

A Study in Genesis 9:18–29

Noah, Ham, and the Ruin of Government

We are reading from Genesis chapter 9, beginning at verse 18.

"And the sons of Noah, that went forth of the ark, were Shem, and Ham, and Japheth: and Ham is the father of Canaan. These are the three sons of Noah: and of them was the whole earth overspread."

"And Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness."

"And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the LORD God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant."

The Principle: What God Commits to Man Comes Immediately to Ruin

There has never been anything that God has put into the hands of man that has not come immediately to ruin — except for those things put into the hands of our Lord Jesus. We have been thinking in previous weeks about God committing government to Noah after the flood: the responsibility, and the privilege, of representing the God of order and light in the world, with the power of capital punishment in his hand. And here we see how it began. Verse 20: Noah began. When Noah began, a great deal began — including what we might call the dispensation of government. And it began with ruin.

Shem, Ham, and Japheth — The Whole Earth Overspread

It is worth noting that Shem, Ham, and Japheth is not the birth order. Japheth was actually the eldest. Shem is placed first because the line of blessing runs through Shem — from whose name comes the word Semitic.

The remarkable parenthetical statement that Ham is the father of Canaan is placed here deliberately. It will be repeated in verse 22. The text could simply have said Ham did this, but it says Ham the father of Canaan. There may be a kinship of mind between Ham and his son Canaan — that sometimes happens in families, a son having a particular affinity for his father's spirit. And Canaan is deeply in view in Scripture, because the land bearing that name is the land God had chosen for His people, to be taken possession of by Israel.

It is also worth noting, in passing, that nothing in Scripture supports the idea that the sons of Noah were the fathers of three races distinguished by skin color. The ancient monuments and paintings from antiquity show Canaanites fair of skin — a fact sometimes ignored for reasons of prejudice. The real distinction between men is not color of skin; it is the condition of the heart, which needs to be washed clean in the precious blood of the Lord Jesus. The diversity of the human race as we now see it has developed subsequent to the flood and the dispersion. All of it was under the hand of God, who saw to it that of these three sons the whole earth was overspread.

Noah the Husbandman — A Choice with Consequences

Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard. It is worth pausing over the choice of occupation. God had committed to Noah the responsibility of government over the whole human race. And the question arises: what did he do with his time? He went into farming — but what kind of farming? He planted a vineyard.

There seems to be something inherently inappropriate in that decision. The thousand-year kingdom of our Lord Jesus will be a time of joy, and there is something fitting about vines and wine in connection with the millennial reign. But Noah was not there. He was the head over the whole human race, with the power of life and death by capital punishment, in a world just emerging from the judgment of the flood. It would have been better for him to have sought the Lord about what to do, and to have gone into something less liable to produce what it produced. There is no record that he sought the Lord at all.

This bears on us. When younger believers are leaving school and choosing a career, it is a serious choice, sometimes with lifelong consequences. It is a matter for getting down on one's knees and seeking wisdom from God. Seeking the mind of the Lord as to what one should do with one's life is not merely a pious exercise — it can affect everything.

J.N. Darby once made a remark worth repeating here. In the Christian's life, one encounters circumstances that belong to the wilderness, to the world, or to one's inheritance in the heavenly places. It is important to discern which is which. If a Christian encounters a piece of the wilderness experience and calls it his inheritance in Canaan, the result will be that it transforms into Egypt. What he thought was a piece of his heavenly inheritance turns out to be a part of this present evil world. Noah, coming

out of the ark, perhaps thought it was time to rest and find some joy in this world. It turned into ruin — not because ruin was inevitable, but because the choices he made provided the occasion.

Ham's Sin — Gazing and Telling with Delight

Ham the father of Canaan saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brethren outside. A careful Hebrew scholar has noted that the word for saw in this verse means something more than casual sight — it carries the force of gazing with satisfaction. And the word for told means told with delight. He did not stumble upon his father and recoil; he looked with a certain attitude, and then he went out and reported it in a certain spirit. That is what the words convey. The sinfulness was not accidental discovery — it was an attitude toward his father.

In contrast, Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, walked in backwards, and covered their father's nakedness with their faces turned away. The text spends words on the precise detail of how they did it. They are commended by the care with which they guarded what was to be guarded. Those are the two contrasting responses, and they are deliberate.

There is also a most solemn practical note for fathers here: it was Noah himself who provided the occasion for Ham's wickedness to be revealed. The wickedness was in Ham's heart — but the occasion was Noah's own doing. That is different from a son going off on his own and performing some wickedness. When a parent's own sin provides the occasion for the heart of a child to be revealed, it is a doubly solemn thing.

Nakedness, Covering, and the Spiritual Application

Nakedness in Scripture does not have a good reputation, and for good reason. In the garden it was perfectly appropriate in the state of innocency — everything open and manifest in the light of God's presence. But God quickly addressed the matter after the fall and clothed them. From that point forward, nakedness carries the sense of spiritual exposure — of a condition that needs to be covered.

The Lord's word to Laodicea is: that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear. That is not physical nakedness — it is a figure of a spiritual condition. And the principle transfers. Everything is naked and open before Him with whom we have to do, as Hebrews says. The unbeliever standing before the great white throne will be spiritually naked — with no covering, no answer, no redress.

There is a corresponding practical application for believers in this world. A cultural drift toward more and more physical exposure and a cultural drift away from any sense of God's presence tend to go together, because they share the same moral root. Peter, when he heard that the Lord was on the shore, girt his fisher's coat unto him, for he was naked, and swam to meet Him. He swam better with his coat

on — not for physical reasons, but because the Lord was there. That instinct was right.

A Christian needs to be exercised about these things, not as a matter of following one culture rather than another, but as a matter of representing Christ here. The Lord said, I always do those things that please the Father. That is the standard — not lowered for any culture or time. We fall short; that we acknowledge. But we have no authority to lower the standard, for to lower the standard is to lower Christ. The Apostle Peter says He has left us a model that we should follow in His steps.

The Curse of Canaan — And Abigail's Answer to It

Noah said: Cursed be Canaan; a bondman of bondmen shall he be to his brethren. This is the lowest possible station — a slave of slaves. It raises questions that have exercised many an expositor, particularly since the curse falls on Canaan rather than on Ham who actually sinned. No doubt there was a strong moral link between Ham and his son Canaan, as the text suggests by its repeated emphasis on Ham the father of Canaan. Whatever the precise reasons for the curse falling on Canaan, what was given is what is written.

There is something beautiful, though, in the contrast that Scripture itself provides to this curse. When David sent to ask Abigail to be his wife, she rose and bowed herself on her face to the earth and said: Behold, let thine handmaid be a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord. A servant of servants — exactly the curse of Canaan. How could she possibly want that? The answer is David. He had won her heart so completely that she said, I would be the lowest of your servants. Out of love for him, the curse of Canaan became her desire.

And that is where we all belong. Not the wrinkle of the flesh at the low place, but the heart that has been won by the Lord Jesus, and says with Abigail — I would be a servant of His servants. To take our true place before God, as low as it may be, and to find in that place the one thing that makes it beautiful: His presence, His love, and His name.

*May the Lord keep us in our true place before Him — His Word in our hands, His Son before our eyes,
and our hearts satisfied with nothing less than Himself.*