

LESSON 8: NOAH (COVENANT WITH ONE FAMILY)

Instruction for Faith Educators

For Basic Level / Age 7	:	Cover points 1 to 11
For Intermediate Level / Age 10	:	Cover points 1 to 11
For Advanced Level / Age 13	:	Cover points 1 to 15

Revision from previous lesson:

In the previous lesson, we learned that mankind had fallen as a result of having been deceived by the devil. We had rebelled against God and contracted the problem of Original Sin. In this lesson, we learn about how God had everything planned out to save us from our sins. He worked out His plan step by step, beginning from the family of a man called Noah.

Current lesson:

1. Read the story of Noah from the Bible (Genesis 6:6 to 9:17) and explain it to the students.
2. Noah was a man who remained righteous despite the violence and corruption that filled the whole earth during his time (Genesis 6:5, 9).
3. God told Noah that He would put a stop to the wickedness of the world through a universal flood. Noah was instructed to build an ark in order that his family might survive the flood, and Noah obeyed God (Genesis 6:22).
4. While Noah was building the ark, he preached about God's impending judgement and mercy. But people ignored his warnings and the flood eventually overcame them.
5. Noah and his wife, his three sons and their wives (eight people in total) who had entered into the ark with all kinds of animals were saved from the flood.
6. God promised Noah that He would never again destroy the world in such a manner (Genesis 9:15). God established a new and everlasting covenant with Noah and his descendants, and it was accompanied with a rainbow as a sign of God's promise (Genesis 9:1-17).
7. God does not will for anyone to be destroyed by their sinfulness. God wants to be in friendship with mankind. But sin is what causes mankind to break friendship with Him. God is always eager to walk with those who choose friendship with Him, like Noah. And He saves them from the flood of sin by renewing His covenant with them.
8. But the sin and rebellion of mankind did not end with Noah's generation. Read the story of the Tower of Babel from the Bible (Genesis 11:1-9) and explain it to the students.

We are told that people were beginning to rebel against God again by the time of Noah's grandchildren. More than just being rebellious, they were attempting to unite themselves in their evil deeds. As a result, the account of the Tower of Babel describes how God

scattered Noah's descendants and multiplied their languages so that they would not unite in their sin.

9. The building of a tower in itself was not the problem. The sin of mankind was in thinking they could build a tower that could reach to God in Heaven. St Augustine, in studying this text, saw pride, in that they thought they could avoid a future flood, as if there could be a tower too high for God! (*Tractates on John* 6.10.2)

The verse calling this place Babel is significant. *Babel* is a Hebrew word meaning "gate of God," or by extension, "gate of (to) heaven." What they really intended to do was to ascend to Heaven, and God, by their own strength. Remember, Adam and Eve had been barred from paradise because they could no longer endure the presence of God. We should never think that we can walk into God's presence by our own unaided power. Only God's grace can do this. We cannot achieve Heaven by our power.

10. To make matters worse, they said, "let us make a name for ourselves". Not only were they seeking to enter Heaven by their own power, but also to make a name for themselves.

Recall that Adam named all the animals (Genesis 2), but God named man (Gen 5:1). To name something is to have superiority over it and to know something of its essence. Parents name their children. In the ancient world, naming was very significant. Ultimately, it is God who names us. In so doing, it is He who declares our essence. It is pride, in this ancient sense, for man to try to "make a name" for himself. Only God can really name us and assign us any lasting glory.

11. Humanity that built the Tower of Babel desired to concentrate and centralise its power without God as its source and centre. Because God had promised Noah that He would ensure mankind would never have to be destroyed, He decided to place limits to how evil mankind could become. Hence, God confused their speech and scattered them in different directions. This unity in wickedness was truly evil, and God had to disunite them in order to preserve them from self-destruction.

St Jerome (in *Homilies*, 21): "Just as when holy men live together, it is a great grace and blessing; so likewise, that congregation is the worst kind when sinners dwell together. The more sinners there are at one time, the worse they are! Indeed, when the tower was being built up against God, those who were building it were disbanded for their own welfare. The conspiracy was evil. The dispersion was of true benefit even to those who were dispersed."

12. The account of Noah and the flood has been questioned by some modern critics on whether it was ever possible for a flood to have covered the whole earth. They say there is no evidence that the whole earth had ever been inundated by flood before. There are also those who say that Noah's story sounds more like the retelling of an earlier Babylonian myth called the Epic of Gilgamesh, in which a council of gods floods the earth and selects a man (Utnapishtim) to gather animals aboard a cube-shaped boat. Much like Noah did, after the flood, Utnapishtim releases a bird to find land and offers sacrifice to the gods.

The Church does not require that the story of Noah be interpreted as a literal worldwide flood. The person of Noah did exist in fact (Hebrews 11:7-8; 1 Peter 3:18-21; 2 Peter 2:4-

5, 9), although the reader is also not required to literally believe that God used Noah and his family in exactly the manner that was described in the story. The writer of Genesis may very possibly have been using the same Babylonian narrative to demonstrate the superiority of God the Creator to all other “gods”, since the gods in the Epic of Gilgamesh were afraid of the floods and fled to higher ground, whereas the God of Scripture asserted total control over the flood. Pope Pius XII said that Scripture constantly used “simple and metaphorical language adapted to the mentality of a people but little cultured, [in order to] both state the principal truths which are fundamental for our salvation, and also give a popular description of the origin of the human race and the chosen people” (*Humani Generis*, 38).

13. The Church also has a special way of understanding this account of Noah. There are elements in the account that point to something of the future:

CCC 845: “[The Church] is prefigured by Noah’s ark, which alone saves from the flood.”

CCC 1094: “...the flood and Noah’s ark prefigured salvation by Baptism.”

14. The story of Noah appears to sound like God truly regretted creating mankind. However, it is important to understand that God does not regret His actions and decisions, for whatever He decides is perfect. Scripture writers constantly wrote in such a way that made God seem human (this is called “anthropomorphism”) in order to put across a point to readers of their time who were very simple in their thinking.

The key phrase in the story of Noah is Genesis 6:6: “Yahweh regretted having made human beings on earth and was grieved at heart.” In ancient Jewish culture, the heart was not understood as a place of emotion, but rather, a place of thinking and judgement. In saying that God regretted and was grieved at heart, the writer was saying that God rendered negative judgement against mankind and creation for its failure to live up to its covenant with God. However, this judgement was not one of hopeless condemnation; instead, it was a true and honest judgement about the state of the world. This also did not mean that God intended to give up on the world, and in particular, on humanity.

15. The account of the Tower of Babel also raises a question of how God did such a thing. The Genesis passage does not quite explain how God confused the language of the people. Perhaps the best understanding is what Catholic theology would call God’s “permissive will”. God’s “permissive will” means to make an event sound like it was God’s purposeful doing even though He merely allowed it to happen out of people’s own free will. In the case of the Tower of Babel, the confusion of the multitude could be understood as the development of their own factions, languages, and loyalties due to their own free wills. The Old Testament writers appear to have employed this literary construct regularly, by attributing to God actions He merely permits, but are positively committed by another. Since they wrote the Old Testament in accordance with how they experienced God in their lives, then we must interpret the text in light of that understanding, culture, and modes of communication.



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