



Noah and the Flood

They Needed a Bigger Boat

An Unburdened Word Pocket Guide

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Introduction

Have you ever squirmed when the Noah's Ark story was mentioned? Maybe it's at a family dinner, a casual conversation with a skeptical friend, or even in your own quiet moments of reflection. Even though you treasure your religion and the Bible, you wonder, "Did animals really line up two by two?" or "Did God really kill almost every living thing?"

You're not alone. Many thoughtful Christians feel caught between a desire to hold onto their faith and a nagging sense that the literal interpretation of stories like Noah's Ark simply doesn't square with what we know about the world. You might feel inadequate, unsure how to respond, or even a little "looney" if you admit your doubts. You want to have faith, but you also want it to be rational and intellectually sound. And you want others to appreciate the Bible like you do and not get hung up on what to do with the challenging parts of Scripture.

We're not talking about throwing out the Bible. We're talking about freeing you from the unnecessary weight of literalism. By the end of this pocket guide, you will

find that you can truly appreciate the profound truth within these ancient narratives. Think of it like this: are you missing the awe-inspiring beauty of a symphony because you're worried about the precise physics of sound waves?

In this pocket guide, "**Noah and the Flood: They Needed a Bigger Boat,**" we will begin a journey of liberation. We'll explore the context of this great iconic story so we can apply its truth to our contemporary lives. Our aim is not to debunk it but to **unburden** it so that we can fully appreciate its meaning. We will better understand the kind of literature we find in Genesis, allowing you to shed those hang-ups about historicity and science.

By the time you finish reading these pages, you will have a fresh perspective on Noah's Ark as well as a new framework for reading the Bible in general. You will acquire the self-assurance to interact with the text—and with other people—from a position of clarity, sincerity, and heightened spiritual awareness. Prepare to uncover the deep significance that has been awaiting you, free from burdens and genuinely applicable to your faith right now.

The Ancient World's Many Floods

For many of us, the story of Noah and the Flood stands alone in our minds as a singular, historical event. We were taught it in Sunday School, pictured the animals, and perhaps even built model arks. But what if I told you that across the ancient world—long before, during, and after the Genesis account was written down—stories of devastating floods were surprisingly common?

Long ago there were campfire tales passed down through generations, each culture recounting a massive deluge that reshaped their world. You can find narratives describing catastrophic floods from Mesopotamia (the region where ancient Israel's ancestors lived) to Greece and even cultures far removed like those in India and Native America. These weren't isolated coincidences; they were a significant part of the shared human experience in many ancient civilizations, often reflecting local or re-

gional flood events that were then woven into larger myths and legends.

One of the most famous examples is the **Gilgamesh Epic**, an ancient Mesopotamian poem that predates the Genesis account. It features a character named Utnapishtim, who is warned by a god of an impending flood, builds a large boat, and saves his family and all kinds of creatures. Sound familiar? The parallels with Noah's story are striking. While there **may well have been some such thing** historically that sparked these tales, the purpose of the stories was not a factual recounting.

What does this tell us about the Genesis flood narrative? It doesn't mean the biblical account is "stolen" or "false." Instead, it provides a crucial lens through which to understand *what kind of story* the biblical authors were telling. When ancient peoples encountered such stories, they weren't asking, "Is this scientifically accurate journalism?" They were asking, "What does this story reveal about God? What does it say about humanity? What does it teach us about our place in the world?"

Given how common flood stories were in ancient literature, it seems likely that the Genesis story was a form of **mythic history** or **legendary narrative**. Instead of being accurate historical or scientific accounts as we know them today, these tales served as potent vehicles for expressing deep theological truths, moral teachings, and cultural identity.

Viewing ancient flood myths as story-based responses to the problems of chaos and God's judgment allows us a richer understanding of the Noah story. Instead of focusing on a literal interpretation and conflicts with science, we can appreciate it as a deeply spiritual narrative. Shifting perspectives helps us think about what the story has to tell us about the link between God and us.

What Kind of Story Is This?

Now that we've seen how common flood stories were in the ancient world, it's time to ask a fundamental question about the Bible itself: **What kind of book is Genesis?**

For many, the instant answer is "history" or "fact." And that's understandable, given how these stories have been presented to us. However, imagine picking up a book today and, without reading the cover or knowing the author, attempting to determine what kind of book it is. Is it a science textbook, a novel, a historical chronicle, or a collection of poetry? You'd instinctively look for clues like whether it has stories with characters or whether it has charts and graphs. This is the concept of **genre**, a category that we assign to creative works based on their style, form, or content.

Here's an example. Let's say you had a legal document in front of you. You wouldn't read it like a poem. If you had a grocery list, you wouldn't consider it to be a letter from an old friend. Each genre has different characteristics and purposes. So we read them differently. Similarly,

ancient authors chose specific genres to convey their messages. They never intended for us to read all of the Bible as if it were one genre.

So, when we approach Genesis, we're not reading a science textbook or a newspaper report. No, we are reading a genre known as **foundational narrative** or **legendary history**. These are stories designed not to provide a literal, step-by-step account of *how* things happened from a scientific perspective but to convey profound truths that we will uncover later in this pocket guide.

As N.T. Wright suggests, these accounts are not a "video script" or a scientific report. Instead, they are "extraordinary picture language," ways of saying something that can't be said in any other way. The question of whether a video camera or spy satellite would have recorded the Genesis flood is really neither here nor there.

The details in these stories (like the precise dimensions of the ark or the number of animals) are usually symbolic parts of the storytelling genre. Rather than provide verifiable facts for a zoological study, they are meant to be part of the book's artistry. For instance, the sheer scale of the flood in the story points us toward the magnitude of humanity's corruption and God's powerful response. The covenant God makes with Noah and the rainbow reminder are meant to assure us that God is still good.

Understanding Genesis as a certain literary genre helps us appreciate its true genius. We don't have to try to force ancient stories into modern categories. We can stop asking questions the biblical authors weren't trying to answer. Instead, we get to engage with the profound insights they *were* trying to communicate. This shift in perspective is key to unburdening your faith and finding a richer, more intellectually honest engagement with Scripture.

Understanding the Bible's Real Authority

So, if the Noah story isn't meant to be a literal news report or a science document, then why should we read it? If we don't take all the stories in the Bible literally, does that mean the Bible loses some of its authority for our lives? Does it still have anything to say to us? Are you trying to tear down the Bible? Does that mean I don't have faith if I don't believe in a literal ark?

These are fair and completely understandable questions. For too long, many of us have been taught that the Bible's authority *depends* on every word being historically or scientifically verifiable. We've been told that faith means mentally assenting to something unlikely, often against our own intellectual intuition.

But here's the liberating truth: The Bible's real power isn't in proving a scientific theory or giving us a perfect historical timeline. The Bible's *real* authority comes from something much deeper and more profound: it comes

from **God, who, by the Holy Spirit, worked through the many people who passed these stories down through the generations.** The Bible is authoritative because it comes from God.

I propose to you that God does not intend for us to take *all* of the Bible stories literally. Never did. In fact, before the European intellectual movement we call “the Enlightenment” in the 17th and 18th centuries, most Christians didn’t wonder whether or not to take all of the stories literally. They simply didn’t ask that kind of question about the text. Instead of asking, “Did this really happen?” they asked, “What does this mean for us?”

Additionally, we should be careful not to let dismissive skeptics lead us to believe that none of the biblical events actually happened either. After all, the Bible contains different genres and different forms of truth, some of them more literal than others.

Someone will wonder if this is where “faith” kicks in. Do people with *more* faith take the Noah story more literally than people with less faith? Not at all! What do we mean when we use the word “faith”? For too long, faith has been narrowly defined as believing impossible things or simply mentally agreeing to something, no matter how unlikely. But that’s not what authentic faith truly is! Faith is not merely believing the impossible. Faith is bigger than that!

Faith is a profound *trust* that God will convey to you, the reader, precisely what God wants you to

receive from the story—no matter whether it's read literally, figuratively, or as some mix of both. Open your heart and mind to the idea that God's message can speak directly to you, understanding that it can go beyond various literary styles and historical backgrounds. Trust this possibility!

Expanding your perspective on faith actually makes your spiritual base stronger, leading to a more genuine bond with God and the old stories of the faith. This lets you use both your brain *and* feelings. Being intellectually honest actually gives you room to *boost* your spiritual insight. Then, you can stop worrying about things in the Bible that seem to clash with science or history and focus instead on the life-changing wisdom that's there.

The Timeless Meaning of Noah's Story

Moving beyond literal interpretations allows the deep meaning of stories like Noah's Ark to become clear. Their worth is found in uncovering the timeless wisdom that has sustained God's people for eons, not in trying to find scientific truth. We will find that this story, however strange it may seem, still resonates with our lives.

Here are just some of the timeless truths found within the legendary story of Noah and the Great Flood:

- **God's Judgment and Grace:** The story of Noah's Ark demonstrates God's righteousness even in the face of human violence and sin. People's depravity saddened God to the point that God second-guessed ever creating people. But the rainbow symbolizes God's covenant, a promise to never again flood the whole earth. And by the end of the story, we see God's mercy despite our

failings.

- **Humanity's Responsibility:** The story highlights humanity's recurring struggle with sin and its impact on creation. It pushes us to reflect on our choices and how we treat each other and the world God has entrusted to our care.
- **New Beginnings:** God starts over after the devastation of the flood by making a covenant with all living things, not just Noah, and the world is purified. This illustrates God's unwavering dedication to creation and optimistic outlook on earth's future.
- **A Call to Re-Creation:** The story of Noah's Ark provides powerful reminders to us to start fresh spiritually and aim for a fairer society. It's a call to be part of a world that pleases God. What inspiration do we draw from God's determination to set things straight?

When we clear away the stress and confusion brought on by literalism and understand the story of Noah's Ark in its own genre, we find that we can get even more from the story than before!

Talking About Noah with Confidence

Now that you better understand the ancient world, the genre of Genesis, and the true source of biblical authority, you now hold a more intellectually honest understanding of the Noah story. But how do you share this newfound clarity with others? You will encounter some people who insist on taking it literally. Yet taking the story as historical fact is a turn-off to other people who are skeptical about the story.

This is where your confidence, born from understanding, becomes your greatest tool. We don't need to try to win an argument or convince others to take the story literally because we know better. We know that the story is a **legendary story**. We can have a meaningful dialogue, share what the story means to us, and show the other person that the story can be powerful and authoritative without having to be literal.

The following are helpful suggestions for discussing the story of Noah, or any biblical account, with friends, believers, or those who doubt:

1. **Start with Empathy:**

- Acknowledge the common struggles people have with the story. Perhaps you struggled with it too. "I used to wrestle with the Noah story too," you might say, "trying to make it fit modern science, and it left me feeling a bit stuck." Beginning this way opens the door for genuine connection.
- Validate the other person's perspective, even if it is different from yours. They'll never really listen to you if they think you are dismissing them outright. "I understand why many people read it literally; that's how it's often taught."

2. **Introduce "Genre" Gently:**

- You could say something like, "Stories come in all different forms, and they each have their purpose. A poem isn't the same as a history book, for instance. We don't read news stories and fairy tales in the same way at all. So we should consider *genre* when we read Bible stories too."

- Use the "campfire story" analogy: For ancient people, stories like Noah's Ark were told around campfires. Perhaps someone asked, "Why does God let people do bad things?" The wise elder answered, "God doesn't put up with people doing bad things. Let me tell you a story about a time God did something about it..." followed by the tale of the Great Flood.
- Lots of ancient cultures all over the world have stories about big floods. They passed the stories down through the oral tradition long before they had international communication or even writing.

3. Shift the Focus from "Fact" to "Meaning":

- Once you've set the stage for genre, gently pivot. Instead of asking, "Did it literally happen exactly that way?" consider asking, "What profound truths was this story designed to teach us about God and humanity?"
- If they want to know more, mention some examples of what the story is really about: God's justice and grace, humanity's responsibility, new beginnings, and God's covenant with creation. These are universal truths we draw from the story.

4. Emphasize God's Message:

- The Bible holds power and authority because God uses its stories to transform people. We don't need to know if every single detail is literally true or scientifically verifiable to believe that the Bible is God's chosen book written for us.
- Instead of focusing on whether a story is literally true, we should trust that God is trying to get some important truths across to us. And storytelling is one of the most effective ways to convey timeless truths to people.

5. Listen More Than You Speak:

- Remember the old adage that we have one mouth and two ears so that we will listen twice as much as we speak. Discussing the story of Noah's Ark should be a dialogue, not a debate. People know when someone is trying to argue with them. Instead, ask open-ended questions. "What do *you* find most challenging about this story?" or "What is your favorite part of the story?"
- Genuine curiosity about others' viewpoints is key to understanding and making a connection. Foster mutual understanding by seeking

to understand the other person's reasoning.

It is possible to make difficult conversations pleasant by talking about faith in an open, honest, empathetic manner. Don't get caught up in every single word or thought. When you let go of literal thinking and others still see faith active in your life, it actually strengthens your witness.

Conclusion

You've reached the end of this pocket guide, and I hope you're feeling a significant shift. Perhaps you began with a silent battle within your mind. Or you felt a sense of inadequacy when others talked about the story of Noah's Ark as if it were either all literally true or else completely meaningless. Uncertain of how to balance your religion and intelligence, you bore the weight of literalism.

This journey helped you let go of what's been weighing you down. We looked at where flood stories come from, understood Genesis as a powerful, traditional story rather than a scientific explanation, and most importantly, confirmed that the Bible's authority comes from God.

Seeing Noah's story with fresh eyes shows us the real meaning behind it. We better understand God's fairness and kindness, our role as humans, and the possibility of starting over. Plus, we now have helpful ways to talk about this and other Bible stories without feeling inadequate.

Our journey is about more than just learning something new; it's about feeling sure, clear, and at ease with our beliefs. That's what "The Unburdened Word" is all about: having a thoughtful faith that connects with the world with intellectual integrity and empathy.

What's Next for Your Unburdened Faith?

This pocket guide is just the first step in your journey to a more thoughtful, confident faith. Now the path is open for deeper exploration.

To help you continue this liberating journey, keep an eye on your inbox! You're already signed up to receive "**The Unburdened Word's**" **welcome series**, which will provide you with **more insights, practical tools, and empowering perspectives** to interpret Scripture with both your heart and your head. Think of these as your next steps towards a faith that is truly set free to be deeply relevant for today's world.

Interested in using this method with other Bible stories? We've got great news for you. Just like we explored Noah's story in a new way, lots of Christians struggle with

Genesis' opening chapters and the creation narratives. Our next pocket guides will be:

- **Beyond Eden's Garden: The Ultimate Origin Story.** Ever wondered how the creation stories truly fit with what we know about the world? This guide dives into Genesis to uncover a deeper, more freeing understanding of our beginnings.
- **The Tower of Babel: Why I'll Never Really Understand You.** Explore this ancient tale to discover surprising truths about human pride, God's plan for diversity, and why communication can be so complicated.
- **Sodom and Gomorrah: It's Never Been About Sex.** Challenge common assumptions about this infamous story and uncover its real message about hospitality, justice, and how God truly wants us to treat our neighbors.

It's the next step to continue shedding those burdens and deepening your understanding of Scripture. Look for details on how to get your copy in an upcoming email from "The Unburdened Word."

Find us at UnburdenedWord.com!

Thank you for allowing us to walk with you on this liberating path. We're excited for you to discover even more of the profound beauty and wisdom within The Unburdened Word!