

“Mountaintop Experiences: The Mountains of Ararat”

One of the adventures that I've been able to undertake in Arizona is a trip to the top of Picacho Peak. Have you made that hike? The hiking path starts near some parking and picnic areas and winds along the side of the hill. After a while, you actually cross to the far side of the hill, head downhill for a bit before ascending a few steep areas. One final uphill and you reach the very top. And from there you can see in all directions and a long way. A while back I explained to someone how I had enjoyed making that hike and reaching the summit. That person asked, “What do you see from the top?” And my answer was, “Nothing.”

I realized right away that my answer sounded bad. Why would I like the view if I didn't see anything? The reality is, you can see cars on the freeway. You can see mountains off in the distance. You can see all sorts of desert terrain. In other words, there isn't any particular sight that captivates you, but you are up there where you can see so far in every direction; there's just something about that.

That story explains what I think about when I hear the term mountaintop experience. You reach a place at the top of the mountain where suddenly you can see so much so clearly, and it takes your breath away. Eventually, you head back down. Down at the bottom, on the plain if you will, you can't see the sights. You have only your memory of what you saw on the mountain.

On the mountain that we're considering today, the view was this: nothing. And I don't mean nothing in the sense of no impressive structure or particular landform to capture your attention. I mean nothing. I mean look around you and don't see another soul apart from your immediate family. I mean don't see any animals except those that you brought with you to that point. I mean don't see any houses or roads or fires or tools or any sign of any civilization anywhere. I'm not sure I can quite wrap my own head around what that view must have been like for Noah as he left the ark there where it sat on one of the mountains in the Ararat range.

Of course, that *nothing* was only slightly different from the view that Noah had in the weeks and months before. For one hundred and fifty days, Noah's view was nothing but water, that is, if he was looking outside the ark. Inside he found a zoo of all types of animals confined in that wooden structure.

Let's review what led up to that point. God had spoken to Noah and told him to build the ark, a large wooden boat, because God was going to send a worldwide flood. The reason for the flood was the wickedness of people. Every thought for every person was only evil. The only exceptions were those whose hearts had been changed when God worked faith in them. But at that time, the faithful, the righteous, were very few in number. God singled out only Noah and his family, which meant his wife, his three sons, and their wives, to preserve the people and animals for the world after the flood.

So for years Noah worked at building this giant floating fortress. To give you a sense of the size, the ark was three stories high, a total of around 45 feet. It was about 75 feet wide and 450 feet long. In other words, it was about the same length as one and a half football fields. Noah built rooms in the ark for the animals and people, and he coated the ark with pitch inside and out to seal it completely. All of this was according to the instructions that God gave him.

As Noah was building the ark, on dry ground and nowhere near any sizable body of water, he was testifying to the people around him about what God was about to do. He was mocked and ridiculed by those who did not believe that God would send a worldwide flood. As the construction was completed, God sent to Noah representatives of every kind of land and air animal that he had made. This word, “kind,” is described and defined in the creation account in regard to reproduction. Animals, like plants, reproduce according to their kinds. That means that there can be some variation in their characteristics as they adapt to various environments. Think of it like this: today we have many different types or species of dogs like poodles or pit bulls, but they are all dogs. They are part of what we could call the dog kind.

So once all the animals, Noah, his wife, his sons, and their wives were all onboard the ark, God shut the door. And the rain came, and the springs of the great deep burst open, and the floodgates of heaven did the same. And the water rose up and up. It buried countless creatures and the same people who had been mocking Noah as he built. And the watertight ark rose up and up and up with the rising water and carried Noah and his family above the destruction.

And then the waters receded, and the ark came to rest, there on one of the mountains of Ararat, in the part of the world that is now Turkey. And Noah and his family, when the time was right, when God told them, exited the ark and saw for themselves what the world looked like with nothing left of the people or animals that had been there before.

In just the brief time of this sermon today, it is impossible to consider all of the aspects or side issues of the account of Noah's ark. But one is rather important. This is a true story. This really happened. God had it written down for us and for our benefit because it is the truth. No matter how any people claim that it couldn't or that it didn't happen, that it is just a myth or a legend, this is a real incident in the history of the world. And you can find evidence of it, like the marine fossils that are found on so many hills and mountains throughout the world.

This is a true story and it teaches us about God. It teaches us that even though he is patient and loving, he is also just and righteous. He enacts the punishments that sins deserve. He brought such a calamity on the earth because the earth was full of rebellion against him. The people had long since refused to listen to him. They believed that they could determine for themselves what was right and what was wrong. And God, in perfect justice, wiped them off the face of the earth.

It's not hard to find similarities between the days of Noah and the times we live in now, just as Jesus pointed out. People go about their own days looking after their own interests. And nothing has changed regarding human nature. Every natural thought is always and only evil. It is rebellious against God. It seeks to redefine what he calls good in the interests of personal comfort and ease and choice. And the most frightening fact for each of us is that such a sinful nature still resides in us. As long as we live we will never be completely free of sinful desires. We will never stop committing sinful actions. We are no better than the Apostle Paul who explained, **"What I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing"** (Romans 7:19). I am a sinner, and as the mountains of Ararat so clearly indicate, God punishes sin.

But God also saves sinners. There on the mountain were the eight human survivors of the deluge. Each of them had a sinful nature. Each of them had committed sins too countless to number. Each of them could have, may have, and definitely should have looked around and realized, "It could have been me in a watery grave and now wiped off the face of the earth." But instead, God rescued them from the destruction. He kept them safe above the waters. And even more importantly, he gave them the confidence to trust in him for that rescue and to look to him for an even greater rescue.

See, God had led Noah and his family to believe his promises that he would send a Savior. And God would use Noah and his family to preserve that promise. These flood survivors owed everything for time and for eternity to the grace of God. The account of the flood is not only about God's judgment, it's also about salvation. The destruction was what everyone deserved, Noah and all the others included. It shouldn't surprise us at all that God punished sin. What ought to surprise us is that he saved some.

When we join Noah on the mountain in the Ararat range, we are reminded that God's promise is always dependable, always reliable, always trustworthy. He promises to us just as he did to Noah that seasons and days, that cycle that we depend on for our very existence, will continue as long as the earth endures. Yes, creation has an expiration date. It will not last forever due to the ruin mankind has inflicted on it. But while it does, God will preserve us. And God has already given us the greatest blessing we could have. He has already sent his Son to die instead of us, to take the punishment and destruction that we most certainly deserved.

That's a mountain view worth taking in, the experience in the mountains of Ararat. God judges. Take your sin as seriously as he does. And God saves, so rejoice in his mercy!

The text: Genesis 8:1–22 (NIV84)

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded. ² Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed, and the rain had stopped falling from the sky. ³ The water receded steadily from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the water had gone down, ⁴ and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. ⁵ The waters continued to recede until the tenth month, and on the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains became visible.

⁶ After forty days Noah opened the window he had made in the ark ⁷ and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. ⁸ Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. ⁹ But the dove could find no place to set its feet because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. ¹⁰ He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. ¹¹ When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. ¹² He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him.

¹³ By the first day of the first month of Noah's six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. ¹⁴ By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry.

¹⁵ Then God said to Noah, ¹⁶ "Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. ¹⁷ Bring out every kind of living creature that is with you—the birds, the animals, and all the creatures that move along the ground—so they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number upon it."

¹⁸ So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. ¹⁹ All the animals and all the creatures that move along the ground and all the birds—everything that moves on the earth—came out of the ark, one kind after another.

²⁰ Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. ²¹ The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.

²² "As long as the earth endures,

seedtime and harvest,

cold and heat,

summer and winter,

day and night

will never cease."