

“THE END OF ALL FLESH”

Together with chapter 5, this chapter tells the story of the old world, the world that preceded the great flood, and of how the demise of that world came about. But, as we will see, this is not just about something that happened in the ancient past. It is not merely a story of something long ago in a world far, far away. This is a preview of what is yet to come in our world. In the flood, the Lord has given us a foreshadowing of the final judgment that lies in store for this world.

This passage begins with a paragraph that has challenged interpreters for millennia. It tells us that the sons of God took the daughters of men as their wives, provoking God’s judgment. The questions raised by this are very clear: who are these “sons of God” and who are the “daughters of men”? There are three main interpretive possibilities.

First, the “sons of God” could be the descendants of Seth, and the “daughters of men” could be the descendants of Cain. This is Calvin’s interpretation. If it is right, then the reason why this provoked God’s wrath was because the members of the covenant family, the family of Seth, were intermarrying with members of the ungodly world, something that God always forbids his people to do. This interpretation fits well within the larger context, since the preceding chapters set the genealogies of Cain and Seth in such sharp contrast with each others. However, the Hebrew name “sons of God” is not used of human beings anywhere else in the Old Testament. On top of that, the name “daughters of men” is more naturally understood as referring to the daughters of mankind in general,

not just the daughters of Cain. These problems are not insurmountable, but they are significant.

The second interpretation is the oldest: the view that “sons of God” refers to angelic beings who rebelled against God by taking human wives. This was the view of the ancient Jewish interpreters. Its strengths include the fact that the name “sons of God” is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer to angelic beings. Also, this view makes good sense of verse 4, which says that these marriages produced a race of mighty men. And finally, there are several New Testament passages in the letters of Peter and Jude that speak of the fall of angels in connection with the great flood. [see 1 Pet. 3:19-20; 2 Pet. 2:4-6; Jude 6] The problem with this interpretation is that angels are spiritual beings, and it is difficult for us to see how they could intermarry with humans. Also, there is Jesus’s statement in the Gospels that the angels in heaven neither marry nor are given in marriage. Now, before you are tempted to deny this interpretation entirely, it should be noted that Jesus only said that the angels in heaven do not marry, which could leave room for the possibility of fallen angels doing so. And even though it is difficult for us to understand how this could happen, the Bible does have a number of passages in which angels appear in bodily form, several of which are right here in Genesis. And there is the fact that the Gospels have many examples of demons taking possession of people. And the New Testament also says that, at the end of history, demonic forces will take on an embodied form in the figure of the antichrist. It may be hard for us to conceive of the

idea of spirit-human marriages, but we need to remember that the pre-flood world was a very different world when compared to ours.

The third interpretation sees the name “sons of God” as a reference to human kings descended from Cain who gathered harems of wives to themselves and produced many offspring who inherited great political power. This interpretation has its basis in comparisons with other ancient literature in which kings make claims to divinity, hence the idea that the “sons of God” are royal figures. But the main problem with this view is that there is no biblical instance of the name “sons of God” being used in this way.

Which interpretation is correct? It is hard to say. As we have seen, each has its own share of merits and problems. It is probably not possible to have absolute certainty here. For some reason, God has chosen not to make this particular portion of his Word clear to us. This does not make it any less the inspired Word of God than other passages of Scripture. Nor does it mean that we shouldn't bother trying to understand it. It simply means that we need to have a degree of interpretive humility here.

Despite their differences, all three of these interpretations convey the same basic point: human corruption got worse and worse, until God determined to bring the world to an end. God says that man's days shall be 120 years. This probably refers to the length of time that will remain until God sends the flood to destroy the earth. But it could possibly refer to the span of each man's life, indicating that people will stop living to be many hundreds of years old, which obviously did end up happening. If it refers to

individual life spans, then it was gradually implemented, since there are several people after the flood who live longer than 120 years.

Again, the details can be taken in slightly different ways, but the overall point is very clear: mankind's increasing wickedness incites the response of God's wrath and judgment. Divine judgment is not a very popular topic in our culture. The idea that God would wipe out an entire civilization - including fathers, mothers, infant children, the elderly - in one fell swoop: that is something that most people believe God would never do. Have you noticed how people get so offended when some fundamentalist preacher says that AIDS is God's judgment against gays, or that the attacks on 9/11 were God's judgment upon American depravity? Granted, such preachers are not usually very wise in the way they say such things, and they do not have an authoritative word from God revealing that these particular things are judgments against specific sins. But is it not true that God's wrath burns against those who practice homosexuality? Is it not true that God is not pleased with the moral decline of our nation? The reason why people take offense at the notion of divine judgment is because they understand neither the nature of God nor the obligation that his creatures owe to him. God is holy, and he is the Lord and Ruler over all the peoples of the earth. We all owe him perfect reverence, allegiance, and obedience. Sin is an offense against God's holiness and sovereign rule. All sin deserves his final judgment. God withholds his final and decisive judgment - not forever, but for a time - in order to provide people with an opportunity to repent. But in many ways he does let his judgments loose within this present age. War, famine, disease - these things

and more are tokens of judgment, testifying to God's justice, reminding us that sin will not go unpunished. They point forward to the far worse judgment that is still to come, the final judgment that will come at the end of history.

The flood stands as a judgment within history, and a foreshadowing of the final judgment, a warning for people in all ages. Listen to these words from 2 Peter 3:3-7:

“scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”

In the days of Noah, the wickedness of man incited God to destroy the world with water. From that time on, the wickedness of man has been inciting God to destroy the world with fire.

The text says that God was sorry that he had made man. This does not contradict other passages that emphasize that God does not change his mind. Malachi 3:6 says,

“For I the LORD do not change.” Numbers 23:19 says, “God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.” God did not change his mind when he expressed regret over having made mankind. This is another example of analogical, or anthropomorphic, language. God is speaking of himself by way of analogy, using language that we can comprehend. God stands outside of history, but we live within history. God’s decree for history has been set from before the beginning of time. It will never change. But, as God deals with people within history, he responds to our actions. From our point of view, this can sometimes look as though God is changing his mind, even though that is not what is ultimately taking place.

The text says that God looks into the human heart, and when he does so, he sees the intentions of our hearts. In Noah’s day, he saw that the intentions of the thoughts of man’s heart was only evil continually, and this grieved him. Sin grieves God, and it provokes his wrath. And if sin grieves the God who is majestic and glorious in all his perfections, the God who is full of steadfast love and faithfulness, the God who is abounding in grace and mercy, the God who is himself the supreme good, if sin grieves this God, then what a grievous thing sin really is. Here is reason enough for us to hate sin with the most bitter hatred that we can muster.

Man’s wickedness caused God to determine to blot him from the earth. But there was one man that he determined to spare. “Noah found favor with God.” Noah is called “a righteous man, blameless in his generation.” This does not mean that Noah was without sin. He inherited the same sinful nature that belongs to every member of Adam’s fallen

race. Noah was righteous in the only way that any man can be righteous before God: by faith. The letter to the Hebrews makes this explicit when it says: “By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.” [Heb. 11:7]

But we do not have to go to the New Testament to discover that Noah was a man of faith. In verse 18, the Lord says that he will establish his covenant with Noah. The word “establish” would be better translated as “confirm,” since that is how it is used elsewhere in the Old Testament. [see Deut. 9:5; 2 Sam. 7:25] And this tells us that Noah was already in a covenant relationship with God, a covenant that God was going to confirm by delivering Noah through the flood. Noah was righteous because he was walking with God, walking by faith in what God had promised his people.

And Noah’s faith was made manifest by his life. He was blameless in his generation, an exceedingly wicked generation at that. As we all know, it is very difficult to live a holy life in an evil age, but God enabled Noah to do so. He will enable you to do the same, if you will also walk by faith.

It is not easy to walk by faith. It certainly wasn’t easy for Noah. Imagine all of the effort involved in building the ark. Imagine all of the things that Noah had to let go of in order to do that work. Imagine what his neighbors must have said to him. Imagine the doubts that must have risen up in his mind as he expended his efforts and resources on building the ark over a hundred year period. Noah was not perfect, as we will see very

clearly a bit later on in his story. But he was a man of faith, the kind of person that God calls all of his children to be.

Noah's generation stands as a warning to every generation that follows after it, including our own. God is exceedingly patient, but he will not relent forever. He will not hold back his judgment forever. Let us all take heed of this warning. Do not be like Noah's neighbors. They saw Noah building the ark. They must have heard his story many times. But they simply could not believe that the world would ever really change. But change it did, a change that brought their world to an end. A great change is going to come upon our world as well, a universal day of judgment, a day when the earth will be destroyed by fire so that it can be made new. God provided Noah with a means of deliverance, and he provides one for us as well. As Peter says in his first letter, God saved Noah and his family by putting them in the ark, and he saves us by baptizing us into Jesus Christ. The ark was a type, a prophetic picture, of Christ and his church. The ark was the only refuge from the flood; and the body of Christ is the only refuge from the judgment that awaits our world. Noah was saved by believing God's Word and doing what God said. The way of salvation remains the same today. The only people who will be saved from that great and dreadful day are those who respond to the gospel with a living faith, the kind of faith that bears the fruit of obedience.