



Part 30 – Grace Greater Than Our Sin

Genesis 11:10-32

As chapter 11 comes to a close, we reach the end of the first major section of Genesis, what is often called the proto-history or primeval history (Adam – Noah). These chapters concern the early history of the human race. The transition beginning in chapter 11 and leading into chapter 12 launches the age of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob). Here we enter human history at an identifiable point; a point where corroborative evidence begins to accumulate.

We know more than a little about the ancient near eastern world during this period around 3,000 years before Christ. When we begin the Abraham narrative in chapter 12 a turning point in redemptive history has been reached. The Bible now shifts focus from Universal human history and narrows in on the history of the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That said, Genesis never lets us forget that all of history is an interconnected whole; a line that moves from a particular beginning to a consummation appointed by God.

As we have already seen in Genesis, the numbers 7 and 10 and their multiples are important in this passage to represent the perfect outcome of God's sovereign purpose. Here we see a major sign post in God's story of redemption: The birth of Abraham from the righteous line of Shem. Through the once pagan Abraham, God will ultimately bring about the Savior.

1. The Comfort of God's Providence

- Genesis chapter 11 introduces us to two brief "books" (sections marked off by the heading "these are the generations of"). First is the book of Shem (vv. 10-26). Second is the book of Terah (vv. 27-32). Shem is the father of the Hebrews (Semitic peoples). Terah is the father of Abraham whose story commences in chapter 12. In this sense, the two genealogies of chapter 11 are actually one: Shem to Terah and Terah to Abraham. The genealogy of Genesis 11 has a very different function than that which is found in Genesis 10. This genealogy begins with the forefather of Israel (Shem), the nation that God has chosen as His covenant partner. This chosen line leads out of the primeval world into the world of the patriarchs.
- The doctrine of God's providence holds that all things come about by the sovereign will of God. "God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions" (*Westminster Shorter Catechism* Q.11). As J.I. Packer has written, by means of his sovereign providence God, "(a) keeps all creatures in being, (b) involves himself in all events, and (c) directs all things to their appointed end. The model is of purposive personal management with total "hands-on" control: God is completely in charge of his world. His hand may be hidden, but his rule is absolute."¹ Even those events which seem most accidental or insignificant are under the sway of God's providence: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD" (Proverbs 16:33).
- The genealogies recorded in the Bible are meant to point us to God's providence in upholding and directing all things toward their appointed end. For instance, the genealogies of Genesis are recorded in such a way as to remind us of their completeness according to the purposes of God. This explains the use of the numbers 7 and 10 and their multiples which represent completeness. These genealogies give witness to the manifold ways that God upholds and rules over his creation.
- The voices of post-modernity taught us to deny that there is an objective reality to which we are all subject. Fundamental to the post-modern project is the denial that there is a meta-narrative or over-arching story of human life in which we must all find our place. The Bible and therefore the Christian faith assume the Divine meta-narrative moving from creation to fall to redemption and finally to consummation. Once this great God-designed meta-narrative is denied, all that is left are our own individual stories in which we

¹ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Tyndale House: 2001)

take center stage. Once our own story becomes the most important story it leaves us with the demand to tell it and have it validated lest we lose all sense of significance.

- If there is no meaning coming down from our Sovereign Creator, we have to construct it for ourselves. And since each person's story is different, so the very purpose of existence changes from person to person. Story-telling thus becomes a way of inventing truth for ourselves. "I have my truth, you have yours." Truth is no longer something objective to be discovered and embraced but something to be created out of our own experiences. Christians reject this account of reality. The stories of our lives are meaningful insofar as they are part of God's great story which he is working out every moment.
- What is made obvious in the Bible in countless ways is that the story of our lives is a story that God himself has written. We are meant to consider this every time we read the genealogies and records of historical events preserved in the Bible. Just like all of history, our lives follow a plot written by God. He has ordered our lives in such a way that we are connected with what has come before and with what follows after. We live in light of the past and we ourselves participate in the outcome of future events but only in those ways God has determined, which is a doctrine taught throughout the Scriptures. In Psalm 139 we read:

In your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them. (vs. 16)

2. The Progress of Man's Sin

- As the human family continues on so does sin. Notice that human longevity is steadily contracting from the unusually long life spans of the pre-flood generations. For instance, Abraham lived to be 175 years old and later Joseph would live to be 110. In Psalm 90 (a prayer of Moses) we learn that the average life span in his own time was 70 or 80 years. While the massive reduction in human life spans probably owes immediately to the profound changes in the earth's atmosphere due to the flood, the ultimate source for the change is the judgment of God. Mankind is subject to the ongoing consequences of sin.
- Beginning in verse 27 we are introduced to Abram, son of Terah. Abram was raised in Ur which was a city dominated by the worship of the moon. The city featured a three-tiered ziggurat during the reign of Ur-Nammu near the beginning of the second millennium before Christ. The ziggurat was topped with a shrine to the moon god Nanna. There is evidence that human sacrifice was practiced in Ur. So what of the promise to preserve the seed of the woman; the righteous seed? Will the seed of the woman terminate among pagans? Has God's promise of salvation come to an end at the top of a pagan ziggurat?

3. The Abounding of God's Grace

- Dale Davis writes: "Within Genesis 11, there is a marked contrast; on the one hand human rebellion leading to the divine judgment of dispersion. On the other hand, we see divine grace leading to the call of Abraham, a call which provided hope for the nations and salvation for the lost." The previous genealogies have been broadly focused on the nations. In chapter 10 for instance it is the lines of Ham and Japheth which are dealt with. But now the writer draws our attention to that line which will be the primary focus for the rest of the Bible: the line of Shem. From Shem will come Terah and from Terah will come the father of the faithful, Abraham, the one to whom God seals his Covenant of Grace.
- Certainly Abraham is a great model of faith. He is held up for us as a source of encouragement. Imagine the faith that was required of Abraham to uproot his family, leave his homeland, his gods, his security and everything familiar all on the basis of a word God had spoken. Imagine banking everything on a promise which required a miracle. But that is precisely what Abraham did. And while Abraham the example of faith is of immense value, Abraham the reminder of God's grace is even more precious. The greatest thing we can learn from Abraham's life is not found in asking "What would Abraham do?" Rather, the greatest thing to be discovered from the life of Abraham is to behold our gracious God!
- Since Genesis chapter 3 the story of humanity has been one laden with sin and its disastrous consequences. Man has sought to transcend the boundaries God placed upon him. Violence, immorality, and false religion spread like spiritual viruses among the human population both before and after the flood. And yet, where sin abounded, God's grace abounded all the more (**Romans 5:20**). God's promise cannot fail. His gracious providence cannot be overturned by the most determined of sinners. God's purpose to save his people from their sins cannot be stopped.