

Floods, fears and families: Bible Study on Noah

This Bible Study can be used in either one or two sessions. Use Section 1 and then feel free to pick and choose from Sections 2–4 according to what will benefit your group the most.

Context: *Many parts of the Old Testament deal with how God wants humans to relate to each other and his world, eg, Genesis 1; Deuteronomy 26:5-12; Psalm 24; Hosea 4:1-3. Noah's story contains several themes and is of special interest when considering the risks of climate change.*

Opening question: *Ask if anyone present can help set the scene and describe an experience of a flood. What happened? What did it feel like to be there? What were the after-effects?*

Read Genesis 6:9-22 and Genesis 8:15-22

Introduction: The story is very familiar to many people, and is often neglected by adults who leave it marooned in Sunday School, but perhaps we can look into it afresh and think about its different angles. Ask group members to re-tell the Bible story of Noah in just two or three sentences ('Just a Minute' style if you like) using three titles.

- Round One: Noah's Ark: The Classic Sunday School Version
- Round Two: Crime and Punishment
- Round Three: Noah's Autobiography, volume 36: Sea of Faith

Questions thinking about human motivation

- 1a What might it have felt like to be Noah building the ark?
- 1b What reasons might Noah have had for doing nothing?
- 1c If someone gave you a warning of impending trouble or even a disaster, what factors would you consider when deciding if it was their irrational fear – or a warning that you should act upon?
- 1d Is fear a good reason for doing something about climate change?
- 1e Given the abundance of scientists' warnings about the impacts of climate change, do you feel we are taking appropriate action? Too much? Too little?

Ethical questions arising from the story

- 2a In the story, why did God send the flood?
- 2b Humans sometimes feel justified in taking drastic action (eg, defeating Nazi Germany). Is this a fair comparison to God's cleansing of evil by sending the flood? Or should we simply see this aspect as symbolic and a literary device which only happened in the story?
- 2c If our collective actions and general lifestyles lead to climate change causing terrible flooding and other disasters, then should we classify our own actions as evil, or is that going too far?
- 2d Should we be willing to sacrifice 'quality of life' for the sake of future generations?
- 2e The existence of many species is now threatened by the pressure for resources and land, and by humanity's ever-increasing carbon emissions. Take a second look at Genesis 8:17 and Genesis 9:1, where God calls on animals and humans to be fruitful and multiply. Given present population growth, this is one command that humans can claim to have generally obeyed ... but are human population levels impacting on the ability of other species to survive? Is the human

race reducing the diversity God so carefully preserved in the ark? Is this a valid concern for Christians?

Looking closer at the text ... and thinking outside the box

- 3a In Genesis 8:17 why does God want the animals to multiply?
- 3b In 9:1, 'God blessed them ...' Is the rest of the verse a blessing or a command or both? Does that make a difference? People in developing countries might see it differently to people in the UK ... why? Do you have a view whether it is a blessing or a command?
- 3c God's words to Noah (in 8:16-17) reaffirm the principle of the peaceful co-existence of all forms of life found at the creation in Genesis (1:20-25). But Genesis 9:2 says that humans have great power over the natural world compared to other creatures. (It also says people started to eat animals.) Theologian Richard Bauckham argues that much of the Old Testament is written as a commentary on the uses and abuses of power and dominion (for example, the stories on Moses, David, Solomon and Elijah). Should there be much difference in the way humans exercise power over the rest of God's creation, compared to how they should exercise power over God's people? Do kindness, compassion and love apply to animals as well as people? How far does God's family extend?

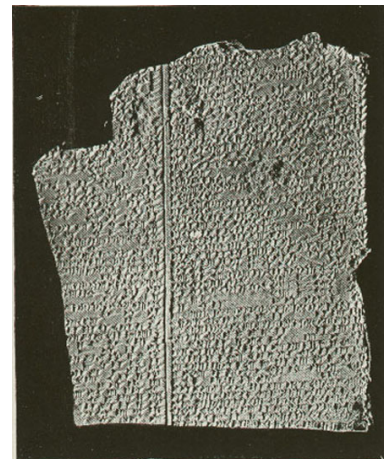
For reflection

- 4 God chose the rainbow as a sign; what is there about rainbows that might make them particularly suitable as a sign of God's covenant with creation? (*ongoing, beautiful, light, rain / sunshine in balance, diverse colours, wow factor, mystery, elusive*)

You might wish to end the study in prayer

Further background information and ideas:

- Gilgamesh epic: archaeology has found other quite similar stories with some of the same details of a great flood: perhaps the most famous is the Gilgamesh epic (picture) about which theologian John Drane says: *'In the Gilgamesh story no explanation is given for the flood ... In Genesis God sends the flood as a judgement on human disobedience ... God (unlike the Babylonian deities) is not afraid of the flood but in complete control of it.'*¹
- Stylistic and symbolic aspects: unlike many stories in Genesis there is little use of place names in this story – only Mt Ararat as the final resting place of the ark. However, there is great use of numbers: Noah's age, the dimensions of the ark, the number of days the flood lasted are all detailed, but these are generally rounded numbers – for example, forty days and forty nights indicates 'a long time'.
- Noah's name sounds like the Hebrew for comfort: this is alluded to in 5:29.
- Blessing: in many cultures children and produce are seen as a blessing from God.
- Jesus mentions Noah specifically: he said that the end times and Judgement Day could not be predicted but that they would be like the time of Noah with people unaware of what was coming (Matthew 24:37).
- In 1 Peter 3:20 we are told firstly that after Jesus was crucified he went and preached to the 'imprisoned spirits' of those who had not obeyed God and had died in the flood, and secondly that the saving of some in the ark was also a symbol pointing to baptism.
- In Hebrews 11:7, Noah is mentioned on the great list of those who acted by faith: 'It was faith that made Noah hear God's warnings about things in the future that he could not see.'
- ON has several articles and studies about Noah at <http://www.operationnoah.org/taxonomy/term/23>.
- Trying to learn science from the Noah story is a dead end – it's about faith, obedience, and God's values / purposes for his creation. But having a general idea of the science may help apply the story, and there is a climate change science summary at http://www.jri.org.uk/brief/BriefingNo14_4thEdition_July.pdf.



1. John Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament* (Lion, 2000).