

Utter Depravity, Incomprehensible Grace

⁵ 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.

⁶ And the LORD **regretted** that he had made man on the earth, and it **grieved** him to his heart.

⁷ 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."

⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

Genesis 6:5-8

A Very Important Passage

The passage before us today stands like Atlas between two great pillars, holding them each up with the strength of his arms, so that the very heavens will not fall down upon us. It stands between the incredibly bizarre world of Genesis 6:1-4 (the specific cause of the Flood), and the narrative that has God coming to Noah via a covenant.

It is transitional for our story, most of it is repeated in coming verses. It is transitional for our lives. In fact, I think it is among the most important four sentences ever penned in all of human history. In four verses (**Gen 6:5-8**), it moves from showing us our **greatest problem** to showing us our **only hope**. It is utterly relevant, and a law/gospel text if ever there was one in the Bible.

Tsunami - The Bad News

The law or bad news comes in the first three sentences (verses). It begins with a **declaration about mankind**. It is the worst possible declaration imaginable. “**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 [or ‘all the time’]**” (**Gen 6:5**). It then moves to what this has caused to **arise in the heart of God**. “**And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart**” (6). This in turn spawns an **unthinkable action** from him. “**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’**” (7). I want to look at these three verses in succession.

To get at this, imagine if you will a **Tsunami**, a theme fairly relevant to the story of Noah and the flood. Growing up, having never seen a tsunami, I had it in my mind that they

must be like the waves of Hawaii on steroids. In fact, you can have tsunamis like this if something huge suddenly falls into the ocean.¹ But there is a much more common tsunami that our world has witnessed not once, but twice in the past ten years, both of which were caught on many video cameras and which together wiped out hundreds of thousands of lives in an instant.

These kinds of tsunamis are a series of devastating waves, not giant in height, but vast in strength and power. They are caused by a great seismic event—a vertical shift of continental shelves deep under the ocean, brought on by the unimaginable power of a massive earthquake. According to Jewish tradition and with the tip of the hat from **Genesis 6:1-4**, there was an earthquake that took place in the days of Jared, the father of Enoch. This earthquake was supernatural in origin. 1 Enoch says,

And it came to pass that when the sons of men multiplied, in those days beautiful and fair daughters were born. And the angels, the sons of heaven, saw them and desired them, and said to one another: “Come! Let us choose for ourselves wives from people, and we will beget for ourselves children.”

¹ The largest mega-tsunami of modern times was the 100+ foot wave that destroyed vegetation 1,720 ft. up the mountainside on July 9, 1958 at Lituya Bay in Alaska. The story of this wave is truly epic.

And Semyaza, who was their ruler, said to them: “I fear that you will not desire to do this deed, and I alone will be a debtor of a great sin.” Therefore they all answered him: “Let us swear an oath and let us all anathematize one another, not to turn away from this plan, until we should complete it and should this deed.” Then they all swore together and anathematized one another by it. And these were the two hundred who descend in the days of Jared to the summit of Mount Hermon, and they called the mountain Hermon, because they swore and anathematized one another by it.

(1EN 6:1-6)

You can hear how this is almost identical to Genesis 6:1-4, but with more detail. **Jared** means “**to descend**” or “**descending**.” So there is a wordplay going on here that the Watchers descended during the days of Jared. This act of the Holy Ones caused a great seismic event to occur in both heaven and on earth, but the waves of the tsunami began far out in the ocean, and would not be felt for many long centuries.

In a tsunami like these, the first thing that happens is **unexpected**. The **ocean actually retreats**. Suddenly, the person standing on the beach finds that the water has moved many thousands of feet in the wrong direction. The ocean actually moves away from the land. This causes a profoundly

dangerous false sense of security for those who don't know what is happening. Yet, to those who **have been told**, it signals an immediate alarm that we must move immediately to higher ground, or die.

If you are ignorant or in disbelief, as tens of thousands of people came to understand the hard way, you will find yourself being lured into the ocean by a tide that is, suddenly, no longer there. When the water goes away, many things that had been hidden under the waves become exposed. Curious people can't help but run out and look—Let's go look at those boats that are now dozens of feet above the water; let's go investigate sunken ship that is now exposed; let's go catch some of those fish that are flipping around in the mud. It's dinner time. Let's just stand here and film this incredible phenomena.

When the analogy of a tsunami first came to my mind for this passage, I thought about **vv. 5-7** like the increasing waves. The **first wave is a complete shock** No one knows what is coming. It comes out of nowhere, and there is no time to run once you know what it is. It is devastating in its power. It hits you, knocks you down, causes you to tumble around in the water, and quite possibly die the horrible death of drowning, perhaps after having your limbs broken and your skin ripped open by tons of rubble crashing against your body. If you've been fortunate enough to make it through

that first wave, the second hits and it's too late to run. The third wave now moves inland for miles, completely destroying everything, including people who were nowhere near the ocean. If you keep this multiplying sense of devastation in mind as we look at the verses, it will certainly impress upon you the shock and awe you are meant to feel.

But then it hit me that in some ways, **Genesis 6:5-7** and even **verse 8** is more like that initial retreating of the waters. They can either be a siren's call or a siren's warning. One is that hypnotizing, beautiful siren, the mermaid demon that lures some out to sea with her enchanting song. The other is that warning siren, that alarm that forebodes impending danger and causes those who listen to flee. Let me tell you how these verses act like this.

Like the retreating waters, these verses leave many things exposed. They **expose something in us**, something that few are honest enough or brave enough to see. They **expose several things in God**. One verse exposes our utter sinfulness, another God's internal reaction to it, two more his external response towards it—one being very fair, the other from all signs is **utterly unfair**.

There is a proper response to hearing or reading these verses. There is a horror and a dread that should suddenly come upon. Even if you have read them before, each time you read them anew, it is like the tide is going out again

before your eyes. The alarm is being signaled yet again. But at just this moment, if you heed the warning, you realize that there is still time to flee to the highland.

Human Depravity

I've been scratching my head all week trying to figure out how in the world do I convey to you the seriousness, the dread, the terror of **Genesis 6:5**. What I'm going to do is attempt to appeal to your **head** and your **heart**. In appealing to your head, I want to do you the grammar, the logic, and the theology of this verse.

The grammar is pretty straight forward. There are **three vital words** in the verse: “**every**” (*kol*) “**only**” (*raq*) and “**all**” (*kol*) (or “**continually**”). These are called superlatives. Superlatives are usually adjectives or adverbs. Adjectives and adverbs can also be comparative in nature. What is the difference? A comparative adjective would be something like, “**some of the intentions...**” or “**his heart was kind of evil**” or “**his heart was evil much of the time.**” But a **superlative** goes farther. It expresses the most that is possible to express. Not some, **but every intention**; not kind of evil but **only evil**; not much of the time but **all of the time**. Add to the idea of a superlative the fact that there are **three** of them and you have a way of literarily compounding the problem in such a way that the very way that the sentence is written is superlative. It is a superlative of superlatives, sort of like infinity and

beyond. The Message Bible actually captures this pretty well, “God saw that human evil was out of control. People thought evil, imagined evil—evil, evil, evil from morning to night.”

Theologically, this refers to the “T” in the TULIP acronym: “Total Depravity.” When we talk about total depravity, we are not saying that man is as bad as he could be, nor that there is no some sense in which mankind is capable of performing good things. It is as Martin Luther says in discussing this verse, “God gives His approval to the governments of the ungodly; He honors and rewards excellence even in the ungodly. Yet He does this so far as this present life comes into consideration, not the future life.”²

But this verse is not talking about our actions, nor even about particular sins. Those come before and after our verses (especially vv. 1-4 and vv.12-13). Rather, our verse speaks to a state of wickedness, a state of being. God is seeing our wickedness, not our wicked deeds. The word is *ra'*. As Westerman says, “Sin describes an action, *ra'* describes a state.”³ Wickedness. There is no greater word in Hebrew to convey evil than this. This is as bad as it gets, and it is what

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 2: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6-14*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 2 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 42 [Gen 6:5].

³ Claus Westermann, *A Continental Commentary: Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 410.

humans beings are. God created us upright, but we have gone in search of many schemes.

Now we are the actual wave itself. A tsunami wave is capable of great devastation. That is its potential. This is visible by its change of appearance. The water which first appeared blue and docile, now appears white with foaming rage. I also use this illustration with my children. Human depravity is like a glass of clear water. Pour enough drops of red dye into that glass, and suddenly, the entire glass, every molecule turns red. If you pour more dye in, you will deepen the color. If you pour more water in, you will lessen it. But none remains unaffected. Every single bit of it is stained. There is no part that remains pure.

This is what our verse is saying. Every intention of the thoughts of the heart is only evil all the time. Evil is our condition. It is the human condition. We are evil, *ra'*, wicked.

There are many verses in the Bible that tell us this basic fact. Psalm 116:11, “I said in my alarm, ‘All mankind are liars.’” Ecc 9:3, “The hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives” (NAS). Jer 17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.” I dare say that there is hardly a doctrine more plain in the Bible than this.

And yet, just here is where I am profoundly troubled. It is astonishing to me that the vast majority of people in America

believe the Bible is God's word, and at the same time they also believe man is basically good. So many people call themselves Christians, and yet so many of these people completely and utterly deny the truth of this verse. Yet, this is God's first great warning to us. It shows the tide going out.

How do people react to it? Many act like the fool who rushes into the ocean because the land is now exposed. They just embrace their depravity and that of everyone else around them. Some do so out of **ignorance**. They water recedes; they have no idea how bad God really thinks we are. No one has ever told them. They don't know why men act like they do. So they just stand there gaping at the ocean in wonder.

Others simply **don't believe it**. The water is receding? Man is evil? That can't be. Ocean's don't act like that. No, no. That's a fluke. People are basically good. Look around. People are kind, nice, compassionate. There may be a few bad eggs, but most of us are really quite good.

Others **minimize it**. I'm sure the tide will come back. That will be interesting to see. I know people do bad things, but as long as the good scales outweigh the bad, the water will come back just fine. Let's go catch some fish. All of these things are different individual's reaction to the warning of God's declaration against mankind. Each is a running into the ocean, becoming trapped by an approaching wave that they cannot see coming.

Something is terribly frightening to me about our day in particular. Yes, men are evil, and they always have been. But there is a peculiar evil that is invading the hearts and minds of people today. It has crept in like a demon in the night, unawares. It is the evil of actually calling our evil good and good evil. There have always been evil things done in America—evil deeds, even laws, delving into satanic religions, etc.

But something has happened to our cultural sensibilities regarding good and evil. There are many things that used to be [fringe](#), unaccepted by the wider culture. Even in the 60s, when the wheels first came off at the popular level, the evil was still seen as an aberration, something to be avoided. But today, we are embracing evil as good as never before. There is a brazen, haughty, arrogance about us. There is a condescending smugness to it all, a flaunting of our evil, a parading it around in pride. There is a taunting of our evil by our leaders, our celebrities, Christians, even some of our pastors. There is a defiance to our evil, a daring of anyone to call it as such. And there is a vitriolic disdain towards those who will. [How do you think a culture such as this can even hear the message of **Genesis 6:5**](#)? I do not think that it can, and only God's Holy Spirit working through the word to convict us of our sins will ever be able to turn the hearts of men such as this.

But my friends, it must start here, with us. We cannot look at the world about us. We must come to grips with our own evil, the evil in this building, the evil in our own hearts. Your own evil heart must be sensed this day in a new way. Every thought of mankind is only evil all the time. That includes you. And by the way, for those who want an out, this is God's verdict both **before and after the flood**. God says the same thing again, "**The intention of man's heart is evil from his youth**" (**Gen 8:21**).

How will you react to the receding wave today? Will you compare yourself to the worst of criminals? Will you ignore sin altogether to make yourself feel better? Will you run out into the open sea? Or Will you acknowledge your own guilt? Will you judge yourself by a perfect, holy standard? Will you hold yourself up before a holy God and find yourself wanting?

Grieving God

The second verse is like the second wave, flattening things that still stand. It is also like the receding waters, tempting us to go out into the ocean's dry sand. It tells us something about God. It tells us **what happens to God because of our sin**. What happens to God? Let's be careful.

The verse says, "**And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart**" (**Gen 6:6**). This verse has a number of temptations. One is to **turn**

God into us. It can be just as fatal to us to have a wrong view of God as it can be to have a wrong view of ourselves. “Oh, God didn’t know what we would do. God changes in his being. God is vulnerable, weak, and sad.” This is the route of panentheism, process theology, and to a lesser degree, open theology. They all say that we have this way of affecting God’s very being, of changing him, making him more or less than he was before. If you have a god like this, you will tend to make him into your own image. But part of why this is here is precisely to impress upon you that God is not like you.

I know that may sound strange, upon just reading this one verse, because it is saying things about God that sound like you. You have regrets, God has regrets. You grieve, God grieves. Take the tsunami again. In watching a program on it this week, you find people regretting, second guessing, feeling guilty for things that happened to them. What did I live? Why couldn’t I save more people? Why did this happen? But is God’s regret like this? Is God’s regret caused by something that happens to him, something out of his control, something he didn’t see coming? Heaven’s no!

This statement has to be read in the context of the whole Bible. God does not regret *as you regret*. Because of his plan before the creation of the world, he sovereignly allowed the fall, Cain’s and Lamech’s murders, and Genesis 6:1-4 to take place. He knew exactly what he was doing. It did not catch

him by surprise. **Vs. 6** leads him to **vs. 7**. His regret leads him to act.

Or take grieving. In a passage very much like this one God says, “I regret that I have made Saul king” (**1 Sam 15:11**). And yet later, in that very same story, it uses the same word for regret (*shaqar*) to say, “The Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret” (**1 Sam 15:29**). God’s regret is not like our regret. Ours takes us by surprise; his does not. Ours comes about because of our own failures; his does not. Here is just were some fall into the ocean of receding waters or get hit by a second great wave because they have come to turn God into something that he is not. It is dangerous to play around with deity like this. It is the definition of idolatry.

And yet, **God truly has regret**. God truly is grieved. There has to be some kind of correspondence to us, otherwise the figure of speech is meaningless. So imagine that our evil actually grieves God, even as the NT says that our sin grieves the Holy Spirit (**Eph 4:30**; cf. **Isa 63:10**). It pains him in some way to see it and to know about it, which he does perfectly and completely. How terrible a thought is it to know that something we are somehow grieves God in his heart? Do you dare run out into the ocean of denying this is true in any meaningful sense?

God's emotions here are real, even if they do not change his being or make him something that he was not before. The best way I've seen of thinking about this is **not to say** that something is changing in God, **but** that God is changing his relationship to us. God is reacting to what he sees in us and is telling us something true about himself with words that we can understand in some limited fashion. Frankly, this whole issue (immutability) has been a rather hot button in Evangelicalism for the past 20 years and is making those waters are making their way into our own association. It is difficult to think through this. I certainly cannot do it justice in 10 minutes. So for our purposes today, what I want to do with a verse like this is affirm what it says about God without robbing him of something true in him or creating him into something that he is not. I'm not sure how well any of us can do this, but for me to do it, I must **move on to consider our third wave**, perhaps the most terrible of all. I dare not contemplate **vs. 6** apart from **vs. 7**.

Justice is Coming

What a terrible final great wave of horror **Genesis 6:7** is. "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.'" This verse becomes the capstone for the coming three chapters of the Flood. It is because of our wickedness,

and because of how God feels about it, that his **justice** moves him to destroy mankind. But not just mankind, also **all living things from the land**. I'll explain more about this next week.

It is enough today to say that the stirrings of regret and grief in God cause him to act. This is why he tells us about his inner emotional life as he contemplates mankind. But what I want point out here is that **this reaction is perfectly justifiable**. That is truly horrific. Earlier I said that God will have two external responses—one being fair and the other not fair. **This is the fair response**. Wickedness deserves death. Justice is fair. It is the fairest thing in all the world. People cry out for God to be fair, but they do not really mean that, otherwise, they would know that they are crying for him to kill them.

Of course, just here, men go running back into the ocean again. They don't like justice, they don't want justice, they love to pervert justice. We saw this all the way back with Lamech, who vowed to destroy a whole city if anyone dared to call him to account for his crime. We see it today in a myriad of ways, from unjust laws, to unjust failure to carry out laws, to politically correct philosophies that attempt to turn justice upside down.

The reason people don't want justice, is because they are lawbreakers. The Apostle points out that **“the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient”** (1Tim 1:9). It is tyrants and villains who hate justice and fairness and

seek to make such things the very opposite of what they are by punishing law keepers and righteous people to ease their own consciences.

But there is another way people can flee into the ocean by these receding siren warnings. They simply don't believe it. Like vs. 5, they won't believe vs. 7. This happened in Noah's day. It happens in our own.

Peter says that God “did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness” (2 Pet 2:4). The word “herald” is the word *kerux*. It means to preach. This almost certainly refers back to Genesis 6:3 which tells us that God said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever ... his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” This does not refer to the upper age limit that man will now be allowed to live after the flood as so many think. This should be obvious by looking at the ages of the descendants of Noah, who lived many hundreds of years but on a decreasing time line.

Instead, it refers to the amount of time between God's telling Noah to build an ark and the coming of the great flood. He gave them 120 years to repent. The targum seems to have the correct interpretation, “Did I not put my holy spirit in them that they might perform good deeds? But behold, their deeds are evil. Behold, I gave them an extension of a hundred and twenty years that they might repent, but they have not done so.” For 120 years Noah preached—

warning, telling them of just what we are reading here. He was the siren telling them to flee the waters coming rage. But no one listened to him. No one. What waters? Don't you know Noah, the waters are actually going the other way!

Peter says the same will be true at the end of the age. He says of people today, “For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished” (2 Pet 3:5-6). They did it in Peter's day. They do it in our day. They mocked God, forget the past, doubt the future, go about their merry lives, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, sitting on a beach sipping mao-tai's as the waters recede.

Today the warning goes out again. God is telling you about yourself, so that you might understand that an earthquake has occurred, a breach of covenant, a breaking of the tectonic plates that bound God to man in love.

He told them that such a break has caused him great pain, pain that he is going to deal with by sending a flood. He tells you that while in his grace he will no longer flood the whole world like that again, a different judgment awaits our own future. It is a judgment by fire, where the whole created cosmos will be rocked, heaving, turning, churning, gasping, flailing, wailing, moaning, erupting, burning, destroying. It

will be the end of all things. It is coming. God will not delay his wrath forever. There will be wave after wave of crushing, crashing judgment upon this world because of our wicked, sinful hearts and deeds. Such terror, if you accept it, prepares you to flee. But where will you flee?

The Grace of God

Here then we come to **the last verse**. *This* is the response of God that is *unexpected* and from all things visible, quite unfair. There is a simple word for it: **Grace**. Grace is truly incomprehensible. It says that Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. The word “favor” here is *chen*. The Greek translates it as *charin*, from the word *charis*: grace. The Geneva Bible says, “**But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD**” (**Gen 6:8**; also KJV).

I’m going to show you next week that Noah did not find grace because he was worthy of grace. That is a misunderstanding of **Genesis 6:9**.⁴ In fact, **grace and worthiness in a context like this are mutually exclusive**. People find grace precisely because they are *not* worthy, and admit as much to God. It is evil people who need grace, not good people. Noah did not find grace because he was a good man. The verse simply says that Noah found grace in the eyes

⁴ Which is actually brought, wrongly I believe, into the targums at this point. Notice, “**But Noah, because he was righteous in his generation, found favour and mercy before the Lord**” (Gen 6:8 Jerusalem Targum).

of the LORD. That is, it simply pleased God to show grace to Noah.

That does not mean there were no reasons for God showing grace to Noah, as if God was just somehow picking willy-nilly, as if grace and election are utterly arbitrary, capricious things. No, **God had his purposes** in showing grace to Noah. Those purposes partly resided in God's purposes in election which are inscrutable to the minds of men. They partly resided in his plan to send Christ, so he couldn't destroy everyone and have his plan succeed. They partly resided in Noah as well, not according to works, but according to **faith**. Noah was a man of faith as Hebrews tells us. Like all other righteous saints, he was righteous by faith. Again more on that next week.

The point for now is that God did not obliterate all mankind, though he said he would do as much in **vs. 7**. He did not even obliterate all the animals and other living things. But **God provided a way wherein salvation might be found**. When you truly apprehend vs. 5 and internalize it, this is astonishing. Apparently, God through Noah the preacher offered this salvation for 120 years to the whole world. But they would not listen. Yet, God was gracious in preserving them and in extending to them the gospel. But they were too captivated by their own perceived goodness. They were too busy working in the idol factories of their own hearts and

minds, creating God in their own image. They were too busy denying the coming judgment, because they could not perceive their own sin or the God who spoke the truth to them through the preacher of righteousness. The lure of a receding ocean lulled them to sleep and caught them unaware. And they were snuffed out in a single day.

Beloved, [flee the coming wrath by turning to God in repentance](#) of your sins. You are utterly wicked, perverse in all things, your heart going astray at every moment. It deceives you into thinking the opposite. It deceives you. It tells you this is not true. It causes you to think that God is lying to you. But God's word pierces the calm air of your complacency and self-deception, and provides through the warning, through the theology, through the history, and through grace a way to escape. Believe what he says about himself and his judgment to come. Trust him. He will save you, as he saved Noah. Believe what he says about grace being extended to you and a way out being possible through Jesus Christ.

You know, [we will see the Lord Jesus](#) in his preincarnate form talking to Noah next week. We have read about his talking to many people in the flesh 2,000 years ago. He came to us as one of us to die for us so that we might escape the final coming wrath of God. This is a greater grace than making it through a flood, for it is a grace that brings us

through to hell to heaven itself. Know and believe that God has shown grace before, and he is even just now showing it today.

Luther said the following about **Genesis 6:8**. “These are words that restored Noah’s courage and life. Such great wrath of the Divine Majesty would have slain him if God had not added the promise to preserve him. Nevertheless, it is likely that his faith was still troubled even though he heard this promise. It is unbelievable how much the contemplation of the wrath of God depresses the heart. Furthermore, here there is a new expression of the Holy Spirit—an expression which the heavenly messenger Gabriel also employs when addressing the Blessed Virgin (**Luke 1:30**): “**You have found favor with God.**” This expression very clearly rules out any merit and gives praise to faith, by which alone we are justified before God, that is, are acceptable to God and please Him.”⁵

There were many survivors, people who lived through the great horror of the two great tsunamis. Their stories are riveting. Their grief is unbearable. Their guilt is depressing. A quarter million human lives were lost in a single day. They woke up to sun, warmth, grace. It was gone in a single second. Their lives were destroyed. Their friends were gone.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 2: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 6-14*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 2 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 54.

Their children drowned. How much worse will be the coming wrath of God after giving us so much grace in this day of salvation?