

WHEN THE WORLD GOES BAD

Genesis 6:1-8

Well, if you're a bit confused after this morning's OT reading from Genesis chapter 6, then you're in good company. Many leading theologians remain divided over what parts of it mean. But, it is an important passage which well deserves our attention; the Jews regarded it as being at least as important as the story of Adam and Eve.

There's no doubt that the main thrust of this passage is about the wickedness of mankind and God's judgement to come, and we shall be returning to that main theme a little later. But the references to the "sons of God" marrying human women in verse 2, the reference to 120 years in verse 3 and the reference to strange beings called "Nephilim" on the earth in verse 4 have all given rise to much controversy and we're going to start with these difficult bits. We shouldn't attempt to dodge the difficult passages in scripture, but rather we should try to make sense of them and harmonise them with the rest of the Bible. I think it's likely that Moses' original listeners had access to other material, perhaps oral traditions from the Patriarchal period which would have made this section of Genesis clearer. But, if it were crucial for our salvation then I'm sure that God would have made sure that our Bibles contained a fuller account. Scripture tells us everything we need to know about God and his plans, but not always everything we would like to know. As we consider this passage together, please open your Bibles at page [**] so that we can study it together.

Let's look at verses 1 and 2:

"When men began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose." (Genesis 6:1-2 NIV)

Verse 1 serves to link the genealogy of Adam in Genesis chapter 5 with the account in chapter 6. Human beings are multiplying in the

land, fulfilling God's mandate to "multiply and fill the earth" from Genesis 1 – as Giles said to me this is the only one of God's commandments we've been good at keeping. I don't think this verse implies that women were increasing unnaturally at the expense of men; it just says that women were being born.

Now there are three leading theories about who the "sons of god" in verse 2 were. The first theory is that they were angels, the second that they were godless descendents in the line of the Godly Seth – one of Adam's children – and the third that they were offspring of Canaanite kings. Now let me say at the outset that we can't be completely sure which, if any, of these suppositions is correct, as they all have some points in their favour and some against. I'm not going to give you all the detailed arguments for and against, as that's not really appropriate this morning, but I will say that I believe the angel theory is correct as it has the most evidence to support it, although we can't be *certain* it's correct.

The angel theory was the explanation accepted by the early church and the majority of Jewish rabbis – indeed the Jewish version of the OT in Greek, the Septuagint, translates verse 2 as "angels of god" rather than "sons of god". Also 'angels' is the most common meaning of the phrase 'sons of God' in this context in the OT. Additionally, the inter-testamental book of Enoch adopts this explanation and we have references in Jude and 2 Peter 2 to angels who did not keep to their proper abode. Most importantly though, this theory involving mixing different orders of creation, explains why God became so angry about these unions. Of course this theory assumes that angels could and did take on human form, but we have other scriptural references to angels appearing in human form and eating and drinking – for example in Genesis 18 and Hebrews 13:2 where we are told that some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

Let's move on to look at verses 3 and 4:

"Then the LORD said, "My Spirit will not contend with man for ever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterwards—

when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.” (Genesis 6:3-4 NIV)

The beginning of verse 3 makes it clear that God is very displeased by the forbidden unions with the sons of God. The implication of God’s spirit being withdrawn brings to mind the hovering spirit of Genesis 1:2 which brought order out of chaos. The withdrawal of God’s spirit will take away order and allow chaos to flourish. We see that God’s patience and mercy turn to judgement in the face of persistent sin. Our God is a God of judgement as well as a God of love and mercy and we should never forget that.

Some have interpreted the second part of verse 3 to mean that ‘henceforth the lifespan of mankind would be limited to 120 years’, but that conflicts with the rest of Genesis where most of the people lived considerably longer. It’s more likely that the reference to 120 years means that God was announcing that he would grant a 120 years stay of judgement on mankind before he sent the flood. This is reinforced by 2 Peter 2:5:

“if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others;” (2 Peter 2:5 NIV)

where Peter implies that Noah preached a call for repentance during this intervening period before the flood. God was pronouncing his judgement on mankind once this period of grace had elapsed. We should be thankful that God usually gives us a chance to repent before he brings down his judgement. That’s part of God’s grace.

In verse 4 the angelic theory which I have advocated, also has the advantage that it explains how the Nephilim – usually considered to be the giants referred to in Deuteronomy and Numbers – came to exist. Many scoff at this and say that it’s just like primitive superstitions of pagan gods in other cultures having sexual relations with humans and producing offspring, but I would turn that objection on its head and argue that this misbehaviour of angelic beings back in mankind’s early history is precisely what gave rise to these myths about gods and human women in other cultures. God’s patience was

tested beyond its limits by this grossly improper and sinful behaviour of the mixing of orders of creation and He moved to kill off most of mankind and the wicked offspring of these improper unions – the Nephilim. Jude and 2 Peter 2 tell us that the angels involved were also punished.

Let's now move on to look at verse 5 and 6:

“The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.” (Genesis 6:5-6 NIV)

The words of verse 5 emphasise once again the wickedness of man implied by verse 3 – a direct paradox, an apparent contradiction, in terms of the goodness of creation pronounced in Genesis 1. The implication is that this wickedness had been building up ever since the rebellion of Adam and Eve and has now passed beyond the bounds God had set.

Verse 6 is another difficult passage, it tells us that God was sorry that he had created mankind. Other Bible passages tell us of God being sorry (e.g. Exodus 32:14, I Samuel 15:11 etc) whilst others tell us that God never repents or changes his mind (e.g. Numbers 23:19, I Samuel 15:29). This illustrates the tension that always arises when we try and describe God in human terms. God is not a man, but the only words we have to describe him are human terms. God is not fickle. He is steadfast and longsuffering in his redemptive plans and purposes for humanity – but mankind's response to God's grace and the opportunities he gives us to repent often determines what God does in a particular situation.

Let's now turn to the final verses of our reading – 7 and 8:

“So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them." But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD.” (Genesis 6:7-8 NIV)

The word translated “wipe” in verse 7 means literally “wash away” – hence the flood which was to come. In verse 8 the word translated “favour” in the NIV might better be translated “grace” – as it is in the KJV – the first use of this term in scripture. I’m sure that Noah was not completely sinless. Perhaps he was less sinful than the rest of mankind – verse 9 tells us that he was a righteous man – but we can’t be certain. What we do know is that he wasn’t completely sinless – we see evidence of that after the flood in Genesis chapter 9 – so he hadn’t earned the right to be saved by God and God wasn’t obliged to save him. That’s why the scripture speaks of Noah ‘finding grace’ – finding undeserved favour. God gave Noah His grace, His amazing grace, His gratuitous favour that was undeserved by Noah, and saved Noah from His coming judgement on the rest of mankind.

In the same way God has offered us his grace, his gratuitous favour, through Christ and when we turn to Christ in faith we are preserved from God’s judgement, our sins are forgiven and we are enabled to enter into the glorious salvation of our God. Noah was saved by the Ark, but Christ is our ark – our refuge and salvation. Make no mistake, we need that grace because we’re all sinners and God’s judgement is surely coming. Let me say that again, God’s judgement is surely coming – at the last day we shall all stand before the judgement seat of God and without God’s grace we shall stand condemned.

So let’s just take a moment to summarise what we’ve learned this morning. We saw that after the rebellion of Adam and Eve, after the fall, sin built up in the world until God decided to act. So sin eventually brings down God’s judgement and without God’s grace – the kind of grace he bestowed on Noah – we shall all perish for we are all sinners and all deserve to be condemned by God’s judgement. But there is good news. In His love and mercy God has freely offered us all his grace through Christ – Christ’s sacrifice on the cross enables us all to stand as righteous before God washed from our sins in Christ’s blood.

So, what about us here this morning? Are we confident that we shall receive God's grace – or will we be condemned to death by His judgement – like most of mankind in Noah's generation – for, as Paul tells us in Romans 6:23, the wages of sin is death. Now God's grace is freely available to us all because Christ died for the whole of mankind on the cross, paying the penalty for all the sins of us all, past present and future. BUT, we do need to accept that grace before it becomes operative, becomes effective, in our lives. You might remember the story I told a couple of months ago about George Wilson who was executed in America for murder even though he had received a Presidential pardon, because he refused to accept that pardon and the US Supreme Court held that the pardon was not valid until it was accepted.

Like George Wilson with his pardon, we do need to accept God's grace, the free pardon he has offered us through Christ to make that pardon effective. Now it's easy to do that, God has made salvation simple. All we need to do is to truly believe in our hearts in the death and resurrection of Christ and acknowledge him as our Lord. Scripture assures us of this in Romans 10:9-10. So, if you've never done that, or if you're not sure about it, then you might want to pray the following prayer along with me quietly in your hearts.

Heavenly Father, thank You that in your grace you offer us a chance to turn to you and accept the salvation which you freely offer us – just as you gave those of Noah's generation 120 years to turn to you. You are not slow to honour your promises, but rather patient to give us all every chance to come to you. Heavenly Father, we have heard that if we believe in our heart that You raised Christ from the dead and confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord then we SHALL be saved. Therefore Father we say to You now that we believe in our hearts that You raised Jesus from the dead and we say with our mouths here and now that Jesus is Lord. We make him Lord of our lives right here and right now and in thanks for Your wonderful grace, your amazing grace, we repent and turn away from our sinful ways. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen