

GRIEF AND GRACE (1)

A Meditation on Genesis 6:5-8

In Genesis 2:8-9 we read, “And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” In the next chapter Eve is looking at the tree in the middle of the garden—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—of which God had said, “you shall not eat [of it], for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). “So when the woman *saw* (note that word) that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she *took* (note that word also) of its fruit and ate...” (3:6).

Now let’s compare Genesis 3:6 with 6:2, where “the sons of God *saw* that the daughters of man were attractive. And they *took* as their wives any they chose.” Eve liked what she saw, so she took that which was forbidden. Likewise, the sons of God liked what they saw, and took that which they weren’t entitled to. And in both cases the result was God’s judgment. The wording is not coincidental, we are meant to picture the fall of man taking place yet again. The Bible repeats themes—with different characters and situations—for our edification and instruction. So if you thought to yourself “This sounds kind of like the fall” you’re exactly right.

Let me give you another example of related themes. Noah builds an ark and then covers it with pitch, so that he can be saved from the water, while others are being destroyed. In Exodus 1:22 we read, “Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, ‘Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.’” But Moses’ mother saved her son by putting him in “a basket (or *ark* as it is translated in the KJV; it’s the same Hebrew word) made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch” (Ex. 2:3). This is The Flood once again, only this time Moses is saved by the ark.

Later, at the Exodus, the Israelites are saved by going through the waters of the Red Sea, while the Egyptians are destroyed by the same water. Then, when we come to the NT we see this same theme of being saved through the waters coming up again—in baptism. 1 Peter 3:20-21 shows that this is no accident or conjecture on my part: “because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, *which corresponds to this*, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” The reoccurring theme is that for believers water brings salvation—resurrection as we come up out of the water after going into it; for unbelievers water brings judgment—death as they perish in the water. So don’t dismiss themes if they seem to reoccur, this is not a coincidence, this is the intention of the Author.

Now I’d like to return to our saw-took-judgment theme. “It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king’s house, that he *saw* from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, ‘Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?’ So David sent messengers and *took* her, and she came to him, and he lay with her” (2 Sam. 11:2-4a). And what happened as a result of his “saw and took” behavior? Judgment. This sad episode could be called appropriately *The Fall of David*.

In the NT, Paul reminds believers, “for we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). Since the dawn of time, God’s people have fallen when they reversed this way of living, and mimicked the world by walking by sight, instead of by faith in God’s Word.

Returning to Genesis 6, the fall of the sons of God came when they gave in to the attractive, but ungodly daughters of man. Comparing Scripture with Scripture, we deduce that the sons of God eventually bowed before the idols of the daughters of man, and worshiped them rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen (Rom. 1:25). This idolatry invariably led to a depraved heart with man’s thoughts being only evil continually. At the end of the day, the consequence of being unequally yoked was the total corruption of the world during Noah’s day. How did God respond to this situation? With judgment as we would expect, yet we also see God’s grief and grace in the midst of this judgment.

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GRIEF AND GRACE (2)

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Man's sin has forced God's hand. God is just, and therefore He must bring judgment, even though it grieves Him greatly. "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" (Gen. 6:5-6). The Creator is so grieved over man's behavior that He is actually sorry that He ever made man in the first place. The KJV says that God repented: "And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth."

We need to comment on this "repenting," since it has been terribly misunderstood by some, like Open Theists, who say that God repents, because He didn't know that man was going to turn out like he did. John Piper replies bluntly and appropriately, "The fantasy that God is ignorant of the future is a heresy that must be rejected on scriptural grounds" (eds. John Piper, Justin Taylor & Paul Kjoss Helseth, *Beyond the Bounds*, p. 9).

To understand this "repenting" of God, we must see that while He repents, He doesn't repent like a man, or as a human does. How does a man repent? He repents when something doesn't turn out like he thought it would. I repented over a car I bought once, because a month after I bought the car, the engine blew up. I never would have bought the car if I knew in advance that that was going to happen. God doesn't repent like that. At first, it may seem like the distinction between our repenting and God's repenting involves hair-splitting, but the distinction is mandated by the text.

John Piper addresses this vital distinction: "After God says in [1 Sam. 15:11], 'I repent that I have made Saul king' (KJV). Samuel says in verse 29, as if to clarify, 'The Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent' (KJV). The point of this verse seems to be that, even though there is a sense in which God does repent (vs. 11), there is another sense in which he does not repent (vs. 29). The difference would naturally be that God's repentance happens in spite of perfect foreknowledge, while most human repentance happens because we lack foreknowledge. God's way of 'repenting' is unique to God: 'God is not a man that he should repent' (the way a man repents in his ignorance of the future).

"For God to say, 'I feel sorrow that I made Saul king,' is not the same as saying, 'I would not make him king if I had it to do over.' God is able to feel sorrow for an act in view of foreknown evil and pain, and yet go ahead and will to do it for wise reasons. And so later, when he looks back on the act, he can feel sorrow for the act that was leading to the sad conditions, such as Saul's disobedience." Numbers 23:19 makes the same kind of distinction: "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? Or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" (KJV).

This is crucial, because one of the features that makes God God, and not an idol, is His perfect and complete knowledge of the future. God Himself appeals to His foreknowledge of events again and again to "prove" that He is God and there is none other. In Isaiah God challenges the idols: "Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob... Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come. Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified" (Isa. 41:21-23). God sets forth two implications of foreknowledge. First, it's a proof that one is divine; the ability to predict the future belongs exclusively to God. Second, we should be terrified by such foreknowledge, since it is a clear manifestation of deity.

Furthermore, God's glory is connected to His foreknowledge: "I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them" (Isa. 42:8-9). So what's at stake in God's foreknowledge? Only the praise and glory that is due His Name! (cf. Isa. 45:21; 46:9-10).

God knows all that is going to take place, and yet He can still repent—grieve over it and be sorry it happened. But this emotional response is not the end. We need to reckon with the truth that God judges sin. "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'" (Gen. 6:7).

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GRIEF AND GRACE (3)

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Second Peter 2:5 refers to Noah as a “herald of righteousness”—which he was for 120 years. “Not only did Noah preach with his lips, he also engaged in a 120-year long project that was a visual witness against the ungodly: building the Ark. ‘By faith Noah, being warned about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world’ (Heb. 11:7). Building the Ark was a sign that the flood was coming. As the wicked saw it being erected day by day, they saw a visible witness, a visible proclamation of the truth of coming judgment. They may have ridiculed it. They may have torched the project over and over again—120 years is a long time to build a ship unmolested” (James B. Jordan, *Primeval Saints*, p. 44).

Noah’s message fell on deaf ears. He was politely ignored, or maybe not so politely ignored. Either way, the ungodly like to suppress the truth that they will give an account for their behavior. Amos graphically illustrates that they will not escape: “It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him” (Amos 5:18b-19).

As sinners, the only hope we have of averting the judgment of God is the grace of God. “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD” (Gen. 6:8, KJV). Noah didn’t earn the grace of God, he didn’t merit it, and he didn’t work for it. He *found* it, because God gave it to him as a gift. Ephesians 2:8-9 applies to Noah, and to all the OT saints, just as it applies to all of us NT saints: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

But the question still begs to be asked, “Why did God choose Noah?” Similarly, we could ask, “Why did God choose Israel?” In answer to our second question, Moses told the Israelites, “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deut. 7:7-8).

“[H]e loved them *because he loved them*. What kind of logic is that: I love you because I love you? Well, it may not be the logic of Aristotle, but it is the logic of grace...If grace were based on anything in us, it would not be grace” (James M. Boice, *Genesis*, p. 321). God chose Israel, because He chose Israel. Likewise, God chose Noah, because He chose Noah.

One characteristic that distinguishes Christianity from all other religions of the world is the teaching of salvation by grace, through faith, apart from works. In light of this, consider the following headline from the *Grand Rapids Press*: “Conversion to Hindu Faith Is Tortuous.” The article stated, “A West German businessman has completed his conversion to the Hindu faith by piercing himself through the cheeks with a 1/4-inch thick, 4-foot-long steel rod, and pulling a chariot for 2 miles by ropes attached to his back and chest by steel hooks. Others walk through 20-foot-long pits of fire, don shoes with soles made of nails, or hang in the air spread-eagle from hooks embedded in their backs.” What a contrast with Christianity!

Charles Spurgeon understood that when you trace your salvation all the way back to the beginning you realize that God and His grace are at the bottom of it all. Spurgeon said, “When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me. I do not think the young covert is at first aware of this...”

“One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God...The thought struck me, *How did you come to be a Christian?* I sought the Lord. *But how did you come to seek the Lord?* The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought Him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek Him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, *How came I to pray?* I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. *How came I to read the Scriptures?* I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day.” And since it’s all due to sovereign grace, God gets all the glory.

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