

“CHOICES THAT DETERMINE DESTINY”
(Genesis 9:18-29)

In our living room at home, we have picture on our wall – a Norman Rockwell painting called *The Family Tree*. I mentioned this painting in a sermon one time several years ago and someone bought a copy of the painting and had it framed. I’ve also mentioned things like cars and I-phones in my sermons but no one has felt led to give me one of these... **SLIDE**. At the top of this family tree is the face of a sweet, innocent, rosy-checked little boy. Below him on the family tree are the faces of his smiling, clean-cut dad and a cheerful, All-American mom. About three or four generations down the tree the tree begins to get a little knotted. On the dad’s side there is the face of a scruffy, bearded mountain man – the kind of guy you don’t want to mess with. On the mom’s side is a mean looking pirate with a patch over one eye. Rockwell included several other disreputable looking characters in this boy’s family tree which makes you wonder how such a lovable little kid could come from such questionable ancestry.

In recent years genealogies have become very popular, as there is a thirst for people to find out where they came from and who they belong to. But if you decide to trace your genealogy you might find some things you don’t necessarily want to find. I have an uncle who has traced the genealogy of the “McKiii” family tree back, quite a ways back, and discovered that the McKays were horse thieves in Northern Scotland. We McKays would rob you blind and not think twice about it.

Sharla and I have both come to realize how much influence our family of origin has in the way we think and respond. There’s a lot of truth to the phrase, “Like father, like son,” and “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” We tend to pass on our tendencies – both good and bad – to the generations that follow – and that the choices we make now can affect the trajectory of our families for years to come.

This morning we’re going to look at the family of Noah – which just so happens to be the family we’re all descended from. Every person on earth can trace their lineage back to Noah and one of his three sons. That makes all of us related to each other – we may have different skin color and speak a different language, but we share a common ancestry with Noah – who, along with his sons, were the only ones to survive the flood.

In chapter 9 Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives – 8 people in all – have just gotten off the ark, after floating on water for over a year. They’re entering a new world, and it’s a chance to start over – to establish a culture built on God’s order and design, and to fulfill God’s purposes for them on earth. But it doesn’t take long before sin again rears its ugly head – just as it did when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit and brought the curse of sin upon all creation. Now another sin is committed that will shape and determine the destinies of three families.

Let’s read the whole passage and then go back and see the many lessons that we find in it... In 9:18 we read... The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) These were the three sons of Noah, and from them came the people who were scattered over the whole 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 naked 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 naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked.

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, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend Japheth’s territory; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth.”

After the flood Noah lived 350 years. Noah lived a total of 950 years, and then he died.

One of the features of the Bible that argues for its authenticity is the fact that it doesn’t gloss over the weaknesses and failures of its heroes. We’re a bit shocked to read that Noah, who was the only righteous man on earth before the flood, is caught in an embarrassing sin. He plants a vineyard – which shows his obedience to God in subduing the earth and making it fruitful – he plants a vineyard and then enjoys the fruit of the vine a little too much. He gets drunk and “uncovers” himself – and lies naked in his tent. Not exactly the image of the righteous Noah we’re used to. One of his sons – his third-born son named Ham, sees his father lying naked, and proceeds to tell his brothers – Shem and Japheth – about what he sees.

Shem and Japheth – rather than looking at their father – take a garment – walk in backwards so they can’t see Noah – and cover his naked body. When Noah wakes up, he finds a blanket laying across him, does a little investigation, and finds out what Ham had done, and pronounces a curse on Ham’s son Canaan. He also pronounces a blessing on Shem and Japheth.

This leaves us with all kinds of questions. What exactly happened in that tent, and what was so egregious about Ham’s actions that would lead Noah to pronounce a curse? And why does Noah direct his curse against Ham’s son and not Ham?

Let’s begin with the actions of Noah and what led to this embarrassing situation. He does exactly what God wants him to do – he cultivates the earth and plants a vineyard from it produces wine. In the Old Testament wine is pictured as a sign of God’s blessing, and Psalms says it “gladdens the hearts of men” (Psalm 104:15). But the Bible also warns of the moral dangers that can come from wine. Proverbs 20:1 says, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.”

Old Testament prophets, such as Habakkuk and Jeremiah, associated drunkenness with nakedness. Being intoxicated lowers inhibitions and causes a person to cast off restraint and expose themselves. When drunk, a person says things and does things they wouldn’t if they were sober. Noah imbibes to the point where he’s no longer in control, takes off his clothes, and lies exposed in his tent.

While the text focuses far more on Ham’s actions than Noah’s, there are three important things we learn from Noah’s embarrassing fall, and the first is one that is repeated over and over in the Bible – and that is that **no one is above the temptation to sin**. Of all the people you’d think were least likely to do this, it would be Noah – who is listed in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11 as a towering example of faith and righteousness. But as righteous as Noah was, he was still human, and reminds us of the wisdom Paul gives in 2 Corinthians 10... “He who thinks he is strong, take heed lest he fall.”

No matter how long we’ve walked with the Lord, we need to maintain a humble attitude and say, “There but for the grace of God go I.” Satan takes direct aim at those who think they are strong. 1 Peter 5:8 says, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” As long as we live on this side of heaven we never get past the point where we’re not vulnerable to sin, but must remain sober and alert.

The second lesson we learn is that **past success does not guarantee future success**. Noah is 600 years old when the flood comes. He's lived a righteous life for a long time. Yet he's one of several examples in the Bible of men falling later in life.

- Moses, you'll remember, sinned late in life by striking the rock in anger and his sin kept him from entering the Promised Land.
- David – the man after God's own heart – had a mid-life crisis, and in a moment of weakness, committed both adultery and murder to cover up his sin.
- Solomon began his reign as king as the wisest man in the world, but over time strayed from God and became enslaved to sin.

All this goes to show the vulnerability we all have to let our guard down and coast – to think that we are beyond sin – even sins we've avoided our whole lives. The truth is we never get past the point of needing God's power every day, and we need to keep running strong all the way to the finish line of life.

A third obvious lesson we learn from Noah's fall is the **pitfalls of alcohol**. While the Bible doesn't forbid the drinking of wine, it gives stern warnings as to the damaging effects of drunkenness. In Noah's life it caused a chain reaction that affected generations to come. God's will for every believer is that we practice self-control, one of the fruits of the Spirit. Paul says, “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). Getting drunk causes you to lose control, whereas being filled with the Spirit leads to self-control and keeps you from doing and saying stupid things.

But the story here in chapter 9 focuses not on what Noah does, but what his son Ham does and the repercussions of his actions. Most people in 2021 read this story and say, “What's the big deal about what Ham does? He sees his father naked and then tells his brothers. Why would such a seemingly minor thing lead Noah to curse one of Ham's sons?”

Many have speculated that perhaps something more happened in the tent – that Ham committed some kind of sexual sin – but all of this is speculation. The best interpretation is to just take what the text says – that Ham sees his father in an undignified state, and instead honoring his father by covering his body, he dishonors his father by making light of it and telling his brothers what he sees.

In the Bible nakedness is a symbol of shame, going all the way back to the garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve sinned and their eyes were opened, they realized they were naked – they were exposed – and they immediately sowed fig leaves together to cover themselves. Covering is the natural response to shame – you want to hide so no one can see you. Before the fall, being naked was natural and normal, but after the fall, all innocence was lost, and now sinful people could not look upon nakedness without thinking impure thoughts, and being naked left you vulnerable to the exploitation of others.

When Ham sees his father's nakedness, instead of feeling grief and concern over the sin of his father, he seems to delight in it. Instead of honoring his father and covering him up, he goes out and says to his brothers, “Hey, you gotta come see this.” He has juicy gossip and gleefully shares the shame of his father with others. It's the same kind of delight someone gets when they tell a dirty joke – they take the purity and dignity of the human body and drag it down to its lowest level and laugh at it.

Contrast this to the actions of Shem and Japheth. Instead of joining Ham in laughing at and mocking their father, they enter the tent – walking backwards so they won't gaze upon their father's nakedness – and honor their father by covering his body. They don't laugh at sin. Ham, on the other hand, shows no shame. Sin doesn't bother him. He revels in it, and it delights him.

History shows that when a culture loses its sense of shame over sin, it will destroy itself from within. Powerful empires such as Babylon and Greece and Rome all gave themselves over to sexual immorality and depravity, to the point where nothing was out of bounds – there was no shame for any kind of behavior – and the result was moral chaos and a fall from power.

We're watching the same thing happen in our culture. It's amazing to think that there was a time when TV shows were not allowed to show married couples in the same bed. They slept separately in twin beds. Even Hollywood, at one time, had a respect for modesty and decency.

But each decade we've seen moral standards decline and disappear, to the point that we're not shocked anymore. Our entire culture – whether it's TV or movies or music or advertisements – is saturated in sensuality – and there's almost a rush to see who can be the most provocative and outrageous, and what sexual taboo can be broken next. Ironically, the more our culture celebrates sexual liberation, the more sexual abuse and exploitation and dysfunction have skyrocketed. There's a heavy price to be paid when we lose our sense of shame over sin, and when the human body is not treated with respect and dignity.

Noah sees something in Ham that is off – he sees a moral defect so serious that he pronounces a curse. Verse 25... He said, "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers." Our immediate response is to say, "Who is Canaan, and why is he cursed? Ham is the one who did wrong. Why isn't he the one who is cursed?"

We learn in chapter 10 – which gives the genealogies of Noah's three sons – that Canaan is one of Ham's sons. **SLIDE.** Ham had four sons, and his descendants spread out to the south and the west – mostly to the area of northern Africa, to places like Egypt and Ethiopia. Canaan, the fourth son of Ham, settled in what would become Israel. That's why the Promised Land is sometimes referred to as the "land of Canaan." The Canaanites became dominant in this region during the 400 years that Israel was in bondage to Egypt, and when Israel went back to the land 400 years later, God commanded Israel to conquer and destroy the Canaanites.

God's command to destroy the Canaanites is viewed by some as barbaric and something that reflects badly on God – as if the Canaanites were completely innocent people. The Canaanites were among the most evil, depraved people who've ever lived – and they are the ones who settled in and built the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah – which gives you an idea of what they were like. In Leviticus 18 God warns Israel to not be like the Canaanites, and then goes on to give a long list of sexually deviant practices that made up the Canaanite culture. I probably won't ever preach a sermon on Leviticus 18, but you can read it for yourself.

Interestingly, the word "nakedness" is used 24 times in the passage. As one commentator puts it, "The Canaanites were naked, shameless, and uncovered." Archeology shows that the descendants of Canaan were obsessed with sexuality, and engaged in every form of deviant behavior you can name. Another commentator described the Canaanites as "having no moral code whatsoever – abandoning themselves completely to the flesh."

Who does this sound like? It sounds kind of like great-great-great grandpa Ham. Although what Ham did was not as depraved and as his descendants would later be, this kind of shameful behavior began with Ham. The Bible says that what we do has a profound effect on those who come after us. Exodus 20:5-6 says, "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."

This verse does not mean that your kids and grandkids will be punished for your sins – the emphasis in the Bible is always on personal responsibility. What it does mean is that the choices you make – whether good or bad – have a direct affect the lives of your children and grandchildren. Children of parents who are abusive, who are alcoholics, who live as though God does not exist – often follow in the same footsteps. On the positive side, those who love God and live according to His order and design, bless the lives of a thousand generations.

What appears to be happening when Noah curses Canaan, is that Noah detects in Canaan the evil traits he sees in his father Ham, and foresees that the shameful, flippant attitude Ham showed towards sin would be passed down through his son Canaan. It's not so much that Noah places a hex on Canaan – as though his descendants were powerless to reverse their course – Noah gives something of a prophecy – that the shameful behavior seen in Ham will continue on through his son Canaan and his descendants. At any point, the Canaanites could have broken the chain of family sin, repented, and turned to God. But they didn't.

Each generation of Canaanites repeated the same cycle of sin for several hundred years, and there came a point where God said, "Enough. Judgment day is here." And their judgment would come in the form of Israel, who has just returned to the Promised Land. He instructs Israel to conquer and destroy the Canaanites so that their wicked lifestyle does not corrupt God's people.

Noah foresaw that the descendants of Canaan would become slaves to Shem and Japheth, and that's exactly what happens in the book of Joshua once Israel conquers the land. Eventually, the Canaanites disappeared from history – illustrating the sad legacy of Ham and Canaan.

But Noah's other sons leave a completely different legacy. In verses 26-27 Noah blesses Shem and Japheth for their act of showing honor and respect... He also said, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend Japheth's territory; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth." Just as God, in His grace, covered the shame and nakedness of Adam and Eve, Shem and Japheth showed grace by covering up their father's shame. They didn't laugh at their father's sin – they didn't delight in evil – or gossip about their father's fall from grace. They treated their father with respect. And because of this, Noah asks God to bless them and their descendants. And that's exactly what happens.

Shem and his descendants settled in the Middle East, and would become know as the Semitic people – taken after Shem's name. Shem's most famous descendant is Abraham – the father of the Jewish people. In chapter 12 God made a special covenant with Abraham – promising to bless Abraham and his descendants, and through Abraham all the earth would be blessed. The greatest blessing is that the Messiah came through the line of Shem – and in the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3, Shem is mentioned as the ancestor of Jesus.

All this goes back to the promise God made to Eve in Genesis 3:15 that from her seed will come a deliverer who will crush the head of the serpent, reverse the curse of sin, and return the earth to it's Eden-like conditions. Throughout Genesis God is preserving the royal line of the Messiah – from Adam to Abel to Seth to Noah to Shem and eventually through Abraham.

Noah also asks that Japheth be blessed in two ways. First, that God would extend Japheth's territory. Japheth his descendants spread out to the north and the west, into Europe and eventually to America. They were the explorers of the world, and from Japheth came the blessings of western civilization we enjoy today. Most everyone here this morning comes from Japheth.

Noah also asks that Japheth may live in the tents of Shem. This is a way of saying, “May you share in the blessings of the host who owns the tent.” God’s grand plan was to bless the world through Shem – through Abraham and the Jewish people. But in the course of time Gentiles – those from the lineage of Japheth – would also come to share in those blessings. When we come to the New Testament, we see in the book of Acts that the gospel message went beyond Israel and the Jews and spread west to the Gentiles nations – the descendants of Japheth.

All that Noah predicted for his sons came to be, and this story serves as powerful lesson that the choices we make today matter – they matter not only for the determining the course of our lives, but the lives of our children and grandchildren. By the way we live, we either bring curses or blessings.

The good news is that while destructive family patterns often persist, because of the gospel no one has to remain stuck in that pattern. One shining example is a Canaanite woman named Rahab. Rahab was a prostitute and deeply immersed in the depraved lifestyle of her people. But through faith she repented and turned to the God of Israel and was saved. And guess what? She became the great-grandmother of King David, and is listed in the family tree of Jesus. Through faith she turned a curse into a blessing.

Every story in the Bible is put there for a reason, and this story – as sordid as it is – reminds us that we’re all sinners in need of God’s grace. Even after God’s judgment of a flood, sin was still in the ark – and even after entering into a new world, sin got off the ark – Noah was a sinner, Ham was a sinner, and so was Canaan.

But in His grace, God used Noah’s son Shem to bring into the world a deliverer – someone to reverse the curse of sin and save us. And in His grace, God offers salvation to everyone – Jew and Gentile alike – and it doesn’t matter how awful our sin is – and it doesn’t matter what family we come from and how messed up it may be – the ground is level at the foot of the cross – and any sinner – even as great a sinner as Rahab the Canaanite – can be saved through faith in Christ. No family, no generation, no person need remain stuck in the cycle of sin – but can be set free through the power of Christ.