

**A VERY
GOOD GOD
IN A
BADLY
BROKEN
WORLD**

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Dedicated to my departed friend Millard Reed.
You complained well to a God who is hard to explain.
And you still loved this God to the core of your being.

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PART 1

THE STORY OF NOAH

We often keep only the ending of a story in our memory. With Noah, we are left with an interesting ark, animal pairs, a rainbow, and a promise that the earth will never again be destroyed by the waters of primordial chaos. Archaeologists have searched for the big boat, and some have claimed to find it. A Christian amusement park in Kentucky has built a replica. Kids have asked curious questions. Were there dinosaurs on the ark? How did they keep the snakes in their cage? Who fed the lions? If they sacrificed some of the animals as soon as they hit dry ground, are they extinct today?

The one thing we have not done is think about the character of the God who was behind this massively destructive divine decision. What does this reveal about God? And, given that the flow of Scripture places this story immediately on the heels of creation itself, how do things go so wrong so fast?

Our world is swamped in chaos. Maybe this is a good moment for us to visit an old story and figure out what God is up to when we are bobbing for our lives in the tide of global evil and personal tragedy.

1

OVERHEARING THE REGRET OF GOD

IT WAS A whisper spoken in the privacy of their bedroom. The boy who had given them fits had become a man. He had rebelled, disobeyed, disrespected them. And now, with his recent violence, he had broken his parents' hearts. His latest crime had gone beyond broken rules—he had left broken bodies. His parents were in their bedroom talking. The lights had long been off; sleep was long past due. He was out there somewhere, still doing violence to people. One parent whispered words of anguished regret: "I wish we'd never had him." If the boy had been standing there, had overheard the whispers of his grieved parents, would it have made any difference?

That's the question we are faced with in the story of Noah and the ark. In this well-known, well-loved story, we are brought face to face with the regret of God. We overhear God say, "I wish I'd never made them"—and he's talking about you and me.

Our story does not begin with regret. It begins with the words, “God saw that it was good” (see Genesis 1). God is pleased with his creation and his creatures. God and the humans stroll the garden and discuss horticulture and animal monikers. They share common interests in work and play. They take the same break at the end of each week. They are partners in creation. Humans are the epitome of God’s handiwork. God has made space in the universe for the existence of will other than his own will. Humans are free and empowered to cooperate with God in the management of the world. It is good—very good.

But in Genesis 3, things begin to unravel in a terrible way. Eve sees something she wants and seizes it. Adam follows suit. No longer satisfied with their partnership with God, they wish to be self-sustaining, independent creatures. They will fend for themselves now that they know good and evil. They run and hide, and in hiding, they discover their desire to cover themselves before God and before each other. It is no longer safe to be naked in the world.

Curses follow: Eve bears babies in pain; Adam farms fields in sweat; the ground grows weeds. They’re a long way from the idyllic garden-tending arrangement they began with. And the worst is yet to come: Eve gives painful birth to two boys, one of whom eventually murders the other. More babies are born, and evil multiplies exponentially across the earth. God’s vision of a good creation is going downhill faster than a Disney roller coaster.

Genesis 6 begins with one of the weirdest stories in the whole Bible. The sons of God look down on the daughters of humans and are captivated by their beauty. They see what they want and seize it, just like Eve did with the forbidden fruit (it's the same Hebrew word). The result of their offspring is a race of warriors—people skilled at killing each other. Cain's murderous art has been perfected by this marriage between the sons of God and the daughters of humans. And, with eternal blood in them, there will be no end to the murderous deeds of humankind. At this point in the story, God limits human life to 120 years; God caps evil.

The next words in the story may well be some of the most sobering in all of Scripture: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them'" (Genesis 6:5-7, NRSV).

We're on page 5 of a 1,009-page story called the Bible, and the main character is having second thoughts. In five pages we've gone from "God saw that it was good" to "God saw and regretted." The word used to describe the grief in God's heart is the same word used for the pain in the woman's womb—the curse has gotten into God. God's creatures are seeing and seizing, and they are destroying the earth. Violence (*hamas* in Hebrew) covers the earth. Humans cannot transcend

their self-interest to care for one another. I'd always thought of the story of Noah and the ark as a good story about animal pairs and rainbows in the sky—but not anymore. It is the story of God's regret. It is the story of a dark moment when God decides to act on his regret and wash us all away.

God-talk interests me. My friends often speak of God in mechanical, preplanning ways. They recount these opening chapters of the story of humanity like this: *Before God made Adam and Eve, he already knew they were going to make a royal mess of things, but he went ahead and made them anyway. After they misbehaved, he slapped a few curses on them to let them know they couldn't get away with such behavior. Then he kicked them out of the garden to give them a taste of the world on their own. Things got worse, but God wasn't worried. He just sent a catastrophic flood to get everyone's attention. Then he preserved the memory of the flood in an ark. Noah made sure everyone who came after the flood knew about the time God got sick and tired of humans messing up his world.* That's how I hear people tell this part of the story—mechanical. No surprises. God arranged it all beforehand. God lined up the dominoes and let them fall. But I have trouble with that way of telling the story.

One Christmas, our family got hooked on dominoes, and we learned a game called Mexican Train. You pile the dominoes in the middle of the table and each player draws fifteen dominoes. To start the game, you place the double-twelve in the middle of the table. Each player then starts his or her own train off the double-twelve, matching to it one of their own domi-

noes that has a twelve on one end. The strategy is to continue to line up your dominoes on your own train by matching the numbers on the ends of the dominoes, connecting them in one straight line. You alone can play on your train. You hope to play each domino in order—but there are ways to mess people up. Someone can play a double on their train and leave it open, which means the next person has to cover the open double before he or she can play anywhere else. People start groaning when they have to pull one domino from the middle of a perfectly arranged train waiting to be played; now there is a gap in their numerical sequence. When it happens to you, your train has been derailed by a rogue double—your competitor has messed up your train.

As I read Genesis 6, I see that God hadn't counted on the mess we made. It wasn't preplanned. God wasn't tipping dominoes by himself; God was playing with partners. And when we played rogue dominoes on our train, God had to respond. This isn't how God intended the game to go. As I read the text, I see that, had God known in Genesis 1:1 what he knew in Genesis 6:5, he never would have emptied the box onto the table. Like the parents whispering in the bedroom, he wished we'd never been born.

Denise and I have been privileged to enjoy watching our daughters act in dramatic performances. I remember when Abby was in the high school's production of Agatha Christie's *Arsenic and Old Lace*. I knew the plotline. I'd seen the play before. I wouldn't be holding my breath to see how it turned out. But if I were reading the Bible for the first time and came to the Noah story

on page five of holy Scripture, I'd be thinking some serious thoughts about the characters. These humans really are free to wreak destruction, and so is God—only, God is a lot better at blotting out.

The freedom of God is more frightening than the freedom of humans. God is on the verge of giving up his vision for a partnership. God is grieved deeply and regrets having ever made us. God is deciding to pull the plug on the universe. God is vulnerable to the evil we do. God can be pushed too far.

Did you know that?