

Chapter 7: Apostasy

Genesis 6:1–8

The long passage of time in the genealogies of Cain and Seth raise an important question: how long will these lines continue down their respective paths? Will any of the children of Cain experience a revival, breaking from the generational sins of Cain and exemplified by the wicked Lamech? Or, will any of the children of Seth apostatize from the true worship of Yahweh handed down through their generations? How many centuries and generations will pass in each lineage before something dramatic takes place, in one direction or the other? Or, does some permanent, fixed biological feature explain the difference between the offspring of Cain and the offspring of Seth?

In fact, we do not learn the details of what happens in each of the lines. The narrative of Genesis does not give us a zoomed in account of the total corruption of humankind as we saw with the temptation of Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, or with the temptation of Cain to murder his brother. Yet, while we do not know *how* the corruption of the whole human race came about, we do know *that* it happened. In Genesis 6:5 we discover “that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” What could have happened? How does Yahweh respond to this depravity? Is there any hope for the human race at this point?

The Greed of Humankind (Gen. 6:1–4)

In Genesis 4–5, true worship distinguishes the spiritual offspring of the woman from the spiritual offspring of the serpent. Cain and his descendants (the spiritual offspring of the serpent) despise the word of God, giving themselves over to lusts and violence, while Seth and his descendants (the spiritual offspring of the woman) call upon the name of Yahweh (Gen. 4:26) by worshiping their creator. Cain, Abel and Seth are full-blooded biological brothers, but only Abel and Seth follow in the footsteps of the faith of Adam and Eve.

Nevertheless, the genealogies of Cain (Gen. 4:17–22) and Seth (Gen. 5:1–32) both reflect the rapid growth of humankind on the face of the earth. Even though Cain is “cursed” (Gen. 4:11), Yahweh gives several generations of children to Cain. So, the narrator summarizes the detailed genealogical records in Genesis 4–5 into the opening phrase of Genesis 6:1: “When man began to multiply on the face of the land...” If, then, we see fruitful multiplication of human beings on the face of the earth, does this mean that God’s original blessing (Gen. 1:28) is beginning to transform the world for the better?

Sadly, the opposite reality emerges. Instead of human flourishing, we find a new, serious threat: “When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they

chose” (Gen. 6:1–2). In response, Yahweh withdraws his Spirit from man and sets a limitation of 120 years to the days of man (Gen. 6:3). While we do not know all the details, we know that the sin of humankind at this point becomes unbearable.

This passage is one of the most disputed and controversial texts in the whole Bible. Who are the sons of God? Who are the daughters of man? What exactly have they done through their intermarriage? God has inspired a text here that he does not fully explain. So, while we must study this passage closely, we need to do so with humility, since every interpretation on this passage has challenges that cannot be fully resolved. While I believe that there is enough information to draw a reasonably clear interpretation of what this text is describing, I acknowledge that there are challenges to my interpretation that I cannot fully resolve. So, as we study this text, we will take two strategies: (1) we will first draw strong conclusions from the clear teaching of this text, and (2) we will then draw tentative conclusions from what is, in my judgment, the most plausible interpretation of the text.

Saw...Good...Took

Beyond our unanswered questions about Genesis 6:1–4, one thing is certain: whatever Genesis 6:1–2 is describing, it is a grievous sin. The clearest evidence to recognize the sinfulness of this narrative comes in God’s word of judgment in Genesis 6:3, which we will return to a bit later. The primary red flag to signal the seriousness of this sin, though, comes in the words *saw*, *good*, and *took*: “...the sons of God *saw* that the daughters of man were *attractive* (lit., “good”). And they *took* as their wives any they chose” (Gen. 6:2). Significantly, these words appeared earlier in Genesis 3:6 to describe the temptation of Eve: “So when the woman *saw* that the tree was *good* for food...she *took* of its fruit and ate...” By repeating this same word pattern, the narrator is signaling to us that these marriages between the sons of God and the daughters of man constitute conscious, wicked rebellion against something God has forbidden.

We will encounter these same infamous words at other key moments in salvation history. During the days of the conquest in the Promised Land, Yahweh (through Joshua) explicitly forbids the Israelites from taking anything from the city of Jericho, since Jericho was devoted to destruction and belonged to Yahweh (Josh. 6:18). When Achan steals some of these “devoted things” (Josh. 7:1), then, the wrath of Yahweh breaks out against the Israelites, dooming them during their next assault against the city of Ai until they remove the devoted things from their midst (Josh. 7:13–15). When the Israelites discover that it is Achan who has stolen devoted things from Yahweh, Achan tells his story, saying, “...when I *saw* among the spoil a *beautiful* (lit., “good”) cloak from Shinar...then I coveted them and *took* them” (Josh. 7:21). When Achan sees the goodness of a treasure in Jericho, he ignores the clear word of Yahweh, and he takes that treasure. The consequences for this sin are catastrophic: Achan, his family, his stolen plunder, and all his possessions are burned with fire and stoned with stones (Josh. 7:24–26).

More famously, we find this same word pattern in the story of David and Bathsheba: “It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king’s house, that he *saw* from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very *beautiful* (lit., “good”)....So David sent messengers and *took* her, and she came to him, and he lay with her” (2 Sam. 11:2, 4). David knows that Bathsheba is Uriah’s wife (2 Sam. 11:3), but he takes her anyway, wickedly despising God’s direct prohibition against adultery in the Ten Commandments. Again, the

consequences for consciously violating the clear commandment of Yahweh are catastrophic for David. The prophet Nathan proclaimed the word of Yahweh to David, saying, “Now the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife” (2 Sam. 12:10).

From the three stories of Eve, Achan, and David, we know that the *saw...good...took* word pattern signifies a direct violation of the word of God, and that the consequences for such a sin are catastrophic. Here in Genesis 6, the sin of the sons of God with the daughters of man will lead directly to another catastrophic judgment: the flood. Furthermore, this *saw...good...took* pattern suggests that whatever these sons of God have done, they did so in defiance of Yahweh’s clear instructions and commandments.

Evaluating What is Good

In our exposition of Eve’s temptation in Genesis 3:6, we noted that the language of how Eve “saw that it was good” was a perverse imitation of the way in which God himself had evaluated his creation seven times in Genesis 1: “and God *saw* that it was *good*.” Furthermore, when God sees that something is good, he does not take it for himself, but rather, he gives it away: “And God said, ‘Behold, I have *given* you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have *given* every green plant for food.’ And it was so” (Gen. 1:29–30). God alone judges and declares what is good, and then he gives it away by his free generosity. By contrast, the woman dismissed God’s word and authority to judge as irrelevant when she evaluated the tree as good in her own eyes, and then took for herself what God had forbidden.

In Genesis 6, then, we should not be hasty to write off the sins of “the sons of God” as garden variety lust for the “daughters of men,” since the text says that the sons of God see that the daughters of men are “good,” not “beautiful.” While we often think of sight as related primarily to sexual lust, we should note that in Eve’s temptation and Achan’s temptation, they see some “good” other than enticing sexual desire. In Achan’s case, he sees the wealth and beauty of the cloak from Shinar, as well as silver and gold that he steals. In Eve’s case, her eyes are drawn not only to the goodness of the forbidden tree as food, but also to the fact that the tree is “a delight to the eyes,” and that it is “desired to make one wise.” So, Eve’s temptation is not sexual, and it is also about far more than food. Likewise, when Satan tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread after the Lord’s 40-day fast, the temptation is hardly about food, but about whether Jesus will obey the word of God, or the word of Satan (cf. Matt. 4:4).

The difference, then, comes in the willingness to *take* what someone *sees* as *good*. Eve, Achan, and David all sin when they *see* and *take* something they judge to be *good* for them, despite what God had spoken. Whatever *good* the sons of God *see* in the daughters of man to *take* them as wives runs contrary to what God has revealed in his word to be *truly* good. The text does not disclose the reason why God forbade these marriages, or even if these marriages were driven by a desire for physical beauty. Still, this text clearly teaches that the sons of God (whoever they are) take for themselves the daughters of man (whoever they are) in direct violation of God’s word.

Seeking a Name

What, then, is the “good” that the sons of God are seeking? In Genesis 6:4, we discover that the children born through the marriages between the sons of God and the daughters of man become “mighty men” and “men of renown”: “...the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the *men of renown*” (Gen. 6:4).¹ Literally, the phrase “men of renown” means “men of the name”—that is, men who build for themselves a “name” (significance, influence, power) apart from their relationship to God. The narrative, then, connects the sinful desires of the sons of God to the arrogance of the people who will later build the city and tower of Babel, saying, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make *a name* for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4).² The sons of God take the daughters of men because they want what they can create for themselves more than what they can receive through faith as a gift of God’s grace. Whatever interpretation we take to identify the sons of God and the daughters of man, this general insight that the sons of God are seeking “a name” (like the builders of Babel) is clear from the text.

But before we move on to speculating on the specific identities and the specific sins described in this passage, let’s first take a moment to consider all that this passage clearly teaches. First, Genesis 6:1–4 clearly reinforces the idea that God alone has the wisdom and authority to *see* things as they really are, and to judge whether they are truly *good*. And, when God does judge something to be good, his pattern is to give his good gifts generously to his people (e.g., “You may *surely* eat of *every* tree of the garden...”; Gen. 2:16), so that when something is truly *good*, we never need to *take* it for ourselves out of the concern that God might withhold some good gift from us otherwise. By contrast, the inclination of sin leads us to seek to create some kind of “name” for ourselves, by way of power, pleasure, wealth, sex, achievements, or even righteousness (that is, self-righteousness). We long to *become* something great, to build for ourselves a *name*, and when we start to think that God is withholding some good gift from us, then, by stoking the fires of our desire through continually *seeing* that *good* thing, we eventually come to the point where we willingly transgress any boundary that would keep us from *taking* that good thing. That’s how sin *always* works, whether in the case of Eve’s temptation to eat of the forbidden tree, or the temptation of the sons of God to take the daughters of men, or your own unique temptation at the very moment you read these words.

What should we do, then, when we feel that God is withholding some good gift from us? First, we should pray, acknowledging to God that he is not only the source of every good and perfect gift, but that he gives good and perfect gifts without variation or shadow due to change (Jas. 1:17). Or, as Jesus put it, “If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11). Therefore, we should pray that God would give us faith to trust that he will give good gifts to his children.

Second, we should recognize the way in which our *gazing* on something increases our desire for it. It is only through *seeing* the temptation that Eve, the sons of God, Achan, and David reach the point of willingly violating God’s word. As we stare at the forbidden, something very strange happens. The temptation begins to form every part of who we are, so that our hearts begin to long for the temptation, our minds begin to use the tool of rationality to justify to ourselves the situation, and we even find our bodies drawing us toward the temptation. All of this begins with what we *see*,

so that, in large part, the battle to avoid temptation and to obey God’s word will be won or lost by what we gaze upon. If you want to overcome temptation, *looking* at something else becomes supremely important, not only in what you look at with your physical eyes, but more broadly, in what you give your attention to with your sight, hearing, thinking, imagining, and even in the habits that you form.³

Third, we should steady our faith by reminding ourselves that God promises to give us a better name. Just as Yahweh will promise Abram that “I will bless you and make your name great” (Gen. 12:2), and just as God promises to lavish his love upon us so that “we should be called the children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1), so also God promises to give a new name to all those who conquer by faith in Christ through persevering all the way to the end (Rev. 2:17). We will discuss this idea in more detail later in the chapter.

Intermingling of Sethites with Cainites

Let us now continue on from what is clear to what is unclear in this passage. Piecing together the story of what happened between the sons of God and the daughters of men is not simple. The three main positions are that the “sons of God” and the “daughters of man” are, respectively, (1) angels and human beings; (2) powerful kings and common women; or (3) the line of Seth and the line of Cain.⁴ The first option proposes that this story tells about how angels intermarry with human beings. This option is difficult to believe on any level, since we never again read of any such thing. Even Jesus himself states that angels in heaven “neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matt. 22:30).⁵ Furthermore, if it is the “sons of God” (the angels) who *see* and *take* the *good* (human women), then it is not clear why the sins of angels should prompt the judgment against the whole human race by wiping out every creature through a flood.⁶

On that basis, it seems that only the second or the third line of interpretation explain the *human* sin described in the text of Genesis 6:1–4. With the second option, however, it is unclear how kings marrying common women would qualify as such a grievous sin.⁷ When did God forbid such marriages? In my judgment, the third option best fits the context and the language of this passage. The godly Sethites become “unequally yoked” by marrying the unbelieving Cainites (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14). Although not universally held, this position has been a historic understanding among many Christian theologians since Augustine’s classic exegesis of this passage in his 5th century book, *The City of God*.⁸

The reason that the descendants of Seth are called the “sons of God” goes back to Genesis 5, when we read that Adam “fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth” (Gen. 5:3). This is very similar language to the description of Adam’s own creation in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26–27; cf. Gen. 5:1). The narrative explicitly describes the passing down of the heritage of God’s image and likeness in the line of Seth in a way that we do not see reflected in the genealogy of Cain.⁹ The offspring of Seth are the “sons of God” since they are spiritually the offspring of the woman. The offspring of Cain (that is, the offspring of the serpent) are merely called the “daughters of men,” and not the children of God.¹⁰

Additionally, Genesis 4:17–5:32 might provide a clue as to the nature of the “good” and the means toward making a “name” that the sons of God are seeking, if indeed “sons of God” refers to the line of Seth, and “daughters of man” refers to the line of Cain. Remember, it was the line of Cain that had wealth through developing the art and science of livestock-keeping (Gen. 4:20), culture

through the invention of music (Gen. 4:21), and technology through the innovation of bronze and iron work (Gen. 4:22). The line of Seth, by contrast, only develops true worship (Gen. 4:26). It is possible that the sons of God abandon true worship in order to seek a “name” for themselves pursuing wealth, culture, and technology. They exchange the truth of God for a lie, worshiping and serving creation rather than the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:22–23). The last vestige of godliness, preserved in the line of Seth, becomes corrupted in by sin as they intermingle with the line of Cain. As in Solomon’s foreign marriages, the pagan daughters of men corrupt the righteous sons of God (cf. 1 Kgs. 11:1–8). The apostasy of Solomon tears apart Israel (cf. 1 Kgs. 11:9–13); the apostasy of the Sethites will bring about the destruction of the whole world through a flood.

Now, we should remember that the innovations of the Cainites were good things in themselves. In fact, all of these developments will be used *for* the true worship of God’s people, so that (1) Israel’s family will become livestock keepers (Gen. 46:32), using their livestock for sacrifices to Yahweh (Ex. 8:25–27); (2) singing will become a regular part of the worship of God’s people (e.g., Ex. 15:1–21); and (3) the construction of the tabernacle will require significant metal working, including bronze-working (Ex. 25:3). It is not that the common grace accomplishments of the Cainites were evil in themselves, but that the sons of God *see* that they are *good* for making themselves a *name* apart from God through marrying the daughters of man. The explicit acknowledgement of “daughters” born in every generation of the line of Seth (Gen. 5:4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 26, 30) demonstrates that there were “daughters of God” to marry from the godly line of Seth; nevertheless, the sons of God chose wives from the line of Cain.¹¹ On this tragedy, John Calvin writes:

That this may be the more apparent, the principle is to be kept in memory, that the world was then as if divided into two parts; because the family of Seth cherished the pure and lawful worship of Good, from which the rest had fallen. Now, although all mankind had been formed for the worship of God, and therefore sincere religion ought everywhere to have reigned; yet since the greater part had prostituted itself, either to an entire contempt of God, or to depraved superstitions; it was fitting that the small portion which God had adopted, by special privilege, to himself, should remain separate from others. It was, therefore, base ingratitude in the posterity of Seth, to mingle themselves with the children of Cain, and with other profane races; because they voluntarily deprived themselves of the inestimable grace of God.¹²

By abandoning the heritage of worship passed down since the days of Seth, the righteousness exemplified in Enoch all but disappears from the face of the earth.

The Withdrawal of the Holy Spirit

In response to the apostasy of the Sethite sons of God, Yahweh withdraws his Holy Spirit from his people: “Then the LORD said, ‘My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years’” (Gen. 6:3). Two parts of this verse are unclear: (1) the meaning of the word “abide” is disputed, so that it might mean “strive” or possibly even “protect” or “shield”;¹³ and (2) the text does not clarify whether the “120 years” marks the time left before the flood or the maximum age of any individual human being. As to the first issue, the overall sense of the passage clearly describes a withdrawal of the Holy Spirit in some capacity, even without precise understanding of

the meaning of “abide.” As to the second issue, the description of roughly 100 years between Noah’s fathering Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Gen. 5:32) and the flood (Gen. 7:6, 11) makes the idea of a time distance between the flood a stronger interpretation than a maximum human age interpretation.¹⁴ Neither of these two issues are necessary for the interpretation of this passage, however.

Instead, the important issue surrounds the nature of the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit. To start, we must recognize that this withdrawal, along with the upcoming flood, is “one of the penal consequences of sin.”¹⁵ As Victor Hamilton reminds us, the role of the Spirit since the very beginning (Gen. 1:2) has been to restrain chaos in creation; when the Spirit “is withdrawn, chaos flourishes unchecked.”¹⁶ Indeed, God judges sin by removing any restraints that would hold sinners back from sin, handing them over entirely to embrace the sin they have already chosen (cf. Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). This may seem in the moment like freedom, but it is slavery to sin, leading directly to chaos and death.

On the interpretation of this passage, the 19th century Scottish theologian George Smeaton is worth quoting in full:

“My Spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh” (Gen. vi. 3).—With whatever shade of meaning the word rendered strive may be connected, the general import unquestionably is, that the forbearance long exercised was about to close, that the antediluvians [those living before the flood] had rejected the testimony of the Spirit, addressed to them by inspired or Spirit-filled men, and despised every call to repentance and faith. *He who thus speaks of His Spirit is undoubtedly Christ.* This we learn from Peter, the inspired commentator on the words in Genesis, who says that Christ by the Spirit went and preached to these antediluvians or spirits in prison, who were alive when Noah preached to them, but were spirits in prison or hell when Peter wrote his Epistle (1 Pet. iii. 19). The Spirit of Christ speaking by Enoch and Noah was about to leave that corrupt generation to its doom. The Messiah, having received the Spirit by anticipation for the purposes of His kingdom, on the ground of the coming atonement, preached the gospel to them by the mouth of Noah, and the message was impiously rejected. The Spirit of Christ, who filled and animated all the prophets, not only summoned them to repentance, but testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow (1 Pet. i. 11).¹⁷

If indeed this passage describes the apostasy of the Sethites from true worship of the living God, then this explains the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit. After Christ proclaimed the gospel to the Sethites for a time through godly Sethites like Enoch and Noah, the unrepentant apostasy of God’s people caused the Spirit to stop dwelling in their midst. This story, then, foreshadows the Spirit’s withdrawal from the temple in response to the false, idolatrous worship of the people of Judah (Eze. 10–11). We need the presence of God’s Holy Spirit. The outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is central to the hope we have in the gospel.

The Nephilim

Although the Nephilim often receive the most attention in this passage, we know very little about them. The word *Nephilim* appears only here in Genesis 6:4, and then again in the report of the faithless Hebrews who spy out the Promised Land: “And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of

Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them” (Num. 13:33). Obviously, the Nephilim who existed before the flood are not related to the Nephilim who live *after* the flood, since only Noah, Noah’s sons, and their wives survive. The later reference to the Nephilim, then, seems to be an attempt to link the Anakim with the legendary Nephilim who perished in the flood. That is, the faithless spies are trying to frighten their fellow Israelites with a boogey-man story: the Nephilim are in Canaan!

Still, the rest of Scripture verifies that a group of people descended from Anak may have *appeared* as though they were the Nephilim.¹⁸ Specifically, we know that the Anakim are very tall (cf. Deut. 2:10, 21; 9:2). The Israelites eventually drive the Anakim out of the land of Canaan (Josh. 11:21), and Caleb himself must drive three of the Anakim out of Hebron when he takes possession of his inheritance (Josh. 15:13–14; Judg. 1:20). After the conquest, only a few Anakim remain in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod (Josh. 11:22). This probably means that the Philistine Goliath, a giant from Gath (1 Sam. 17:4), is in some way descended from the Anakim, although the text does not explicitly say that.

In our passage, we should notice that, the “mighty men...of renown” (Gen. 6:4) are not the same group of people as the Nephilim.¹⁹ The reference to the Nephilim in Genesis 6:4 simply provides a rough date (“...in those days...”) for identifying the span of time when the intermingling between the Sethites and the Cainites is taking place. Although these people are intriguing, God inspired this text to direct our attention *away* from the Nephilim. Instead, the text of Scripture directs our attention entirely toward the great sin of all humankind that leads to the destruction of the world through a flood.

The Grief of God (Gen. 6:5–7)

If the people of God (the offspring of the woman) have corrupted themselves by intermingling with the children of the world (the offspring of the serpent), then there no longer remains a remnant on the earth—or, at least, no more than a very small remnant (Gen. 6:8). Since the Fall, we have observed humankind descending deeper into rebellion and chaos with every generation. The extent of depravity in the world is all but total. In Genesis 6:5–7, Yahweh evaluates the state of the world and sets into motion a plan for the world’s judgment.

Yahweh Sees

First, Yahweh evaluates the seriousness of the condition of humankind: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). When we read that Yahweh “saw” the earth, we should contrast this statement not only with the way that the sons of God “saw” that the daughters of men were good, but also with the original creation story. In Genesis 1, we read repeatedly that God “saw” that his creation is good. For example, here is Genesis 1:31: “And God *saw* everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.”²⁰ God alone has the right to judge what is *good*. In creation, God evaluated all his handiwork as very good. When human beings begin to judge for themselves what is good, however, creation unravels into chaos that is *not* good.

When God looks at the world now, he sees the complete corruption of his creation. Note the stressed, extreme language to describe the extent of evil: “The LORD saw that the *wickedness* of man

was *great* in the earth, and that *every* intention of the thoughts of his heart was *only evil continually*.” Each word heightens the severity of the situation on earth. Humankind has become absolutely wicked.

Yahweh Grieves

Second, the narrative describes the emotion grief and anguish of Yahweh over the condition of the world: “And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen. 6:6). This verse uses vivid, *anthropomorphic* (that is, human-like) language to describe Yahweh’s reaction to the sin of humanity. We will go astray if we try to interpret these words as if Yahweh *were indeed* a human, rather than *as though* he were a human. When the Bible speaks about God’s mighty right arm (e.g., Ps. 89:13), that does not mean that he has a bodily right arm, for God is Spirit (John 4:24). Instead, the idea of a mighty right arm is an anthropomorphism, using human-like language metaphorically to describe something literally true about God. A mighty right arm speaks to God’s strong power.

Here, the anthropomorphism describes Yahweh as a mourning, grieving human being. He is “sorry” that he has made man, and the current state of humanity “grieved him to his heart.” This does not imply that Yahweh has sinned or failed, but only that Yahweh grieves for the state of his creation: “The making of ‘man’ is no error; it is what ‘man’ has made of himself.”²¹ Even the once-godly line of Seth have polluted themselves by abandoning their first love for Yahweh to chase after the worldly benefits of the daughters of Cain.

Finally, this verse makes a haunting play on words, for the three verbs in this passage (“was sorry [*naḥam*]...made [*ʾaśah*]...grieved [*ʾatsab*]”) are spelled the same as the root words used in the speech of Noah’s father Lamech in Genesis 5:29: “Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed, this one shall bring us *relief* [*naḥam*] from our *work* [*ʾaśah*] and from the *painful toil* [*ʾatsab*] of our hands.”²² Making this observation, Umberto Cassuto writes, “The hopes that Lamech set on his son were realized in a manner far different from that which he had imagined.”²³ As we mentioned in the previous chapter, things will get much worse before they get better.

Yahweh Judges

From these observations, Yahweh determines a plan to judge the world: “So the LORD said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them’” (Gen. 6:7). The list of all that he will “blot out” includes man, animals, creeping things, and birds. These creatures are listed in the reverse order of their creation in Genesis 1, where God had first created birds (Gen. 1:20–22), then animals and creeping things (Gen. 1:24–25), and then finally man (Gen. 1:26–30). This reversed order of de-creation through destruction underscores the significance of what Yahweh is doing: this is not merely a speed bump in creation, but the reversal of creation altogether.

As at the Fall, when Yahweh cursed the ground because of the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:17), Yahweh again curses elements of his creation because of the sin of his remnant on earth. The Apostle Paul observes this phenomenon in Romans 8:19–21, writing, “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” As human beings go, so

goes creation itself. The corruption of humankind on the face of the earth is total at this point; likewise, Yahweh will annihilate his creation in judgment.

The Grace of God (Gen. 6:8)

In response, Yahweh is justified by responding in righteous judgment with a flood. Nevertheless, even in these dire circumstances, Yahweh also responds through free grace. While almost all of humanity (including the Sethites) have plunged headlong into wickedness, we read, “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD” (Gen. 6:8). The word for “favor” should more accurately be translated as “grace.” In fact, the word “grace” is the name “Noah” spelled backwards in Hebrew.²⁴ The common translation of “favor” might suggest that Noah has done something to earn Yahweh’s pleasure. This, however, is not the case. Yahweh’s grace comes first, and only subsequently do we read of Noah’s virtues in Genesis 6:9: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.” As with Enoch (Gen. 5:22, 24), the phrase “walked with God” describes an intimate communion with God. Noah the Sethite enjoys the true worship that his fellow sons of God have forsaken.

Depending on grace is the opposite of seeking a name. In both cases, we look to a *good* of one kind or another. In the first case, we seek the good that God *gives* to us; in the second case, we pursue the good that we can *take* for ourselves. When we live to seek a name, we must first define our own sense of the *good*. Then, we must violate God’s word in order to take that *good* for ourselves. The further we go down that road, the more we believe the lies we create at every juncture, calling our own evil good, and calling God’s good evil.

When we instead depend on grace, we bring ourselves empty handed before God. We trust in him to provide all that is *good*. We reject the lie that God is withholding something *good*, or that he tells us something other than the truth. We recognize that we are blind people trying to navigate the minefield of the curse, and that God’s word is the only relevant resource we have to bring us home to safety, peace, and joy. We throw ourselves at the mercy of God’s generosity rather than seeking a name for ourselves. The irony, though, is that it is only by losing our life that we find it (Matt. 10:39; 16:25).

The heavens and the earth came forth as an act of God’s grace. Adam and Eve were artistically and intimately formed, given work, and joined in marriage as an act of God’s grace. When they sinned, God preserved his people from total destruction as an act of grace. God pleaded with Cain not to sin and even protected Cain in exile as an act of grace, and God preserved a remnant in the line of Seth through grace. Now, when the line of Seth overwhelmingly abandons the worship of their covenant God, God again responds with grace toward Noah. Through Noah, God will preserve a remnant to repopulate the earth as an act of grace. Then, after Noah, God will continue to preserve his people through grace, all the way up to today. It is by grace that God sent his Son into the world (John 3:16), and by grace that God gives us faith as a gift (Eph. 2:8–9).

By grace, God calls us to know and love him in true worship as we walk with him through life. In knowing God, there is life and truth and beauty and all that is truly *good*. Will we, then, seek to gaze on the beauty of the Lord in worship by grace through faith? Or, will we allow the blindness of our own sight to lead us toward making and taking a name for ourselves?

Discussion Questions

1. What do you *see* that you want to *take*? Toward what *good* do you find Satan luring you? By *taking* that *good* thing that you *see*, what deeper need do you think you will satisfy? In what way has God promised to meet that deeper need? Why does this line of temptation seem so alluring to us? Why is it so hard to trust God to do what he has promised to do?
2. What makes the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit such a severe judgment here? What makes the withdrawal of God from the temple before the Babylonian exile (Eze. 10–11) so severe? What makes the restoration of God’s Spirit to the world on the Day of Pentecost such a tremendous blessing? What are we missing apart from the presence of the Holy Spirit?
3. What did God see in his original creation? What does God see in Genesis 6? What does God see today? How do we learn to see the world through God’s eyes? What does he grieve over? What causes him to rejoice? How would seeing the world from God’s perspective change the way we saw ourselves? Our churches? The world?
4. How does Noah find grace before God? How do we find grace before God? Where do we see the lavish grace of God toward us in creation? Where do we see the lavish grace of God toward us in his plan of redemption? Do you gaze at the beauty of the grace of God? Or, do you gaze at the alluring beauty of the things of this world?

Notes

1. These “mighty men...of the name” are not the same group of people as the Nephilim, whose inclusion in Genesis 6:4 simply provides a rough date (“...in those days...”) for when the intermingling between the Sethites and the Cainites is taking place. “Sometimes overlooked is the fact that the Nephilim are not specifically said to be the offspring of the marital unions.” (Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 337.)

2. “The use of the name motif in Gen. 1–11 appears several times. It surfaces with a negative connotation in the Tower of Babel episode, where the builders wished ‘to make a name’ for themselves (11:4). This self-aggrandizement contrasts with the promise of God that he, not Abraham, would make great the patriarch’s name (Gen. 12:2; 2 Sam. 7:9)” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 270.)

3. On the way that habits, rituals, and liturgies form and shape us as human beings, see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

4. For a thorough treatment of these three positions, see Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 325–32.

5. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 327.

6. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 327.

7. Allen Ross (*Creation and Blessing*, 272) sees a possible illustration of this sin in Genesis 12 when Pharaoh (a powerful king) sinfully takes Abram’s wife. While there are parallels with that passage, the text of Genesis 12 displays Abram *more* culpable than Pharaoh because of his deceit. Pharaoh acted in ignorance; Abram lied willfully.

8. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XV, Chapter 22–23, p. 679–84.

9. Mathews also suggests that “sons of God” might mean something like “godly sons,” interpreting the

phrase as a genitive of quality: “*Ēlōhīm* can be rendered as a genitive of quality, meaning ‘godly sons,’ referring to the heritage of the Sethites. We already observed that *bēnē hā’ēlōhīm* has analogues pointing to human referents. Also important is the weight of the Pentateuch’s testimony, which identifies the Israelites as the children of God (e.g., Deut 14:1; 32:5–6; cf. Exod 4:2; Pss 73:15; 80:15); this resonates well with taking the ‘sons of God’ in 6:2 as an allusion to godly (covenant) offspring (cf. also Isa 43:6; Hos 1:10; 11:1; John 1:12–13).” (Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 330.)

10. Pace Kidner (along with many others expressing similar sentiments) who writes, “while the Old Testament can declare God’s people to be his sons, the normal meaning of the actual term ‘sons of God’ is ‘angels’, and nothing has prepared the reader to assume that ‘men’ now means Cainites only.” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 89.)

11. Pace Wenham, who argues that “daughters of man” picks up the story of the “daughters’ often mentioned in passing in chap. 5 despite their apparent irrelevance to the genealogical line. Now they become the focus of attention. Indeed, the opening phrase ‘When man began to multiply’ could refer to the whole process of multiplication recorded in 5:1–32, while the closing sentence about Noah in 6:8 links this paragraph to the close of the genealogy in 5:29–32.” (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 136.)

12. Calvin, *Genesis*, 237–38. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xii.i.html>>

13. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 183.

14. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 269.

15. George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 17.

16. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 267.

17. Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 19.

18. Here are all the references to the sons of Anak/Anakim: Num. 13:22, 28, 33; Deut. 1:28; 2:10, 11, 21; 9:2; Josh. 11:21, 22; 14:12, 15; 15:13, 14; Judg. 1:20.

19. “Sometimes overlooked is the fact that the Nephilim are not specifically said to be the offspring of the marital unions.” (Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 337.)

20. Kidner, *Genesis*, 91.

21. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 343.

22. The full forms of these verbs and nouns change. I am simply reflecting the root words from both passages.

23. Umberto Cassuto, *Genesis*, vol. I., trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1989), 303. Cited by Kidner, *Genesis*, 91.

24. “Noah alone among all the others ‘found grace in the eyes of the LORD’ (6:8). Here again the narrative makes a play on Noah’s name in that the word grace (חַן) is a reversal of the consonants of the name Noah (נֹחַ).” (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 124.)