

Dr. Kenneth Mathews, Genesis, Session 6, Sons of God

© 2024 Kenneth Mathews and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Kenneth Mathews in his teaching on the book of Genesis. This is session 6, The Sons of God and Daughters of Men, Genesis 5:1-6:8.

Session six concerns the genealogy of the Sethites and how we have, as we saw in session five, the trajectory of sin that is increasing in number and also in severity.

It will culminate in the intermarriage between the sons of God and the daughters of man described in chapter six, verses one through eight. Six, one through eight, is our narrative bridge between the genealogy and the account of Noah and the flood, beginning in verse nine. We might pause right here and recognize the value of genealogies, which are so often overlooked by contemporary readers.

Let me mention why genealogies are so important in the Bible and should be read and appreciated by readers who want to have a fuller understanding of the way in which genealogy and narrative work in concert. So, in the case of chapter five, we have a genealogy that speaks to how God recognizes and superintends, is a better term, how he superintends the history of the outworking of his promissory blessings for the human family. From Adam to Noah, let me reference you to chapter five, verse 32.

After Noah was 500 years old, he became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And then if you were to turn to chapter 11, you will see the Shemite genealogy given that results in Abraham, who's called by God to be a blessing to all peoples. So, when you put chapters five and chapter 11 together in your mind, as you read this connective story between the larger frame of the universal family, the human family, and then the particular specific family, you will see the superintendence of God over history from Adam to Noah and then to Abraham.

This genealogy also speaks to the unity of the human family, both in a positive way, that is, with the Sethites in chapter five, but previous to this, in chapter four in a negative way as it describes the Cainites. Now, the genealogy in the case of chapter five is one that's found in the Bible elsewhere as far as its style, and that is a linear genealogy. A linear genealogy names one descendant from the family, from the father, and that's what's outworking here.

And then you have what is known as a segment, where all of the descendants of a father would be named. And so, this is where you would see a branching out, a breadth of the genealogical legacy of a patriarch, of a family head. So, when it comes

to a good example of the segmented, chapter 10, which names the offspring of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, those genealogies are branched.

You can see here in chapter five a branching, briefly, in verse 32, where it names Noah's three sons, not just one. So you have a branching in this case, giving us a contrast or an illustration. Now, a couple of the issues we want to revisit that will be important for us is the contrast that occurs between Lamech, the murderer of Cain's genealogy, and then we have Enoch.

Enoch is first named in verse 18, where it reads that when Jared, his father, had lived 162 years, he became the father of Enoch. After he became the father of Enoch, Jared lived 800 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Jared lived 962 years, and then he died.

See, this fits the pattern of what we see at every named offspring. But in verse 21, we begin to see the pattern deviate or deviate from the pattern. When Enoch had lived 65 years, he became the father of Methuselah.

After he became the father of Methuselah, there was a change. No doubt this is highlighting with this embedded narrative an important theological message regarding the genealogy of the Sethites. Because here, the language that's used of Enoch will be used later in Genesis, speaking of a relationship between the person and God that shows that the person is righteous in the eyes and favor of God.

So, we find that Enoch walked with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enoch lived 365 years. Now, 365 years, of course, will remind you of a number that would be suggestive of 365 days, a completed year, 365 years, a completed life.

Perhaps this is what's meant by 365 years. And then Enoch walked with God, that kind of repetition to reiterate his holy lifestyle. Then he was no more.

This is very cryptic. It is unclear exactly what took place because God took him away. So, since it does not say, and then he died, evidently, Enoch was translated into the presence of God.

Such was his godly walk with the Lord. Now, although this is certainly a high commendation of Enoch, there's much more at work here because it is saying, even in the context of each of those who die, that it doesn't have to be this way.

This does not have to be the end; the destiny of God created man and woman. But there is a destiny beyond death, and that is the resurrected life—a translated life into the presence of God.

So here we have a very bright hope in the offspring of the Sethites that will culminate in a heroic deliverer. And that is Noah. Now, also in verses 28 and 29, we discover another act of grace on the part of God.

And that is the hope that is spoken by Lamech in verse 28. When Lamech had lived 182 years, he had a son. And he named him Noah.

Noah is the way it is pronounced in Hebrew. And it is very similar to the sound that occurs in Hebrew for the word comfort. And so there is a sound play between Noah and the Hebrew for the word comfort.

And he will comfort us, that is Noah. Let me play with the word a little bit. And it is intended to be understood.

And that is to translate comfort with the word Noah. So, he named him Noah and he will Noah us. In the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground, the Lord has cursed.

This has to do with Adam and the curse against the ground. And the toil by the sweat of his brow in bringing forth procreation from the cursed land. Well, Lamech says much more than he probably realized.

Because Noah not only is hoped to be a resolution to all of the toil and difficulties living in a fallen world. But he actually is the new Adam. He is the one who, through his sons, will be God's answer to the grave depravity and decadence that human society becomes and will deliver with a new start, a family that is preserved by God by means of the floating ark or vessel that Noah builds. So, all of this working together provides for a positive reading of the ancestry of Noah by means of the Sethite lineage. These two then are in contrast.

Well, a common question has to do with the long life spans. Because we know nothing of this. There is no such thing as such life spans.

And later Israel or in our lives for what we know from human history. So, there have been many attempts to understand these long life spans by explaining them along different lines of what the numbers may be. Perhaps the numbers refer in some way for figurative purposes.

Perhaps what's in view here is an ancestral lineage for each of these. So, for example, when it comes to a person lived 182 years with verse 28. That's his lifespan.

Which of course is quite long and is still not a resolution. And then what followed would be the years of Lamech's progeny which would eventually reach down to Noah. This is altogether problematic because of a number of things.

It just doesn't work out for each of these named. It doesn't resolve fully and completely the problem. Now, when we look at the literature of the ancient Near East.

We do have some literature that points to the long reigns, not life spans. That's presupposed. But it's actually having to do with royal figures and their reigns.

The one that I have in mind that's typically appealed to is the Sumerian king list. Sumer was a people group living in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley from as early as the 3rd millennium BC. There is produced a written king list that summarizes the history of ancient Sumer and it's parallel Akkad. Akkad to the north, Sumer to the south. In the Mesopotamian valley.

And it's from the time of the flood. There's a reference to the flood down to a king that you may have heard of. The most famous king of that region.

Hammurabi who reigned about 1800 BC. So, we do have the flood. We have kings and their dynasties listed before the flood as well.

But most scholars are agreed that the original account began with the flood. What was previously listed as a secondary addition to the flood. But when you look at the spans of these kings, they are utterly fantastic.

If you think that Genesis 5 is fantastic in its numbers, we find in the Sumerian king list truly long reigns. And the longest reign in that list is 72,000 years. Well, I think what is at work here is an indication that at one time the patriarchs did have longer lives and that their lives began to, in terms of their lifespan, reduced because of what was occurring in a post-fallen world.

The pressures of a deteriorating world. So, we have the longest life of Methuselah, 969 years, and that's in verse 27 of chapter 5. And then when it comes to Shem's genealogy in chapter 11, the average age of those who are named in Shem's genealogy, the average age is 344 years. So, we see a reduction.

Abraham lived 175 years, Joseph 110 years, Moses, we are told, 120 years. Psalm 90 was authored by Moses and he spoke of the ideal lifespan as 70 or 80 years. And so, Moses in his own life, in his own perspective, understood that God's good grace for humanity would involve a life of roughly 70 to 80 years.

And so, we see an ongoing reduction. And this is probably due, as I said, on the corruption of the human condition and nature's corruption. So what can we derive from this? Although we don't know precisely how these numbers work, it is not

unreasonable to conclude that in the ancient world there was a memory of humanity's long lives.

So set in that way, we can say that there is historical precedent for these long lives outside the Bible. And then we can say, very importantly, theologically, that as we read through Genesis, the reduction in the years of the lifespan testified to the sinful condition and its implications for humanity and life as well as nature's corruption due to sin. Now, we turn to the narrative beginning in chapter 6. This is under the same superscription of chapter 5, verse 1. Therefore, it needs to be understood in the progression of the narrative, chapters 4 and 5, that parallel with the two contrasting genealogies of the Canaanites.

And I want to be clear, I'm not talking about Canaanites. We're talking descendants of Cain, Canaanites and then the Sethites. And so, we have this narrative that bridges and serves then as an explanation of the consequences of the intermarriage and the unprecedented violence and wickedness of the era as preparatory for understanding the flood account.

For example, if you look at chapter 6, verse 11, now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. And so, this is an explanation of just how corrupt the human family had become and the necessity of God to respond with a just response.

And yet, in the midst of that, he preserves Noah, for he found in Noah, in contrast to his generation, an upright and righteous man who followed in the train of Enoch who did not experience death but was translated by the Lord because Enoch walked with God a most godly man in the context of his own Sethite genealogy. Well, what we find then in verses 1-4 would be a first paragraph that is matched by verses 5-8, the second paragraph.

And these two paragraphs work in tandem. For example, we find in verse 1 that it reads, or rather verse 2, the sons of God saw. There's a bit of a play on that when we find in verse 5 the Lord saw.

So, whenever the intermarriage occurred, it says when men began to increase, when that took place, and the intermarriage between these two took place, God observes it, and God observes the consequences. It's not outside his view and his evaluation of the development of human life. So, we do have the language also in this chapter bridge of the language that's used in chapter 6 verse 1 of increasing.

So, there's an explosion of procreation, and concomitant with that is an explosion of sinfulness. And so, you have these terms that occur in verse 5 that accent human wickedness. So, in verse 5 it says how great human wickedness on the earth had

become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only and then evil.

Now when it comes to looking at the first paragraph, let's look at this very carefully because of all the passages that could be found certainly in Genesis, if not the whole Old Testament, this has to be ranked as one of the most problematic for interpreters. Historically in understanding what is taking place here. And there's a lot of speculation regarding it both in Christian circles but also even in popular culture.

So, when men, and I take this to be the generic humankind, when humankind began to increase. Remember how I had said in an earlier session, in chapter 4, verse 26, it says when people began, began to call upon the name of the Lord. So, the language began to occur here, and just as I said, in that case, there is an introduced new direction in the case of chapter 4, verse 26; this is in the context of verses 25 and 26 that describe the birth of Seth, who replaces Abel.

And then you have following on that, the righteous genealogy of the Sethites. And so I think with the birth of Seth and with the righteousness that he would bring to the Adamic family through his lineage, through Seth's lineage, there was a turn in an unusual way by the human family to worship the Lord, to call upon his name in prayer, which then helped us understand how God marked out the Sethite community as the one through whom he would raise up Noah and eventually Abraham. So, when there was something new taking place, something different in the direction and then as we move from the righteousness that's found in chapter 5, here's the new direction, a new direction of procreation and increase in procreation.

But more importantly, what will occur, as described in verse 5, is a new direction of wickedness, a turning away from the righteousness of the Sethites. And this is brought about primarily by the intermarriage of the sons of God and the daughters of men. And how would this have been understood on the part of the first readers? Well, at least we can say this: when it comes to the different interpretations, we can agree that boundaries have been crossed.

When it comes to the first readers, they would have well recognized the importance of boundaries and how crossing boundaries results in complicating and corrupting what the boundaries have separated. When it came to Israel's identity in the context of the various people groups, you'll remember there is an emphasis on separating Israel from its neighbors, not because of ethnicity, but rather because the neighbors, these various people groups, who inhabited Canaan, and then of course the great nations around Canaan, they practiced an illicit form of worship, and that is idolatry with their polytheism, and all of the things pertaining to a fertility cult of sexual deviation. And so there is warning and prohibition against intermarriage because the new wives would bring with them their gods, the new wives would bring with them the influence of idolatry and betrayal of God, their covenant master.

So, this would have been very understandable in reading what's taking place here. Do notice that this is occurring on Earth, and it says that daughters were born to them. It doesn't say sons, but rather daughters, and this is because daughters become increasingly important, as they're described in verse 2, daughters of men, and that these daughters then will be important in producing offspring that evidently were even exceeding the wickedness of the Canaanites.

Now, then we come to the problematic expression: sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and I mentioned quickly that the language translated as beautiful is the same word that occurs in Genesis chapter 1, that's the word good, and this word can mean beautiful aesthetically, but it may be one of many recollections of Genesis 1 that God's creation was not the creation of men and women in sinfulness, it was not a creation of a defective world marked by sin and wickedness, murder and violence. That was not God's creation. That is what became of men and women because of their rebellion against God through human sinfulness. Now it goes on to say they married any of them they chose, and I want you to pay attention to the fact that the word here is married.

Some translations will have, and they took. Now, the word took is the Hebrew word here, but it is also an idiom in Hebrew for taking a wife, and hence that's why the New International Version translates married. And the choice does not mean rape, and there have been some who think that what occurred was rape, a force, or a sexual relationship.

But that's not really what it says. Now, here we have the sons of God; who are they? Well, the strongest argument for the traditional view is the language here, the expression sons of God, because you will find that expression used for angels, and this would occur in Job chapter 1 verse 2, or rather chapters 1 and 2, that speak of the angelic hosts who come before the Lord, and a spokesman of that would have been the adversary, Satan. So, there has been a very strong, very old interpretation of the sons of God as angels, or even we could say demons, because these are angels who have rebelled against God because they have transgressed their appropriate sphere of habitation, and that would be the heavenlies.

And so, they saw, and this would be the allurements of the daughters of men, and out of their sexual obsession, they wanted to take the daughters of men, who were beautiful, and use them for their own sexual appetites. So, we can speak of these as fallen angels, or you could use the term demons. There's so much packed in these verses, it's a hurdle for almost every word, but here we have the sons of God saw.

Now what does that remind you of? That reminds you of the garden. It reminds you of what Eve saw in this fruit that was now available to her if she chose to pick it and to eat it, and how it was very desirable in its appearance, how it was good for food,

and also how it would make one wise in her mind. So, there may be an echo here of the garden sin, the garden fall.

Well, that's the argument for angels or demons. Another interpretation is very popular and very early on in the early church. And in terms of popular Christian culture, I don't find it as popular as the angel perspective, the angel view, which has argument that's very strong.

And I would not be definitive about this interpretation one way or the other. And if there's anything about a problematic passage when it comes to interpretation, it certainly humbles us as interpreters. For although the word of God is true in every way and reliable in every way, interpreters aren't.

And so, that there are different interpretations should caution us about being too definitive about passages that are difficult and in this case obscure. Now, another way in which to interpret the sons of God is to remember what the word is in Hebrew for God. And here it is Elohim.

And this is the term that is generic in its idea. That is God's if it's taken as a plural or God if clearly in the context it refers to the one true God of Israel. And another way in which Elohim can be used is a descriptive word.

And so just like Elohim could be God or plural gods, it can also be understood as Godly. So that the sons of Elohim could refer to a Godly lineage. Now this is the way I understand it.

That because of the narrative, and this would be the strongest argument for the interpretation I lean toward, that chapter four and chapter five establish for us how we are to understand the sons of God. The sons of God would be the Godly offspring. And the Godly offspring would be those of the Sethites.

The daughters of men involve any that they choose. So, it could be the offspring of the Cainites or the offspring of the Sethites. But the point is that they don't show discrimination in who the Sethites marry.

They don't keep to the boundaries of a Godly family with Godly lineage. And there is an intermarriage that involves the Sethites and the Cainites. And as a result of breaking the boundaries, the Lord takes steps to curb the sinfulness that will arise.

And that's why, in verse three, we have this declaration: My spirit will not contend with humanity or with man forever, for he is flesh in the translation here, for he is mortal. His days will be 120 years. So, what's at work here is spirit as a reflection of the in-breathing, the in-breathing of God in the nostrils of the first men in chapter 2, verse 7, the life force.

So, your translation may have a capital S, My spirit. If it is a reference to God's spirit, then we would have to say this is a reminder of chapter 1, verse 2, where you circumscribe the restricting of the chaos in verse 2 of chapter 1, verse 2, where the spirit of God is hovering over the waters. If it is to be taken as a lower-case s then the Lord is saying My life-giving breath, He says will not contend for give advantage to humanity forever.

In other words, He's saying inevitably there's going to be death that God will require of this new lineage that's been created as a result of the intermarriage. And then He goes out to explain for He that is the offspring is mortal. Now this word flesh could be used for the idea of immortal or it could be having to do with the vulnerability and the fragileness of human life, hence mortal.

I lean toward this is the life-giving breath, the creation of the first man in chapter 2, verse 7. And therefore, the idea of mortal as flesh as opposed to eternal spirit is in mind. Then, the 120 years is even a difference of opinion on how to interpret the 120 years. Do the 120 years refer to the lifespan? A general statement about the reduction of human life in its lifespan? Or is it talking about a 120-year period when there is going to be a window of opportunity for or delay? Maybe we could say the opportunity for repentance before the flood comes.

This is variously understood. In my case, I lean toward the idea of a lifespan of approximately 120 years. Perhaps it's coincidence, but perhaps not that Moses lived 120 years, living the ideal lifespan.

Now in verse 4, this is so troubling. What do we do with the word translated Nephilim? And you can see it in your Bible. Most of your versions will transliterate the Hebrew.

Now, that's not translated. It gives you the word in English characters and English pronunciation, the Hebrew word. And so this is transliteration.

Nephilim, which is plural. So, it says the Nephilim were on the earth in those days. And also, afterward when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them.

Let's pause right there. Who are the Nephilim? We are told in Numbers 13 that there is a description of the Nephilim as giants and unusually strong, towering group of people. And it may be that that is what is influencing the interpretation of verse 4 and the Nephilim here.

A couple of problems that come to mind. And one is that the Nephilim should have been wiped out with the flood. And the other is that it says and also afterward.

So, the Nephilim were on the earth in those days and also afterward. So, I think that we have here the Nephilim that were contemporary. See it says were on the earth in those days.

And these could have been contemporaries of the sons of God and the daughters of men. Not necessarily their offspring. Now, how is it that the Nephilim are mentioned in Numbers, chapters 13 and 14? Well, I think this would be similar to the way in which reference can be made as a figure of speech when it comes to using the Nephilim as a name of a tradition, a heritage, going all the way back to antiquity, the earliest life in the earth when the Nephilim were seen as vicious offspring of this period.

They were on the earth in those days and then also afterward. In other words, this is an icon of violence, of viciousness that occurred. It kind of reminds me of Darth Vader who in the Star Wars accounts or stories is seen as an epitome of wickedness.

So were the Nephilim. So, when they look at the Nephilim, and they look at the Canaanites and their fortresses, the spies who were sent by Moses into the wilderness, they draw on that language to say, look, we're overwhelmed. We can't possibly take these cities with their walls, with their advanced culture and warfare, and they're like Darth Vader.

They are the Nephilim. Now it does say they were the heroes of old men of renown. And so, the men of renown literally is the men of name.

So, they had a reputation. They were seen as warriors, heroes of old. And this seems to be connected with what follows in verse 5 and following about the wickedness that occurs.

So, I am not saying that the Nephilim were a race of giants but a group of warriors who had a reputation. Heroes of old, men of name, men of reputation who were noted in these days when you have intermarriage. Not necessarily the offspring of these intermarriages creating a giant race but rather that these are ones who rose up in this time period and afterward that produced, that created the world of verse 5. A world marked by wickedness even to the point that the human family spent their time thinking of how to practice and carry out evil.

This was who they were. Thoughts of their heart. Their interior life.

So, we have this highly anthropomorphic description of the Lord. Describing the Lord's response like that of how we as humans would be grieved in our heart at the wickedness and the shame of our own offspring should they practice such evil. And that the Lord who has created humanity for the good.

He loves humanity. He loves men and women. He wants them to share in his holy and good life.

His eternal life. And that's why he's grieving. He's not grieving that he had created man but rather what has become of his creatures.

And so it says that he grieved his heart was filled with pain, and he says, I will wipe mankind whom I have created from the face of the earth. And notice again it has to do with the connection of the animal world because men and women who are superintending the animal world they are representative of the whole creation. And they are creatures too.

This is some time lost on us. We have to remember that we are creatures. And that God has created us with a spiritual capacity to commune with him, who is spirit.

Nonetheless we are as the dust of the ground. We are creatures. And so, it reads like we would find from creation.

And that is men and animals and creatures that move along the ground and the birds of the air, for I am grief that I have made them. Now, what we will find in the flood account that will follow is the reversal of creation. The uncreated is going to be at work here.

That is how God will bring his judgment, wiping out the human family and all of its wickedness. You remember that the unproductive and uninhabited world of chapter 1 verse 2 was marked by darkness, was marked by the sea waters, the deep. And God will bring about the seas and the oceans with the rainfall to reverse the productive world and the inhabited world to be that of the unproductive and of now the uninhabited with the exception of Noah.

And so that's what we have in verse 8. Verse 8 highlights the hope of Noah and his generation to follow as a deliverer. I might also notice that your interpretation does not say angels in chapter 6 unless you take the sons of God as a technical reference to angels. But what is something for us to consider is that there is no word against angels.

That all of the terminology that's used for the practices and the judgment of God would be men or humankind. Men as humankind where you have the male sons and you have the female daughters. So, these are known as humans and the concern is human and the concern is not with angels.

Moreover, there is no mention or reference to angels in chapters 1 through 5. Of course, if you interpret the serpent as Satan, you could conclude that there is a

reference to an angel there, but that's not how the serpent is presented as an angel. That must come later as interpreters understand that the behavior and practice of the serpent is like that of Satan who is identified later. So, we have here the sorrowful story of the depravity of humanity, but yet God takes steps to curb this out-of-control wickedness, and that's through the judgment of the floodwaters.

And then how he steps in and redeems a remnant, a family, the Noahic family, establishes a preservation and then as we will see when we come next time together, we are told in verse 18 of chapter 6 that God establishes my covenant, and that will occur in chapter 9 after the flood where you have a specific covenant that is named in chapter 9. So, our next session will be about Noah's floodwaters.

This is Dr. Kenneth Mathews in his teaching on the book of Genesis. This is session 6, The Sons of God and Daughters of Men, Genesis 5:1-6:8.