

Family Fortunes...

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Genesis 7:1-12



On Tuesday 2nd November 1982, a British institution began. Channel 4 launched with its first programme, *Countdown* which has gone on to be a fixture both on the channel and in the psyche of British afternoon quizzers ever since. With over 7000 episodes having been broadcast, with countless vowels and consonants being rearranged into anything up to nine-letter words, with Conundrums proving crucial to the final result and an air of light whimsy pervading the studio under the watchful eye of original host Richard Whiteley and his successors, it's been a winning formula for nearly forty years of broadcasting. Of course, like all good ideas, it's not unique, nor indeed was it the first of its kind. The French programme *De chiffres et des lettres* began its run in 1965 and inspired the version that we know so well.

Whereas many are addicted to the letters games, I have a special affection for the numbers rounds. After all, Carol Vorderman and Rachel Riley are both mathematicians whose main skill is far more than placing letter cards in little square holders. For me, the challenge is to try to solve the maths puzzle, though I sometimes cheat by pausing the TV to give that little bit extra time (I will also admit that as an infrequent viewer, I don't get many opportunities to try out my mental arithmetic). I also admit that I'm not very good; my success rate is probably somewhere in the region of one in three, which is hardly startling.

The thing is, I like numbers. I like the way that by manipulating six sets of figures, with the judicious

application of addition, subtraction, etc, we can arrive at results that are hundreds apart. Oh, the joy of figures!

Now, we approach the next section of the tale of one man in a boat with numbers at the forefront of our minds. And haven't we got a lot of them to choose from? Whether it's in the number of pairs of clean and unclean animals and birds (seven or two depending on their acceptability), the age of Noah, the number of days before the disaster or even the number of days and nights that the rain fell, we get a plethora of numbers to play about with.

There are those who will point at the significance of these numbers. Seven (the number of pairs of clean animals and birds – something that is usually overlooked by toy makers) is a number that we encounter frequently in the Bible: from the number of days to create everything including rest (Genesis 2:1) to the number of churches and seals (on a letter, not the aquatic ones) mentioned in John's visions (Revelation 2-6). Equally, the 40 days and nights of rain might remind people of the number of years that the Israelites spent in the desert during their journey from Egypt (Exodus 16:35) and the time that Jesus spent fasting before facing temptation (Matthew 4:1-3). And there are plenty more if you look for them.

But what's the point of all this? Are we meant to read some special significance in these numbers, by adding some of them together, dividing by some of the others and arriving at a number that is God's phone number? Of course, I jest, but I also bring a warning. It's possible (very easily possible) to read significance into the insignificant and thereby ignore what we ought to be paying attention to.

For example, the point of Countdown isn't the numbers and letters themselves, it's the contestants ability to weave those numbers and letters into patterns that provide the correct answer or longest word (as found in the Oxford English Dictionary). It's only by doing so that they are in with the chance to win the much-coveted teapot (up there with Bully and the Blankety-Blank chequebook and pen as the most iconic prizes on TV).

Likewise, if we spent all our time on the numbers in the extract of the story this week, we would miss a key sentence that occurs right at the start of our reading. God says to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation." (Genesis 7:1).

Now what does God mean by this? There is, of course, a semantic question here: is God referring to Noah as the only righteous person, or is the "you" a plural (the Americans would say "y'all") to include the family? If so, how did they manage to keep themselves so blameless while all around them were succumbing to every kind of vice?

However, if we take this to mean that Noah was the only one who was counted as righteous, in other words that he was the only one who did what God commanded of him, were the rest of them included because of their association with Noah? Was this a "save one, save all" kind of strategy that God was employing?

Of course, the answer may be purely biological; whatever of the world was devastated by the flood water would need repopulating and, as the saying goes, "it takes two to tango." So maybe the extended family was being brought along to help in that way, though there are other questions that are to be answered if that was the case.

Or maybe it's more like the experience of the Philippian jailer many centuries later; he was the one in charge of the apostles Paul and Silas when they were imprisoned for healing and generally causing an outrage. When the doors of the cells flew open but the prisoners didn't make a break for it, the jailer is stopped from committing suicide by Paul with these words: "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved – *you and your household*" (Acts 16:31 – italics mine). Does this mean that like Noah, the belief of one person was enough to save a family (either from death by drowning or being sold into slavery/eternal

damnation)?

It's a question that has dogged theologians over the centuries and not one that I feel equipped to answer, except to say that God is obviously fond of families. And, though that might sound a bit trite, it's absolutely true. The family unit is a crucial one for the whole story of the Bible. We have at its beginning two families: Adam and Eve, with Cain and Abel and so on, and the divine "family" of the Trinity, with the Spirit of God moving over the face of the water (Genesis 1:2) and the first oblique reference to Jesus, the Godman who would put right the wrongs that started in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:15).

We read of the significance of the family throughout the Old Testament, from the troubles that Jacob had with his offspring, to the support that Moses had from his siblings when confronting Pharaoh, to the Davidic dynasty that saw Jerusalem go from its pinnacle of religious fervour and military might to the ruin of exile (there are too many references here to list - a whistle-stop tour of Israel's history will suffice). Even Jesus was known variously as the Son of David and the Son of Man, both titles rooted within a family identity. So, I suppose it's little wonder that if God was going to save Noah the rest of the family would have to come along as well.

But what about us?

We all are part of a biological family, whether we're the last in the line or just one among many who share a common surname and shared ancestry. Not one of us was created in a vacuum and, without getting too personal, we all must have someone in our history who spent some time in a degree of intimacy with someone else in order for us to be here. Your very presence and appearance speak of family (I curse the "Graham nose"). Our family shapes us, forms us, provides so much of our genetic makeup, for good or ill. Our experience of being part of a family will affect everything: past, present, and future. For many that will be a good thing. Sadly, for others, not so much.

But then again there is another type of family that is important here. There is such a thing as the "Countdown family," with all those involved in the programme are included: the contestants, hosts, guests in Dictionary Corner, audience members, even the loyal viewers who tune in each weekday afternoon. They are all joined not by genetics or biology but by the common love of a game of numbers and letters.

Likewise, we are all members of a "family." But the key defining characteristic of this family is a word that was the Countdown Conundrum solution back in 1986^[1]: *righteous*. However, for us, righteousness is not through Noah, but in the person of Jesus.

Noah's righteousness was evident in obediently making the boat to save him; our righteousness is in accepting that Jesus obediently took up his cross to save us. Noah needed a boat to save him and his family from a watery death; we need Jesus to save us from the sins that caused the flood in the first place.

There is one other key difference between us and Noah and his family. There were only eight in the boat who Noah could save. There are billions across the world who Jesus can save, if only they knew it. Let's do what we can to get the message out around the whole of God's family...

Amen.

^[1] "EIGHTOURS" Countdown episode 455, first broadcast on 27th October 1986 (https://wiki.apterous.org/Episode_455)

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