



"[W]rong behavior (if it is really wrong on universal principles) is progressive, always: it never stops at being 'not very good,' 'second best'--it either reforms, or goes on to third-rate, bad, abominable."
—J.R.R. Tolkien

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Has Humanity Reached Total Depravity? (Part One)

Just before the [Noachian Flood](#), [God](#) declares His assessment of the moral state of humanity, and He pulls no punches: "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" ([Genesis 6:5](#)).

A commentator, James Burton Coffman, writes, "It would be difficult to devise a sentence that would any more effectively portray the corruption of humanity than does [Genesis 6:5](#)." To put it in a few words, God informs us that mankind at the time was totally depraved.

This verse is a purposeful contrast to His statement in [Genesis 1:31](#): "Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day." On the day He created Adam and Eve, He felt more than satisfied with His work, evaluating what He had made as excellent and beautiful. But about sixteen centuries later, humanity had degenerated from very good to wicked, from unspoiled to rotten to the core.

The final verses of Genesis 3 narrate God's expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after their sins. He placed cherubim, each with a flaming sword, around the Garden to block them from returning. The scene illustrates humanity in the persons of our first parents being cut off from God. [Sin](#) causes separation from God ([Isaiah 59:1-2](#)).

[Genesis 6:5](#) stands as a glaring depiction of what ultimately results when humanity loses contact with the God of creation. In a relatively short time, mankind regressed from "very good" to "only evil continually." The contrast between these moral states is stark. An analysis of Moses' phrasing in [Genesis 6:5](#) shows just how total their depravity was:

First, he writes that "the LORD saw" their wickedness. Rather than meaning just "to see," *saw* here possesses the force of such stronger words as "observed," "surveilled," "scrutinized," or "examined." God took time to observe and understand what He saw humanity doing. He did not suddenly look down from on high and say, "Oh, no! Look at how bad things have become!"

Instead, the image is one of God intently watching and observing mankind's behavior over an extended period. Intimately involved with His creation, He oversees the activities of His creatures, and He had observed from the very beginning that humans sin. God closely watched their steady deterioration over many centuries.

So, [Genesis 6:5](#) does not describe a short-term moral decline. It did not happen only during the last century or two before the Flood, but man's moral character steadily corroded from purity to wickedness from our first parents' expulsion from the Garden until the Flood erased all but eight human lives. Abel, Enoch, and Noah were among the few bright spots throughout that period.

Second, God describes mankind's wickedness as "great." We can glean two vital details from this description: The first is that pre-Flood humans were not simply naughty, wayward, or ignorant. God means that they were truly evil, corrupt, immoral, depraved, wicked! He is not mincing words.

The other detail is that their "great" wickedness was not static. The implication is that their evil multiplied. They were not committing random acts of violence, nor were great sins happening just here or there. He describes evils piled on top of evils, wickedness beyond belief! The Hebrew word underlying "great" implies "increase in proliferation" or "burgeoning growth." Without straining the meaning, we could put it in terms of "exponential growth." Evil was expanding at such a rate that there was a steadily diminishing chance of [repentance](#) or revival. Pandora's Box had been blown open, and there was no shutting it short of human annihilation.

Third, God uses the phrase "in the earth," suggesting a worldwide, global, universal condition. Human evil was all over and everywhere. The multiplying wickedness was not relegated to just one area of the globe, but it had gripped the whole earth. No area of human habitation was immune to the increasing sin; no geographical region had been spared the destruction sin brings. It was pervasive.

We see, then, why God sent a global Flood upon the earth. God's solution to universal sin and wickedness was universal punishment. God is just. If sin saturated only one region, we could expect God to destroy just that one region. However, because human wickedness covered the entire earth, He needed to punish the evildoers by covering the whole planet with water.

Fourth, the second clause of [Genesis 6:5](#)—"and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually"—parallels the first clause. Parallelism is a Hebrew way of adding description or emphasis by restatement. Here, the second clause both intensifies and expands on the first. If the first clause described a terrible moral state, the second clause amplifies the matter. It explains how egregious, abhorrent, and repugnant the wickedness of humanity was.

God focuses on their "intent." *Intent* suggests "impulse," "tendency," "inclination," "design," "plan," or even "fashioned thing." Intent is the attitudinal germ behind human thoughts, words, and actions. God means that in everything pre-Flood humans did—even in fashioning material things!—their initial attitude was to do evil. Their wicked attitudes sparked thoughts and plans that drove their wicked deeds onward to more evil.

This phrase explains that the external violence on the earth was the outworking of internal corruption. They were rotten to the core, and the only thing that their rottenness could produce was more rottenness. Their corruption spoiled everything they touched, like King Midas in reverse. He would touch things, and they would turn to gold, but these wicked people turned everything to sin and destruction.

But God is not done amplifying the description of their evil. He adds, "was only evil." We might imagine that somebody still had a bit of good mixed in with the evil. Yet the text says man's heart was "only evil"—no good remained. They did not even do evil things for "good" reasons. Pre-Flood men and women were altogether evil, exclusively evil, or wholly, completely, and entirely evil. In their hearts was evil alone, and nothing else.

It gets even worse with the addition of "continually." Their evil never stopped. It was ceaseless, endless, constant, perpetual. Each person's heart was only evil all the time. The Hebrew word for "continually" means "all the day." From the time they woke until they returned to bed, the people of Noah's day thought only evil thoughts and followed through on them with evil deeds.

The thrust of God's judgment in [Genesis 6:5](#) is that every person's every thought was, from the outset, altogether evil all the time. This string of universal terms tells a tale of total depravity.

Next time, we will compare what the rest of the Bible decrees about the moral state of humanity.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[The Original Sin Question](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh (1932-2023)

It seems that Satan has taken every art form, distorting and twisting the underlying truth. Every Christian has to endure a similar fate, bearing a cross of resisting falsehood, slander, and deception. We carry around in our own hearts the components that threaten to defile us. We must endure this destructive carnal nature and the wiles of the devil until we enter the Kingdom of God. The world's churches blame God for infecting human nature with original sin; this lie was concocted by Satan, even though God, through His sovereignty, has certainly allowed Satan some latitude. Adam's sin was presumptuous and deliberate, and has directly infected all of his offspring. The second Adam, Jesus Christ, rectified this fatal error of our first parent. Though we inherited the proclivity to sin from Adam, he did not make us sin; we are individually responsible for our own sins and for the consequences of our sins—death. Everyone is equipped with a rudimentary conscience having a clear grasp of the essential law. Human nature is the adaptation of Satan's nature by the neutral nature—the spirit in man given by God as standard operating equipment. Our objective is to battle or deflect this carnal nature by means of God's Holy Spirit.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Hating Evil, Fearing God](#)

by David C. Grabbe

II Corinthians 6:14-16 contains a strong warning against mixing evil with good. As Christians, we must be careful to avoid having anything to do with things like Halloween that are evil or glorify it, even if it is "just in fun." Highlighting Proverbs 8:13, David Grabbe explains how the fear of God plays a significant role in helping us rid evil from our lives.

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