

Genesis 6:1-8

A Sermon

By Rev. Scott Lindsay

Pastor of South Baton Rouge Presbyterian Church (PCA),
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

We are continuing this morning with our study of the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis, picking up at chapter 6, verse 1 and continuing through to verse 8 of that same chapter. In previous studies we have seen the developing story line of how the world as we know it came into being through the wise and purposeful actions of a merciful and just Creator God.

Specifically, we have seen, in the first two chapters, how God designed his perfect universe and perfect world. We have seen how he placed within that world all manner of plants and animals and how, at the head of that creation, he placed men and women who were not like the animals but were created in His image to glorify Him. We have seen how in spite of being given every advantage and every reason to remain faithful, the first man and woman rebelled against God and so fell into a state of sin and were banished from the garden paradise that had been their home.

Following that we saw the further fallout of their actions as God pronounces a curse and judgment upon them and yet how, at the same time, there was contained within that judgment the seed of hope and promise in Genesis 3:15 - that God would one day, through a godly line, send a Deliverer who would crush Satan.

We then saw the downward progression of the man and woman's sin as it manifested itself in their own relationship, in their own family, and in all their descendants. We saw the early development of the two lines of humanity - the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman - in the lines of Cain and Seth.

And now we have arrived at chapter 6 where the genealogy of chapter 5 leaves us with the account of Noah and his descendants, who belong to the godly line of Seth. In dealing with this account and these stories about Noah, we find ourselves, in one sense, on familiar ground. Not many children could be found who have not, in some form, heard the story of Noah and the flood and the Ark, etc. And so, this is a familiar story.

But, as you have heard me say before, because it is a familiar story then it is also, at the same time, a hard story to hear because we tend to go on "autopilot" when we hear familiar stories. We think we know what's going on before the story even

begins. And, to a certain extent, that is probably true. And yet, my own experience is that a great deal about this story is often quickly glossed over or completely ignored in a rush to get to what is felt to be "the more important parts" of the story.

Well, it is my hope that as we work our way through the account of Noah and his descendants you will hear both things you have already heard, and at the same time, it is my hope that, like me, you will discover some things - some very important things - that have up till now escaped your attention. So, with that as an introduction, let's pray together, and then we'll dig in.

From the outset it needs to be acknowledged that the passage before us is probably one of the more difficult passages in the entire Bible to grapple with, for various reasons, and so if you find yourself scratching your head at any point - CHEER UP! - you're in good company!

But, the reason why these verses have proven to be so challenging is due to the presence of a couple of words and/or phrases in the text which have proven notoriously difficult to interpret. As a result, there are things in this passage about which it is almost impossible to have any confident certainty. At the same time, there are other things in this passage which *are* much clearer and about which we *can* be much more confident and thus benefit from in some way.

And so, our approach this morning will be fairly straightforward. We will look firstly at something *about which it is difficult to be certain* and then we will finish up by looking at some things which are much clearer.

Something about which it is difficult to be certain

The first matter and indeed the main thing about which there has been the greatest amount of discussion has to do with the meaning of verses 1 and 2. What is meant by the phrase "Sons of God"? To whom is this referring? Likewise, who are the "daughters of men"? What is the reference for this phrase?

Well, as you can imagine, bible scholars over the years have speculated a great deal about these things and a number of proposals for how to understand these phrases have been put forward. However, the vast majority of scholars, as far as I can tell, end up taking one of two main positions, which we will spend the next few minutes considering.

One viewpoint takes the position that "Sons of God" is a reference to angelic beings that entered into God's creation and engaged in sexual relations with human beings - with the women who are spoken of in verse 1 as rapidly multiplying across the face of the earth, as the human race expands itself. Some of the arguments that are marshaled to support this position are:

1) The phrase "sons of God" while not appearing anywhere else in Moses' writings - and so difficult to be sure of - does nevertheless appear in other places in the Old Testament - like Job - where the context makes it clear that the phrase is a reference to angelic beings.

2) The co-habitation and co-mingling of angelic and human beings does seem to fit with a developing plot line that shows the downward progression of sin. So, for example, sin begins with the woman and the man in the garden, starting internally with certain thought patterns which then lead to some external actions that are sinful. It then manifests itself in the man and woman's relationship with each other. It then manifests itself in a pronounced curse which affects the creation itself and all future humanity. We then see it in the story of Cain and Abel - with Abel being murdered by his brother. We next see it in the genealogy of the descendants of Cain, and especially in Lamech who is a violent murderer who boasts to his wives about his deeds. And then, in this viewpoint at least, the climax of all this is when the angelic beings come and mix with the human race, spreading the corruption of sin to cosmic, supernatural dimensions.

3) In keeping with all of that - this sort of radical, bizarre evil would help explain why God's response to it - in the form of an all-devastating flood - seems to be *equally* radical.

4) The view that these are angelic beings would seem to be supported by other passages in the New Testament which are possibly referring to this very event - or at least to something like it. (Read 1 Peter 3:18-19; 2 Peter 2:4-10a; Jude 6-7). It is possible that all these verses have in view the events of Genesis 6 - seen from this certain perspective.

5) As one scholar seems to suggest (Kidner), this perspective could be seen as a *second* attempt on the part of angelic beings to thwart the purposes of God. The first attempt was what we have already seen in Genesis 3 when Satan, in the form of the serpent, comes to the woman and tempts her to sin. After those events, in which she was promised she would become "like gods" she and her husband are cast out of the garden so that they might not eat of the tree of life in their sinful condition and thus gain immortality in their fallen state. As this one scholar suggests, in Genesis 6 we have not just *one* but a number of angelic beings again coming to not *one* but many "daughters" of men and trying to achieve for them both power and possibly the immortality that had been denied them by *means of* this unholy union between humanity and angels.

6) Finally, the view that these were angels is possibly linked to the account here of the Nephilim - mighty warriors. In other words, even though it is not specifically stated, it might be taken as implied that the Nephilim are the sort of "hybrid" offspring of the union between women and angels. However, this is far from obvious in the passage, but I will say more about that in a moment.

At any rate, that is one view that many scholars maintain as the most likely reading of these verses. The *other view* that is held by many scholars is that the phrase "Sons of God" refers not to angelic beings but simply to men who were born in the godly line of Seth.

Correspondingly, in this view the "daughters of men" are women who belong to the ungodly line - the descendants of Cain. And so, this view is simply saying that what began to happen was a mixing of the two lines - the godly with the ungodly. This greatly angered God, and then we all know what happened after that. Now, some of the main arguments in favor of this view are:

1) It does seem to fit better with the immediate context of the last couple of chapters. In Genesis 3:15, as we have already seen, contained in the curses pronounced against the woman was the promise that the offspring of the woman would crush the offspring of the serpent. And so there is forecast there the development of two lines of humanity. What we see next in Genesis takes this further with chapter 4 showing us the Cain and Abel conflict - which was simply the seed of the serpent (Cain) making a futile, but pre-emptive strike against the seed of the woman (Abel). We then see the story of Cain and his descendants and the development of *that* line, followed by the genealogy of Seth with his descendants the development of *the other* line. To then see chapter 6 as this event where the descendants of Seth were being lured away by lust and sensuality into illicit marriages with the descendants of Cain would seem to be flow quite well with the immediate context.

2) To regard the "Sons of God" as angels does, it could be argued, seem like something of an intrusion into the text. We're not really talking about angels here; that's not the subject of concern and then, all of the sudden, there they are. It does seem a little surprising but then it must be said that the same thing could be said of the events in Genesis 3. There you are, the story going along just fine about creation when suddenly, out of the blue, there is a talking snake.

3) The view that "sons of God" is referring to the descendants of Seth and not to angelic beings also seems to fit better with what follows in Genesis 6:3. In verse 3 you have God saying that he is not going to put up with the sinfulness of man forever. Indeed, God even puts a time limit on the whole thing saying that the clock is running and that after 120 years, he will carry out his judgment against humanity. The important thing about all this for the point at hand is simply that if verses 1 and 2 were talking about a co-mingling of angelic beings and humanity, then you would think that the words here would include judgments against *angels* as well as humans, for they were equally guilty. But no word is mentioned. When you compare this to Genesis 3 you see that God pronounces curses and judgment against both the humans *and* against the serpent, or Satan. *At the same time*, while no word of judgment is mentioned here - if you take into account the other passages that we just read from the New Testament as

referring to these events - then in those passages you *do* find promised words of judgment that awaits angelic beings.

4) This view is also possibly supported by the fact that the "sons of God" here - whoever they are - are described as "taking wives" to themselves - language which is almost always used to refer to the act of marriage and thus seems to fit more naturally with what *humans do*, not angels. The text that is usually brought in to support this point is Matthew 22:29-30. This text, understood one way, could be read as rendering the marriage of angels outside the realm of possibility but then, read another way, does not necessarily exclude that possibility at all. So, it's not a strong point, but it is a point nonetheless.

5) Finally, in support of this view a scholar named Currid says that a better translation of Genesis 4:26 would make the meaning of this passage more obvious. In short, he makes the case that instead of saying that "people began to call upon the name of the Lord" a better translation is "men began to be called by the name Yahw*" or, in other words, *men began to be called by the name of God*. If that is correct, then for Genesis 6:2 to come along later and refer to actions taken by "sons of God" then it would seem to be a more obvious linguistic connection. And so, those two views - that "sons of God" refers to angelic beings OR that it refers to the descendants of Seth - those are the main ones being offered and defended. But the reality is that there are problems that arise no matter which one you take.

As far as the "angelic" view is concerned, it does seem to interrupt the *flow* of the story as we see the developing account of the line of Cain vs the line of Seth. And yet, while it seems to interrupt *that flow*, it seems to enhance another one - the downward progression of sin. The angelic view also, as we have seen, leaves us wondering why no immediate word of judgment is pronounced against the angels for their part in the sin. And, further, it seems to contradict Jesus words about angels in Matthew 22.

As far as the "two lines of humanity" view is concerned, you have the same problem as outlined above - it *flows* well with one line of development, but seems to interrupt another one.

Another difficulty is outlined by a guy named Motyer who says, "the mere mingling of some godly with some ungodly humans is hardly the sort of climactic sin which Gen 6 appears to require by its place in the narrative." To that, Motyer adds this comment: "there is no reason why a mixed human marriage should produce the sort of offspring that Genesis 6:4 implies (although, it must be said, the text is not necessarily implying this and, in fact, may be trying to make the exact opposite point - that the Nephilim were not at all superhuman but were simply extraordinary humans). One final problem with this view is that it would seem to present a different picture than what is suggested by the New Testament passages we read earlier.

So what do we do? Well you may have already made up your mind about these things and, if so, that's great. For my own part, what I've presented here is no more than a summary of what *might* be said, not to mention that fact that there are other views - including an especially intriguing one by a Jewish scholar named Cassuto - which we aren't even going to go into. For my own part, I have to confess to something of a draw. If you pushed me to choose, I would say this: If I had 11 votes to cast, I would cast 6 for the view that this is talking about angelic beings, and 5 for the view that it is talking about two lines of humanity - *and the deciding vote has a swinging Chad attached to it.*

As I read these verses, I remember what Peter said about Paul's letters once - that some of what Paul writes is hard to understand - and I think that the same thing is true about Moses. Some of what he writes is hard to understand. So, if you find yourself in that same boat with me on this one, keep praying, keep studying the Word, keep listening to your brothers and sisters, and perhaps God will give you, and me, some further insight.

Some things about which we can be more certain

Whether this passage is talking about angelic beings crossing the line by co-mingling with humans, or whether it is talking about a godly line illegitimately mixing with an ungodly line - either way you go, it is clear that God does not view marriage as an "anything goes" sort of proposition but has definite designs and purposes for it that are not to be altered or challenged by his creatures. If we look a little further on in the Old Testament, we come across one of the clearest elaborations of this in another of Moses' books - the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 7, verses 1-4.

In these verses we see why marriage outside of God's established bounds is a problem:

Because it is an expression of unfaithfulness to God, a doubting of his wisdom and goodness, an acting upon one's own initiative and authority in an attempt to control your own destiny.

All such attempts at self-control are the fruit of doubt, not faith, doubting that going God's way will see you ending up in a good place, doubting His kind intentions toward you, etc. Rejecting God's designs and bounds for marriage is an expression of all these things. And as the act is from the very beginning, so it shows itself to be later on as the fruit ripens and what appeared at first in seed form, now blossoms into full rebellion as it results in open departure from the Lord.

This was certainly a concern for the people of God in Moses' day and may be one of the intended purposes *for* this passage. You see, here they were, on the edge of the promised land - the descendants of Seth - the godly line - about to go in amongst a number of ungodly peoples.

And Moses knows that the same temptation we see in Genesis 6:1-2 is going to

be in front of his own people soon enough - to be lured away by lust and mere physical attraction into unholy alliances with ungodly peoples. Moses' people needed to see the folly of marriage outside of God's designs - however you view this passage. And so as they received these texts from Moses, they would have been reminded of God's severe judgment reserved for those that spurn Him in this regard.

And for God's people in our own day the implications are similar. On a *relational* level, it is vital that we see how serious God is about marriage and how important it is that we adopt God's perspective as our own. Specifically, we need to remember that marriage is not an infinitely malleable concept that we are free to shape and cast into whatever form the latest opinion poll seems to approve. We always have to come back to the Scriptures to understand what God says marriage IS and what it is FOR. And as we do so we will see that there is and always will be, lines that are not to be crossed, limits that are not to be exceeded.

One of those, as we have seen previously, has to do with the appropriateness of heterosexual marriage, and the inappropriateness of same sex unions. Another one, closer to the subject of this passage, has to do with the mixing of marriages -joining the godly with the ungodly, bringing together two parties that were never meant to be joined together in this way. People feel that they are free to ignore these things but they are not, at least not without consequence.

Dorothy Sayers says that there are "two kinds of law." The law of the stop sign and the law of the fire. The law of the stop sign says that if you ignore it, you may get hurt. On the other hand, you may not. You may ignore a stop sign and get through unscathed. But the law of the fire is different. The law of the fire is irrevocable. If you ignore the warnings and cast your hand into the fire - you will get burned. The violation carries its own judgment within itself. The rejection of God's designs for marriage is like ignoring the law of the fire. The consequences are automatic and irrevocable. The warning that these verses must have been for Moses' people are the same warning for God's people today.

Alongside the relational implications of this truth for God's people today are the spiritual implications of what is being said here about intermarriage. As some of you saw when we looked at Genesis 2 together, and as Deuteronomy 7:1-4 which we've just read reminds us, God's ultimate concern behind human marriage is the *spiritual reality to which it points*. Marriage, when it is biblical and thus healthy, serves as God's perpetual "visual aid" for what His covenant faithfulness is all about.

Now, the grave concern shown for marriage here - seen in God's severe response to its corruption - is shown even more clearly and positively in the life and work of Jesus - the groom who out of love for His bride undertakes to do all that is necessary to cleanse and purify her from her adulterous ways. This bride is the church who, in spite of her unfaithfulness, is rendered beautiful and clean by Jesus so that the union between Christ and his bride, the Church, is not an unholy alliance - not an intermarriage - but is a union that is pleasing and honoring to God the Father.

And so, our concern for marriage *between people* in the here and now is to be seen in the light of, and indeed is to be pursued and maintained in a way which corresponds to this ultimate reality to which it points. So, marriage and how we approach it is and always has been a big deal with God. And if it is a big deal with God, it ought to be a big deal with us.

Well, not only is it fairly clear that God is very concerned about marriage, it is also clear from these verses that God is very affected and even *grieved* by the general sinfulness and wickedness of humankind. So much so that He says here that He is "sorry" that He ever made people at all. Now that is a stunning statement. And perhaps it may seem a puzzling statement for a sovereign God to make. But let's think about it for a moment.

God - while all powerful and infinitely wise and perfectly just - God is still, at the end of the day, a Father. He is a father who, on the one hand, is never surprised by the outworkings of His own wise providence but neither does He respond *impersonally* to these things - like some sort of detached, clinical observer. He truly does love His creation and His creatures. And surely we can all understand this, if only in a limited and analogical sense, can't we?

In my own experience as a father - and I have nothing even remotely approaching omniscience - but I can tell you that in my own experience that there have been a number of times when I have watched my children in certain situations - seeing things coming long before they see them, knowing the decision they will probably make when the situation arrives, and knowing the painful consequences that await them for making that decision - I have seen that happen on a number of occasions and, when things turn out just as I knew they would - did I just sit there and rejoice in how correct I was? No, I hurt. I grieved. My heart was pained and burdened. My knowledge and foresight regarding them did not at all change the fact that when these things happened *they happened to people I care deeply about.*

Now, some theologians seem to be quite uncomfortable with passages like this which talk about God *grieving* because they fear that a wrong understanding of these things might somehow impinge upon the divinity of God. And in an attempt to deal with their angst over all this they talk about this kind of language - whether it's talking about grief or anger or sorrow - but they talk about this as being something called an "anthropomorphism" - which is simply attributing to God a human emotion which is not *exactly* what God is feeling but is the best we can do at explaining it.

In other words, it is an approximation. And, while there is some truth to the fact that our language is always an approximation of that which it represents - still, what is going on here is not *mere* anthropomorphism. The working out of God's plan and purposes that we see here in Genesis 1-11 is not just some divine being moving pieces of plastic on a chess board - like the computer - I think it was called "Deep Blue" - that squared off against the chess champion Bobby Fisher years ago, coldly making its

calculations and moves. No, this God who is our Creator, has a *real, personal, dare I say it, emotional* connection with his creation.

And that knowledge then *frames* our reading of God's actions that follow - his just response, his judgment in the form of a flood. This was not the spur-of-the-moment, fly off the handle, haphazard, capricious rant of a God who has lost control of Himself and His senses. These are the just, necessary - and yet slow and reluctant responses of a grieved Creator who is not at all surprised, and is yet deeply saddened, by what takes place.

This would have been crucial for Moses and his people to remember. This God that was leading them was a *personal* God, a *feeling* God who cares so much about his creatures that He is grieved by their sin and wickedness. They were not being led around in the wilderness, as I've said, by a God who was just shuffling pieces around on a cosmic chess board but by a God who was personally and emotionally *invested* in His creation. And there was both comfort and warning to be found in the recognition of that. On the one hand, they could trust a God like that and know and *feel* close to a God like that. On the other hand, they could never take this God for granted and presume upon His love and what it all meant.

And it is important to remember that all of this knowledge about God was available through passages like Genesis 6, long before Jesus Christ appears on the scene, right? When God later on, through Christ, takes on human flesh a whole new world of revelation about God becomes available, making plain and obvious things like this which, in the Old Testament, are much more understated.

And so, for example, in the cross of Christ, the judgment of which the flood was a precursor or *type* or shadow, but in the cross we also see the judgment of God within the larger context of His love, just as we do in Genesis 6. Indeed, in Jesus we see the God of Genesis 6 *writ large*. We see a Jesus who showed joy, pain, laughter, tears, and anguish - not as pretense, not as mere anthropomorphism but as real expressions of a real person, vitally connected to the creation over which He ruled. This is the God Moses called his people to follow, and this is the God that we are also called to follow. This is a God who grieves. This is a God you can trust.

Finally, the last thing that I want to point out, and which we can see with some certainty in this passage, is a clear picture of God's grace, seen in his response to Noah (Gen. 6: 8). Verse 8, appearing as it does at the end of all this, is a thin ray of hope that comes to us on the heels of verses 5-7 which would seem to leave no room for hope at all. Indeed, verse 8 is only properly understood when read in the light of the verses which precede it. Apart from verses 5-7, you might read 6:8 and then go on to 6:9 and conclude that Noah's finding favor with God was on account of his own righteousness. But reading vs 8 in the context of verses 5-7, you see that Noah too was among those whose hearts were evil and desperately wicked and that, as such, God's grace and favor comes to Noah *in the midst* of *all that so* that verse 9 is not read as the *cause* of vs 8 but as the *consequence* of it.

For the people of God in Moses' day, this too would have been a comfort. They could look at God's grief over his fractured creation and His desire to blot out the people - they could look at all that and then look back across the past 40 years in the wilderness and see a similar thing - an entire generation of their people blotted out under the judgment of God. So they knew full well the severity of God's judgment. Whether or not they still knew their own hearts remained an open question. But they knew God's justice and here are reminded again of His mercy toward the undeserving - finding favor with Noah their forefather.

To be sure, they could look at their own experiences and see other, more contemporary examples of God's favor toward them. But now they are facing a fearful task, taking over a land in the face of formidable foes. And in the face of such things, reassurances of mercy and favor never go astray - not to mention the additional affirmation that comes through these verses almost as a side observation - the matter of the Nephilim being present in those days. This is, I believe, the real significance of their being mentioned.

Here were these powerful, fierce possibly statuesque warriors who, despite all of their strength, could not withstand the judgment of God in the flood. This would have been a vital reminder and affirmation of grace to Moses and his people. Because the last time they stood on the edge of the promised land the reason they *didn't* go in was because one of their spies came back and reported that there were "giants" and powerful warriors in the land. Moses through this account reminds them that even the Nephilim are no match for God. They can enter the land with confidence knowing that God can defeat them again, and knowing that they stand in the line of Noah as those who have found God's favor.

We too, as God's people can be comforted and assured in the same knowledge – that Christ our Savior has gone ahead of us, defeating all of his and our enemies - including the greatest enemy which is death - and he has done so precisely because He has found favor with us - not because of us - but in spite of us, in the midst of our wickedness and evil intentions God, through Christ, has and continues to shower great mercy and blessing upon His people.