

Noah Builds an Altar

Devotional Reading: Psalm 77:1-2, 7-19
Background Scripture: Genesis 6:1–9:17

Genesis 8:13-22

¹³ By the first day of the first month of Noah's six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. ¹⁴ By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry.

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.

²⁰ 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. 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."

Genesis 9:11-13

¹¹ "I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

¹² And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³ I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth."

Key Text

I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

—Genesis 9:13

Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings

Unit 1: The Genesis of Altars and Sacrifices

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the terms of the Lord's covenant with Noah.
2. Suggest reasons why Noah's sacrifice pleased God.
3. Write a prayer of thanks to God for one specific instance of his covenant faithfulness.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Getting Out of the Boat
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I. Noah's Situation (Genesis 8:13-22)

- A. Waiting Two Months (vv. 13-14)
- B. Obeying God's Command (vv. 15-19)
- C. Building an Altar (vv. 20-22)

A Pleasant Fragrance

II. God's Response (Genesis 9:11-13)

- A. The Covenant (v. 11)
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Rainbow: A Happy Symbol?

Conclusion

- A. Learn to Wait. Learn to Act!
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Getting Out of the Boat

At age 36, I decided to enter a 340-mile river race on the Missouri River between Kansas City and St. Charles, Missouri. I had entered the race some years before but did not finish. I knew from experience that it was going to be a physical test. Long stretches of the race required that I remain in an 18-foot-long kayak in the middle of the river with no way to get out of the vessel. I was able to dock the kayak at rest stops periodically. But I only slept about 10 hours during the four-day race.

About 82 hours after I started the race, I found the finish line. I was proud of my accomplishment, but by the end of the race, I was ready to get out of the kayak and feel the dry ground beneath my stiff legs; I was eager to get out of that boat!

So was Noah. However, some significant differences exist between my getting out of the kayak and Noah getting out of the ark. God did not tell me to get in or out of the kayak; if I had to, I could have paddled the kayak to the riverbank and disembarked the vessel. Noah did not have that option. He had to trust that God would tell him when to leave the ark—even though Noah did not know how long it would be until he could feel the dry ground beneath his legs.

B. Lesson Context

Today's lesson focuses on events directly after the flood wiped out all creation, except for all living creatures—human and otherwise—in the ark. Interestingly, the flood is one of the most well-attested accounts in history.

The biblical account of the flood is but one of at least five ancient flood stories. The existence of the latter leads some to believe that the biblical account used them as sources and that the flood is a legendary myth of an ancient and ignorant people. But if there truly was a great flood in ancient times, then stories of the event would be passed down from generation to generation.

As people spread over the earth and formed distinct cultures, these stories would take on the characteristics of those cultures. It would be strange indeed if accounts of the actual flood were

absent altogether from ancient writings! So, the existence of the nonbiblical stories serves to confirm that there was indeed a great flood at some point in history. The Bible’s account of this flood is the accurate one.

The biblical account of the great flood is detailed in giving specifics for the beginning of the flood, the length of time the rain fell, how long the floodwaters covered the earth, and how long it took for the waters to recede. The total amount of time adds up to more than a year (see Genesis 7:11; 8:14).

Having made it safely through the flood, creation and humankind had another chance. But even as that new chance began, God was fully aware of the still-present reality of man’s brokenness. Sadly, even before the end of Genesis 9, sin manifested itself again. Humanity’s brokenness becomes apparent.

I. Noah’s Situation

(Genesis 8:13-22)

A. Waiting Two Months (vv. 13-14)

13. By the first day of the first month of Noah’s six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry.

The biblical account of the flood gives specific details regarding when the flood began (Genesis 7:11), the length of time the rain fell on the earth (7:12, 17), how long the floodwaters covered the earth (7:24), and the length of time it took for the flood waters to recede (8:3). The total amount of time from when the flood began to when the earth was dry adds up to a little more than a year (8:14). We know that Noah was 600 years old when the flood began (7:6, 11). This verse states that one year had passed, and it was *the first month of Noah’s six hundred and first year*.

For Noah to see *the waters had dried up from the earth* suggests that he could see dry ground on “the mountains of Ararat,” where the ark came to rest (Genesis 8:4). The sight of which would have been significant to Noah and his family.

Although *the surface of the ground was dry*,

Noah, his family, and the animals remained in the ark. They were all “shut . . . in” (Genesis 7:16) until the Lord revealed the time for them to leave the ark.

14. By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry.

The phrase *the twenty-seventh day of the second month* reveals that about two months had passed between the events of this verse and the previous verse. The duration of the flood was 150 days (see Genesis 7:24; 8:3), but the process to dry out the land took about 60 days.

B. Obeying God’s Command (vv. 15-19)

15-16. Then God said to Noah, “Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives.

As *God* had commanded *Noah* and his family to go into the ark (Genesis 7:1), so God also commanded them to *come out of the ark*. One can only imagine how ready Noah and his family were to do so—they wouldn’t have had to be told twice!

Scripture gives us the names of Noah’s *sons*: Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Genesis 7:13; 9:18-19; 10:1). However, we are not told the names of Noah’s *wife* or the *wives* of his sons. The New Testament informs us that a total of eight people were saved through the ark (1 Peter 3:20).

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.”

The four designations *living creatures* (wild animals), *birds*, *animals* (likely domesticated

How to Say It

Abrahamic	Ay-bruh-ham-ik.
Adamic	uh-dahm-ik.
anthropomorphic	an-thruh puh-more-fik.
Davidic	Duh-vid-ick.
Habakkuk	Huh-back-kuk.
Japheth	Jay-feth.
Lamech	Lay-mek.
Noahic	No-ay-ik.
Zephaniah	Zef-uh-nye-uh.

animals), and *all the creatures that move along the ground* are intended to convey a message of totality. The four underlying Hebrew words also occur together in Genesis 1:26 and 7:14, although not always translated the same way. The passage from Genesis 1:26 is a bit more comprehensive in mentioning fish as well. This category is probably not mentioned in the verse before us due to the nature of the disaster being that of water (compare 1 Kings 4:33; Ezekiel 38:20; Hosea 4:3; Zephaniah 1:3). We should not fail to consider the amount of labor that was necessary to care for all the animals on that ark! And imagine the smell after even a day or two of being cooped up with them in the ark.

The statement *be fruitful and increase in number on [the earth]* repeats the command given to Adam and Eve in the garden (Genesis 1:28). In this verse, however, the command is not issued to Noah and his family but to the creatures in the ark so that they would *multiply on the earth*.

Noah and his family would receive such a command later: “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1). Noah would become something like a second Adam (not to be confused, of course, with “the last Adam,” who is Christ; 1 Corinthians 15:45).

What Do You Think?

In what ways can our interaction with animals improve our understanding of their creator (Job 12:7-9)?

Digging Deeper

How do Numbers 22:22-32; Proverbs 12:10; and Jonah 4:11 speak about God-honoring treatment of animals?

18. So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives.

As in Genesis 6:13-22 and 7:1-5, the verse before us shows the pattern of God’s command being followed by Noah’s obedience to that command. God spoke, Noah listened, Noah acted. It is a simple sequence on paper, but it is one that believers sometimes struggle to put into practice.

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.

The animals, birds, and all creatures aboard the ark are in two categories: clean and unclean (Genesis 7:2). Regarding the natures of *animals*, *creatures*, and *birds* see commentary on 8:17 above.

C. Building an Altar (vv. 20-22)

20. 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.

One of the first things—if not the very first thing—that Noah did after exiting the ark was worship. That is not surprising, as Noah’s character has already been testified (Genesis 6:9). Worship is a very appropriate response after one has been delivered by God.

This is the first *altar* mentioned in Scripture, but it’s not the first blood sacrifice (see Genesis 4:4). When Noah was commanded to save pairs of animals in the ark, more clean animals were spared than unclean ones (6:19-20; 7:2-3). Perhaps the act of sacrifice noted in the verse before us had been intended from the beginning, provision for it having been made by keeping more of the appropriate animals alive.

We are not told what differentiates *clean animals* and *clean birds* from unclean ones at this point in salvation history, but Noah somehow knew the difference. His righteousness had allowed a remnant of humanity to survive the flood, and that character was again on display.

Centuries later, the burnt offering was a voluntary offering for sin and for general worship and thanksgiving (Leviticus 1:4). Noah’s offering seems to have prefigured that later rite.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to ensure that worship precedes any new endeavor?

Digging Deeper

How does James 4:13-15 help shape your answer?

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.

We should note immediately that the phrase *said in his heart* indicates private thoughts, not a response to Noah, which comes later. Thus, the writer uses figurative language to describe God’s reaction to the sacrifice. Since “God is spirit” (John 4:24), we need not assume that God smells things the same way we do or has a literal, physical heart. Nevertheless, we understand such language. The same manner of figurative language is used when Scripture speaks of the “hand” and “arm” of the Lord (Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; etc.). This kind of figurative language is known as anthropomorphic language. The point being made is that God accepted the offering. Moses will use the same type of language later to describe the sacrifices and burnt offerings that the new nation of Israel will be commanded to present to the Lord (see Exodus 29:18, 25, 41).

We may wonder to what end God accepted Noah’s offerings. In later times, burnt offerings will atone for sin (Leviticus 1:1-9) and ordain the Aaronic priesthood (Exodus 29). Some suggest that Noah’s offerings are for atonement for the sins of all who perished in the flood, but that is not likely. Ordinarily, an offering of atonement is made in lieu of punishment, but those who perished because of the flood have already been punished.

More likely, Noah’s sacrifice is tied to the purification of the earth. Centuries later, Aaron and his sons offered burnt offerings to purify themselves for the new priesthood. Similarly, Noah offered sacrifices to cleanse the earth as home to new generations.

Up to this point in the Bible, the ground has been spoken of as being under a curse only twice. The ground was cursed in Genesis 3:17 because of sin. Only with difficulty would humanity be able to make a living from it (Genesis 3:18-19). Much later, Noah’s father, Lamech, prophesied that Noah would be the one to bring relief from the burdensome toil because of the ground “the Lord has cursed” (5:29).

The question that arises, then, is whether the

statement *Never again will I curse the ground* here in refers to the flood itself or to the original curse of Genesis 3:17. If the latter, then the prophecy of 5:29 is fulfilled—but then we have to ask why thorns and thistles still interfere (Genesis 3:18) and why agriculture still involves sweat-producing labor (3:19). If the reference is to the punishment of the flood, then the promise to not again curse the ground is another way of stating the promise never again to flood the earth (see 9:11, below).

The term *smelled* here has a figurative sense in which it simply means that the sacrifice was pleasing to God (Exodus 29:18; Leviticus 1:9; Numbers 15:3; Philippians 4:18). This language was likely used to better communicate that fact. Refusing “to smell” would have meant that God rejected the worship offered (Amos 5:21).

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to ensure that our efforts for the Lord are a pleasant fragrance to him and not the opposite?

Digging Deeper

How does Amos 5:21 inform your response?

A Pleasant Fragrance

Week after week, the task remained the same: pulling weeds, one minute after another. Any joy in my work eroded, and agony took its place. Hope remained a dim glimmer on a very distant horizon. How could things get better?

Over the next several years, I found different jobs. Through a series of events, God has provided me several life-giving jobs. We all experience moments of hopelessness, but we have a God who offers us true, unfailing hope.

On a different scale, we might wonder what hope we have to help us through the trials of life. We see that nothing changed about the human heart after the flood. Evil persists up to the present day. Even so, God found Noah’s offering to be a pleasant aroma.

Looking ahead to the return of our Savior, Jesus Christ, we acknowledge the way God has made us to enjoy him in this life and for all eter-

nity, giving us life and meaning both now and forever. How can you hold on to hope when hope seems like a glimmer on a distant horizon? —J. K.

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

The apostle Peter refers to the Noahic flood as an illustration of the fact that God can judge the world and that another destruction is coming, one by fire (2 Peter 3:6-7). But until that time of judgment, the cycles of the seasons will continue. The flood had interrupted that normal cycle, but God reaffirmed the ordering of his creation (Genesis 1:14; Jeremiah 33:20-25). The language suggests that God was restoring the world back to its original order.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways that can prompt you to praise the Creator as one season gives way to the next?

Digging Deeper

Which Bible passages prod you most to do so? Why?

II. God’s Response

(Genesis 9:11-13)

A. The Covenant (v. 11)

11. “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

The word *you* indicates that God has switched from pondering thoughts privately to communicating with Noah personally. And what God communicates is the first of the five covenants mentioned in Scripture. These five are the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and the new covenant. Some commentators add two more: Adamic to begin the listing and Everlasting to finalize it. Other commentators see only two: the old covenant and the new covenant.

This *covenant* in view here fulfills God’s promise in Genesis 6:18. The establishment of this cov-

enant is one-sided: God does not ask anything of Noah and his descendants.

What Do You Think?

What kinds of emergencies would prompt us to place faith God’s promises from Genesis 9:11?

Digging Deeper

Would such emergencies be the same for everyone? Why, or why not?

B. The Sign (vv. 12-13)

12. And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come:

Giving a *sign* of a *covenant* is a common idea even today. We exchange wedding rings to remind us of the covenant of marriage. Circumcision was used as a sign or token of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17), and the Sabbath was also used as a sign between Israel and God (Exodus 31:16-17). In reality, these three signs of a covenant are all present in Genesis, with the Sabbath at creation (Genesis 2:4), the rainbow here in 9:12, and circumcision in Genesis 17. Signs appear at watershed moments in salvation history.

The promise that this covenant is *for all generations to come* is also reflected in Genesis 9:16, where it is deemed “everlasting.” But neither the word *everlasting* nor the phrase *all generations* should be taken to mean that the covenant extends into eternity. The time limitation of Genesis 8:22 is that the covenant is in force “as long as the earth endures.” This verse sheds light on the meaning and significance of words such as *perpetual*, *everlasting*, and *forever* as they occur in other contexts regarding God’s covenants (examples: Genesis 17:13, 19; Exodus 31:17; Leviticus 24:8-9; 2 Samuel 23:5; 1 Chronicles 16:17).

13. “I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

A form of the underlying Hebrew word translated as *rainbow* also refers to a bow as part of a

bow-and-arrow combination (examples: Genesis 27:3; 48:22). Perhaps the image is one of a weapon of war becoming a symbol of peace. The image is further explained in Genesis 9:14, which is not part of today’s lesson text.

Rainbow: A Happy Symbol?

My daughter loves to draw rainbows, along with a bright sun and smiling people. She considers it “happy.” I suppose you could call it a happy symbol in the Genesis context as well, but not necessarily because it looks attractive or picturesque.

When God hangs his bow in the heavens, it reminds us that he won’t be making a dramatic intervention to destroy evil with a flood. God’s plan is more extensive and longer-term, revealed through the life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. He alone can bring true and permanent redemption. The rainbow remains a symbol that life goes on without divine cataclysmic judgment—for now. God is not destroying wickedness (Matthew 13:30; etc.). Season continues to follow season, and night continues to follow day.

In this fallen world, we face days when justice seems to be an unattainable ideal. I sympathize with the psalmist who, after first marveling at all of God’s creation, couldn’t help but pray that sinners and the wicked should just vanish (Psalm 104:35; compare Habakkuk 1:1-4, 13-17). Truly, we look forward to the day when God puts an end to evil. But 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that God delays judgment so that all might repent. The question then becomes, *How are you responding to God’s patience?* —J. K.

Conclusion

A. Learn to Wait. Learn to Act!

Most people know what it means to be impatient. As a parent, I have three highly mobile balls of impatience. And when you throw my wife and I in the mix, waiting for things becomes agony. The people in the Old Testament were not any different. King Saul had a major failure due to his lack of patience as he waited for Samuel to offer the sacrifice. Saul offered the sacri-



Visual for Lesson 2. *Display this visual as you introduce the Into Life section of the Involvement Learning page.*

fice himself even though he was not a priest and had no authority to do so, and it became a great sin (1 Samuel 13).

Waiting can be even more difficult when under challenging conditions. Saul’s army was melting away from him in the face of the Philistine threat, and seemingly, that is why he offered the sacrifice before Samuel got there to keep his army together (1 Samuel 13:11-12). Impatience is a feature of many chapters of the book of Psalms (examples: Psalms 6:3; 13:1; 119:84). It’s easy to imagine Noah as having felt that strain too.

Yet, when God told him to do something, he did it. He chose to operate on God’s timeline; he did not expect God to operate on his own (contrast Genesis 15:2-5; 16:1-4). Noah’s patience and obedience serves as a model for Christians. But there’s a caution here: sometimes, believers who are waiting impatiently for God to do something have already been given the command to take care of it themselves. But you aren’t one of those, are you?

B. Prayer

Lord, thank you for how you deliver us as you delivered Noah. Thank you for Noah’s example in that when you spoke, he listened and obeyed. May we learn to do the same. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Wait for God’s command
and then obey it!