

Sermon 12, How to Live Under Judgment, Pt. 1: Noah, 2 Peter 2:4-5

Proposition: Noah shows us that proclaiming righteousness is an appropriate response to the truth that our God judges and saves.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to a text of profound relevance for our era. There are many ways to approach this text, and we can get lost in some of its more spine-tingling extravagances if we want. But I want to focus not on the black pits of Tartarus, as chilling and fearsome as they are, nor on the more gruesome aspects of the flood. Instead, brothers and sisters, I would like to approach topic from the direction of how to live under judgment. Clearly our text this evening is primarily interested in telling us about the character of God. Our God judges and saves, and these are not opposites but rather perfectly united in His holiness. That's the main point not only of this sermon, but of the next two as well. We know about that truth, though of course we need to be reminded of it. But as we're reminded of it (which much of the sermon will do), we see Noah held up as an example of how to live during a time of judgment. When God is pouring out wrath on the ungodly and saving you as the godly, how should you and I live? What we'll see this morning is that God judges and saves, and that proclaiming righteousness is one very appropriate response to that truth.

I. Setting: The Antediluvian World, Genesis 6

Return with me now to those thrilling days of yesteryear, in which the sons of God took the daughters of men as wives for themselves, and produced very evil descendants known as Nephilim in Hebrew and rendered "giants" in Greek. They were mighty men, men of renown, who walked on earth in that ancient world. Who were these Nephilim? Were they really half-demon, half-man, as ancient interpreters and many modern ones believe? Brothers and

sisters, the fact of the matter is that everything that's known for sure about them is right there on the page in front of you. If you read Genesis 6, and the references to it here and in Jude, you know everything that actual reliable primary sources can tell us about those days and the Nephilim who walked on earth. I will say that for a long time I refused to accept the interpretation that reads Gen. 6 as describing human-demon marriages. All across nature, we see that two beings of different kinds cannot reproduce with each other. But it is also true that slightly different lineages *can* have children together, the most obvious being the horse-donkey cross we call a mule and the tiger-lion cross we call a liger or lion. Could it be just possible that angels and humans are close enough that we can reproduce together? I confess that the possibility cannot be ruled out. In any case, in that world before the flood, of which we have the tiniest glimpse in the pages of Scripture, angels sinned. If they did not sin by marrying human women, as described in Gen. 6, then Scripture and tradition are silent as to what their sin might have been. Jude describes their sin as "going after strange flesh." So likely what's in view here is indeed angels leaving their proper place in the world and doing something really evil. And that evil spilled over such that human beings in general were wicked; the thoughts of man's heart were only evil, and that continually!

So in an evil time, God acted. That's the point of this example. When men and angels were being bad, God acted.

II. God's Judgments on the Antediluvian World, vv. 4-5

First of all, He acted in judgment.

A. He didn't spare angels, v. 4

He didn't spare angels. Obviously, angels are holy and powerful beyond our ability to imagine. We don't know much about them, but we know that they stand in the presence of God and that they are fearsome burning ones. They are the highest of created beings, but that did not protect them from God's wrath.

1. He confined them to the black pits of Tartarus

Instead, He cast them into Tartarus, the lowest part of the underworld, and confined them to pits until the day of judgment. This language may be only metaphorical, and mean that God somehow restrains their actions. We would say, even less poetically, that He "keeps them on a tight leash." But it may be more literal than we can imagine, too. Some versions read "chains," others "pits." I think "pits" is the better reading because it is not like Jude but rather shows an independent reference to the book of Enoch, where the sin and punishment of these evil angels is described at greater length. Regardless, God threw the evil angels into the black pits of Tartarus, confining them so that they can no longer wreak havoc in the world as they once did.

2. He keeps them there until doomsday

This is a permanent confinement; they will be there until doomsday, stuck in prison until the day of sentencing dawns with the Second Coming of Christ.

What's the point of telling us this tantalizing little bit about the angels and their fate? It's obvious. To anyone who says "God wouldn't judge" our response must always be "He already

has.” Surely this is a telling rejoinder! I remember being in college and arguing with Patrick Bartell, the guy who always drove me nuts. We happened to be in a room with a damaged screen in the window up on the third floor of our dorm. He said something and I told him “stop it or I’ll throw your keys out the window.” He didn’t stop it, and I threw his keys out the window. He was furious, especially since they fell through the grate below into the air conditioner pit and nearly fell into a big condenser unit. I never again had to threaten to throw someone’s keys out the window. They knew I would do it, because I’d done it! And in the same way, brothers and sisters, you know that God has no problem throwing you or anyone else who lives a lifestyle of sin into the black pits of Tartarus. We know that, because He’s done it and He’s still doing it.

They are in the black pits, and there they will stay until the judgment day — the day of final sentencing, when they will be cast into the lake of fire with the beast and the false prophet. Yes, that’s right: just as in our civil justice system here in the USA, you can rot in jail for a long time before you ever have a trial and get a sentence. If you think about it, you can realize that the black pits of Tartarus are to Hell what jail is to prison. Doesn’t give you a lot of confidence in how pleasant Hell is going to be!

B. He didn’t spare the ancient world, v. 5a

But it wasn’t just angels that He judged. He also judged the entire planet.

1. He sent a flood on the world

He sent a flood on the world — and the Greek word here is “cosmos.” Obviously, He didn’t flood the universe, or what we would call “the cosmos.” Rather, He flooded the planet, what we usually just call “the world.” Because really, Earth is enough of a world for most of us (aside from Alexander the Great with his overweening ambition). God didn’t spare that ancient world. Now, it’s odd to us to see a writer from what we call “the ancient world” talking about a world far more ancient than his own. After all, in Peter’s mind he lived in modern times, and the world in his day was older than it had ever been. So he looks back thousands of years to the flood that destroyed the ancient world, recognizing that God sent that flood.

You’ve all seen videos and pictures, and in some cases seen firsthand, what floods can do. Very few things that humans make can withstand the pounding of huge quantities of water. A flood forty or fifty feet deep would destroy most of Gillette. A flood that covered the tops of the highest mountains, such as God sent in Noah’s day, would destroy virtually everything we’ve built. Allegedly, if the earth were smooth, there’s enough water in the oceans today to cover the whole planet to a depth of over 2 kilometers. Can you imagine being Noah and sailing endlessly over that sea without a shore on a watery planet? The idea terrifies me, gives me the creeps. I am not a sailor and have never been to sea. God sent that kind of a flood.

2. The flood targeted the ungodly

The flood specifically targeted the ungodly. It destroyed their world. In fact, since the Bible tells us that only 8 people survived the flood, we can presume that there were only 8 godly people in the world at the time. Essentially, then, it is more than fair to describe the world as “the world of the ungodly.” Basically everyone on Earth was ungodly. And God destroyed them with a flood.

A few weeks ago I asked whether you felt that it was inappropriate for God to strike Miriam with leprosy for a week just because she questioned her brother's authority. I ask the same question now: Can you trust this God who destroyed the whole world? Killing everyone except 8 people is a very aggressive action. But it clearly reflects the character of our Father. He will react against sin.

Judgment is unpleasant. Do you think Noah enjoyed living at a time when everyone was so evil that they simply had to be wiped out so that God could start over? Do you think he enjoyed sailing through the maelstrom that was the flood, probably complete with meteor strikes and volcanoes and other similar disasters? We don't know exactly what all went on during the flood. But a recent *New Yorker* article spells out some of our guesses about the kinds of things that were happening while Noah and the other seven in the ark were hanging on for dear life.

A few years ago, scientists at Los Alamos National Laboratory used what was then one of the world's most powerful computers, the so-called Q Machine, to model the effects of the impact. The result was a slow-motion, second-by-second false-color video of the event. Within two minutes of slamming into Earth, the asteroid, which was at least six miles wide, had gouged a crater about eighteen miles deep and lofted twenty-five trillion metric tons of debris into the atmosphere. Picture the splash of a pebble falling into pond water, but on a planetary scale. When Earth's crust rebounded, a peak higher than Mt. Everest briefly rose up. The energy released was more than that of a billion Hiroshima bombs, but the blast looked nothing like a nuclear explosion, with its signature mushroom cloud. Instead, the initial blowout formed a "rooster tail," a gigantic jet of molten material, which exited the atmosphere, some of it fanning out over North America. Much of the material was several times hotter than the surface of the sun, and it set fire to everything within a thousand miles. In addition, an inverted cone of liquefied, superheated rock rose, spread outward as countless red-hot blobs of glass, called tektites, and blanketed the Western Hemisphere. . . .

The asteroid was vaporized on impact. Its substance, mingling with vaporized Earth rock, formed a fiery plume, which reached halfway to the moon before collapsing in a pillar of incandescent dust. Computer models suggest that the atmosphere within fifteen hundred miles of ground zero became red hot from the debris storm, triggering gigantic forest fires. As the Earth rotated, the airborne material converged at the opposite side of the planet, where it fell and set fire to the entire Indian subcontinent. Measurements of the layer of ash and soot that eventually coated the Earth indicate that fires consumed about seventy per cent of the world's forests. Meanwhile, giant tsunamis resulting from the impact churned across the Gulf of Mexico, tearing up coastlines, sometimes peeling up hundreds of feet of rock, pushing debris inland and then sucking it back out into deep water, leaving jumbled deposits that oilmen sometimes encounter in the course of deep-sea drilling. . . .

Earth's two essential food chains, in the sea and on land, collapsed. About seventy-five per cent of all species went extinct. More than 99.9999 per cent of all living organisms on Earth died, and the carbon cycle came to a halt.⁵

Now, again, this is a “best guess”-type reconstruction of the events. But this is some of the kinds of events that were happening

III. God's Salvation in the Antediluvian World: He Protected Noah, v. 5b

But in the midst of judgment, He also sends salvation. He protected Noah. He killed almost everyone, but He spared 8.

A. Noah's Salvation as Eschatological Sign

Peter emphasizes, both here and in 1st Peter, that Noah was the eighth person saved. Why does he mention that? Because Noah's salvation is a sign of the eighth day, the day of resurrection, the eschatological day. The fact that Noah was saved is a signal, a type, of the truth that the perfect number plus more will be saved on God's eighth day — that is, on the day when the age to come dawns. When this age is completed, when it comes to the end of its “seventh” and last day, then God will decisively act to save and to damn.

Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. He, his wife, and his three sons and their wives went into the ark, where they were preserved while the world died around them. In the same way, brothers and sisters, those within the ark of the church will be saved through the final judgment even while the world dies around us.

Can you believe that God hasn't changed — that the God who sent the flood and saved His own in Noah's day is still alive and well and acting in history for judgment and salvation? You must believe it. It is the first step to living well under judgment. The God of floods and meteorites has not changed. He will still save His people and judge those who rise up against Him and prefer their sin.

Why do you need confidence in God as judge? If you don't have it, you'll give up. You'll join the herd, the mass of wicked people who no longer believe that God will judge or save. Or else you'll grow depressed as you endure the kinds of things that Noah went through, and lose your motivation to stand for righteousness.

Imagine Noah in the ark, saying “This is how God treats His servants.” Yes, it's good, in that He saved them — but what a terrific cost!

B. Noah's Preaching as Contemporary Lesson

You see, in all this Noah acted as a preacher of righteousness. That's the other lesson with contemporary significance. While no asteroids have fallen, no great floods have overspread the earth, we know that our nation is under judgment. It's obvious as our politicians continue to spend millions on dismembering the weakest members of society while refusing to work together on the most obvious positive changes (like eliminating daylight saving time). How did Noah respond to that kind of thing? He preached righteousness. That means imputed righteousness and

⁵ Douglas Preston, “The Day the Dinosaurs Died,” *The New Yorker* (March 29, 2019), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/08/the-day-the-dinosaurs-died>

imparted righteousness — the righteousness that comes from God by faith, and the righteousness that is the result of actually being good and obeying God wholeheartedly. Noah preached Christ, for Christ has been made righteousness to us by God Himself.

Can you still talk about righteousness in a world under judgment? Brothers and sisters, you must talk about nothing else. Okay, so that's hyperbole. But of all the things that are told us about the antediluvian world, we know that Noah got through judgment by preaching righteousness. His day job, so far as we know, was as a carpenter building a huge boat. But he did not fail to tell people about Jesus, the righteous one, and the obedience to God that knowing Him will produce.

Righteousness alone will get you through judgment. Righteousness is what pleases God. Righteousness is the message that we can't lose or ignore in a world that's cruising for the black pits of Tartarus. It was Noah's message, and it was Noah's habit. It could be because Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD — and so have all of you, if you are in Christ. In Him, righteousness needs to be your message and your habit. Don't go off-message; don't make evil a habit. If you do these two things, you will live, even under judgment. Amen.