

UNIT ONE: THE HUMAN SITUATION

SESSION FIVE: THE GREAT FLOOD

Summary of the Fifth Session

Flood Stories

We saw that many people in the ancient Near East and around the world had flood stories – myths and legends of a great flood that, in various ways, expressed the anger of the gods at human beings or their concern with human over-population. The writers and editors of Genesis appear to have used these myths and legends to tell something significant about Yahweh and the history of humanity from Israel’s viewpoint of faith in the God who redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and made covenant with them to be their God and to care for them.

We reviewed the ancient Israelite view of a three-story world, with water beneath the earth and water above the vault (firmament) of the heavens. The great flood is presented as an undoing of creation – a return of the world to the waters of chaos.

So, even if there were floods in very ancient times that gave rise to these myths and legends, no historical flood in nature would amount to the undoing of creation. The flood we see in Genesis is of mythological proportions and is meant to be. God is disgusted and actually repents of having created the world. We read, “And Yahweh was sorry that he had made human kind upon the earth, and it grieved him to the heart.” What a long way down from, “God saw everything that he had made, and, indeed, it was very good”!

I presented the Great Flood (Genesis 6-9) as the story of God’s fateful choice *not* to destroy the world. In this story, we see God’s inner turmoil over the condition of the created world. Yahweh God is grieved to the heart, which is a remarkable statement. God is sorry to have created human beings and the world in which they live. Unless we take this insight very seriously, we will never be able to understand the larger story the Bible has to tell us, and we will not be able to understand Jesus’ suffering and death. God is grieved and disgusted by the state of the world and the life of humanity– so grieved and disgusted that God could willingly destroy the created order. Almost.

“But Noah found favor in the sight of Yahweh.” Here we see a hesitation on Yahweh’s part, a bit of doubt in the mind of God. It seems God still sees in Noah a hint of possibility, a trace of what the human being was meant to be. God, therefore, has a problem.

If God were simply and totally disgusted with humankind, there would be no problem, but God has mixed feelings. It seems there is still something God finds to love in humanity, and that

love is the source of God's trouble. God cannot stand us as we have become, but neither can God bear to give us up and be rid of us. So, the story will go on.

In this view, the old story of the Great Flood becomes *the new story of God's own struggle to resolve the problem of loving the sinful creature*. Should the holy, righteous, and just God destroy the evil creatures, or should God let us continue to live? If God lets us continue, then what? How can the problem be resolved? One thing is certain: the problem cannot be resolved easily, not so long as God is determined to let us remain free so we can be capable of responding willingly and joyously to God's love and care. Force will not do.

The Long Biblical History of Yahweh God's Anger, Grief, and Compassion

To hear the same turmoil, we read Hosea 11:1-9. At first, Yahweh God sounds sad because all the love and care given to Israel seem to have been wasted on a stubborn and rebellious people who would not respond. "The more I called them, the more they went from me." Then, Yahweh God gets angry and resolves to destroy Israel (Ephraim it is called, because Ephraim was the predominant tribe in the northern kingdom of Israel). "They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king" is a declaration of God's intention to undo the whole history of love and salvation that brought Israel out of slavery and into the land promised. Historically, Assyria will be the nation that destroys Israel, but by equating submission to Assyria with a return to Egypt, Hosea shows what is threatened here to be nothing less than the complete undoing of the history of salvation – a historical parallel to the Great Flood story that shows the undoing of creation. Yahweh God is hurt enough and angry enough to do it.

Then comes the change of heart and mind – for God. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?" "My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a human being, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." Then God looks toward a day when the people will return and be responsive.

What Hosea 11:1-9 shows us of God with relation to Israel, the story of the Great Flood shows us of God with relation to the world. Jesus puts the same triumph of compassion into his parable we call the "Prodigal Son." The father cannot bear to give up the son (or enslave him) and can only welcome him home.

The Conclusion of the Story

Nothing has changed with the humans, but God's course is set. We read Genesis 8:20-22 and saw that human nature remains the same after the Flood, and the will of the human beings is evil from their youth. But God will not destroy them. God will do something else, but what God will do remains to be seen. In the rainbow part of the story, God makes a covenant with all flesh not to

bring back the waters of chaos to destroy life on the earth. The seasons of earth will continue until God's work of redemption is completed.

We discussed the fatefulness of God's choice not to destroy. The Old Testament shows us the God who suffers, the God torn by holiness and love, the God who is passionate about human beings. I suggested that the shadow of the cross falls already on the Bible, across the pages of Genesis 6-9, because God will have to find another way – a way that can be taken by grief, anger, and love mixed. If we take this Old Testament understanding of God seriously, then Jesus' suffering on the cross is not a new thing but, rather, a fully personalized embodiment of what has been true for Yahweh God all along. God's way of redemption is the way of suffering love, the way of the cross.

We human beings can be unbelievably cruel and amazingly compassionate. We are so filled with the possibility of love and life, and so plagued by failures to live or love. We can stoop so low and reach so high. Each of us is a living contradiction, and together we are a mass of contradictions. We suffer from the contradictions, but so does God.

The Beginning of God's Solution to the Problem

We read Genesis 12:1-9, the call of Abram (whom God would rename Abraham). Here, we enter history. The places named in the story were real places we can locate on a map. We have entered the Middle Bronze Age of earth when civilizations are emerging in the Near East, particularly in the Fertile Crescent. Out of those civilizations, God calls a man and his wife (Abram and Sarai), and, with them, God begins to work within human life and history to redeem the fallen world. God starts with one family so all the families of the earth will be blessed.

God comes first with promise – not with threat or demand, but with promise. In verse 7, we saw two promises contained within the one: offspring and a land of their own. The context (the human condition) has been set, the problem identified, and now the story has begun. God will not rest until it ends with a new creation, with a humanity that responds to God's grace and lives within it.