

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 3 – Judgement and Grace, Sacrifice and Covenant

Key Questions:

- Will God ever stop the suffering that is in the world? Will He judge those who do wrong?
- Is there any hope for the world to get better? Can God's Kingdom be rebuilt?

The story moves on (Genesis Chapter 5)

Genesis Chapter 5 tells about the descendants of Adam through his third son, Seth. It lists the names of eleven generations of Adam's family, starting with him and ending with three sons of Noah. There is a good reason why the story focuses in only on Seth's descendants and why the list finishes with Noah's children. **The Bible does not try or claim to tell the whole history of mankind in all detail, but is intended to teach us about how God has been working through history to bring people into His Kingdom.** The life-spans of these men are extraordinarily long by modern standards (from 777 to 969 years), but this prolonged life can be explained by considering the following facts:

- **The human gene pool was more pure**, with less mutations (mutations began after Adam sinned)
- **There were less people alive**, so there was less competition for land and a better standard of living
- **There were probably less infectious diseases** – these have increased over time, and later became the major cause of death until the 20th Century when modern hygiene and medicines reduced infections significantly
- **God had not yet imposed a shorter limit on man's life** – in Genesis 6:3 God imposes a limit of 120 years on the age of mankind (this limit works through a genetically programmed process of ageing). This maximum age limit was true throughout the Bible from that time forward, and remains true today in the record books!

One man, Enoch (verses 21-23), stands out in this list of men – he did not die, but was taken out of the world by God because he had a close relationship with God. It seems that most people in these days did not have a good relationship with God. Enoch is mentioned especially because he was an exception. He lived by the way of faith.

God's Judgement and Grace (Genesis Chapter 6)

In Genesis Chapter 6 the story focuses in on Noah. Verse 1 describes rapid population growth, and in verse 3 God limits the human life-span to 120 years. As mankind grew more numerous, their sin became greater, and they grew further and further away from God. This brought pain to God's heart, and in verse 7 He decides to judge mankind for their sin. Judgement is a very important principle in the Bible. Sin has consequences, and God will not leave sin un-judged. It is His right to judge mankind, as He is the Creator, and His judgement is based on truth since He alone sees all things – including man's thoughts and motives (verse 5).

Verses 1 to 7 paint a very dark picture of the world, full of sin and far from God. But in verse 8 we see that one man, Noah, was different – he found "favour" with the Lord. God's favour is also known as **grace** – it is undeserved by any person, because all have sinned. In verse 9 we learn that Noah was living by faith and not in disobedience:

1. He was "righteous" & had a good reputation

RIGHT ACTIONS

This means that he did what was right, and his actions towards others were consistent with his heart

2. He "consistently followed God's will"

RIGHT WORSHIP

Like Enoch, his great-grandfather (see Genesis 5:22), Noah obeyed God's will and knew him

So, the way of faith is shown in worship of God (trust that His will is best) **and** right actions towards other people.

In contrast to Noah, the earth was corrupt in God's sight and full of violence (verse 11). This is a powerful contrast between the two ways to live:

	Way of faith	Way of disobedience
People	Abel, Enoch, Noah	Society as a whole
Attitude to God	Walking with Him – obeying & worshipping Him	Corrupt – disobeying Him & worshipping other things
Actions	Righteous & blameless	Violence

God decided to judge the earth through a great flood, and so told Noah to prepare a great boat. In verse 18, God said that He would make His "covenant" with Noah by saving him in the boat. He gave orders that would ensure that every kind of living creature would be saved (verses 19-21). Noah obeyed God (verse 22). Obedience is the evidence of true faith. Throughout this Bible we can see these themes of God's judgement and grace. He will judge sin, but He also wants to rescue people because of His grace. However, **God's grace can only be received by people through faith in Him.**

The Great Flood (Genesis 7:1-8:1-14)

The Flood came, just as God had promised, when Noah was 600 years old (verse 6). It covered the whole earth, and was not a gradual rising of waters, but a very powerful event that changed the face of the earth. Rain fell for 40 days and nights, and the ground broke open so that the water that was under the earth burst up (verses 11-12). This probably included great volcanic activity, with the formation of many of the earth's great mountain ranges and the continents beginning to move apart (perhaps very quickly at first). It may also have triggered climate change, as there seems to have been much more humidity in the air across the earth than there is now (this may also have caused an Ice Age). If you add up all the days in Chapters 7 and 8, we discover that Noah and the others were in the ark (boat) for over a year. All people and creatures that were not in the boat died – only Noah and his family (8 people in total) were saved.

Sacrifice (Genesis 8:15-9:7)

In Genesis Chapter 4 we learnt that God wanted people to worship Him by offering sacrifices to Him, but that this had to be done in the right way, and most importantly with a right attitude of heart (Abel's sacrifice was accepted, but Cain's was not). The first thing Noah did when he came out of the boat was to sacrifice some animals and birds (8:20). This principle of worshipping God through sacrifice runs through the Old Testament.

A sacrifice was made to give thanks to God and to worship Him. It cost something to the person who was making it, but it also had a deeper meaning. Since death is the punishment of God for sin, when a person sacrificed an animal to God it was a reminder of that person's own sin, as if the animal was dying in that person's place, for his sin. This idea becomes clearer later in the Old Testament, but there is a very important principle here:

God must punish sin. Sin can only be forgiven on the basis of sacrifice.

Sacrifices were a picture of true faith in God, and God is not pleased with sacrifices from people whose hearts are not right before Him (see Psalm 51:16-17). However, sacrifices of animals were limited for two reasons:

1. **They could never really pay for sin.** They were only a picture to show that the individual was sorry for his sin and was asking God to forgive him, but an animal life is not equal in value to a human life, and so **we need a better sacrifice to really pay the price for sin.** To be equal in value to a human being this sacrifice must be a person, and to be a sacrifice for another person they must be sinless themselves (not deserving God's judgement).
2. **They had to be repeated many times.** Because the person kept on sinning, they needed to repeatedly make sacrifices to God. **We need a perfect sacrifice that can bring forgiveness for sins once and for all.**

When God saw Noah's sacrifice, He was pleased with it since it came from Noah's heart, and was offered with proper respect for God. God made a promise that He would never again destroy all living creatures in this way. Rather, there would be a normal cycle of days and seasons, which we still see today (verse 22).

God's Blessings and Covenant (Genesis 9:8-17)

God had saved Noah and his sons from His judgement, and He now gave them new blessings. God gave these remaining human beings a new beginning, giving them the same command to increase in number and fill the earth that Adam was given (9:1 compared to 1:28), although without the hope of subduing the earth and animals as Adam could before he sinned (compare God's words in 9:1 with His words to Adam in Genesis 1:28) – the animals will fear man. God introduced some new freedoms and rules for mankind:

1. **Man can now eat meat** (verses 2-3) – before this time human beings must have been vegetarian
2. **Man must not eat meat with its lifeblood still in it** (verse 4)
3. **Human life is special because we are made in God's image** (verses 5-6). This is not a new principle – it is a re-statement of the principle of creation. Human life is unique on earth, and must be respected and protected.

In Genesis 9:8, God introduced His covenant with Noah. The concept of covenant is very important in the Bible. A covenant is a special relationship between God and a person or group of people based on promises God makes to bless them. It may include a rule or rules that the people must obey to maintain these blessings, and always has a sign to remind God and people of it. Perhaps the best example of a covenant for us is the marriage contract between two people – a relationship based on promises with a sign (a ring). Take a look at the covenant God made in Genesis Chapter 9:

Made with:	Noah, his descendants, and every living creature (verses 9-10)
The promise:	There will never be another flood to destroy the earth (verse 11)
Rule(s):	NONE
The sign:	The rainbow (verses 12-17)

This is the first of three covenants we will learn about as we continue to study the Bible. It is through these covenants that God restores His kingdom with mankind. The covenant with Noah gives hope that God will restore His Kingdom, and as we read verses 1-17 we might even wonder if the kingdom will be restored fully at this time – Noah and his family were God's people living in His place (the earth He had given them) under His rule.

The Founding of the Nations (Genesis 9:18-11:32)

However, as we read on in Chapter 9 we learn that despite God's covenant, **the problem of sin had not gone away** as Noah's son Ham dishonours his father. Chapter 10 tells how Noah's three sons became the ancestors of all nations, as they fulfilled God's command to multiply. However, sin continued to reign in mankind, and in Chapter 11 we see mankind's sin becoming so great that God had to move to limit man's destructiveness again. The people came together to build a city and tower to celebrate their own greatness. The problem wasn't that they built a city but that this was another action rejecting God as their King! So, God confused the languages of the people causing different groups to speak different languages, and scattered the nations over the earth (11:7-9). Since then there has been distrust and conflict between nations and cultures. This event is significant, because it tells us something very important:

Man is not able to make this world perfect through his own effort, even if all the nations work together in unity. Because of sin (which shows itself in pride and greed), even the best political ideas will ultimately fail if they do not recognise God as ruler over all.

Chapter 11 finishes with another line of descendants of one man – this time of Shem. Like the list in Chapter 5 it ends with a man with three sons (verse 26). One of these sons, Abram, will be the next great figure of the Old Testament. We are left wondering how God will restore His Kingdom, and how He will finally deal with the problem of sin, which makes it impossible for people to obey Him. Who could be the perfect sacrifice for sins?

Key Lesson: There is hope for God's Kingdom to be restored because of His Grace

God is holy and He must judge sin, however, He is also gracious and wants to save and forgive those who have faith in Him. God will restore His Kingdom through Covenant, and will forgive sin on the basis of sacrifice.