

The Chosen Line

Genesis 11:10-32

One section of the Bible ended with the sermon last week, and the second section begins with our text this morning. The tower of Babel is connected to the story of the flood, and completes the description of God's universal judgment upon the sinfulness of men. And that first section of the Bible is the history of all mankind. That infallible history of all mankind ended with verse 9 of Genesis 11.

The genealogy of Shem, beginning in verse 10, is really the introduction to chapter 12, which starts the account of Abraham and the patriarchs. And from Genesis 12 forward, through the rest of the OT, we find the history NOT of all mankind, but instead the history of God's people, God's elect people. Specifically, the line of Shem, the line of the Hebrews, the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The nation of Israel.

And so, today we begin our study of the history of that chosen line, the history of God's people. It's a history that take us to the end of this book, many more months from now. As we studied last Sunday, only one of those three sons of Noah is included in God's chosen line. Only Shem. And so the genealogy we'll study today is the genealogy of Shem.

v.10a

I. GOD'S ELECT PEOPLE ARE IDENTIFIED BY ONE PARTICULAR LINE.

This one particular line is kept intact and identified all the way down to the twelve sons of Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel. In each generation from Shem to Jacob, only one son carries on the line of his father, the line of God's elect people. That is God's design.

I can't say it strongly enough. God's people were chosen. They were elected. They were limited. They were personally and particularly identified. One son in each generation. Notice the sequence in verses 10 through 26. Shem. Arphaxad. Shelah. Eber, or Heber, the man who gave his name to the people called the Hebrews. Then Peleg, who was born about the time of the division of the earth at the tower of Babel. Then Reu. Serug. Nahor. Terah. Abram.

And as we'll study in weeks to come, Isaac. Then Jacob. And finally, the fulness of Israel consists in the fulness of the 12 sons of Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel. That is the line of God's elect people. And the purpose of that calling and election is to separate God's people. We see from this list that,

A. The Hebrews were separated from all the other nations.

Noah was a righteous man, but him alone. By God's grace he was chosen. He was called out of a wicked and perverse world, indeed, saved from it! The world perished, everyone but Noah and his three sons, along with their wives. But only one son of Noah was chosen. This one son of Noah's was chosen to be separated from the other two.

And then as the various families finally started spreading out into all the earth after the tower of Babel, one man in each generation continued to be chosen by God to be separated out from the others. There was always just one. The emphasis is upon separation.

The world was becoming increasingly sinful, again. Even after the flood. Even after the dispersion of Babel. That sinfulness is made obvious by the shortened lifespans that we are seeing. Remember, before the flood, particularly in the line of the godly,

the lifespan was in excess of 900 years. But after the flood, we see an immediate decline, explainable scientifically by realizing that the radiation-filtering vapor canopy over the earth was gone, thus increasing genetic mutations. The changes in body cells can easily be seen as accelerating the aging process. Mutations, continued inbreeding, to say nothing of the more rugged environment, inadequate nourishment in the food, and greater stress in living would also contribute to that acceleration of aging.

But spiritually, it was sin that brought about death. And sin was increasing, as we saw in the example of the Tower of Babel. After Babel, the lifespan grew immediately shorter, by almost 1/2. That dramatic drop does give some evidence that perhaps there is a gap in this genealogy at this point, something which is possible without questioning the truthfulness of the text. There could be some gaps, though certainly not the gaps of thousands and millions of years necessary to prove evolution.

Still, on the surface, there are no gaps mentioned. Eber, before Babel, lived 473 years, and beginning with his son Peleg, born at the time of the dispersion, the lifespan dropped into the two hundreds. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all lived only into their mid-100's. Joseph lived only to 110.

Sin abounded. And death reigned. But where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more. For God's people in each generation were being separated out from the wickedness of the world, separated from all the other nations by the electing love of God. So it is now. He chose us to be holy!

Eph. 1:4 "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him."

And that electing love was not to be without effect. In other words,

B. The Hebrews were called to turn away from serving other gods.

This is made especially clear when we reach the generation of Terah, the father of Abraham.

v.27-29

Again, three sons. One chosen line. Now, what do we know about Terah?

He lived in Ur, of the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans, at this point a prominent tribe in the kingdom of Babylonia, would actually become the dominant group, such that Babylonia is often called Chaldea. And the city of Ur was a well-known center of idolatry, demonstrated by archaeology to be dominated by the worship of the sun god and other false deities. And we know from Scripture that Abraham's own father, Terah, was involved in that idolatry.

Josh. 24:2 And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel: Your fathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods."

It was out of that idolatry that the Hebrews were called. As Joshua said in the very next verse,

Josh. 24:3 "Then I took your father Abraham from the other side of the River, led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac."

We read in verse 31 of our text that Terah, Abram, and Lot all settled in the city of Haran, after leaving Ur. Haran, too, was well known for things such as the worship of the moon and other idolatries.

Let me make an important application at this point, one which

demonstrates how beneficial it is for us to study and understand the OT. The application is simple. We are called to be separate from the nations and to turn away from serving other Gods, just as the OT nation of Israel was.

Our calling is to come out and be holy! Be separate. Be different. Stop worshipping false gods of this world. In the very wise and appropriate words of the Apostle, we have both a promise and an exhortation joined together,

1Cor. 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. 14 Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. 15 I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say.”

Flee from idolatry! And when it came to the idolatry of the people in Corinth, Paul was perfectly clear,

1Cor. 10:19 “What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? 20 Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons. 22 Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?”

You can’t have it both ways. You can’t claim the name of Christ, and refuse to give up the false gods and idols of this world. But that is precisely the subtle temptation that Satan brings to each one of us! And we must resist it. So flee from the idolatry of the world, which the Apostle John explains as the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Flee from the idolatry of self-worship, of pleasure-worship, of money-worship, and of

power-worship. Flee from anything and everything that competes with God for your loyalty!

It’s entirely possible that Terah never really rid himself of the idolatry of Ur. Having settled in Haran, Abraham did not leave until Terah’s death, we’re told in Acts 7:4. And at that point, we’re told in Genesis 12:5, that they had accumulated a lot of possessions! Their obedience to God was delayed while they accumulated the things of this world! Those things of this world are so dangerous when we fall to the temptation to love them, and to pursue them instead of obeying God! God’s people of all ages--the Hebrews of the OT and the church of the NT--God’s people are called to turn away from serving other gods. As God’s elect people, as those who are now inheriting the spiritual blessings of Abraham, that is our calling as well.

Something else is made prominent here in Genesis 11, something we will come back to in much greater detail in weeks to come, and that is the whole subject of God’s promise.

II. GOD’S ELECT PEOPLE ARE IDENTIFIED AS THE CHILDREN OF PROMISE.

Again, we’ll see this idea developed in the coming chapters, but it is introduced here through Sarah, Abraham’s wife.

v.29-30

Now, both Nahor and Haran had no difficulty having children. Lot was born to Haran before Haran’s death, according to verse 27. And according to Genesis 22:20-24, Nahor had at least 12 twelve children. But Abraham and Sarah had none. None before they left Ur. And none while they lived in Haran.

But the promise was for them, the promise of the chosen line. The point is obvious.

A. Abraham was unable to continue his own line by his own strength.

Many young couples have to deal with the struggles of infertility, the inability to beget and conceive children. For some, that means waiting a long time for children, for some it is a permanent burden they bear. It is a very real struggle, and one which Abraham and Sarah experienced personally. But Abraham was given a promise, which we'll study in detail next week. A promise of descendants as numerous as the dust on the earth.

But here in Genesis 11, the circumstances are that Abraham, in his own strength, was unable to fulfill that promise. He was unable to continue his own line. And that's the point! His children would be children of promise. And so, noting at this point that Abraham and Sarah had no children, we learn that,

B. Abraham's line would be continued by God's supernatural strength.

God would give them children, and Abraham was called upon to believe, and to trust in God's supernatural strength. No easy task! But as we read in,

Hebr. 11:11 "By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore."

Because Abraham and Sarah were unable to have children in their own strength, and were enabled to have children only as the fulfillment of God's promise, their descendants are called children of the promise. And in Christ, we are included in that list. Notice how Paul explains it in,

Gal. 4:22 "For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the

one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. 23 But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, 24 which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar— 25 for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children— 26 but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. 27 For it is written: "Rejoice, O barren, You who do not bear! Break forth and shout, You who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children Than she who has a husband." 28 Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. 29 But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. 30 Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." 31 So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free."

The line of Abraham would continue, through Isaac, the son "born according to the Spirit." His line would continue, but not by his own strength or ability! So it is that God's people are the chosen people, called in Scripture simply the "elect." And in words quoted from the OT describing God's people in the NT, the church,

1Pet. 2:9 "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

Finally, as we finish our introduction to the rest of Genesis, let's look at the promise of the land. What we will learn from Abraham is that,

III. GOD'S ELECT PEOPLE ARE IDENTIFIED BY THEIR LAND OF PROMISE.

Except for Jesus, Abraham is perhaps the greatest example of faith given to us in Scripture, and his faith is defined by his willingness to believe these two great promises, the promise of children and the promise of the land. But to inherit the land, the receive the promised land, he had to do something very dramatic. He had to step out on faith. He had to live by faith. He had to put his faith into action. He had to leave home.

v.31

They set out from Ur of the Chaldeans. They left behind their home, and their homeland. Presumably, most of what they possessed was left behind.

Let me tell you what leaving home does. It makes you trust God more. I believe that one of the times when it is the hardest to trust God is when you have achieved some stability and security. When you leave home, when you move, you lose that external security. Thus you have opportunity to trust God all the more! So Abraham's faith was put to the test, and strengthened, when he left home.

A. To obtain their promised land, the line of Abraham was called to leave their homeland.

v.31

Though Genesis 11 doesn't say it directly, Abraham had already received his calling from God, and that's why he left. What's only implied here in Genesis is made explicit in,

Acts 7:2 "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, 3 and said to him, Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.' 4 Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He

moved him to this land in which you now dwell."

Abraham was called to leave. So he left! He would live by faith, believing in God's promise. And obeying God's instructions.

B. To obtain their promised land, the line of Abraham was called to live by faith in obedience to God.

Don't miss the significance of these words. Abraham was called by God to leave, to go to the land which God would show him. At first, it was unidentified. Abraham was just told to leave. So he left.

v.31-32

He left. That's faith. And faith, by definition, must be connected to obedience. For if Abraham hadn't left, if he hadn't obeyed, he could not have claimed to have faith! Do you see the connection!

I wish everyone today did! I wish everyone who professes faith in God would see the connection. Faith implies the willingness to walk in obedience to God. To live by faith is to live in obedience to God no matter what the consequences, and no matter what your own personal desires might be!

Now, as I've already said, it seems that Abraham's father Terah stalled his plans for awhile, and they stayed on in Haran for many years. But after Terah died, Abraham continued his journey.

Hebr. 11:8 "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

In practical terms, I believe that is the best example of faith in the Bible, the best definition of living by faith. We will be studying this great man of faith in the weeks to come. More importantly, we will be studying God's covenant promise made to him and to his descendants. As an introduction to that study of Abraham, let me exhort you live as Abraham lived--in other words, to live by faith in obedience to God.

By faith, trusting and believing that what God says is true and good, obey him. Whatever the consequences. Whatever the circumstances. Whatever the implications. Obey him. Walk by faith, not by sight. And as you do that, obey him. Always remembering this, that you who believe in Jesus have this promise, along with Abraham, that you too, are included in the chosen line of God's elect people, those whom he calls his beloved.