

JUDGMENT AND RESCUE

by Steve Zeisler

"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so shall the coming of the Son of Man be." (Matthew 24:36-39, NASB.)

These words of Jesus might serve as a good summary plot for the most successful movie to date in Hollywood history, *Titanic*. In the movie life was going on as expected, people assuming their right to happiness and frivolity, the rich assuming they could enjoy their riches. Then in a moment of awful surprise, terrible events took place, and suddenly hundreds of passengers were drowning. *Titanic* is the story of a surprise flood and of a great ship. This ship was impressive, filling the screen with its remarkable qualities. It was a showpiece ocean liner, fast, elegant, richly appointed to pamper wealthy passengers. For its day, it was the height of luxury and technology.

The Biblical account of an unexpected flood also centers on a water craft, the ark of Noah. You can picture it in your imagination. It was completely different from the Titanic, but remarkable and impressive in its own way. It was a hulk of a boat, made out of wood and covered with pitch on the inside and outside. Within the structure of the boat there were three decks, dimly lit, we can imagine. And in among these decks were built homes for animals-stalls, nests, warrens-so they would survive. There was a great storehouse of food that would be needed during the months that the ark floated on the flood.

These two giant water craft are more compelling because the stories about them are true. At the bottom of the Atlantic, the wreckage of the Titanic has been discovered, and efforts have been made to bring up relics of the lost lives of people who were on that ship. And there are tantalizing tales of the discovery of the ark, perhaps encased in ice, on the top of Mount Ararat in Turkey. Over the last hundred years or so many have reported seeing a large wooden boat there. Whether its remains are discovered or not, the ark was a real boat, with real passengers- just like the Titanic.

It's difficult to know how the Genesis story of the flood was accomplished in scientific terms. The early chapters of Genesis have many questions of this type. All the questions aren't answered. We don't know everything that the Biblical literature is teaching. Modern science has great gaps in its understanding as well. But there is abundant evidence of a catastrophe on the earth. Geologists tell of a period in earth's history when something extraordinary took place. There is evidence, for instance, that the land mass in Antarctica, now covered with ice, was once tropical.

We also know that cultures all over the world have legends telling the story of an awful deluge that inundated ancient peoples. The stories are different in detail, but remarkably similar in at least the outline. The account of Genesis took place with real people, real cries of terror, real loss of everything. We won't be able to read all of Genesis 6 and 7 in this message. I urge you to read them in your own Bible. As you do so, view these events as not just some sort of myth or story, but as history, and try to imagine what it would have been like to be there.

The other similarity between the contemporary movie *Titanic* and the ancient account of the flood in the Bible is the focus on individuals. The Titanic was filled with people, but the two young lovers form the heart of the story. They had a different set of values from everyone else. In their case, romantic love conquered all. That's a theme of the movie. In the Bible text we find one man and his family who are the focus of the story. It's not

just the terrible events, but the story of Noah and his family that become the fascination. Noah took a stand on faith in God that set him apart from everybody else in the world he lived in, a life that stood out uniquely in his day and time.

THE DAY OF THE CATAclysm

God declared his horror at what the world had become and determined to do something about it. So he commanded Noah to build a boat, and he made him a promise. Noah obeyed God, and finished the craft and gathered the animals into it. The story culminates in 7:11-13 with these words:

In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month-on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.

On that very day Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, together with his wife and the wives of his three sons, entered the ark.

Why did the flood occur? We saw in the opening verses of Genesis 6 (Discovery Paper 4563) a description of the terrible conditions of the earth. Some horrific commingling of demons and humans had taken place so that there was very little normal humanity left on the earth. There's the odd, muted description of the sons of God and the daughters of men having children together. Again, I think the best explanation is that the sons of God were fallen angels, or demons. The human race was degraded almost beyond recognition.

The Bible doesn't describe the colors, the smells, the vistas of this terrible time. The text pulls back and gives us just enough information so that we know what took place, and it gives us God's reaction. We know how thoroughly disgusted he was with the human race. But we aren't invited to imagine the earth in the years before it was destroyed. It's the same perspective we observed in Genesis 3:1 (Discovery Paper 4557). We noted the creation of the man and the woman, and then, unexpectedly, "The serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made." This Satanic figure appeared out of nowhere. The Bible doesn't tell us in any great detail about the fall of Satan and how the demonic beings came into existence. It does us no good to know of the rebellion of angels against a loving God. And we're not supposed to be fascinated by a world in which demons and humans had become allies and intimates. Such information will just bring out the worst in us.

GOD'S CLEANSING OF THE EARTH

We read God's reaction to these terrible conditions in Genesis 6:6-17:

The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth-men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air-for I am grieved that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

This is the account of Noah.

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth.

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high. Make a roof for it and finish the ark to within 18 inches of the top. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle and upper decks. I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of

life in it. Everything on earth will perish.

The language is stark. Let me just note a couple of things. Verse 11 says, "...The earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence." The combination of the words "corrupt" and "violence" is repeated. The moral degradation of a life, the destruction of a soul, is always accompanied by violence. During the Vietnam era some of my contemporaries marched under the slogan "Make love, not war." The point was that sexual liberation, or the experience of unbridled sexuality, was an alternative to violence and war. But that's not the Biblical perspective, and it's never been true. If people give way to lust, greed, or any of the other soul-destroying choices, if humanity becomes morally degraded or corrupt, it becomes violent.

In verses 13 and 17 and at other points throughout the story, we hear God's determination to destroy not only human life, but all other life. Every living creature is going to die except for the few animals that are protected in the ark. That might seem excessive to us until we remember that the human beings were made the regents of earth, to have dominion over created things. Human corruption had accomplished the ruin of everything else. It's somewhat like what we see in the scientific efforts being made today to create highly virulent strains of viruses to be used as weapons. Radioactive waste that will remain a danger for thousands of years and poison everything it comes in contact with. In some places it's leaking into the air and water. Something like that evidently had happened in the days before the flood. Human fools had ruined life everywhere, and there was not enough of anything left to save.

Note the language God used for his choice to act. This is not a description of a potentate who was affronted that his world had been managed badly, and who was going to do something about it. This was not an angry, selfish, proud power who said, "I'm going to show you!"

God was, however, determined to cleanse what had been ruined. Verse 7: "I will wipe mankind...from the face of the earth...." After a little child has tried to eat pudding or some other messy food, you have to get a clean cloth and wipe his or her face off to cleanse it again. In the same way, God said the earth had been covered with filth, and he needed to cleanse it. When he talks about destroying life on earth, it's the language of a surgeon who has to cut out a cancer, someone who is preparing to fix what has gotten wrecked.

NOAH, A RIGHTEOUS MAN

With that in mind, the focus of our attention ought to be what the focus of the text is: Noah. What about this remarkable exception, this unique individual? He lived in a culture that was unimaginably degraded, horribly corrupt, and yet he was different. He found favor in the eyes of the Lord, and became the one man of faith in an entire world going to hell. So what can we learn from him? As I said, there's a great deal more in this passage than we're going to be able to talk about. But consider 6:9: "This is the account of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God."

We're told three things: (1) He was a righteous man. (2) He was a man of integrity who was influential in his generation. (3) He walked with God. There is no such thing as a Christian life that is not counterculture. If you are a follower of the Lord, it means you are going to have to be distinguished from the world you live in. No one can thoroughly participate in everything that's true of the contemporary culture and follow Christ at the same time. This world is no friend of Christ. It persecuted him to death and would do so again, given the opportunity. We have to determine that our lives will be his and will not belong to the world. Noah is a good example of that, and we have a lot to learn from him.

Let's look at the first statement: He was a righteous man. What does that mean? It isn't saying he had righteous moments. It's also not a statement about his popularity. To say someone is a righteous person is to say that you've discovered what is at their heart, the core thing that is true of them. Even the most righteous person can have days when they do things that they're ashamed of. If you looked at them only on that day, you would draw the wrong conclusion. Or if you looked at a person just when they were doing the most altruistic thing they'd ever done, you would also draw the wrong conclusion. The statement that Noah was a righteous man speaks of what was essential to him.

In an era of spin-doctoring, when the outward appearance means everything to everybody, the Bible's

insistence that the outward appearance means nothing and the heart means everything is refreshing to come back to.

You may remember Peter's last conversation with Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee after the Lord had been raised from the dead. Jesus asked, "Peter, do you love me more than these (more than everything else)?"

Peter said, "Yes, Lord, I love you."

But then the question came a second time, "Peter, do you love me?" And then a third time in John 21:17:

"The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?'"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.'"

In this conversation with Jesus, Peter was discovering what was essentially true of him. He couldn't even claim that he knew himself well enough to be sure, but replied, "Lord, *you know* that with all my heart I love you." Jesus' questioning had made it clear that if everything were to be taken away from Peter, what would remain was love for Christ.

Everything would be taken away from Noah, and what would remain was love for God.

INFLUENCE ON OTHERS AND INTIMACY WITH GOD

Secondly, it says that Noah lived a blameless life in the midst of his generation. He didn't hide away from people like a hermit so he wouldn't have to deal with all their corruption. He also didn't compromise himself when he was in public by going along with the crowd, becoming indistinguishable from them. And this blamelessness has something to teach us as well.

Humans have five senses through which they can receive information. It's been interesting to me to observe that the Scriptures refer to all five senses in metaphors that talk about a Christian's influence on other people. (1) Jesus said we are the light of the world, and others will see Christ as they see us. (2) He said that we are salt that should remain salty to the taste, so that our lives have the "taste" of the reality of God about them. (3) Paul described us as an aroma or fragrance of Christ among those who believe and those who don't believe. (4) We speak the words of God and tell the truth to people so that they hear it. And (5) we lay hands on the sick, clothe the naked, and touch those who need the touch of the Lord. In all these ways believing people are to bear testimony to their world as they stand for the Lord. These are the ways that Noah influenced his contemporaries. That can be an encouragement to us.

Lastly, Noah walked with God. That phrase came up in our discussion of Enoch in chapter 5 (Discovery Paper 4563). The point there was that to habitually walk with someone says something significant about how much you value the relationship with them. To choose the intimacy of a walk with its conversation, its leisurely quality, its give-and-take, means your companion is a close and important friend.

Are we different from our contemporaries in these things? Are we different because at the core there is love for God that can't be taken away? Are we different because we live our faith publicly before our contemporaries? Are we different because we walk as the near friend of God?

A REFUGE AND A WARNING

With Noah as our example, we might do well to look at the New Testament. There are at least two ways that the New Testament uses the flood story to teach Christians. One is as a figure for Christ. The other is as a warning.

Let's think about how the flood story is a figure of Christ. That's how 1 Peter 3:20 speaks of the refuge of the ark in the midst of the flood. Noah and his family were called into the ark. God shut the door from the outside

and prepared them for the day in Noah's six hundredth year when the deluge would begin. In that day there was no possibility of learning to swim well enough to survive. They couldn't climb high enough to reach safety. Similarly, there is no way to fix or escape the problem of our sinfulness. We need a savior, somebody to gather us in and protect us. God needs to act. There's nowhere to go except into the ark, to be united with Christ, the one who is the source of our salvation.

The other lesson is the one we began with, the warning. The flood came as a surprise, and Christ's second coming is going to come as a surprise.

We tend to think that our experience is a good teacher, as if it were sufficient to make predictions about the future. We assume that because God hasn't dramatically intervened with terrible judgment during our lives that such things will never happen. But Jesus' warning (which is also given in 2 Peter 2:5) is that just because the end hasn't come yet doesn't mean that it's not going to. Another cataclysm is coming. These people were eating, drinking, partying, going to weddings, and living out their corrupt but comfortable existence-and then came the deluge.

You're a fool if you avoid what the Spirit of God is saying to you. If you're not a Christian and are putting off responding to the claims of the gospel, be aware that there will come a day when there's no longer a choice to make. Not every option stays open forever.

The warning is to take seriously what God takes seriously. If you're a Christian, is the Lord calling for a response from you, an act of repentance or obedience that you are avoiding? The end will always come as a surprise, whether it's the end of your life or the end of the age. If there's a call on your life that you're holding God at arm's length about, ask for the strength to say yes to him.

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