

FROM ABEL TO BABEL

Genesis 4-11 consists of three cycles recapitulating Genesis 3: Sin, Judgment, Grace

	4-5	6-9	11
Sin	Cain's murder of Abel	Runaway wickedness	Tower of Babel
Judgment	Expulsion from God's presence	Flood	Confusion of language and scattering of people
Grace	Birth of Seth	Preservation of Noah	Call of Abram

Certain similarities connect these cycles. In each case, judgment is more than mere punishment; it is a merciful act, limiting the influence of Satan and frustrating his attempts to prevent the fulfillment of 3:15. Further, in each cycle God shows grace by initiating a new beginning with one individual. Geerhardus Vos writes that the purpose of this period of salvation history appears to be that “it was intended to bring out the consequences of sin when left so far as possible to itself.”

“...God... did not protect Adam and Eve from the Serpent, nor Abel from Cain, nor the daughters of men from tyrants, nor the earth from violence. Rather, he allows people to be authentic and in so doing validates human nature in the crucible of history. Adam shows he is no match for Satan and is easily led astray, and Cain shows that man courts self-destruction by engaging in self-congratulations. Nevertheless, God restricts sin and its consequences. God protects the garden and Tree of Life by expelling Adam; he marks Cain with a tattoo and destroys the corrupt earth, while he preserves Noah to start over again. God intervenes to change Eve’s religious affections, and we may assume that he does the same for Noah.” – Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, p. 286.

II. CYCLE II: THE FLOOD (6-9)

Genesis 6:1-8 serves as a “janus” between Adam and Noah, looking back to the story we have just finished concerning the lines of Cain and Seth, and ahead to the Flood narrative.

A. Sin

1. The deterioration of society continues, culminating in the intermarriage of the 'sons of God' and the 'daughters of men'. What in the world is going on? Different interpretations exist of who these are:

i. The 'sons of God' have been interpreted as descendants of Seth, fallen angels, demon-possessed men, and a royal line of kings (Kline favors the latter; Waltke agrees but also sees at least a demonic element at work).

ii. The 'daughters of men' have been interpreted as descendants of Cain or women in general.

While it is not certain, it seems that vv. 6:1-4 and 6:5-8 give two perspectives on the same events:

Man's perspective	God's perspective
'the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive (Heb. <i>tob</i> , 'good'). And they took as their wives any they chose.' (2)	'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' (5)
"The Nephilim were on the earth in those days... the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown.' (4)	'But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.' (8)

2. A crucial point is that the sin of 6:2 alludes to the fall: They *saw* for themselves what was *good*, and they *took*. The Lord sees that this is evil.

3. Whoever the Nephilim were, they were - from man's perspective - mighty men, great heroes, natural heirs to the line of Cain and Lamech. But it is Noah that finds favor with God.

B. Judgment: God looks upon humanity - including these mighty men - and reacts with sorrow and judgment.

1. He limits the lifespan of men (3) (but note: Waltke gives the alternative interpretation that God is setting a period of 120 to elapse until judgment, to give mankind time to repent).

2. He is grieved in his heart and determines to blot out man (*adam*) from the face of the land (or ground, *adamah*).

Excursus: The verb translated ‘grieved’ can also be translated ‘repent’ or ‘relent.’ What do we make of this? Does God change His mind? Does He suffer?

a. The bible is comfortable asserting both that God does not relent and that He does – sometimes in *very* close proximity (cf. 1 Sam. 15:11, 15:29).

b. That *God is unchanging* is asserted very strongly (Num. 23:19; Ps. 102:26; Mal. 3:6; 2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 6:17-18; Heb. 13:8; Jam. 1:17; Rev. 1:8).

c. But equally strongly it is asserted that *God “relents over disaster”* (Ex. 34:6-7; Jer. 18:8; Jer. 26:3; Jer. 26:13; Jer. 26:19; Jer. 42:10; Zech. 8:14; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

d. In the end it must be said that both of these are critical to our salvation. If God suffers then He is reactive, love must be goaded into being by pain, and reactive suffering must in some sense be an aspect of His eternal being; but if He does not relent then we have no hope of salvation. In the end it is best to affirm that God grieves over sin and, indeed, manifests other emotions, but only in a proactive, never a reactive, sense. God grieves over sin *eternally*, precisely as an expression of His unchanging holiness. More difficult is to understand how His providence can so order things that even sin, judgment, and His gracious relenting all work for the good of those who love Him.

3. The flood will undo creation, returning the earth to its initial state, covered in water.

4. Noah is represented as finding favor in the eyes of the Lord before he is represented as blameless – a final note of hope, grounded on the graciousness of God rather than on the promise of man, in this short literary unit.

Genesis 6:8 brings to an end the second *toledot* (“the generations of Adam”); 6:9 begins a new literary unit (“the generations of Noah”).

C. Grace

1. Noah's life: he is described as righteous, blameless in his (extremely depraved) generation, walked with God (as did Enoch). There is a difference in nuance between righteousness – which has to do with adherence to an ethical standard defined by a covenant – and blamelessness – which implies wholeness, completeness, strength of character to refrain from sin, though not necessarily complete sinlessness. From Hebrews 11 we learn that this is the result of God's gracious gift of faith to Noah, such that we read that Noah found favor with God before we learn anything else of his character.

2. Warning and delay of judgment

- i. 6:3 can be interpreted to mean that God gave 120 years' warning before the Flood.
- ii. Enoch warned his generation of coming judgment (Jude 14-15).
- iii. Noah also was a "herald of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5).

3. Preservation of Noah - 8:1, 'But God remembered Noah' is the literary turning point of the episode.

4. Blessing - God blessed Noah as he did Adam before the fall, charging him to be fruitful and multiply. The flood returned the earth to its pre-creation state; the receding of the waters and the blessing of Noah recapitulate the events of the first creation. Note Noah's rule over the animals before and after the flood.

5. Provision for life: God enacts new limits on the danger of the fallen world, placing the fear of man into animals (9:2) and establishing a principle of criminal justice (9:6).

5. Covenant - God enters into covenant with Noah, and through him with all creation (9:10). As with other covenants, God enters this one unilaterally and in full knowledge of mankind's depravity (8:21). He demonstrates his maintained commitment to his creation and his intention that it will continue toward the end he has designed it for: creation and redemption are consistently intertwined. The rainbow is a sign for him, not for mankind.

6. Noah's blessing on Shem - Though Noah's life quickly comes to embarrassment (9:21-25), out of this scene comes the new revelation that God will identify himself uniquely with the descendants of Shem.

D. The Significance: The Flood serves as a paradigm for judgment and salvation.

1. The Flood serves as the paradigm of the coming judgment (Matt. 24:37-9, 2 Pet. 3:3-7); the two share many similarities

- i. Judgment is ultimately the result of God's love for his creation and his intention to restore its purity
- ii. Judgment is due to man's sin
- iii. God gives extended warning before judgment
- iv. God offers salvation from impending judgment

2. 1 Peter 3:20-21 draws a direct connection between the waters of the Flood and baptism:

- i. Noah was saved by taking refuge in the ark; we are saved by taking refuge in Christ
- ii. Noah's salvation depended on his having found favor in the eyes of the Lord (he would not have built the ark on his own); similarly, baptism itself does not save, but represents the gracious covenant God has extended.

iii. The motif of "new creation" is repeated throughout scripture, frequently relying on the commonly-held ANE imagery of a flood (but subverting ANE theology!). Imagery of water, wind, dry land in the midst of the waters, light in the midst of darkness, and of

God hovering over his people like a protecting bird appear at creation, the flood, the Exodus, and with reference to Jesus' ultimate salvation and the creation of the Church.

3. The Flood narrative demonstrates the pattern of election.

i. Noah finds favor with the Lord.

ii. Following the flood, Noah's blessing rests with Shem in particular.

iii. Note that there are varying interpretations as to what is going on in 9:18-28. The traditional interpretation places fault on Noah for his drunkenness. However, Hugenberger suggests that Noah is enjoying the fruit of the vine appropriately, "in his tent," and that Ham does not stumble across his publicly drunken father but invades the marital relations of his parents, possibly with malicious intent. The latter interpretation is supported by the fact that *nakedness* can refer to a man's wife, rather than to himself (see Leviticus 18) and that the phrase "to look upon the nakedness of..." can refer to dispossession (Gen. 42:9, Isa. 20:3-4). Moreover, this interpretation also fits a parallel to Gen. 1-3, in which the nakedness of Adam is covered with *the* (not *a*) garment.

E. Covenant

1. Waltke defines a covenant as "a solemn commitment of oneself to undertake an obligation." Hugenberger's definition is "an elective, as opposed to natural, typically family-like, relationship of obligation established under divine sanction." Note that last bit about divine sanction: ANE covenants were typically *tri*-partite, and biblical covenants are no exception, as God plays the role of both Lord of, and divine witness to, the covenant.

- i. Westminster asserts Adam *could* have secured eternal life for himself by obedience ("the covenant of works").
- ii. The covenant of grace exceeds that of works in that it offers, not merely the possibility of life, but life itself by faith in Jesus Christ.
- iii. The covenant of grace does not set aside the covenant of works: Jesus, as second Adam, *fulfills* the covenant of works, and His righteousness is imputed to us!

2. The Noahic covenant is an unconditional covenant in which God commits Himself to the preservation of the earth. The stage is set for God to begin to work through the line of Shem for the salvation of the world.