

RESOLVED: Obedience

Genesis 6-8

1. Obedience is costly.

2. Obedience is messy.

3. Obedience is beautiful.

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Resolved: Obedience¹

“Today we are concluding our sermon series called “Resolved.” The word “resolved” has a couple of different meanings, and both work here: one meaning is to make up one’s mind; to have a firm determination or be *resolved* about something. The other meaning is when the solution for a question or dilemma has been arrived at or determined – then that question or problem has been solved, or *resolved*. We’ve just come through the month that is all about resolutions. Statistically by now less than 20% of us have kept our resolutions.

But unlike New Year’s resolutions, in this series we’ve *not* been talking about decisions we *hope* to keep; we are talking about decisions that have *already* been made when it comes to being a Christian.

This is about *living in what has already been resolved* in your life. If Christ is in your life, you have everything you need to succeed in your Christian life – *if* you will act on it – if you will be obedient to what God asks of you.

You are going to need to be obedient, or act on your faith, in this year. There are struggles you will face, there will be temptations you’ll need to overcome, there will be doubts and attitudes that you will want to avoid, *especially* with everything that is going on in the world today! Your family, your neighbors, your co-workers and classmates all need to see Jesus in you; *God has resolved for you, Christian, to be the presence of Christ in this world.* He’s given you his Holy Spirit so that you can do that. But they won’t see Christ if your faith stays in your head; if it isn’t visibly carried out in your life through obedience.

And it’s more than just *your* life, God has a vision for our church and this community in which we live, and that vision is exciting, it’s bold, and it’s clear. As a church, we see it and are moving toward it, and we want to act on it in more and more ways.

This series, by the way, is preparing us for the *next* sermon series that begins next Sunday, because we want to have the spiritual sight, readiness, and courage to be obedient in order to see some incredibly exciting things that our church is about to engage in. I want to make sure you are aware that next Sunday we will embark on something together unlike anything we’ve ever done before, and it will take all of us being resolved to see it through as God will work miraculously through all of us together. I’m asking you now – please plan to be with us for all five Sundays from February 9 to March 8. Also, this is *so* important that we are asking you to consider joining a small group, even if it’s just for the six weeks. We have groups ready for you that will be only six weeks long, so even if your schedule doesn’t normally have room for a small group, please consider being in one for just those six weeks.

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Please. You can sign up at Starting Point in the middle of the foyer. Because these are adventurous days; this year we will launch a major initiative that will be successful if we have 100% participation. We are on the verge of something that will propel us forward in the mission statement that we have faithfully followed all these ten years that I've been here: *to introduce people to Jesus Christ, to equip people with a faith that works, and to live as people with purpose.*

So, for today, we started out in this series talking about the importance of *resolved sight*, having spiritually opened eyes, focused on Jesus. In part two we talked about readiness – about faith, anticipation, and preparedness. Last week we talked about the need for courage – that courage is acting on our faith. We will see this kind of courage when we are under life's pressures, when we are introducing people to Jesus, and when it comes to being generous. All of that leads us to act on our faith – which was the last point last week and is the topic of today: *obedience.*

Remember our definition of faith from a couple weeks ago? Here's what we said: Faith is an "active trust and belief displayed through obedience...(In the Bible,) faith is typically understood as involving the whole self—mind, heart, and body—in a relationship with God that expresses trust and a grateful response to His loving initiative."² In other words, faith is an all-in relational response *of obedience* to what God has already said, or established, or resolved out of his love for you. Obedience IS our whole-life response to God. Jesus said very clearly in John 14, "If you love me, you will obey my commandments." Obedience is a loving response. It is impossible to have faith and not be obedient; the very definition of faith includes obedience, or action.

In the Bible we are told:

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says...What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 1:22; 2:14, 17 niv)

Faith and obedience, obedience and faith – two sides of the same coin.

When I did a Google search on obedience, the most popular sites fell into two categories: dog obedience or the Stanley Milgram experiments. You know why people don't search for cat obedience? There's no point! Dogs want to learn to be obedient and please their owners. Cats could care less.

But the other category is the Stanley Milgram experiments. In the early 1960s, Milgram, a PhD student at Yale, started a series of experiments called "Obedience to Authority." He had grown up listening on the radio to the horrors of the holocaust, and he wondered how those soldiers could carry out the atrocities against their fellow humans. So he created an experiment to study the limits of obedience to authority. The participants included a learner, a teacher, and an experimenter. The experimenter represented the voice of authority. The teachers, who were ordinary people like you and me, were supposed to administer electric shocks to the learners whenever they answered a question incorrectly.

² Kyle A. Roberts, "Faith," in *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016).

They used a “fake” shock machine. There’s Milgram and his fake machine. The teachers didn't know it, but the learners were actually paid actors. When they received the shock, they would act like they were crying out in pain and groaning, but despite that, in Milgram's experiment, most of the teachers still obeyed the instructions of the experimenter and kept *increasing* the level of the shock. Ultimately, over two-thirds of the teachers kept obeying the experimenter in the white coat until they punished their learners with the maximum shock of 450 volts.



So based on this little survey, apparently obedience is a nasty word; we're suspicious of obedience. It's something that you demand from dogs but not human beings. Many think it is mindless, scary, and hurts people. Often in our culture when you talk about obedience it conjures up images of mindless obedience in weird religious cults.

Is that what obedience is? Not according to the Bible. The Bible is filled with stories about people who obeyed and were rewarded, and people who obeyed even if they were *not* rewarded. There are also stories of what happens when people do not obey. All of those stories are in the context of relationship with God – they trust him and his love for them and the world, so they obey regardless of the outcome, or they choose not to obey him because ultimately they don't trust him. Faith and obedience, obedience and faith. Faith without obedience is dead.

So I want us today to look at just one story – it's a very old story. In fact, it's not just found in the Bible; you can find it many oral and written accounts from nearly all the major world religions, and that's the story of the great flood. In the Bible, the story's main characters are God and Noah. In that story, which you can find in Genesis chapters 5-9, it tells the story of messy, costly, beautiful obedience from an ordinary man named Noah. It's not what we might expect about obedience. Through his story, we learn it's when we're loving God, knowing God, and experiencing God that we're living a life of active obedience to God. Remember we said that obedience is our *response* to God? Well it's true here, too; in the story of Noah...

God makes the first move.

To begin with, the story of Noah's obedience—like every story of obeying God—does not begin with Noah; it begins with God. In the midst of the human disaster of Genesis 6, there is this bright ray of hope:

"But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord." (Genesis 6:8, niv)

Noah found grace because God, in his grace, found Noah. You and I find grace only because God, in his grace, finds us.

Like I said, the world is filled with ancient flood stories, but there are crucial differences and themes in the biblical story that set it apart. The Babylonian flood stories, for example, emphasize the heroic image of the main character. The biblical Flood story begins with God and emphasizes his grace. Only then does it tell us about Noah's simple, humble, but costly

response to God's grace. It all begins with God. And it doesn't leave out Noah's obvious flaws.

Here we have a foretaste of the Good News of Jesus. In the New Testament, we're told over and over again that God saves us, favors us, chooses us, forgives us, and sets us free from the power and penalty of sin and the sting of death. We are also reminded it is not by our own moral effort or progress; it's all by his grace. Some people say, "I've heard this before; I want to move on to the 'deep stuff.'" I'm sorry, but there's nothing deeper than the Gospel. Nearly *every* problem in the spiritual life—pride, elitism, a failure to love others, joylessness, impatience, lust, greed, and a failure to be generous—can be traced back to a failure to apply the work of Jesus on the cross and the sending of his Spirit. It doesn't matter how deep the stuff is you know if you don't obey it.

That raises another very important question I hear often: "If I'm saved by God's grace in Jesus and it isn't based on my good deeds, then why would I want to obey? Couldn't I just live the same life I've always lived and then just ask forgiveness?" No, because once you understand God and his grace, it demands a response; you *want* to change. Jesus is the one who set you free from the bondage of sin. He redeemed you when you were utterly lost, and as a result, you love him. When you're in love, it changes everything about you—your actions, attitudes, motivations, and affections.

So this story of obedience is first a story of God's grace. When you're chosen and loved beyond your wildest imagination, you will love God in return. When you love him, it changes everything. You will live a life of costly, messy, beautiful obedience.

In the Bible's flood story, we also get a front row seat to see...

The radical obedience of an ordinary guy.

All of this leads us into the story of Noah, the man who epitomizes costly, messy, beautiful obedience. Genesis 6:9 tells us:

"Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God." (Genesis 6:9, niv)

The word for blameless meant "free from defect, wholesome, sound." It does not imply Noah was perfect or sinless, but it does imply something special about Noah: he was consistently obedient to God. Notice the following verses:

- 6:22—"Noah did everything just as God commanded him."
- 7:5—"And Noah did all that the LORD commanded him."
- 7:9—"as God had commanded Noah."
- (and again) 7:16—"as God had commanded Noah."
- 8:15-16, 18—"Then God said to Noah, 'Come out of the ark' ... So Noah came out."

By the way, you'll notice Noah never speaks for the entire story. God gives four little speeches, but Noah just keeps his mouth shut and does his job. Now, he's not a mindless robot. He's a flesh and blood human being with real problems and struggles. When you come to Christ, God doesn't expect you to be a mindless robot either. John Polkinghorne, the brilliant physicist, said, "Many people think that faith involves shutting one's eyes,

gritting one's teeth, and believing six impossible things before breakfast, because the Bible or the Pope ... tells us so. Not at all! Faith may involve a leap, but it's a leap in the light, not the dark. The aim of the religious quest, like that of the scientific quest, is to seek motivated belief about what is the case ... It's not a technique for whistling in the dark to keep our spirits up." Noah may well have questioned, doubted, and argued along the way, but all we have is the end result of his journey. He received God's grace and then he responded by listening and obeying God. Noah perfected the art of obedience—not the art of *thinking* about obedience. He acted, putting faith into practice, and as Noah put his faith into practice, he shows us first that...

1. Obedience is *costly*.

Obedience will always cost you something. If you read the details of the ark in Genesis 6:14-16, you'll see how massive it is. Someone has estimated that the dimensions imply Noah's boat was 95,700 square feet. That's much smaller than the modern ocean liner *Queen Elizabeth II*, but it's also much larger than Columbus's *Nina*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria*. The length of 450 feet is one and a half football fields. This was a massive project! Imagine what obeying God cost Noah. It wasn't a hobby; it consumed his time, money, energy, and life. When you're in love, it affects everything about you. Obedience is the flow of God's love in your life.

I remember 35 years ago, some friends of ours were preparing to go work on the mission field in Africa. At that time it was considered a third world area. They had just had their first child, who was only a few months old. They had come to stay with us before leaving the country, and as we were talking, I asked them, "Are you at all concerned about the safety of your newborn son's health, since you are taking him to a place that doesn't have the same quality of health care?" I'll never forget their response: "If we disobeyed God and stayed in the US, he might be in greater danger here, than in Africa because of our obedience." I could tell they had weighed and prayed their obedience.

After I heard that, I couldn't help but pray, "Father, change my heart. Let my faith cost me something. Make it a daring and dangerous adventure of following you."

Does your faith cost you anything? Does it cut into your lifestyle at all? Does your worship cost you anything? When King David entered a worship service, he said:

"I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God offerings that cost me nothing."
(2 Samuel 24:24)

So if you come up to me after a worship service and say, "Thanks! That was a perfect service—exactly what I wanted," I think I should say, "I'm so sorry worship cost you nothing this morning. I'm so sorry we had cheap worship, and you didn't offer anything valuable to God."

The second thing you need to know is that...

2. Obedience is *messy*.

Noah's obedience was also messy. Genesis 6:9 describes Noah very simply with these words:

"He walked with God." (Genesis 6:9, niv)

Right before this story about Noah, there is another story; Genesis 5:24 describes someone else who walked with God:

"Enoch walked with God, and then he was no more because God took him away."
(Genesis 5:24, niv)

That's neat and clean obedience. We obey and God removes us from the mess of life. But that's *not* the norm; that's not normal Christian spirituality. Normal Christian spirituality means living for God and walking with him in the midst of a hurting, broken, messy world. Jesus said normal Christian spirituality means letting your light shine into the midst of darkness:

"Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16, niv)

What Jesus meant was essentially this: Go back into the darkness and form a community of my people who will reach out and shine my light into the darkness as they love one another.

I always get agitated when we—the people of Jesus—slip into an “ark mentality.” An ark mentality says, “We just have to get inside, shut the doors, keep the bad influences out, and then hold on until Jesus comes, God opens the doors, and lets us out so we’ll be free at last!” In the midst of a flood, an ark is a wonderful thing. But an ark is also a very messy place. It's part of life in the ark.

The whole point of the ark was not to permanently escape the world; the ark was created so Noah and his community could re-enter the world as bearers of a new, alternative reality. In other words, *the church isn't a refuge from the culture around us; it's the place that helps us enter into and engage the culture.* The amazing thing is that, besides being costly and messy...

3. Obedience is *beautiful*.

At this point, you may be thinking, *costly, messy, obedience—why would I ever want that?* Noah's life shows us something else about obedience: it's beautiful. Obedience brings life to Noah and his family.

Perhaps that's one of your fears about obedience: maybe you think it's ugly, hurtful, and painful. We've all probably heard awful stories of people who said, “God told me to do this. God told me to leave you. God told me to hurt you.” In other words, obedience turns people into total creeps. I remember when I was a senior in high school that there was a girl in the youth group who asked if we could exchange senior pictures, so we did. And, you know, the custom is to write something on the back, like “stay cool” or “have a great summer” or something banal like that, which I did. But she wrote something like, “Don't worry about the future; the Lord told me the man for my life would be...” and then listed these things

about me. So apparently she and the Lord were in cahoots behind my back! I guess I'm still living in disobedience because I told her, "That's great – I'll let you know, but I'm pretty sure the Lord would tell me that, too!" Sometimes people will say some pretty crazy or creepy things that they claim the Lord told them. But that's not what happened with Noah. God's call and Noah's obedience produced a thing of beauty for Noah, his family, and the whole earth. Obedience leads to blessing. Notice the result of obedience in Genesis 9:

"I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."
(Genesis 9:9-11, niv)

Through his obedience, Noah became the bearer of a new, alternative reality—the reality of blessing, the reality of God's grace. Through his obedience, Noah bore witness to and left a legacy of God's grace.

We sometimes think Noah was perfect. But he was sinful and needed grace like all of us! All you need to do is read Genesis 9:20-23 and you'll see Noah's drunken adventures. But more often than not, we see that Noah as a man of obedience.

Do you know one thing that blocks us from the beauty of obedience? We always think we need more information. We say, "I'd like to obey, but I need some deeper teaching on that issue. If someone would just feed me, then I could obey. It's someone else's responsibility, and I'm a victim of my own disobedience." And yes, we do need to question, explore, and get answers. The Bible isn't always easy to understand. We need to understand the principles of biblical interpretation, read the verses in context, grasp the historical and cultural context, and define biblical words with care and patience. That's hard work, and God wants us to engage our brains. But there comes a point in our lives when we're no longer seekers or infants; we're the mothers, fathers, big brothers, and big sisters of the faith. At that point, we need to say to ourselves, *How much more information do I need before I can respond to God with costly, messy, and beautiful obedience?*

I remember one older lady at a church I was pastoring who said, "Please don't teach me anything new that I don't know; teach me to obey what I do know!"

I often take time to ask myself: *Do I need more information about forgiveness before I let go of my grudges and release those who have wounded me? Do I need another teaching on Christian community before I decide I need a small group? Do I need more training on how to pray before I actually set aside time to seek God in prayer? How many more Bible studies do I need to go to before I decide it's time to downsize my lifestyle and give the money towards something that will last for all eternity? Do I need more information before I share my faith in Jesus with other people?*

I'm so glad that the guy who prayed with me to accept Christ when I was 17 years old didn't say, "I need more training on how to share my faith before I can talk to Mike."

Listen, do I really need another sermon on sharing my faith or the theology of evangelism? Do I need someone to feed me so I can share my faith?

The problem in my life is pretty simple: obedience might get costly or inconvenient. It might get messy. I might get hit with questions I can't answer. I might invite someone to church, and they might say, "Sorry, but I found your service irrelevant. It's not for me." For many of us, our problem is summed up in one word: disobedience.

I know a guy who built a car. Before that he was not a car guy at all; I don't know that he'd ever changed the oil in his car. So I asked him, "How did you figure out how to do all this?" He said, "It's pretty simple," which I thought was an understatement! He said, "I just read the manuals and then I do it. Of course, there's an important element in between; it's called courage."

As a Christian I would put it this way: We read God's Word and then we have the courage to obey it. But there's an important element in between: it's called love. God loves us and showers us with grace, and it changes everything about us. We want to respond with love for God and others.

I want to offer an invitation and a challenge. First, let me offer the invitation. Do you know God's grace? Can you marvel at the love the Father has for his children? To all of us broken sinners, here's the Good News: "Christ died for us while we were still sinners. This proves God's love for you."

God loves you. Obedience isn't something that he demands because he is some kind of divine control-freak. He isn't going to keep shocking you until you obey. He loves you! He wants what's best for you. He can be trusted. Yes, at times it's going to be costly and messy, but the outcome is always going to be beautiful – sooner or later – because that's the way God is. He is a father who loves you. All you need to do is respond to his love, accept what Christ has done for you on the cross, allow him to forgive you, and begin responding in obedience to what you know. It's not like you suddenly have to obey everything in the Bible even though you haven't even read it. You simply start with what you know, and then you grow.

Secondly, because God loves us, I want to issue a challenge to those of us who are already in a relationship with God through Christ; you'd call yourself a Christian. Where does your obedience refuse to go? Where do you say, "Sorry God, but that's too messy, too costly, too inconvenient?" Let me say it bluntly: if you consider yourself a follower of Jesus, if you consider yourself to be under his loving authority, where are you in active or passive disobedience? If you have put your faith in Christ, you have the Holy Spirit dwelling within you—the one who will guide you into all truth. So follow his guidance. Do what he asks – especially if it's costly and messy.

Pray