

“Would you have died in the flood?”

Genesis 6:1-8

Dr. Jerry Nelson

Very few passages of Scripture fly in the face of modern popular theology more strongly than the passage before us today. The language, the implications and the results in this biblical text are totally out of step with our contemporary understanding of our condition and our destiny.

I want to ask you 5 questions:

Question #1: Have you ever lied about anything? I came out of the kitchen with chocolate all over my 4 year-old face and my mother asked one of those ridiculous questions parents sometimes ask, “Jerry, have you been eating chocolate?” I lied, “No!” Have you ever done that? Question #1: Have you ever lied about anything?

Question #2 Have you ever sinned against another person? Have you ever spoken in such a way as to leave others with a false impression about someone or something? Have you ever willfully hurt another person emotionally if not physically? Have you ever intentionally, knowingly, willfully violated any of God’s commands?

So question #3: Have you ever sinned against God?

Questions #4: Do you deserve to be punished for your sin against God and others?

And question #5: Do you deserve to be eternally punished in hell (“lake of fire”) for your sin?

I have still another question:

Before what question (1-5) did your answers change from “yes” to “no”? Where your answers change tells a lot about your theology. I think anyone with any memory would say “yes” to question #1. Some might object to question #2. They might say “yes” if I had asked if they had ever intentionally emotionally hurt another person but they object to the word “sinned.” Maybe they’ve done things that were socially counterproductive but the word “sin” sticks in their throats. Why? Let me come back to that in a minute. Others might

even say they have “sinned” but when they got to question #4 they said “no”. They think, maybe they deserve to be confronted or corrected but not punished. And most in our country would definitely draw the line before question #5. No, I don’t deserve to be punished **eternally**.

We admit we have done things that are wrong. But we are reluctant to call them “sin” and certainly unwilling to think our wrongs or sins, even if we admit that word, deserve eternal punishment. Look with me at Genesis 6:1-8 and see a very different perspective on humanity, on us, and on the future we **deserve**.

“When men began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them,² the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose.³ 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.”⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.⁷ 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.”⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.”

This passage begins the story of the flood – that time in ancient history when God covered the world with water, drowning most living creatures and all humans except 8 – Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives. This account was retold and written in Scripture hundreds, if not thousands, of years after it happened. Moses put the history into written form because he wanted the Israelites of his day, their children and all through the ages, to learn something from that incident.

Before he recounted the story of the flood, however, he gave some commentary about the conditions that led to the flood. It is that

commentary, that description of humanity, that runs so counter to popular theology today. And the biblical perspective, in contrast to popular theology is so opposite that they cannot both be right. Put most succinctly, here is what I'm getting at – if you had been alive in Noah's day, would you have deserved to die in the flood? Assume you were, thousands of years ago, the 15 year old son of a shepherd living in southern Iraq minding your own business when the flood began – would you have deserved to die?

For that matter the question could be put this way. Assume you are a 43 year old saleswoman living in southern Jefferson County and that flood were to occur today – would you deserve to die in it?

According to the Bible *the answer to both questions (about people thousands of years ago or today) is "yes!" they both deserve to die. According to popular theology today the answer would be "no" they don't deserve to die. That contrast is very definite and it is very important to you and me. For yourself, you have to judge whether you believe the Bible or popular theology!*

Turning again to Genesis 6:1-8 I want to summarize the passage with two phrases: Divine evaluation and Divine intervention. Verses 1-5 summarize God's evaluation of humanity and verses 6-8 summarize God's intervention.

*The evaluation begins with a description of humanity in verses 1-4. There is too much we don't know to be absolutely certain about all the details of this section of Scripture but we can certainly get the gist of it. From the context, it seems clear to me that what Moses is describing in these verses is **not** good. People were increasing in number on the earth just as God had commanded back in chapter 1 when God said, "be fruitful and increase in number." But something negative is immediately implied when the increase is described the way it is in verse 2 "The sons of God (or the gods) saw that the daughters of men were beautiful and they married any of them they chose." Verse 4 goes on to describe these actions further – "The Nephilim (fallen ones) 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."*

Who were the “sons of God” and who were the “daughters of men?” For thousands of years scholars have studied and debated the answers to these questions. Some have suggested the “sons of God” were angels who came to earth and married human women. Others have suggested the “sons of God” was a reference to the descendants of Seth (from chapter 5) – the lineage through whom the Messiah would come and the “daughters of men” were the descendants of Cain (from chapter 4). Still others have suggested that “sons of God” is a reference to royalty, to men of high place in government or the military.

There is some biblical and literary support for each of these views but I think the strongest support is for the last view – that the “sons of God” is a reference to kings and others of high position who took it upon themselves to circumvent God’s ways and God’s will by marrying whomever they wished and as many as they wished, in order to create immortality for themselves. I think what Moses is here describing is the same kind of rebellious (“who needs God”) attitude we saw in Adam and Eve in chapter 3, Cain in Chapter 4 and Lamech in chapter 4. Now I get that “rebellious attitude” idea from the way the Lord reacts to them in verse 3. “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.’” There is difficulty in being absolutely certain about this verse as well because we can’t tell if “spirit” is a reference to God’s will or to God’s breath of life. And we don’t know whether “contend” should be translated “remain.” The difference it makes is this: “My spirit (breath of life) will not remain in man forever, for he is mortal (fleshly); his days will be a hundred and twenty years.” This translation appears to mean that the length of man’s life will be shortened compared to the long lives referred to in chapter 5.

The other possible translation is this: “My Spirit (God himself) will not contend (argue and put up) with man forever, for he is mortal (sinful); his days will be a hundred and twenty years.” This translation appears to mean that God is through striving to get people to obey him and in 120 years the judgment of the flood will come.

In either case, what seems clear is that God is evaluating their character and their conduct. Because of what people are doing, the

way they are living in rebellion against God's ways, judgment will come.

With that description given as an illustration of why God's judgment was coming, Moses goes on in verse 5 with the evaluation itself. "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." This is one of the strongest statements about the condition of the human person in the entire Bible. This is one of the verses almost always cited to substantiate the doctrine of "total depravity".

*When you read the verse, what sense do you get of God's evaluation of our spiritual condition? Look at the negative words: "wickedness", "evil." Look at the encompassing adjectives "great", "every", "only", "all." Whether we like it or not, God's evaluation is that every one of us is wicked and evil. "In our culture, the use of evil simply expresses **our** abhorrence of something; in the Bible, the word sin expresses **God's** abhorrence of it. " (Wells 182) Remember when earlier I said that most people don't like the word "sin" attached to their actions? Well how about these words – "wicked" and "evil"? God says that what we do is "sin" but popular theology wants to call it maladjusted.*

Helen Lynd wrote "The words good and bad have been replace by mature and immature, productive and counterproductive, socially adjusted and maladjusted. (in "On Shame and the Search for Identity" p 16 in Wells p72-3)

David Wells wrote "We no longer have failures, only underachievers. We no longer do things that are wrong but simply those that are inappropriate. We no longer talk about a person's character but evade the difficulty of making moral judgments by speaking of his or her lifestyle... We no longer have druggies but substance abusers... We refuse to speak in moral categories. (p 73)

Woody Allen carried on an affair with the 19 year-old daughter of his wife and the worst his counselors would say was that he may have made an error in judgment and that he lives in a post-modern family. (Wells p 73)

An advice column summarized today's thinking with this heading: "It's Not Your Fault." A woman said she was having trouble with a habit

and the columnist responded: “The first step you must take is to stop blaming yourself. Your compulsive behavior is not your fault; refuse to accept blame – and above all, do not blame yourself for what you cannot control... Let go of your guilt feelings.” (in MacArthur The Vanishing Conscience p20)

“Drunkards” don’t exist anymore now they are chemically dependent. Children don’t defy authority they are hyperactive or have A.D.D. Gluttons now suffer from eating disorders. Adulterers are now sex addicts. Gamblers are treated under health insurance plans. But God says that every sin we commit is first and foremost a sin against the holiness and glory of God. We were made to honor Him, love each other, and be responsible stewards of the earth he has given us. Every one of us has violated every part of that Divine plan. You cannot read the 10 Commandments (as we did this morning) and Jesus’ commentary on it in the Sermon on the Mount and not stand convicted as guilty. We want to call them mistakes but God calls it sin, wicked, evil – because it is rebellion against God.

A widely quoted Wall Street Journal editorial recounted a series of highly publicized scandals in the US and then added, “The United States has a drug problem and a high school sex problem and a welfare problem and an AIDS problem and a rape problem. None of this will go away until more people in positions of responsibility are willing to come forward and explain, frankly in moral terms, that some of the things people do nowadays are wrong.” Until we admit that our problem is as serious as sin against a Holy God there will be no solution. But God not only says we do sinful, evil things but that we are sinful – we are evil – at the very core of our being.

Describing human beings in Genesis 6:5 God says, “every inclination of the thoughts of his heart is only evil all the time.”

Popular theology says we are basically good but that we sometimes make mistakes. God says we are evil to the core even though we are still capable of doing apparently altruistic things. Popular theology says: “Sin is any act or thought that robs myself or another human being of his or her self-esteem.” And hell is simply the loss of pride that follows such an act. (Robert Schuler in The New Reformation 14) The “basic defect” of contemporary Christianity is its “failure to proclaim the

gospel in a way that can satisfy every person's deepest need – one's spiritual hunger for glory." (The New Reformation 31) "Classical theology has erred in its insistence that theology be God-centered, not man-centered." (The New Reformation 64) "We must tell people everywhere that God wants them to feel good about themselves." (The New Reformation 58) "By nature we are fearful, **not bad**...Label it a 'negative self-image' but do not say that the central core of the human being is wickedness. If this were so, then truly, the human being is totally depraved." (The New Reformation 65)

All those last quotes are from popular television preacher Robert Schuler. But God says the fountain of our sinful thoughts, words and actions, is a heart that is inclined to evil. He said it again in Genesis 8:21 "The imagination of man's heart (is) evil from his youth." Jeremiah said, 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?"

The idea of sin then includes not only **acts** of sin but also the heart as the source of that sin. The sin lies not only in the act but the motivation behind it AND in the sickness of the heart that produces the motivation and the act. Jesus said it this way: Mt 15:18 "For out of the heart comes evil thoughts..." (and actions).

The term that best describes God's evaluation of us is "Total Depravity". Total depravity **does not mean** that humans are totally insensitive to matters of right and wrong. Paul said (Romans 2:15) that people have a conscience which bears witness to truth and produces conflicting thoughts in people accusing or excusing them. Total depravity **does not mean** that all humans act as badly as they can possibly act. Humans can be seemingly altruistic – showing acts of kindness, heroism, selflessness, etc. But this goodness does not earn a good standing with God. Total depravity **means** that every part of a person is affected by sin- his body, mind, emotions and will. Total depravity **means** also that even the best deeds of a person are affected by improper motives. Good acts are not done only for God's glory and out of perfect love for God. Even the good is tainted. We can look gracious, charming, selfless but underneath the veneer is a heart not truly inclined toward God.

*Langdon Gilkey tells how the finest of people acted when put to the test of imprisonment in a Japanese prison camp. Space was at a premium but the most gracious person would move his bed even an inch at night to gain more space. He said that the true nature of a person comes out in crisis: "Such experiences with ordinary human cussedness naturally stimulated me to do a good deal of thinking in such time as I had to myself. My ideas as to what people were like and as to what motivated their actions were undergoing a radical revision. People generally – and I know I could not exclude myself – seemed to be much less rational and much more selfish than I had ever guessed, not at all the 'nice folk' I had always thought them to be. They did not decide to do things because it would be reasonable and moral to act in that way, but because that course of action suited their self-interest. Afterward they would find rational and moral reasons for what they had already determined to do." (Shantung Compound 1966 as found in Erickson's *Theology* book)*

*Our great difficulty is that we are always comparing the nice person to the bad person and judging that in comparison, the nice person is better. We have difficulty accepting that the nice person – our grandmothers – are sinful and in need of spiritual life. BUT sin is not defined in terms of what **we** find unpleasant (a Hitler or Stalin or Pol Pot or Amin or Radivic) It is defined in terms of failure to love, honor and serve **God** as we ought. Thus even the most likeable person needs new spiritual life as much as the most obnoxious, despicable, crude, or cruel person does. Total depravity also **means** that the person can't solve his sin problem on his own. Even the good we do is tainted and even if it wasn't we can't maintain good all the time, 24 hours of every day. Will power and determination aren't enough to make ourselves into people who love, honor and obey God perfectly.*

In the current issue of LIFE magazine former boxer Muhammad Ali, speaking as most Americans, is quoted as saying, "When God judges you, He will look at your good deeds and your bad deeds. Good deeds outweigh bad deeds in the hereafter. It pays off when you die." LIFE Dec 98 p69 But according to the Bible, contrary to what Muhammad Ali thinks, salvation by works is absolutely impossible (Eph 2:8-9) With all those concepts in mind then, Addison Leitch wrote, Depravity means, "If sin were blue in color I would be blue all

over” inside and out. *Beginnings in Theology* 1957 p36 **That’s God’s evaluation – we are sinners deserving God’s judgment.**

So look now, briefly, at God’s intervention in verses 6-8. Verse 6 speaks of God in ways that make us uncomfortable. “The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.” We have trouble with this language to describe God because we believe in an all-knowing, unchanging God and we wonder how such a God could wish he hadn’t done something. But what Moses is doing is using language with which we can identify AND it expresses a dimension of God that ought to make us tremble in fear. The text says that God is so “fed up” with sin that he will not tolerate it any longer. We want so desperately to always paint God as soft, loveable, tolerant, forgiving, - bland, inconsequential, subject to our wishes. The Bible paints him as a holy consuming fire – who will uphold his glory. And any person who forgets that about God will try to downplay sin and will pay the consequences.

And so the **second thing pointed out to us about God’s intervention in a sinful world is that God will judge them.** “So (verse 7) the Lord said, ‘I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth...’ The flood will come and God will wipe them out. This term is as descriptive in Hebrew as it is in English. They will be gone, finished, done away with.

God’s evaluation and God’s intervention are not good news. But the people of Noah’s day, the people of Moses’ day and we will never be ready to receive the grace of God until we understand and agree with God’s evaluation and God’s intervention. We will never be ready for rescue until we know we are lost. We will never be ready for salvation until we know we are damned. David Wells said, “Without an understanding of sin...there can be no deep believing of the Gospel.” (Wells in *Losing our Virtue* 180) Thomas Gregory wrote, “If sin means total depravity, and if total depravity means hell, then salvation can really mean amazing grace.” Thomas Gregory in *Soli Deo Gloria* by RC Sproul p31

And so the passage ends with a light piercing the darkness. “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.” We will look at that more closely in the next lesson, but know that God in mercy reaches out one more time with unmerited favor – grace. To the man or woman

who would **confess** - agreeing with God about their true condition, **and repent** – turning away from their sin, **and believe** – trusting God to provide forgiveness and life, God would save them as surely as he did Noah. God says we are in desperate trouble and only he can save us. Popular theology says we need minor adjustments that we can do on our own. Who will you believe?

I want to close with a long quote from A.W. Tozer. In it he summarizes so well the great difference between God's evaluation and remedy and popular opinion and remedy.

The Old Cross and the New

“All unannounced and mostly undetected there has come into modern times a new cross into popular evangelical circles. It is like the old cross, but different: the likenesses are superficial; the differences, fundamental.

The OLD cross would have nothing to do with the world. For Adam's (our) proud flesh it meant the end of the journey. The NEW cross is not opposed to the human race; rather it is a friendly pal and, if understood aright, it is the source of oceans of good clean fun and innocent enjoyment. It let's Adam live without interference. His live motivation is unchanged; he still lives for his own pleasure...though the fun is now on a higher plane morally...

The NEW cross does not slay the sinner, it redirects him. It gears him into a cleaner and jollier way of living and saves his self-respect.

The philosophy back of this kind of thing may be sincere but its sincerity does not save it from being false... It misses completely the whole meaning of the cross.

The OLD cross is a symbol of death. It stands for the abrupt, violent end of a human being... The OLD cross made no compromise, modified nothing, spared nothing; it slew all of the man, completely and for good. It did not try to keep on good terms with its victim. It struck cruel and hard, and when it had finished its work, the man was no more.

The race of Adam is under death sentence. There is no commutation and no escape. God cannot approve any of the fruits of sin, however innocent they may appear or beautiful to the eyes of

men. God salvages the individual by liquidating him and then raising him again to newness of life.

We who preach the gospel must not think of ourselves as public relations agents sent to establish good will between Christ and the world. We are not diplomats but prophets, and our message is not compromise but an ultimatum.

God offers life, but not an improved old life. The life he offers is life out of death. It stands always on the far side of the cross.

How can this theology be translated into life? Simply, he must repent and believe. He must forsake his sins and then go on to forsake himself. Let him cover nothing, defend nothing, excuse nothing. Let him not seek to make terms with God, but let him bow his head before the stroke of God's stern displeasure and acknowledge himself worthy to die.

Having done this, let him gaze with simple trust upon the risen Savior, and from Him will come life and rebirth and cleansing and power. The cross that ended the earthly life of Jesus now puts an end to the sinner; and the power that raised Christ from the dead now raises him to a new life along with Christ.” *(In Man, the Dwelling Place of God by Tozer)*