

*Foundations: Wicked (Not A Musical)*

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*Psalm 1; Luke 11:37-54; Genesis 6:1-12*

Our final Scripture reading today is Genesis 6:1-12. May God add His richest blessing on the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “When men began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose. Then the LORD said, “My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years.” The Nephilim were on the earth in those days -- and also afterward -- when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown. The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth -- men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air -- for I am grieved that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. This is the account of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways.

Sometimes, Bible stories are just perplexing. We read some things in the Scriptures and we think, “OK, that’s weird, maybe I’ll come back to that,” and then we move on and never give it a second thought. Whatever it was, it didn’t seem that important to delve into more deeply.

We can understand a large amount of the Scripture without much further explanation; what we called “the plain reading” of Scripture is enough to convince someone of the gospel truths – that we fall short of the Law, that we need a Savior, and that one has been provided for us in Christ Jesus who has done all that is needed for us to be accepted in God’s eyes. The belief that all Christians should be able to read the Bible in their own language came out of the Reformation, and still today we have translation projects in countless languages for people groups who have never heard the gospel in their own first language.

Yet sometimes the meaning of Scripture isn’t so plain at all. That’s true of today’s passage. I’m reminded of my old Japanese teacher, Maeda-sensei. (She was a wonderful Christian woman who I learned this week was an ordained minister in her church.) She had to work out of a Japanese instruction book that didn’t reflect modern Japanese very well. From time to time, she would get to a part she didn’t like and she’d smile at us and say, “Skip skip skip!” Always 3 skips. Unimportant. Don’t need that.

But with the Bible, we can’t just “skip skip skip.” If it’s in the Scripture, God intended it for a reason. It may not always be a reason we can completely understand in our day and age. We might need to use commentaries and resources to understand what’s going on, to get the wisdom of the ages behind us. But very rarely is there any passage of Scripture that doesn’t speak to us once we understand it properly.

It's also important that we tackle difficult passages because hard, misunderstood parts of the Bible are typically where we find the most resistance from those who oppose the faith. They read something easily misinterpreted and they base their judgment of Christianity on that misunderstanding. We admit humility; we admit we don't understand everything in Scripture completely and totally. But we also don't need to be afraid of Scripture, or of those who would try to twist it to attack the faith either.

So let's dive into the mysteries of this passage and what it's really trying to teach us. The human population starts to expand greatly. Suddenly, we run into this phrase: "the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose." What do we do with this phrase, "the sons of God"? Because of the description of their children, the Nephilim, some scholars conjectured that these were fallen angels, that in fact this might be when some of them fell from their position in heaven. Legends have sprung up around this.

The problem is, the preceding five chapters of Genesis know nothing about angels. The first angel doesn't appear in the text until Genesis 16. And remember, the word "angel" in Hebrew means "messenger," so it doesn't always even mean the kind of spiritual creature we know of as an angel of the LORD bringing God's word to His people. Moreover, every time we see angels, they are spiritual beings. They do not have a physical body the way we do. In Mark and Matthew's gospels, Jesus says that the angels do not marry or have that kind of relationship.

The phrase "sons of God" is used never of angels in the Bible, but of human beings. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says the peacemakers are blessed, for they will be called "sons of God." In Romans 8:14, Paul writes, "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." In Galatians 3:26-27, Paul again says, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Psalm 82, Isaiah 41, John 10, all have some reference to this. The term "sons of God" refers to those people who are righteous, who follow God, who want to know more of Him, who are forgiven their sins by Him and walk in His ways.

So how do we understand this passage? We have to look at the passages we've studied the last two weeks. If you remember, we learned about two completely different lines coming from Adam – the family line of Cain and the family line of Seth. Cain's family line, for the most part, was defined by his sin of killing Abel, to the point that his family line includes Lamech, the first polygamist who boasts about his murders to his two wives. In comparison, Seth's line was mentioned as those who called upon the name of the LORD. One of Seth's progeny, Enoch, walked with God and didn't even die – God took him!

What brings these two lines together is this passage. One group was following God and worshiping Him; the other was, mostly, uninterested in God. A godly line and an ungodly line. But then, what is it that brings the two lines together? Well, what has brought all sorts of incompatible people together over all the generations? Lust! At some point, when the two lines that had been generally separate starting meeting together again, they start intermarrying. The women of Cain's line were beautiful, so the men of Seth's line married them.

This leads us to our first major thought of the day that's heard in many places throughout Scripture: *believers must be very careful who they are yoked to*. Whether it's in marriage or in business or in friendship, even within our families, we must be discerning who we join ourselves to in important, lasting, and life-long relationships. We must be so careful because of our human nature. When we become intertwined with those who have no interest in God and follow their own way, we don't pull them up to our level so often as we are dragged down to theirs.

The ultimate result of the wide intermarriage of believers and unbelievers, of the righteous and unrighteous, is eventual wickedness on a grand scale. The habit of following God got lost, and so humanity becomes wicked to the point where Scripture says, "every inclination of the thoughts of (the human) heart was only evil all the time." Now we live in a different era. Believers have the Spirit of God living in us, guiding us, directing us. Because of the Spirit, we are not always pulled down when someone near and dear to us engages in sin. But it can happen, and even when it doesn't, pain results.

I know of quite a few people who have married people who aren't their spiritual match. Some have married unbelievers; others have married nominal believers. I know from their stories how much prayer goes into those relationships, and how much pain and how much heartache. I know parents who have fallen away from faith when their children go against the clear teachings of Scripture and they side with their children over their beliefs. I know of friendships and businesses that are ripped apart over faith issues. And it's heartbreaking.

My encouragement to us today is not to cut off relationships with unbelieving people or sinful people. Even Paul, when he warned against relationships with people in the church living blatantly sinful lives, said, "I wasn't talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or who are greedy or are swindlers or idol worshipers. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that." Many times, because the Holy Spirit is gracious, God works through us to bring people far from Himself to Himself. We should be looking for those relationships, looking for ways to invite people to come and see that God is good and that they can be forgiven and become a part of His Kingdom. Jesus Himself was criticized by the Pharisees for all the time that He spent with infamous sinners.

But the difference is committing major portions of our lives, through marriage, through business partnerships, in different ways, to people who have no interest in God. This doesn't mean that these people can't be nice people, even moral people. I've met non-Christians far more interested in morality than many Christians I know! It's putting your future alongside theirs. It's committing yourself to them. Often we enter into those relationships with the best of intentions. But when we pledge our loyalty to others, we have to know that they are not spiritually opposed to us. Otherwise, the situation that results may be more like that of this passage than we'd like to think.

Now what are the Nephilim? When Cain and Seth's lines started marrying and having children, their children were extraordinary. They were not extraordinarily godly, but they were gifted in strength and size. The ancient translation from Hebrew to Greek called them giants, meaning tall – Goliath was a giant at 8 feet! They were legendary men of old. But they weren't godly heroes, just amazing in their feats. The Nephilim are not monsters or demi-gods, just men.

It's at this point that a double meaning comes into the text. God is dismayed with human sin and decides He is going to do something about it. He says, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years." This phrase has a double meaning to it. First, it refers to the length of time that will occur before the great flood. Man will have 120 years to live and repent before the flood sweeps it all away. But second, shortly after this statement, after the time of Noah, human lifespans greatly diminish, to the point where living 120 years would be considered ancient. God has decided that humanity's great sinfulness is going to limit how long we live on this earth.

The wickedness is so bad that we're told, "The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain." This brings up yet another question. Can God, who is unchanging, immovable, unable to be harmed, complete in and of himself, capable of being grieved in this extraordinary manner? (Some translations have even taken it to mean that God repented of making us, which is a valid way of looking at the language.)

The answer is yes and no. No, we cannot harm God in any meaningful way by our disobedience. We cannot make God suffer. God is impassible, which means that He does not change in His inner being, and thus His emotions do not change. He is utterly consistent. Nor do we want Him to change. If He did, we might not be able to trust the Gospel. What if God changed His mind because we were once again so wicked? Thankfully, God does not do that. He empathizes with our suffering; Jesus did in fact suffer on the cross, so He knows it personally; He has emotions; yet He does not personally change.

At the same time, though, the answer is yes, God can be grieved. A perfect God is disturbed by and must do something about injustice, about oppression, about sin that harms all involved. God is real, not just a concept; He has emotions. God, in His perfection, grieves the lawlessness and evil His creation carries out. No one can force God to feel anything; no one can harm God; yet as our Creator, He has genuine emotions consistent with His perfection.

You might say, "If God knows everything ahead of time, how can He be grieved by it?" I think it is much the same when any parent sees their child doing something harmful. Let's give an example. A parent warns a defiant child about taking drugs. The parent knows the child, knows their friends, knows their circles, knows their rebelliousness, knows in all likelihood the child is going to indulge in drugs; even without perfect foresight, the parent knows this is the foreseeable outcome. Yet the emotional toil doesn't come before the event but when it does happen. In the same way, I believe, God's foreknowledge does not limit His sorrow when someone sins...and it doesn't limit God's joy when a son or daughter finally gives up their waywardness and enters into His Kingdom.

So God decides to flood the earth. Is this legitimate? Is it just of God to wipe out everything? Yes. Why? Because sin had become so pervasive. *Every* inclination, *only* evil, *all* the time. Three words that are at the very extreme of language. Not some inclination, some evil, some of the time. Every, only, all. God's plan for a flood to destroy all the living is not a mark of human anger, of rage, of vengeance. He gives humanity 120 years. He allows some to live for nearly a millennia. He is not quick to anger. But the sin of humanity is so great that it is the only way to appropriately bring justice.

And that is our second thought for today: *God, to be just, must punish wickedness.* He is not gleeful at it; He does not relish and delight in our destruction. He laments our sin. And yet, His justice demands appropriate punishment. We know from our own day many cries for justice. We may argue how legitimate all those demands are or what punishment and retribution should look like in those situations. But we do understand. Every one of us has an innate sense of justice, from the child whose toy was just taken by someone else on the playground to the driver whose car was just totaled by a drunk driver on the interstate.

Sometimes God is accused of being mean, harsh, or vindictive. The destruction of the world seems extreme. Over the next several weeks, we're going to look at that story in more detail. And yes, there should be a great sadness that falls over us as we contemplate the deaths of all those people. And yet, there should be a great sadness within us about the immensity of the sins committed, against God and against other people, and how like in the story of Lamech a couple weeks ago we find people bragging about their depravity. As Isaiah 45:22 says, "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other." Without any turning, without any repentance, without the desire for forgiveness or even the thought that they should be forgiven, judgment is not only necessary but right and good. Punishment is the only step left after grace and mercy and long-suffering and even an offer of forgiveness show no fruit.

We are not so unlike the people condemned in the flood. As a society, we have turned our backs on God. Even those of us who want to be godly find ourselves increasingly distracted from Him. We genuinely need God's mercy and grace because we certainly aren't anything close to obedient. And yet, this story gives us hope. Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. That's what's so important for us to hear. Noah found favor. Let's be clear – Noah was righteous, blameless among the people, and one who walked with God. God did not randomly pick someone out of a hat to save. He saved someone who was in a genuine relationship with Him. But it wasn't because Noah was good that God saved Him, but because of God's grace. Noah is very human; he is not free from sin; we'll see bizarre behavior from him after the flood. God does not save Noah and his family for their sinless perfection. God saves them because, by nature, God is full of mercy and grace and wants to show these traits to us.

And so our final major thought for the day is this: *if you truly believe in Christ, rejoice, for God has shown you favor.* In the midst of a wicked and ruthless generation, God saves Noah. Due to God's overwhelming compassion, we now know of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ. We have seen God's redemption plan written out across the ages. We have the gift of salvation purchased for all who would believe and trust and follow. God's grace is not for the perfect, but for the one who He grants the ability to admit their imperfection and come to Him for forgiveness. God has shown you favor just by being here this morning, able to hear this word that there is forgiveness available for all who will turn to Him.

Let's rejoice, friends! With our lips and with our lives, let us praise the God who has saved us! There is no looming spiritual flood for those whom He has rescued. We are assured that we are covered by the atoning blood of Jesus. We are declared righteous. We do not fear the judgment because our judge is also our defending attorney. Today, if you are not sure of God's favor, turn to Him and ask Him to show it to you even now. And you will know that peace that you are a part of His family, brought into the Kingdom of those He loves.