

# NOAH BUILDS AN ALTAR

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Genesis 6:1–9:17

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

[God said,] “I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” (Gen. 9:13)

### Daily Bible Readings

<b>M</b>	June 2	Gen. 6:11–22	Obedience to God’s Command
<b>T</b>	June 3	John 6:15–20	Jesus Joins Us in the Storm
<b>W</b>	June 4	John 14:18–27	Peace through the Word
<b>Th</b>	June 5	Gen. 7:11–24	God Protects
<b>F</b>	June 6	2 Pet. 2:1–9	A Herald of Righteousness
<b>Sa</b>	June 7	Ps. 77:1–2, 7–19	A Cry for Deliverance

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

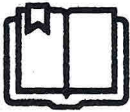
**W**hy do we worship God? Is it because we were told to do so? This may be the answer for some, but the story of Noah and the ark, Genesis 6–9, proposes another: we worship because we are grateful to the One who created us. The opening chapters of Genesis revolve around God’s creation of the world. The Noah story represents the continuation and climax of this work. When human brokenness threatens the world that God created, God responds by starting the story over in the persons of Noah and his family, a second Adam. Noah’s experience in this story is of God’s guidance and protection. When the long ordeal of their time on the ark finally ends, Noah offers a sacrifice to thank God for bringing his family safely through the flood.

This story is not the last time the Bible connects the dots between worship and gratitude. Later in Genesis, after his dramatic reconciliation with his brother Esau, Jacob builds an altar at Bethel “to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone” (Gen. 35:3). Many biblical stories follow this pattern. Awareness of God’s presence in the valleys and shadows of life leads to gratitude for God’s sustenance and protection,

which leads in turn to worship as the most appropriate expression of that gratitude.

Could this mean that gratitude is itself a form of worship? Could it be that, anytime we are grateful to another person for their help, support, or friendship, we are thanking God for them? How much richer would our relationship with God be if we took more opportunities to be grateful and to show our gratitude?

*Protecting and delivering God, we offer our thanks for all the ways you guide and sustain this hurting world. Open our eyes to all that you have done for us, and all you might do for the world through us. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Genesis 8:13–22; 9:11–13

**8:13** In the six hundred first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth, and Noah removed the covering of the ark and looked and saw that the face of the ground was drying. <sup>14</sup>In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. <sup>15</sup>Then God said to Noah, <sup>16</sup>“Go out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. <sup>17</sup>Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.” <sup>18</sup>So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives. <sup>19</sup>And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.

<sup>20</sup>Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. <sup>21</sup>And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of humans, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

<sup>22</sup>As long as the earth endures,  
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,  
summer and winter, day and night  
shall not cease.”



Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

9:11 “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” <sup>12</sup>God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: <sup>13</sup>I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

## NOAH AND NEW BEGINNINGS

Just as lack of familiarity with a biblical story can impede our understanding of it, the same can be said of an over-familiarity. This is certainly true of the story of Noah and the ark, in Genesis 6–9. Impressions of this passage, formed for many of us when we were children, can become ruts in our thinking. They prevent us from seeing aspects of the story that speak to us in fresh and sometimes startling ways. For example, did you know that the story as it appears in Genesis represents a combination of material from multiple sources? The cutting and pasting by ancient editors is easy to spot by comparing Genesis 6:19, the familiar instruction that Noah should bring two of each animal and bird into the ark, with 7:2–3 in which God tells Noah to bring *seven pairs* of clean animals and birds.

Familiarity often draws our focus away from the central drama of the story: the struggle within the heart of God over creation. God created the world as a place where the love of God would be always on display, where humans lived in joyful fellowship with creation, with one another, and with God. Then humans violated God’s good intentions. God’s response to the broken situation was more heartsickness than anger. The Old Testament prophets frequently describe the divine attitude toward God’s wayward people in these same terms (see, for example, Hos. 11).

There is no getting around the problematic aspects of this story, most especially the decision to destroy all of humanity. Yet this is not where the biblical text’s focus falls. Rather, this is a story of God’s gracious re-creation of the human story in Noah and his family. It is a story of God’s decision to bind himself to us forever in the covenant of the rainbow. The Bible never says that human nature was somehow automatically lifted up and improved by the experience of the flood (the embarrassing narrative of Noah’s drunken nakedness in Gen. 9:18–27 makes that clear). It says that God has eternally committed God’s love and

forgiveness to this sad lot of humanity. In building an altar to God and offering sacrifice there, Noah demonstrates that the best human response to God's gifts is always the gift of our own gratitude.



What other biblical stories can you think of where too much familiarity potentially limits our appreciation of their meaning?

## THE POWER OF GRATITUDE

In recent years, behavioral scientists have documented the link between gratitude and emotional (and physical) health. Gratitude lessens anxiety, promotes heart health, relieves stress, and generally seems to lighten the burdens of this frazzled and taxing life of ours.

Gratitude is also the beginning of worship. Upon descending from the ark, the first thing that Noah did was build an altar and make sacrifice. In spite of everything else that needed to get done, Noah took time to worship. Why? The most likely explanation was to say “thank you.” As noted, creation is the overarching theme of Genesis chapters 1–11. The Flood story represents a culmination and turning point in the Genesis account of creation, as God restarts the human narrative in Noah and his family. Noah receives this new beginning as a gift. He responds appropriately by giving thanks and giving back.

Have you ever been in an accident where you narrowly avoided physical harm, or seen a loved one's life saved by a medical intervention? For most of us, such situations make us aware of how easily our lives might have been changed for the worse and awaken intense feelings of gratitude. It is natural to direct these feelings to God, from whom comes “every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift” (Jas. 1:17). Gratitude is itself a form of spiritual health. It makes us aware of the gifts and presence of God in our lives. It helps us perceive our fellow human beings, complicated though they might be, as chief among those gifts. It helps us look beyond the disappointments of the moment to see the big picture of all the things that make life worthwhile. It recognizes that so many of those things came to us from beyond ourselves, that we did nothing either to make them happen or to deserve them.

Gratitude is the first gift we lay upon the altar in worship. Worship without gratitude is empty, centered only on ourselves.

Without gratitude, our prayers of supplication too often express only our wants and desires. With gratitude, prayer is communion with the God who loves to give gifts to God's children. Preaching without gratitude can slip into self-righteous "thou shalt." In gratitude, the preacher announces the arriving reign of God and invites everyone to join the party.

**?** How do your prayers usually begin: with supplication (asking for God's help)? with expressions of awe at God's greatness (sometimes called "wow!" prayers)? with thanksgiving?

**?** Do you mix the three, or do you customarily focus on one aspect of prayer?

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

If gratitude is the beginning of worship, then making gratitude part of our daily life can make us conscious of the presence of God surrounding us moment by moment. The way to do this is to treat gratitude as a *practice*. Gratitude is like forgiveness: most of us tend to think of it as an emotion, a feeling that wells up inside us, usually in response to something going on outside us. In truth, gratitude is most powerful when we make it a decision, when we choose to cultivate it through certain actions and perspectives. Here are some suggestions for doing this:

- *Be mindful of why we are grateful.* The young child of a family member has trouble remembering his manners, especially when it comes to saying thank you to adults. The thing about this little boy is that he actually says thank you fairly often. When he does, it is always heartfelt; if he tells you "Thanks," you know it's because he appreciates what you did for him. Stopping in the moment to think about why we are grateful for another's help or kindness can be a kind of gratitude prayer offered to God for them.
- *Find the one positive thing in a bad situation.* I had a professor who went out of her way to affirm every student's question, no matter how ill-informed or off track it was. That struck me as a good rule for life. Whenever things let us down, choosing to find something to affirm takes us out of ourselves, removing (however briefly) the lens of negativity and hurt through which we're tempted to see things.
- *Write it down.* I know; keeping a gratitude journal is an idea that seems great for somebody else, but not for me. Who has the time? Yet, much wisdom resides in the observation



that when we use our bodies to write something down, that thing sticks with us better.

A friend of mine once connected gratitude to belief in God: “If I didn’t believe,” she said, “what would I do with my gratitude?” Practices of gratitude tie us to God in powerful ways. Not every act of gratitude needs to be done with God specifically in mind, as long as we know that God is the Giver “from whom all blessings flow.”



**Remember a time when someone said they were grateful for you. How did it make you feel? What are some ways to show that same gratitude for people in your life?**

### SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today’s Scripture.*

1. Centuries before the Book of Genesis took shape, the story of a global flood circulated in written form in Mesopotamia (the Gilgamesh Epic). Through retellings over time and in various cultures, storytellers interpreted the epic to reflect their particular worldview.
2. When Noah disembarked from the ark, he offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving. He received covenant promises that God would preserve order in the cosmos rather than oppose the chaos of human sin through flooding waters (8:18–22).
3. In the Mesopotamian story, the gods discover that with all humans destroyed, no one will be left to sacrifice. Without sacrifices, the gods are deprived of their sustenance. The Gilgamesh Epic emphasizes the gods’ needs and exposes their shortsightedness. Genesis highlights God’s pleasure in the creatures God made and the commitment not to destroy them.
4. God’s salvation of Noah (9:1–17) leads to the covenant to preserve human life and not destroy people. The sign of the covenant is the rainbow, by which God’s promise is guaranteed. Every major covenant that God makes in the Pentateuch has a sign: Abraham’s covenant has circumcision (Gen. 17). Israel’s covenant has the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8–11; 31:13, 17; Deut. 5:12–15). The sign assures us that God remembers the promise and acts on our behalf.