

Foundations: Waiting On The Waters
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 37:1-9; James 5:7-8; Genesis 8:2-20

Our final Scripture reading today is from Genesis 8:2-20. May God add His richest blessing to the reading of His perfect, infallible, holy Word. “Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed, and the rain had stopped falling from the sky. The water receded steadily from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the water had gone down, and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to recede until the tenth month, and on the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains became visible. After forty days Noah opened the window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find no place to set its feet because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him. 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. By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry. Then God said to Noah, "Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. 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 upon it." So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. All the animals and all the creatures that move along the ground and all the birds -- everything that moves on the earth -- came out of the ark, one kind after another. 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.”

When was the last time you had to wait? Probably not long ago. You might have waited on breakfast to be served on your way here this morning. We had to wait for everyone to arrive at church this morning. Everyday, waiting is just part of life. We wait in lines at the grocery store, the fast food window, and at the Secretary of State. We take a test and get done early, we wait for everyone else to finish. We've all been waiting a lot on the Post Office to deliver stuff lately. Maybe you've been waiting for a vaccine to go visit family and friends; we've all been waiting for the pandemic to end.

There are seasons of waiting. There's a long season of waiting between planting seeds in your garden and seeing some tomatoes or cucumbers sprout up. We wait for the harvest. Sometimes it seems that spring and fall are just the waiting periods between the hot times and the cold times. The church understands seasons of waiting too. Advent is a time that we remember the wait for the Christ child – and it's a time that kids wait to find presents under the tree Christmas morning. Lent reminds us of Christ's journey to the cross for us at Easter.

But the hardest waits are the ones with an unclear outcome and an uncertain future. Time in a hospital waiting room stands still. Waiting to find out if some long-term danger has finally gone away...waiting for a child after years without progress...waiting for the job to turn around or for a credit score to go up...these can be painful waits, especially when we don't know when or if things will ever turn around.

This is where we find the story of Noah this week...literally in-between worlds, the world that God has created and the world that God is re-creating through the flood. As we learned together a couple of weeks ago, God takes us through the storms of life, not around them. And as we pick up the story today, we see Noah right in the middle of it. Last week, we heard about the storm itself, the great flood, the destruction of all things living on dry ground. But this week, we come to the story of waiting.

We might remember that our last passage ended with God remembering Noah, and because of God thinking about Noah, the storm abates. But there's still a long way to go. The waters begin to go down after 150 days – 5 months. But the only way they know this is because they're doing soundings of some sort...they can finally drop some buoy or anchor that hits some earth. The ark doesn't come to rest on the mountains of Ararat until day 197. But remember, the ark is four stories tall. They can't see the mountain peaks until day 270, three months later. It's 360 days when the waters dry up, and 417 days until the earth is dry and God has Noah and his family and the animals disembark.

It might help to think of it this way – from the time of the first COVID closing mandates to the opening up last weekend was 425 days. The pandemic timeline to now is almost identical to the time Noah and his family spent cooped up on the ark. Now Noah had years and years of preparation building the ark, but the total time in social isolation with seven other people and an ark full of animals – about the same as us right now!

But here's the thing I want to point out for us that we simply can't afford to miss: *the ancient saints relied on faith just as we do*. Sometimes we read Scripture and we think, “these guys had it easy – God talked to them directly!” And yes, that seems to be the case. We don't get the idea that God put thoughts in Noah's head or Abraham's head or Moses' head – He spoke with them in some way. But the consistent thing we see in Scripture is how seldom God speaks directly to them.

God tells Noah to build an ark to avoid the flood. But God doesn't tell know when that flood is coming. God doesn't tell Noah how long he has to build the ark. God doesn't tell Noah how long the flood is going to last. God speaks to Noah twice before the flood...one to give him his marching orders, the second to send him and his family and the animals onto the ark. But during the flood itself, during this time that would have been most scary of all, God is notably silent. Noah is a righteous person, so we assume that he talks to God in prayer; he isn't just floating on the boat without any sense of God's presence. But God does not speak to Noah from day 1 until day 417.

The Scripture doesn't say what was going through Noah's mind at the time. But God is not giving him special coaching. God's Word to Noah has been proven true; the rains did come; the flood did happen. But in the heart of the catastrophe and even well beyond, God is silent. Noah must rely on his faith to see him through.

For me, this truth has been so important. Because it is easy to look at the stories of the saints of old and assume that God worked differently back then, that God was regularly in communication with His people. Yet He wasn't, not in a conversational, hear His voice kind of way. Sin precluded that. Until the sin problem is dealt with once and for all, there will always be that barrier to our understanding God's communication with us.

That's where we rely on faith patterned for us by those biblical heroes. They aren't heroes because they were physically strong or had much to recommend about them; they were heroes because they relied on their faith in God despite enemies laughing at them and circumstances suggesting that God wouldn't pull through. Noah wasn't fearless; Moses wasn't without his doubts. Their own frailty makes them relatable to us. Don't think that because Noah went through an amazing scenario in the flood that he is all that different from you. You can have that kind of faith. Just keep trusting God in the storm.

Here's another thought that came to mind in looking at this passage today: *God does sometimes end our crises, but He rarely ends their consequences for our convenience.* Let me unpack what I mean by that. God ended the crisis for Noah and his family when the rains ended and the flood waters began to recede. That part was done. But if I read this right, the consequences of that flood last almost double the time of the flood itself, and last nearly ten times as long as the initial rains! The flood was over, but the consequences of the flood would last for some time.

It would have been convenient for the consequences to have been over once the crisis was averted, but that's not the way it happened. Our text even tells us that while the water was gone from the surface of the ground about a year in, the earth itself was muddy and waterlogged. (Any of us who've driven the dirt roads around here know what that's like!) The crisis was long gone, but the natural consequences took time.

This is true in so many situations. I think about how some people who fight an addiction to alcohol have to white-knuckle it going to AA meetings whenever they're offered to get them through, where it's a constant struggle. And then I've heard a few Christians here and there say, "When I turned to Jesus, I turned over the bottle to Him and I've never wanted a drink since." Part of their testimony is how God took away their addiction. And sometimes we ask why God gives some this special grace and others battle it their whole lives.

But what I see is that even when God does cut off a crisis, He almost never ends the consequences. That person still has to make amends for what they've done. There are apologies to be made, broken friendships to mend, sometimes even jail time to be served. The consequences look different with God in the picture. Knowing that Jesus has saved you from sin's grip can make the consequences easier to deal with. But it doesn't get rid of them.

In our situations, we can take heart...just because we're going through something and it takes a long time to resolve doesn't mean God isn't involved and looking out for the best interests of His children. While I'm sure the boat ride was long and tedious, I'm sure the hardest part were those 57 days between the ground looking less wet and God opening the ark when the ground was completely and totally dry. But God was still working, and just because the consequences were playing out didn't mean God wasn't behind them.

Maybe you've gotten a better job but old debts are still trailing you. Maybe events from your past are still coming back to bite you even though you're a changed person. Don't take those things to mean that God has abandoned you or forsaken you. God is at work drying up the ground from the floods in your life. It's not fun and it's not convenient. But God is just as much at work drying out the flood as He was when He sent it in the first place.

And this brings us to another important thought: *we are not expected to have blind faith, but patience is at the heart of faith.* One of the most intriguing parts of the story is how Noah sends out a raven and a dove to literally test the waters. The raven was considered a scavenger who could take care of himself if he could find anything to eat. On the other hand, doves in a variety of different cultures symbolized purity. If a dove could survive out in the world, they were good to go. Noah isn't hearing from God, so he sends these birds out to get a feel for what is happening. He doesn't leave the boat; he doesn't go out early when things just appear muddy; but he uses the birds to get a proper perspective on what to expect.

Noah is not chastised for sending out the birds to get an idea of what's going on out in the larger world. In the same way, I think that we are not expected to blindly follow God in faith without asking any questions, without any sort of reassurance, without doing what Noah did and getting a proper perspective. In our day, we have Jesus. We know that He came for us; we have the testimony not only of the Bible and the ancient eyewitnesses but also the church for the last 2000 years. When God asks you to take a leap of faith and trust Him, He's not asking you to trust without any evidence. He will send us olive branches from time to time to show us He is with us. But patience is at the heart of faith. Noah waited those extra 57 days without trying to get the ark door down...we need to have patience in the same way.

So many problems the people in Scripture have come from their lack of patience. Abraham lacks patience with God's promise to give him a son, so he arranges things with his wife's handmaiden. The end result is Ishmael, not the child of God's promise, a child he later sends away with his mother, a child who now the Islamic countries claim as their heritage in faith. The Hebrews are impatient with manna from heaven when they wait in the wilderness outside the Promised Land, and it turns out only their children get to enter what would become Israel. King Saul, impatient to get into battle, takes it on himself to make the sacrifice that only the prophet Nathan can make, and he loses his kingdom over it.

When things are tough, patience is hard. We all know from this last year how patience has run out. Patience with masks, patience with kids at home, working from home, businesses closed, patience with getting back to life like what it was before. Hebrews 6:12 says, "We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." Patience means not giving up on God when the wait seems like forever.

That doesn't mean that we go at it with blind faith. And that's why we need the church. That's why I'd encourage you, whenever you have the chance, whenever we can have service, come and worship together. In many ways, we the people of the church are the olive branches the rest of us need. The trials and frustrations are easier when we know that we're all in it together, praying for one another, supporting one another. It is easier to be patient through those difficult times when we know that someone has our back.

With that said, though, it is hard sometimes when God seems silent. Many times, we've been on our personal ark for a year and things seem spiritually quiet. We say we want to know God's will for our lives. Many times, though, that desire to "know God's will" is really a way out of us making difficult choices. God has let us know the vast majority of His will through His Scripture. He can choose to make His will for us in small things known. But here's my final thought for the day: *when the specific will of God isn't clear, obey your marching orders.*

One of my favorite movies is *Saving Private Ryan*. For those who haven't seen it, it's about Captain Miller and his squad who make it through D-Day to be given an unusual assignment – to find Private First Class James Ryan out on the battlefield and bring him back safely. Problem is, Ryan is a paratrooper who was dropped far beyond their current position. It's going to be so hard, Captain Miller describes it as "trying to find a needle in a stack of needles." The squad will be in constant danger; some of them will die. There'll be no communication back and forth with high command, no way for them to know Ryan's position or if he's reported dead or wounded. Their one job is to find him, and the squad's job is to obey those orders until the matter is resolved.

God has given us so much wisdom in the pages of Scripture that we would need more than one lifetime to truly understand, process, and obey it all. God has made it clear how we as Christians should act, what rules to follow, and what to believe about Him and what He created. If we follow those things, we will be OK. Those are our marching orders.

Noah and his family were in the ark 417 days. During that time, the marching orders didn't change. I'm sure there was a lot of praying, probably a fair amount of worrying, and a whole lot of the mundane, everyday rituals of feeding the animals and cleaning out their stalls. Not a glamorous job, not a fun job, but necessary and important. I'm sure that there was more than enough to do in taking care of all those beasts.

I'm sure they all wondered what life would be like after the flood. They wondered when it would be over. They surely got excited when the dove came back with signs of growth on the ground again. I imagine that nerves ran high and thoughts of a new life were constant. But in the meantime, the lions were hungry and the elephants needed a bath. We don't read about those things, of course, but they had to be done. So they were.

Friends, there is a lot up in the air right now. We're starting to come out of the strangest 14 months any of us have lived through, and it's not quite done yet. But I believe in these days, we can look to God's provision for Noah for guidance. God seems silent, but was always there. It's still true today. Turn to Jesus in faith, be patient for His lead, follow what He's already said, and you will find His rest as you wait on the waters of whatever flood you face.