

Hebrews 11:7 Faith at Work: the example of Noah

Introduction

Imagine yourself living in the Middle East with beautiful glorious sunshine day after day. Week after week there is little change in the weather, only twice in the year with the spring and autumn rains on which all the crops and vegetation depended was the steady daily diet of sunshine interrupted. In a sparsely populated neighbourhood people start to get curious about the extraordinary large quantities of wood one family are gathering around their property. It is possibly miles from the sea and with the climate of the region unchanged no obvious use for such a large amount of wood. Eventually a neighbour would have plucked up the courage to ask Noah about it. As you can imagine it would be a difficult conversation under the beautiful blue cloudless skies. ‘God told me to build a large boat of this size to carry both people and animals to enable them to escape from a great flood He will send to judge the world for its wickedness.’ To the best of our knowledge human society had never before experienced a flood on the scale Noah was expecting. The waterways that existed in the area would be too small to navigate the giant boat he was starting to build. In addition, without modern engineering skills and equipment how could such a large boat be moved to the seaside or somewhere where there was a large body of water deep enough for it to float and be manoeuvred appropriately? The questions would keep coming and Noah’s answers to an audience who did not share his faith in God must have seemed extremely doubtful at best. There were bound to be some people who thought he had suffered from sunstroke or some other medical condition that had affected his mind. There had never been such a calamity in living memory and in any case what difference could one individual even with help accomplish in the face of such adversity. In any case, how would it be possible to get such a diverse range of wild animals on board the boat at inevitably such short notice? Noah you must be mad! We must put ourselves in his shoes. Imagine our grounds at Panmurefield were sufficient to erect such a boat at the present time. The conversations with neighbours would be absolutely no different to those of his day. Of course Noah would not have had to deal with Council regulations and planning permission for his structure, but that was the least of his concerns at the time. This boat will eventually be a minimum of 450 ft. long, 45 feet high and seventy five feet wide. To grasp the size of the space on board we must recognise that it could accommodate with a degree of comfort 125,000 sheep and their food supplies. It was not a family boat or even a yacht of the size that the superrich have moored in the South of France. The core story we know so well and it is often a favourite with children as well, not least because they only get to hear the nice bits about those who survived the flood! We must acknowledge that as the boat was being erected in glorious sunshine there must have been thoughts on occasions by some participants –will this boat really be needed to save our lives? Taking God at His Word is not easy on many occasions; it is far from easy to brush off the critical comments that other people inevitably will make if we live lives from a perspective with which they disagree. It is also the case that if what Noah was doing was right and God had told him to build this boat, then it was a judgement on everyone else who declined to get onto the boat. The Gospel today is like that – a real joy and encouragement to those who receive it, but others who reject it inevitably must come to very different conclusions. At the end of the day Noah would be vindicated, but he had to wait a long time to see it. The calling entrusted to each of these people named in Hebrews 11 is quite different. What mattered is that they did what God asked them to and they lived their lives in a way that pleased Him. The same principle applies today for each of us. Will we trust the Lord with the

callings He has given to us and faithfully serve Him in the ordinary events of life –not just in the moments of the spectacular faith challenges.

1. **Noah took God at His Word** (Hebrews 11:7a / Genesis 6:22)

Noah did everything just as God commanded him (Genesis 6:22).

The problems Noah encountered as he sat down to comprehend what was involved in building a boat of this size and complexity must have been enough to give anyone a sore head! Great Britain did not build a sea-going vessel this large until the Nineteenth Century, though the Chinese had done so by the time of Jesus on earth, 2,000 years ago. Ideas of plans for rafts or the small boats of that day would be utterly useless. In addition, there was no-one trained in the art of building large ships. The shipyards to do so were many centuries into the future. We have no idea what the largest flood or longest extended period of rainfall had been previously in the experience of the generation of people alive in the days of Noah. Yet in the text before us is the wonderful statement given in Genesis 6:22 that declares: *Noah did everything just as God commanded him*. Noah like us had his faults and failings. However, when the most important and difficult challenges of his life presented themselves this man rose to the challenge and embraced it. It is in our most difficult times that we find out most about ourselves. When all is going well and life is wonderful and the metaphorical sun shines every day on our endeavours, we are not really tested, because we can ‘go with the flow’ of life like everyone else. But when it costs to go God’s way, when it becomes more difficult to do what is right, suddenly we have to think more carefully about each step we take. In a hot and dry Middle-Eastern climate Noah said yes to God’s request. It was as far removed from the winter in, for example, Fort William with its endless rain and snow as it is possible to be. The challenge of course comes back to us – how would we react if God asked us to take some steps of faith? Actually He does each day of our lives. It is not to build big boats in advance of a flood, but something else very different that you and I are asked to accomplish for God. If we try to rationalise every step into the future we may never start. If Noah had realised at the start how many trees needed to be chopped down, or how many –of whatever else he needed then he might have felt completely overwhelmed. Then and now faith in God is taking one step of obedience at a time to His revealed will.

In the 1980s at the heart of the charismatic renewal movement in Sheffield two congregations in the Crookes area of the city decided to merge and share much larger premises on the site of St Thomas’ Anglican Church. It was an extremely costly project at the time, with an estimated total bill of approximately £500,000. There were some interesting discussions at the level of the Church of England Diocese where the total budget for all the ministries of the Anglican churches in the district barely totalled half that amount at the time. The Anglican congregation at the time was approximately 200 people at Sunday worship. By the early 2000s the joint church had an estimated 2,500 people attending its multiple services on several sites across the city, but that was the future. The vicar afterwards produced a book telling the story of how God provided for all their needs and how the faith journey on which they embarked was the right way to go – even when at very short notice the final costs went up a further £150,000 to £650,000. God provided for their needs. Our difficulty as human beings is that we can rejoice when we read the stories of these successful initiatives and say it was alright for them – our situation is much more complex! It is, though, more likely that they like us could not see how things would work out but sensed God’s call and trusted Him to see them through their times of testing. We are all very familiar with the story of Abraham’s test, recorded in Genesis 22, of God asking him to take his one and only son Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah, after he had waited decades to have a child

with his wife Sarah. The story comes to its gripping conclusion in verses 13-14, a climax as engrossing as any Hollywood movie. *Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram^[a] caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.*¹⁴ *So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.'* (Genesis 22:14-15). Abraham's trust that God had a solution that would enable him and Isaac both to go home afterwards was truly remarkable. But again what God has in store for you and me will be quite different to that scenario as well. The challenge comes to us all – will you/ will I take God at His Word and trust Him to work things out for our future? Is there a step of faith He wants you to take at the present time? God will be Jehovah Jireh for you and for me and for us as a church as we go forward with Him.

2. Noah was not deterred by his critics (Hebrews 11:7b)

*The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.*⁶ *The Lord regretted that He had made human beings on the earth, and His heart was deeply troubled.* (Genesis 6:5-6).

What began as curiosity and a fascination with Noah's project turned in time to mockery and scepticism about what this religious fanatic was up to. It's okay to be a bit religious Noah, but this is taking it too far. For every one of us, from Christian children in the playground and staff in the staff room to every other place where adults congregate, there will be moments when we are under real pressure to compromise our faith or to compartmentalise it into a tiny private 'box' marked 'bring out on Sundays'. Sadly there are some Christians who hide their faith completely and others around them never know about their special secret. Our secular society wants to squeeze us into its mould and keep silent about our convictions- all the time allowing its own to rule in the public square. There is no neutrality in this matter. Our overarching worldview shapes our perspectives, attitudes and actions in every area of our lives – or if not it should do! When believers retreat and stay silent, moral standards start to fall in all sorts of places and society becomes less cohesive and fair. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount explained our calling using two powerful images. In Matthew 5:13-16 it states: ***You are the salt of the earth.*** *But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.*¹⁴ ***You are the light of the world.*** *A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.*¹⁵ *Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.*¹⁶ *In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.* The salt has the purpose of preventing decay to prevent something good going bad. The light gives vision and a way forward in a place of uncertainty. It enables people to be freed from fearing the unknown and revealing a perspective on the way forward. The people here so described as light are called to model a way of life that others will find attractive and want to emulate. The challenge to each individual Christian and to each local church – is our witness positively attractive in some way? Polished halos are not realistic, but a genuine authentic attempt to live the Christian faith will be attractive to some people. Yet there will always be others who are unconvinced and who are not afraid of telling you so!

What was it that kept Noah going forward with this project? Hebrews 11:7b gives us the answer. It states: ... *in holy fear built an ark to save his family.* Noah's reverent awe of God and a desire to please Him outweighed his fear of public opinion and the negative comments of his critics. There is not the slightest doubt that if you plan to accomplish something significant with your life that there will be other people who find serious faults with what you are attempting to do. There will be circumstances, in addition to people pressures, that conspire to test your resolve to go forward. It is inevitable that for the foreseeable future

Christians growing up will have even greater pressures not to practice their faith or hold fast to their convictions. At the current time the biggest pressures are to force us to conform to the secular wisdom are clustered around human sexuality. For the last fifty years it has been the pressures on Christian young people to engage in inappropriate sexual activity before marriage, but now the obsession of the secular elite is their ideological conviction that gender identities are choices and not a given; that family structures can take any form and be equally okay. In public service careers the pressures to conform may eventually result in the exclusion of people holding what are termed ‘traditional values’. However, we live day by day and from one year to the next, during which the Lord will give us the grace we need to live out our faith in practice. But like Noah we will have to stand firm and politely resist the critics who challenge us to dispense with our Christian moral convictions as outdated in the present age.

3. **Noah’s faith was a judgement on others** (Hebrews 11:7c)

By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world...

In II Peter 2:5, the apostle Peter wrote these words about Noah: *...if He did not spare the ancient world when He brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; Noah warned people about the consequences of God’s coming judgement. But the sad truth was that outside his immediate family no-one took him seriously. It seemed too fantastic to be true. Noah is honoured in the later passages of the Bible for his biblical God-honouring preaching. The problem was not with him, but in the choice the majority of his hearers made to reject what he was proclaiming. It is tough to be rejected. It is hard to invite people to some form of outreach activity or church service, time and again, and obtain a negative answer. It becomes emotionally more difficult to retain a sense of expectancy that next time there might be a different positive response. In Noah’s day and later in that of Isaiah and Jeremiah it was an overwhelmingly negative reaction to their faithful proclamation of God’s Word. There is a possibility that Christians can sometimes use the true conviction that ‘God’s calls me to be faithful not successful in mission’ as an excuse for outdated language, methods or approaches to outreach. It is unlikely that speaking or preaching ‘at people’ is likely to win anyone to your point of view! However, a believer may be as creative or innovative as is possible in that situation; may be persistent and enthusiastic in their manner, and orthodox in their theology but see little outward response at any particular time in their witness. On other occasions not just in remarkable times of Revival, but in other seasons of spiritual harvest there may be much less effort involved in Christian work that is blessed with professions of faith and lives changed by the Gospel. It does, though, take real dedication to keep going as Noah did decade after decade with zero response. Usually God honours a faithful witness with a spiritual harvest over a period of time. In Galatians 6:9 Paul encourages us with these words: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.**

However, in the time of Noah it was a particularly hard time to proclaim God’s truth. Ezekiel in his message picks up on the social context of Noah’s day and proclaims that his own time was also distinctively wicked. In Ezekiel 14:14 he wrote: *even if these three men – Noah, Daniel and Job – were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign Lord.* The Gospel is good news for those who receive it, but bad news for those who reject it because it points to their inevitable judgement by God for despising what His Son did for them on the cross. What is your response to the good news of Jesus? Have you committed your life to follow Him?

4. **Noah vindicated by God** (Hebrews 11:7d)

... and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. (Hebrews 11:7d)

The preaching of Noah finally came to an end and the heavy rain started to fall. I suspect that even that weather phenomenon did not bother his neighbours. After all it had probably rained before so the fact of rain was not new to them. It was only as the downpour continued day after day without ceasing that the first doubts might have begun to creep into some people's minds. Maybe Noah was right after all? Genesis 7:12-16 summarises what happened when God called time on the message of redemption and grace to Noah's generation. ¹² *And rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights.* ¹³ **On that very day** Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, together with his wife and the wives of his three sons, entered the ark. ¹⁴ *They had with them every wild animal according to its kind, all livestock according to their kinds, every creature that moves along the ground according to its kind and every bird according to its kind, everything with wings.* ¹⁵ *Pairs of all creatures that have the breath of life in them came to Noah and entered the ark.* ¹⁶ *The animals going in were male and female of every living thing, as God had commanded Noah. **Then the Lord shut him in.*** How much notice had God given of the coming flood? Genesis 6:3 gives the answer. *Then the Lord said, 'My Spirit will not contend with humans for ever, for they are mortal; their days will be a hundred and twenty years.'* Now that is extremely generous, but sadly too many people would have seen the delay in the judgement as evidence it will not happen at all! Yet God often gives a warning to allow sinners to repent of their sins and escape the consequences of their previous actions. In the Book of Jonah what was the message of that prophet to the people of Ninevah (Mosul today)? *The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ² 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me'* (Jonah 1:1-2). Jonah was convinced that God was too gracious to condemn these people and there was a fair chance they might repent – something he didn't want as he thought they deserved only God's punishment for their wicked lives. He initially tried to opt out of God's calling, so there had to be a 'take two' call to mission. Jonah 3:1-5 states: *Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ² 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.'* ³ *Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.* ⁴ *Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.'* ⁵ *The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.* Here there was forty days' notice of impending judgement for their sins. The bad news from Jonah's point of view was that there were people who were genuinely sorry for the wrong they had done and repented of it and received God's forgiveness. It is so ironic that Jonah took no pleasure in his success as an Evangelist. He enjoyed preaching about judgement and wanted these people to face the consequences! Thank God for His graciousness and mercy to us. God is not like His servant Jonah! He does not treat us as we deserve, but because of Jesus, forgives those who turn to Him by faith and welcomes us into His family for ever.

Have you put your faith in Jesus? You may have heard the Gospel so many times but never truly responded to it. The solemn moment here is recorded in Genesis 7:16: **Then the Lord shut him in.** God said 'time is up'. It was too late for a response from those people of Noah's day. It is the same in every generation. We have our opportunities and need to take them. Some Christians have expressed unbiblical hopes of a 'second chance' after death. But such a view is contrary to the explicit teaching of Scripture. Hebrews 9:27 states: *Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,* ²⁸ *so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.* Noah was a righteous man because heard God's Word and responded to

it. In fact, Genesis 6:9 in summary says of him: *This is the account of Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.* The question remains – what summary statement would accurately describe your relationship with God? I sincerely hope we too are people who have put our trust in God through Jesus' sacrifice in our place and who then seek to live in a manner pleasing to our great God and Saviour, Amen.