

## 2 Peter No. 11, “Believing in the Flood”

2 Peter 3:1-7

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It has been several weeks since we were last in 2 Peter. We spent some weeks in chapter 2 exploring some of the prominent themes of that fascinating chapter, so similar in its content and wording to the short letter of Jude. But now we come to chapter 3. Peter has already made mention of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of the Lord Jesus in v. 16 of chapter 1 and then in chapter 2 he made a point of the judgment that awaits sinners and of the Lord’s promise to deliver his own children from that judgment. Now he is going to address more directly the time and circumstances of that Last Judgment and that Second Coming.

All of the attention Peter has so far paid to the future consummation of history in judgment and salvation was due to the fact that it was that consummation that the false teachers were denying. What we will hear in chapter 3 is the echo of what the Christians Peter was writing to were hearing from these heretics who had come among them.

### Text Comment

v.2 Peter has been stern, stern, stern in the previous chapter – in the previous verse he has compared the false teachers to dogs and pigs – but now he reminds his readers of the relationship *they have with him*; “beloved,” or “dear friends” he calls them. He will address them in that way three more times in the chapter (vv. 8, 14, 17). It is a way of reminding them that, of all people, he has their best interests at heart. They should listen to him, because he cares for them. A “sincere” or wholesome mind, is a mind that thinks in that way that leads to sound and healthy living.

This is the second letter Peter has written to these folk. There are reasons to wonder if the first letter Peter refers to here was our 1 Peter. For example, it has been argued that while Peter hardly had a personal acquaintance with all the people to whom he wrote 1 Peter, 2 Peter seems to suggest a closer acquaintance between the apostle and the recipients of the letter. If 1 Peter is not the first of the two letters Peter sent to these believers, the first letter referred to here would belong to that large body of correspondence, the letters written by the apostles, that has been lost to posterity. The apostles were letter writers; we know that. The letters that are found in the New Testament are hardly the only ones they ever wrote! By a process that is not explained to us, only some of those were incorporated in Holy Scripture.

What is the commandment of the Lord to which reference is made in v. 2? In all likelihood it is that Christians live holy lives in the prospect of the Lord’s return. Here is another instance in which the apostles of the Lord Jesus are placed on the same footing or level with the prophets of the ancient epoch. The reference to “*your* apostles” is meant to remind these people that they had a past relationship with the apostles, the apostles were instrumental in their becoming Christians. Surely these believers should listen to them and their teaching – the teaching that transformed their lives – rather than to these late-

comers who have brought a very different message and whose own teaching is contradicted not only by the teaching of the apostles but by their lives. The apostles, not to put too fine a point on it, were better men! [Green, 136-137]

- v.3 That false teachers should appear to trouble the faith of the church should come as no surprise. False teaching in the church was an age-old problem. The prophets had had to contend with heretics in their day. So much of the preaching of the OT prophets was directed in one way or another at the individuals or at the teaching of those individuals that had lead Israel away from the true faith. And the apostles had told them to expect heresy in their time as well. More than that, they told them this false teaching would be motivated by age-old man-centered hedonism and self-interest. False teaching is almost always easier to follow than true teaching. People who live for themselves and for their pleasures, who live for their own position and station and fame, will always mock the very idea of the Last Judgment and a final division between the saved and the lost. People who are not serious about their own lives before God certainly are not going to be urgently warning their hearers of the judgment to come.

By the way “last days” is a biblical way of referring to the prophetic future, in this case, the time between the first and the second coming of Christ. Throughout this period the church may expect to have its message scoffed at.

- v.4 They supported their skepticism about the Second Coming and the Last Judgment by appealing to the stability of the worldly order – the earth goes on as it always has – catastrophic interventions simply do not happen. That was a commonplace in the thinking of Greco-Roman culture and, for that matter, of most cultures ever since. It is this prejudice that makes people nowadays resistant to both the Bible’s teaching of the creation and the consummation. It is the reason why skeptics argue that the miracle accounts in Holy Scripture are legendary, not historical. Such things simply don’t happen. Everybody knows that. But the Bible knows full well that the life of the world ordinarily proceeds in the way of natural laws of cause and effect. What the skeptics fail to reckon with is that those laws are God’s laws and that he can intervene in the life of the world whenever and however he pleases. What is more, he has! The universe is not a “closed” system, as Dr. Schaeffer used to say. It is always open to divine activity.

The reference to “the fathers” suggests in the context that this is a reference not to the first generation of Christians who had begun to die by the mid-60s, but to the ancient fathers, the believers of the ancient epoch, since Peter says that things have been continuing as they have been since the creation of the world. [Lucas, 131]

- v.7 Peter argues from history to make the point that God has already intervened in history to judge the world at the time of the flood, an unprecedented interruption in the ordinary round of life. The world inhabited by human beings was destroyed once at the command of God. The heavens and the earth, the entire creation will be destroyed at the consummation of history as part of God’s judgment. The first destruction was by water; the second will be by fire. The simple point is that the God who made this world and who destroyed it once before, can certainly destroy it again.

It is hardly difficult to follow the thread of Peter's argument in these verses. These false teachers, like so many teachers today, assume a uniformitarian universe. Things go on as they always have according to natural laws we understand at least to some degree. It is mere superstition to believe in such divine interventions in human history as we read of in Holy Scripture. And, if we cannot believe in such interventions in the past, why should we imagine that the world will end in a great act of judgment as Jesus and his apostles taught?

Ah, says Peter, but the flood is no superstition. It was an event in history. It is some proof of God's power and his willingness to intervene in human affairs and execute his judgment upon sinners. And, of course, if one accepts that God sent the flood to punish a sinful world, it is impossible then to deny that he might do the same again on a still greater scale at some future time. Now it would be helpful to know what the false teachers Peter is writing against, these men who were teaching that the Second Coming of Christ was a falsehood, thought about the flood. The fact that Peter refers to the flood as paradigmatic of the Last Judgment might indicate that they did accept that the flood had occurred in history as the Bible teaches.

But what is more interesting to me is that the problem this denial of divine intervention in history posed in Peter's day is the very problem we are facing today. As you know the belief that the history of life is a history of bio-chemical accidents is simply a modern form of this same static uniformitarianism. Much of our elite culture today, as the elite culture in Peter's day, believe that "all things are continuing as they were from the beginning..." Their argument against the biblical miracles, for example, is that they violate the laws of nature. We know that such things simply don't happen.

But, of course, the Bible knows that miracles don't happen; that almost all human beings who have lived in the world have never witnessed a miracle. Indeed in biblical times, during the history covered by the Bible, miracles were exceedingly rare, almost all of them crammed into three short periods of history, all three major junctures in the revelation of God's will to the world: 1) from the 10 plagues in Egypt to the early conquest of Canaan; 2) the ministries of Elijah and Elisha at the headwaters of the prophetic movement in the OT; and 3) the ministry of Jesus and first period of the ministries of at least some of his apostles. *That's all we know. By the middle or end of Paul's ministry no miracles were occurring; and John the Baptist, before the Lord's ministry, we are told in the Bible worked no miracles.* The Bible never tells us to expect to witness miracles ourselves and teaches us that miracles are self-authenticating acts of divine power. That is, when they occur *everyone knows it*, believers and unbelievers alike. The largest problem with claims about miracles made today is that they don't even convince half of the church much less the unbelieving world. I've always reminded you that you needn't worry about missing out on a miracle because you don't have enough faith to expect them. When a miracle of the biblical kind – now we're not talking about extraordinary providences, we're not talking about answers to prayer, we're talking about miracles, objective acts of divine power witnessed in the world – occurs again in the world, you will read about in on the front page of the *New York Times*. The *Times* may ascribe the miracle to some other power, maybe to Beelzebub for all we know, but they will not deny that a supernatural event had occurred. It was precisely their self-authenticating character, that Jesus' enemies could not deny that they had occurred, that led to their effort to murder the Prince of Life.

But that still leaves us with the fact that Peter argues that we should believe in the Last Judgment because of the history of the flood, that early destruction of the world of men on account of their sin. But what do we do with those *who deny that there ever was such a flood* as is described in Genesis 6-9? How does the history of the flood support our confidence in the Second Coming if the culture thinks the Bible's account of the flood nothing more than a myth or legend and our childlike faith in the Bible's account a mere superstition?

First we admit that our confidence is the confidence *of faith*. We know that every part and parcel of our worldview is denied by unbelievers. That hardly surprises us. We know that in the final analysis true understanding comes by faith and not by demonstrative empirical or logical proofs such as you find in mathematics or sometimes in a laboratory. God has spoken. And we are alright with that because we believe that our faith in Holy Scripture and in the God revealed in that Book is rationale, is justified, and has very well weathered the criticism from skeptics for now these two thousand years. There are so many good reasons to believe the teaching of the Word of God and there are so many reasons to be highly skeptical of the arguments that have long been brought against it. I'm not planning to cover that ground this evening. But I think it important to say, as we have often said, that however reasonable our faith may be, however many arguments there may be to support it, it is a divine gift and we believe in the final analysis – in the flood, in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, in all the Bible teaches us – because we have been convinced of the truth of these things by the Holy Spirit himself. What is more, we are only too well aware that unbelief has its motivations as well and that the idea that unbelief is, somehow, more rationale, more reasonable, less superstitious has been disproved times without number.

But I want us to think this evening about the flood, which, after all, is the argument Peter uses here to prove that divine interventions in history have occurred and so it is hardly unreasonable to deny that they will occur again, all the more when we have been taught by Jesus and his apostles to expect nothing less.

What about the flood? What about a worldwide flood that destroyed every human being on the face of the earth except for Noah and his family? Not only does our elite culture consider this a legend, a myth, but they argue that the evidence is in. There is no evidence that such a flood ever happened.

I find it fascinating and wonderfully confirming of the biblical narrative that over and over again as doubts arise in any culture about one or another historical assertion in the Bible, evidence appears, if not to confirm the biblical account – though it often does just that – at least to render it credible or reasonable. God sees to the defense of his own Word. This has happened, as you know, times without number. Julius Wellhausen, the father of modern biblical skepticism, once argued that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch in the mid-second century B.C. because writing hadn't been invented by that time. Archaeology has long since provided us with massive amounts of ancient near eastern literature, quite sophisticated literature, some of which dates from more than a thousand years before Moses! The Bible's references to Hittites were once thought to be evidence of its historical unreliability. Archaeologists have long since identified the Hittites, recovered and translated many of their documents. More than 50 people identified in the

Bible are also mentioned in other ancient near eastern writings of various types. Even historical details mentioned in the Bible have been confirmed by archaeological investigations and by the translation of the ancient literature of Egypt or Mesopotamia. I could go on and on.

But what about the flood? Well, in my view, the same sort of thing has happened here as has happened in respect to other biblical historical narratives. Let me explain. For long years now we have had access to several Mesopotamian flood narratives. Mesopotamia, you remember, is the land in present day Iraq, the land of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. These sagas also tell of a great flood sent by the gods as divine punishment. In those flood narratives also one man builds an “ark” or vessel in which he, his family, and animals are saved from the waters. But the differences are profound and revealing.

1. In the Mesopotamian accounts the gods sent the flood because they couldn't stand the noise human beings were making, not, as in the Bible, because God was judging mankind's moral evil. *The gods were acting out of petty annoyance, not justice!*
2. The gods hid their plan from human beings, hoping to destroy them all. The one man was told what was up by a friendly deity who betrayed the plans of the pantheon. In the Bible, of course, Noah was commanded by the Lord to build a boat to save himself and his family and so save the seed of the woman from which the salvation of the world would come. *In the sagas mankind was saved because the gods couldn't get their act together!*
3. In the Bible Noah's ark has ship-like proportions. The Mesopotamian ark was a cube.
4. A much larger company populate the Mesopotamian stories and crew the Mesopotamian “ark” (craftsmen, a pilot, etc.) whereas in the Bible Noah takes only his family onboard.
5. The Mesopotamian hero leaves the ark on his own initiative and then offers a sacrifice to appease the gods who were angry that he had escaped. Noah was commanded to leave the ark and his sacrifice was one of thanksgiving for his deliverance. [cf. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the OT*, 425]
6. In one of the Mesopotamian accounts it took the hero, Gilgamesh only seven days to build the ark. The epics concentrate on the heroism of the hero, who is very active in the story: building the ship, telling his neighbors a story as to why, and, at the end, *he shuts himself* in the ark. In the Bible Noah is presented simply as an obedient servant of the Lord; he never speaks, and *God shuts him* in the ark. The living God, who judges wickedness but graciously provides for the salvation of mankind is the actor in the Biblical account; heroic men and jealous and quarrelsome gods litter the ancient near eastern flood sagas.

There are further differences, far more than necessary to prove that the biblical narrative is not dependent upon the Mesopotamian stories. However, almost everyone accepts that the existence of all of this tradition of a great flood suggests almost certainly that there had been a flood of unprecedented size and effect and that someone had in fact been rescued from that great deluge. In the Mesopotamian accounts the flood was also an event in human history. It is placed in the annals after certain kings and before others. There were floods aplenty in Mesopotamia, the land between two rivers. Why this fuss about a flood? Because quite obviously there had been a particularly terrible flood that had left its mark upon the memory of the civilization. Many

scholars, believers and unbelievers alike, have sought to date such a flood, perhaps in the early third millennium B.C. But compare the accounts. The Mesopotamian accounts are so obviously mythical in nature and the biblical account so obviously so much more concise, sober, serious, and unadorned with mythical features. If you were to choose which narrative to accept as factual, the choice is obvious!

But there is more to consider. It has only been comparatively recently that a deeper appreciation of biblical literature has been gained both from comparative studies of other ancient near eastern writing and from more careful examination of the biblical text itself. We understand in a better way how to read the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible, a way that was not appreciated just a few generations ago. We appreciate that it is a basic principle of the interpretation of any written document that a text should be interpreted on its own terms and according to the conventions of style and thought the author shared with his audience. The question in this case thus becomes: is the universal language in the account of the flood the language of modern literalism or *the language of appearance and a feature of style* common to ancient Hebrew. Up until recent years virtually all Christians reading Genesis 6-9 assumed that the flood covered the entire earth, even the tops of the mountains. It was truly a universal flood. Nowadays fewer and fewer think that and for perfectly sound reasons; reasons arising from the Bible itself. For example, consider the biblical statement that the waters of the flood covered “the high mountains under the whole heaven.” Taken literally, that certainly sounds as if all the mountains in the world were meant. But actually it is typical Hebrew hyperbole. Moses uses the same phrase in Deut. 2:25 when he assures Israel, about to enter the Promised Land, that God has put the fear of them on the peoples *under the whole heaven*. He means, and we know this because he actually lists there all the peoples the Israelites are about to face in battle, the peoples of Canaan. [J.G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 86] “Under the whole heaven,” that is, means “in Canaan,” but in *all* of Canaan.

Or take the term “mountain” itself. As you may know from your own reading of the Old Testament the term is often used in the Old Testament for what we would call a hill, sometimes even a hillock, such as the slight rise upon which the temple was eventually built in Jerusalem. The ground upon which Jerusalem was built is called a “mountain” again and again in the Bible. So is the Mount of Olives to the east. We wouldn’t call either one of them a mountain. We call them hills at the most. You have, for example, “high mountain” again in Deut. 12:2 and elsewhere in the OT in reference to summits that scarcely deserve the term “mountain” in its modern usage. This kind of exaggeration for effect is a common literary technique in the Old Testament, a commonplace of ancient near eastern literary style, and we have noticed it many times in our studies of biblical books. Or consider this. Later in Genesis we will read that “all the earth” came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain because the famine had spread “over all the earth.” [41:56-57] It is, of course, possible that Moses means to say that there was no population of people on the entire planet that was not suffering from famine, but no evangelical commentator takes him to mean that. They understand him to mean only that part of the world and that part of its population that was before his view. It was the way they spoke and it is a fair way of speaking *from the author’s own perspective*. Now hear what I’m saying: “let God be true and every man a liar.” Of course I believe that the history reported in Genesis 6-9 is true and is historically accurate in the ordinary sense of that word. There was a great flood and there was an ark in which Noah and his wife, their sons and their wives, were saved alive along with animals and birds. The question is: what does the Bible tell us about that flood.

Again, in 1 Kings 10:24 we read that “the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon...” Later in Acts 2 we will read that Jews from every nation under heaven were gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost, but then we are told specifically which nations were represented, the nations of the Mediterranean basin where the Jewish diaspora was to be found. In other words, no one thinks that “every nation under heaven” has to include the Chinese or people from the Indian sub-continent, or inhabitants of North and South America. What was intended, of course, was to emphasize with such universalistic language how many people *were* there and from *how far afield* they had gathered. In countless instances hyperbole is the language of the Bible and especially of the Old Testament. “The sand on the seashore,” “the stars in the sky,” are such instances of hyperbole. “The number of grains of sand on the seashore” is once used to describe the size of a Moabite army, a comparatively small body but large in comparison. *In other words, these descriptive statements, that sound universal or immense in scope, cannot be read with a pedantic literalism. To do so is to mistake the Bible’s way of speaking and its meaning.*

What I’m saying is that the description of the flood as we have it in Genesis 6-9 does not require us to believe that the flood was worldwide in scope or that the waters covered Mt. Everest, the high mountains of the world, only that the flood was great enough and the waters high enough to float the ark above the land *in that part of the world*. That is all the language we find in the Genesis account of the flood can be fairly taken to mean. Like it or not, that is how those terms, phrases, and descriptions are repeatedly used in the Bible.

Now, I fully realize that in saying this I may offend some of you and certainly would offend many evangelicals today, including some in our own Presbyterian Church in America. Many Christians today think that believing in a world-wide flood is a test of faith, of loyalty to the Bible. That any doubt that the flood was universal is a capitulation to unbelieving science. There is much to say about this and far more than I can say tonight. Let me simply remind you that many thoughtful believers, ardent defenders of the inerrancy of the Bible, vocal critics of the theory of evolution, have for a long time taken the biblical narrative, fairly understood, to describe only a great flood in the Mesopotamian basin. Such was the opinion of my OT professor at Covenant Seminary years ago, R. Laird Harris, educated both as a scientist and as a scholar of biblical Hebrew, and such is the opinion of many if not most of our OT scholars in the evangelical world today. Their appreciation of the biblical text, of the Hebrew way of thinking and speaking, not their capitulation to the opinions of modern scientists explains their viewpoint. I would say that whatever your view of the biblical flood may be – local or universal – you could argue that the Bible permits such a view; but I don’t think the defenders of a universal flood can any longer argue that the Bible demands such a view. And in my own view, the use of this universal language elsewhere in the OT suggests to me that it is far more likely that the flood being described was a great flood in the Mesopotamian basin.

The simple point I wish to make this evening is that at a time when the biblical narrative has come under intense criticism in this particular – its account of the flood – almost on cue comes a new appreciation of how to read the biblical text more faithfully and a greater understanding of what it is that the Bible tells us actually happened when God judged the world with a flood.

In other words, as so often before, a piece of biblical history becomes easier to believe at the very moment when unbelievers are singling it out for their scoffing. Scoff away; the biblical account of the flood reads more realistically today than ever before!

True enough, it is by faith that we know that God judged the world with a flood long years ago. But that faith is not belief against the evidence, in defiance of the evidence, or without evidence. The Mesopotamian flood sagas are themselves proof that there was such a great flood long ago and that only a few people were saved alive. The faith to which we are summoned in the Bible is the conviction of things not seen, to be sure, but of things for which we have good reason to believe; very good reason. So Peter's argument has been given new life in our own day. What God has done before he can and will do again on a far greater scale. And that is a reason to believe in the Last Judgment and to live our lives in the expectation of it!

When the great Princeton theologian, B.B. Warfield, was asked, "What is Christianity?" he replied, "Unembarrassed supernaturalism." Exactly. Our confidence in the narrative of the flood is of a piece with our confidence in the narrative of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Extraordinary things *have happened* in this world, because it is God's world and because he is both judging and saving the people who live in it.