

A.B. Simpson:

The deluge has left its impress on the traditions of all ancient nations and in the structure of the globe itself. The Greeks have the story of a flood as vivid as the Bible narrative. The Assyrian inscriptions give accounts of an early inundation very similar to the account in Genesis. We read the story of the deluge also in the traces the waters have left upon the rocks of earth, so that the truth of this part of the Bible history is written ineffaceably in stone.

It is not historically, however, that we wish to look at it so much as in the light of symbolism, to see what there is of deeper truth lying beneath the narrative. It would be a great mistake to read the Bible symbolically only; but it is beautiful to see hidden truths below the history, and above and around it, like the nebulous light that surrounds certain stars with a cloud of glory.

SECTION I -- The Flood Itself

This is full of symbolical teaching.

1. It was a sign to man that God is holy and just and pure, and will deal with sin in righteousness. It was a great object lesson of His retribution for sin. It was also a foreshadowing of the judgment to come. It is a type of the deluge of flame that shall one day sweep around the world again. Both our Lord and his apostles speak of the deluge as a foreshadowing of that coming day "when the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up."

"As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of Man."

2. The deluge is not only a type of judgment, but of salvation also. The principle of salvation by destruction is taught all through the Bible. The deluge destroyed sin from the earth but it saved the Church; it swept away the world of wickedness, but it was the very means of preserving the little flock. The plagues of Egypt illustrate the same principle; they ended in death to very many of the Egyptians, but they saved the children of Israel. The destruction of the Canaanites after the children of Israel entered the land of promise exemplifies the same truth; their extermination was the salvation of the chosen people. The cross of Calvary brings us salvation from eternal destruction by the destruction of sin and Satan in the death of Christ. So in the epistle of Peter we are told that eight persons were saved "by water." The deluge therefore stands as a type of the great principle of deliverance by destruction; the salvation that comes through the love and power of God to His own people by the very thing that overthrew their enemies.

3. We learn also from the deluge the great principle of death and resurrection; perhaps this thought could not have been embodied in a more definite and striking figures In the flood, the little church was buried in a seeming grave, and came forth on Ararat as if raised from the dead. It was the great type of Christ's death and resurrection, and it points forward also to His second coming when the earth shall have passed through its last baptism of suffering and come forth to the new age of blessedness and purity. And therefore Peter connects it with the deep spiritual significance of Christian baptism: "The like figure whereunto baptism doth also now save us, not the putting away the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience towards God, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

SECTION II -- The Ark

This also has a spiritual and typical meaning. It is the picture of the Lord Jesus Christ as a shelter from the storms of judgment and the tempests of life.

1. Jesus Christ, like Noah's ark, is God's provision for our safety from the floods of judgment. The ark was not constructed according to the scientific plans of human carpenters. It probably would not pass the building department of our day. But it was a welcome refuge when the storm came. It was built by Noah in exact conformity to the directions given to him, and it saved all those who trusted it. Jesus Christ has not been prepared according to man's ideas of things. "When we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him." But He is a hiding-place, for those who trust Him, in every time of need. In Him we are safe from all the floods of judgment that will come upon the ungodly, and from all the storms and trials of life. And He is the life boat through which alone we can reach the heights of yonder harbor.

He is the one in whom we die, and in whom we rise again to newness of life. Noah seemed to die in yonder ark.

It was only seeming, however, and he stood ere long under the rainbow arch in the light and glory of a new world. So we lie down in baptism in His arms. It is a symbolical tomb, but we do not die. It is in seeming only. He had the bitterness of death. We have the safety of it. We are as secure in our seeming death as Noah was in the ark. Through Him we enter into death, and we come forth in Him into life eternal. Was there ever a ship before that started from the low lands of earth and landed on the mountain tops that touch the skies? None indeed, but the ship of grace which sails from earth to heaven.

Was ever such a voyage?

SECTION III -- The Raven

As the fierce waves of the flood begin to subside, a strange figure may be seen above the waters, the only thing that is happy and at home in the wild conflict of the elements and the wastes of desolation. It is the raven that Noah sent forth from the ark, and it went to and fro upon the waste of waters until the flood had subsided from the earth. What a type of the great personality of evil -- the prince of all evil, Satan himself. It is the same figure of evil omen, whether it is found in him or in his followers.

1. The raven is characterized by restlessness. It went to and fro, to and fro, constantly, but it returned not again to the ark. It fluttered hither and thither with weary wing over the tossing wave, finding there its congenial element in the wild sea, the reeking carrion and the decaying vegetation of nature. It was a restless soul having no quiet and no repose. What an image of him who goes about constantly seeking whom he may devour. Image, too, of the restless, unquiet spirit of man. You can see this unrest in the spirit of the world, whether in the ballroom or in the counting-house. In the ceaseless round of excitement he is ever vainly seeking for repose and satisfaction; but he never shall find it until the raven is cast out of him, and the dove is put within. In heaven he would have no rest, but would break every barrier in the wild struggle to get away to find his home in the eternal abyss of darkness, and the society of other spirits as restless and dissatisfied as himself.

2. The raven is characterized also by great filthiness. It found a congenial banquet in that from which everything else recoiled. It fed upon corruption. The dead of the earth lay upon the waves, and they became its prey. There is a spirit akin to this also in man. It is a type of impurity in life or thought or feeling. The wild passions in the heart of man, the sensual desires that take delight in vile pictures, in unrestrained indulgence, in filthy stories, in abominable literature, or unclean and idle gossip -- these are the desires of the flesh, they are ravens -- every one.

3. The raven is a bird of great melancholy. His spirit is as morbid as the food he lives upon. He is the bird of despair. The poet pictures him as sitting above the door of his heart and crying "nevermore." What a picture of evil, restlessness, uncleanness and morbidness. May the dear Lord save us from the reality.

SECTION IV -- The Dove

There is another symbol in the ark very different from this. It is the dove. You will not find it in regions where the raven delights to dwell. It went forth from the ark with gentle wing and moved for a while over the wild waste of waters, but unable to stay in the place where the other found its home, it came back again into the ark. A second time it went forth, and this time it found an emblem of its own sweet spirit, an olive branch which it plucked from some springing shrub, and hastened back with it into the ark. A third time Noah sent it forth, but now the waters were abating from the earth, the flood was passed, and it did not come back any more.

All this is suggestive of the Holy Spirit and the heart in which He rests.

The three outgoings of the dove from the ark are all symbolical of the work of the Holy Ghost. The first time it went forth, it fluttered for a time over the waters, but finding no place of rest, it went back to the ark. So in the ages before Christ came the Holy Spirit went forth over the earth, looking for a place of rest, but failing to find one. He touched men here and there, but He did not always strive with man. He lingered with Abraham, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and David, but He did not come to dwell in the earth because Jesus had not yet come. He was abroad upon the world, seeking a place where he could build a nest and remain, but He could not find it, and He returned again to the bosom of the Father.

A second time He came, and this time He did find something. He came during the ministry of Jesus on the earth. He rested on Him like a dove, and thus could linger awhile in the world. He plucked an olive leaf of peace from the cross of Calvary, and, with this token of pardon and reconciliation for the earth, He went back again to Heaven, with the message that the floods of judgment were abating.

A third time He went forth, and this was on the day of Pentecost. The world was ready for Him now. The floods had gone, and there was a place in which He could build a nest, and fold His wings, and rest. And now He came not as a fluttering guest, but as an abiding presence. He came to build a nest and rear his young. Beloved, has the gentle dove got a nest in your heart? Is He rearing His brood in your house? If He has, the spirit of Christ is there, and "the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, temperance, faith."

SECTION V -- The Altar of Noah

As the flood subsided and Noah came forth, he built an altar, and offered sacrifices unto the Lord, no doubt by divine direction. God looked down upon the scene with satisfaction. He had long been disgusted with what He saw on the earth. He had smelt the stench of sin until He could stand it no longer, and He at last turned the floods of water upon the earth to wash it away. But the judgment was not sweet to Him either. It was all a great charnel house, and it was dreadful to Heaven. But at length there was something on earth that pleased God. "The Lord God smelled a sweet savor."

There are people today who call themselves Christians, and who are preaching in evangelical churches who either openly repudiate the doctrine of atonement by the shedding of blood, or so refine it that there is nothing but an apology for it left; they have taken the blood all out of the gospel; they have done away entirely with all thought of vicarious suffering for sin on the part of Christ; they say they cannot bear to hear that God would be willing to butcher His Son for the sake of sin. It makes him like some wild Indian tiger. They cannot stand the smell of it -- they call it a doctrine for the shambles. How different is the story of it here in Genesis. When Noah's altar was erected and the bleeding victim was burning upon it, we are not told that God turned away in disgust -- the odor to Him was as sweet as the breath of spring blossoms; or of the frankincense from off the golden altar. He smelled a sweet savor; He saw that man was no better than he was before; He looked into his heart and saw there the same black wickedness as ever. He looked at Noah and saw that in a little while he, too, would be drunk in his tent; and yet in spite of all He promised that He would not again curse the ground any more for man's sake, "for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." He would not henceforth expect anything from man, for he was a poor, helpless creature; but He would count on Jesus Christ. The cross of Calvary has been sending a sweet odor up to Him continually ever since. He would not curse man any more, but He would take him at his worst for Jesus' sake. From that time He has looked upon man's unworthiness as covered by Christ's righteousness and counted him worthy for Jesus' sake. When Jesus is brought to God as an offering He looks at you in Him and smells a sweet savor; it is the sweet savor of Christ, not of you. Keep Him ever upon the heart's altar, beloved, burning with the fires of the Holy Ghost; so shall you ever be sprinkled with the blood of the atonement and God will ever say of you: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." Then, too, the Dove will hover over you and find a home for itself in the surrendered heart, where Father, Son and Holy Ghost shall make their everlasting abode.

SECTION VI -- The Rainbow

The sublime and majestic climax of this series of types is yonder splendid arch spanning the sky as Noah looks back upon the departing clouds. What a sight it must have been to the eye that first beheld it. Nothing is more beautiful to the eye of a child than the lofty magnificence of the rainbow. It is the closing symbol connected with the flood. "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth." So the rainbow is the token that God's covenant is with us. We read of it in the book of Revelation as a complete circle: "There was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald."

There is a blessed meaning in this for our Christian life. It is the token of God's covenant with you and me for spiritual blessing. It is a type of the nearer intimacy into which He designs to bring us. It is a symbol of the covenant of His everlasting love, "as I have sworn that the waters of Noah shall no more go over the earth, so have I sworn that I will not be wroth with thee nor rebuke thee. Sorrow is the dark background on which He paints this token of His love. The rainbow is formed by a combination of light and darkness; the light shining on the small drops of rain, they are separated into these beautiful prismatic colors.

His grace can take the storm-clouds and teardrops of our life, and turn them into arches of triumph and jewels of glorious luster.

The time is coming when our rainbow will be a complete circle. We shall not have half victories then as now. That which we have only half seen, and which has perplexed and bewildered us, will develop into a full circle of light and glory. We shall know as we are known, and our sorrow shall be turned into joy.

There has been a difference of opinion as to whether the rainbow had ever been seen before. Possibly it never had. Science tells us this is nonsense. It says the causes which produced the rainbow must have existed ever since the creation. They may have and yet never have caused a rainbow. We do not see a rainbow every time it rains. God lets the light strike on the cloud frequently at such an angle that there is no rainbow. Could He not have kept back the sun and rain from ever getting in that position, which would produce this beautiful appearance if He had so chosen? Undoubtedly He could. Perhaps for two thousand years all the causes of the rainbow never combined, but God held them in suspense until the right moment came, and then He suddenly painted it on the sky by flashing the light at the exact angle, which should divide the rays into their prismatic colors, and form the majestic arch for the first time.

Beloved, there are hidden causes in us which could, at any moment, produce spiritual rainbows. God has kept them back, but some day He will bring them all out. It is possible to be preparing every day, by patient endurance of trial, by victories gained through faith in His name, a crown of glory for our head when God shall let the light shine in on these troubles and temptations, and they will take in a different aspect, and be turned into triumphal arches and jeweled crowns on which we shall gaze in raptures of praise and wonder. Thank God, dear friends, for the things you have not seen yet, the surprises He is preparing for you out of the very heartbreaks that have been so terrible to you. When He wipes your tears away you will know that promise to be true: "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."