

9. Sin reigns, but not forever (2007)

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[0 : 0 0] Well, do turn, if you would, to the verses that we read in Genesis chapter 6. And as I said, these first eight verses of this chapter form Act 2 of this second book of Genesis.

The second book of beginnings. It begins at chapter 5, verse 1. And it takes us from Adam's creation in the image and likeness of God, as we're told, and under God's blessing. It takes us right through to the time of Noah, and to the terrible judgment of destruction that came upon the whole known world in his day.

And it really is a terrible thing. The language of creation at the beginning of chapter 5, you see it there, echoing chapter 1. But it gives way to the language of decreation at the end of chapter 6, verse 7.

A blotting out of man and animals and birds, because God is sorry that he's made them. In chapter 5, we saw the terrible entail of sin as death reigned from Adam onwards, even in the chosen promised line of Seth.

And he died, and he died, and he died, and he died. The bell tolling for everyone, because God had said, to dust you shall return.

[1 : 3 0] But now in chapter 6, we widen the camera angle to look at not just the family line of Seth, but the whole of a developed human society. And to see just what a mammoth tragedy has overtaken the whole human race because of sin.

And how vast the disaster of sin and rebellion against God is, for the whole of man, for the whole of the world, indeed the whole world of nature. Look at verse 1.

We see man multiplying on the face of the earth, filling the earth with new generations of humanity. That's just what God had created man to do and blessed him to do.

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, he said. But you see, the picture that we see here is something that has become the very antithesis of God's purpose.

What we read in these verses is very far away from man ruling as God's image on earth and doing everything for God's glory and honor, isn't it? He is man ruling in rebellion against God and seeking only his own glory.

[2 : 3 9] Not ruling for the good of the earth, but for the ill of the earth and those on it. Not cherishing and perpetuating life, but promulgating exploitation and violence and death.

And it's this appalling reversal by man of his creation purpose that leads to the terrible judgment of the flood where God effectively reverses his whole creation process.

And the world recedes again into the darkness, into the overwhelming waters that we began the book of Genesis with. Terribly grim reading. And yet, that's not the whole story.

Nor is it the end of the story. Just as in chapter 5 where we faced the relentless reality of the reign of death, but the stories of Lamech and Enoch still gave us a powerful ray of hope in the midst of that persistent reign of death.

Well, so here. You'll have noticed that our reading ended with verse 8 with a wonderful reminder that God's plan and purpose cannot and will not be derailed.

[3 : 45] Even by the most appalling and gruesome realities of the sinfulness of the human heart. So if the message of the first act of this little book of Genesis in chapter 5 was death reigns but not supreme, then the message of act 2 verses 1 to 8 of chapter 6 must be sin reigns but not forever.

And so that's our title for this morning as we look at these verses together. I must say at the start that this passage contains some of the most difficult verses in the whole of the book of Genesis. And we'll do our best to try and make sense of them.

But whatever else may be clear, this much is surely indisputable as we read these verses. Derek Kidner says this, Whichever way we take it, a new stage has been reached in the progress of evil with God's bounds overstepped in yet another realm.

And that seems to be absolutely clear, doesn't it? What we read of here is a terrible development in the grim march of evil. A development so terrible that it made the awful judgment of the flood unavoidable at the hand of God.

So I want to look at these brief verses under three headings. First, the terrifying reality of evil. Second, the terrible result of sin. And third, the tenacious refrain of grace.

[5 : 14] First then, look at verses one to four. They speak of the terrible, terrifying reality of evil in the heart of our human world. And the predominant message that we're meant to see here, I think, is this.

It's about man's defiance and God's patience. The arrogant defiance of man, but the astonishing patience of God in the face of such sin.

Look at verses one and two. When man began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive, and they took as their wives any they chose.

And the result of that action was so serious that God declares judgment on the whole human race. Look at verse three. Then the Lord said, My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh.

His days shall be 120 years. Difficult to be sure of the translation of that verse, whether it's speaking about God's spirit abiding in man, that is the breath of life that gives us mortal life, or, as the footnote says, God's spirit contending with man, that is pleading with man, that he might repent so that he does have life.

[6 : 28] But either way, the point is exactly the same. God will not endlessly permit those who rebel and fill his world with evil to do that forever.

He is the giver of life, and he also will take away life at his will. So man's days are numbered, he says. Only 120 more years until judgment must come.

I don't think, by the way, that 120 years there is a limit on individual human lifespan. There's nothing else in the Bible that would suggest that. But rather, it's the time span between these words and the coming of the judgment of the flood that we're going to read about.

At the end of chapter 5, Noah was 500. When the flood began, he was about 600. It seems that God gave a long period of notice, this 120 years, during which Noah's building of the ark and Noah's ministry would call people to repentance.

Peter, do you remember in the New Testament, calls Noah an evangelist, in 2 Peter 2, verse 5, a herald of righteousness. And in his first letter, 1 Peter 3, verse 20, he says God's patience waited in the days of Noah.

[7 : 42] So God shows astonishing patience, even in the face of such terrible sin. He gives gracious warnings, and he prepared a way of escape for those who would listen.

But in the end, he must bring to an end such wickedness that was so destructive to his world. But what sin could have been so heinous to precipitate the destruction of the entire known world in such a cataclysm of punishment that the world has never again witnessed, despite the undoubted horrors and terrors of evil that have resurfaced persistently throughout the history of our world?

That's the question that must inform our interpretation of verses 1 and 2. What was it that was so terrible that caused this awful, awful judgment of God?

So who were these sons of God and daughters of men that we read about? Well, some think that the sons of God are those of Seth's godly line, and that the daughters of man are those of Cain's ungodly line, and therefore the sin here was mixed marriages that led to corruption of the faith.

Well, certainly that was something that was a problem throughout Israel's history and no doubt a concern of Moses, but there's no mention of that kind of language up until now in the account here. And verse 1 does look very general, talking about sons of God, daughters of man.

[9 : 19] So, although it might give us some useful sermon material about the warning of mixed marriages and the danger of being yoked together with unbelievers and so on, I just don't think it really makes sense of the context that we have here.

And more importantly, it hardly does seem to explain, does it, the calamity of the judgment of the flood. Well, others see these sons of God as being kings or nobles who took wives from the peasantry and built up harems of whoever they chose.

And that means that the sin here then is violence and polygamy and tyranny. And that does seem to fit with verse 4. They are the dynasty.

We're told of the Nephilim, the tyrants, the mighty men of old. We come to chapter 10, we read about people like that again. Nimrod, the mighty man, the tyrant.

He and his ilk tyrannized the world, built cities, raped and pillaged throughout the ancient world. But again, that alone seems hardly enough to justify the uniqueness of this situation that's described to us before the flood.

[10 : 30] And furthermore, again, ascribing that meaning of sons of God to kings like that is a bit precarious. There's no real biblical support for that anywhere else. By far the oldest view is that sons of God refers to angelic beings.

Certainly that's the usual meaning of this phrase in the Old Testament. Almost always means that. So for example, if you read Job chapter 1, you read about the sons of God presenting themselves before God in the heavenly court, including Satan.

In Job 38, he speaks about creation when the sons of God shouted together when the morning stars sang for joy. And so if that is the correct reading, and I'm bound to say I think it is, what we have here is fallen disobedient angels, spirits, invading the world of humanity to bring about terrible and terrifying demonizing of the world.

And that does seem, doesn't it, to fit much better with the response of God which is to destroy the whole world of humanity in a devastating way.

Now we can't be dogmatic. But I do want to pursue this line of interpretation, but also to make clear what we are and we're not saying in taking that line.

[11 : 53] There are objections to this view from various directions. Some, of course, dismiss it just as fanciful mythology and simply debunk the whole idea of the supernatural in that way.

But others do have much more reverent objections. They'll say, well, if the rebellion here was angelic, why does God punish man? And they'll also point out quite rightly that in verse 2 it's talking about real marriage.

It's not just talking about acts of sexual intercourse by demons who then somehow disappear. And further, they'll say, well, in Matthew 23, verse 30, doesn't Jesus say that angels can't marry?

Well, let me just take that last one first. Actually, no, Jesus doesn't say that. What he does say is that in the resurrection we won't marry and give in marriage, but we will be like, he says, the angels in heaven.

He doesn't say, therefore, that angels can't crave sexual relationships. And also, notice he is talking about the angels in heaven in the resurrection.

[13 : 01] Obedient angels who are in their right place. But that doesn't exclude the possibility that some angels, fallen angels, might crave the experience of human beings and seek to do just exactly that.

And indeed, the New Testament does seem to point very much in that direction. Both Peter and Jude speak about these things in a way that seems to refer precisely to this incident in exactly these terms.

So, 1 Peter 3 and 20 speaks of disobedient spirits who, quote, did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah. In 2 Peter 2 and 4 he speaks of angels who sinned and were cast into hell.

And in the very next verse he speaks of the flood. Probably clearest of all is Jude who mentions angels who did not stay within their own position of authority but left their proper dwelling just as Sodom and Gomorrah likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, unnatural flesh.

So, it really does seem as though the New Testament gives us good reason to see the work of fallen angels here. Sons of God once, yes, like Satan himself, but rebellious spirits abandoning their proper place and invading the world of humanity.

[14 : 21] Now, we shouldn't be surprised by that when we get to Genesis chapter 6 because it's exactly what Genesis chapter 3 tells us happened in man's first rebellion.

Man was led into evil by the serpent himself, the devil. So now we have the devil and his angels as Jesus himself calls them and they're working their dark powers again influencing the human race.

Now, I think we must take that seriously. But that's not to say, of course, not at all, that we're dealing here with monsters, with half-men and half-beast, creatures of mythology.

No, nothing like that. And that is where I think the view that these were earthly tyrants is helpful because in earthly terms that seems to be exactly what they were.

These sons of God who bred a race of Nephilim, of mighty men, of tyrants, they were men. But men possessed by frightful demonic powers.

[15 : 26] These were men, it seems, who were wholly possessed and controlled by these spirits, these fallen angels. As one scholar puts it, their perverted psyches allowed this entrance of the demonic.

And friends, ultimately, only that can really explain the terrifying reality of evil in our world. And we needn't think that that's strange or fanciful.

The whole Bible understands that reality. That behind the veil of this physical world that we see and that we live in and experience, behind that there is a real spiritual realm of real powers, evil powers, that have this world in their thrall.

One of the clearest places where that is unveiled is in the book of Daniel. Do you remember when we studied it in the first part of that book we see the struggles of God's people on earth where their earthly enemies are against them.

But then in the second half of the book we see the veil lifted back and we see behind the scenes to the heavenly realms, to the warfare that's going on there. In Daniel 10 in particular we see that there's a dark angelic power, the prince of Persia who stands behind the actions of the despotic kings of Persia who are oppressing God's people.

[16 : 48] Of course that's just exactly what Ephesians 6 tells us. Our struggles are never merely against earthly powers but against real forces of evil, rulers and authorities in the heavenly places says Paul.

And these powers can and do invade the personalities of human beings sometimes with very terrifying consequences. Witness some of the characters that we come across in the Gospels present themselves to Jesus.

And still today too I believe that we see evidences of exactly that. You've all seen haven't you the pictures that you sometimes look at in the newspapers of some of these terrible, awful serial killers.

I was just looking the other week there at that dreadful, dreadful business of that Russian man, the chessboard killer. Do you remember? Who wanted to kill enough women to put a name on every square of a chessboard.

64. When I saw the face of that man staring out at me from the newspaper I thought that man has the face of absolute demonism, wickedness. And we see the same sometimes don't we?

[18 : 00] And that I believe is what we have here in Genesis chapter 6. See verse 4 if you look at it gives us what we might call the earthly view. History sees only the Nephilim.

The authorised version translates that as giants. The root means fallen ones. They were the mighty tyrants as it could also be translated. The mighty men of old.

Men who raked and pillaged and brutalised peoples and set themselves up as rulers and overlords violating women. Building harems, oppressing peoples with apparently supernatural power.

But you see verse 2 tells us what lies behind that history. It's the terrifying reality of demonic powers at work in opposition to God and in defiance of God seeking to be gods and to rule themselves and rule over others as God.

Men and whole society seeking to usurp the place of God in arrogant presumption in arrogant pride because they're driven by fallen angels who are in total opposition to God.

[19 : 13] You see it's the same pattern isn't it? Exactly as chapter 3 if you look at these verses. They saw that these women were attractive and they took that just echoes exactly the words we read about Eve in chapter 3.

It's exactly the same when we get to chapter 11 in the Tower of Babel and they said let us build a tower that reaches up to heaven so we can get to heaven ourselves and be gods. And that is the terrifying reality of evil.

Human beings become consumed by a demonic delusion of seeking immortality and fame for themselves in sheer defiance of God. And when that happens the result really is terrifying.

It's the world of the Nephilim who ruled then and did you notice verse 4 and now afterwards. Even after the flood those influences still resurface in the world and we've seen that all the way through history.

No doubt Moses added that particularly for his first readers because they knew that the Nephilim faced them too. In Numbers chapter 13 we read that it was their presence that was one of the reasons the people balked and wouldn't go into the land and refused.

[20 : 23] But this is the recurring story of history. We live in the world of the Nephilim of powerful men of ruthless rulers who do as they please who wreak violence and havoc.

And that almost always involves doesn't it the dreadful exploitation and abuse and tyranny over women. We just need to read the history books. All the great empires of the ancient world Babylon the Syria Greece they were famed for their brutality for their violence.

Just think a little bit back to the 20th century think of the Nazi Reich think of the Soviet tyranny think of Pol Pot in Cambodia and others like them.

Just think today of the warlords who rule in so many parts of the world the drug barons the terrorist tyrants. What is it that can explain such terrifying evil?

Well our liberal secular world just can't explain it. It just can't. And that's why our newspapers have to resort to this kind of language isn't it? Talking about devils and monsters and demons.

[21 : 39] Well yes says the Bible that is what lies behind all such things. It's a terrifying demonization of man and even whole human societies.

And sometimes the result is something of such epic proportions that unleashes such terrible and terrifying evil on the world that but for the direct intervention of God humankind would utterly destroy itself.

but here you see way back in the earliest days of developed human civilization so pervasive had become that malign and malevolent influence of the powers of evil in the world so arrogant had become the defiance of man against God and his rule and his purpose that God must tell you to the whole world in judgment in a merciful judgment lest the whole world would be completely overcome and overrun by that evil.

You see eventually God's patience must run out and judgment must come even though then as we've read he did give him a time to repent and a standing witness and a warning in Noah and his message about the coming flood.

And although God promised after the flood never to send such a global disaster again as long as the earth shall last he said that is until the very end of this world yet we have seen haven't we throughout history that wherever the Nephilim have reigned supreme and arrogant defiance against God has reached such heights when sheer evil has become so entrenched in society or a nation or an empire well there has come a time hasn't there when God has said enough my spirit will not contend with man forever for he is flesh man is not God and though he deludes himself often to think that he is though he thinks that his power his ideology is invincible it is God who declares the length of days for men and nations not man and we've seen proud empires come and go haven't we and that ought to be a warning to the world to societies the governments who set themselves arrogantly in defiance of God who defy his justice who abuse humanity every single towering empire of the past has in the end been left in the ruins of the dust sometimes yes they flourished for what seemed a very long time because God is astonishingly patient gave the world in Noah's day 120 years to repent but in the end because God is just he must show himself to be just so we must remember sin may reign but not forever and that also is just as true for the individual human heart isn't it you know it's the most dangerous thing in the world to presume upon the mercy and the patience of God you never know do you how much that time of respite is left before God's judgment must at last fall and that brings us to the second thing the terrible result of sin in the human heart if you look at verses 5 and 6 they speak don't they of man's depravity and of God's pain of man's absolute depravity but the agonized pain of God himself see verse 5 here is very very important because sometimes when people speak about the reality of the demonic and evil in the world and people's hearts being possessed by the demonic they rather think that somehow that excuses them it's the devil's fault it's not theirs but the Bible will never ever allow us to think like that on the one hand it does teach the terrifying truth of the reality of evil and demonic influence on man from outside

[25 : 57] Paul says the God of this world that's the devil has blinded the eyes of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel men are imprisoned by real and terrible demonic powers but the Bible says human beings are wholly responsible for that condition because they are willful pursuers of sin and that's why the Bible's answer to that plight is never something outward to get rid of these influences but something inward real repentance be reconciled to God says Paul don't resist and refuse God's grace you see that's what verse 5 tells us the terrifying reality of evil at work in humanity is the terrible result of sin in man's heart man is wholly culpable for his condition of rebellion against God just look at verse 5 but the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intention of the thought of his heart was only evil continually you couldn't find could you a clearer definition of the doctrine of total depravity than that look at it the wickedness of man is extensive it's great in the earth it's intensive and pervasive it's every intention of his heart it's inward and personal it's the thoughts of his heart it's absolute it's only evil and it's habitual only evil continually that's pretty comprehensive isn't it total depravity in society we mustn't misunderstand though when we say that human beings are totally depraved the doctrine of total depravity we don't mean we don't mean that we're all totally evil all of the time we just mean that every part of our human makeup is tinged somehow with the fallenness of sin but that does mean that we're all capable of far more terrible evil than any of us could ever imagine that's why when we hear sometimes as we do on the television the relative of some accused person saying he's just not capable of such a thing we should never believe that because it's never true the truth is that but for

God's restraining hand of grace upon us and on our world we would be far more wicked than we are and the world would be a place of terminal evil but God is merciful and patient and we thank him for that but there does come a time for societies for individuals and ultimately for the whole world when God will lift his hand of restraint and when he does the sheer horror of sin and wickedness and its result in the human heart will become clear and plain to all and God's judgment is revealed then as being absolutely and wholly just and righteous and in fact essential because of the wickedness of sin and that is how it was we're told in the days of Noah a society a world in outright rebellion extensive and intensive and absolute wickedness inward and personal and habitual and that's the terrible result of sin in the heart of man but look at verse 6 you see it affects not only man's heart but God's heart too the Lord is sorry that he's even made man he's grieved to his very heart the NIV says his heart was full of pain we tend to see sin as our problem don't we but in fact above all else human sin and rebellion is an assault on

God himself not of course that God can be ruled or overcome by emotions nothing creatures can do can ultimately change God but that's not to say that God has no emotions we're told here he is sorry about his creation it grieves him it pains him and that word echoes the words of the curse that God had placed upon man in chapter 3 in pain and toil you shall live but God himself we're told here feels the pain of that curse in himself as Derek Kidner comments already God suffers on man's account and that conveys the terrible terrible result of human sin not only does it bring absolute depravity to the heart of man but it brings agonizing pain to the heart of God himself pain that he must bear it seems on account of the awfulness of man's sin just think about that but that pain for our sin isn't the only thing that's in God's heart in God's heart we're told here so as we close don't miss how this section ends don't miss verse 8 which speaks doesn't it of the tenacious refrain of grace in the heart of God see verses 7 and 8 speak both of man's destruction and of

God's promise yes of the global destruction of man in the flood yet also of the gracious promise of God God must judge such overwhelming evil how could he be a just and good God and do nothing in the face of such dreadful wickedness we would never tolerate would we in our society a human judiciary that allows absolute wickedness and tyranny to reign of course not think of the outcry that there is when a judge is ridiculously lenient when a heinous crime has been committed no there must be justice and there is justice with God and yet there's more look at verse 8 but Noah found favour or grace in the eyes of the Lord why in the midst of this world of sin and dreadful rebellion did this one man Noah find grace and favour in God well not not because he was any better than the rest quite the reverse clearly

Noah belongs to the humanity and the society just described in verse 5 don't jump down to verse 9 after the break and say oh Noah was righteous we read so God favoured him that would be to totally abuse the Bible text verse 9 starts a whole new account a whole new book of Genesis what verse 9 says of Noah is the result of verse 8 not the cause of it now Alec Matheer tells us that this phrase finding favour or grace in the eyes of someone occurs more than 40 times in the Old Testament and always he says it is a formula that safeguards the pure understanding of grace as the outreaching of free and unmerited favour it wasn't that Noah found grace by merit or effort or searching for it rather it was grace that found Noah let me read from the notes in that annual set of readings by William Still that we were mentioning last week he says the but of verse 8 is not of human initiative but divine it was not

[33 : 51] God who found grace in Noah but Noah who found grace in God Noah found grace but he did not create it and he found it where it was and ever had been and ever shall be in the eyes of the Lord you see not even the terrifying reality of evil and the terrible result of sin can extinguish the tenacious refrain of grace throughout these early chapters of Genesis not even the grief and the pain in God's heart can extinguish the grace and the promise of life and salvation that is also in his heart indeed we could say this he bears that pain that there might be grace and promise in his eyes free and unmerited favour that comes to a man like Noah just like all the rest but transforms him into one who will walk with God and know his salvation and but for that tenacious refrain of grace the world would have ended then and it would have ended many times since but there was grace grace to be found in the eyes of the

Lord not notice grace that does away with the just and right judgment on sin and wickedness and evil but grace that saves and preserves through that judgment and from that judgment and that is the eternal gospel isn't it Paul puts it this way in Romans chapter 5 where sin increased grace abounded all the more so that as sin reigned in death grace might also reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord you see sin reigns in this world but not forever Jesus Christ the promised seed of Noah has come and by his resurrection he has called time on the world just as Noah called time on the world in those days he has declared an end and a judgment to come just as chapter 3 of

Genesis 6 proclaimed that and none of us know how much of that time is left but the New Testament is very plain Peter tells us that just as the flood deluged the world in ancient days so this world he says is being kept for a day of judgment by fire a day when sins reign will at last be utterly ended forever and when a new heavens and earth will emerge the home of righteousness forever and the New Testament tells us we are already in these last days Paul tells us in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 that these days will be marked by the lifting of the restraining hand of God from the wickedness and the lawlessness of man until it is fully exposed for what it is rank hatred and defiance of God and behind it the activity of Satan himself read 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 this afternoon when you go home and see just how parallel it is to Genesis 6 and then when his hand is so lifted says the New

Testament all will be condemned who did not believe the truth who refused says Paul to believe the truth and so be saved and as it was in the days of Noah so will be the coming of the Son of Man Jesus himself says exactly that in Matthew 24 you see friends Genesis 6 is written for us that we might be wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ it shouts to us look around at the world around you see the terrifying reality of evil see the terrible result of human sin but be clear sin reigns but not forever and if the signs of our times seem to speak of the restraining hand of God being lifted and the multiplying of evil around us as humanity multiplies as it never has been before on the face of the earth then perhaps that time is much shorter than we think but there's there is still the tenacious refrain of God's grace the New Testament says now is still the time of salvation now is the favourable time grace still shines out from the eyes of this same God you see God's patience waited in the days of Noah it's waiting now but friends you and we can't afford to wait are you sure that you have found grace in the eyes of the Lord as

Noah did it's there it's there to be found and received it's still the same as ever the Bible says don't despise it don't resist it grasp it and own it and rejoice in it today while it's still called today as you bow the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ and as you keep bowing the knee to him sin reigns but not forever don't let any of us be found on the wrong side when that rain comes at last to an end in our personal life or in the life of this whole world but grasp it find the grace that Noah found while it's still called today let's pray but concerning that day and hour no one knows not even the angels of heaven nor the son but the father only as were the days of Noah so will be the coming of the son of man for as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking marrying and giving in marriage until the day when Noah entered the ark and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away so will be the coming of the son of man then two men will be in the field one will be taken and one left two women will be grinding at the mill one will be taken and the other left therefore stay awake for you do not know on what day you're

[40 : 37] Lord is coming heavenly father we thank you that you leave us not without a word of warning and a word of grace we pray that every one of us here might find the same grace that Noah found the grace that streams from your heart of love and streams towards us this day in the gospel of your son our Lord Jesus Christ Christ oh may we be found in him we pray that Jesus the lover of our souls may shield us and keep us safe in that great and terrible day when he comes and this earth gives way and is destroyed by fire and the birth of that new world that we long for the home of righteousness bursts forth in glorious day to the rejoicing of all who have loved you so may we hear your word today and respond for we ask it in

Jesus name amen you you