

SIGNS OF COLLAPSE

by Ray C. Stedman

In this present series we have been looking at the great principles that govern human society, those principles which produce straining social problems, such as war, crime, poverty, unequal distribution of food, improper use of leisure, and urban blight. These all arise when men who are made in the image of God, but have lost the likeness of God, seek to fulfill the original command of God to master the earth and fill it, but without the Spirit of God within. As is so evident in our day, man succeeds only in darkening the skies, ravishing the ground, poisoning the water, setting men against each other in violence and cruelty, and in spreading death, fear, and hatred throughout the earth. But all this is done in the midst of increasing comfort and luxury and the technical brilliance that builds impressive cities and produces astonishing gadgets of incredible complexity and power. The seeds of all this are found in the first five chapters in Genesis, as we have been seeing.

Now no house built upon such a shaky foundation can long stand, therefore the record of history has been the collapse of one civilization after another. Arnold Toynbee has indicated there have been in the past some twenty-one or more different civilizations, each one in turn collapsing and giving way to another. Therefore we should not be at all surprised to find here, in this definitive passage of Scripture, a description of the signs that accompany the imminent collapse of a civilization. Since many of us feel that we are living in such an hour today, it is easy to see how contemporary this is.

The Bible, as you know, speaks of "times and seasons" in the affairs of men. Times are those major divisions of history which are marked by a special character. The Bible speaks, for instance, of the "times of ignorance," and by that it is referring to the ages before the coming of Christ, when men lived in relative ignorance of the understanding of God. It speaks again of the "times of the restitution of all things," in the future when God would work out all his purposes and unite all things together in Christ. We use language somewhat similar. We speak of the "Dark Ages," characterized by widespread ignorance and moral darkness. But "seasons" are those divisions of time in which certain events come to the fore. I do not think I can do better than to quote Archbishop Trench, from his *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, in this respect:

The "seasons" are the joints or articulations in the times; the critical epoch-making periods, ordained of God, when all that has been slowly, and often without observation, ripening through long ages, is mature and comes to the birth in grand decisive events which constitute at once the close of one period and the commencement of another.

Remember that Jesus said to his disciples after his resurrection, "the times and seasons are not for you to know," {cf, Acts 1:7}. They will unfold as history goes on its way, but we cannot predict when they will occur in the span of time. It is very important that we recognize these divisions when they do occur, and especially to understand what our Lord meant when he said, "As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be in the days of the coming of the Son of Man," {cf, Matt 24:37}. Now we are studying the days of Noah. Our Lord linked these two epochs together and said that one is the parallel of the other. If we are living in the days immediately preceding the return of Jesus Christ we shall find similar conditions to the days of Noah. So in Genesis 6 we have the real story behind the headlines of history. Here we find three steps traced for us that mark the signs of the imminent collapse of civilization.

The first one is given to us in Verses 1 through 4 and, as we shall see, it is that of a demonic invasion:

When men began to multiply on the face of the ground and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose. Then the Lord said, "My a spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh, but his days shall he a hundred and twenty years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown. {Gen 6:1-4 RSV}

Interest immediately focuses on the question, Who were these sons of God? What kind of beings did these strange things? One suggestion that we must take note of is that here we have the blending of two lines; the line of Cain, and the line of Seth (which have been followed briefly in previous chapters); and that here is the intermarriage between these two lines, that of the godly (the line of Seth), and the ungodly (the line of Cain). But there are several severe objections to this idea. One, of course, is that this would make the line of Cain the "sons of God," and that hardly seems fitting in view of the character that is given to us in the Bible of Cain and his descendants. It seems much more likely that that description would be applied to the sons of Seth, rather than those of Cain. Then, too, it appears that the ungodly have only sons, while the godly have daughters. Now that is a perfectly acceptable view as far as I am concerned, since I have four daughters. But it hardly seems possible to accept such a view. It is all too clear that this theory does not take account of all the factors evidenced.

There is an alternative view that takes note of the fact that in Scripture it is only by a specific divine act of creation that any being can be termed a son of God. God is a Spirit, and man is flesh, and in the New Testament we are told that "that which is born of the flesh is flesh, but that which is born of the Spirit is spirit," {John 3:6 RSV}. So you cannot have men of the flesh termed "sons of God," except a divine creative act be performed. In the New Testament Adam is called a son of God because he is the direct result of divine creation, Jesus Christ is called the Son of God because he is eternally begotten of the Father; and believers are called sons of God because they are born again by faith in Jesus Christ, in a divine creative act. Also, in the Bible, angels are called sons of God for they came directly from the creating hand of God and are not reproduced sexually, as men are. It is interesting that in the Old Testament every other use of this term "sons of God" refers to the angels. You will find in the book of Job that the angels are called sons of God {Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7}.

Now we learn from Jude and Peter in the New Testament that there was a fall of angels, and the time of that fall is given as "the days of Noah." There are two very interesting passages that link up with Genesis 6. In First Peter, Chapter 3, we have a passage that has been a puzzle to many but which does directly apply to this account. Peter says of Jesus that he went "in the spirit" and preached to "the spirits in prison," {1 Pet 3:19}. Now there has been much controversy as to what this meant. Some have thought it meant that Jesus descended into hell and preached to the spirits in hell during the three days between his crucifixion and resurrection. Personally, I do not ascribe to that theory at all. I think it means that it was through the Spirit that Jesus preached in the days of Noah, speaking in the person of Noah. Noah, we are told, was "a preacher of righteousness" {2 Pet 2:5}, and the Spirit of Christ preached through him.

But at any rate that is somewhat beside the point. The passage goes on to say that these were spirits in prison,

... who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. {1 Pet 3:20 RSV}

Also in Second Peter, Chapter 2, Verse 4, Peter recounts a fall of the angels:

For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to the pits, of nether gloom to be kept until the judgment; if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, {2 Pet 2:4-5a RSV}

Note that he links this fall with the days of Noah. Then in the book of Jude we have another reference to this event:

And the angels that did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling have been kept by him in eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgment of the great day; just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. {Jude 1:6-7 RSV}

There Jude gives us the nature of the sin of the angels. He said it was like that in Sodom and Gomorrah; it was

"unnatural lust." This you can see is directly in parallel with the statement in Genesis 6, that the "sons of God" came in to the daughters of men and married them, taking wives as they chose. This is evidently regarded in the Scriptures as an unnatural act. Thus we have the picture of fallen angels joining in sexual intercourse with the daughters of men and producing a strange race.

There have been those who object to this idea by pointing out that Jesus said that angels are sexless. In Matthew 22, Verse 30, he does say that those who are in the resurrection "will neither marry nor be given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven." It must be noted, however, that he adds the words, "in heaven," as opposed to the angels in hell. Some have suggested that perhaps there was a time when angels did have sexual powers, and this, of course, would permit the kind of thing recorded here. However, it seems more likely that the explanation is given to us by Jude when he says of these angels that they "left their proper dwelling" {Jude 1:6}, and presumably took up improper dwelling places. Now bodies, in Scripture, are called dwelling places. The very term Jude uses is, elsewhere in Scripture, applied to the body. Its use here implies that the angels took up residence where they did not belong. This, therefore, is suggestive of what we have in the New Testament in the days of our Lord, in the many, many cases of demonic possession recorded so frequently in the pages of the gospels. Evil spirits, fallen angels, possessed the bodies of men, and these demon-possessed men married women and produced a race of strange beings called here in Genesis 6, the Nephilim. They were a race of giants. The word, Nephilim, is confirming of this whole idea, because it means "the fallen ones."

All this strongly suggests that demonic possession has the ability to affect genetic structure. The chromosomes are changed so that the progeny are markedly different; a sort of mutation takes place, and the result is a pronounced change in the children of such a union. We know today that LSD has this kind of an effect upon the genetic structure. Chromosomal changes take place and children can be malformed and mentally deficient because of the use of LSD by their parents. It is interesting that, in the book of Revelation, the Bible links drugs with demonism and suggests that drugs are a means by which the human spirit is opened up to the control of demonic beings. *Time Magazine* reported a new theory to the effect that "a genetic abnormality may predispose a man to antisocial behavior, including crimes of violence..." A normal male baby has an XY chromosome pattern, but occasionally one is found with an XYY pattern. According to an all-woman team of researchers in Scotland, this "may be a supermale, overaggressive and potentially criminal." It was further noted that "the XYY (males) averaged 6 ft 1 inch tall whereas the average for (others tested) was 5 ft 7 inches."

It is clear that the result of this union of demon-possessed men with women was a race of mighty men, "men of renown." Here, I think, is the explanation for the stories of mythology with which many of you are familiar, the demi-gods -- half man and half god -- such as Hercules, and others. Mythology is no mere invention of the mind of man; it grows out of the traditions, memories, and legends which were a corruption and perversion of primitive truths. We are told in this passage that this occurred "also afterward." This "also afterward" means that after the Flood a similar incursion of demonic beings took place. This second invasion resulted in the presence in the land of Canaan of certain gigantic races which are called in our Bible, the Canaanites. Many of you who have stumbled over those long lists of "ites" in the Old Testament are familiar with these various races -- the Jebusites, the Geshurites, the Hittites, etc. All of these are divisions of the Nephilim (they are also called the Rephaim in the Old Testament) who were already in the land when Abraham came to the promised land. They represent an attempt on the part of demonic powers to derail the divine program of bringing a Redeemer into the world through the human race.

It is interesting that archaeologists have now discovered the giant-cities of Bashan, and they confirm the fact that there did exist in this area races of gigantic beings whose beds are ten, eleven, or twelve feet long. (They had king-size beds in those days, but only because they needed them.) It was these people that the Israelites were commanded to exterminate completely. It was these giant cities they were to wipe off the face of the earth; to exterminate the whole populace and their animals.

When this invasion of demonic powers into mankind takes place, notice that God, in his governing grace, immediately limits it:

Then the Lord said, "My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years." {Gen 6:3 RSV}

That is sometimes regarded as a reference to the length of life of man before the Flood, but in this context I think it is clear that it means, rather, the number of years before the Flood, the length of time in which God would permit this kind of thing to go on in human society. The one thing the Bible makes clear everywhere is that God controls human society; he restrains demonic forces and only permits them to operate to a limited degree and for a limited period of time. Here we have clearly suggested the idea that he marked off before the Flood a hundred and thirty years, which would be the time when Noah would be permitted to preach the grace of God and extend an invitation to the people of his day to turn from their wicked ways and revive the promise of salvation. This First Peter confirms. Noah was indeed a preacher of godliness, of righteousness, and the people refused to hear his word during the one hundred and twenty years of the preaching of grace.

Dr. Charles Malik, who was for a long time President of the United Nations and delegate from Lebanon, once said,

...we are still living, as the Germans say, *zwischen den zeiten* (between the times) when demonic forces can quickly soar very high and can take possession of the world in very short order.

There is a word from a world statesman confirming the fact that demonic forces are at work in human society. The first mark of an imminent collapse of civilization is this appearance of demonic powers at loose. They manifest themselves primarily in open and unchecked wickedness.

We shall see that this is the second mark given to us in the first part of Verse 5:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, {Gen 6:5 RSV}

Unusually intense (that is the meaning of "great") and very widespread (in the earth) wickedness -- that is the second mark. The whole of the world of that day was involved in this. This wickedness is described in detail in various portions of Scripture. Wickedness is always the absence of the life of God at work in human society. It is always opposed to the things of God. Perhaps the most vivid, most accurate and detailed description of wickedness given to us in the New Testament is in the book of Galatians, where the apostle describes the works of the flesh. It is the flesh that is "enmity against God" and produces wickedness. He says,

Now the works of the flesh are plain [i.e., they are easy to identify; they are obvious]: immorality, impurity, licentiousness [notice how he begins on the sexual level], idolatry, sorcery [witchcraft, or anything to do with the occult], enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. {Gal 5:19-21a RSV}

That is wickedness. It is very noteworthy that in every listing of wickedness you will find, first, sexual wickedness. In the gospels it was "unclean" spirits that were possessing the bodies of men. This word, unclean, is used elsewhere in the New Testament as the word for lust, therefore these were lustful spirits, i.e., sexually twisted and distorted spirits. Their presence in society is always marked by outbreaks of sexual perversity. This is what Paul describes in Romans 1, where he is tracing the decline and fall of a society. He gives there, as the ultimate sign of imminent collapse, the turning of men to unnatural lusts with other men, and women to unnatural lusts with other women, and the breakdown of society at this sexual level. Thus we have clearly, as the second mark, a widespread and unusual manifestations of sexual wickedness; not sporadic, but continuous; {not} localized, but everywhere. Naturally there have been occurrences of this sort in every civilization at some time. But here, it has a double character; it becomes a continuous thing and is everywhere taking place.

Now in the second half of that same verse we have the third mark of the imminent collapse of civilization. It is what Moses calls here, evil (debased) imaginations.

The Lord saw ... that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. {Gen 6:5a, 6:5c RSV}

The outward wickedness rested upon a deeper corruption within. The "imagination of the heart" are the desires and urges for ever more stimulating experiences, what Paul calls in Ephesians "deceitful lusts," which constantly urge men and women, boys and girls, to try to find something more exciting; what in modern parlance we call "kicks," something that satisfies and is exciting. Now this urge for kicks constitutes debased imaginations. They would find expression in any society in the creative arts, those which depend upon imagination for their motivation and expression, such as literature, art, and drama. It is most significant that more and more today we are finding this area given over to the expression of the salacious, the lewd, and the sensual. Recently I heard of a teacher in public school who refused to teach literature anymore because of the salacious content of what he had to teach. He simply gave up his training and professional background in order to avoid having to teach this kind of stuff.

All of this is summed up for us in two words in Verse 11:

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. {Gen 6:11 RSV}

Corruption is inward pollution, the polluting of the mind, the heart, the imagination, the inner nature. The inner kingdom becomes extremely sensual and is polluted. The result is outward violence destructiveness, the outbreak of cruelty and violence on every side. There you have the marks of an impending collapse of civilization. Rather sobering, isn't it? When civilization reaches this stage then the Bible clearly implies that judgment is certain, by divine fiat. We read on in Verse 6:

And the Lord was sorry that he had made men on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. {Gen 6:6-8 RSV}

When the account says, "God is sorry," it is really the word, "God repented." We know from other Scriptures that it is impossible for God to repent. He does not change his mind like man does. But this is a powerful figure to express in a vivid way the anger and determination of God. When society reaches this stage of dissolution and deterioration, God's anger burns. It appears that he has changed his mind completely even though he is but acting on principles that are entirely consistent with his own being.

Yet, in the midst of this, we read that it grieved him, and grief is always the activity of love. What we finite human beings do not understand is that God's love and wrath are exactly the same thing. They are two sides of the same coin. What entrances us and warms us about God, and draws us to him, is love, the manifestation of his total being. He is the God of love, who loves regardless of merit. This is what attracts us. But it is because we respond that he appears to us in that way. To those who reject his love, the same quality in God becomes wrath and it seems to be a wall of fire, burning and consuming everything. We can see this also in ourselves. It is our love that causes us to be angry at anything which injures what we love. You injure a mother's child in the mother's presence and watch her love flame out in wrath and anger against you. Thus we have here clearly described a time when man, in his rejection of God, passes beyond the place of seeing God as love, and begins to experience his love as wrath. But it is exactly the same thing.

With mankind goes the whole creation because the creation is linked with man. The animals were made for man, so when man goes, the animals must go as well. But always there is the shining of grace, Verse 8:

But Noah found favor [or, literally, grace] in the eyes of the Lord. {Gen 6:8 RSV}

God was calling throughout this whole age, just as he is calling in our age today, pleading with men 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 twentieth-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.

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