

The First Prophet

Genesis 9:18-28

Who is the first prophet in the Bible? That would be a good question for Trivial Pursuit, if anyone still plays that game. Is it Samuel? Or Moses? Or Abraham? Those are all good guesses, but not correct. The first prophet is Noah.

The first prophecy from the mouth of a man came from Noah, and it came as the result of horrible circumstances. Noah himself fell into sin, getting so drunk on wine that he passed out, unconscious. But not until after he removed his clothing, exposing himself in his tent only to be seen and degraded by his own son Ham.

Then, after being covered by his other two sons, Shem and Japheth, he wakes up, learns what has happened, and speaks a word of prophecy to each of his sons. Noah is, therefore, not only the head of his family, but now the head of the whole human race. Obviously, all mankind is descended from Noah and his wife. For everyone else died in the flood.

v.18-19

We can also say that every member of the human race is descended from one of the three sons of Noah--Shem, Ham, or Japheth. Therefore, this great prophecy is a prophecy about the whole human race, a prophecy that reaches into future ages and describes God's plan for all mankind for all time. We can divide all mankind into three groups, and in this prophetic pronouncement from Noah, each group is represented by one of his sons. Ham represents the wicked. Shem represents Israel. And Japheth represents the Gentiles. Let look at those one by one.

I. THE LINE OF HAM REVEALS THE SINFULNESS OF WICKED MEN.

First, what was Ham's sin? Well, the context for it was certainly Noah's sin. This was the worst moment recorded in the life of this godly man. In this circumstance, his sinfulness broke forth despite his faith and righteousness. Simply put, he got drunk.

v.20-21

After the flood, Noah had quickly turned to agriculture, and was, no doubt, successful in raising a good crop. A vineyard. And he enjoyed the fruit of that vineyard, which when fermented, gave him wine to drink. On this particular occasion, he did what so many others continue to do, he drank in excess. He drank more than he could handle. He lost control of his actions, he got drunk and he passed out. And, in his drunken stupor, he exposed his nakedness.

Now, there is nothing here to diminish the extent of that sin. It was horrible. And he was guilty of it before the Lord. But his sin was no where near as detestable as the sin of his son Ham.

A. Ham's sin is a vile and degrading example of human depravity.

v.22

Ham saw his father's nakedness. What's wrong with that, after all, Noah was the one lying there drunk? The translation "he saw," however, isn't really strong enough. He looked at his father, he gazed upon his father, and with apparent enjoyment or satisfaction of some horrible sort, he quickly went to tell his brothers so that they, too, could enjoy the spectacle. The context indicates that he went and told his brothers with delight.

Their response, such a contrast to Ham's, points out the sinfulness of Ham's actions, and sufficiently rebukes him.

v.23

Ham had no such shame, no reverence whatsoever for the honor and dignity of his father, seeming to rejoice in his father's humiliation. His actions were of the utmost disrespect to his father, actually therefore a rebellion against his father's authority. His interest was impure, filthy and vile, his mind unclean. Clearly, as we've already seen, the judgment of the flood did not change the sinful heart of man.

I want to suggest an even deeper sense of Ham's sin, though, for I believe that the Scripture is speaking here in gentle and tasteful language, but actually describing an event that was even more degrading. I believe that the phrase "he saw his father's nakedness" is a euphemism, that is, a soft and gentle expression communicating something very harsh and severe. I believe that the reference is not merely to gazing with the eyes, but actual sexual sin, with his own father.

There are several other places in Scripture where the phrase "to look upon the nakedness" of a person is to actually have physical relations with them. One of the clearest is found in,

Lev. 20:17 'If a man takes his sister, his father's daughter or his mother's daughter, and sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is a wicked thing. And they shall be cut off in the sight of their people. He has uncovered his sister's nakedness. He shall bear his guilt.'

The following verses in Leviticus 20 continue with that same thought, that to uncover someone's nakedness means to enter into relations with them, translated simply to lie with them. We might use the expression today, "to sleep with them."

Now, I can't prove absolutely that Ham committed such a heinous sin, but the cross reference in Leviticus and the context of Genesis 9 both seem to indicate the atrocity of such a sin. Thus Ham's sin is a vile and degrading example of human depravity. And, it gets an appropriate response.

B. Ham's sin provokes a prophetic curse upon his descendants.

v.24-25

Noah woke up and found out what had happened. Then he spoke forth his prophecy, in the form of a curse. But notice that the curse fell upon Canaan, Ham's fourth and youngest son. Why is that? Why was Canaan cursed for the sin of his father?

Well, to answer that question, you've got to keep in mind the large context of this prophecy. Noah is not merely punishing his son for his sin. Instead, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he is prophesying about the separation of the nations of the world under God's providence. This prophecy is not just about three boys and their families, but it is about all the people of the world. And so, the curse is appropriately given to the seed of Ham, those representing his line, his descendants. And all of the descendants of Ham are represented by his youngest son, Canaan.

Yet, even saying that, we can see a good measure of God's grace, for only the fourth son of Ham was cursed. In actuality, the whole line of Ham was not cursed, but only that line that was born through Canaan. And in fulfillment of this prophetic curse, the Canaanites clearly became the primary example of wicked sinners. They would be the ones displaced from the land when Israel finally entered and conquered their promised land of Israel. They would be the ones from whom the Israelites were to keep

completely separate. They would be the ones destroyed and placed under the ban. The seed of Canaan would, indeed, become the slave of all slaves, the lowest of the slaves, conquered and enslaved by the seed of Shem, Ham's brother.

That seed of Canaan would grow into the nations of the Amorites, the Jebusites, the Girgashites, and the Hittites, among others. And they would be the most sinful among all nations. And they themselves would experience God's judgment because of their sinfulness.

I should say that it is entirely wrong to see these verse as a curse upon the Africans, and certainly it would be wrong to use these verse to justify the atrocities of the African slave trade of the previous centuries. The curse of slavery is NOT pronounced by God upon the black man, for the reference here is not racial in the sense of skin pigmentation. The descendants of Ham included Egyptians and Ethiopians, but they are in no way limited to those whom we would classify as "black" today. I'm rather ashamed that some interpreters would even make such a direct connection.

The emphasis is upon spiritual wickedness, not the amount of pigment in a person's skin. This curse is actually a prophecy, a prophecy of God's judgment upon sinful men. Represented by the line of Ham. And just so you don't miss God's grace even in that curse, I should note that even some among the Canaanites were actually saved by grace. One, particularly, was even included in the genealogy of Jesus Christ--Rahab. She was rescued from destruction, and according to Matthew 1:5, was the wife of Salmon, the mother of Boaz, who was the father of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David.

Even in this curse upon Canaan, God's grace is evident. But

that grace is even more evident in the lines of the other two sons of Noah, Shem and Japheth. Remember that these two sons acted honorably with respect to their father, their actions were as far removed from the actions of Ham as could possibly be.

v.23

And they are both blessed. First, the blessing to Shem. Like the curse upon Ham, this blessing is also given to a seed, to Shem and his descendants. It's a glorious blessing.

II. THE LINE OF SHEM REVEALS THE PROMISE OF GOD'S SOVEREIGN ELECTION OF ISRAEL.

Shem has given his name to all those included as Israelites. Semitic people are the people of Israel. Anti-semitism is the label given to those who hate or oppose the people of Israel. And Christ traces his own descent back to this particular son of Noah as well, defined in Luke 3:36.

The line of Shem is to be the line of Christ. The line of Shem, therefore, is to be the line of God's people, God's elect people. In the OT, that means the line of Israel. This promise of God's sovereign election of the nation and people of Israel is spoken very clearly,

v.26

The point of that blessing is that,

A. The Lord God shall be the God of Israel.

That is, the God of Shem, and his line. Notice that the LORD is capitalized, showing you that the personal, covenant name Jehovah, or Yahweh, is being used in the Hebrew. Yahweh will be the God of Shem!

The proper name Shem itself means "name," and so the

emphasis here is on the revelation of God's name, God's covenant name, the name Yahweh. This prophecy refers to the covenant promise so often repeated, "I will be your God and you will be my people." Noah prophesies that the nation of Israel, the descendants of Shem, would lay claim to that great covenant promise.

The Lord God would be the God of Israel. And that nation of Israel would be born under the leadership of Moses in the exodus out of Egypt. At that point, God reveals the significance of this personal name, Yahweh.

Exod. 6:1 "Then the LORD said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh. For with a strong hand he will let them go, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land."

Exod. 6:2 "And God spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the LORD. 3 I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name LORD I was not known to them. 4 I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, in which they were strangers. 5 And I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel whom the Egyptians keep in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. 6 Therefore say to the children of Israel: I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. 7 I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. 8 And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage: I am the LORD.' "

I should make reference here to the current events of our day with respect to the nation of Israel and the conflict, the war that

has been provoked by Palestinian terrorists just in the past week. I want to explain clearly what all of this in Genesis 9 about the descendants of Noah has to do with the current political circumstances of Israel and the Palestinians today. I have a simple explanation that you can all understand. What does Genesis 9 have to do with the current events of the nation of Israel today. NOTHING. I hope that is clear enough.

The Old Testament nation of Israel, descended from Shem, ended in the generation of Jesus' first coming. In Jesus there is no Jew or Greek, and though the nation of Israel is an important ally to the United States both politically and militarily, there is no theological connection between the nation of Israel today, as it was reconstituted in 1948 by the United Nations, and the Old Testament nation of Israel that was ended by the Roman army in AD 70. This distinction set forth in Genesis 9 with reference to the three sons of Noah represents the division of mankind in relation to God, their spiritual identity and definition. No longer is there any reference to ethnic or geographical identity. And so Paul would declare of us, the New Testament church, we are the Israel of God. And the covenant promises of God given to his people in the Old Testament are now given to his church—his people of the new Covenant.

That promise given by Moses was built upon this promise spoken by the prophet Noah. "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God." And because the Lord God was the God of Israel, the promise is that,

B. Israel shall rule and conquer other nations as God's people.

Read through the book of Joshua to find that promise fulfilled. All the Canaanite nations were destroyed, completely and totally destroyed, put under the ban and devoted to destruction. Just as

Noah prophesied.

v.26b “Blessed be the LORD, The God of Shem, And may Canaan be his servant.”

And so they were. In perfect fulfillment of the promise of God’s sovereign election of Israel. In the OT, the elect was the line of Shem. In the OT, the nation consisting of the line of Shem was the nation which God had chosen to be his own treasured possession, his own people. That’s easy to prove,

Exod. 19:3 “And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: 4 You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. 5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. 6 And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

So, there are two sons of Noah. The first representing the wicked. The second represent the elect people of God. But what about the third son? Who else is left?

Well, the promise to the third son, Japheth, look directly into the New Testament, when God’s elect people are no longer restricted to the nation of Israel. What we see here is that,

III. THE LINE OF JAPHETH REVEALS THE PROMISE OF GOD’S SOVEREIGN MERCY TO THE GENTILES.

The line of Japheth represents, therefore, the elect people of God from all nations. Specifically what we read is a prophecy of prosperity.

v.27

A. The Gentiles shall grow numerous and prosperous.
God shall extend their territory.

The very name “Japheth” means to enlarge, and enlarge they did. The seed of Japheth extended to Southeast Asia and India, to Europe, and finally to the western hemisphere. Most of us, if not all, would likely trace our descent to Japheth.

But the greatest blessing given to Japheth is not merely outward prosperity and a worldwide presence. The greatest blessing is not that Canaan, also, would be in servitude to him. No, the greatest blessing is to Japheth is defined by the middle line of verse 27, a promise that anticipates the NT church.

v.27b “May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem.”

The seed of Japheth, that is, the Gentile nations, would live in the tents of Shem. In other words,

B. The Gentiles shall be joined together with Israel as God’s people.

This is a tremendous prophecy! All along, throughout the whole OT, God’s eternal purpose was that there would be one church, consisting of Jews and Gentiles together. God’s elect people would come from every nation of the world. And that is the mystery which is revealed for us in the NT.

Eph. 3:6 “...that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel.”

Thus, the distinction between Jew and Gentile is ended by Christ. The seed of Japheth and the seed of Shem are joined together in one church. The NT makes that just as plain as day,

Eph. 2:11 “Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the

flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands— 12 that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, 16 and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. 17 And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. 18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. 19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

So Paul can say to the Galatian church in,

Gal.3:28 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

So, there is only one people of God. In the words of Romans 11, the Jews who reject Jesus are cut off from that one tree, and the Gentiles who believe are grafted in. So if you belong to Christ, then you are Shem’s seed. And actually, if you don’t belong to Christ, then you become one of Canaan’s seed. So the

line of the three sons of Noah are merged into just two in the NT. Those who belong to Christ and those who do not.

Thus the crucial issue today is simply this, “Do you belong to Christ?” Ethnic heritage is meaningless. The question is, do you belong to Jesus? If you don’t, then I would urge you to repent, to confess your sinfulness to God, to turn away from your sin with grief and hatred, to rest upon Christ alone for salvation as he is offered to you in the gospel. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Receive him personally, by surrendering your life to him.

No matter what your heritage, and no matter who your ancestors. For all of you who do belong to Christ already, who understand the certainty and security of your salvation, let me urge you to realize the emphasis here upon God’s sovereign election and mercy. Ultimately, it’s not that you chose God but that he chose you. In Jesus’ own words,

John 15:16 “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain.”

People of God, you are saved because of God’s promise, a promise prophesied in Genesis 9 by Noah, the first prophet. It’s a prophecy that is still being fulfilled today. By God’s sovereign mercy, the lines of Shem and Japheth are being joined together in the church. Noah’s blessing has come to us!

So what should we do? I’m not interested in merely teaching you something, as interesting and exciting as that is. But exhortation. Given all of this, what should you do in response? The answer is simple and straightforward. Praise him and worship him for that grace which you have received.

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus

Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.”