

“The Heart of God”

Genesis 6:1-7

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We're reading this morning the first seven verses of the sixth chapter of Genesis. We have read most recently the genealogy of Cain and the succeeding generations of unbelief and increasing wickedness descending from him and then in chapter five the long line of the descendants of Adam through Seth, all faithful men.

Text Comments

v.2 These first two verses present us with perhaps the most famous problem of interpretation in the entire book of Genesis and one of the most famous problems of interpretation in the Bible as a whole. Interestingly, there is a long article in the latest number of the *Westminster Theological Journal* devoted to the interpretation of the first four verses of chapter 6. [Vol. 76, No. 2, 351-370] In our tradition, beginning with Augustine and represented by Calvin, most commentators have taken "sons of God" to refer to the descendants of Seth, the godly line whose genealogy was provided in the immediately preceding verses, and "daughters of man" in v. 2 to refer to the descendants of Cain, the line of unbelief and wickedness which was given, at least in its beginnings, at the end of chapter 4. What is being described then is the mixing of the lines by marriage, a mixing that poisoned the spiritual life of the Sethite line. The passage, thus interpreted, is then the first of many passages in the Bible warning of the inevitable and terrible consequences of spiritual intermarriage. When believers marry unbelievers the result is rarely the salvation of the unbelieving; rather the believer's faith is destroyed, or if not the believer's, the faith of his or her children. But there are certainly problems with this interpretation. For example, the term "sons of God" is not a common term for believers in the OT. It is not inconceivable that "sons of God" should refer to the children of God in a spiritual sense -- a similar phrase is found with that meaning in Deut. 14:1 and Israel is often referred to as the *son* of God. But there are other problems. "Daughters of man," for example, would not obviously be a reference to the daughters only of the unbelieving line.

Alternatively, many others and some of our own authorities have taken "sons of God" to refer to angels, as may be suggested in such NT texts as 1 Pet. 3:19-20; 2 Pet. 2:4-6 and Jude 6. The phrase "sons of God" in the Bible -- though, to be sure, there are only a few examples -- normally refers to angels.

The words themselves of Gen. 6:1-2 may seem to favor the "angel" interpretation, but it certainly creates difficulties of its own: angels assuming bodies and living in the world; angels -- or, better, demons -- not simply seducing human women, but actually marrying them and, as the text certainly seems to suggest, living with them in the world as husbands and fathers. In other words, what would be taught here would be not merely that angels assumed human bodies for momentary appearances, but "actual angelic incarnation." [Delitzsch, 225] What is more, of course, the text does not raise any of these questions though it would seem, in the entire context of the books of Moses, an utterly unprecedented event for angels to marry human beings, full of all manner of

problems that are addressed nowhere in the Pentateuch or anywhere else in the Bible. It was Jesus himself who said that angels do not marry!

Still others argue that the “sons of God” are a dynasty of tyrants, kings who succeed Lamech in the line of Cain. Lamech was simply a bigamist, these kings created harems. Professor Bruce Waltke, whose judgment I have great confidence in, thinks of the “sons of God” as demon-possessed tyrants, men controlled by fallen angels. [117] Good men support all three views and give powerful arguments for each one and, thankfully, we do not have to solve this problem this morning. As we read on we will see clearly enough that, however these first two verses are understood, the effect of what happened was to deepen and widen unbelief and disobedience **to God** in the world. The godly line from Seth ceased to be an adequate counterpoise to the ever-widening stream of unbelieving human life.

Clearly, the entire point is that the human beings involved were culpable parties to this intermarriage of faith and unbelief and so responsible for the corruption of the pure line of living faith in the world. As you see, the attraction of the daughters of men was their physical beauty, not their character, and certainly not their faith in God. [Sarna, 45]. One powerful argument for the interpretations that see the sons of God as men, men responsible for what they did, is that it is human beings who are punished for what was done. They are blamed for it and punished for it, and the mixture of the pure line with evil is regarded as the cause of evil progressing to the point that such a ferocious judgment as the flood was required.

Young people beware. If you marry an unbeliever; if you are cavalier in your decision to marry a person who seems only mildly committed to Christ and to living for him, you may, I say, you *may* survive yourself in the true faith of Christ, but, apart from an act of supreme mercy that both Scripture and observation teach us God only sometimes extends to his children, you will have damned your children. This is the lesson of these three verses and many others like them in the Bible.

- v.3 The word the ESV translates “abide with” and the KJV translated “contend with,” appears only here in the Hebrew Bible and has been translated in a variety of ways. One authoritative source of the meaning of Hebrew words gives the translation “to rule” and then follows it with a question mark! [Lisowsky, *Konkordanz*, 358] However the word is translated, the point seems clear enough: the Lord would not continue to bless mankind, even to endure mankind, when it lives in such rebellion against him.

“His days shall be 120 years” is usually taken to mean that subsequently man would not live as long as he did before. Remember the immense ages reported for the descendants of Adam in chapter 5. After the flood, it is true, the recorded ages of men steadily decline. But it could also be a reference to how many years remained before the flood was to destroy almost all of human life. In any case, elsewhere in the OT the word “flesh” is used of human frailty. [Sarna, 46]

- v.4 It is not easy to understand the meaning of this reference to Nephilim. It provides some historical context, no doubt obvious to the original readers, but it is hard for us to know precisely who or what these people were or why they are mentioned.

The KJV rendered the word "giants" as a result of its one other use in the Bible, Num. 13:33, where the Israelites spies said of the Nephilim who lived in Canaan in those years that they were so tall they felt like grasshoppers in comparison. The ESV rightly confesses the obscurity and uncertainty of the word by simply transliterating it, that is giving us the sound of the Hebrew word, *Nephilim*, in English letters. "Men of renown" or "Mighty Men" suggests warriors of great power. It is not necessarily to be understood that these were the special result of the union described in v. 2.

- v.5 You may remember that in the NT the moral condition of mankind at the time of Noah is several times used to describe the moral condition that will prevail among mankind at the end of history. As the virtually universal immorality of man led to the great judgment of the flood, such a nearly universal immorality will portend the final judgment.

We have said already many times that the most fundamental perspectives, the most salient facts concerning God and man are laid down in these first chapters of the Bible. This is the foundation upon which the entire edifice of biblical truth will then be built. This is what must be understood if we are to understand the rest. Creation *ex nihilo*, the uniqueness of man made in God's image and likeness, the fall of man into sin, the grace of God, the promise of redemption, the moral obligations of human life, the succession of spiritual condition through the generations of believers and unbelievers: we have found all of this and more in the first five chapters of the Bible. These are *the most important ingredients of a biblical world view* and the warp and woof of biblical revelation from the outset to its end.

We have been introduced to the living God who created the heavens and the earth and man in his own image and likeness. The Lord God has been revealed to us as a person of unmeasured majesty and goodness, who brought all things into being by the mere utterance of his word and then created the first two human beings by discrete acts of personal involvement. We have learned something of what a human being is: a creature, but one who speaks, who lives in relationship, who is subject to moral laws, who has himself creative power, and is capable of and responsible for exercising dominion on God's behalf over the world that God made. He is, in other words, as *person*.

We have seen how man fell from his pristine state of goodness and happiness in which he had been made by rebelling against God and we have seen the consequences of his sin: the cruelty, the ugliness, the heartbreak, and the melancholy that descended upon human life. We have seen how sin gathers strength in the march of the generations, and we have seen how the life of the world that God made now lies under his wrath and judgment on account of that sin and something of what God's punishments entail.

But there is another dimension of this truth about human sin and man's rebellion against God that we have not yet considered and this too is a fabulously important part of the whole picture as the rest of the Bible will teach us times without end. Unless we understand *this* we cannot really

understand any of the rest. The people you rub shoulders with all day long do not understand this; we ourselves struggle to understand it.

I am speaking of the extraordinary statement in verse 6: "The Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." Other translations render that last phrase, "his heart was filled with pain." The Lord God was offended by the sinfulness of man, his selfishness, his indifference to God and to his fellow man, but he was not merely offended by it; it cut him to the heart! The word translated grieved is used in the OT to express the most intense emotion: sometimes anguish, sometimes rage mixed with anguish. It is the word used to describe the way Dinah's brothers felt after they learned their sister had been raped. It is the word used to express Jonathan's emotion when he heard that his father planned to murder his best friend David; and the same word is used of David when he learned of the death of his son Absalom. In Isaiah. 54:6 it is used of the way a deserted wife feels.

There are, as you know, a great many statements like this one in the Bible. We read that Israel often *grieved* the Lord in the wilderness (Psalm 78:40) [same word as used here] and in both the OT (Isa. 63:10 [again using the same word]) and the NT (Eph. 4:30) we learn that God's people have often *grieved* his Holy Spirit. Later the Lord would grieve that he made Saul Israel's first king (1 Sam.15:10) and on and on.

Now, to be sure, this is what is called *anthropomorphism*, a figure of speech in which human characteristics are attributed to non-human beings. A talking dog is an anthropomorphism, but so is a grieving God who regrets that he ever made man. We know that because of everything else that the Bible teaches us about God, starting with the fact that God, being a spiritual being does not have a heart!

We are taught, for example, even in this same book of Genesis, that the Lord God superintends human history. He is never caught off guard, never surprised by what men do. The whole tawdry episode of the internecine feud in Jacob's family, the hatred of the brothers for one another, the ten sons of Leah eventually selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt, their lying about it to their father; all of that, we learn in Genesis 50 was part of a divine plan to preserve alive Jacob and the promised seed. In other words, the Lord God always knew the future -- the Bible teaches us that a thousand times -- because he controls the future -- another fact of biblical revelation. As we read in Psalm 135:6:

"Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth..."

What is more, the Lord does not change his mind. He does not regret having done something, because everything that he does, whatever he does, is what he planned to do with perfect knowledge of the outcome. As we read famously in Numbers 23:19,

"God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind."

Or, similarly, in 1 Samuel 15:29:

“The Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man that he should have regret.”

These truths are elaborated at such length in the Bible and put so emphatically that there can be no doubt that when Moses put Genesis 6:6 to parchment or papyrus, or when Paul urged us not to grieve the Holy Spirit in Ephesians, neither biblical writer had any intention whatsoever of denying God’s omniscience or his absolute sovereignty over the affairs of men, *including their sin and rebellion*. After all, the Lord already knows that he will bring history to an end in part precisely to judge mankind who will then be living much as mankind was living before the flood. He also knew from the beginning about the seed of the woman who would bruise the head of the serpent. Human history, as C.S. Lewis once put it, is “a story with a divine plot!” [*The Discarded Image*, 176] When the Lord Jesus tells us that not a sparrow falls from a tree apart from the divine will and that God has determined the number of hairs on your head at any moment, he does so precisely to assert that God’s control of events is absolute, subject to no power outside of himself, and that God’s knowledge likewise is absolute, that the past, present, and future are equally before his view.

Not only does the Bible say that God “works out *everything* in conformity with the purpose of his will” which obviously must include human sin, which is after all the one thing in the world that must be ruled and must be defeated if God’s purposes are to come to pass, but over and again the Bible represents God as directly in control of the sinful actions of men -- however freely they commit those actions, however responsible they are for them, and however pure God remains in his control over them. I have common-placed my Bible on this subject at Rom. 9:15 and I have in the margin there a very large number of texts:

from Isa. 63:17 “Why, O Lord, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so that we do not revere you?”

to 1 Sam 18:10: “The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully upon Saul.”

Now, there are great questions here, no doubt, far beyond our knowing and, in any case, requiring far more time to discuss than we have this morning. But, take the point: God was not caught by surprise by the sins of mankind in Noah’s day. He was not defeated in his purpose by the rebellion of his creatures. The flood was not some “Plan B” that God had to think up on the spot because his original plan had come to grief. We read in the last book of the Bible that Jesus Christ is the Lamb *slain before the foundations of the world* -- that is, God knew before he made the world what would become of it and that mankind would need his Son for a Redeemer. Indeed, all that happened in the generation of the flood was only the fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose for mankind. Noah’s greatest achievement, indeed, will be to keep alive the seed of the woman that had already been promised in Gen. 3:15!

But all of that to say what the statements “The Lord was sorry he had made man” and that man’s sin “grieved him to his heart” *do not mean*. They are not a denial of God’s omniscience or his absolute sovereignty over the affairs of men. But we have not yet said what *they do mean*.

Moses fully understood that he was describing God and God's reaction to sin anthropomorphically. The only way human beings can grasp God is to describe him in language that they themselves can understand, even if the result is that we have to say seemingly contradictory things about God: that he regretted having made man and that he is not a man to regret what he has done. We struggle to understand God, indeed, we can grasp the divine life only slightly, precisely because he is so far above us. As Anselm famously put it:

“O Lord, you are not only that than which nothing greater can be conceived, but you are greater than all that can be conceived.”

It may indeed be that to say that God regretted having made man and that he was grieved to his heart is an anthropomorphism. But such figures of speech are designed to teach us *something* about God. It may be that we cannot know, perhaps never will know, *how* it can be said that the God who knows and who plans all things was grieved to his heart by the sin of mankind, but we have such vivid anthropomorphisms concerning God everywhere we look in the Bible. All manner of human emotions are attributed to God: sorrow, regret, anger, love, joy, satisfaction, and so on. And they are obviously crucial to the revelation of God that we are given in Holy Scripture. “For God *so loved* the world that he gave his only son.” We read in the Bible that God is a sovereign king -- we can understand that because we know what a king is and what it means to rule over a kingdom, even if God's sovereignty far exceeds that of any human king or ruler and is, in fact, of a different order entirely. We also read that God cares for his people like a mother hen cares for her chicks and loves them like a doting father or mother -- even if his caring love is a power and an affection that far transcends the greatest love that has ever occupied a human heart.

Muslims are absolutely right to say that God is ineffable, that his nature cannot be comprehended by mere human beings. But remember, even in saying so they are saying something true about God and they are using words to describe him. But they are wrong to say that we cannot know God as a God of personal love and deep feeling. We have been made in his image precisely so that we could relate to him and understand who and what he is at least *to some degree*. We were made *like* God, even if we remain utterly unlike him in so many ways. After all, even our sin reflects God's nature in some way since in its essence sin is a matter of man attempting trying to be *like* God, a point made emphatically in Genesis 3:5. [Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 366] Remember, the very language with which we speak of God and think about God, the very language he has used to teach us about himself, is the language that God has given us so that we can understand him -- so far as he can be understood by mere creatures -- and so that we can relate to him person to person.

So, even if we confess, as we must, that the human-like description of God that we find in Genesis 6:6 is a figure of speech, that it is perhaps only the best we can do to describe the inner life of the living God, and gives us only a somewhat feeble grasp of the divine mind, what we have here at the headwaters of biblical revelation is the clearest conceivable assertion that man's sin *in some way* and *to some significant degree* can be rightly described as a personal tragedy to God; that it grieves him, and cuts him to the heart.

Once again, I say, we have here one of those essential ingredients of a true understanding of the God, of the world, of human life in the world, and of salvation. *Human sin is a matter of the deepest sorrow and disappointment to the living God.* Unless we know that fact, how God feels about our sin, how he responds to it and reacts to it, we do not and cannot understand this world or human life in this world. Sin is not simply a problem; it is a tragedy, and the deepest reason for that is its effect on God himself.

It is this fact, God's intensely personal response to human sin that explains the ferocity of his judgment of it, first at the flood, then on the last day. God's wrath, his determination to punish sin is no pageant, no mere tale full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Divine judgment comes up from the heart, from the life, from the inner self of God who has been not only offended but deeply hurt by the sins of his creatures. Later, when we read that sin is "the abominable thing that God hates" (Jer. 44:4) -- obviously another anthropomorphism -- we are being told the same thing in another way. God takes human sin, our sin *personally*!

It is this fact, God's intensely personal response to human sin that makes the whole grand story of redemption in Christ so impossibly magnificent. God sent his son to save us in defiance of the fact that we had grieved him so deeply and disappointed him so severely. No one ever did anything remotely as great for you as God did in sending his son to rescue you from sin and death, as God did in subjecting his son to such humiliation and suffering as was the price of your redemption. But all of that was done for you even though your sins had disgusted him, and offended him, and grieved him, and pained him to the heart. This is love bald and bare. No reason, no explanation possible, now or ever! He found us full of what breaks his heart and then he sold the farm to redeem us for himself. There is no figuring this out -- there is only amazement, and wonder, and love, and astonished gratitude throughout the rest of the Bible.

And it is this fact, God's deeply personal response to human sin that explains why it is so important to repent of our sins -- all our sins all the time -- and seek to put them to death. You and I should not seek to live a godly life simply because it is God's will, or simply because the path of righteousness is the path to God's blessing. Our sin *hurts* our heavenly Father; it grieves him; it causes him pain. And no one with Christian blood in his or her veins should ever willingly do that! God did not save us by the sacrifice of his beloved son so that we could continue to sin without penalty. Our sins are too painful to him for that! He saved us to rid us of those sins, and if we love him at all, as we say we do, we will not rest until we *are* rid of them, every last one, and the big ones first and foremost.

You know how certain events in your past life live on in your memory even if you wish they didn't. Sometimes happy memories and sometimes sad, sometimes memories of which you are proud and sometimes of which you are ashamed. I remember, alas I think I will always remember, an evening during my seminary days, when I had an animated, even somewhat heated discussion about predestination and divine sovereignty with my father and my late brother-in-law. As seminarians are sometimes wont to do -- and as I certainly was wont to do -- I spoke rashly about a profound mystery. I wanted to make my case for absolute divine sovereignty, the truth of which I had come recently to feel the force of in a way I had never before, and the arguments for which I now knew better than I ever had before, and I wielded texts like a sword, seeking to skewer all of their efforts to represent the many texts in the Bible that emphasize the

free will and responsibility of human beings. I realized only afterwards that their approach of biblical balance and humility before a subject that must remain a great deep was far wiser than mine. I was much more interested in winning the argument, than I was in carefully stating and, at the same time, adorning the whole counsel of God.

But, what I can never forget about that night, and, I think, the reason I remember it so well, was seeing how disappointed my father was in me as he left the room. In an instant what I had thought my victory turned into bitter defeat. My father was disappointed in me, ashamed of me, for the way I had spoken, for the disrespectful and intemperate and juvenile way in which I had treated so sacred a topic before my elders. And I couldn't bear his disappointment, I couldn't stand it; until at last, later that night knowing I could never go to sleep in that condition, I crept upstairs to his room to apologize and seek his forgiveness. Well that is the difference it makes to know what our sins do to God himself -- sovereign though he is; in absolute control over every detail of our lives as he no doubt is; fully aware of all that we would do, sins and all, before we or the world in which we live ever existed -- our sins grieve him and disappoint him. Next to his love for us, that is the most important thing that any human being can know!