

Genesis 1-11
The Grieving Heart of God
Chapter 6:1-8
November 5, 2006

On his very first day teaching his class for 250 college freshman, Professor R.C. Sproul carefully explained the assignment of three term papers. Each term paper was due on the last day of September, October and November. Professor Sproul clearly stated that there were no extensions (except for medical reasons) So at the end of September, 225 students dutifully turned in their papers, while 25 remorseful students quaked in fear and begged Dr. Sproul, “We’re so sorry. We didn’t make the proper adjustments from high school to college, but we promise to do better next time.” He bowed to their pleas for mercy, gave them an extension but warned them not to be late next month. Sure enough, October rolled around and 200 students turned in their papers while 50 students showed up empty-handed. “O, please,” they begged, “It was homecoming weekend and we ran out of time.” Once more he relented but warned them, “This is it. No excuses next time; you will get an F.” So November came and only 100 students casually told Dr. Sproul, “Yea, Doc, don’t worry about it. We’ll get it in soon.” To which Dr. Sproul replied, “Sorry, it’s too late now. You get an F.” The students howled in protest, “That’s not fair!” Dr. Sproul replied, “Okay, you want justice, do you? Here’s what’s just: you’ll get an F for all three papers that were late. That was the rule, right?” Dr. Sproul comments: “The students had quickly taken my mercy for granted. They assumed it. When justice suddenly fell, they were unprepared for it. It came as a shock, and they were outraged.”

In the same way, we often take God’s mercy for granted and when judgment finally appears in the Bible we’re shocked and outraged. That’s exactly what happens in Genesis chapter 6. Up to this point in the story, men and women who were made in the very image and likeness of God, made to reflect God’s incredible glory and goodness, made to love God and live in light of God’s love, have blatantly turned away from God. They ignore God’s commandments, rebel against his good heart for them, resent God’s leadership in their lives, trample on his plan for relationships, and then they turn on one another and start hating and murdering one another. All throughout this story we find example after example of God’s mercy and patience. God promises judgment but the judgment always seems to be delayed or tinged and softened with mercy.

But now in Genesis 6 God’s judgment will hit with full-force. Read 5-6. “The Lord saw.” The last time we heard that line was back in Genesis 1:31 – “God saw all that he made and it was very good.” From “God saw that it was very good” to “God saw how great man’s wickedness had become.” And this wickedness not only controls our actions; it also controls our thoughts and our imaginations. Verses 11-12 continue the theme of human wickedness. Read verse 11. In Chapter 1 of Genesis we read that animals and humans should fill the earth; now “the earth was filled with violence.” Verses 11 and 12 could literally be translated from the Hebrew to read like this: “gone to ruin was the earth ... indeed it was gone to ruin ... all flesh had ruined its way.” It’s the

same Hebrew word used in Jeremiah 18:4 for a spoiled pot in the potter's hands.¹ It can't be fixed; the potter must begin with a new lump of clay. In other words, when God sent the flood God was merely judging and ruining something that was already ruined.

This story has a dim view of the human heart. As one Bible scholar has written, "The question is not whether people are ... 'nice,' but whether in the deep places of life, human persons and the human community are capable of saving themselves. Can we transcend calculated self-interest which inevitably leads to death?" The answer in this story is "NO" we cannot – at least if we're left entirely to ourselves. And it's important to keep in mind that the Bible clearly teaches that we are all part of this mess (story about child laborers in Africa).

How was everyone responding to this moral deterioration? Most people in those days we're responding like most of us – with outright apathy and indifference. Read verses 1-2. These have been difficult verses to interpret and many people have debated various options. Most people have taken these verses as an introduction to the flood story which leads to one set of interpretations (including the idea that the "sons of God" are angelic beings who are cruising around picking up, dating and marrying good-looking earthling women. Now it's true that elsewhere in the Bible the phrase "sons of God" refers to angels, but the biblical worldview just doesn't allow for the scenario of angels hitting on earth women.). But there's a more straightforward explanation: these verses are tied to the end of chapter 5 than to the beginning of chapter 6. Genesis chapter 5 begins like this (read verses 1-2). So who are the "sons of God" and the "daughters of men" in Genesis chapter 6? They're people just like us who are, as we might say, just "doing life": getting married, having kids, raising a family. It's a picture of an interlude before the storm, but the storm is brewing and they're all entirely oblivious to it. Jesus put it this way: "As it was in the days of Noah so will it be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away" (Matthew 24:37-39). They were just like us – stuck in the everydayness of life, sunk knee-deep in trivialities, without any vision for something great and wonderful and beautiful. And yet, I'd argue that we have it much worse because our lives are cluttered with distractions and trivialities. We as a culture are "amusing ourselves to death." And we, as the people who have professed Jesus as Savior and Lord, we also have allowed our lives to become awash in the trivial - trivial conversations, trivial fights, trivial agendas, trivial reading, trivial praying, and trivial views of God. I've been massively guilty of it. I don't want to live a trivial life anymore. Life was meant to be a grand adventure with God – knowing God, pursuing God, living passionately for God and with God, caught up with God's mission for the world. It should seize us, compel us, and burn within us so that trivial stuff still exists but it gets pushed down on our agendas.

However we interpret this passage, it's saying that the human race had taken a turn for the worse. We saw in chapter 4 a downward trend towards violence, brutality and

¹ "But the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make."

arrogance, but apparently no one seems to care. No one remembers the glory of the Garden of Eden. No one hungers and thirsts for the beauty and harmony that used to exist. Everyone is accommodating to ugliness, disharmony, violence, brutality, human arrogance and hatred ... everyone except God, that is.

Verse 7 tells us how God responds: "I will blot out man whom I have created on the face of the earth." The Hebrew word for "blot out" meant to "erase by washing." It's a complete, total cleansing act. Imagine you wake up tomorrow morning and someone has spray-painted vulgar graffiti all over the side of your house. Initially, you're sad and appalled and outraged all at the same time. Later in the day you'll probably rent a power-washer and start to wash it off. That's the way God feels about His creation, except there's one crucial difference in this scene from Genesis: in this case it isn't just surface graffiti; it's more like a dangerous mold that's crept into the wood and sheetrock and flooring and even the furniture and clothing. You simply must blot out the house, tear it down and start over from scratch.

God will judge our sin and violence and indifference because God is not indifferent. God is passionately pro-creation. God is pro-life in the broadest definition of that word. God's heart is for us. God doesn't like our destruction of His good creation and His good plan for our lives. Most of us like hearing about God's love and grace. But what kind of God never fights against the world's wrongs? What kind of a God would just watch evil triumph over good, winking at human violence and brutality and arrogance and apathy, throwing up his hands and chuckling, "O, well, whatever?" What kind of God is that? The Bible has many, many more examples of God's mercy, but mercy is never an automatic. God's judgment is as real as God's mercy.

Now this is exactly what some of you have come to expect from religion or churches or the Christian faith. We screw up and God judges us. And some of you might be thinking, *this is exactly why I don't come to church. I'll get creamed with judgment.* And you're partially right: God's judgment in this passage is real and unmistakable. But here's where this story and God might surprise you: in the midst of God's judgment there are two very surprising twists in this story. First, notice verse 6 - "It grieved him to his heart." It was like an arrow that pierced God's heart with grief. The Hebrew word for grief is an intense word. This same word for grief was used in the following situations:

- A group of brothers discover that their sister had just been raped (see Genesis 34:7).
- King David was told that his oldest son Absalom had just been murdered (see 2 Samuel 20:34 and 19:3).
- A wife has just been abandoned by her husband (see Isaiah 54:6).

That's the same word used for grief in Genesis to describe the heart of God. So God looks at his creation, the broken and fragmented creation that he must now blot out, and he grieves as if His sister has just been raped or his son has been murdered or his wife has just deserted him. This is intense grief.

There is pain in the heart of God. In the Bible, our God feels. And when God appears in human flesh in the person of Jesus he demonstrates the vulnerable heart of God. There

are two occasions in the Gospel accounts of Jesus when he cries on behalf of other people. On one occasion he's standing at the grave site of a good friend of his named Lazarus. The Gospel writer John records that "Jesus wept." Why did he weep? Doesn't he believe in the resurrection? Doesn't Jesus know that he will be victorious over death? Of course, but he also knows about life in a fallen and fractured world. He knows that life can hurt and he know that death will always hurt. So he stands by his friend's grave and he cries. On the other occasion Jesus was when he rode into the city of Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, surveying the great city, the city that has rejected the coming of Jesus, the city that will be torn apart and dismantled by the Roman armies, and his heart breaks as he says, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for your peace! But they are hid from your eyes ..." (Luke 19:41). And then Jesus wept again – and the Greek word for "wept" implies great, big, convulsive sobs of grief.

I remember sharing with a mentor friend of mine a story from my junior high days. Back in the jungle of 8th grade, a so-called new friend of mine named Bob invited me to sit at his lunch table. Bob was the leader of a group of very cool kids and more than anything in the world I wanted to be in that group of friends. So when Bob invited me to sit with them, my heart leapt and my skin tingled. And then as I sat right next to Bob I watched in quiet horror as Bob proceeded to destroy my school lunch in front of all the other cool kids. They all laughed as I sulked away from the lunch table in utter humiliation. As I told the story, I chuckled under my breath and told my mentor, "Isn't that a silly story of teenage anguish? I mean, it all happened nearly twenty years ago." My mentor said nothing. For a long time he stared into my eyes and then he gazed out the window. Shy and embarrassed, I looked at the ground. When I looked at him again he was crying as he said, "I'm so sorry that that happened to you. No one should be treated that way." I was stunned. No one had ever said anything like that to me. It moved me because behind my tough, cavalier appearance, that event still brought back pain.

Has anyone ever wept for you? Has anyone looked into the broken things of your life - and we all have many broken things that we carry like shards of glass inside our heart - has anyone looked into your heart and experienced grief? Has anyone ever wept with you and for you?

It's easy to avoid a God who is always angry and disappointed with us. Who wants to enter into a relationship with God – or anyone for that matter – when they are perpetually ticked off at you? But what can I do with a God who weeps, a God who stands beside my graveyards – those sad and dead and broken places in my life - a God who surveys my life and sobs, what shall I do with that God? That's the God we find in the Bible. He weeps for us.

That's the first surprise: we can't avoid God's judgment but in the midst of judgment we find a God in Jesus as the God with tears streaming down his face. Secondly, in the midst of judgment and cleansing, we find God making a way out of the mess. Read verse 8. In the midst of judgment and cleansing there is grace. Do you know what grace means? It means receiving what you don't deserve as a free and gracious and lavish and over-the-top gift. That's grace – and that's what Noah found. Now notice the order here is very

important: God's initiative of grace comes before Noah's righteousness. God finds Noah before Noah finds God. In the midst of this mess and darkness and violence and self-destruction, God reaches out His hand and reaches down to Noah.

Noah is not a powerful and famous person. Actually, verse 4 speaks of the famous people of the earth. Read verse 4. Who are the Nephilim? The name means falling ones – as in the bigger they are the harder they fall. Later in the Bible the word will be applied to very tall, fierce group of people. In this instance it probably refers to famous people, the cool people, the celebrities and superstars and powerful people, the people who have made a name for themselves. Noah is not one of them. He's just ordinary, unspectacular, but God chooses him anyway. That's the way God's grace always works.

So God chooses Noah and he will provide a way out of judgment. The cleansing must take place, but notice: in the Bible every time there is judgment, God provides a way out. Going back to our house illustration, it's almost as if God says, "Look, this has been condemned. It's coming down soon. The mold and rot and mildew are too deep and destructive; the house must be judged and condemned. But, look, you don't have to stay in the house. Let me show you a back door. Let me show you a way of escape so you can go free." So the Bible is, at least in part, a story that shows us how seriously God takes sin – our sin! But the Bible is also a big, grand, wonderful, joyful story about how God has provided for us a way out. And all throughout the Bible God gives us hints and clues about a big, grand story of how God, the good God of creation, but also the God of justice and cleansing and judgment, can be both the world's Judge and the world's Savior. This big, grand story leads right to the cross of Jesus.

What does God's grace look like a human life? How does it change us? One of the greatest privileges we have as a church family is regularly offering God's grace, watching God change hard hearts, melting hearts, making hearts new in Christ. And one of the greatest ways we can celebrate the grace of God in our worship services is to hear stories about how God is changing people in our midst (Lisa's story).