it took the form of a promise, indeed, more accurately, of a covenant.

But, before we go any further, we need to stand back and set these divine revelations in their context.

By my reckoning, according to Genesis 7 and 8, it was 371 days from the time 'all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened' until the time God told Noah and his family to step out of the ark onto dry ground.³

As far as the record goes, the first time the Lord spoke to Noah was in chapter 6 verses 13 to 21, when God warned Noah of the forthcoming flood and charged him to build an ark. I know of no way of dating this revelation to Noah. But certainly, it was nowhere near, as is so often claimed, 120 years before the flood!

The Holy Spirit has not only made it very clear that the flood commenced when Noah was 600 years old,⁴ but has gone so far as to give us the exact date that year when this took place; namely the 17th day of the second month.⁵

Chapter 5 verse 32 tells us that Noah was 500 years old when he fathered his first son.⁶ At by time God first spoke to Noah about the forthcoming judgement and told him to build the ark, Noah not only had three sons, but all three were already married.⁷

Even if we assume that Noah's three sons were around sixty years of age when God first spoke to Noah,⁸ given that Noah was 500 years old when his first son was born and 600 years old when the flood occurred, God's word to Noah can have come to him no more than 40 years before the flood. I suspect that thirty years would be nearer the mark.

And that then would be the length of time during which, in the language of the New Testament, Noah 'prepared' the ark – and not for 100 years or more.⁹

God's first recorded message to Noah alerted Noah to His decision, on account of man's gross wickedness, to destroy the human race.¹⁰ We read, back at the end of chapter 1, that 'God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good'.¹¹ But now, we read, He 'saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth', and that when He 'looked on the earth ... behold, (not 'it was very good' but) it was corrupt.'¹² The mandate which God had originally given Adam and Eve had been to 'fill the earth' – to fill it with offspring, that is¹³ – but mankind had filled it rather 'with violence'.¹⁴

Having decided 'I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth',¹⁵ the Lord made this known to Noah.¹⁶

And the man to whom God spoke was certainly an exceptional man – righteous before God,¹⁷ blameless before his contemporaries (which is how I understand the expression 'in his generations'), and walking in the steps of his great-grandfather Enoch ... who, long before Noah, 'walked with God'.¹⁸

And Noah's godly life was all the more impressive because of the appalling moral conditions which prevailed in his day. And given the degraded society at the time, Noah necessarily stood very much alone. One American poet and philosopher once wrote, 'If I seem to walk out of step with others, it is because I am listening to another drum beat'.¹⁹ And Noah could certainly have said that!

Apart from the 23 times where the word translated 'ark' occurs in Genesis 6 to 9, it is found in only one other passage in the Old Testament – in Exodus 2, where it refers to the basket of bulrushes in which baby Moses was hidden by his mother.²⁰ We read that 'she (the mother of Moses) took an ark of bulrushes for him, daubed it with bitumen and pitch, put the child in it, and laid it in the reeds by the river's bank'. No doubt such small hand-basket 'arks' could be obtained easily and readymade in ancient Egypt. But, alas for Noah, an ark of the size which God required certainly did not come readymade – nor was it easy to come by!

Somebody once asked G.K. Chesterton, 'If you were marooned on a desert island and could have only a single book, which would you choose? Given Chesterton's reputation as a Christian writer, everyone expected him to respond 'a Bible'. But they were wrong. Quietly he replied, 'Thomas' Guide to Practical Shipbuilding'.

But Noah had better shipbuilding plans than could be found there. For, in terms of the ark's dimensions, structure and material, everything was prescribed for him by the all-wise God. All Noah had to do was to build it!

But the construction of this huge barge-like structure was a staggering undertaking. I say 'barge-like' because, given that it later came to rest 'on the mountains of Ararat',²¹ clearly its bottom was flat – not like that of a ship. But then this vessel was designed for floating, not for navigation!

If we take, as seems reasonable, a cubit to be 18 inches²², according to chapter 6 verse 15, the ark was in effect a huge box measuring 450 feet long, 75 feet broad, and 45 feet deep.

These dimensions make it to be a little larger than Logos Hope. Compared with Logos Hope's length of 132½ metres, the ark was 135 metres. In terms of its breadth, compared with Logos Hope's 21 metres, the ark was 22 metres. And in terms of its gross capacity, the ark came in at almost 14,000 tonnes, compared with Logos Hope's 12,500. So the ark was big!

We are told that the ark had three decks²³ – each of which was divided up into 'rooms' or cubicles.²⁴ Less than a month ago – on 25th May – the world's only full-size replica of Noah's Ark opened in Hong Kong, complete with hand crafted animal models. But I very much doubt that Mr. and Mrs. Noah's room would have matched the accommodation on offer there! But then their room probably didn't cost as much either.

Noah was given his passenger list – although he was to be given further details nearer the departure time.

Thankfully, whereas he was told to ‘gather’ to himself ‘every sort of food that is eaten’ – ‘food’, that is, of a vegetarian kind²⁵ – Noah didn’t have to collect, still less capture, any of his fellow-passengers! God assured him that they would ‘come to him’ of their own accord.²⁶

‘Thus did Noah’, we are told.²⁷ No questions asked. ‘According to all that God commanded him, so he did’.

Not that we are compelled to believe that Noah and his sons built the ark all on their own – anymore than we believe that Bezaleel and Oholiab built the tabernacle by themselves²⁸ or that Solomon built the Temple on his own – even though there are verses which might have suggested to us that they had if we didn’t know otherwise. I shouldn’t be surprised if ‘Noah and Sons’ hired a workforce to assist with the project, taking full advantage of the iron tools invented by Tubal-Cain many years before.²⁹

And yet, even so, it was an incredible engineering challenge. And let us not forget that, as yet, Noah had seen no rain – still less witnessed a flood.³⁰ He built his ark without one cloud on the horizon.

But for Noah it was enough that God had spoken – a point picked up by the writer to the Hebrews. ‘By faith Noah’, he wrote, ‘being warned by God of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household’.³¹

The fact that, when God next spoke to Noah – at the beginning of chapter 7 – He gave him a full week’s notice of the imminent downpour suggests that, given the size of Noah’s ‘passenger list’, boarding was going to take some time.³²

Verse 2 reads literally, ‘You shall take with you seven seven each of every clean animal, a male and his female; two each of animals that are unclean, a male and his female’.³³ To me, the meaning is unmistakable – there would be seven pairs of clean animals, just as there would be one pair of unclean. And this, for the obvious reason, that extra numbers of clean animals would be needed for the purpose of sacrifice – or the clean animals would soon become extinct.³⁴

Again, on this, the second time when God spoke to Noah, great emphasis is laid on Noah’s obedience.³⁵

It must have been an amazing sight – a seemingly endless stream of animals of all shapes and sizes, from far and near, and all converging on the door which, according to God’s specification, Noah had set in the side of the ark.³⁶

Converging, did I say? Led there, rather, by the same divine hand which would one day direct two milch cows to bring back a very different kind of ark out of the land of the Philistines ... which would direct ravens – not to leave an ark, as Noah in verse 7 of the next chapter – but to nourish an obedient prophet ... which would direct a lion to meet, tear and kill – but not devour – a disobedient prophet ... which would direct two she bears to deal with a group of mocking youths ... and which would, as we have heard over the past two weeks, direct a great fish to provide three days’ free hospitality for a reluctant preacher.³⁷ No indeed, the Lord God had no problem in bringing – perhaps by some form of migratory instinct – all these animals and birds to the right door.

And, when all were safely aboard and settled in, God took care of the one thing which Noah could not – ‘the Lord shut him in’ – ensuring that there was no gap, no matter how small, through which even one drop of water might seep into the ark.³⁸ For it was the same hand which was to open the windows of heaven which first shut the door of the ark. Noah’s floating zoo didn’t boast any water pumps but then it wouldn’t need any!

The forty days and nights of torrential rain were followed by a further 110 days when the waters continued to ‘prevail’ – making 150 days in all – or five months as reckoned by scripture. And I note that the word ‘prevail’, which occurs four times in this section³⁹ is a military word for success in battle.⁴⁰ The waters, that is, ‘triumphed over’ the world.⁴¹

And so chapter 7 closes on a scene of almost total desolation – with water enveloping the whole earth, as though the world had returned to its condition at the dawn of creation.⁴² Nothing remained of those manifold forms of life which until recently had been spread on the surface of the planet. Nothing? Well, not quite nothing. For, almost lost in that terrifying expanse of water, there was one tiny speck.

But that one tiny speck is enough. For, as the first verse of chapter 8 assures us, ‘God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the animals that were with him in the ark’. Indeed, that statement furnishes the central hinge of the whole flood narrative.⁴³

And whereas *until* now the waters of the flood have 'increased greatly' and 'prevailed exceedingly' so as to cover the highest mountain peaks⁴⁴ ... *from* now on the waters will begin – albeit gradually – to recede, until in God's time the ground is sufficiently dry for Noah and his passengers to disembark.

But we note that, although the ark came to rest on one of the mountains of Ararat on the 17th day of the seventh month⁴⁵ – five months to the day after the flood began⁴⁶ – although the ceasing of the vessel's movements must have told Noah that his gigantic houseboat's floating days were over – and although he and his fellow passengers had been cooped up on board already for five months, he took no action for a further 114 days. That's almost four more months! And the only action he took *then* was to set free two birds – one clean and one unclean – over a three week period that he might find out whether the waters had yet 'receded from the face of the ground'.⁴⁷

And when he knew that they *had* receded? He waited – for almost another month – before removing the ark's covering that he might have a good look around. And when, according to verse 13, he saw that 'behold, the face of the ground was dry'⁴⁸ ... he waited! He made no move to leave the ark. Not until, almost two months later again, he heard that familiar and doubtless very welcome voice again – when 'God spoke to Noah, saying, "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing of all flesh that is with you".⁴⁹

Only then – at God's command – did Noah step off the ark. Clearly he believed that God knew best and trusted Him to release him and his passengers at the first suitable moment. And he was, of course, right. For when it says in verse 14 that 'in the 27th day of the second month the earth was dried', the word translated 'dried' indicates fully dried, 'dried out'⁵⁰ – unlike that in verse 13 which tells us that back on that New Year's Day 'the surface of the ground was dry' ... when, though no longer covered by any depth of water, it would inevitably have still been very wet and muddy.

Hebrews 6 verse 12 speaks of 'those who through faith and patience inherit the promises'. And so it was with Noah. Having exercised remarkable faith, and no less remarkable patience, in the middle section of chapter 9 – on the last occasion when God spoke to him, he inherited some very impressive promises. Although first, having *walked with* God, having *worked, witnessed and waited for* God, he had built his altar and *worshipped before* God, sacrificing his burnt offerings, to which God had responded by blessing him and twice repeating to him the remit which He (the Lord) had originally given to Adam and Eve - to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'.⁵¹

Nor did Noah inherit the promises of chapter 9 for himself alone. For God established, not only with Noah, but with 'every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth'⁵² an 'everlasting covenant'⁵³ to the effect that there would never again (a point he stressed three times⁵⁴) be a worldwide flood 'to destroy all flesh'.⁵⁵ And the appointed 'token' or 'sign' of this covenant (the first covenant of which scripture speaks) would be the 'bow' which God would henceforth set in the cloud.⁵⁶

And today, just as the fossils in the sedimentary rocks witness to the great Flood of the past, so the rainbow witnesses to the fact that there will never be a second performance!

The Hebrew text of the Old Testament used the same word for a rainbow as it did for a battle-bow. And, inasmuch as the Bible sometimes uses the imagery of the battle-bow when speaking of God's wrath and judgements,⁵⁷ it may be – it just may be – that the Lord here speaks as if He is hanging His bow in the heavens as a sign to all His earthly creatures that He will never visit the earth again with the same mode of judgement as He did in what our Lord Jesus spoke of as 'the days of Noah'.⁵⁸

The choice of a rainbow as a symbol of God's promise and blessing has captured the imagination of many Christian poets and hymn-writers. One such was George Matheson.

In closing, let me quote to you the third verse of his well-know hymn, 'O love that will not let me go'⁵⁹ ...

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.*

Footnotes

¹ 1Chron. 1. 4; Isa. 54. 9; Ezek. 14. 14, 20 (but see too verses 16 and 18); Matt. 24. 37-38; Luke 3. 36; 17. 26-27; Heb. 11. 7; 1 Pet. 3. 20; 2 Pet. 2. 5.

² Gen. 6. 13-21; 7. 1-4; 8. 15-17; 9. 1-7; 9. 8-17 (split into three sub-sections; verses 8-11, 12-16, and 17).

³ Generally speaking, the scriptures are precise as to the dating of the main events.

Event	Date	Scripture references
Flood announced and instruction to build ark.	Unknown. Probably 30-50 years before the flood.	Gen. 6. 13
God's command that Noah enter ark.	10 th day of second month of Noah's 600 th year.	Gen. 7. 1 (note 'yet seven days', v. 4)
Flood commences.	17 th day of second month of Noah's 600 th year. DAY 0	Gen. 7. 11
Heavy rainfall etc ceases.	40 days later. DAY 40	7. 4, 17
Flood 'prevails'. But after 40 days begins to decline gradually. By the end of 150 days lowered to point that ark could settle on a high mountain.	Another 110 days; making 150 days in all. 17 th day of seventh month. DAY 150	7. 24 8. 3-4 (verse 3 refers to the 150 days of 7. 24)
Flood continues to decrease to 10th month. (As it does for another three months – see 8. 13.) Other mountain tops now visible.	1 st day of 10 th month. I.e. period of 74 days (13+30+30-1) DAY 224	8. 5
Noah sends out raven.	40 days later. DAY 264	8.6-7
Noah sends out dove for first time.	7 days later (see "yet other", 8.10). DAY 271	8.8
Noah sends out dove for 2nd and 3rd times.	14 days more. DAY 285 I.e. now 2 nd day of 12 th month.	8. 10, 12
Noah removes covering and sees dried ground.	Further 29 days; now 1 st day of 1 st month of Noah's 601 st year. DAY 314	8.13

Earth now dry enough for Noah to leave ark. God tells him to do this.	57 days later, now 27 th day of 2 nd month. DAY 371	8. 14
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⁴ Gen. 7. 6.

⁵ Gen. 7. 11.

⁶ Indeed, we know the order in which his sons were born – and that this was not, as might be assumed ‘Shem, Ham and Japheth’! For, according to chapter 10 verse 21, Japheth was the oldest, and, according to chapter 9 verse 24, Ham was the youngest. Shem, therefore, ranked as the middle son. (LXX, Symmachus, Rashi, possibly the MT, and Cassuto suppose that “oldest” modifies “Japheth”. Combined with the comment that Ham is the youngest, make the order “Japheth, Shem, Ham”. (Based on the Word Biblical Commentary on Gen. 10. 21.) Shem was born 98 years before the Flood, Gen. 11. 10, whereas the first of Noah's sons was born 100 years before the Flood, Gen. 5. 32 with 7. 6,11. Shem could not, therefore, be older than Japheth and the footnote to Gen. 10.21 in the NIV is therefore wrong. I suspect that the standard summary order of ‘Shem, Ham and Japheth’ reflects the practice of naming first the son who features in the Messianic line. The same is true, for instance, back in chapter 11 verse 26, where the sons of Terah are listed as ‘Abram, Nahor, and Haran’, whereas we know from other scriptures that Abraham was certainly not Terah's firstborn. (Terah's firstborn was born when he was 70 years of age, Gen. 11. 26. But Abraham was born when Terah was 130 years of age; Abraham left Haran when his father died, Acts 7. 4, being then 75 years of age, Gen 12. 4, when Terah was 205 years old, Gen. 11. 32.)

⁷ Gen 6. 18 etc.

⁸ From the previous chapter, chapter 5, we discover that, throughout the previous ten generations, the very youngest age at which any man fathered his first son was 65 years, Gen. 5. 15, 21. We read of no children taken into the ark and can assume therefore that none of Noah's sons had yet fathered any offspring.

⁹ The ‘120 years’ of Genesis 6 verse 3 (which I am happy to accept does refer to the interval before the Flood came) is clearly related to the intermarriage between the ‘sons of God’ and the ‘daughters of men’ (whoever you understand these to be) and not to any revelation which God gave to Noah.

¹⁰ Gen. 6. 7.

¹¹ Gen. 1. 31.

¹² Gen. 6. 5, 12.

¹³ Gen. 1. 28.

¹⁴ Gen. 6. 11.

¹⁵ Gen. 6. 7.

¹⁶ Gen. 6. 13.

¹⁷ Gen. 7. 1; cf. Ezek. 14. 14, 20 (together with verses 16 and 18); Heb. 11. 7; 2 Pet. 2. 5.

¹⁸ Gen. 6. 9; cf. Gen. 5. 24.

¹⁹ Henry Thoreau.

²⁰ Exod. 2. 3, 5.

²¹ Gen. 8. 4.

²² 45 centimetres.

²³ Totalling over 100,000 square feet of deck space.

²⁴ An ark of the dimensions described would have been extremely stable and almost impossible to capsize. The existence of the floor timbers for the three storeys, 6. 16, and the walls for the many ‘rooms’ would have served to strengthen and brace the ark for the tempestuous weather ahead. The vessel was covered with pitch inside and outside so that water couldn't seep through into it, Gen. 6. 14.

²⁵ Gen. 1. 29-30; contrast Gen. 9. 3.

²⁶ Gen. 6. 20.

²⁷ Gen. 7. 1.

²⁸ Compare Exod. 37. 1 and 38. 22 with Exod. 36. 6. And 1 Kings 6. 9, 14, 22; 7. 51; 9. 1, 25; 2 Chron. 5. 1; 7. 11; 8. 16 with 2 Chron. 2. 2, 17-18; 1 Kings 5. 13; and 2 Chron. 8. 10.

²⁹ Gen. 4. 22.

³⁰ Gen. 2. 5-6.

³¹ Heb. 11. 7.

³² Only now was Noah told anything of the mechanics of the flood – ‘after seven more days I will cause it to rain on the earth forty days and forty nights’, Gen. 7. 4.

³³ See both the Revised Version and JND ‘by sevens’ yet ‘by two’. Also the note by Professor Umberto Cassuto on Genesis 7. 2. The rendering ‘seven pairs’ is found in the Vulgate, LXX., Michaelis, De Wette, Alford and Wordsworth.

³⁴ Although the Lord stated no reason to Noah, Noah was probably already aware of the need to have extra clean animals with him so that he and others might offer sacrifices to God. Cf. Gen. 4. 4 and possibly Gen. 3. 21. Also, although Noah did not yet know it, later he and others would soon be authorised to eat animal flesh, Gen. 9. 3.

³⁵ Note the three-fold refrain in verses 5, 9 and 16, ‘as the Lord (God) had commanded him’.

³⁶ Gen. 6. 16.

³⁷ Indeed, the same hand as would one day direct a much smaller fish in the Sea of Galilee to collect a coin of sufficient value to pay the temple tribute for His Son and one of His disciples, and then come in to the shore at the very right moment to connect with Peter's shiny hook.

³⁸ I note that God hadn't said a word to Noah about the duration of the flood – about how long he, his family and all these creatures were to be cooped up in his ark.

³⁹ Gen. 7. 18, 19, 20, 24.

⁴⁰ E.g. Exod. 17. 11.

⁴¹ Truly, as the apostle Peter expressed it, God 'did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly', 2 Pet. 2. 5.

⁴² Gen. 1. 2.

⁴³ The structure runs ...

A God resolves to destroy mankind and tells Noah (6. 5-21).

B Noah builds an ark according to God's instructions (6. 22).

C The Lord commands Noah to enter the ark – which Noah does (7. 1-9).

D The flood begins (7. 10-17).

E The flood prevails and the water covers the mountains (7. 18-24).

F God remembers Noah (8.1a).

E' The flood recedes and the mountains are visible (8.1b-5).

D' The earth dries (8. 6-14).

C' God commands Noah to leave the ark – which Noah does (8. 15-19).

B' Noah builds an altar (8. 20).

A' The Lord resolves not to destroy mankind and tells Noah (8.21-9. 17).

⁴⁴ Gen. 7. 18-19.

⁴⁵ Gen. 8. 4.

⁴⁶ Gen. 7. 11.

⁴⁷ Gen. 8. 4-12. I take the 'window', Gen. 6. 16; 8. 6, to be a gap of about 18 inches between the roof-covering and the sides of the ark.

⁴⁸ Gen. 8. 13.

⁴⁹ Gen. 8. 15-17.

⁵⁰ This is the word of Genesis 1. 9.

⁵¹ Gen. 9. 1, 7 with Gen. 1. 28.

⁵² Gen. 9. 9-12, 15-17.

⁵³ Gen. 9. 16.

⁵⁴ Gen. 9. 11 (twice), 15.

⁵⁵ Gen. 9. 15; cf. God's reference back to this covenant in Isaiah 54. 9.

⁵⁶ 'This is the token ...', Gen. 9. 12, 17.

⁵⁷ E.g. Psa. 7. 12; Lament. 2. 4; 3. 12.

⁵⁸ Matt. 24. 37; Luke 17. 26.

⁵⁹ Born with poor vision, George Matheson's eyesight gradually worsened until he was almost totally blind. The words of the hymn came to him during an eighteen-year ministry in the Church of Scotland's Clydeside parish of Innellan. His own account is sometimes embellished with romantic fiction. He was alone in the Manse on 6 June 1882; one sister was just married; other relatives were away in Glasgow. 'Something had happened to me which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering'.