

Prayers

To God

Pray for a quiet heart. Pray that God will give you the inner peace you need to do what is necessary today.

For myself

Weekly theme: Pray for joy

Father God, You have given me every reason to be happy, yet often I do not feel like jumping up for joy. Help my soul to see the difference between the feelings of the moment and the 'peace that passes understanding', which is the salvation of my soul in heaven and my peace with God eternal. Keep close, Lord, Keep close. AMEN

For others

Pray for those who feel that they are the subject of prejudice, of whatever colour or creed in whatever country, developed or less developed.

Meditation

Listen for the voice, my soul,
Which tells you how and when to do the will of God.

Seek the 'shalom', my soul,
Which is God's gift to those who stand with Him.

Turn the corner, my soul,
Which redirects your life towards its heavenly goal.

See the light, my soul,
Which shines forever brightly in this troubled world.

Speak the truth, my soul,
Which is known by revelation from the throne of grace.

Accept the love, my soul,
Which saves you from the death of worldly living.

Stay open to God, my soul,
Hear and do the simple things of faith by which you live.

Bible Passage

Genesis 6:1-10

¹ When people began to be numerous across the land, and daughters were born to them, ² the sons of God saw that they were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves by choosing them freely.

³ Then the LORD said,

'My spirit shall not support people forever because they are flesh, and their days will number one hundred and twenty years.'

⁴ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and afterward as well, when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore them children. These were the heroes of old who were renowned men.

⁵ The LORD saw that the wickedness of people covered the whole earth, and that the thoughts and desires of their hearts was always evil. ⁶ The LORD regretted making people on earth and grieved bitterly. ⁷ So the LORD said,

'I will wipe out from the earth the people I have created; people together with animals and creatures and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.'

⁸ However Noah found favour in the sight of the LORD, ⁹ and these are the descendants of Noah. He was a righteous man, blameless in his generation, and he walked with God. ¹⁰ Noah had three sons; Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Review

This reading today begins a significant new story within scripture, the story of Noah and the great Flood. This occupies four chapters of Genesis (Genesis 6-9), and together with the stories of Creation, Adam and Eve, and the Fall, (Genesis 1-4), it dominates the opening chapters of Genesis (1-11) which together, are commonly called the 'prologue' to the Bible. Most Christians know about the story of the Flood, which tells us that God wiped out all humanity except Noah (a descendant of Adam and Eve by Seth), and started again with Noah's family; in the process wiping out the entire line of Cain, the errant son of Adam and Eve. It was a radical new start for humanity.

The story holds some surprises for us today, however, because the simple understanding provided by Sunday School teaching has left many with the feeling that this is little more than another myth. It is easy to paint the story of Noah as one about a good man, an ancient calamity, animals, an amazing boat called the ark, and the wonderful rainbow at the end. What more could we want from an ancient world myth? Indeed, many Biblical scholars are content to describe this part of Scripture just like this, and so stop short of delving into what it can mean if we take it as God's Word. This story of Noah is far more important to the history of God's dealing with people in the Old Testament than we imagine, as our studies in forthcoming days will show. There is much for us to explore.

To begin with, the first part of the story in our passage today raises a number of questions. What was really happening on earth before the Flood? What made God decide to wipe out

so much of what he had made? Who were the '*sons of God*' (6:2) and the '*Nephilim*' (6:4)? Why is there a difference between the '*sons of God*' (6:2) and others? Who was marrying who, and who were their children (6:1-4)? Although the story is relatively understandable from verse 5 onwards, the first four verses are highly mysterious; what does it all mean?

Over the years, many theories have arisen to attempt an explain of this passage, and it remains something of a mystery whichever view you take. One theory rests on the idea that scripture uses the term '*son of God*' (as in 6:2) elsewhere to describe good people who do His will, such as David (as we find in 2 Sam 7:14 and Ps 2:7). Could it be therefore that this passage uses the term here to describe the 'good' line of descent from Seth, separate from the sinful line of Cain merely as 'people', or 'humans'? In this way, it is therefore possible to say that God was not happy for the two lines of humanity to intermarry; He did not want Cain's sin to be carried through the generations into Seth's pure line!

Another theory suggests that the '*sons of God*' were angels who lived on earth at that time, and intermarriage between humans and angels produced people of special strength called the '*Nephilim*' (6:4). If you have followed these studies, you may also be tempted to wonder whether this passage somehow expresses the difference between the true descendants of Adam, who are possibly as '*sons of God*' because they are god-breathed, and the humans who still existed on earth at the time who were not god-breathed and thus not spiritual beings (see my notes on Genesis 4:17-26). It is all very complicated; but if you have a better theory, then please do publish it!

At this moment in time I am not convinced that any particular theory of verses 1-4 fits the text sufficiently well to have my unqualified support. I have read a number of works on this passage, as well as spending time on it myself, but have not yet found any presentation to be conclusive. I therefore suggest that it is better to read the text and accept it as we find it, that is, as something of a mystery, than attempt to 'explain' it away. It could be that God does not wish to reveal more of this period of time to us, and we cannot know what we are not told. Nevertheless, scripture has left us with a clear sense of evil pervading the world and a need for God to do something about it (6:5-7). Earlier in Creation, God had commanded people to '*fill the earth*' (1:28), but the earth had been filled with evil (6:5), and in order to preserve the integrity of His creation, drastic action was required (6:6). God decided to bring to an end the features of creation that interacted primarily with humanity, and re-create a significant proportion of His previous work (6:7).

Some find it hard to come to terms with the idea that God might destroy a significant part of His creation, especially since when He made it, God was 'pleased' with His creation. However, these few verses dramatically demonstrate the serious effects of the Fall, and if God did not do something about the evil that had penetrated Creation, then it would be impossible to claim that His 'goodness' was in evidence within the world.

The great truth to emerge through this strange passage of scripture, however, is that God always has a plan in hand for the salvation of humanity. Right at the end of the passage we are told simply that in the midst of the chaos, there was indeed a glimmer of hope, found in one man and his family; that of a man called Noah. He is called '*righteous*', '*blameless*', and '*he walked with God*'; at the time, the highest praise that Scripture could heap on anyone. What do these three words mean? We know that the term 'righteous' come to have specific meaning later on in Scripture where it describes a state of being acceptable to God and by implication 'sinless'. No such complexities are suggested here. These are all words that describe Noah's acceptability to God as a spiritual man who can be trusted, and through whom God can work. The world has never been without such people, whatever gloom may have happened; and God had a work for Noah to do.

As we will find out, God was planning to destroy the world and allow Noah and his family to survive. The story is about to unfold. Ultimately, Noah and his family would be the start of a new generation of humanity, and therefore herald a new work of God within the world (see 9:8-17).

Discipleship

Application

A difficult passage of Scripture

Yet we cannot deny that the opening verses of Genesis 6 are notoriously difficult to interpret. It is humbling to have to accept that we cannot just say this or that, and give an answer to every question there might be about a text. Scripture is sometimes like that, I would even suggest that we tend to overstate our true ability to understand God's Word. Some of the things we say with confidence today may well prove incorrect over time; for example, even the Authorised Version which has proved to be so influential to the lives of so many faithful Christians, has been found to be linguistically and technically incorrect in places. So we must accept that the translation is not perfect although God's Word communicated by it is perfect; it is a tight balancing act for some!

Yet all these things do not dissuade us from believing the Bible to be the Word of God. Our mysteries are more a result of our own inability to understand than inherent 'faults' within the text. Who knows, there may well come a time when these verses will be fully and well explained because of some new approach or discovery, and we will be able to say with confidence who the '*Nephillim*' were, and the '*sons of God*' and the '*daughters of men*' in this passage!

God's unmerited love and favour

Noah's finding favour in the eyes of God is the first scriptural evidence of God's 'justice and mercy' by which He deals with the reality of what happens within His Creation. This is an incredibly important 'key' to our understanding of the loving nature of God and how He works within the world. Centuries later, we now know this nature of God through Jesus, and it remains God's purpose to deal with evil swiftly, and whenever people repent of it. He now acts through the saving love of Jesus Christ who heals us, saves us, and delivers us from evil. The unmerited love of God towards those He favours is the one link to be found throughout the Bible; it is no unimportant message.

Noah was about to become the first great 'hero' of the Bible; a man of God who stood out from the shameless evil of his day, and who was prepared to do God's will. It is no small matter that he was a descendant of Adam through Seth, for although things had gone wrong, even amongst the line of Seth, there had to be a line of inheritance by which Noah had received 'the Faith'. Who will stand out from the crowd today? Who will stand in the line of God's works of renewal and the heritage of godliness which goes right back to the Apostles and further to Noah and Adam? Such are those who God will use to do His saving work today.

Ideas for what to do

- *Does it worry you when you are unable to find a definite answer to the problems raised by a scriptural text, or are you simply challenged to look deeper? How easy do*

you find it when there is no clear answer to a scriptural problem, and how far should we pursue our efforts to find an answer to everything?

- *Pray for those who find themselves under the grip of evil today and unable to either understand it or perceive how they can be liberated. Ask the Lord to show you if there are any people you can help to overcome the evils which beset them.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *Were you aware of the problems with this passage? Which of the theories about who the 'sons of God' were do you prefer?*
2. *What are the key features of wickedness and evil that cover the world today? Are they different from those of any other generation?*
3. *How does God destroy sin and to save people from sin, and how does the story of Noah help us understand this?*

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord; You clothe us, You feed us, You give us energy, and You nurture us; but we are not babies! You do this for us so that we might grow into the full stature of those who live by faith. May we achieve the maturity of living by faith, trusting in You, and being confident of the glories of our eternal home in heaven! We praise You, glorious Lord! **AMEN.**