

Genesis 6:1–22 — The Sons of God Saw the Daughters of Men

The Sons of God Question, Jude and 2 Peter, Leaving the First Estate, Imagination Only Evil, and Noah Finding Grace

Scripture Reading: Genesis 6:1–22; Jude 6–7; 2 Peter 2:4–5

“And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually... But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.”

“And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.” (Jude 6)

Two Explanations for the Sons of God

Two principal explanations have been offered for the sons of God who took the daughters of men in verses 1–2. The first is that the sons of God refer to the godly line of Seth, and the daughters of men to the ungodly line of Cain; the transgression in view is the spiritually mixed marriage of believers with unbelievers. The second is that the sons of God are fallen angelic beings who violated the created order by taking human wives.

The first explanation faces a serious difficulty from verse 4: there were giants in the earth in those days, and also after that — after the flood. After the flood, the entire genealogical bottleneck passes through Noah and his three sons. There is no separate godly line of Seth and ungodly line of Cain after that. If the mixing of those two lines is what produced the giants and mighty men before the flood,

what accounts for the same phenomenon afterward? The explanation that works for before the flood must also work for after the flood, and the Seth-Cain theory cannot account for the post-flood occurrence.

A further difficulty with the Seth-Cain reading is that a mingling of godly and ungodly human lines would naturally produce degradation, not giants and men of great renown. Scripture consistently presents the crossing of God's boundaries as producing weakness and failure, not unusual might. The character of what is produced in verse 4 does not correspond well to what you would expect from spiritually mixed marriages.

The Term Sons of God in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the phrase sons of God is used exclusively of angelic beings — not of Israelites, who are not called sons of God during the period of the trial of the first man. Job 1:6 is the clearest instance: the sons of God came to present themselves before Jehovah, and Satan came also among them. That the term refers to angelic beings there is beyond dispute. Job 38:7 uses the same expression of beings who shouted for joy at creation: when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy. There is a prophecy in Hosea that Israel shall be called sons of the living God in the future day of their national restoration — that is prospective, at a point when they are acknowledged as God's people under Messiah. But it is not a description of their status during the trial of the first man. For the entire Old Testament period, sons of God refers to angelic beings, and it is most natural to read Genesis 6 in that consistent light.

Jude 6–7 and 2 Peter 2:4–5: What the New Testament Says

Jude 6 speaks of angels which kept not their first estate but left their own habitation, now reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. Verse 7 continues: even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities

about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication and going after strange flesh. The connection is explicit — these angels are compared to Sodom and Gomorrah, and the comparison is as to the nature of the sin: going after other flesh, a violation of the created order. The sin of Sodom was not merely immorality within the human order; it was a going after other flesh, a violation of the constituted order of nature as God had set it up. The sin of these angels is described in the same terms. This is clearly more than the godly line of Seth intermarrying with the daughters of Cain.

Second Peter 2:4 specifies that God spared not the angels that sinned but cast them down to the lowest pit — J.N. Darby translates the Greek word Tartarus as the lowest pit of gloom — and delivered them into chains of darkness to be reserved unto judgment. The very next verse continues immediately to the flood: and spared not the old world but saved Noah. The connection between the bound angels and the flood judgment is the same as in Jude. Peter and Jude both place the sin of these specific angels in immediate proximity to the flood event and describe it in terms that echo the sin of Sodom. This is not speculation; it is what the New Testament says about it.

An objection often raised is the Lord's statement in Matthew 22:30 that in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven. The key phrase is in heaven. The Lord was speaking of the holy angels in their present heavenly state. He was not speaking of fallen angels. This verse describes the angels of God in their proper estate; it has nothing to say about angels who left their estate, which is precisely what Jude says these did. To use a statement about angels in their proper state to argue that no angel could ever leave that state is to assume the conclusion.

A further important distinction: the angels who kept not their first estate are bound. But many fallen angels — the demons that appear throughout the Gospels, and Satan himself, the prince of demons — are not bound. Two classes

are in view: fallen angels in general, who are loose, and a specific group of fallen angels who committed this particular violation and who are therefore reserved in chains. Those bound ones will have their part in the lake of fire at the final judgment, as part of the devil and his angels, but their particular binding is a consequence of this particular transgression.

Leaving the First Estate: A Principle with Wider Application

The phrase keeping not their first estate — or in J.N. Darby's translation, their own original estate — describes a departure from the place God had assigned them. Genesis 6:2 describes the sons of God seeing the daughters of men and taking for themselves wives of all which they chose. They chose — without reference to the will of God. The will of God had placed them in their original estate; their own will took them out of it. This is the essence of sin: self-will in the place of submission to God's appointment.

The principle runs wider. Leaving the first love of Revelation 2:7 is a parallel in the moral sphere. God had appointed for his people what is best for them — a warm, living, first-love relationship with Christ. To leave first love is to make one's own choices about what to value, where to invest affection, what to seek — just as the sons of God made their own choices in Genesis 6. The thing God appointed is set aside for what one chose. The result in both cases is departure from the original estate that God in his goodness had provided.

Every Imagination of the Thoughts of His Heart Was Only Evil Continually

Verse 5 gives the divine assessment of mankind at the threshold of the flood: God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. This is sin in the flesh — the old nature, Romans 8:3 — described in its fully developed

expression. Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart: there is something in the deep recesses of the soul, working continuously, driving in one direction only. It is what might be called the subconscious in the language of psychology, though that term is not precise enough. It is the old nature, seated in the soul, governing the will, shaping the direction of all man's thinking and desiring.

The fool has said in his heart, there is no God — not in his intellect, not in his mind, but in his heart, because that is where the affections are. The atheist's atheism is not primarily an intellectual conclusion; it is a heart decision, a preference, a desire not to have a God to whom he is accountable. He repeats it to himself — no God, no God — because he likes the idea. And from that heart-set all his intellectual operations are energized and directed toward confirming what the heart has already decided. This is the mind of the flesh: not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be (Romans 8:7). Man in his fallen state cannot produce from himself a different result than what is described in verse 5.

The only remedy is the implantation of a new nature from God. That new nature, like the old, is one-directional — but in the exact opposite direction. It loves what God loves; it wants what God wants; it is entirely God-oriented. Noah had this, and therefore he walked with God in the midst of a generation whose every imagination was only evil continually. The flood did not remove the old nature from those who survived it — Noah came through with it intact, and it showed in Ham and in subsequent generations. The cure for what verse 5 describes was not the flood. It was the cross.

Violence and Corruption: Satan's Two Instruments

Verse 11 says the earth was corrupt before God and filled with violence. These two — corruption and violence — are the characteristic instruments through which the enemy of God and man works throughout history. He works by corruption when he comes as an angel of light, introducing false doctrine subtly

into the profession, mingling truth with error until the poison has spread. He works by violence when he goes about as a roaring lion, seeking to devour. Sometimes one instrument is dominant, sometimes the other, depending on what works in a given situation. Before the flood, both had reached their maximum expression: the earth was both filled with corruption and filled with violence.

The Lord said that his coming would be as it was in the days of Noah. What were the days of Noah like? These very chapters tell us. We are reading the description. And those who read it in the light of the present state of the world will find the likeness more than passing.

Noah Found Grace: The First Use of That Word in Scripture

But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. This is the first occurrence of the word grace in Scripture. It appears in the midst of a description of universal wickedness, after everything that could be said against the world had been said. That is exactly the setting in which grace appears — not against a backdrop of modest failure but against universal ruin. Grace is most fully itself when the darkness around it is deepest.

Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations — that is, blameless in the context of his contemporaries, not sinlessly perfect — and he walked with God. These are the marks of a man who had the new nature and lived by it. He was not the head of a visible community of God's children; he was a remnant within a world of wickedness. The ark that God commanded him to build was the instrument of preservation: not for the removal of the old nature, but for the carrying through of those who had God's life to the other side. And with thee will I establish my covenant. Grace not only saves; it covenants, it commits, it binds itself by promise to those it has reached.

But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.