

# St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

*The Unfinished and Ruined Soul*

*Holy Communion*

---

The Text: Genesis 6: 1-8

## **The Wickedness of Humankind:**

6 When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, 2 the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. 3 Then the Lord said, 'My spirit shall not abide\* in mortals for ever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred and twenty years.' 4 The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterwards—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

5 The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. 6 And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7 So the Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.' 8 But Noah found favour in the sight of the Lord.

.....

The American Poet Jones Very (1813-1880) was the son of two cousins who never married: his father a roving sea captain, his mother an outspoken atheist. Very reacted to his atheistic and unsettled upbringing by becoming an intensely religious man. During his twenties Very went through a decade where he claims to have been deeply aware the Holy Spirit at work in his life. During these years he wrote some memorable poems. One penned in 1839 was inspired by

the life of Enoch, of whom we read in Genesis 5. Enoch stands out in this chapter as a man who walked with God, at a time when the others referred to in that chapter chose to disregard God.

In this poem Very fashions a picture of God which shows God's sadness because people chose to create buildings which honour him while the human heart remains closed to his intimate presence. Very writes:

*I looked to find a man who walked with God,  
Like the translated patriarch of old; -  
Though gladdened millions on his footstool trod,  
Yet none with him did such sweet converse hold;  
I heard the wind in low complaint go by  
That none his melodies like him could hear;  
Day unto day spoke wisdom from on high,  
Yet none like David turned a willing ear;  
God walked alone unhonored through the earth;  
For him no heart-built temple open stood,  
The soul forgetful of her nobler birth  
Had hewn him lofty shrines of stone and wood,  
And left unfinished and in ruins still  
The only temple he delights to fill.*

Here Very captures the thought that Paul expresses in Romans 1, that although God's eternal character is seen in the world he has made, people choose to turn away from God and worship things made by human hands, rather than the Creator, who is to be ever praised. The last part of this poem speaks with such poignancy of the perennial human problem. God desires to fill the temple of the human heart. This is what Jesus described as worshiping God in Spirit and in Truth. This is our nobler purpose. But instead we hew out lofty shrines of stone and wood and leave the soul bereft of God's nearer presence.

Genesis 3 – 11 illustrates for us repeatedly what happens to the lives of men and women when they show religious attitudes but have hearts far from God. Religious people can very easily fall into the trap in desiring to be like God rather than choosing to live in joyful obedience towards God. As we consider chapters 6-11 of Genesis this autumn, I will keep before us the image of Very's poem. When the soul forgets his or her nobler birth, not only does this lead to the breakdown of relationships at the level of the family, something profiled in Genesis 3 and 4 but indeed society as a whole is affected in adverse and

destructive ways, as Genesis 5 and these verses in chapter 6 elucidate. The societal crisis that begins with the disobedience of Adam and Eve in chapter three reaches its climax here in the opening verses of chapter 6. As we turn to these verses in chapter 6 we have depicted here a population explosion, where although this civilization had multiplied in number and power, the lives depicted are characterized by gross immorality and violence.

We see illustrated in these eight verses what happens to civilizations when the collective soul of a people replaces the Spirit of the living God with idols and demons. For here is a story of a primeval culture corrupted and on the verge of collapse as the story of the flood will illustrate for us next week.

Although this is an ancient story, I hope to show you today that it has a very contemporary application. As we consider this text we see that there are three things that happen to civilizations that leave "unfinished and in ruins still the only temple God delights to fill."

1. Morality is compromised,
2. Life is shortened
3. Human power and hubris are idolized.

Please look with me at verses 1 and 2:

6 When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, 2 the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose.

This is considered to be one of the most difficult texts of the book of Genesis to interpret. I could go into great detail about three lines of thinking that have been considered in relation to this passage since the first century. However for the sake of brevity let me consider just one.

In the ancient world there was a practice referred to as "The Right of First Night". This was a prerogative given to ancient kings, who could choose to sleep with a woman about to be married, before the groom had conjugal relations with his bride. If upon sleeping with her, the king decided he wanted this maiden for himself, he could nullify the impending marriage and take this woman for his own. Therefore the reference to the sons of God in verse 2 is synonymous with those who are rulers and the wives they chose had been selected after the ceremony of the "Right of First Night" Thus when the text says "the

sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose" this is what it could possibly mean.

What we have depicted is sexual perversion that is characterized by unmitigated lust. Commentators have long seen that the wording of verse 2 parallels the fall of Eve in the Garden in Genesis 3:6, where Eve saw the fruit, that it was pleasing to the eye, and she ate it. Here in this exercise of sexual immorality and power is the replay of the fall. However the object of lust is not the fruit, but it is the bodies of beautiful women, which the sons of God saw and took for themselves.

It is worth reflecting on the idea that this point presents to us. One of the things that can be traced historically is how when civilizations have come to a point of crisis and judgment there has often been associated with the demise, sexual perversion. Here we see depicted for us the shaping of a world where power is exercised through sexual relations, devoid of love. I don't think it is stretching the interpretation to say that what is happening here is the control of a culture by spiritual forces of wickedness manifested in acts of sexual immorality. When the soul is left unfinished and in ruins still the perversion of the most intimate relationship becomes legion.

The effect of this perversion has its first consequence as a sentence of a shortened life span is announced by God. After Genesis 11 the life spans get shorter and shorter, and after the time of Jacob the longest living patriarchs were Joseph at 110, Moses at 120, Joshua at 110. Only Aaron goes beyond 120 and dies at 123 years of age.

The bible is clear that death is part of the judgment that all of life faces as a result of evil's power. At verse 3 we read: "Then the Lord said, "My spirit shall not abide in mortals for ever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred and twenty years."

Of course we see in our own lives that such a life span is itself extraordinary. As Moses observed:

"The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble. (Psalm 90:10)

God shortens our life span because as a race we have chosen to live devoid of his presence. As C.S. Lewis observed in his book *Miracles*:

"Death is a safety device, because once Man is fallen, natural immortality would be the one utterly hopeless destiny for him."<sup>1</sup>

Because we are fallen, to have immortality in our present state would result in an eternity of toil and trouble. Could you imagine an eternity in a world such as this? Thanks be to God it will not be so. Again to quote Lewis:

Death is, in fact, what some modern people call "ambivalent." It is Satan's great weapon and also God's great weapon; it is holy and unholy, our supreme disgrace and our only hope, the thing Christ came to conquer and means by which he conquered.<sup>2</sup>

So you have the rise of sexual perversion, a shortening of life, and then you come to violence and hubris idolized in verse 4: The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterwards—when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.

These fallen ones, these Nephilim, were the offspring of the debased marriages. In older translations of this verse, the Nephilim are translated as giants. This is because the only other reference to Nephilim in the Old Testament is in Numbers 13:33, where it talks about the Nephilim in the land the of Canaan. The Nephilim were so tall that the Israelites felt like grasshoppers, so the translators took the word *Nephilim* and translated it to *giants*. We know a direct genetic link between the Nephilim in Numbers and the Nephilim in Genesis 6 is impossible, because the Nephilim before the flood were completely wiped out. But we know these fallen ones were the heroes, the mighty men of old, the men of renown, and they were men of violence. The same word is used in Genesis 10:8 to describe Nimrod, "who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth." So they were violent and full of hubris.

Hubris is an excessive pride and self confidence that results in someone taking on a god-like complex. That such a thing was happening in a culture where kings were taking women from their intended husbands and having children, portrays a culture thoroughly demonized.

---

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: McMillan 1947), 130

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 125

How does God view such happenings? What does God think of this? The Genesis account puts it in dramatic terms. Chapter 1 repeats a statement four times: "And God saw that it was good." "And God saw that it was good." "And God saw that it was good." "And God saw that it was good." And then in verse 31: "And it was very good." But here we read in stark contrast:

5 The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.

You couldn't conceive of a more emphatic statement of the wickedness and depravity of the human heart. The words *every, only, continually* leave nothing out. The term *every inclination* is literally "every forming," which comes from the metaphorical use of a potter forming and molding his vessel, as in all the things bubbling up and forming in the mind. It means even the reflections of fantasy were debase all the time. The rising and freely formed movements of the will are only evil continually. The depravity of primeval culture was not a temporary state. There was no relenting, no repentances, no hesitation. Lust was their medium, violence their method. This is total, inveterate depravity in primeval humanity.

It was, of course, destroyed by the flood, except for Noah and his family in the ark. But this demonized civilization has enjoyed many recurrences throughout history. Canaanite Baal worship is an infamous example of sensual sexual violence. This is depicted repeatedly in the Old Testament. You can see it in Nero and Caligula's Roman courts or in the depravity of the Third Reich in this last century. Numerous are the leaders who have used their power to abuse their subjects and cause untold suffering.

And yet we need to ask how does such a text address the time in which we live? I wouldn't go so far as to say Western culture today is completely represented by what we read here in Genesis six, but the signs are ominous. A perversion of sexual relationships has taken place in Western culture, in Europe and the Americas. Although we do not have kings practising the "Right of First Night" we see around us the stars of our culture showing sexual indiscretion and perversion of all kinds.

How can you conclude otherwise when on the major networks you can view men on top of women, women on top of men, and wrestling in faux intercourse? How can you think otherwise when daytime talk

shows plumb any subject with appalling bathos? How can you think otherwise when the holy name of God is blasphemed, when the most holy things, from the virgin birth to the sexuality of Jesus, are made into obscene jokes on the national media? And those who so often represent these practices and views are the most famous.

How can you suppose otherwise when many heroes of our culture are violent men filled with hubris and arrogance?

Think for instance of the popularity of the World Wrestling Federation. Sensuality, violence, fantasy, steroids, and the spectacle of men gone wild is broadcast for all to see. You can rent DVDs and access videos on the internet that depict the most depraved of behaviours. This is a culture of sexual perversion and violence.

Here displayed in a text that is thousands of years old we see how this happens. People of influence and power make normative practices that are depraved because they run counter to the will of God. When men and women are at the controls and the soul is left in ruins, the downfall and judgment of a culture is immanent

This is what happens in the lives of people that have a particular collective power when we leave unfinished and in ruins still the only temple he delights to fill. Here we see what happens if we allow oppression and perversion to become institutionalized. And as we will see next week, the story of the Flood shows how such a civilization cannot continue unchecked but rather comes under the judgment of God.

And yet we have verse 8 that introduces hope into a hopeless situation.

But Noah found favor [or, literally, *grace*] in the eyes of the LORD.

God was calling throughout this whole age, just as he is calling in our age today, pleading with men and women to turn from their ways, to resist the widespread lie of Satan. One man and his family turned and found grace in God's sight. He did not deserve it, and he could equally have turned and gone the other way, but he responded to the wooing and pleading of God and found grace in his sight.

That same grace is why we are here this morning. Bring this down to this 21st-century hour, and draw the parallel between the days of

Noah and the days in which we live. You can see it plainly everywhere. We must remember that if we are delivered from the wrath to come, if we escape the judging hand of God upon society, it is not because of anything we have done; it is the manifestation of God's grace.

Remember the Christian who saw a drunkard staggering down the street wallowing in his own vomit, and turned to his friend to say, "There but for the grace of God go I." We can all say that. What has kept us? What has brought us to the truth? Was it any goodness on our part? No, it is God's grace. It is that he loved us and called us, he wooed us and won us, seeking us out and, through many influences upon us, bringing us at last to see that the age in which we live is an age under the bondage of a lie. He has opened our eyes, partially at least, to the truth, till we have turned to the Lord Jesus and rested under the grace of God.

As our age deteriorates, as other ages have done before us, and our civilization nears the point of utter collapse, we can thank God that we have been snatched away as brands from the burning, like Noah and his family, if our hearts are responsive to the appeal of God's grace.