

'As It Was In The Days Of Noah'

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Bahal was beginning to worry, since, as mayor, it was his job to worry for the rest of his remote, highland community. His wife, Chera, had remarked the day before that the rain was unusually heavy for this time of the year, but he had shrugged off her comment. Yet now, having endured three days of steady, heavy downpours, he felt the rain was something more than "unusual."

Earlier in the day, he had braved the pelting raindrops to check on his son's livestock down the road. His son, Sair—off on his honeymoon with his third wife—owned lands at a somewhat lower elevation than his father, so Bahal was concerned about flooding. He was glad he checked: The cattle had bunched together on the "drier" upper pasture because the lower one was knee-deep in water. Bahal had opened a gate to let his son's cattle move onto his own lands.

After breakfast, a member of the town council had reported that most of the town's streets ran higher than ankle-deep and some people were using flat-bottomed boat's to get around. A neighbor sloshed over a little later to tell him that a mudslide had buried the home of an outlying family overnight. Worse, most considered the current crop, only partly harvested, to be ruined. The only good news was that the rain hampered the criminal elements as much as anyone else.

Bahal chuckled, suddenly amused by a stray thought. He had heard just last week that old Noah, the crazy, landlocked shipbuilder, had finally finished his "ark" after 120 years of scorn. Rumor had it that he and his family had actually sealed themselves in! "He's probably the only one not concerned about this storm," he thought. With a last chuckle, he made his way to the kitchen to grab some lunch before someone else interrupted him.

Millions of people like Bahal, Chera and Sair drowned in the deluge God brought upon the earth in the days of Noah. The Flood destroyed the flourishing but corrupt civilization that mankind had built apart from God, and only Noah and his family survived. It was such a colossal event in history that most cultures have some kind of "legend" or "myth" remembering it.

The Bible contains the most lucid, historical, reliable version of the Flood story. Covering only four chapters (Genesis 6-9), it nonetheless expresses one of the Bible's major teachings and illustrations. Later, Jesus, Peter, Paul and others drew upon the account of the Flood to give moral or prophetic instruction. Truly, it was a "watershed" event in the history of humanity!

One of Jesus' allusions to the Flood is especially meaningful to us as Christ's second coming nears:

But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. (Matthew 24:36-39; see Luke 17:26-27)

What does Jesus mean by "as the days of Noah were"? What were the days of Noah like? Apart from the Bible, we have very little conclusive information about pre-Flood civilization. The Flood itself erased most of the evidence, and what we do have from that time is a source of fierce debate among archeologists, botanists, paleontologists and historians. The pages of Scripture are our only reliable source of information about "the world that then existed" (II Peter 3:6).

Pre-Flood Society

After man's expulsion from Eden, the Bible records only three vignettes from before the Flood, all of which involve unrestrained sin. As these accounts are our only glimpses into that period, God must have considered them representative of the activities and attitudes of the people who lived then. They paint a grim picture.

The first contains the well-known story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-15), in which the first man born on the earth also becomes the first murderer. A few points in this account are significant:

- » Cain killed Abel after a quarrel over a sacrifice to God. Cain brought a sacrifice, but God would not accept it because it did not meet His standards. While Abel's offering showed his complete submission to God, Cain's hints at grudging worship of God—and that done in his own way.
- » Becoming angry and sullen over his rejection, he quarreled with and killed his brother. Then, he lied to God's face! He had no fear of God or the consequences of sin.
- » Cain's retort to God's inquiry as to Abel's whereabouts is also significant: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain's attitude of indifference toward his fellow man greatly influenced later generations.
- » Coupled with his entirely selfish attitude, Cain tried to take advantage even of God's curse upon him. Using a "woe is me" ploy, he "convinced" God to guard his life from anyone avenging Abel's murder.

The way of Cain—idolatry, murder, deceit, selfishness, hypocrisy—saturated Pre-Flood society to the point that God, seeing the wickedness of man, regretted He had even created humanity (Genesis 6: 5-7). The other two vignettes merely expand upon Cain's sins.

The next account tells the story of Lamech, five generations after Cain (Genesis 4:19-24). His sins run from polygamy to murder to boastful pride in his transgressions. Though it cannot be proven, Jewish tradition claims he killed his forefather Cain as well as righteous Enoch (verse 23). Though his children were talented and inventive, the general tone of the passage suggests that they achieved their progress apart from God (see verse 16).

The third vignette deals with the prevalence of ungodly marriage practices leading to disastrous results (Genesis 6:1-7, 11-13). The gist of this section is that, after a few generations of multiplying, men as a whole began to leave God out of their lives. They chose wives—probably several of them, like Lamech—based solely on their physical beauty, not on their depth of character. Their children, though they became mighty, famous leaders, grew into wicked adults whose every impulse, thought

and plan was corrupt. Violence became a way of life. Once conditions reached this point, God decided to destroy them before they became so totally depraved that they could never repent, even in the resurrection.

The Bible pictures a society of unrestrained sin of every kind. The New Testament frequently mentions it in the same context as Sodom and Gomorrah and Israel's sins caused by Balaam and Korah. The underlying factor in all these situations is rebellion against and rejection of God. Cain, Lamech and mankind in general never took God into account when they committed their iniquities. As Psalm 10:4 says, "The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts."

Has our present society reached this nadir of behavior?

Today's Society

A few minutes of the evening news or a glance at the newspaper headlines provides enough proof for most Christians to answer this question affirmatively. Surely, mankind's behavior is not improving! Yet has mankind in general reached the point that "every intent of the thoughts of his heart [is] only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5)?

Charlotte, North Carolina, a city of about a half-million people, has over one hundred listings in the local Yellow Pages under "Security." Is that not an indication of the fear people live in? The recent surge in popularity of car security alarms, Lojack systems, the Club, pepper sprays and mace, mobile phones for emergencies and other security devices speaks volumes about the high incidence of crime.

We have become so used to "everyday" crimes that we fail to realize how much time, money and effort we use fighting them. From multiple door locks on cars and homes to personal identification numbers for credit cards and bank accounts to exterior floodlights and window grills, we take the cost of safety for granted. Some communities pay heavy fees for high walls, gates and guards. Taxpayers pay for increased police patrols and occasional sweeps of high-crime neighborhoods. Even air travel and mailing a letter or box involves high levels of security.

So much crime is committed around the world that we hear only about the major or more unusual ones such as a recent story out of Belgium (*Time*, December 1, 1997). A couple, dubbed "the Diabolical Lovers" by the Belgian press, found lonely singles, married them and soon thereafter murdered them to collect their life insurance payouts, a reported \$1.272 million. Police arrested them in Miami, where they had been living the high life in an oceanfront condominium while planning their next hit.

In Luxor, Egypt, the same militant Islamic group that assassinated President Anwar Sadat in 1981 attacked foreign tourists visiting the ancient temples. In a 45-minute rampage in mid-November, the terrorists shot and slashed to death 58 people, most Swiss nationals, leaving centuries-old pillars splattered with blood. This rivals the Oklahoma City Bombing in gore if not in numbers of dead.

The way of Cain does not only reveal itself in crime but also in perversions of every stripe. At a November "Human Rights Campaign dinner" for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, President Bill Clinton claimed that moral law is evolving (*World*, November 22, 1997). "We're

redefining in practical terms the immutable ideas that have guided us," he remarked. This oxymoronic statement seems reasonable to people who have no moral foundation, such as God's law. This is just a pseudo-intellectual way to say, "If it feels good, do it."

The President later said that "most people as they grow older become somewhat limited in their imaginations." By this he meant, "Get 'em while they're young!" He wants to make sure that educators teach youngsters early that certain kinds of sexual activity are not morally wrong or that one kind is not morally superior to another. Such early sex education is taking place all over the country in the public schools.

And it is not confined just to the U.S. A non-profit group, Human Life International (HLI), reports that Planned Parenthood, along with its international affiliates, "does more to promote abortion and contraception throughout the entire world" than any other organization ("*Sex Education Programs Subject Latin American Youth to Wholesale Immorality*," January 1996). The unprecedented increase of illegitimate pregnancies, abortions, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS among adolescents, HLI says, are "a direct result of its sex education programs, which are devoid of moral values and usurp parental authority."

It is not hard to find evidence that "the wickedness of man [is] great in the earth" (Genesis 6:5) and "the earth [is] filled with violence" (verse 11). If the end time is characterized by its similarity with the days of Noah, Christ can come at any time!

The Primary Meaning

Though we have seen that our day rivals Noah's in corruption and evil, this meaning of Matthew 24: 36-39 is actually the secondary interpretation. The primary meaning is more simple: Christ would come at a time when most of the world was busy doing its normal activities.

Notice verse 36: "But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only." This is the subject sentence of the entire paragraph. Verse 42 repeats the thought: "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming." Jesus rephrases it in verse 44: "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect Him."

Luke's version makes this especially clear:

And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed. (Luke 17:26-30)

People will be involved in their normal activities, not realizing such a momentous event is about to occur!

Paul writes that "the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they

shall not escape" (I Thessalonians 5:2-3). Just when men begin to think they have a handle on society's problems, total chaos and destruction will erupt.

Peter reminds us of scoffers coming in the last days who would say, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation" (II Peter 3:4). The apostle goes on to cite the example of the Flood—which came on suddenly and unexpectedly—as an event that broke the natural cycle of life (verses 5-6). Such is the time of Christ's return.

All of these prophetic warnings include the admonition to watch and be ready for it when it comes. As Paul says:

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. . . . Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober, . . . putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. (I Thessalonians 5:4, 6, 8)

Christ's return will not be sudden and unexpected to the church. We may not know the day or the hour, but we will be somewhere "in the ballpark." Jesus says His day "will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth" (Luke 21:35). But, as verse 34 says, if we "take heed to [our]selves," not being mired down by sin, we will be expecting it.

We are certainly living in times very like those of the days of Noah, so the return of Christ could come anytime soon. Knowing this, our job is to watch and pray and overcome so "that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man" (verse 36).