

Week 4: The partnership that saves (Genesis 7–8)

In the movie called *Noah* (2014), Russel Crowe played the title character. It was very different to the Biblical story since the director/co-writer (Darren Aronofsky) was exploring a different question: would it have been better if humans had died out, leaving the world to the animals?

That's not the question Genesis asks. The question in Genesis is whether the world can survive if no one is partnering with God. After Cain left the LORD's presence (4:16) and built a city that relied on violence for justice (4:23), the rest of Adam's family (Genesis 5) redefined "good" as what was good in their own eyes (6:2), lauding the big fighters, the heroes of old (6:4). There was no one left in partnership with God: *every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time* (6:5).

Consequently, *the earth was corrupt in God's sight and full of violence ... for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways* (6:11-12). If no one is partnering with God, there's no future for the earth or any of its creatures.

God found one person who would partner with him. Noah listened to God's instructions to build a box (ark) for the preservation of his family and the creatures of the earth, *to keep them alive with you* (6:19). *Noah did everything just as God commanded him* (6:22). One person in partnership with God—that's all it takes to save the world.

Before we go into the flood story in Genesis 7–8, do you have questions or thoughts on previous chapters?

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Genesis 7: Ruined

How long did the flood last? Do you remember? It rained for 40 days, right? But after then the earth was flooded for 150 days (7:24; 8:3). Then Noah waited for the land to appear, for the earth to dry out, and for God's command to step out into the renewed world. Altogether, they lived in the ark for a whole year.

So why are we told the story in three phases: 40 days, 160 days, the rest of the year? The 40 days and the 150 days are the "unmaking" of creation. After that, Noah waits for the Lord's declaration that creation is renewed, ready for repopulation.

Structure of the Noah story

On the first day of creation, God decreed light in the heavens, separating light from darkness to give us day and night (1:3-5). On Day 2, God prepares the earth by creating a vault in the sky to separate *the waters above* from *the waters below* (2:6-8).

But the world is no longer functioning as God intended. The earth has been *corrupted* because of violence (6:11). The earth became *corrupt, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways* (6:12). When God's agents on earth run amok, the earth itself runs amok. When God's regents no longer follow what God decreed, the earth no longer follows what God decreed.

The flood is described as the collapse of creation. God separated *the waters above* from *the waters below*, but God's decrees have fallen. That's the 40 days:

The world as God decreed (Day 2)	Not functioning as God decreed
<p>Genesis 1:6-8 (NIV)</p> <p>⁶ And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." ⁷ So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.</p>	<p>Genesis 7:11-12 (NIV)</p> <p>¹¹ ... all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. ¹² And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.</p>

Then we see the unmaking of what God decreed on the next day of creation. God commanded the *waters* be gathered into one place, so the *dry land* appeared. In the corrupted world, that no longer stands. The waters transgress their boundary, rising against the earth, overwhelming it. That's the 150 days:

The world as God decreed (Day 3)	Not functioning as God decreed
<p>Genesis 1:9-10 (NIV)</p> <p>⁹ And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.</p>	<p>Genesis 7:18–8:3 (NIV)</p> <p>¹⁸ The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth ... ¹⁹ They rose greatly on the earth ... ²⁰ The waters rose and covered the mountains ... ²³ Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out ... ²⁴ The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days. ... ⁸ ³ The water receded steadily from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the water had gone down.</p>

Noah must then wait until the overwhelming waters recede, until the land appears and dries out, until God decrees that the re-formed earth is ready for habitation (9:15-17). That's the rest of the year.

Does that make sense? What are your thoughts on the structure of the Noah story?

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God's partner in a corrupted world

If the disobedience of the earth means its demise, how does anyone survive in a world that no longer follows what God commanded? There's hope if one person follows God's instructions. That's all it takes to save the world.

The earth was *corrupted* (no longer following God's decrees) because humans had *corrupted* their ways (6 :12). But in that chaos, one person who *did everything just as God commanded him* (6:22) saves himself and the world.

Genesis 6:12-22 (NIV)

¹² God saw how corrupt (*šā·ḥăṭ*) the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted (*šā·ḥăṭ*) their ways. ¹³ 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 (*šā·ḥăṭ*) both them and the earth. ¹⁴ So make yourself an ark of cypress wood ...

¹⁵ This is how you are to build it ...

¹⁷ I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy (*šā·ḥăṭ*) all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish.

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. ... ²² Noah did everything just as God commanded him.

Noah constructed the life-preservation box (ark) as God instructed. When God says it's time to enter the box, Noah obeys, leading the creatures of the earth to safety:

Genesis 7:1-12 (NIV)

¹ The LORD then said to Noah,

"Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation. ² Take with you seven pairs of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and one pair of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate, ³ and also seven pairs of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth. ⁴ Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made."

⁵ And Noah did all that the LORD commanded him. ...

¹¹ 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. ¹² And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.

The corrupted earth cannot stand. The waters below (*springs of the great deep*) and the waters above (*floodgates of the heavens*) flow together to flood the earth.

But even as the waters ruin creation, the waters lift the little preservation box:

Genesis 7:17-24 (NIV)

¹⁷ For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased they lifted the ark high above the earth. ¹⁸ The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the water. ¹⁹ They rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered. ²⁰ The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than fifteen cubits. ²¹ Every living thing that moved on land perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind. ²² Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. ²³ Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; people and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark. ²⁴ The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days.

What God did in partnership with Noah saved the world. The ruination (*šā·ḥăṭ*) of the world with the flood became its rescue.

The ruin and rescue of creation: is that what you hear in Noah's story? What questions does the Noah narrative raise for you?

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Genesis 8: Rescued

It took a full year to cleanse the corrupted earth:

- Noah entered the ark in: year 600, month 2, day 17 of his life (7:11-13).
- Noah left the ark in: year 601, month 2, day 27 of his life (8:13-18).

The years of Noah's life were probably measured in lunar months, so a year and ten days would be a full solar year (365 days).³⁰

That's when God's decree proclaimed the ground to be ready for habitation. God restored and blessed the earth with fruitfulness as it was in the beginning:

Genesis 8:15-19 (NIV)

¹⁵ Then God said to Noah,

¹⁶ "Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. ¹⁷ Bring out every kind of living creature that is with you—the birds, the animals, and all the creatures that move along the ground—so they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number on it."

¹⁸ So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. ¹⁹ All the animals and all the creatures that move along the ground and all the birds—everything that moves on land—came out of the ark, one kind after another.

³⁰ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Eerdmans, 1990), 305.



"The mountains of Ararat" in eastern Türkiye. Photo: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Ararat

Noah's sacrifice

After this amazing rescue of Noah and the other creatures, why does Noah kill some of his precious cargo?

Genesis 8:20 (NIV)

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he **sacrificed burnt offerings** on it.

In Christian theology, the word *sacrifice* is often connected with Jesus dying for our sins. We think sacrifices must have been about taking away personal guilt. That's not what the text of Genesis says. It's already told us twice that Noah was a *righteous* man (6:9; 7:1). Noah was doing right. So why was he offering a burnt offering?

The truth is that God never asked for animal sacrifices. It's what people did in the ancient world. Not just Israel, but the nations too. They worshipped by offering gifts to their gods, usually food offerings. Every morning and every night, Israel offered a burnt offerings as a meal for God. They offered other meals as well, such as the fellowship offering where the priests symbolically sat at God's table, representing the covenant people as they shared his meal.

The Torah regulated how burnt offerings were to be sacrificed:

- only to YHWH (the LORD) (Exodus 3, 6).
- on an approved altar (Exodus 20, 27).
- in the approved manner (Leviticus 1, 4).
- offering only approved (clean) animals and birds (Leviticus 14).

God's name had not yet been revealed and the laws of clean animals had not been given, yet verse 20 presents Noah as worshipping in the Torah-approved manner.

So God responds as the Torah anticipates. The scent of the meal (*pleasing aroma* of the burnt offering) rises into the heavens (verse 21, compare Exodus 29:18, 25, 41; Leviticus 1:9, 13, 18; 2:2, 9, 12; 3:5, 16; 4:31; 6:15, 21; 8:21, 28 etc).

God understands that Noah was expressing his gratitude for rescuing and recreating what had been ruined. Noah's worship recognizes the LORD's authority over the earth.

God responds to Noah's gift by affirming his partnership with humans, even though they corrupted the original creation with their violence:

Genesis 8:21-22 (NIV)

²¹ The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart:

“Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.

²² “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”

What a story: ruined yet restored through a human in partnership with God!

Judgement and salvation

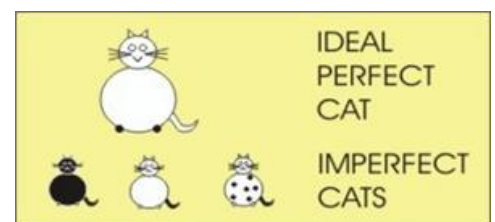
In Jewish and Christian literature, Noah's story has become foundational for understanding judgement and salvation. God judged the corrupted world, and God saved the world through Noah.

Old Testament scholar David Clines put it like this:

The Flood narrative does not function simply as yet a further stage in the development of human sin, but imports concepts of 'end' and 're-creation' into the *primaeval* history. When Genesis 1 is also taken into consideration, some case can be made out for suggesting that the theme of the *primaeval* history is 'creation—uncreation—re-creation'. ...

Re-creation occurs, in the first place, by the renewed separation of sea and land: the waters recede from and dry up from the earth (8:3, 7, 13). Then comes the renewal of the divine order to living beings to 'breed, be fruitful, and multiply' (8:17). ... The creation ordinances are re-announced ... (9:1–7), the separation of sea and land ... is assured (9:8–17), and humankind begins to be re-created (by procreation, ch. 10) and to fill the earth at God's command (10:32).³¹

The Greeks didn't think this way. Plato (around 400 BC) was fascinated by the “ideal” world. In his mind, there was a perfect reality beyond this one, with nothing in this present world measuring up to that ideal. As Christianity spread to the Greeks, some kept the belief that the material world is inferior, that all that matters is the spiritual realm.



The early church rejected that as heresy (Gnosticism), but the shards of Plato's belief still infect our thinking. Some Christians think of “salvation” as going to that perfect world when we die. Some hope is to be snatched out this world before God destroys it, as if creation itself was a bad idea. In that framework, the resurrection of the body makes no sense. Anything material is imperfect, so all humans must be evil from birth and there can be no such thing as a *righteous human* like Noah (7:1), someone who *did all the LORD commanded him* (6:22; 7:5).

Noah's story challenges how we think of judgment and salvation. God did not judge the world because a material world is bad. God judged the world because the good

³¹ David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 80-81.

earth was corrupted when humanity turned from partnering with God. God saved the world when one person partnered with God.

Un-creation and re-creation reverberate as themes through Scripture. It's what God does in Israel (Isaiah 65:17–66:24), in the Messiah (Colossians 1:19-20), in the church (Ephesians 1:18-23). Re-creation is the goal (Revelation 21–22).

That's how the Hebrews thought and worshipped:

Psalms 104:5-9 (NIV)

⁵ He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved.

⁶ You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.

⁷ But at your rebuke the waters fled,
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;

⁸ they flowed over the mountains, they went down into the valleys,
to the place you assigned for them.

⁹ You set a boundary they cannot cross;
never again will they cover the earth.

Flood stories in the ancient world

It's interesting how widespread the story of a flood was in the world of the Ancient Near East.

The best known is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.³² It was written in cuneiform, by pressing a wedged stick into wet clay, and then baking the clay. It spans twelve clay tablets, with the flood story on Tablet XI. Yale University describes it as:

“the oldest surviving literary work ... composed nearly 4,000 years ago in ancient Mesopotamia (roughly equivalent to where Iraq and eastern Syria are now).”³³



Babylonian clay tablet: “The Epic of Gilgamesh.” Photo: <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2020/04/30/the-epic-of-gilgamesh/>

The stories are not identical. The boat in the Babylonian story was square, and it came to rest well south of Ararat, on Mount Nisir (near Sulaymaniyah in central Iraq).

But there are striking similarities, such as sending out three birds as they waited for land to appear. It's possible that both accounts derive from the same experience in Mesopotamia. One Bible scholar draws these conclusions:

There are a variety of flood stories from the ANE, not just in Gen. 6-8. The Babylonian Genesis story known as Enuma Elish, has some similarities to the Gen. 1-2 story except it involves pre-existing matter and dueling deities. It's clear the Genesis story did not derive from the

³² James Bennett Pritchard (editor), *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 93–95.

³³ John Carey, “The Epic of Gilgamesh” at <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2020/04/30/the-epic-of-gilgamesh/> accessed 13 January 2025.

seventh century B.C. story found in the palace of Ashurbanipal. But there is also the Gilgamesh epic in which Utnapishtim tells how he survived the great flood, but this story is in fact based on a yet earlier account called the Atrahasis epic from Babylon dating to about 1600 B.C. The retelling of the latter epic by Berossus 280 B.C. is known to Josephus, and there are some close parallels between the Genesis story and this earlier epic. Now the proper conclusion to draw, since there are various ANE flood stories is that there was indeed a giant flood, known to various ANE peoples, and the stories are similar enough to make clear something drastic happened.³⁴

So what?

What does Noah's story teach us about the themes of *judgement* and *salvation* that are crucial to the Bible narrative?

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Have you considered the flood as a story of *uncreation* and *recreation*? How does that sit with you? How does it sit with the rest of the story of Scripture?

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What conclusions to you draw from Genesis 7 and 8?

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In preparation for next week, read Genesis 9–10.

Going further

- [The kingdom is a partnership](#) (Genesis 7–8)
- [The faith of Noah](#) (Hebrews 11:7)

³⁴ Ben Witherington III. "What Difference Can a Literal Translation Make— Part Six" at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2024/12/27/what-difference-can-a-literal-translation-make-part-six/> accessed 13 January 2025.