



## AS IT WAS IN THE DAYS OF NOAH

THE days of Noah are described as a time when men “were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away”.<sup>1</sup> It is for us to see to what extent our own days fit this same description, and what lesson we can draw from the comparison.

There is no specific reference to “eating and drinking” in the Genesis record of the antediluvian world, and so the Lord’s reference has been taken as meaning nothing more than a complete absorption in the ordinary things of life to the exclusion of God from His rightful place in men’s lives. A close study of the conditions prevailing at the time of the Flood, however, will reveal many important facts about the reason for judgment, the ground of condemnation, and the longsuffering of God, which will help us in our assessment of the last days which are come upon us.

“And it came to pass ... that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose.”<sup>2</sup> This was the act which brought the Lord’s displeasure to the point where He decreed judgment and set a term upon the days of opportunity for repentance. It is plain therefore that the “marrying and giving in marriage” of both Matthew 24 and Luke 17 implies the additional words “not according to the will of God”. Much has been written about the identity of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men”, but the suggestion that the former were fallen angels need not detain us here. The judgment pronounced is clearly upon *man* as responsible for the corruption of God’s way upon earth, and whereas the expression “sons of God” can elsewhere be applied to angels,<sup>3</sup> though not fallen ones, the idea is out of place here.

Two explanations of this passage appear in the Soncino commentary on the Pentateuch. One is that the term “sons of God” could also be rendered “sons of the mighty”, and that the verse means that “the sons of nobles took wives of the daughters of the people who were powerless to resist. These marriages were the result of mere unbridled passion, and are an indication of the licence and oppression of the time”.<sup>4</sup>

### A Godless Civilization

The other explanation is preferred here, however, namely that the “sons of God” were of the line of Seth, theoretically at least committed to the worship of the true God or retaining their knowledge of Him, and the “daughters of men” were of the descendants of Cain, who were developing a Godless civilization. The progress made in art and inventions had not been matched by a spiritual development. Indeed, the devotion to them and the misapplication of God-given, skill and inventive genius had

led man to corrupt his way upon earth. In Genesis 4 the invention of musical instruments is ascribed to one descendant of Cain, and to another the development of skill in forging metal; but the first song was in exultation over an act of homicide, using the newly-forged weapons,<sup>5</sup> by Lamech the father of both Jubal and Tubal-cain. Yet these same gifts of craftsmanship rightly applied found expression in the skilled metalwork in the Tabernacle and the praises of the Book of Psalms.

As it was, the conversion of God's gifts to the service of human desire led to the depraved condition of the earth described so forcefully in Genesis 6. "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually ... The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence."<sup>6</sup> So we have a vivid picture of an age of progress and development in all the material aspects of life which was nevertheless evil because divine principles were flouted. The revealing words of verse 2 define the root cause, a cause which had its origin in the basic weakness of fallen human nature—"they took them wives *of all which they chose*". The corruption was in the world through lust, or the desire for self-satisfaction; and the promptings of the human heart to enjoy that which is good for food, pleasant to the eyes and much to be desired to make one wise, without reference to the restraints imposed by obedience to God, had become the rule of life of an entire culture. *And the sons of God allowed themselves to be assimilated into it.*

The words in which God expresses His righteous displeasure are also revealing: "My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh."<sup>7</sup> The fact that God had created man in His own image and after His own likeness had given him the capacity to respond to God and grow in spiritual stature until, reflecting the divine mind, he could fully partake of the divine nature. The clash of wills which occurred when man set created things above his Creator as the object of his desire, and devoted the gifts of mind and intelligence which distinguished him from the animals to the satisfaction of his animal nature, could only be described as a strife between the spirit of God and the spirit of man, who "by reason of his going astray showed himself to be but flesh".<sup>8</sup> The earthly side of his nature too readily overpowers the spiritual.

James attributed the origins of violence and strife to the "lusts that war in your members", and states that friendship with the world is equivalent to adultery, adding "Do you suppose it is in vain that the Scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the Spirit which he had made to dwell in us'?"<sup>9</sup> The verse, and indeed the whole James passage, is an allusion to the scripture that speaketh not in vain in Gen. 6:3. God yearns over man in whom He has put His spirit and His breath with the righteous jealousy of a parent who sees evil and destructive influences at work on his children, and so "it grieved him at his heart". Although judgment was decreed and its execution inevitable in order to root out violence from the earth, a time was set to give opportunity for repentance. The "longsuffering of God *waited* in the days of Noah" for a hundred and twenty years while the ark which was to be the appointed way of salvation "was a preparing".<sup>10</sup>

### **Willingly Ignorant**

We are not left to speculate why, after one hundred and twenty years' delay in the accomplishment of this purpose to destroy man and make a fresh beginning with the

only man to find grace in the eyes of the Lord, it could be said that the antediluvians “knew not until the flood came and took them all away”. *They were willingly ignorant*. Either by the fact of his preparing the ark in response to God’s command, or more probably by his actual words proclaimed, Noah was a “preacher of righteousness” who condemned the world in the same sense that the men of Nineveh condemned the men of Christ’s day.<sup>11</sup> If some react with faith and repentance to the divine message, it is a declaration that the message has been proclaimed and that men have exercised their free choice in accepting or rejecting it. The same willing ignorance is described by Paul in reference to the age when the Gospel began to be preached: “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind”—that is, to a mind which eventually becomes insensitive to the distinction between good and evil.<sup>12</sup>

So it was that the preaching went unheeded. And so it was that the threatened judgment became a reality, and to emphasize that the delay had not been slackness on the Lord’s part,<sup>13</sup> but longsuffering, the record declares with precision that it was “in the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, *the same day*, that the fountains of the great deep were broken up and the windows of heaven were opened”.<sup>14</sup> In other words, God had appointed a day—and it came.

The longsuffering of God has been waiting now for over nineteen hundred years. The call to repentance and the warning of judgment to come went forth in the preaching of the Gospel in the first century with a special urgency because God had already definitively intervened in human affairs in the birth, death and resurrection of His Son, and was again to do so in his Second Coming. So the time was described as “the last time” and “these last days”,<sup>15</sup> and men “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come”. In the court of the Areopagus where he was called to explain the preaching which the sight of a city “wholly given to idolatry” had stimulated, Paul proclaimed the purpose of the God who, being the Creator of all men, would therefore be their Judge.<sup>16</sup>

The interval between the first and second advent was intended to give men the opportunity to accept or reject the salvation revealed in Christ and to fashion their lives accordingly. The pattern had been given in the “Word made flesh”, a man with whom God’s spirit had no need to strive. “He that believeth on him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is *condemned already* because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”<sup>17</sup> The very grace of God itself also teaches men what [their responsibilities before Him are, as Paul wrote to Titus: “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, *teaching us* that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

## **The Last Days**

If the whole period between the two advents could be described as “the last days”,

there is no doubt whatever that the apostles speak also of the last days in the more special sense of the ending of the period of opportunity and the beginning of judgment, as witness Paul's reference to the last days which would bring perilous times and Peter's last days of the scoffers, to mention but two of many examples.<sup>19</sup> The outstanding thing is the agreement of the records that the end of the age is to be a time of moral degeneracy. There can be no justification for the argument that human morality has been degenerate in every age and so there is no reason for singling out one period of history more than another as displaying this characteristic sign of the times. The "waxing worse and worse" of 2 Timothy 3 suggests that there is in view a progressive decline in standards, and while there is no statement as to how much worse things are to become before the crisis, there is clear evidence that the "days of Noah" have begun.

For they were to coincide with the other signs which mark the imminence of the Lord's return—the mounting tension, the social and political signs, above all the sign of a resurgent Israel described in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. Although Luke does not use the phrase "days of Noah" in the Olivet prophecy as Matthew does (it occurs in Luke 17), the warning against surfeiting, drunkenness and the cares of this life, and the unexpectedness of the judgment which comes "as a snare" are a clear allusion to the same theme.

What then are the special characteristics of the present days which invite comparison with the antediluvian world? They are not so much different in kind as in degree from those of other ages. Indeed, they are a further development of the situation described in Romans 1 when the revelation of the righteousness of God in Christ threw into relief the wickedness of men, and it is the failure of mankind in general to obey the command to repent which invites the judgment of the last days.

This is an age of unprecedented progress and development in everything which is the product of man's inventive skill. In a few decades more has been discovered about the nature of the physical world than in centuries of previous scientific history, and man has learned how to use the earth's resources for his own benefit. Let it now be clearly stated: it is no part of the purpose of this essay to decry the benefits of civilization, the work of scientists, or the beauties of art and culture. The urge to explore, the instinct to create and the capacity to enjoy are all God-given attributes. Man's basic sin in Eden was to satisfy himself in the abuse of what God had given, rather than in the use of it with thanksgiving. So in the days of Noah the phrase "of all which they chose" reveals an attitude of mind which made sinful their "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage".

It would be distasteful if not tedious to describe in detail the aberrations of our times. One must at all times guard against the wrong emphasis, the false balance and, above all, the natural tendency (which we all ought to be able to detect in ourselves more readily than we do) to ascribe all the faults to a generation growing up in an environment which our own generation has helped to create. The fact is that what is happening to young people is a most reliable index of our times because they respond with vigour and enthusiasm to their surroundings, and also because their mass behaviour is more readily observable, and statistics about them seem to be the special concern of educationists and social workers. Their behaviour is a less inhibited expression of the mental attitudes and standards of the world in which they are

growing up, or shall we say, of which they are the more innocent victims.

## **Twentieth-Century Civilization**

To begin with, then, twentieth-century civilization, which displays so many of the triumphs of man, has not *retained* God in its knowledge. It is no longer a question of thinking that “the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man’s device”. Art and man’s device have replaced God altogether, to become objects of worship in themselves: and the scientific discoveries which confirm that the “eternal power and Godhead” have been at work, have caused God Himself to be reduced in some men’s minds to a “hypothesis of which they have no need”. Here, then, is one of the grounds of responsibility—that “knowing God they glorify him not as God, neither are thankful”. They discuss Him, of course. In fact, there never has been such an age for discussion about religion, without reaching any valid conclusion since it is all subjective—argument from a purely personal point of view. The Bible doctrine that God has revealed Himself and that men are required to submit to His authority over them is considered an extremely naive, even old-fashioned concept, and it rarely enters into the discussions. Thus the standard which alone can give sanction to a moral code has been abandoned.

Small wonder then that the great declaration of God’s standard for human behaviour, the Ten Commandments,<sup>20</sup> is ignored, even though they go to the very root of modern problems, and their values are, by God’s intention, eternal. Man’s opinions, man’s reason, man’s pleasure have become the standard, and the phrase “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God”<sup>21</sup> is seen to have the most literal application. God, in setting His standards, revealed Himself as “I”—the God who, having redeemed a people from the bondage of Egypt, entered into a covenant with them and commanded their obedience. In bowing down to their other gods, men have tried to reduce Him in their minds to an indefinable Force, an abstraction who, being neither “up there” nor even “out there”,<sup>22</sup> no longer requires recognition in the First and Second Commandments.

There has crept into everyday speech, and is frequently heard on the lips of quite young children, a catch-phrase which is really the name of God with vowels distorted, used in imitation of a television comedian who can always raise a laugh with it. Blasphemy there has always been, of course, but it was usually recognized as such. This kind of “unconscious blasphemy” however (if that is the right description for it), is symptomatic of a satirical age which has carried its mocking of organized religion to the extent of irreverence towards all things religious. The increase in the number of jokes and cartoons in certain periodicals which do not hesitate to refer condescendingly or slightly to God, or in the number of plays which attribute attitudes of mind to Him and make Him play a part, as it were, is surely significant. The outlook which these things and all loose expressions incorporating divine names express, can all too easily be acquired when the Third Commandment is ignored. “With our tongues we will prevail; our lips are our own: who is lord over us?”<sup>23</sup>

The increase in the amount of leisure time available to many people has also left them without excuse. The sabbath day was given to men so that they had time in which to worship God in a special way, to refresh themselves in contemplation of the ways of God and in rest from labour. This was for Israel a matter of commandment and it is not in any way suggested that the rigorous observance of the Jewish sabbath law

should be maintained; it is true also that God can and must be worshipped in the things of everyday life. But the fact is that the setting aside of any time at all, let alone a whole day, for the worship of God has no place in modern society, at any rate in the Western world. As leisure time has increased so has the sense of boredom, and pleasure is no longer taken—it is pursued! So the demand is for “round-the-clock” entertainment, and ironically one of the great discoveries of our time, the science of electronics, helps to minister to it.

The appetite for entertainment and sensation has grown to be insatiable. Healthful recreation, refreshment of spirit and the enrichment of the mind with cultural activities are one thing. The erosion of all leisure time and even of the working day by what the pleasure industry can provide is quite another. Yet there are compulsive TV-viewers and chain-listeners who, without their amplified distortion of sound or continuous flitting images, feel as lost and apprehensive as the deprived drug-addict. There are pastimes which are harmful and degrading to the human intellect in themselves; but the innocence or otherwise of the rest depends upon how much time we spend in their pursuit.

### **Dangers for Young People**

The dangers of sensuous pleasures it is impossible to exaggerate, for once all known sensations have been exploited there is a great temptation to explore the unknown. Most alarming in its implications is the small yet growing number of young people who experiment with drugs—often at first in a spirit of bravado and then in desperation. “This House defends the Right of the Individual to take Drugs”—so ran the announcement for a School Debating Society meeting. The motion was lost, but the issue had been considered worth discussing.

An article in the *Sunday Observer*<sup>24</sup> entitled “Drugs, Youth and Society” was extremely interesting in this connexion. Discussing the sentence passed on two members of a “pop” group convicted of drug-taking the writer said: “To many of the hundreds of thousands of youngsters, those for whom the Rolling Stones are part of the pop Pantheon of heroes, it was like a drum-head court-martial on the battlefield where the war of the generations is conducted. In this sense the judge’s sentences must have seemed like the verdict of one generation on another.” It can be argued that there has always been a “war of the generations” because the younger has always been impatient of the restrictions which seem to delay its entry into the adult world. But surely there has been nothing previously quite like the growth of this “culture of defiance and rejection” of which taking drugs is a part. “In effect there is resentment on both sides. The parents resent and envy—consciously or not—the freedom and prosperity of their children (both of which are symbolized by the lush living and high rewards of pop stars). The children resent the attempts of the parents to maintain standards which they feel have become meaningless and are often hypocritical into the bargain. Here, they feel, are our parents telling us not to take pep pills or smoke marijuana cigarettes when they feel no compunction about smoking themselves into a cancerous death, or drinking themselves into a state of DTs.” Extreme, or even as some might think, exaggerated, as the examples chosen here may be, the effects of parental attitudes and standards upon those of their children are effectively illustrated. Notice also the deliberate use of words like “heroes”, “Pantheon”, which suggest a cult of the idols, a worship of that which is not God. The case of the Rolling Stones

produced, according to the writer of the article, two “martyrs”.

According to Paul “disobedience to parents” was to be one of the special characteristics of those living in the perilous last days, and although the reasons for it can be analysed, it is still a breach of the Fifth Commandment. If society in general does not respect any of the other commands, should it be surprised that this one also has lost its force?

“The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.” The spirit of Lamech, who exulted in the slaying of a young man who had fallen foul of him in some way, had become widespread in the days of Noah and has its parallel in the indiscriminate acts of violence of today— an old lady battered to death for savings, a watchman murdered because he disturbed thieves at work, crimes of sexual passion leading to murder. Is it just that more statistics are available, or that news travels further? Or is the “bottling”<sup>25</sup> of a lad by others whom he had refused to invite to his party (the parents had absented themselves, by the way, in order not to “inhibit” the youngsters) one of the signs of our times? “Ye lust, and have not; ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain.”

### **The Seventh Commandment**

The James passage already referred to describes as “adulterers and adulteresses” those who exchanged friendship with God for that of the world. This can be understood in a spiritual sense, conveying the idea of unfaithfulness to God and His covenant, but the literal meaning is applicable too. The equation of the days of Noah with our own would lead us to expect that men’s desires would be the determining factor in sexual morality and that sex would be a dominant interest. Illicit unions and general promiscuity apart, the tendency to marry at an earlier age, the rising divorce rate and the growing disregard for marriage vows, or even for the married state at all, are an indication that this is so. The situation is aggravated by the fact. that (underlying movements for the reform of the laws on divorce, homosexuality and abortion) there is a genuine concern on the part of some people for the human tragedies involved and a desire to bring the law up-to-date to meet existing conditions. This has the effect of making society more “permissive”, while the refusal of the Commission set up by the British Council of Churches to give a “legal” and therefore “too narrow” a definition of chastity conveys the impression that charity and chastity are mutually exclusive virtues.<sup>26</sup>

Again, it is among the younger generation that the casualties are the heaviest. “Not before the children” is no longer a maxim which shelters children from some aspects of the adult world until more stable emotions or a set of personal standards afford some chance of resistance to temptation. It is not merely a question of information about the “facts of life”, for none can question the value of the right information allied to sound moral teaching. And in view of the great pressures exerted on young people growing up in the second half of the twentieth century, the opportunity for frank discussion of problems with someone sympathetically aware of them can be of vital importance. The word “vital” is here used advisedly. But the glamorization of sex is not the right information and is hostile to sound moral teaching. The serious discussion of the “right” to have sexual intercourse before marriage, arguments about “the pill”, the parade of entertainers who glory in the title of “sex symbols”, the

clothes designed to reveal and excite, the “frank” presentation of “real life” drama, the prescribing for school reading of books which have been the subject of obscenity trials in the courts—all this indicates the place occupied by sex in the modern world. “You only live once, so see ‘\_\_\_\_\_’ twice” said the film advertisement, and the accompanying illustration gave some indication of what it was all about. So the impression is conveyed that *this* is life, and those who do not participate never really live. Perhaps the designer of the poster for the University notice-board was pronouncing a judgment when he wrote: “Sodom and Gomorrah are as a spoonful of weak tea compared with ‘\_\_\_\_\_’, an uproarious comedy of licentious low life.” Perhaps, too, he was willingly ignorant of what happened to the cities of his simile.

### **As it was ...**

If this particularly sordid aspect of life seems to have been dwelt upon at too great a length it is only because the characteristics of Noah’s age singled out for comment by the Lord seem here to find their counterpart.<sup>27</sup> Lack of respect for other people’s property with all the petty thieving and destruction of public property which is curiously enough the mark of an affluent society, and the covetousness expressed in “keeping up with the Joneses”—in short, the breach of the Eighth and Tenth Commandments—could be described at equal length.

Because they do not like to retain God in their knowledge, God has given them over to a mind which can no longer distinguish right from wrong, to do those things which are unseemly and degrading to the human spirit. Yet as the hours of broadcasting time, the miles of recording tape, the millions of feet of film, the skills of the chemist, the gifts of music and of song are all dedicated to that which is not God, the long-suffering of God still waits, as in the days of Noah. But, as in the days of Noah, God has said: “My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is but flesh. Yet his days shall be ...” How many years? Surely not many, before the last few who are willing to respond have responded, and turned the longsuffering of God into their own salvation. And if the others know not until the judgment comes and takes them all away, they will have been willingly ignorant. Let those who will be truly sons of God refuse to be assimilated by their world around them, but be preachers of righteousness, and setters of standards in thought, habit and speech, that they may escape the corruption that is in the world through every man taking of all which he chooses, and become partakers of the divine nature. For God hath appointed a day—and it *will* come.

ALFRED NICHOLLS

### **POSTSCRIPT**

The above essay was first published in 1969. Since then the downward trend in moral values has continued at an alarming rate. Abortion has become a social evil, pornography commonplace, and violence the order of the day. Vandalism, riots, rape, picketing, hijacking, and the many manifestations of international terrorism, show that man, for all his achievements, is no more civilised now than he was in the days before the Flood. Other problems of increasing complexity all contribute to the “distress of nations with perplexity”, which is the sure sign of imminent Divine intervention in human affairs.

February, 1982 A. N.



## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 24:38-39.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 6:1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Job 38:7.

<sup>4</sup> *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, page 19.

<sup>5</sup> The *New Bible Commentary* says that the word “slain” here means “to run through with a sharp weapon”.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 6:5 and 11.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 6:3. The word “strive” here is used in Ecclesiastes 6:10 for “contend”, and in Proverbs 31:9 for “plead a cause”.

<sup>8</sup> See R.V. margin.

<sup>9</sup> James 4:1-5, R.S.V.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Peter 3:20.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Peter 2:5; Hebrews 11:7; Matthew 12:41.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 1:28.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Peter 3:9.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 7:11.

<sup>15</sup> Hebrews 1:2; 1 John 2:18.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Thessalonians 1:10; Acts 17:16 ff.

<sup>17</sup> John 3:18.

<sup>18</sup> Titus 2:12-13.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Timothy 3:1; 2 Peter 3:3.

<sup>20</sup> Exodus 20:1-17.

<sup>21</sup> 2 Timothy 3:4.

<sup>22</sup> As in *Honest to God*, (1963) by John Robinson, then Bishop of Woolwich.

<sup>23</sup> Psalm 12:4.

<sup>24</sup> 2nd July, 1967.

<sup>25</sup> The slashing of the face with the jagged edge of a broken bottle. Since this pamphlet was prepared a number of mass demonstrations taking a violent form have been reported in various parts of the world.

<sup>26</sup> Report to the British Council of Churches on *Sex and Morality*.

<sup>27</sup> With reference to “eating and drinking”, it is noteworthy that there has been a marked increase in the number and variety of advertisements for wines, spirits and exotic foods, especially in the “glossy” magazines, which have themselves proliferated in the last ten years. A leading London newspaper, on more than one occasion, has carried a full-page advertisement, in colour, for vodka.

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