

# THE NATIONS OF THE EARTH

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In Genesis 9:18-11:32 we've come to the end of the introduction to everything. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are the epic story of the beginnings of the universe, the creation of human beings, and the earliest origins of civilization. All of these grand themes apply to the whole world and tell the story of how we came to be as we are.

Genesis 12 begins what is well regarded as the greatest story ever told. It starts with the command of God to Abram: "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household...." It is Abram's going forth that begins the salvation story. Through Abram's response to the call of God, the Savior would eventually be born, and he would overturn all that had gone wrong with the race that was given rule of the planet.

We ended the last message with a rainbow, with the wonderful promise of God that he would never again destroy the earth by flood, that he would not visit universal judgment on the planet again until the end of history. It's a wonderful promise. But the rainbow is in the heavens, and the promise is only to not wreak judgment upon us. The promise doesn't tell us whether God will address the problem of human sin and its degradations on the earth. Will he also bless? Will he get involved and help us with our jealousy, self-promotion, anger, pride, rivalry, and all the rest?

## FAMILIES AND NATIONS

That's why the greatest story ever told, beginning in Genesis 12, has a wonderful series of promises--among them that Abram will be made a great nation, and through him all the families of the earth will be blessed. God is going to do good to families and to nations.

The problems of family life and the problems of nations, in both of which we need God, are going to be the subject of this message. These are the final themes of the introduction of everything.

Out of the two-and-a-half chapters before us, we're going to consider only two stories. We'll allude to what's in the rest of the passage, but not look at it in detail.

Let's read 9:18-29 and look at the sons of Noah. As we do so, think about your experience in your extended family, acknowledging some of the dysfunctions that can take place in the families that we're part of. Verse 18:

**The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.)**

That statement "Ham was the father of Canaan" is going to be made twice. In the time of the exodus, when Moses wrote the Pentateuch, the Canaanite people were looming on the horizon as the great enemy of Israel. The reference to Canaan in this writing is to remind the first hearers of this book that when God judged the Canaanites, as he would, the hearers could look back and see where they came from and have understanding of why their judgment might be appropriate. The Canaanites were people of tremendous wickedness, idolatry, and perversion. Verses 19-29:

**These were the three sons of Noah, and from them came the people who were scattered over the earth.**

**Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father's nakedness. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father's nakedness.**

**When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said,**

**"Cursed be Canaan!**

**The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers."**

He also said,

**"Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem!**

**May Canaan be the slave of Shem.**

**May God extend the territory of Japheth;**

**may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,**

**and may Canaan be his slave."**

**After the flood Noah lived 350 years. Altogether, Noah lived 950 years, and then he died.**

## FAILURE IN FAMILIES

This is an unsavory story. It's not one of the high points of the Bible. Yet it comes at a time when we might have expected a high point, doesn't it? The wickedness of Noah's generation--the awful pride and idolatry, the descent into devilry--has just been judged. The earth has been wiped clean. All the things that made the world terrible before the flood don't exist anymore. The newly established earth is a place where Noah and his sons can begin again. What we might expect is the wonderful story of the flowering of godliness. But the only story of Noah after the flood is a story of tawdry failure. Why is that? What do we learn about human hearts, about families, by hearing this story?

Donald Grey Barnhouse has written this helpful insight: "The evil that was in the earth and which had drawn forth the anger of God against the race was also within the Ark in the hearts of Noah and his sons and in the hearts of the four wives. Even the grace of God does not change the roots of sin that are within man; instead it plants the new roots of grace. Even God does not deal with the old, unregenerate heart: He declares it to be incurable (Jeremiah 17:9, Heb.), and gives us a new heart."1

Given the opportunity, probably three or four years after the ark landed (it takes awhile for vines to grow enough to produce grapes that could be fermented into wine), once again human hearts were acting as they would always act, and we see the dynamics of failure in this family. It's a cryptic account, and we don't know in detail what happened. Let's examine the story, then look at the curse, which is widely misunderstood.

Apparently, Noah got drunk, and in his drunkenness was too warm, took off his clothes, and fell over in a stupor. His youngest son, Ham, it says, observed or gazed at the nakedness of his father. There is much speculation about this among the commentators. Some go as far as suggesting that he castrated his father, or he performed sodomy on his father. The Bible doesn't say that, and there is no reason to even speculate in that direction. Apparently, Ham saw his father in his dissolution, failure, inadequacy, and weakness; and he enjoyed it. There probably is also some sort of sexual overtone, some fascination with his father's nakedness in particular. Ham went out and told his brothers what happened. But they, rather than enjoy their father's fallen condition, backed in and covered him.

Now, what we're being told of here is not only drunkenness and probably lust, but also rivalry. In your own extended family, do you know of the terrible triumvirate of alcohol, inappropriate sexual interest, and rivalry? Do you know families in which the patriarch drinks too much, in which sexual tensions have made an awful mess of relationships, in which there is rivalry between generations--the younger generation wishing to see the older generation put in its place--or between siblings?

When Noah awoke, he immediately knew what Ham had done. Now, if he had been in a stupor, he couldn't have known that his son had stared at him and enjoyed his fallen condition. The suggestion is that when the older brothers covered their father, they left some evidence that indicted Ham. They did something that indicated that they had done right and their younger brother had acted inappropriately. There was rivalry and jealousy not only between the son and his father, but between brothers.

The curse that follows has been misunderstood, especially in the United States. This curse that Canaan would be the slave of his brothers was used to justify the slavery of African people in this country. It makes absolutely no sense; slavery in America has nothing whatsoever to do with this text.

Noah realized that his youngest son had gloated at his moral failure. The youngest child is often the dearest of the children to parents. For example, Jacob's favorite sons were Joseph and Benjamin, because they were the youngest, the children of his old age. Ham was the youngest of Noah's sons, and he had disrespected his father profoundly. And so Noah's curse was, "May your youngest son do to you what my youngest son did to me. May Canaan be a source of embarrassment and shame to you as my youngest son has been to me." Hundreds of years later when the conquest took place, and the Canaanites were discovered to be a perverse and weakened and hardened people, the Israelites remembered back to the curse of Canaan. This has nothing to do with the contemporary makeup of races and that sort of thing.

The rest of chapters 9 and 10 tells how the children of these sons expanded geographically. Fascinating studies have been done on the spreading out of peoples that shows where the European stock, the African stock, the Middle Eastern stock, and so on came from, the roots of various tribes and clans. It's complex, however, and we don't have time for it in this message.

## BEING A BLESSING IN OUR FAMILIES

I do want to make a couple points about life in families. One of the tensions of human life is how much we need families, and how frequently our need for families puts us in painful circumstances. Nearly everybody I know longs to be part of a circle of support in a family. Yet time after time, the family is a source of tension, rivalry, covering up, jealousy, hurt feelings, misunderstanding, and anger. The people you're closest to can hurt you the most. That's the story of this family.

What we desire in family life, therefore, needs to be rethought. God didn't give us the families in which we're placed ultimately to be the source of support, peace, and identity that we want them to be. The Lord Jesus himself is the only one who can make us secure on the inside, bring peace and wholeness, give us an identity that won't shatter, love us always and without fail. He's the only one who can give us what we hope our families will give us. The reason he put us into families is not to gain life, but to give it, to be a source of blessing. The people you're closest to are the ones to whom you can speak most thoughtfully and pray for most thoroughly. They're the ones to whom you're most accountable, the ones who will hear you when you name the name of the Lord. They're the ones for whom you can be courageous. We have families in order to give the life of Christ away, to be God's agents in their life.

Another observation about families is that just as this account of Noah and his sons is one of starting over, the temptation that exists widely today suggests that if you could just start over, things would be different. If you could just jettison this husband or wife, just get out of this frustrating set of circumstances, send these kids to their grandparents and start over with a new group--if you could somehow just get out of this tangled, unfortunate, deceptive, heartbreaking group that you're in and start over again--everything would be different. Of course, the person who wouldn't be different is you. You would take the same heart, the same set of needs, the same frustration with God, the same tendencies into the next family and eventually reproduce what was in the first one. The only place to get wholeness is from Christ.

## DIVISION BETWEEN NATIONS

Let's turn to the subject of nations. God's promise to Abraham was that the families of earth would be blessed through him, and that a great nation would come from him (Genesis 12:3). Is it possible for nations to be a good thing rather than a bad thing? What does the tale of the tower of Babel in chapter 11 tell us about nations? It applies to any sort of ethnic, cultural, racial, or language-based community. It might even apply to corporate identities. It might include the gang in an urban neighborhood. Most of the strong ethnic identities and the powerful commitment to a language, a nation, a culture, or a way of life occur because people need desperately to belong to something. We need roots, a name, a group to call our own.

But such an identity removes us farther and farther from other groups. Violence is committed frequently around these sorts of divisions. Perhaps you saw President Clinton in Rwanda last week, calling to mind again that terrible genocide that took place between the Tutsi and the Hutu in that country. For the life of me, visually I can't tell the difference between a Tutsi and a Hutu. The nuances of difference in their languages they can of course detect, but they are not at all obvious to me. And yet extraordinarily violent hatred exists between these two tribes.

The same is true in Northern Ireland. I can't tell the difference between Ulster Catholics and Protestants, to look at them or hear them talk. Yet because they're divided from each other, there is hatred and fury that seems impossible to contain.

There is anger being expressed as the San Francisco school board tries to use ethnicity and race as ways of choosing literature for high-school students. The majority groups like the advantages of being the majority and don't want things to change. Minorities insist that they have their place in the sun.

Remember, however, that the promise to Abram was that his nation would be great. National identity would become a source of blessing.

Let's look at the story of the tower of Babel to see what it teaches us and then try to reach a conclusion. Chapter 11, verses 1-9:

**Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.**

**They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and**

not be scattered over the face of the earth."

**But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."**

**So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel--because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.**

## THE IRONIC OUTCOME OF BABEL

This story has long been a source of fascination for people. It's written in an ironic way, and the irony of it is one of the most interesting things about it. The clan that settled in the land of Shinar was worried that they would be scattered, and they wanted to make a name for themselves, to promote their own greatness. They wanted to integrate themselves more tightly together. In order to do these things, they determined to build a city with a ziggurat at the center, a religious tower that would reach to the heavens and probably have the sign of the zodiac on top, appealing to the powers of astrology. The story tells us, however, that their very effort to not scatter themselves accomplished their scattering. Their city did not get a name until the end when it was called Babel, an embarrassing name calling to mind confusion and dissolution.

Further, it says that this tower was going to be a dramatic thing. When God heard of it, in wonderful visual imagery it says that he had to leave heaven and travel some distance to find the building. It was so small and insignificant that God couldn't even see it from heaven. Their effort to be great was contradicted completely by what they accomplished.

We can see in the prescription that God made at the end that his determination to confuse language and scatter people was so they couldn't accomplish worse things. Given a common language, they were capable of something much worse. And so God determined to take that capability away. In a way this is saying that Murphy's Law, "If anything can go wrong, it will," is a blessing. It is a benefit for us to have a propensity to shoot ourselves in the foot, get in our own way, and thwart the very thing we're trying to do. Our best efforts would be in the wrong direction. Given the opportunity to accomplish what we most want to accomplish, what we aimed at would be destructive. God has helpfully frustrated our ability to accomplish our plans.

## OVERCOMING THE DIVISION OF BABEL IN CHRIST

What should we conclude from the story of the tower of Babel? Once again, identity that is rooted in making a name for oneself, the drawing together of a clan, a gang in the barrio, or a corporation that will take over the world, all are places from which it is impossible to draw blessing. We will not become more secure by having a language-based identity. We will not become more whole and human by championing our background and our culture. We will not become more mature, more human, more valued by cutting ourselves off from others and championing our tribe.

We have these relationships, and we were given our capacity for language, in order to speak important things to people. We have a familiar way of doing things because other people who have that familiar way of doing things will listen to us. We can reach out to them, invite them into our homes, tell them the good news of Christ that we've learned. Our names identifying us as having families that came originally from China, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Korea, or wherever become a bridge by which we can reach out to other people and minister. Our identities weren't given to divide us; we were given these types of identities so we have an entrée to serve the Lord in the lives of other people.

One of the great things that happened in the beginning of the life of the church was the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit descended on the gathered believers and the church was born (Acts 2:1-12). The tower of Babel was reversed in Jerusalem. Instead of having their languages confused, everybody heard God praised in their own language. The capacity to communicate was restored, they were given new opportunity to break down barriers. The praise of the Lord Jesus became the word that everyone heard together in their own language, and in his name the division of Babel was overcome.

There are a couple points of application. If it's true that your family will not be able to do for you what you hope, that people will disappoint you and forget you and not love you as much as you want them to, if families will have rivalries and inappropriate behavior and group deceptions, then it is wonderful news to hear the New Testament description of our being brothers and sisters in Christ, children of one Father. It's a great gift, of course, if those in your biological family are also your spiritual brothers and sisters. But if not, you have family in those who love the same Lord you do; brothers and sisters who will love you for Christ's sake, who will be his instrument in your life as you can be in theirs. I would call on you to take seriously Christian fellowship, to make time in your life for the kind of relationships with fellow Christians that are real, deep, challenging, open, lasting, and honest; to join a small group, a ministry team, others with whom you can share brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ and the common life of Jesus.

Secondly, coming from these verses is a challenge to reach across what divides everyone else, to not worsen the sorts of divisions that happen because of culture, language, ethnicity, gender, wealth, and so on. We must recognize not only that we share common humanity, but that the gospel applies to everyone. There is no one outside of God's love, and those who love him back from whatever place they come are family to us. Our challenge is to boldly overcome confusion and division among Christians of a different place, different habits, different appearance, different social class, and so on.

## FROM BEGINNING TO END

The opening eleven chapters of Genesis are the epic story of the beginning of everything. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, is the epic story of the end of everything. To close, we're going to read from Revelation 5 a doxology, a song of praise that is offered by every living thing to the Lamb of God who was slain for our sins.

The opening chapters of Genesis tell us how we got into the mess we're in, how everything began and everything got broken, how the tendency toward destruction and selfishness and division came about. The last story of Noah, even though he was a righteous man, is a sad story of drunkenness and cursing. It leaves us with an aching longing for God to do something, to not just send the rainbow but to touch the earth, to not just refrain from judgment but to offer blessing and hope.

That's what everything else in the Bible from Genesis 12 on is about. It is about God's coming near, getting involved, bearing our sins, sharing our humanity, and suffering what we deserved to suffer. It's the great story of the coming of Jesus, the presence of Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus, the church of Jesus. And the very end of all things is going to be the praise of Jesus. Revelation 5:8-14:

"And when he had taken [the scroll], the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song:

**'You are worth to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
because you were slain,  
and with your blood you purchased men for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation.  
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,  
and they will reign on the earth.'**

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

**'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength  
and honor and glory and praise!'**

**Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:**

**'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb  
be praise and honor and glory and power,  
for ever and ever!'**

**The four living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell down and worshipped."**

The beginning of the story is heartbreaking, but the end of the story is filled with the glory of God.

## NOTES

1. Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Genesis: A Devotional Exposition* . © 1970, 1971, 1973 by Zondervan Publishing House, Grand

Rapids, MI. P. 65.

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