

The modern world in which we preach

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According to the Lord Jesus Christ, the days of Noah and the days of Lot are like the days in which we live, and this is a great sign, as the Master said that he would return to the earth during such an evil and wicked time. Indeed, the wickedness of those days is more than matched by the wickedness of today's world. We must therefore take heed to the example of men like Noah and Lot and be warned by the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, striving to remain upright and separate, and fully determined to be, as best we can, 'preachers of righteousness', in both words and deeds, as we all await our Saviour's return.

IN EVERY GENERATION God has preserved a remnant; and in every generation there has been a preacher of truth. The Apostle Paul exhorts: "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on Him in Whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in Him of Whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:13,14). Thus the world has at all times been blessed with faithful preachers, ever since it was recorded that Noah was a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5).

Faithful to God's will, Noah preached for one hundred and twenty years to a world that had departed into moral deprivation so deep that, the Scriptures say, "it repented the LORD that He had made man" (Gen. 6:3,6). Noah's message was certainly unpopular during his day: one of doom and destruction, demanding repentance. One may argue that Noah was an abject failure, having been unsuccessful in converting those around him; yet Noah, his wife, three sons and their respective wives (eight souls) were all saved from the mighty and destructive deluge. Indeed, "By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house", says the writer, "by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith" (Heb. 11:7).

From Noah's example we learn that faithful preaching is one where the Scripture is taught

and fear of worldly rejection is consciously cast aside. Though we live in a world that opposes God, we must not be overly concerned about the prevailing attitudes encountered when preaching the gospel. At best, there may be a small level of interest; at worst, downright hostility. But it matters not a jot, as God's ultimate purpose will be fulfilled in due time. For God is calling out a people for His Name, one here and one there, and the number of the elect will be made up.

We are therefore to view Noah as an exceptional example of faith, and one which we should try to emulate as best we can.

The days of Noah

"And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all" (Lk. 17:26,27).

So "the days of Noe" are associated with "the days of the Son of man". A world which looks like the time of Noah is a sign from God that Christ is at the door. Yet some have suggested that these words of Jesus describe a relatively normal situation: eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage. Surely there is nothing wrong with any of these, for we all eat and drink, and many of us are married and enjoy married life. On face value, this is what some may well conclude. However, the people of Noah's day were ultimately destroyed because they were godless. Though they were given a choice to listen to Noah's preaching, they chose not to.

Just observe how the Word describes Noah's faithless generation: "And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). Though God is longsuffering, not willing that any should perish, there is a limit. Regarding this the Apostle Peter

says: “. . . when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water” (1 Pet. 3:20; NASB). God waited patiently, and then His patience ran out and the rains came. In God’s sight the earth was corrupt and filled with violence (see Genesis 6:11-13); yet amidst this mess there was one man, Noah, who pleased Him. Noah is called “a preacher of righteousness” in a godless society (2 Pet. 2:5). Though the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth (Gen. 6:6), so grieved that He was determined to blot man out (v. 7), Noah and his family were going to be preserved.

But what was so godless and sinful about this particular generation? And what lessons can be learnt? Notably there are three verses in Genesis that provide insight into the depths of sin and depravity that characterised the people of Noah’s day. Observe closely these sections of Scripture:

“the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose” (6:2);

“There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (vv. 4,5).

Verses 2 and 4 describe a most distressing situation, and one which God did not approve of: the sons of God took for themselves wives from the daughters of men. As Israel is described in the Bible as a ‘son of God’, even the Lord’s firstborn (Ex. 4:22,23; Deut. 14:1; Hos. 1:10; Isa. 43:6,7), then “the sons of God” during antediluvian times evidently make up the ‘seed of the woman’ (see Gen. 3:15). In other words, those in the Truth were marrying out of the faith (see 1 Corinthians 7:39 and 2 Corinthians 6:14 to read of the importance of marrying “only in the Lord”). Also observe the emphasis on the word “saw”: these men “*saw* the daughters of men” and spotted “that they were fair”. It was the same process that led Eve to sin. Now her male descendants were doing the very same and, again, with forbidden fruit! Outwardly these women appeared to be strikingly beautiful; but only to the mind of the flesh. According to the mind of the spirit, on the inside they were loathsome! So sin had raised its ugly head again;

“the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 Jno. 2:16) had taken hold of the sons of God.

Verse 5 provides an even sorrier detail, if that is possible. Recall that “God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them” (Gen. 1:27). Thus man and woman were altogether different from the rest of God’s creation; they alone had the intellectual and emotional capacities to worship Him. They were made in the image of the *Elohim*, and amongst all of God’s creation they only could enjoy fellowship with Him. From this high and privileged position, by the time of Noah, man had fallen to unbelievable depths. So miserable became the situation that “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart [man’s] was only evil continually” (6:5). By looking at the margin we see that evil was practised without intermission every day. They thought only about sex, pleasure and wickedness!

The days of Lot

“Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed” (Lk. 17:28-30).

Here “the days of Lot” are also linked with “the day when the Son of man is revealed”. But, again, the words of the Master can, at first glance, appear to describe a fairly legitimate state of affairs in Sodom (and Gomorrah). Just as we asked before, what can be sinful about eating, drinking, buying, selling, building and planting? The fact is, God did not destroy them for these things alone, but because they rejected Him and had no time for anything else. What is more, this heady indulgence soon led to a gross immorality, so perverse that even now it stands as a historical benchmark for depravity.

For a quick glimpse of how bad things really were, just bring to mind how Lot received two men (angels of God) and insisted that they spend the night in his home, knowing too well the dangers they would face otherwise. Outside the house the men of the city were perverted and acted on their evil cravings. Maybe these Sodomites recognised that the angels were holy men, and this would be the ultimate act of evil and defiance against God. Regarding what they demanded, Moffatt translates Genesis 19:5 as, “Bring them out to us that we may rape them”.

They sought to commit homosexual rape against these two heavenly visitors. And it was not just a few banging on Lot's door; rather, "the men of the city, even the men of Sodom, compassed the house round, both old and young, all the people from every quarter" (v. 4).

History informs us that homosexuality was common in Sodom and accepted as the normal way of life; but under the Law of Moses it was viewed as the lowest depth of moral perversion and corruption (see Lev. 18:22; 20:13,23; Judg. 19:22; Ezek. 16:50; cf. Rom. 1:24-27). Notice also, when the Law stipulated what was unacceptable (or immoral) behaviour for the nation of Israel, the Scripture also stated, "in all these the nations are defiled" (Lev. 18:24). Hence Sodom was not alone in its evil and corruption, but probably the most sinful of all of them.

It is the Apostle Peter who explicitly establishes the reason why the Almighty poured fire and brimstone upon these two ancient cities:

"... and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly; and delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (for that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;)" (2 Pet. 2:6-8).

From Genesis it appears that this wicked perversion had affected all areas of society, from top to bottom, from high government to the average worker. It had taken hold of the city to such an extent that God could not even find ten righteous people amongst them! In order to show all succeeding generations His extreme hatred of homosexuality, God rained fire and brimstone, reducing it to ashes. The destruction was so complete that there is still considerable speculation as to the exact location of the cities. This serves as a timely reminder to all those who would legalise this sin, or condone it as acceptable.

Jude also speaks about this evil society in graphic language: "Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude v. 7). Notice the phrase, "giving themselves over to fornication, and . . . strange flesh". In other words, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were longing for something that was completely contrary to the natural order originally ordained by

God in the beginning. Of note, the Greek phrase "giving themselves over to fornication" means 'to go a whoring' (and is the Greek word *ekporneuō*, which is where the English word 'pornography' is derived from). It suggests that they were out of control; that their wild lusts had taken full reign over them. Though these men did not have filthy magazines, nor access to unlawful material on the internet, or indecent movies on television, they were still mentally and physically consumed with it!

But what were the root causes of this self-indulgent and gross behaviour in Sodom and Gomorrah? Surely there must be a good reason why a whole city would give itself (entirely) over to such corrupt practices. The prophet Ezekiel provides a simple and telling explanation:

"Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty, and committed abomination before Me: therefore I took them away as I saw good" (16:49,50).

God assessed Sodom (and Gomorrah) as being full of pride, and having fullness (meaning, satiety, as in saturation) of bread (meaning devour, eat). Sodom's sin thus revolved around her abundance of wealth and idleness, or 'prosperous ease', as it says in the RSV. This is certainly an apt portrayal of Western civilisation today. To build on this further, it is worth mentioning that, according to the World Health Organisation, there are more than one billion overweight adults in the world, and at least 300 million of them are obese. The level of international obesity has now reached epidemic proportions! Economic wealth, modernisation, urbanisation and globalisation are just some of the forces thought to underlie this epidemic. Hence we see that the abundance of wealth and prosperous ease go hand in hand with each other.

Our days

The Lord Jesus indicates that the world that exists prior to his return will be given over to pleasure-seeking, immorality, perversion, idleness and a rejection of the things of God—just like the days of Noah and Lot. Indeed, our present world is close to exceeding the wickedness of these ancient civilisations.

For instance, never before has the traditional marital union—the husband and wife relationship—or the family unit been under so much

pressure. Marital breakdowns are taking place the world over, and global soaring divorce rates are testimony to this. Sadly, today, instead of this problem being contained in a few cities—like Sodom and Gomorrah—it has become a worldwide phenomenon.

Something else that is unprecedented in history is the global influence of homosexuals in society; they are a most potent force today. There is an aggressive homosexual/lesbian lobbying group in virtually every major public office—whether it be religion, government, army or the civil service.¹ Humanists have also (craftily) created legal organisations to force the high court systems to support these militant (minority) groups. Proof of their success is seen in the growing (and ever vocal) ‘gay pride’ movement (this group pushes the thinking that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people should be proud of their sexual orientation and gender identity). It seems that man is too proud to admit he is a sinner, but very proud of his sin!

Today, and uniquely so, we now have the technology that is able to send wave after wave of degeneracy to every corner of the globe, to every computer in the world. We are evidently living in an age that is “Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7). The Web, as a medium, is obviously neutral. Like other communication methods, it has no intrinsic moral attributes. However, left to man’s devices, it can be used for evil, and it certainly is. At any time, when online, one is only a few clicks away from hard pornographic images and explicit material. This has resulted in a global epidemic of sick and immoral downloads, and has led to a whole host of criminal activities that cannot possibly be mentioned here, such is their nature. One major concern to highlight here specifically is the growth of internet child pornography; and strong links have already been made to the rapid rise in paedophilia cases. Dreadfully, paedophilia has become a widespread scourge of our present age—yet another example of man’s ever-sinking (and sickening) morality.

Noah’s character

“But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6:8,9).

Closely observe how Noah’s character contrasts with the world that he lived in. From these verses alone we see that Noah was a righteous

man, blameless among the people, and that he walked with God. In the midst of an immoral society, Noah stood out for God. The Scriptures also emphasise that “Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD”. In fact this is the first time that the word “grace” is used in the Bible, and the RV alternatively renders the word ‘favour’. The Hebrew actually comes from a root meaning ‘to bend or stoop’. Hence grace, or unmerited Divine favour, was lovingly bestowed by God on His servant. Yet Noah must have prayerfully ‘sought’ for grace in order to have “found” it.

Once “Noah found grace”, God revealed His intentions to destroy the earth with a great Flood (vv. 13,17), commanded Noah to obey Him (vv. 14-16), and promised him and his family salvation from the Flood (v. 18). Though Noah “found grace”, he still had to demonstrate his faith by thoroughly applying himself to building the ark and preaching the truth. Salvation was not going to be given to him immediately. Noah had to trust in God, and to trust Him for some 120 years. The words of the writer to the Hebrews come to mind: “But without faith it is impossible to please Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him” (11:6). Noah came to God, believed, and diligently sought Him in faith.

Importantly, as we have seen, Genesis highlights three main attributes of Noah: that he was “a just man”, “perfect in his generations” and “walked with God”. We now want to examine each of these in more detail, as there is much we can learn from their closer examination.

Firstly, to be “just” means to live a righteous life, and to treat others in a fair and just way despite the circumstances. It means to be upright, honest and virtuous, never to cheat or steal from others. In other words, Noah lived a moral life, both before God and before man, and his righteousness exceeded that of the people. He was

1. For instance, the promotion of homosexuality by the UK Government was illustrated recently by its review of school sex education, which concluded that compulsory sex-and-relationships lessons for eleven-year-old children are to include classroom discussions on gay unions and civil partnerships. So homosexuality—the sin of Sodom, viewed as illegal until relatively recent times—is going to be taught to young children as a so-called ‘acceptable way of life’ in the classroom, though the Bible clearly stresses the absolute contrary (see “Pupils aged 11 to learn about gay sex”, *The Times*, 28 Apr. 2009).

unafraid to live a life totally devoted to his God, one that was daily in opposition to the world about him. He wanted only to live by God's standards and not by those around him. The words of the Apostle John could have been written about him. Maybe John had Noah in mind when he penned them: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him . . . And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever" (1 Jno. 2:15-17).

Secondly, to be "perfect" means to be without blemish or to be blameless; to be moral, a person of purity, integrity and honesty; to be whole and complete. Not that Noah was sinless (Gen. 9:24), but there were no blatant faults. He was a man of moral integrity among his generation. In that godless society, no one had any charges against him; no one wondered if he was dealing dishonestly with them. They knew his ethics were unquestionable and they never queried his sincerity, though they may have doubted his sanity! Noah typified every faithful follower of the Lord, for they are to be as "a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27).

Thirdly, to 'walk' with God means to be fully aware of His presence. Noah was in close communion and fellowship with God, and in walking with Him he was, by inference, out-of-step with the world. Hence it speaks of Noah's attitude; though the wicked had only "evil continually" in their hearts, he had God firmly within his. Again, a figure of a faithful follower of Christ: "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 Jno. 1:6,7).

We are saved by grace

"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection,

trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 3:1-7).

Indeed, we are living in "the last days", which are termed by Paul "perilous times". Going through the list above (vv. 2-7) one is struck by the use of the word "lovers". In verse 2 we find "lovers of their own selves", and in verse 4, "lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God". They are lovers of self rather than lovers of God. This perfectly speaks of our day—of ease, plenty and immorality—but equally could be describing the times of Noah or Lot. These are great signs that the return of the Lord Jesus is nigh, for we are living "in the days of Noe"!

So what exhortation can we take to ourselves? We too need to continue preaching the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to witness and be the best possible example we can be. And how will we find grace? Like Noah, by being just, perfect, and walking with God. It is worth remembering how God appealed to Noah from within the Ark: "Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before Me in this generation" (Gen. 7:1). When Noah and his family were inside, "the LORD shut him in" (v. 16). Similarly, just as "Noah found grace", we too have been promised this gift: for "by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

When the storms of Divine judgement finally rain heavily upon this earth, a secure Ark will have been prepared for us to escape. The Ark will be Christ. Just as Noah was sheltered inside the Ark, so will we be sheltered. Then the unforgettable words of Paul will finally be realised: "then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17).

"Now it is time only to strengthen what remains" is sometimes a reaction to ecclesial difficulties and an evil world. However, it is unlikely that an ecclesia can be strengthened without the fulfilment of its preaching obligations. Ecclesial work and preaching are mutually interdependent aspects of discipleship.

Ron Abel, *Quenching All the Fiery Darts of the Wicked*, p. 15