

Genesis 9:19–27 — They Are Quickly Gone Out of the Way

The Pattern of Quick Failure, Noah's Prophecy, The Curse on Canaan, Nimrod, and Japheth in the Tents of Shem

Scripture Reading: Genesis 9:19–27; Romans 13:4; Daniel 5:12

“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.”

“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.”

They Are Quickly Gone Out of the Way: A Moral Constant

Whenever God introduces a new order, a new administration, a new thing in his ways, there is one invariable feature: the failure comes quickly. God said to Moses, they have quickly gone out of the way. It is the moral constant of the history of man under God's administrations. The failure does not have to be spectacular or lurid. Noah's failure was not a massacre; he simply got drunk. But what that addressed was the very capacity with which he had been entrusted: the capacity to judge between good and evil, to exercise the government God had placed in his hands, to act as the man who would require life for life. Drunkenness undermines exactly that capacity. Dreams, hard sentences, doubts — as Daniel 5 illustrates of Belshazzar's kingdom, these are the mark of the man who has been drinking: thoughts disconnected from reality, hard sentences that cannot be interpreted, doubts that produce no assurance. These three things

undermine the capacity of a judge to judge righteously, which is precisely why the queen mother's counsel was to send for Daniel, who could interpret dreams, show hard sentences, and dissolve doubts.

The pattern runs from Noah through every administration. Aaron's sons offered strange fire immediately. The priesthood quickly went out of the right line — Eli was of Ithamar, not of the Phinehas line that God had promised. Solomon as a type of the millennial king had to restore Zadok and thrust out Abiathar. God gave Israel Saul — asked-for, a creature of the flesh — before bringing in David the beloved, the elect king. Joshua wins Jericho and immediately Achan's self-will mars the conquest. Ezra builds the worship and within the same book is sitting in ashes weeping over the mixed marriages. Nehemiah builds the wall and a corrupt priest is given a room in the temple. The apostles are barely gathered and Ananias and Sapphira introduce the mystery of iniquity — self-will in the things of God, working its way through Christendom to its eventual maturity just before the Lord returns to smite it.

The principle is not discouraging but instructive. The failure of man in everything is precisely the demonstration that only Christ can carry out God's purposes perfectly. Every administration fails in the hands of the first man; every one will be taken up and made perfectly good in the hands of the second man.

Government Even in Ruins: Romans 13 and the Policeman

Despite Noah's failure and the long degeneration of government since, the institution retains its divine sanction. Romans 13:4 says twice in a single verse: for he is the minister of God to thee for good... for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. This is written of the government of Rome under Nero. Yet Paul could say, with full scriptural warrant, that the official in his uniform and badge is truly a minister of God. The brother who told a policeman who had stopped him that this very thing was

written in the Bible had the exactly right and correct idea. In a world setting aside every form of authority — governmental, domestic, ecclesiastical — this is a truth worth holding clearly.

The Curse on Canaan: Mercy in Its Limitation

When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his younger son had done, he cursed Canaan. Had the curse fallen on Ham himself, all of Ham's sons would have come under it. By falling on Canaan specifically, the curse was limited. The other sons of Ham — Cush, Mizraim, Phut — were not individually placed under it. There is a mercy in the specificity of the curse, and verse 18's anticipatory note that Ham was the father of Canaan prepares the reader to understand why the curse fell where it did.

This passage was badly misused in the antebellum period in America to justify the enslavement of African peoples on the grounds that black Africans are Hamites. The argument fails on multiple counts. Not all Hamites are Canaanites — the curse was specific to Canaan's line. The Canaanites were not the same people as sub-Saharan Africans; ancient monuments depict them as clearly distinct peoples. Moreover, the Chinese and other East Asian peoples are also considered Hamitic in origin, looking quite different from African peoples. The extraordinary variation in human appearance since the flood, from a single family, is itself evidence of the remarkable genetic potential built into God's creation.

Nimrod: The Beginning of Slavery Among Men

From Ham's line comes Cush, and from Cush comes Nimrod, who began to be a mighty one in the earth and a mighty hunter before the Lord (Genesis 10:8–9). Many have understood before the Lord as against the Lord — in defiance of him — and the hunting as the hunting of men: the taking of men by force and

subjecting them to slavery. This appears to be the historical beginning of slavery among human beings, and it arose in the Hamitic line. Whatever instrument participates in the subjection of other men, whether an African chieftain selling captives or a European supplying ships, the root of it is here, among the descendants of Ham.

Blessed Be the LORD God of Shem

The blessing of Noah over Shem is the most significant of the three: blessed be the LORD God of Shem. This is the language of personal covenant relationship — the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. It implies that Shem was a man who personally knew the Lord. That Noah says blessed be the Lord God of Shem rather than blessed be Shem shows where the true blessing lies: not in the natural greatness of the man but in the God who owned him. From Shem comes the messianic line that reaches its goal in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is a Shemite.

The blessing over Japheth — God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem — has found its fulfilment in the spread of Christianity through the Western world, the Japhethite peoples. The blessing that has come to Europe and the Americas has come through Shem, through Israel, through the Jewish people from whom Christ came. Japheth has entered into the tents of Shem. The blessing of Canaan taking the servant place is worked out in Joshua's conquest, where the few Canaanite communities that submitted to Israel — like the Gibeonites — became hewers of wood and drawers of water and found their place of blessing in that submission.

It is remarkable that the curse at the end of Genesis 9 tends to be what is remembered, while Noah's blessing is what matters most. Blessed be the LORD God of Shem: that is the word that did not miss its mark. That is the word that runs down through the centuries to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the Lord Jesus

himself.

*Blessed be the LORD God of Shem... God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in
the tents of Shem.*