

Failure After the Flood

Now the sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And Ham was the father of Canaan. These three *were* the sons of Noah, and from these the whole earth was populated. And Noah began *to be* a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. ²¹ Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent.

And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid *it* on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces *were* turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. Then he said: "Cursed *be* Canaan; A servant of servants He shall be to his brethren." And he said: "Blessed *be* the LORD, The God of Shem, And may Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant." And Noah lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years. So all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died. (Genesis 9:18–29)

One of the world's seemingly unsolvable problems is the problem of race. Ethnic hatred, racism, enslaving or targeting others based on skin colour has always been a problem in the world, and continues to be a problem. For all the worldly solutions to end racism, the problem only seems to grow, in the hands of the world.

But a careful reading of Genesis is the place to start, because Genesis gives us the origin of the races. To understand the biblical origin of race or ethnicity is to remove a world of lies, suspicion, slander, and enmity. To see from Scripture that we are all descended from one man, and his three sons, ought to be the beginning of the solution.

Noah's three sons were to become the three ancestors of all the nations of the world. In this passage and in chapter 10, we learn that they are the three streams through which all ethnicities came.

We also learn that the actions here were both prophetic and in some ways determinative of the future of their descendants. We see something very similar in Genesis 49 when Jacob blesses his twelve sons, and predicts the future of the tribes named after each of his sons. It sounds strange and perhaps unfair: why should the actions of the ancestor determine the fate of the descendants? Well, it does and it doesn't. Ezekiel 18 teaches that a son will not be judged for the sins of the father. So in one way, no individual descendant of Shem, Ham or Japheth was bound to the fate announced on their ancestors.

But on the other hand, there is a principle of solidarity, of being like your family. Family traits are a real thing: we've all seen how children often have similar physical, emotional, even dispositional traits as parents or even grandparents, aunts and uncles. And what's true in one family, becomes true in a family of families: a whole ethnic group, a nation. It's the old debate of nature vs nurture: what is inherited, and what is cultivated. The Bible seems to say both are true: nature and nurture, your ancestry and your behaviour.

Genesis 9:18-29 is both the description of the ancestors of the nations, and also an insight into the depravity and sin that will continue to ravage the new world. The world might have been cleansed, but water cannot wash away sin. It remains, and is present in Noah and his sons. So this is a description of the failure after the Flood.

I. The Intemperance and Inappropriateness of Father

Now the sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the whole earth was populated. And Noah began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent.

Right after the great triumph of faith, there is a great moral disaster. Noah, the chosen man to bring a new humanity into the world, obeys God by faith, builds an Ark, gathers the animals, and comes out on the other side. We saw him sacrificing in faith, receiving the Noahic covenant, ready to begin afresh. This time, humanity will turn out well, right?

Well, straight out the gate, and we have a fall. Noah becomes a farmer, cultivates the ground, and one of his crops is grapes. Now Noah had to know what he was doing here. This is not like mistakenly eating a poison berry. You have to cultivate vines over a few years, gather the grapes, crush them, and if you want fermented wine, you have to store it and age it. And then once you have that, you have to choose to drink enough of it for the alcohol to intoxicate you.

Noah's drunkenness led to some kind of inappropriate behaviour. At the very least, it was losing the restraint and modesty that should always characterise a believer in public. Noah uncovered himself, revealed more of himself than was fitting for one supposedly as dignified as he. His drunkenness led to a loss of self-control, a loss of healthy shame, and exposed himself. In this moment, Noah looks a lot more like the people who perished in the Flood than like the one who found grace in the sight of the Lord. Noah had been a preacher of righteousness, and as Ecclesiastes puts it “Dead flies putrefy the perfumer’s ointment, And cause it to give off a foul odor; *So does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor.* (Ecclesiastes 10:1)

It turns out that Noah is not the paragon of perfection, not some ideal saint who will lead the way. Fresh from leading his family out of a world filled with debauchery and immorality, it appears Noah brought it with him. Sin and corruption are not around us and outside of us, they are inside of us, in the heart. Noah and his family didn't only bring the animals on board the Ark, they brought their sin as well. Safely preserved through the flood, their sin now takes root in a new world.

Noah's behaviour can now be received in two very different ways. We see this in his sons, who go in two different directions.

II. Obscenity and Modesty in the Sons

And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father’s nakedness.

The first way to take Noah's failure was to rejoice in it. Evidently, Noah's nakedness was not so private that it could not be seen. Somehow, Ham sees it. He sees the shameful state his father is in. But evidently, Ham thought it something to laugh at, to scorn, and to call others to mock at too. It seems Noah is fast asleep, so Ham is calling on his brothers to exploit the

situation, creep into the tent and behold their father in his degraded condition. To Ham, the degradation of drunkenness is funny.

Proverbs 14:9 says, “Fools make a mock at sin”. First Corinthians 13:6 says love “does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth”. Ham rejoiced in iniquity. Another way of saying this is the description Paul gives of the ungodly in Philippians 3:19 whose end *is* destruction, whose god *is their* belly, and *whose* glory *is* in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.”

Whose glory is in their shame. The world glories, celebrates, exhibits what is shameful. The definition of the word obscene is offensive or rude, but the word originates from words meaning “off-stage” or “out of sight”. That is, some things should not be looked upon, stared at, viewed. Obscenity applies not only to sexual matters but also to human suffering, to violence, to cruelty. Those that see it should be those rescuing, healing, remedying. But it should not be a spectacle for people to stare at. We know the phenomenon of the rubber-necking in traffic, where a huge traffic jam builds up on one side of the highway, where cars slow down just to look at the carnage and misfortune of the accident on the other side of the highway. Much of the modern news media is filled with the obscene, presented to human eyes in the name of “keeping you informed”. But it is a spectacle of what is not meant to be viewed by eyes not involved in rescuing, healing, in remedying. It can be a visual form of gossip.

Teach your children that staring is usually bad, and staring and being curious about misfortune, pain, violence, gore, horror is not a healthy love of knowledge. Watch your own heart when social media gives you images and videos of violence, destruction, sexual images. It is developing in you a taste for the obscene, a taste for glorying in shame.

This was Ham's reaction to his father.

Now somehow, in ways we don't understand, his son Canaan was involved in this sin. Canaan was one of several grandchildren around at this time, and yet he is singled out.

The sons of Ham *were* Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan. (Genesis 10:6) Canaan was the fourth recorded son of Ham, not counting daughters. If you look at the other brothers, they also had a number of children by this time.

The sons of Japheth *were* Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras. (Genesis 10:2)

The sons of Shem *were* Elam, Asshur, Arphaxad, Lud, and Aram. (Genesis 10:22)

Let's conservatively estimate at least another 12 sons besides Canaan, as well as daughters. Here is a small tribe, and so if Canaan is singled out from all these, we have to imagine he was involved. Perhaps he was directly involved in the discovery of Noah and then involved his father. The fact that he will be named in the curse means he had to have played some part in it.

But then consider the reaction of the two other sons of Noah. Shem and Japheth hear from Ham that their father is in an obscene state. Notice then the care they take to not even view the obscenity, and to make sure that they cover and remove the shame, rather than rejoice in it.

But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid *it* on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces *were* turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness.

Here Shem and Japheth show evidences of grace, of the truth they had been taught by Noah in his best moments. They had nobility in their souls. That is, they knew that a noble person covers the weakness and shame of others, instead of broadcasting and celebrating it. A noble person wants to uphold the dignity of the people they honour, not besmirch it, and drag it into the gutter. Their father is in a degraded state: this is something they themselves don't want to remember with their own eyes, but wish to cover this moment with a veil, a physical one for their father, and a mental one for their own minds.

Wiersbe: "Love doesn't cleanse sin, for only the blood of Christ can do that (1 John 1:7); nor does love condone sin, for love wants God's very best for others. But love does cover sin and doesn't go around exposing sin and encouraging others to spread the bad news."

The father has failed. At least one of the sons, and likely the grandson, has failed. So that leads to both curse and blessing.

III. The Curse and Blessing on the Descendants

So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. Then he said: "Cursed *be* Canaan; A servant of servants He shall be to his brethren." And he said: "Blessed *be* the LORD, The God of Shem, And may Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant." And Noah lived after the flood three hundred and fifty years. So all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died. (Genesis 9:18–29)

Noah wakes up, and must have had enough memory to realise that his younger son, and grandson had seen him, and then invited others to come and ridicule him. And he either inferred from the garment what Shem and Japheth had done, or perhaps he asked and found out.

In response to the obscenity of Ham and Canaan, Noah pronounces a curse. In response to the modesty and nobility of Shem and Japheth, he pronounces a blessing.

What is the curse? "Cursed *be* Canaan; A servant of servants He shall be to his brethren."

Canaan will be in servitude, lower than a slave, but a slave of slaves. He will find himself at the bottom of the social order, and end up being subservient to his brothers. Canaan will not be a ruler, or even an equal, but will find himself at the bottom.

What is the blessing? And he said: "Blessed *be* the LORD, The God of Shem, And may Canaan be his servant. ²⁷ May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant.

The blessing is first a praise of God, a glorifying of Yehovah, the God of Shem. Shem and his descendants will worship the true and living God. Canaan will be his servant.

Japheth will be enlarged, which likely means both in number of descendants, but also in power and wealth. But Japheth will dwell in the tents of Shem. Somehow Japheth will make his home in the dwelling place of Shem. And again, Canaan will be his servants.

So what are we to make of these curses and blessings? Much depends on identifying the descendants of these men, and then trying to work out who is being referenced and who is not. In a future message, we'll dive into tracking the nations mentioned in Genesis 10. But for now, Ham appears to be the father of nations that migrated into Africa, the Near East, and the Far East, including the Oceanic islands. Shem is the father of the Semitic people: the Hebrews, Syrians, Anatolians, Elamites. Japheth is the father of the people who moved into Europe and North Asia Celts, Scythians, Medes, Greeks, Iberians, Russians, Thracians. Japheth also appears to be the father of some of the Asian people who migrated into India and East Asia.

So who are the Canaanites upon whom the curse of servitude lands? “The Canaanites are listed in Genesis 10:15–19 and are the very nations the Israelites conquered and whose land they inhabited. “Canaan begot Sidon his firstborn, and Heth; the Jebusite, the Amorite, and the Girgashite; the Hivite, the Arkite, and the Sinite; the Arvadite, the Zemarite, and the Hamathite. Afterward the families of the Canaanites were dispersed.” (Genesis 10:15–18)

The Canaanites settled in the Middle East, not in Africa, or sub-Saharan Africa. And notice, of the sons of Ham, only Canaan is cursed, not Cush, Mizraim, or Phut. This curse was tragically misused in history, and even used to justify the transatlantic slave trade. Those who misused it claimed that the curse of Canaan was on all African people, and it was fitting that they be the servants of servants. But again, this curse was specifically on Canaan, and his descendants, who ended up in the land named after him, were subjugated by Israel during Joshua's conquest, by Saul and then David, and ultimately by other sons of Japheth: the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans.

The other sons of Ham produced large and powerful civilisations, including the Egyptian. Likely this is also included so that the first readers of Genesis, the Israelites under Moses, would have seen that the people they were told to subjugate had been predicted to be subjugated.

So what about the blessings? The blessing of Shem names the true and living God. This seems to mean that it is through Shem that the knowledge of the true God will come to the world. And Shem is the ancestor of Eber, the father of the Hebrews. Through the Hebrews comes the revelation of God's Word, and through the Hebrews comes the Messiah. It is through Shem that the world comes to know Jehovah. Here is the prophecy of Genesis 3:15 now enlarged and made clearer. The one who will crush the serpent's head will come through the line of Shem, and bless the whole world.

But then what does it mean that Japheth will dwell in the tents of Shem? Largely speaking, the Gentiles descended from Japheth would eventually be converted to the God of Israel. Turning from their paganism, they would come and dwell in the faith and truth brought through the descendants of Shem, the Israelites.

And just as Noah predicted, these have come to pass. Shem's descendants brought the knowledge of God to the world. The descendants of Japheth did spread far and wide, but

many came to embrace the faith of the Jewish Messiah as their own. And some of the sons of Ham have indeed lived in subjugation to sons of Shem and Japheth.

But this was not meant to be the final word on every descendant from every one of these tribes. The book of Acts has Paul, a son of Shem, the Ethiopian eunuch, a son of Ham, and Cornelius, a son of Japheth. The Pentecost of Acts is what reverses the confusion of Babel.

And that is the ultimate answer to racism. If you read Genesis, you will understand the problem of racism is in the heart. Noah's sin was not washed away by the flood, nor was Ham's nor Canaan's. You will see that we are all of one blood, descended from one man. My neighbour is my brother, in some distant way.

Our ethnicities have had different destinies, both determined and chosen, both from nature and nurture. We should take note of that and be humbled.

But the answer is not in glorying in self, but in the God revealed through a descendant of Shem for the whole world. When He, Jesus, is your Saviour, the pride that fuels racism is slain in your heart. You can no longer boast in racial heritage once you are in Christ, for He creates a new race, a new humanity, neither Jew nor Gentile, a messianic race.

For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation... so as to create in Himself one new man *from* the two, *thus* making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. (Ephesians 2:14–16)