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Genesis 6:1-8

23rd Message

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# LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

I have always liked maps. This is one reason why I studied geography at university followed by a Masters in surveying. When I was single I decorated my apartment walls with maps. I have many books of maps, old and new, and can happily spend an afternoon looking through these. One of the fascinating features about old maps are the artistic flourishes of the map-makers. They liked to fill in the blank spaces on both land and sea with animals, both real and imaginary. Claus Magnus's *Carta Marina* (1539) depicts a particularly fine collection of sea monsters cavorting in the North Atlantic. Medieval copies of old Roman maps, such as *The Anglo-Saxon World Map* (1025), show lions with the phrase *hic abundant leones*, "here lions abound." On the Lenox globe (1510) appears the phrase *hic sunt dracones*, "here be dragons." This phrase has entered the English idiom, denoting dangerous or unknown territory. This phrase came to mind this past week as I was thinking about today's passage.

After a hiatus of six months, we return to my series on Genesis 1-11 entitled "Our Story of Origins." Today we arrive at chapter 6. Here be dragons! The first few verses of this chapter are notoriously difficult. Here we find the sons of God, the daughters of man, and the Nephilim. Consult any volume on Bible difficulties and you're sure to find these verses. Who are these people? Scholars are divided on the issue. It's not just a division between liberal and conservative: evangelicals are divided on the issue. Prominent evangelical scholars whom I highly respect interpret these three groups in very different ways. I've been pondering these verses for over thirty years. For many years, as I read the different arguments, I used to feel like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, saying "He's right" of whomever had just spoken. If scholars disagree on how to understand these three groups what hope is there for us? The good news is that I don't think the identity of these three groups is the most important thing about this passage.

There are two very important things to bear in mind as we seek to understand this text: context and structure.

## 1. Context

5:1-6:8 belongs together as a unit, forming the second account (*toledot*) of Genesis, "The written account of Adam's family line" (TNIV) or "The book of the generations of Adam" (ESV). The third account, that of Noah, begins at 6:9. So, 6:1-8 belongs with the preceding genealogy as the conclusion to the account of Adam. There are numerous connections between the genealogy of chapter 5 and the narrative of 6:1-8.

## 2. Structure

These eight verses are presented as two parallel panels, each with a similar three-part structure. Someone sees and acts, then the Lord speaks, and finally a person or group of people is described. In the first panel it's the sons of God who see; they see that something is good and then act upon this evaluation. In the second panel it's the Lord who sees; he sees that something is evil and then responds. In

the first panel the Nephilim are described; in the second panel Noah is described. These two panels offer us earth's view and heaven's view on the situation when humanity began to multiply on the earth.

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|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Earth's view (6:1-4) | 2. Heaven's view (6:5-8) |
| a. The sons of God (2)  | a. The LORD (5-6)        |
| i. see that...good      | i. sees that...evil      |
| ii. take                | ii. regrets              |
| b. The LORD speaks (3)  | b. The LORD speaks (7)   |
| c. The Nephilim (4)     | c. Noah (8)              |

This structure highlights two major contrasts: between how the sons of God see and how the Lord sees, and between the Nephilim and Noah. It was only when I discerned this structure that I finally began to make sense of the passage, after years of feeling like Tevye.

## I. The View from Earth (6:1-4)

Hitherto I've used TNIV for this series. But unfortunately, in its quest for readability and inclusive language the TNIV has lost some of the nuances of this passage, so here I'll switch to ESV.

**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. Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. (Gen 6:1-4 ESV)**

### Setting (1)

Verse 1 gives the setting for the passage: "When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them." Genesis is a book of beginnings. It begins "In the beginning." Five times the verb "begin" is used in these opening chapters (Gen 1-11); this is its second instance. Man began to multiply upon the face of the land, *adam* upon the *adamah* (here *adam* means man as a species, man as humanity). This multiplication was good; this was as God intended it to be. In the beginning, when God created man as male and female, he blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (1:28). The beginning of the account of Adam reiterated this:

**When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. (5:1b-2)**

This blessing was divine enablement to fulfill the command, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." So the multiplication of humanity upon the land, of *adam* upon the *adamah*, as detailed in the genealogy and in 6:1, was a good thing, a sign of God's blessing.

## 1. The sons of God see (2)

The narrative proper begins in verse 2: “the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive.” This wasn’t just a curious gaze. As the sons of God looked upon these young women they made an evaluation: these were “attractive” (ESV), “beautiful” (NASB, TNIV), “fair” (NRSV)—they were “good,” for this is the same adjective we’ve heard 15 times already in Genesis. The sons of God then acted on their evaluation: “they took as their wives any they chose.” This might seem harmless enough: “they took wives for themselves” is the normal Hebrew idiom for marriage. We use a similar idiom in English. Next Saturday, when I conduct a wedding, I will ask the man, “Do you take this woman to be your wife?” But here the phrase has sinister connotations, especially when it is the response to seeing that something is good.

In the garden Eve saw that the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was good and she took. Now the sons of God see that the daughters of man are good and they take. This is not a good echo we hear. Seven times in chapter 1 the Lord looked upon what he had made; seven times he saw that it was good, even very good. As creator God can make that evaluation of his creation. But was Eve qualified to make that evaluation of the fruit? The Lord had told the man what was good. When Eve made her own evaluation, she ceased living by faith and started living merely by sight—her own sight. The echoes of Eve are unmistakable in the behavior of these sons of God. They acted in autonomy from God when they made their own evaluation that these daughters were good and then took.

Who are these sons of God and daughters of man? There are three major interpretations of the sons of God: that they are angels, or kings, or the descendants of Seth. All three interpretations are ancient; all are held by evangelicals.

Probably the most common Christian interpretation is that the sons of God are the male descendants of Seth. They are the sons born to the line of Seth in the preceding genealogy (ch. 5). They are the sons of the covenant, the seed of the woman, the men in relationship to God. Support for this interpretation is found in the father-son language that God later uses for his covenant people. The daughters of man are then understood to be the descendants of Cain, whose genealogy is given in chapter 4. The Sethite men sin by intermarrying with the ungodly line of Cain. They fail to keep the covenant line pure. A major problem with this interpretation is that the context requires that the daughters of man include the daughters born to the line of Seth in chapter 5. It also fails to explain the contrast between “God” and “man” in the two groups: the sons of *God* and the daughters of *man*.

A second interpretation is that the sons of God are kings, since this is how ancient peoples often regarded their rulers. Later, God would use father-son language to refer to the king who ruled over his covenant people. Most consider these kings to be tyrant rulers, even demonic-possessed tyrants. In this view the daughters of man are ordinary women. The rulers are a law unto themselves, doing whatever they want, taking as many wives as they want, behaving in the style of Lamech at the end of chapter 4.

The third major interpretation is that the sons of God are heavenly beings. This makes best sense of the contrast between the sons of *God* and the daughters of *man*. Elsewhere in the OT “the sons of God” are the heavenly beings gathered around God’s throne; they are his heavenly court (e.g., Job 1-2). Their sin lies in mixing heaven

and earth. This view also makes best sense of some statements in the NT. Peter says of Jesus and his resurrection,

**Christ [was] put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah. (1 Pet 3:18-20)**

That passage will also be found in any book about Bible difficulties! Describing God’s judgment upon those who did not believe, Jude says,

**And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day—just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. (Jude 6-7)**

These two passages suggest that angels engaged in sexual immorality. Genesis 6 suggests the nature of this perversion: unnatural liaisons with human women.

Critics of this view point out that Jesus said that angels don’t marry (Matt 22:30), but these were rebellious angels. Critics also object that it seems unfair for God to punish humanity for the sin of heavenly beings. But there were two separate judgments, one on humanity and a separate one on these rebellious angels: God threw them out of heaven into “prison” to await their final judgment.

This is the interpretation I take: that the sons of God were angelic beings who intermingled with human women, for which sin they were thrown out of heaven.

## 2. The LORD speaks (3)

The second section is the Lord’s speech: “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.” Here be several more dragons! What shall the Lord’s Spirit no longer do? How is man flesh? And to what do the “120 years” refer?

a. The verb here translated “abide” is used only this once in the Hebrew Bible. Since no one knows what it means, scholars resort to slight modifications of the Hebrew text. Some modify it to “remain,” which is the Septuagint reading. Others modify it to “strive.” Among English versions, perhaps slightly more adopt “remain.”

b. Does the Lord say that man is “flesh” because he is mortal (TNIV) or because he is corrupt (HCSB)?

c. Are the 120 years the new lifespan of man or is it the period of time before God exercises judgment?

The Lord’s Spirit is his life-giving power. When the Lord breathed the breath of life into the man (*adam*) he had formed from the dust of the ground (*adamah*), he became a living being (2:7). The Lord here announces at least a reduction in this life-giving presence inside humanity. The ten generations of Adam’s genealogy (ch. 5) had all lived long lives. Henceforth the reduced presence of the Lord’s Spirit would limit lifespans to 120 years. The post-Flood genealogies do show a steady reduction in lifespan. The offspring of this intermingling of heaven and earth are neither immortal nor divine; they are mortal and will die. God’s Spirit will not remain in them. They will not be under blessing, invigorated by God’s life-giving Spirit. God will frustrate this quest for immortality. Life does not lie in this direction.

### 3. The Nephilim (4)

Finally we come to the Nephilim. These are presumably the offspring of the sons of God and the daughters of man. The narrator provides two further clues to the identity of these Nephilim, referring to them as “the mighty men of old, men of renown.” I think that some Greek mythology can help us here. The Septuagint translated both Nephilim and “mighty men” (*gibborim*) with *gigantes*, “giants.” In Greek mythology the *gigantes*, the giants, resulted from the union of heaven and earth; they were semi-divine beings, sharing divine and human parentage. Likewise the heroes of old. Our word “hero” derives from the Greek “*herōs*.” The hero was also often of mixed divine and human ancestry, giving him great strength and ability. The most famous Greek heroes were Heracles, Achilles and Perseus. These mighty men of old were celebrated and venerated. These were men of renown.

Societies of the Ancient Near East also told stories of semi-divine ancestors. The semi-legendary founders of the Mesopotamian city-states were considered to be semi-divine rulers. This well fits the context of Genesis. When Cain went into self-imposed exile from God he fathered a son who was the first city-builder (4:17). His line led to Lamech, a mighty tyrant. The next person described as a “mighty man” (*gibbor*) is Nimrod, the first empire-builder (10:8-11). Understanding these Nephilim as the semi-divine heroes of old fits both the Biblical text and the ancient societal context.

So, I’m now willing to stick my neck out and identify the sons of God, the daughters of man and the Nephilim. The sons of God were angels who intermingled with human society, and specifically with the daughters born to human society. From these illicit unions came the Nephilim, the semi-divine founders of ancient society. These were the great men, the men of renown, the men to whom human society looked with admiration and awe. But God announced he would withhold his life-giving Spirit from these. He would not bless these unions. What does the Lord make of all this? We’re told in the next four verses.

## II. The View from Heaven (6:5-8)

**The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (6:5-8)**

### 1. The LORD sees (5-6)

The first panel began with the sons of God making an evaluation; the second panel opens with the Lord making an evaluation. But his evaluation is the polar opposite. The sons of God saw good. But the Lord sees evil: “the wickedness (evil) of man was great on the earth.” God intended a multiplication of people on the earth, but what this brought was a multiplication of evil. This evil is comprehensive: *every* intention, *only* evil, *all* the time. Evil had permeated every part of man’s being: his intentions, his thoughts, his heart. The rebellious heavenly beings saw good, but God, the Lord whom they rejected, saw only evil.

Just as the sons of God acted on their evaluation, so the Lord responded to his evaluation: he “was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” Whoa!! Did I read that

right? “The LORD was *sorry* that he had made man on the earth.” Let’s try other translations: “The LORD *regretted*.” Elsewhere the verb is translated “repent” or “change one’s mind.” Can the Lord do that? Can he be sorry or regretful that he has done something? Can he repent or change his mind? Here be more dragons! This is such a big topic that I’m going to punt and deal with it next week, devoting the whole message to this one topic: can God change his mind?

### 2. The LORD speaks (7)

Next, just as in the first panel, the Lord speaks: “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.” The structure of the two panels suggests that we should read the Lord’s two statements together. Removing his life-giving Spirit from man, the Lord will blot him off the earth. Just a few verses ago man/*adam* had been multiplying on the land/*adamah*, as the Lord intended. But now, because human multiplication was accompanied by multiplication of human evil, God determines to wipe man/*adam* off the face of the land/*adamah*. And he would extend this blotting-out operation to the animals and the creeping things and the birds. At this stage the Lord does not specify how he intends to do this; we’ll be told this in the next section.

### 3. Noah (8)

Finally Noah is described very briefly: “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.” We’re not told why Noah found favor in the Lord’s eyes; we’ll be told this also in the next section. We hear echoes of Abel. Both Cain and Abel brought an offering to the Lord, but it was only on Abel and his offering that the Lord looked with favor? Why? Because it was only Abel who presented himself to the Lord together with his offering. Abel lived his life with reference to the Lord; Cain did not. Similarly, that Noah found favor with the Lord suggests that he, too, was living his life with reference to the Lord. We sense that he was the only one in his generation to do so.

The structure of the passage places Noah in contrast to the Nephilim. Note the very disparate lengths of the two verses. The Nephilim receive a lengthy verse; Noah a verse of just five Hebrew words. Much is said of the Nephilim: they were the mighty men of old, the men of renown. Little is said of Noah: only that he found favor in the eyes of the Lord. That’s all that needs be said at this point. The Nephilim found favor in the eyes of society, but Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. The Nephilim were the world’s heroes, but Noah was God’s hero. Enough said!

This narrative features five sets of characters. Everyone wants to know about three of them: the sons of God, the daughters of man, and the Nephilim. But it’s the other two characters who are the most important: the Lord and Noah. The precise identification of the sons of God, the daughters of man and the Nephilim is not the most important thing about this passage. More important is observing the two sets of contrasts: between how the sons of God and the Lord see, and between the Nephilim and Noah.

These two contrasts are again brought together in the crossing fates of Saul and David, the first two kings of Israel. As Samuel grew old, Israel worried about its future leadership and asked for a king “that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Sam 8:20). They wanted a Nephilim-style of ruler: a mighty man to fight their battles. Though it displeased the Lord, he gave them what they wanted: Saul, a man head and shoulders taller than anyone else (9:2)—just the man for the job! But Saul had no faith; he did what was right in his



own eyes, until the Lord “regretted” or “was sorry” that he had appointed him king (1 Sam 15:35). The Lord then sent Samuel to Jesse’s house to anoint a new king. But even Samuel was deceived; even he failed to see as the Lord saw. Samuel was confident that the Lord had chosen Jesse’s eldest son, presumably a strapping fellow like Saul. But the Lord said to Samuel,

**“Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”** (1 Sam 16:7)

Whom did the Lord see? David, the runt of the family whom Jesse had not even bothered to present to Samuel. But David was a man after God’s own heart, a man of faith, a man who lived his life in relationship to the Lord.

This passage raises three big sets of questions, none of which concerns the identity of the sons of God, the daughters of man and the Nephilim.

1. Do we see as the Lord sees? Or do we see good where he sees evil? Do we look on outward appearances or on the heart?
2. Whom do we look to as our heroes, as the mighty men of old, the men of renown?
3. Whose favor are we seeking?

In boarding school in England we used to sing a particular hymn each year on Remembrance Sunday:

Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us,  
Such as did bear rule in their kingdoms, men renowned for their power;

Leaders of the people by their counsels, and by their knowledge.  
Such as found out musical tunes, and recited verses in writing:  
All these were honored in their generations, and were the glory of their times.

And some there be, which have no memorial;  
Who are perished as though they had never been.  
Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name liveth for evermore.

The movie *Chariots of Fire* opens with some of these lines as Lord Lindsay offers a eulogy, saying, “We’re here today to give thanks for Harold Abrahams, to honor the legend.”

*Let us now praise famous men* was written by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1923), using a text drawn almost verbatim from the Apocrypha, from chapter 44 of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus. Who are these famous men being praised? Ben-Sira goes on to list them: Enoch, Noah, Abraham and so on. The godly men of Israel’s history: these are the famous men whom he holds up for praise. He was being counter-cultural in doing so. He was giving Israel a different view of the men of renown. These are not the heroic men looked to by the Greeks, or by the Hellenizers of his day, or later by the Romans. The author of Hebrews does a similar thing in his hall of faith (Heb 11), filled with many of the same names, beginning with Abel, Enoch and Noah.

The ancient world had its heroes, its men of renown. But the Lord’s hero was Noah. Halls of Fame proliferate for every imaginable sport and activity. But the Lord looks on people differently and so should we. In his hall of fame are men and women of faith, many of them nobodies in the world’s eyes, but who find favor in his eyes.

At their head is the Lord Jesus Christ. Where the sons of God abandoned their station in heaven in pursuit of lustful desires, this true son of God voluntarily gave up his station, making himself of no reputation (Phil 2:7 κῆρ). Rejected by man but faithful to his Father to the end, he went down to apparent defeat at the hands of the strong men, the mighty men. But he emerged the victor and proclaimed his victory to those fallen angels held in prison for eternal judgment, proclaiming to them that theirs was not the way to join heaven and earth, theirs was not the way to bring eternal life to earth. It is Jesus who joins together heaven and earth in the right way. And now God pours out his Spirit into the lives of those who follow this champion. That Spirit which he withheld in the days of Noah he now pours out on all those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ, giving us eternal life. Therefore, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:2).

*Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)*

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