

Stories From The Stable

Christmas Series

Genesis 8; Numbers 6, & Matthew 3

Written By

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Doves. They are such a beautiful, graceful, and innocent looking bird. They are tasty, too, and, no, they don't taste like chicken. Dove season where I pastored in California for nineteen years starts on Labor Day and runs typically through the 15th day of September. You always know the exact day it starts because you are awakened by what sounds like a warzone off in the distance. It is fifteen straight days of hearing shotgun blasts off in the distance as hunters seek to get their coveted limit.

In addition to being a great food source, doves are also a source of rich and profound theological nutrients. Are you kidding me? Actually, no. While I have never prepared a sermon in last twenty-seven years of preaching on a bird, I have found this particular bird most instructive when it comes to the Christmas story. How so? Well, since God guided all the animals and birds into the ark, don't you think He sovereignly made sure the right animals and birds were in the stable when His Son was born? I tend to think the animals present were probably a donkey, a camel, a goat, a lamb, and a ram because of their theological significance where the Messiah was, and is, concerned. And don't you think that somewhere resting/roosting on a dusty ol' wooden rafter there was a soft, white dove or two, just cooing melodically away over the birth of the Savior?

I'm convinced. The same living God who says He knows every bird on every mountain (Psalm 50:11; that's 200-400 billion of them, with 10-20 billion in the U.S. alone)¹, who will use

¹Kevin Drum, "How Many Birds?" *Mother Jones*, March 23, 2011, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2011/03/how-many-birds/#>.

carnivorous birds in His final judgments against sinful man (Ezekiel 39; Revelation 19), would have made sure one of these theologically significant birds did not miss the arrival of the long-awaited messianic Savior/King, Jesus. All of this, of course, leads us to focus on the question at hand this Christmas:

What Do We Learn From The Dove? (Selected Texts)

Interestingly enough, after spending four hours reading and studying through all the biblical texts related to doves, I have determined there is more info here than I can possibly share in one study. Since, I have two other creatures I'd like to study in our remaining two studies prior to Christmas, I guess it is the wisest move to limit our analysis to three spiritual truths. In light of our time parameters, we'll limit our analysis to three pivotal passages.

Answers From Genesis 8

Genesis 8 is the final chapter detailing God's judgment of wicked mankind by means of the Noahic flood. Man's sin ran rampant in the antediluvian world (Genesis 6:1-7), leaving only Noah, his wife, and three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and their wives as devout followers of God (Noah 6:8-9). For one hundred and twenty years, Noah built the ark in the middle of nowhere and, according to Peter he faithfully warned sinners to turn to God before it was too late (2 Peter 2:5). No one listened, as they don't listen today (as Jesus prophesied, Matthew 24:37-38), and there came the day with flooded the earth for forty days and forty nights (Genesis 7:4).

Yes, I know, the more "scholarly" among us will have a hard time moving cognitively forward if I don't, at least, offer a few salient points regarding whether the flood was universal or local.

The use of the word "all" (כֹּל, *kol*) in the flood narrative is typically understood to be universal in nature—"I have determined to make an end of *all* flesh" (Gen 6:13 ESV). Verbs like "blot/wipe out" (מָחָה, *machah*) (Gen 6:7; 7:4, 23) combined with phrases like "every living thing" (כָּל־הַחַיָּוִים, *kol-hayqum*) (Gen 7:4) suggest that the flood destroyed all living things from the face of the earth.

- The flood narrative states that the waters covered "all the high mountains under the whole heaven" (Gen 7:19 ESV).
- If the flood were confined to one geographic region, Noah would simply move his family rather than construct the ark.
- The human race by the time of Noah had ample time to spread out globally. Hence, if God determined to wipe out "all flesh" (כָּל־בָּשָׂר, *kol-basar*) from the face of the earth, it would make the most sense for the flood to be universal.

Reactions to this theory include:

- Whitcomb and Morris conclude that "[e]xcept for the family of Noah, the entire [pre-flood] race of mankind, widespread and hopelessly wicked, was destroyed by water" (Whitcomb and Morris, *The Genesis Flood*, 87).

- Mathews suggests “all flesh/people” and “every living thing” (Gen 6:12–13, 17) apply globally—“the cataclysm was worldwide in scope ... the insistence of the narrative on the encompassing character of the flood favors the literal understanding of the universal view” (Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 365).
- Hamilton concurs with this approach as well—“elsewhere in the Flood story ‘all flesh’ includes both animals and people (6:17, 19; 7:15, 16, 21; 8:17), it is most likely all-inclusive in 6:12” (Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 279). Although the phrase “all the earth” (כְּלִי-הָאָרֶץ, *khol-ha'arets*) (Gen 7:3) can legitimately mean a local area of land, Hamilton concludes that it is best take it at face value—it refers to the entire globe (Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 273).²

Add to this the fact Jesus uses the Noachic flood as an analogy for His Second Coming at the end of His wrath against the world (Matthew 24:36-51), and it appears a worldwide flood is the biblical, historical option.

Anyway, when the rain stopped at the end of the forty day cycle, Noah realized it would not be long until they, as a family, were back on dry land once again. Genesis 8 tells us what he did next:

⁶ At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made ⁷ and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. ⁸ Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; ⁹ but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. ¹⁰ He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; ¹¹ and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. ¹² Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him anymore.

When the rain stopped on the twenty-seventh day of the third month (Genesis 7:12), the waters continued to rise for an additional 110 days (Genesis 7:24). The waters receded for another 150 days (Genesis 8:3), and eventually the free-floating ark to rest on a mountain peak of Ararat (Genesis 8:4). After 2 ½ months they could see mountaintops, and forty days after this is when Noah released the raven, and then seven days later the dove. The raven found plenty of food to enjoy, given its carnivorous make-up, but the dove was sent out three times before it came back with an olive leaf in its beak. Noah now knew the earth was dry enough for his family to venture out of the ark and enjoy the earth again, and based on God’s leading that is exactly what he did 57

² Jason C. Kuo, “Flood,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

seven days later (Genesis 8:13-19). And to think that freedom came from the work of one little innocent, but ever-faithful, dove.

What do we learn from the dove? Much.

The dove underscores that fact that God is *always* true to His word, whether man choses to believe it or not.

- God said it would rain for forty days and forty nights, and it did.
- God said He would deliver Noah and his family, and He did.
- God said He would spare some animals so they could re-populate the earth, and He did.
- God said He would judge sinners because all they desired prior to the flood was sin, and He did.
- God said He would send the Messiah through the chosen line of Seth (Genesis 3:15; 4:25), and He did because Shem, the son of Noah, was the great, great, great, great, great, great grandson of Seth, and he was also the progenitor of Abraham, Isaac, the tribe of Judah, Ram, David, Solomon, Zerubbael, Abdiud (Matthew 1:13), Eliakim, Azor, Sadoc, Achim, Eliud, Eleazar, Matthan, Jacob (Matthew 1:16), and Joseph, the husband of Mary and the earthly father of, you guessed it, Jesus, the baby in the manger.
- God said He would send the messianic Savior to the world to deal with sin (Isaiah 53), and in 5 B.C. He fulfilled that prophetic word to the letter.

Along these lines it is most fitting for the ark to rest atop Mount Ararat on the seventh month according to the Jewish calendar, for eventually this month (Tishri: September-October) would become the first month of their sacred calendar and during this month was when God instituted the Day of Atonement feast whereby Israel could secure forgiveness by means of the prescribed sacrifice. Of course, the baby lying in the stable that quiet evening, while the dove was cooing in excitement, was born to fulfill the message and meaning of that redemptive day to the nth degree (Hebrews 9).

Additionally, it is worth noting that the presence of the olive leaf in the beak of the dove was no accident. Of all of the plants on earth, why did God direct this bird to find this type of leaf? Why not a tangerine leaf, or a leaf from a pear tree? Got a couple of Sundays to talk about the significance of this? Oil from the olive tree eventually had great national, religious and spiritual significance in Israel. Not only did it serve as a main food source and was used in the preparation of everything from stews to the preparation of peas and lentils, it became the fuel for the light of the Menorah candelabra in the Tabernacle and Temple (Exodus 25:6; 27:20; 35:8, 14, 28; 39:37). Israelites, per God's direction, also used olive oil to anoint and set apart prophets, priests, and kings for their special roles (Exodus 29:7; 1 Samuel 10:1; Psalm 89:20). Again, Jesus, the babe in the manger, not only was the ultimate spiritual light to Israel and the world (John 8:12), but he also was *the* anointed prophet, priest, and king (Deuteronomy 18; Matthew 21:11; Hebrews 4:14-15; Revelation 19). The presence of the olive leaf in the mouth of that innocent dove

pointed forward to these wonderful messianic motifs, motifs which found their ultimate fulfillment in the birth of Jesus.



In addition, the very process of extracting oil pointed to the Savior who would one day suffer and die for our sins. To extract oil from the small olives, Israelites would pour the olives into a hollowed out stone basin where they would be initially crushed. From here, they were carried by baskets and placed in stone vats where they would be crushed further by using the fulcrum power of a massive beam of wood with a counterweight.

Here is an ancient olive press from a picture I took back in 2011 near Beth Guvrin. The coveted oil, which was only released after much crushing, was collected from the troughs.

One can readily understand how this all points to Jesus. Was He not eventually be betrayed by Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane among a grove of olive trees (Matthew 26:36ff)? Indeed. Was He, the light of the



world and the medicinal oil for sinners, not crushed beyond measure for our sins (Isaiah 53:5) so we might secure forgiveness when we place our faith in Him? Indeed. No wonder, then, a little dove was probably present in the stable that starry evening. He reminds us still that in wrath God always remembers mercy, that God always fulfills His prophetic Word, that salvation would come through the crushing of the Messiah, and that where there is spiritual darkness, Jesus is the perpetual and only true spiritual light.

As you might guess, there is more to learn from the dove.

Answers From Numbers 6

Numbers 6 gives us the requirements for a man who desired to be a Nazarite. What was a Nazarite? First of all, the Hebrew *nazar* (נָזִיר) lexically speaks of that which is separated or consecrated for a special purpose.³ He was a man who took a special vow, either for a limited period of time or for a lifetime to be completely dedicated to God. Remaining pure during this

³ Holladay, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the OT (HOL)*, Hol5445, נָזִיר: cs. נָזִיר, sf. נָזִירָה; pl. נָזִירִים, sf. נָזִירָה: (s.one) dedicated, consecrated; — 1. †inn[®]bê n[®]zîrek¹ adj. (grape-)vines given over to free growth & not harvested during sabbatical year, unpruned vine-stem † Lv 25[•]11; — 2. noun, Nazirite, s.one devoted to God (n[®]zîr °|æhîm Ju 13⁵) w. the obligation to let hair grow & not to touch wine Nu 6²; — 3. s.one dedicated, consecrated, prince, Joseph-tribe in contrast to others † Gn 49²⁶ Dt 33¹⁶. (pg 232).

time of consecration called for him to also be very careful about what he drank, touched and so forth. If he happened to touch a dead body, which was unclean according to Levitical law, he had to secure divine atonement for his infraction. Imagine if we actually believed that doing, saying, and touching certain things defiled us before a holy God? Imagine how this would potentially change our behavior. Anymore, however, you can pretty much do as you please and not defiled at all. In any event, let's get back to the Nazarite with a spiritual issue if he came into contact with death. How did he secure spiritual restoration? Verse 8 tells us.

⁸ All their days as Nazirites they are holy to the LORD. ⁹ If someone dies very suddenly nearby, defiling the consecrated head, then they shall shave the head on the day of their cleansing; on the seventh day they shall shave it. ¹⁰ On the eighth day they shall bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, ¹¹ and the priest shall offer one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering, and make atonement for them, because they incurred guilt by reason of the corpse.

Note, the man in question had to do exactly as God prescribed. No deviation or discussion was allowed. He shaved his head on day seven and on the eight day he brought two turtledoves and two young pigeons to the priest for a sin and an burnt offering.

What's the difference between a sin and burnt offering? Good question. First of all, realized that in Leviticus God made it quite clear that no one approaches Him without the appropriate blood sacrifice (Leviticus 1-7). Second, realize that sin, in God's eyes, needs atonement, or proper sacrificial coverage so God's wrath against the sin in question is averted (Leviticus 6:30; 8:15; 16:20; Ezekiel 45:15). Third, God offered different kinds of sacrifices to cover different kinds of sins. The sin offering represented the sacrifice needed when sin was done unwittingly or unknowingly. A Nazarite could say he didn't purposefully touch a dead body, but if he had, then, he could offer a dove and a pigeon to secure the much coveted sin offering. A burnt offering, conversely, was made by a worshipper in communion with God in order to maintain communion. By offering a dove and pigeon for this particular sacrifice, the man was saying he realized he was a sinner and that his ability to have a viable, intimate relationship with the living God was dependent solely upon the correct and costly blood sacrifice.

Why was a dove used? The dove was permitted in those cases where the person was poor and could not afford a costly lamb of the first year for a burnt offering sacrifice or a bull for sin offering (Leviticus 4:2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 20, 21). Let me put this differently, God made sure that no one was barred from securing forgiveness for sin, regardless of your net worth or lack thereof. A dove was, therefore, permitted for the poorest of the poor among Israel (Leviticus 1:13-17). A dove, then, is what Joseph and Mary offered to secure spiritual cleansing since they both were, in God's eyes, defiled by the birth process.

²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

They did this in the Temple on the fortieth day after the birth of Jesus, and represented a sin and birth offering, which is what a Nazarite had to offer when he was seen as unclean before God. An why did they offer doves and pigeons? Because they were what we might call cash strapped, and yet God, out of love for sinners, made it possible for even them to secure cleansing in His sight by means a some innocent birds. Did they have money? Yes. They had just spent forty days living in Bethlehem, and Joseph had also paid for the journey there from northern Israel. When it came time to pay the redemption money, to fulfill the law, for Jesus, and to also secure a sin and burnt offering sacrifice, the young father was probably financially pushed to the limit. God, then, who is rich and mercy and grace, made it possible for Joseph and his wife to secure a lesser blood sacrifice so they could get back into fellowship with God.

In light of this, is it any wonder a dove was most likely present in the stable where Jesus lay? He came to earth to be the perfect and costliest sacrifice so that they way to heaven was opened up for all mankind, whether they were people of means or no means. All of the lambs, bulls, goats, rams, pigeons, and, yes, doves, which were used for blood sacrifice to cover sins, found their complete fulfillment in Him. As the writer of the book of Hebrews states so powerfully:

¹⁰ And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹ And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.

¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10)

As that white, innocent dove looked upon the baby Jesus, he looked into the eyes of the One who would be THE sacrifice of all sacrifices for all of mankind, whether they be rich or poor. You are certainly somewhere on that spectrum. You certainly should know now that Jesus came and died to make sure that all mankind has the prospects of securing eternal forgiveness when they turn to Him in faith as the true sacrifice and the true Savior.

No wonder we sing the old hymn . . .

Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere;
go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.
Down in a lowly manger, the humble Christ was born,
And brought us God's salvation, that blessed Christmas morn.
Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.

You want to tell this story because it is the redemptive story. He was and is the sacrifice who made it possible for sinners of all stripes to find forgiveness and eternal life. If the dove could sing instead of coo, he'd probably be singing this song at the top of his little voice.

Answers From Matthew

The last place we find the dove is at the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of His earthly ministry. Matthew, the former tax collector turned disciple, records the event for us, as do all the other gospel writers (Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32).

¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

At the baptism of Jesus, we see the Holy Trinity in action. As Jesus came up out of the water (biblical baptism is a full immersion), the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove. The metaphor does not mean the Spirit was a dove, but his descending presence look like a dove as it came and rested on Jesus. All of this, of course, was to fulfill Isaiah's 8th century prophecy that the Messiah would be full of the Spirit of God (Isaiah 11:2ff). After the Spirit identified with Christ and anointed Him to prepare Him for His earthly redemptive mission, God the Father spoke words of fatherly love from His dimensionality. With all three members of trinity present, it underscored that God was at work in and through the ministry of His only Son, Jesus. Ostensibly, this means He was not working in any other religious group or set of religious teachings. He was pleased with His Son's desire to come to earth to be our Savior, and there is no one who pleases the Father more. None even come close for He is the Savior, the Messiah who had the collective power of the Trinity to take on the inferior power of sin and death.

Now you have another viable reason why a beautiful dove was probably present in the magnificent atmosphere of that insignificant, out-of-the-way stable full of animals. His presence would have been a word of assurance that the Spirit of God was there as Jesus began His march toward the cross for each of us. That why we sing . . .

O Holy Night!
The stars are brightly shining
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth!
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till he appear'd and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary soul rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!

Fall on your knees
Oh hear the angel voices
Oh night divine
Oh night when Christ was born

Oh night divine
Oh night divine⁴

It was a holy night because a dove reminded us of God's commitment to His prophetic/messianic plan for sinner. It was a holy night because a dove reminded us that God sent Jesus to be the substitutionary sacrifice of all sacrifices. It was, also, a holy night, because the Trinity was present as baby Jesus set out on His demanding and difficult journey to defeat sin and death.

I think I hear a dove cooing in the background. What's he saying? He's calling for you to come to faith in Jesus, the Savior, this Christmas.

⁴"O Holy Night," accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.41051.com/xmaslyrics/oholynite.html>.