

### **A new understanding of the sacred scriptures 3- Noah's Ark and the Flood.**

Certainly one of the most dramatic and at the same time one of the best known stories of the Bible is the description of the Flood and of Noah's Ark, which occupies almost all of chapters 6 to 9 of the Book of Genesis.

"And it came to pass when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the Sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose . . . . And God saw that the wickedness of man was very great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually . . . . And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth: both man and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them." (*Genesis 6: 1, 2, 5 & 7*).

Of all men only Noah, it is said, "found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (*Genesis 6:8*), and at Divine command and according to detailed instructions he built a massive ark in which he, his family and specimens of every living creature would take refuge when the waters came.

"In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened, and the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights . . . . And all flesh died that moved upon the earth, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of beast, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and every man: all in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died." (*Genesis 7:11, 12, 21, 22*).

All in all the waters, it is said, "prevailed upon the earth a hundred and fifty days". (*Genesis 7:24*). Thereafter they began to subside, and within three months the tops of the mountains had begun to appear. In time, and after further waiting, it was safe for them all to come out of the Ark. "And Noah went forth, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him: every beast, every creeping thing, and every fowl, and whatsoever creepeth upon the earth, after their kinds, went forth of the Ark". (*Genesis 8:18,19*). It is, as we said earlier, one of the most dramatic and graphic stories in the Bible.

And yet at the same time, just as with the stories of creation and of the Garden of Eden which I have previously dealt with in this present series of talks, it has given rise to more difficulties and been at the centre of more controversy, than most others. Whereas in the past, and in years gone by, it was implicitly believed that we had here the description of something which actually happened, now we know that this can't be so. Once people would not have questioned its factual accuracy. Now few people attempt to defend it.

But, and as I've pointed out, factual and historical accuracy is not, so far as these stories are concerned, the important thing. Swedenborg wrote of them as "made-up" histories (*Arcana Caelestia* 1403), the significance of which lies in the fact that, as with the parables of the New Testament, they contain within them a deeper and more interior meaning. The Lord has used the imagery of the Flood in order to speak to us of spiritual things and to teach us of an experience which comes upon us and can be expected to recur on innumerable occasions in the course of our lives and as we strive to become regenerate.

More deeply considered, the story of the Flood describes the experience of temptation. It is a graphic picture of the way in which evil thoughts and selfish desires flood into our minds and would inundate and overwhelm us. So strong do certain feelings and ideas come upon us at times that we would be swept away by them. And tragically, sometimes we are. But it is possible to ride out these storms and to rise above them. This in fact is what the story is designed to teach us. Subject to temptation as we all are, yet we don't have to be overcome by it. Massive and destructive as evils and falsities are, yet they need not destroy us: not if we will both remember and trust in the Lord, and take refuge in the things He has told us and in our understanding of what is right and wrong.

Every person has such an understanding, which is what is pictured by the Ark; and it is only within the confines of such understanding and conviction that we can find refuge and will be safe when evil and falsity come upon us. There is nothing else and no other way. When, for example, resentment floods into a person's mind, what is there that can possibly save them from it but their remembering and holding onto the Lord's teaching about forgiveness? There are times, too, when we are sorely pressed to make judgments of other people but are saved from doing so by remembering the Lord's words which caution against things about people which we can't really know. And such remembrance and understanding is, as I'm saying, what is meant by Noah's Ark.

But such understanding and conviction doesn't come to us overnight. As was the case with the Ark, it is a long time in the making. It is of Divine mercy that we are not subject to temptations before we are prepared and in a position to withstand them. The building of the Ark represents the coming into being - over a period and during youth and early adulthood - of strong conviction and understanding of the Lord's teaching; an understanding which is infilled by the living things of love and charity, which is what is meant by the beasts and the birds.

That the Flood is to be understood in the way I have described, as an inundation of evils and falsities, pouring through the mind in times of temptation, is more than evident from what is said elsewhere in the Scriptures, particularly in the Book of Psalms. Psalm 69, for example, constantly makes use of the imagery of a flood of waters to describe evil and falsity, and clearly nothing else can be meant. "Save me, O God, for the waters, are come into my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me" (verses 1 and 2). And in verses 14 and 15, "Deliver me out of the mire, and let me not sink; let me be delivered from them that hate me, and out of deep waters. Let not the water flood overflow me, neither let the deep swallow me up, and let not the pit shut her mouth upon me."

I pointed out earlier in my talk that Noah was in the Ark for some twelve months or more at the end of which God (and I quote) "remembered" him, as if - strange though it may seem - He had previously forgotten him. Small detail though this is, it nevertheless illustrates something which is characteristic of all temptation experience - that God, as it were, both forgets and is unmindful of us, while temptation is upon us. He doesn't, of course, but it seems as if He does. When, as in temptation, we feel we need Him most, apparently He isn't there. We pray for deliverance and yet it doesn't come. To all appearance God has forgotten us. But this, as I've indicated, is only as it seems to be. He knows that it is best for us that we so seem to ourselves to be alone that we might as of ourselves see the temptation through to a successful conclusion. God will not prematurely interrupt temptation and save us from the conflict for He knows how beneficial it is for us to endure it.

You would be an exceptional person if you have come this far in life and had not experienced those times when unhappy thoughts and desires sweep into our minds and, like a flood, threaten to carry us away. It could be that you have been badly hurt or let down by another person and a resentment sweeps over you. It's like a wall of water which covers over common sense or the excuses which, in calmer moments, we would be able to find for them. You have probably seen people carried away by their anger over something. And it's so strong, so powerful and so deep, that, at least for a time, nothing you say has any impact. These experiences are just so common. And the Lord knows this. And this is what He is talking to us about in this story of Noah's Ark. He is talking to us about those times, all too frequent, when our passions are running strong and twisted thinking is threatening to swamp us. And He couldn't talk to us about such things more tellingly or more effectively.

Swedenborg wrote both of the necessity and the inevitability of temptation if a person is to be regenerated. It cannot but be that we shall be subject to inundations, or "floods", of this kind many times. But we need not, and we do not, have to succumb to it - not if we take refuge in the Lord and, as we saw, in those teachings of His which we know and believe in. Much as we may be tempted by it there is no question that we have it in our hands to hold out against evil, to ride out the storms, and to come through to better things and a better day.

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