

## **BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary**

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### **Studies in Power & Purpose: God Unveils the Universe (Genesis 1-11)**

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Lesson Eight

#### **God Walks with a Righteous Man in a Decadent World**

##### **Focal Text**

Genesis 6

##### **Background**

Genesis 6

##### **Main Idea**

As mankind spiraled into wickedness, God walked with a righteous and blameless man.

##### **Question to Explore**

How can we live righteous and blameless lives in the midst of a wicked world?

##### **Quick Read**

In response to the increasing spread of sin, God chose to punish humanity with a destructive flood but spared one righteous man and his family.

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#### **Introduction**

This lesson is the first of three lessons designed to interpret the biblical narrative of the great Flood that God sent during the time of Noah. (In these lessons, I will capitalize “Flood” to denote this singular deluge of water.) The significance of this event is demonstrated by the fact that four chapters of Genesis 1-11 are devoted to telling the story of the Flood.

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The Flood account in Genesis 6-9 is arguably the most well-known of all the stories in the Bible, especially by children. The principal features of this story are used in decorative motifs in children's bedrooms as well as for children's toys and coloring books. Pinterest advertises more than 1,000 ideas for using Noah's ark as the theme for a birthday party. Maybe we should have seen it coming, the reality of a "Disney-like" theme park dedicated to the Flood.

After a ribbon cutting ceremony on July 5, 2016, Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky, officially opened on July 7 (7/7) to correspond with Genesis 7:7, the verse stating that Noah and his family entered the ark. This theme park was the brain child of Ken Ham, the founder of the "Answers in Genesis" apologetics ministry. It contains a replica of Noah's ark built to scale and sculptured representations of animals. It also includes aerial zip line cables and the Ararat Ridge Zoo.

The Flood was a disaster or tragedy of epic proportions. The Flood was an act of God's judgment upon the widespread sin and corruption in his world. It resulted in the drowning death of many humans and animals. It devastated God's beautiful creation.

Now, I am not suggesting that one of the exhibits at Ark Encounter should graphically depict that massive destruction and death. What I am saying is that even adults sometimes know only the more "sanitized" children's version of the story. My comments in these lessons will attempt to convey the rupture between the Creator and his creation, the serious issue of human sin with the judgment of God upon that sin, and the theological implications that move the Flood story along to a hopeful conclusion.

## **Commentary**

While Ark Encounter is the only theme park in the modern world devoted to the Flood of Noah, the biblical account of the Flood is not the only flood account in the ancient Near Eastern world. Archaeologists have unearthed fragments of a Sumerian flood story and more complete flood accounts within the Gilgamesh Epic and the Atrahasis Epic. All of these were written prior to the biblical account. These other flood stories (like other creation stories) have some similarities to the Flood narrative in Genesis, but they also have some strong differences. Some of these differences will be noted within the Commentary sections of Lessons 8-10.

### **The Decadent World (6:1-4)**

Nahum Sarna, a perceptive Jewish interpreter, asserts that this paragraph is the strangest and most difficult one to understand of any in this book. The purpose of these verses is to give an example of the widespread wickedness in God's world that brought about the Flood (6:5). God's perfectly created world of unity and harmony, with its divinely established boundaries, had been shattered.

The almost “in passing” reference to the “increase in number” (6:1) is noteworthy. In the Babylonian flood stories, the reason the gods determined to send a destructive flood had to do with the explosion of human population growth. The humans were too large in number and too noisy, becoming a nuisance to the gods. That is not the rationale for the Flood in the biblical account.

The most difficult issue to resolve in this most difficult paragraph is the identity of “the sons of God” (6:2). The various interpretations of this phrase are gathered into three general categories.

First, in the context of the polytheistic religions in the ancient world, this phrase referred to the lesser gods in the pantheon (according to hierarchal order). In Israel’s monotheistic faith, it usually referred to angelic beings or members of God’s council or royal court (Job 1:6; 2:1; Psalm 29:1; 82:6). This was the interpretation preferred by the Jewish books that were written between the time of the Old Testament and the New Testament. It was also the dominating understanding of the earliest Christian interpreters. In contrast to Genesis 3, where human beings desired to be like God and God intervened; here godlike or spiritual beings desired to be like humans, and again God would intervene.

Secondly, the view that the “sons of God” described a group of powerful human judges or rulers connotes the central issue as polygamous kings who took women by force into their harems. The third understanding believes the phrase conveys the thought of “godly men” rather than godlike beings. They believe this group consisted of the descendants of Seth, the godly line through which God would work. The great Church father Augustine, as well as the Protestant reformers Luther and Calvin, understood the phrase in this way. They held that the sin committed was the righteous men of Seth’s line marrying the daughters or descendants of Cain.

Since this passage is in no way about pagan kingship or polygamy, the second view does not enjoy strong support. Both of the two remaining possibilities have problematic concerns. No other Old Testament text describes a sexual capability for angels (See Matthew 22:29-30 and Luke 20:34-36). In addition, the extreme judgment of God announced in the text is upon humans rather than angels.

It is true that the Flood narrative is embedded within the genealogy of Seth (Gen. 5). On the other hand, it is difficult to accept that “the daughters of men” (6:1, 2) referred only to the descendants of Cain. Cain’s genealogy (4:17-24) has only one reference to a woman, the sister of Tubal-Cain (4:22), while Seth and all of his descendants except Noah “had other sons and daughters” (5:7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 26, 30).

Yahweh would not tolerate this trespassing of his boundaries or the challenges to his sovereignty. His Spirit, who can hover over his creation (1:2) and breathe life into the human creature (2:7), can also withdraw when he chooses (6:3). The verb “contend” (6:3)

occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament. It either means “to deal with by pleading in behalf of someone” or “to remain (abide) with another.”

“Mortal” (6:3) is one of the most important anthropological terms in Hebrew. It means the flesh or body in contrast to blood, and is the opposite of spirit (Isaiah 31:3). If God determined to restrict the human life span to 120 years, it was a very general standard. The Patriarchs lived well beyond that number (Abram—175; Isaac—180 and Jacob—147). This number could denote a period of grace before the full judgment of God on this decadent world would come.

The relationship between the sons of God (6:2) and the “Nephilim” (6:4) is not certain. The only other time this word occurs is in Numbers 13:33 where it refers to the population of Canaan. I believe its use here is an illustration to help the readers understand the nature of the sons of God in the time of Noah by associating them with the Canaanites; otherwise, the Nephilim would be survivors of the Flood.

### **God’s Grief over the Decadent World (6:5-7)**

Some interpreters see these verses as the “official” beginning of the Flood narrative. These verses assert what God saw, what God felt, and what God would do.

God saw the entirety of his creative work and declared that it was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Now God saw his creation in the full expression of human wickedness and concluded that it was evil (6:5). Not many verses equal this one in the expression of the widespread depravity of radical disobedience against God. The strong statement is characterized by the phrases “how great,” “every,” “only evil,” and “all the time.” This verse emphasizes sinful deeds and the human thoughts that produced them.

Remember that in Hebrew understanding, the heart was the center of thinking, intellect, and decision making. “Inclination” (6:5) is the noun form of the verb “formed” found in Genesis 2:7, 19. It described the work of a potter or other craftsman in the making or shaping of something. The human creatures had determined to shape or form their own conclusions about their behavior and actions. They had decided to be “self-made” men and women without any concern for God. Their determination had failed miserably.

This comprehensive wickedness “grieved” God (6:6, 7). The verb *nacham* is found forty-eight times in the Old Testament. In thirty-four of those occurrences, God is the subject. This verb possessed a wide range of meaning, demonstrated by the fact that *The New International Version* uses ten different English words to translate this one Hebrew word.

The Israelites used this verb to denote the suffering of emotional pain (Hosea 11:8); giving comfort (Gen. 37:35); executing wrath (Isa. 1:24); taking back or turning away from promised punishment (Jeremiah 18:7-8); or taking back a blessing (Jer. 18:9-10). This verb was a strong expression of the personal anguish of God regarding human sin. It

was not used to debate the abstract notion of God's decision making or whether God could change his mind or not.

The presence of *nacham* here conveys the emotional anguish within God. He responded to great human wickedness not as an angry tyrant or dictator but as a troubled or grieving parent. God was churning within himself because his perfect work had been shattered by human selfishness. This is confirmed by the statement that God's heart "was filled with pain" (Gen. 6:6). This word describes the human mixture of rage and bitter disappointment. It was the way Dinah's brothers felt after she was raped (Gen. 34:7), and the way Jonathan felt when he learned that Saul, his father, planned to kill David (1 Samuel 20:34). Read Hosea 11:1-9 for another time when God expressed his anguish in terms of a loving parent.

As a result of how God felt about what he saw, God determined to punish this widespread wickedness. It would be a thorough and uncompromising judgment upon human and animal creation. "Wipe" (Gen. 6:7) literally meant to wash away the letters or words that had been written on a papyrus scroll so that it might be used again. It then became the term for the wiping away of sin and its guilt (Exodus 32:32-33; Ps. 51:1; Isa. 43:25). God's judgment would wipe out all living things including human beings, land animals, and birds of the air. As Dr. Matthews points out in his *New American Commentary*, it is explicitly stated to be comprehensive in terms of life rather than in terms of land or geography.

### **A Righteous Man (6:8-10)**

Noah has appeared previously in the genealogy of Seth (Gen. 5:28-32). The verses under consideration here describe his character. This description of his character is enveloped by descriptions of the wicked environment in which he lived (6:5-7 and 6:11-12). This is suggestive of the contrast between the upright character of Noah and the decadent world in which he lived.

The phrase "found favor" (6:8) was a formal expression used when someone without status was making a request from a superior for approval or assistance. It was also used in prayers for seeking the favor of God. The assertion that someone had found favor with God was rarely made (See Exod. 33:17). God saw something different in Noah than what he saw in his creation (Gen. 6:5). The Hebrew language contains a pun between the words "Noah" and "favor." They both have the same two consonants but in different order.

Genesis 6:9 offers a threefold characterization of Noah. This is the first occurrence in the Old Testament for the significant word "righteous." It is frequently used as the opposite of "wicked." It is the most general Hebrew term to describe someone who faithfully lives up to his or her obligations in relationship to God and others. Our cliché "they are really good people" corresponds to this word.

“Blameless” is much less frequently used to describe human beings; rather, it was the usual word to denote animals that were worthy to be sacrificed to God (Exod. 12:5; Leviticus 1:3; 3:1). In that context, it described animals that were free from physical defects or unblemished. When it referred to humans, it meant “wholesome” or “sound,” “complete” rather than “perfect.” Noah “walked with God” or enjoyed an intimate ongoing relationship with God. The only other person described in this way was Enoch (Gen. 5:22, 24). The exemplary character of Noah was demonstrated in his obedience, as noted throughout the Flood narrative (6:22; 7:5, 9; 8:18).

### **God’s Judgment of the Decadent World (6:11-13)**

These verses make a twofold contribution to this chapter. First they elaborate on the wickedness expressed earlier in verses 5-7. The all-encompassing totality of the wickedness would be matched by the all-encompassing totality of the judgment. “Earth” occurs five times. Along with the heavens, it composes the universe created by God (Gen. 1:1). The severity of this judgment is also conveyed through the term “put an end” (6:13). This word denotes the end of a fixed time, or a radical change of new direction, or an imminent or certain doom (Amos 8:2; Lamentations 4:18).

*The New International Version* has chosen to interpret the Hebrew rather than to translate it with its rendering of “all the people on earth” (Gen. 6:12) and “all people” (6:13). It is literally “all flesh” including the word “mortal” (6:3), the general word for living creatures. Elsewhere in the Flood story this phrase is an inclusive one denoting both humans and animals (6:17, 19; 7:15, 16, 21; 8:17). Should it not carry that same connotation here?

Within this elaboration, a new element of the wickedness is introduced. God is quite displeased with the extent of “violence” (6:11, 13). The Hebrew word is *chamas* which refers to any anti-social behavior, usually involving brute force with no regard for the sanctity of life. That word is the name chosen by the Palestinian governing body of the Gaza Strip, a group that is dedicated to violent uprisings.

The second contribution to this chapter is that these verses provide the organic or essential connection between the wickedness and the judgment God has promised. The Hebrew verb *sachat* occurs four times in these three verses. The basic meaning is “to be ruined.” It denotes the spoiling of a garment or the flaw in a pottery vessel. The narrator deliberately used this one word both to describe **the corruption of the wickedness** (6:11 and twice in 6:12), and to describe **the destructive punishment from God** (“destroy” in 6:13). In a sense, God will complete the destruction of what has already been destroyed or ruined by his human beings.

### **God’s Salvation of a Righteous Man (6:14-22)**

Genesis 6:13-21 contains the first of several speeches that God communicated to Noah. God voluntarily and fully shared with Noah what he was about to do, and gave explicit instructions about what Noah should do to survive the coming destruction. This is the

opposite of what we learn in the flood myths of Babylon. In them the gods attempt to send the flood in secret, but the human hero finds out accidentally and makes preparation on his own to survive.

In this speech, the narrator reveals for the first time that the judgment will be in the form of a destructive flood. God gave Noah the specifications for building a large boat (6:14-16); explained why he needed that boat (6:17); and related to Noah who and what should be taken into the boat (6:18-21).

The narrator does not give enough information for us to draw a blueprint of the ark Noah built. So many of the words are found nowhere else in the Old Testament; consequently, we don't know specifically what they meant. What we can know for certain is that the biblical text describes a large boat, box-like in shape. It is much bigger than the ships that Christopher Columbus commanded, and five times larger than the Mayflower which brought the Pilgrims to America.

God was in control of Noah's survival and destiny. The boat had no rudder, no sail, no navigational aid of any kind, and no crew. The control or sovereignty of God is seen in the fact that God "will establish my covenant with you" (6:18). This relationship between God and Noah will receive attention in the discussion of Lesson Ten.

The occupants of the large boat, humanly speaking, would be only eight people in all (6:18). The clear majority of the space would be taken up by a pair of every species of animal that walked or crawled on the land, and every species of bird (6:19-20), and the necessary food provisions for the humans and the animals (6:21).

True to his righteous and blameless character, Noah fully complied with God's instructions (6:22).

### **Conclusion**

The Gulf Stream begins in the Gulf of Mexico, moves around the tip of Florida, flows northward hugging the eastern seaboard of the United States until it passes Newfoundland, and then crosses the Atlantic Ocean arriving in England and Europe. It is slightly more than sixty miles wide and 2,600 to 3,900 feet deep. It moves along at a maximum speed of just over 5 mph.

The first mention of the Gulf Stream is in an entry of April, 1513, in the ship's log of Ponce De Leon, the Spanish explorer. He described facing a current that he could not sail against even though he had a favorable wind. Benjamin Franklin pictured it in an Atlantic Ocean chart he did in 1770 and took advantage of it in getting mail efficiently to England in his role as Deputy Postmaster of the American colonies.

The Gulf Stream is part of the Atlantic Ocean and yet remains distinct from it. This special current defies the mighty ocean. It ignores its tides, is different in color (deeper

blue), different in temperature (warmer), and different in direction (moves south to north).

Noah was like the Gulf Stream. He lived in a wicked world but was a righteous man. We should be like the Gulf Stream and like the righteous man Noah. Jesus prayed for that reality (John 17:15-18).

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**Meet the Writer: Dr. Ron Lyles**

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