

Origin Stories | From Boat to Bow | Genesis 6-9

March 17, 2024 | Matthew McNutt

[Title Slide] Apparently, I'm the worst kind of computer user according to one of my friends in the computer repair business. Why? I know just enough to get myself into trouble. A lot of you have a healthy fear of technology. You're not going to mess with settings, install risky software, take it apart – because you're afraid you'll ruin it. A few of you know how to design and build elaborate computer systems. I'm somewhere in the middle; I'm a little too confident and most of the time it works out, but every once in a while, I have to do a full reset. Do you know what I mean? I have to take my messed-up computer, back up my important data, then wipe it and restore it back to its factory settings and start over from scratch with it.

It only took a handful of chapters in the Bible to get to the point where God felt the need to restore creation to its factory settings:

Genesis 6:5-7 (NIV) ⁵ The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. ⁶ The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. ⁷ So the Lord said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them."

Can God have regret? Doesn't that imply a mistake? Let's talk about this word for a moment. This ancient Hebrew word shows up throughout the Old Testament and is translated in ten different ways in those different passages in our Bibles today, some of which are the opposite of each other. And this isn't a new thing; even the ancients when they were translating the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek translated it ten different ways in its different places in scripture.¹ Why? Because it is not a simple word with a simple definition; it has complexity.

We take the complexity of English words for granted because we're used to them and use them naturally, but our language can be difficult for others as well. When I was in high school, I had a friend from South Korea ask me once to explain the word "even" to him; I was immediately stumped, so I said, "can't you just look it up in your dictionary?" He was exasperated, pulled the dictionary open and showed me; "I did – look, the explanation is three pages long!"

Back to this word "regret." John Walton, one of my favorite scholars on the book of Genesis and ancient cultures, suggests based on the different meanings we can identify for this word that it should be understood in accounting terms. In other words, the ledgers must be kept in balance and when they're out of balance, something needs

¹ John H. Walton, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 309.

to be adjusted. That God looked at creation and saw that creation was out of balance. Walton suggests another way to phrase this verse based on how this ancient word could be understood, *“The LORD audited the accounts because He had made humankind in the earth and His heart tormented Him (i.e., He was distressed) over it. So the LORD says, ‘I will wipe humankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth ... because I have audited the accounts since I have made them.’”*²

This doesn't mean that God was not grieved by this process, but it gives us a better understanding of His intent; *it was a cosmic balancing of the scales [scale image]* needed because of the misuse of free will by humankind, not regret over a mistake by God. To be clear, we're not talking about God weighing all our good deeds versus all of our bad deeds to decide if we're good enough, or in this case, humanity's good deeds vs its bad deeds; the scales have God's holiness on one side, all of humanity on the other. And they finally became so out of balance, the ledger was so far off, that it was time for a drastic reboot.

We tend to think of Genesis 6-9 as a story about Noah, the ark, all of the animals. The animals! They're just great. We love to tell the story of Noah to kids because of all the animals and the mass execution of humanity. Okay, we water down that last part, pun intended. But it's really not about any of that; in fact, Noah doesn't utter a single line in the text until the end of chapter 9, after the flood, after the miracles, and only to deal with the sin of his son. Noah is not the main character. **God and His holiness** is the center of this account.

Genesis 6 records that Noah was a righteous man, faithful to God and blameless among the people.

Genesis 6:13-14 (NIV) ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out.

This was a standard way to make a boat back then, with wood, coated with pitch to make it waterproof. God goes on to describe the size of the ark; it was to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high. Massive.

Genesis 6:17-18 (NIV) ¹⁷ 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. 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.

² Ibid, 310.

God then described how two of every bird and animal will come to Noah to be protected on the ark, as well as gave him instructions on the food to prepare and bring.

Genesis 6:22 (NIV) Noah did everything just as God commanded him.

Here's what's fascinating; we have a lot of traditions around this story that over time have been accepted as part of scripture. The reality is, we don't have a lot of detail. We don't know that Noah's family was righteous, only that they were saved because of their association with him. In fact, his son Ham seems to have some issues, but that could be its own sermon. We don't really know how long it took to build the ark. We assume Noah and his sons built it, but it's entirely possible that he hired people to help construct it. It was a massive task. We don't know how others reacted to it, whether they mocked Noah or respected his desire to honor His God's wishes. As a kid my teachers told me stories of people banging on the sides of the ark, begging to be let in, but we don't know from scripture if that was the case. Why don't we have these details? Because the story is about God, not Noah.

Genesis 7:11-12 (NIV) 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.

Scripture describes the water rising over the mountains, killing everything in its wake. The flood remained for 150 days before it began receding. Noah and his family ultimately spend just about a year in the ark while they waited for the world to be ready for them to reemerge.

This was a massive act of un-creation, returning the world to its Genesis 1 state of just water. The factory reset has happened.

There is a lot of debate over the size of the flood and it would be difficult to teach this passage without acknowledging that. We follow a God of incredible miracles. To cover the entire earth with water, over the mountains, would require three times the water in our oceans today – this is not beyond our God. But I don't think that diminishes the faith of those who would suggest that God used a devastating local flood – a flood of the known world at the time - to accomplish His purposes. The ancients would have viewed the far distant mountain peaks as the edge of the world, holding up the heavens, the home of the gods, and would not have considered them to be a part of covering the world with water. We do know that flood narratives are common in the ancient world; something significant happened to trigger all of these stories passed on from generation to generation.

In the 1990's, geologists and oceanographers discovered evidence of a massive flood in the **Black Sea region [map]**, where Noah would have lived, beyond anything we

have experienced today. They've found that around 5500 BC there was a massive rise in the water level of the Mediterranean which triggered an overwhelming waterfall through the Bosphorous into the Black Sea. In the space of about a year, it flooded about 60,000 square miles of land and raised the Black Sea level around five hundred feet.³ This kind of massive shift in water would also cause significant displacement in the air currents, triggering rain for days and days.

Why do I say all of this [title slide]? Because regardless of how you interpret these passages, something massive did happen. As John Walton puts it, **God took “the earth’s corruption to its cosmic conclusion.”**⁴

The flood receded, Noah and his family were able to come out of the ark, release the animals, and begin the process of rebuilding. At this point, God established a covenant with Noah, a contract, an agreement, a pledge:

Genesis 9:9-15 (NIV) ⁹ “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you— every living creature on earth. 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. ¹⁴ Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.”

Again, God is the focus of this story. This is a one-sided covenant, pledge. Typically, covenants, or contracts, involve commitments from both sides. But the focus is God and His relationship with His creation. He's saying, I will no longer view the ledger book as all of creation; it will be with each individual. God's judgement is not going away, His holiness demands it, but how He weighs the scales to determine judgement is changing.

I used the image of the large scale before; measuring God's holiness on one side, and all of humanity on the other – impossible to balance. But God is shifting how He approaches the scales going forward; **now the focus is on individuals [slide with multiple scales]**. Again, and I have to emphasize this, this is not an image of our good deeds vs our bad deeds. In this context, this story, this covenant, these scales

³ Ibid, 330.

⁴ Ibid, 331.

represent God's holiness weighed against each of our lives – we will always deserve judgement in that assessment. But God has adjusted the ledger book. Through the gift of **Jesus Christ, the scales are balanced**. Through His death and resurrection, through our repentance and acceptance of Him, our sin is wiped out and we are able to balance our scale.

What do we do with this story of the flood today? Does it even apply to our lives? Peter gives us some insight to that as he references the end of time, when God reconciles each of our ledger books, when He remakes and restores the world to its intended state:

2 Peter 3:10 (NIV) ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. ¹¹ Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives ¹² as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. ¹³ But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”

What is Peter saying? Judgement may not be happening in this moment, but it is coming. For those who refuse God, that judgement will be terrifying. For those that follow God, we will also be judged for our reward – will we be found good and faithful? Or just barely making it in? Peter is telling us to **live with urgency**. To live with the awareness of what really matters. We are called to a mission, to reach this world, to build God's kingdom. We look forward to a new heaven and a new earth, but does your life reflect that hope? Or are you so wrapped up in the daily mundane that you find yourself forgetting why you are here? God's holiness demands judgement, but we know the key to balancing those scales, Jesus Christ.

We've been talking a lot about our hashtags in recent weeks; have you put the names of people connected to you that need to know God on your hashtag? We're a few weeks into it; have you been praying for opportunities to share with those people about God? Have you initiated conversations? Our culture values Easter, statistically speaking, the odds are incredibly high your friends, your hashtag names, will say yes to an invitation to our Easter service. So ask them! Grab one of our postcards and give it to them, tell them you'd love for them to sit with you, and when they come, follow up with them in the days after and ask them what they thought, ask them what they think about God and faith. It's an incredible opportunity to live with urgency in reaching this world. We are **called to be holy and godly**, to live like Christ, and that means sharing His mission, His focus, His passion, and His desire to reach this world.