

A Flood of Mercy

By Brad Allison on 9/11/2005

Scripture Reference *Genesis 6:1-8*

We have all read of the suffering caused by Hurricane Katrina, after it passed just east of New Orleans two weeks ago. The body count continues to mount, and the receding waters are exposing daily the extent of the destruction. So many people have suffered so much, and many more will continue to suffer for weeks, months and even years ahead. As I have considered this scene, it has occurred to me that some of the greatest suffering stems from the lack of knowing the true God. The reason this suffering is greater than the obvious economic distress, disease and death brought by the hurricane is simply that a theological ignorance has eternal consequences. This theological ignorance has been spread over our newspapers. I saw an article last week in the *Birmingham News* that said that the reason for this hurricane is that God had withdrawn his hand of protection from our nation because we had encouraged Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Others said that New Orleans had been singled out because it was a more sinful city than other cities of our nation. On the very next day, there was another column by a pastor who said that this hurricane had nothing to do with God's judgment because the New Testament portrays Jesus as full of compassion and love. Both responses show a lack of biblical understanding on the topic of God's judgment.

It has become clear over the last two weeks that if you don't prepare properly for a hurricane, you could suffer significantly because of that lack. But it is even more the case that if you don't prepare properly for God's judgment, then you will suffer a far greater catastrophe, one that will affect you for eternity. So I would like for us to look today at an act of God's judgment that is basic to the biblical view of judgment. The Great Flood that God sent in the days of Noah is referred to throughout the rest of the Bible as the pattern for God's judgment. So I would like for us to look at this flood and notice three things it teaches us about the judgment of God.

I. The Cause of God's Judgment

All judgment comes from God because of the sin of the human race, and this judgment is no exception. We read that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (v. 5). It would be hard to construct a sentence more severe than this one. The sin of the human race had advanced about as far as it could. It was at the level of the human heart, unmixed with any good intentions. If the source is corrupt, then everything proceeding from that source will be corrupt as well. So it is not surprising to read in verse 11 that the earth was filled with violence. As God saw his creation, declared by him to be very good, now descending into utter anarchy and violence, his heart was grieved within him, and the judgment of the Flood came as a result.

But there's something more in this passage that we need to consider. The first 4 verses of our chapter describe the cause of the earth plunging into this corruption and anarchy. It was the fact that "the sons of God" took in marriage "the daughters of man". There are a couple of possible interpretations of these phrases and of this passage. One would see the sons of God as angelic beings, who came and took as their wives mortal women. The best case for this interpretation is that the phrase "sons of God" is normally used to describe angels rather than humans. But in this case I think the phrase "sons of God" has a different referent, one that better suits the context. Back in Genesis 4, a passage that describes the growth of the human race, we read of the line of the descendants of Cain multiplying and producing the monster of violence named Lamech. But then there is also the line of Seth, Cain's younger

brother. As his descendents multiplied, “people began to call upon the name of the Lord” (Gen. 4:26). So I believe these “sons of God” in Genesis 6:2 describes the people of God descending from the line of Seth. There is one other significant reason for rejecting the interpretation of angelic beings. Jesus clearly said that angels don’t marry (Matt. 22:30).

With the identity of these sons of God as the people of God, notice now what leads to the increase of wickedness on the earth in the days of Noah. Wickedness increases when God’s people, the sons of God, lose their distinctives as God’s people as a result of entering into marriages with those who are not God’s people. This is highly significant. God steps in to judge not because of the wickedness of unbelievers, but because of the wickedness of believers. This is a view reflected throughout the Bible. Do you remember when Abraham was praying for Sodom, that he asked God to preserve the city from judgment if only ten righteous could be found there? God said, “For the sake of the ten I will not destroy it” (Gen. 18:32). Sodom was judged because there were not ten righteous people living there. Jesus taught the same thing when he called his followers the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13). Salt is a preservative against the natural process of decay, and God’s people need to maintain their saltiness, their difference from the world around them.

Here’s the application for us all. One of the significant ways you can be a blessing to the world around you is simply by being different from the world around you because you follow Jesus. When a husband loves his wife even if it costs him something, when a wife gives up trying to control her husband, the ramifications echo through eternity. How is God calling you to be different? If you’re single and hope to be married some day, you need to marry a believer. If you are parents, you need to disciple your children to follow the Lord instead of the crowd. The failure to be distinctive leads to increased corruption on the earth, which leads to the judgment of God.

II. The Nature of God’s Judgment

The New Testament teaches that tragedies such as this hurricane are intended, among other things, to serve as a warning about the coming great judgment when Jesus returns. When a tower fell in Jesus’ day and killed 18 people, Jesus interpreted that event like this. “Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:4-5). Jesus here teaches that the correct view of events like hurricanes is to see them as merciful warnings of the greater judgment to come.

What do we learn about the nature of God’s judgment from Hurricane Katrina? Several similarities between God’s judgment and this hurricane come to mind. First, God’s judgment is a descent into chaos. We’ve looked at this before, but notice how this flood was a reversal of creation, portrayed in Genesis as a time when God brings order out of chaos. Creation is portrayed as God separating the waters, and this flood is explained as God removing the partition between the waters below and the waters above (7:11). Just as we have been reading about in New Orleans, the forces of chaos and anarchy are unleashed. That is a picture of the great judgment of hell, a place where chaotic forces are unleashed, and God’s hand of restraint is removed.

The judgment of God is accompanied by a deep sense of loss. I have read estimates that 40% of all New Orleans property owners were not insured against the losses they have sustained. Houses for which people have worked and sacrificed for years, gone in a matter of minutes. Not only property, but jobs and accomplishments have been lost as well. *Newsweek* included the account of a Tulane University AIDS researcher by the name of James Robinson.

He and his wife, Monique, decided to stay behind to protect some cell lines that represented decades of research on his part. When the water level rose, the generator that had kept the freezers and incubators running failed, resulting in a complete loss of decades of his research.

God's judgment is something before which we are powerless. When you see eight feet of water coming toward your home, there's not much you can do. It won't matter if you had B-Dry fix your basement or not. You're going to be wiped out, and there's nothing you will be able to do about it. We received just a small taste of that even here in Birmingham last week when there was a momentary run on gas stations. I remember going to a couple of stations on Thursday afternoon before finding one with gas. What would we do without gasoline? You can't make it in your garage workshop, and our city is not set up for meeting our transportation needs in any way other than the automobile. The judgment of God is just like that. Neither the clever nor the strong will be able to elude it by their cleverness or strength.

The judgment of God will come suddenly, though not without warning. There were certainly warnings about the damage that would be done to New Orleans as the result of a direct hit from a powerful hurricane. But none were taken seriously enough to make sufficient preparations. In the same way, God's judgment comes with warnings. Though he has not told us when it will come, he has told us that it will. He even gives warnings through events like this hurricane to help us feel what his judgment is like, that we might take steps to flee it.

What is the appropriate application to the judgment of God? I think it is to fear God. Don't believe those who tell us that God is not a God of judgment, but one rather of mercy and compassion. The truth is that God is both, and we cannot fully appreciate his mercy without also understanding his judgment. So don't be so quick to run to God's mercy that you bypass his judgment. That brings us to our next point.

III. The Only Refuge from God's Judgment

The ark was the refuge for Noah and his family, and it was the only refuge. In the same way, Christ is the only refuge against the judgment of God. There simply is none other. I know that sounds overly exclusive to some people, who want there to be many ways for people to reach heaven. It is exclusive, but it's also true. There is no other escape than through Jesus. But there is an escape through Jesus, and no one is excluded. In this way, Jesus is unlike the evacuation order given in New Orleans prior to the storm. The poor were excluded from that simply because they lacked sufficient resources to flee. But any who want can flee to Jesus for refuge. No one is excluded.

Actually, what I just said is not entirely correct. There is a group of people who are excluded. It is those who refuse to leave their current refuge. I saw a news report of someone on the second floor of a New Orleans house whose entire first floor was flooded. The rescue boat came by to take them away, and they refused. They preferred their hot, damp, smelly dark house to freedom and deliverance. In the same way, there are those who don't flee to Jesus for refuge because they prefer the refuge they've always known. It may be crumbling around them, but it's their refuge and they won't leave it. In order to find refuge in Jesus, you will need to leave all other places of refuge. If you have sought refuge in money, you will have to leave that behind. If you have sought it in being successful at work, in beauty, in health, in being in control of your life, in being right, you must leave it all behind and enter the ark. They are the ones alone who will be secure. There is a little sentence in chapter 7 that brings great comfort. "And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him. And the Lord shut him in" (v. 16). Derek Kidner says this about that verse. "The expression beautifully shows God's fatherly touch, at the very brink of judgment.

The same care that saw this matter through carries our salvation to its conclusion” (p. 91).

God shuts us in and brings us security at no cost to us, but at great cost to himself. Someone has pointed out about the rainbow that God gives at the end of this story, that it is in the shape of a drawn bow, aimed at heaven. The rainbow is God’s sign that he will never again bring this kind of universal judgment through a flood. But there is an arrow aimed at heaven, and when Jesus was crucified, the string of the bow was released, sending the arrow of God’s judgment straight into the heart of Jesus. Jesus endured the judgment due us, leaving us to escape it.

CONCLUSION:

I think now you will be able to appreciate the three applications with which I want us to close. First, God calls us to maintain proper separation from the world. Just as this flood in Noah’s day was brought when God’s people failed to do that, so God’s judgment will come again when that occurs. Is there some area in your life where you are not being distinctive enough as a follower of Jesus?

Second, believe in the reality of judgment and be afraid. The destruction, chaos and loss we have witnessed in this hurricane is but a glimpse of the “Big One” that is to come, the great judgment of God.

Third, sing joyfully the praise of Jesus, who is your refuge. In heaven, you will be happier than you are now, but not more secure. Those who have forsaken all other refuges to come to Jesus have been shut into the ark, and you are completely secure in him. At the close of our service today, we are going to sing a well-known hymn written by George Matheson. Listen to his explanation about the writing of the hymn, *O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go*. “I was at that time alone, it was the day of my sister’s marriage... Something 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.”

What was he suffering? We don’t know for sure, but it is not difficult to conjecture. He had been engaged years before, but his fiancée had broken the engagement when she was told of Matheson’s impending blindness. She informed him, “I do not wish to be the wife of a blind preacher.” His sister had learned Greek and Hebrew just to help her brother do his exegetical studies and prepare his sermons. And now a second significant woman in his life was leaving. But Matheson took refuge in the love of God through Jesus. May God help us to do the same!