

## **Genesis 5:32-6:8**

### **The Coming of the Flood**

Genesis chapters 1-11 form the background to biblical history. We have the Creation, genealogies, the Flood narrative, more genealogies, and the Tower of Babel. There is the wonder and beauty of Creation and the horrific disaster of the Fall of man. There is the continuation of the *imago dei* in the birth of two sons, and the fratricidal murder that followed. There is the wicked line of Cain, epitomized by Lamech's polygamy, and the godly line of Seth, highlighted by Enoch's "walking with God." Though wickedness spread, and man descended into spiritual and moral darkness, yet throughout all, God's promise of blessing endured.

This passage is divided into two distinct sections. The first five verses continue the discussion of the increasing spread of population over the earth, and the last four verses relate God's response to human depravity. The first section is very unclear and has been the source of much speculation. The second section is much more straightforward. But the theological principle underlying both sections is that such immorality as occurred with the spread of humanity proved intolerable to a holy and righteous God. Divinely established boundaries had been transgressed. Ultimately, the earth itself could no longer support its inhabitants.

#### **Noah**

The linear genealogy of Genesis 5 evolves into a segmented genealogy when discussing Noah and his offspring. The author writes that "Noah was five hundred years old, and Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth" (v. 32). Notice that the standard "and then he died" is omitted. Noah *was*, rather than Noah *lived*, implies that this is a story that will continue. And continue it does.

The description of Noah's three sons could mean that either there were three consecutive boys born to Noah and his wife, or that she experienced the pain and joy of having triplets. In light of references elsewhere (9:24 and 10:21) though, it makes more sense to think of these brothers being older and younger in more than the sense of a few minutes.

To introduce them to us, Shem was the eldest, since it was tradition to cite the firstborn of each generation. He was also the ancestor of the Hebrews, who bear the name of his son Eber. "Also to Shem, the father of all the children of Eber, and the older brother of Japheth, children were born" (Genesis 10:21). Ham was the youngest. He was the one who will be shame to his father. As a result, he was the ancestor of many of Israel's future enemies. Places such as Babel, Nineveh, Assyria, and Amorite permeate the descriptions of his descendants (Genesis 10:6-20). Japheth, apparently the quintessential middle child, is little mentioned in Scripture.

#### **Sons of God and Daughters of Men**

The remainder of this section is a very difficult passage to unpack. It demands attention to both the words and context. The author writes, "<sup>1</sup>now it came about, when men began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, <sup>2</sup>that the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose" (v. 1-2).

These verses serve as an excellent transition from the genealogical account to the consequences of the actions of Adam's progeny. Interestingly, while chapter 5 focused on the sons of Seth, this chapter begins with more of an emphasis on the daughters. But the theme that unfolds is that the procreation of the human race has resulted in increased sinfulness.

The main textual issue is in trying to discern who these "sons of God" and "daughters of men" really are. As often with ancient texts, the author was writing to people who possessed information the modern reader does not. Think of it this way. If I were to reference something by stating that "it reminded me of Washington crossing of the Delaware . . ." you would not need me to explain who George Washington was, or when the event occurred, or what the particular circumstances were that led to his crossing the Delaware River. That is all common knowledge to those who remember the American Revolution. But to an outsider, the reference is obscure. So, too, in this case. There was no reason for the author to explain to his audience who these people were, as they were readily identifiable to them. To us, however, they remain an enigma.

Three basic ideas have been proposed. The first sees this narrative as part of an ancient myth. The word *El* was a very commonly used word to identify a deity in Hebrew, Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Ammonite texts (all ANE people groups). Many names of God in the Old Testament reflected this - El Shaddai, El Elyon, Elohim, for example. So proponents of this view argue that these "sons of God" were heavenly beings (sons of *El*), overcome by their own selfish lusts, who came to earth to take human women, "daughters of men," for themselves as wives. (Interestingly, there is no sense in the context that these were acts of violence against the daughters of men, but rather mutually consensual relationships). It is argued that the offspring of these unions were men who possessed remarkable physical abilities who used their power to engage in extraordinary wickedness. Related to this argument is that the Nephilim mentioned in verse 4 are likely these offspring.

Those who espouse this view have the advantage of pointing out that it is the most ancient understanding of the text. This was the view taken by the early church and long remained the traditional understanding. In addition, often in the Old Testament "sons of God" refers to heavenly beings, even Satan.

"Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them" (Job 1:6)

"For who in the skies is comparable to the Lord?  
Who among the sons of the mighty is like the Lord" (Psalm 89:6).

Also, the interaction between humans and angels seems referenced in the New Testament as well.

"<sup>6</sup>And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day, <sup>7</sup>just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 6-7).

In the ancient world, there was a general understanding that the gods could interact sexually with humans. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the goddess Ishtar proposes marriage to Gilgamesh, for example. Those who suggest that the Genesis narrative refers to angels engaging in sexual activity with human women argue that this dispels the notion that it was the gods who transgressed the boundary between the divine and the human, and that it was merely angels instead.

Those who find this argument untenable, point out that, until this point in the text, there has been no reference to any angelic host. There is the cherubim mentioned in Genesis 3:24, but no sense that that angel is one of many. They also contend that Scripture teaches (through no less an authority than Jesus) that angels do not marry. <sup>29</sup>“But Jesus answered and said to them, ‘you are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. <sup>30</sup>For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matthew 22:29-30).

Also, the entire focus of the narrative in Genesis thus far has been on humanity. The creation of the cosmos in which they were placed, their rebellion and punishment, and the unfolding of their history has been the subject of Genesis. And, there is no other biblical evidence for the sexual union of angels and humans beyond that referenced here (and its corollary New Testament passage, if so it is). Certainly angels can take on human form. Certainly they can interact with humans. But many argue that such an interpretation of this passage leads to bizarre thoughts of sexual acts too reminiscent of classical mythology.

Finally, if these ‘sons of God’ were angels, then one must wonder why would God punish man for their actions. If the angels were culpable, why was humanity condemned to destruction? However, to counter this last argument, it could be suggested that the innocent animal life of the planet (down to every “creeping thing” [v. 7]) is punished for man’s sin during the flood, so the punishment of innocents is not inconceivable.

A second proposal, this first put forward by Jewish writers, is that these “sons of God” were great rulers, reminiscent of an early aristocracy. The “daughters of men” referred to the harems they created. They populated the earth with their progeny. Their sin was that of Lamech, polygamy, and it was their polygamy that prompted God’s response. To support this view, we can consider that in making His covenant with David, Israel’s greatest king, God referred to David’s future offspring, the great king Solomon, as a son, “I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men” (2 Samuel 7:14).

In this argument, it is Cain’s descendants who are seen as the likely ancestors of these “sons of God.” The point of the narrative, then, would seem to be to place much of the blame for the increasing depravity of mankind on the Cainite line, rather than on humanity as a whole. Though it was never understood that the Sethite line was free of sin, the point here is that the main cause of God’s wrath and judgment were the descendants of Cain.

While this argument has the advantage of removing any mythologizing from the narrative, the actions are more the routine practice of powerful men taking women at their pleasure, it must be pointed out that in

both Scripture and other ANE texts, while an individual king may be called a “son of God,” groups of kings are never given that appellation. Another argument against this view is that the sin of polygamy, while certainly wicked, hardly seems sufficient in itself for prompting God to destroy all life on the planet except for Noah.

The third option is that these “sons of God” were children of the godly Sethite line, and the “daughters of men” were from the ungodly Cainite line. This is the view advanced by many Church Fathers such as Augustine, and later by Luther and Calvin. In this view, it was the intermarriage of godly men with corrupt women who influenced them away from the proper worship of God that was the cause of God’s complaint. Such a theme was common in the Old Testament.

“<sup>1</sup>While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. <sup>2</sup>For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods” (Numbers 25:1-2).

“<sup>1</sup>Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, <sup>2</sup>from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, “You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods. . . <sup>4</sup>when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. <sup>5</sup>For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites. <sup>6</sup>Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not follow the Lord fully” (1 Kings 11:1-2, 4-6).

Unfortunately for proponents of this view, nowhere in Scripture are the offspring of Seth viewed collectively as “sons of God.” However, it can be argued that the idea of godliness is prevalent in the passage describing the Sethite line.

“To Seth, to him also a son was born; and he called his name Enosh. Then men began to call upon the name of the Lord” (Genesis 4:26).

“Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him” (Genesis 5:24).

“Now he called his name Noah, saying, ‘this one will give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the Lord has cursed’” (Genesis 5:29).

Also, proponents of this view point out that the Flood narrative is embedded within the larger Sethite genealogy. And while there is no specific mention of the descendants of Seth being collectively viewed as “sons of God,” Scripture often speaks of the nation of Israel and the Jewish people generally as being God’s children.

“Do you thus repay the Lord,  
O foolish and unwise people?  
Is not He your Father who has bought you?  
He has made you and established you” (Deuteronomy 32:6).

Some who hold this view do not necessarily think that it follows that if the “sons of God” are the Sethites, the “daughters of men” must necessarily be the Cainites. They argue that it was the wanton disregard for the laws of marriage that angered God. The particular lineage of the women involved was not the crucial issue. Ultimately, I think that it is not possible to be dogmatic about the meaning of “sons of God” and “daughters of men” in this context. While most modern authors believe the third argument seems to fit the context best, perhaps the more important point is that the “sons of God” fell into the same trap as Eve did in the garden. They looked and “saw that the daughters of men were beautiful” and responded by indulging their own lustful appetites.

### **The Removal of God’s Spirit**

Whatever the particular identity of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men,” God had had quite enough. “Then the Lord said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years’” (v. 3). The word translated ‘strive’ in the NASB can also be rendered ‘abide.’ Again, this produces an apparent problem. Was God’s Spirit living with man, or was God’s Spirit fighting with man. Fortunately, the translations are not as exclusive as they may, at first, appear. Under the weight of man’s sin, it surely was difficult for God to abide with them. God simply announced that His Spirit would no longer continue with man, giving him long life and success against the elements.

God’s judgment could no longer be suspended. Note that God’s punishment was to be directed strictly against man; there is no mention of God’s punishing angelic beings at this time. This is further evidence that angels were not the “sons of God” mentioned earlier. Furthermore, it is clear from the position of this verse, that it was the acts of man that were reprehensible to God, not the mere fact that those acts produced offspring.

The term for flesh, *bāsār*, is a general term that describes the limitations and fallibility of humankind. It can also refer literally to flesh, as in “flesh and bones.” While it can also refer to the literal flesh of man, that is to say, that man is not an angelic being, it does not seem logical that God would punish man simply for being mortal. Mortality was, itself, a punishment. The idea that it was man's moral depravity that was the reason for judgment makes more sense.

The other interpretive issue here is the limit of time imposed by God. Is this a reference to the age past which no man shall from now on be able to live? Or is it the amount of time allotted to man before God renders His divine judgment in the form of the coming Flood? If it is the first, then like the ‘death’ which was promised as a result of eating the forbidden fruit, God delayed the execution of this judgment for some time. And indeed, in the book of Genesis, the only major figure who did *not* live past 120 years was Joseph. However, the place of this passage within the general narrative seems to indicate that it is more likely this 120 years refers to the time before the Flood.

### **The Nephilim**

The writer then introduces the mysterious Nephilim. “The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown” (v. 4). As with “sons of God” and

“daughters of men” it is likely that the original audience understood to whom the writer was referring. We, however, do not.

The only other biblical reference to these people occurs again in Numbers 13:33, when the spies are reporting their findings after exploring the land of Canaan. “There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.” However, the obvious point is that the people mentioned in Numbers 13 could not be related to those mentioned in Genesis 6, since all of the Nephilim in Genesis 6 were destroyed in the flood. No doubt these men of Genesis 6 were formidable, and the reference to them by the Israelite spies is perhaps a bit of “scare tactics” on their part to avoid having to invade Canaan.

Scripture does not specifically state that these Nephilim were the result of the union between the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men” though it certainly could be implied from the context. The issue is further muddied by trying to discover to whom the “men of renown” refer. In other words, were the Nephilim the descendants of the “sons of God” and “daughters of men” and if so, were they the same people referred to as “mighty men who were of old, men of renown” or were they simply their contemporaries? We cannot, with absolute certainty say. Most interpreters have generally concluded that the Nephilim and the “mighty men who were of old, men of renown” were not the same people.

### **The Pervasive Wickedness of Man**

After so much that we cannot understand, Scripture moves quickly to clearly explain what happened next. “<sup>5</sup>Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. <sup>6</sup>The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. <sup>7</sup>The Lord said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them.’” <sup>8</sup>But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.” (v. 5-8).

In a few brief sentences, man’s sin is exposed and his punishment decreed. Unlike the sixth day of Creation, when God saw that all was “very good” now He saw only the wickedness of man. On the one hand, the desire of God that man be fruitful and multiply was being fulfilled, yet sadly, wickedness was spreading just as rapidly.

Note the emphasis on the extent of man’s sin. The intent of man’s heart was wicked. Every intention of man’s mind was corrupt. Man thought of sin continually. The wording should not confuse us. To the ancients, the heart was the source of thought. It was the center of intellectual activity, as well as the emotions. It was where cognition took place. And, these thoughts were not mere imaginings, but rather evil plans and schemes on which man acted. Evil permeated how mankind thought. Yet, even the Flood would not wipe out sin, only sinful man.

We cannot lose sight of the fact that God is concerned about how those who bear His image live. His actions toward humanity were not formed out of indifference, nor cold heartedness. Neither were they an emotional response of unprovoked anger. God simply judged, as He had every right to do. God did not then, nor does He now, act arbitrarily or without reference to His own perfect moral standard.

The passage unfolds straightforwardly. First, Scripture reveals what God saw. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (v. 5). Next is a description of what God felt. “The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (v. 6). Finally, it is revealed what God will do. “The Lord said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them’” (v. 7).

Many are troubled by the idea of God being sorry He had made man. Some older version use the word ‘repent’ to convey the idea. This has the sound of making God seem less than omniscient (did He not know man would sin?) or of even changing His mind. Yet, Scripture clearly states elsewhere that,  
“God is not a man, that He should lie; nor a son of man, that He should repent” (Numbers 23:19).

“Also, the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind” (1 Samuel 15:29).

But there really is no issue here. This is not a verse about decision making. God’s sorrow was based on the fact that He was compelled to judge man’s sin. God did not regret making man, He regretted that man has chosen to sin and therefore must be punished. But even here is grace. Man must be destroyed to be saved. With the righteous Noah mankind could begin again.

There is no linguistic or contextual reason to support the fact that “face of the land” means anything other than the entire earth. This was not to be a localized event. God’s solution was to eliminate man. The verb used (“blot out”) means to clean by washing. It was a common metaphor in Scripture.

“The priest shall then write these curses on a scroll, and he shall wash them off into the water of bitterness” (Numbers 5:23).

“I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake,  
And I will not remember your sins” (Isaiah 43:25).

“Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity  
And cleanse me from my sin” (Psalm 51:20).

At this lowest of points, the writer offers hope as he concludes. “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord” (v. 8). The ‘but’ sets off Noah from his contemporaries. It is stated out that Noah “found favor” in the eyes of God. However, we must be careful not to assume that this implied that Noah merited or earned his salvation from the impending Flood. To be sure, Noah was a righteous man. To “find favor” with God was, like Enoch's “walking with God,” not a common description of an Old Testament saint. It was applied to such as Abraham (Genesis 18:3) and Moses (Exodus 33:12-13).

But, still, we cannot take from this the idea that Noah had earned his reprieve from the Flood. We cannot believe that Noah never sinned. We cannot argue that Noah was righteous *in himself*. It is better to think of ‘favor’ in this case means God’s grace, and Noah indeed found that, but not because he deserved it. He found grace because God sovereignly chose to elect him to salvation through His own free choice. God

gave Noah the faith to believe. “By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (Hebrews 11:7).

### **Takeaways**

Often, with such difficult and perplexing narratives, it is easy to fall into one of two extremes. Either, one can focus entirely on the unknowable details, or one can simply dismiss the entire passage as obscure. Either choice is filled with danger. The first distracts the reader from what God would say, and the second never gives God the chance to speak.

So let us take away what we can, and leave the rest to better scholars than ourselves. We can see that God judges sin. He is patient, He is longsuffering (to use a favorite word of mine), but ultimately He must judge sin. There is no biblical reason to assume that because God has not judged our sin yet, He will let it go on indefinitely.

But we can also see that God saves. God chooses those whom He will protect from the full force of His wrath. They are those with whom, by the gift of God’s grace, He finds favor. The situation of Noah and the Flood is a picture of each of us. We are all sinners living in a fallen and decaying world, that is ever moving further from God and His righteousness. The great judgment of God, where He pours out His wrath, is coming. We require saving. We must “find favor” with God. And we can only do so by His grace. We cannot earn this reprieve. We cannot outswim the Flood. We must be saved. Let us thank Him for saving us, and beseech His grace that we might live a life that reflects, however imperfectly, that gratitude.