

*Foundations: You Either Die A Hero...*

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*Psalm 18:30-35; 2 Corinthians 4:4-9; Genesis 9:18-9:29*

Our final Scripture reading for today is Genesis 9:18-9:29. May God bless the reading of His sacred, perfect, and holy Word. “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 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.”

“You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain.” That’s a line from the Batman movie *The Dark Knight*. In the movie, there’s a new district attorney in town by the name of Harvey Dent. Harvey is successful at cleaning up Gotham, despite attempts on his life by the criminal underworld of the city, in part because Batman is looking out for him. But when the Joker strikes, Batman saves Harvey, but not in time to keep him from being permanently scarred. Harvey goes insane and becomes the villain Two-Face. As the film ends, Batman takes the blame for Two-Face’s crimes so that the city can retain their faith in their fallen hero Harvey Dent.

It’s a story we hear all the time in the news media...people we thought were good folks, celebrated actors and comedians, beloved politicians and presidents, sometimes pastors and priests and theologians, the full story comes out and we realize that they weren’t the people we thought they were, the people that they presented themselves to be. Realistically, there’s a huge difference between people who committed heinous crimes and people who simply couldn’t overcome dangerous habits. My favorite theologian R.C. Sproul said the one thing he wished people wouldn’t know about him, but should, was that it took him over 45 years to get over his smoking habit – and he died of a lung condition that was directly caused by it. The process of giving up this vice was very, very long. Obviously, smoking is way down the list of things that aren’t good for us, right alongside my own eating habits. But we see in those ways that even those who love God and are chosen by Him have a long way to go to holiness.

And that’s what we see in today’s passage. When I read something like this in the Bible, my first thought, my gut reaction, is, “Do I really need to know this?” If the storybooks we’ve seen over the generations tell us anything, the consensus is “no.” The picture books end with smiling Noah and his family and smiling animals coming out of the ark with a rainbow behind them. Everything’s happy and good, the picture fades with the blessings of God, roll end credits.

But that's not the way the story of Noah ends. It ends with a story that sounds like it belongs in some sort of frat party movie gone really badly, only it ends with curses on family members. It is weird. It's the reason a lot of preachers don't preach straight through biblical books without skipping bits, because the Bible is full of these weird little bits that throw us in the modern age with our modern sensibilities for a loop. There are stories that don't fit our paradigm about what the Bible should be – stories about people behaving wickedly in ways we don't even want to talk about. And yet, more often than not, they tell us things we really need to understand here and now. So let's dig into what's going on with Noah in this final story to get some perspective on the whole thing.

The story starts by reminding us of Noah's three sons, the ones who came with him on the ark with their wives. Shem, Ham and Japheth have been named several times, but now they will become important on their own. And they are truly important, because as we'll eventually learn, their descendants will populate the earth, and we'll see that happen very quickly. So this story is not just about the three sons, but about their legacy, about the peoples that will come from their lineage.

As the story continues, we're not surprised that Noah becomes a farmer, an agriculturalist. I'm guessing he'd had enough of animals at this point! He plants a vineyard. So far, so good. And while many Christians over time have condemned drinking alcohol, it's often spoken of in positive terms in Scripture – that wine can make the heart glad. Paul encourages Timothy to drink a little wine for his stomach. The ancients knew that a moderate use of alcohol wasn't a bad thing...and in some circumstances, it was far safer to drink than polluted waters.

But apparently Noah didn't get the memo about moderation, and so he gets drunk. So drunk, in fact, that he loses his inhibitions and starts shedding his clothes. He's out of control. And we know this for a specific reason – not six chapters ago, we established in the fall of Adam and Eve that their shame at their nakedness was a significant sign of their sin. And in ancient Hebrew culture, nakedness in any sort of public context was deeply degrading. Even though Noah is in his own tent, there's the sense that his drunkenness has affected his judgment in a really embarrassing way that could reflect on his character.

Did Noah do this while Ham was in his tent? He's so drunk, it's possible. Did Ham go into his dad's tent in the morning to wake him up? Maybe. We don't know. Ham did not intend for this to happen. The mere act of seeing is not what creates an uproar. It's that Ham doesn't do anything to help his father but instead goes and tells his brothers about it. Maybe he thinks it's funny. Maybe he's mad at his father's antics and trying to get back at him. We don't know.

But where the sin comes in is that the ancient world is one of honor and shame. We in the modern West think about things in terms of guilt. Did you break the law or not? If you are guilty, you have terms of paying your debt – whether that's jail time, money, whatever – until your debt is paid. But in the ancient near East and many other cultures, honor and shame are the center of their thoughts on morality. Ham going and telling his brothers about what has happened to their dad is incredibly dishonoring to Noah. Noah is given no opportunity by Ham to hold his good name in esteem. In comparison, Shem and Japheth in doing what they do, in covering Noah without looking at him, give Noah the opportunity to save face.

When Noah sobers up and finds out what's happened after his stupor, he is incredibly upset. He curses Ham's family – in particular, one of his sons named Canaan. This will play a role in the eventual history of Israel, because the land where Canaan's family eventually settled was named after him. Canaan is the promised land; Canaan is the place that the Hebrews will conquer in the far future after their slavery in Egypt. And the people of Canaan turn out to be incredibly wicked, and those in the lands surrounding Israel are a constant thorn in their side. Noah's curse on Canaan plays out in violence among all of his children for centuries to come.

There are good things here too, of course – the blessing of Shem and Japheth. Some ancient scholars thought that the promise to Shem is actually the promise that the messianic line will come from him. And the pattern of blessing one's family near the end of one's life will continue throughout Scripture.

But what is striking to us is not the blessings so much as Noah's rage at his youngest son. From our perspective, it seems way out of line; the punishment doesn't fit the crime. An honor and shame culture would agree with it far more than we would. Either way, though, the deeper issue is that Noah's dishonor stems not from Ham's proclamation but from his own actions.

And perhaps most importantly, this shows us that Noah is not the savior that we might have hoped for. In some ways, Noah is set up as the second Adam. In last week's passage, he and his family were given the same command as Adam and Eve, to increase upon the earth and have dominion over it. There was hope that where the first Adam failed, Noah might not. But those hopes are dashed quickly. Just as Adam and Eve indulged in the forbidden fruit, Noah indulged in too much of the fruit of the vine, and they all wind up wholly ashamed and uncovered. Noah, for all his righteousness, is not the fulfillment of the promise made to Eve that one day, one of her descendants would crush the head of the evil serpent who tempted them.

That leads me to my first major thought of the day: *be careful who you idolize, even in the Bible*. Noah is righteous. Scripture says so, and it explains why Noah's family was chosen to be saved out of the entire world. Many other people in the Bible are declared to be righteous in God's sight, meaning simply that God views them with favor because of their faithfulness. But many times, God declares that righteousness not based on their perfection, but on their willingness to turn to Him in everything, even when they've committed grave sins. Sometimes, they have many virtues worth emulating. But many times, they have just as many faults.

I remember when I was a kid, I had a two-record set of Bible stories with a album-sized storybook so you could read along. (Records are making a comeback, but I doubt anybody's buying storybook records!) I actually found the whole thing on YouTube – it's quite a trip to see something from 40 years ago and see how much your memory works or doesn't! I remembered that the first three sides were the stories of the Old Testament, and the fourth side was the story of Jesus' birth, parables, death, and resurrection. And I'll tell you what...I wore out the first three sides when I was little, but not so much the fourth.

That's because the first three sides were filled with action. Creation, the fall, Cain and Abel, the flood, Abraham and Isaac, Joseph and the coat of many colors, Moses vs. Pharaoh, Joshua and the destruction of Jericho, Samson and Delilah, David and Goliath, Jonah and the Whale, Daniel in the Lions' Den. It was exciting! Jesus was fine, sure, but there were more thrilling events in the Old Testament stories. The Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son were no match for Joshua and his army or David and his slingshot.

And as I got older and heard many of those Old Testament stories, there was still the focus on these incredible men and women of faith. And indeed, they *were* full of faith. But time and again, they make seriously bad mistakes, sometimes even criminal mistakes, awful sins. When people say, "I want to be a man after God's own heart like David," I have to ask, "How much like David do you want to be?" Because while David is full of faith, the writer of many of the psalms, truly someone who longed for God, he was a man who was a part of so many wars that God wouldn't let him build the temple. He offended God by taking a census of his people rather than trusting that God would provide enough men for him to defend the Kingdom. That doesn't even get into his adultery with Bathsheba and setting up her husband's death.

Every human we admire will fail us in some way. We can and should have mentors, especially people in the faith who can lead us. There are people who have lived long lives of faithfulness despite falls and failures. We should listen to them and emulate them in as much as they emulate Jesus. They remind us that everyday, ordinary people can be loved by God and know His love and follow God faithfully.

But at the same time, we must be careful who we idolize. God never meant for us to put too much stock in humanity. I'm saddened at how many friends and acquaintances I know who are writing off Christianity because they see so much hypocrisy and bad will. Those things upset me too. But for a long time now, I haven't expected Christians to be perfected – I've expected us to be hypocrites, to get things wrong, to make huge mistakes. We wouldn't need a Savior if we were perfect! We believe we should live in ways we don't always live. It's hypocrisy if we say, "you must follow these rules, but I don't have to." But it's not hypocrisy, really, when we admit our failings and get our knees before God and show everyone grace because we know how quick we are to fall too. We aren't going to get it all right. We want to follow in the steps of faithful people who came before us. And when we read that they stumbled too, it doesn't mean we write them off. Instead, we pray that God's Holy Spirit would direct us closely, because we're not so far from falling off the path either.

All of that said, the second thing I want to talk about briefly today is this – it's not big, not a long discussion, but maybe a game-changer: *the Bible is believable because it is so honest about human nature*. People in power don't like to hear from those who disagree. In the last few months, you could have read about how those who spoke out against various oppressive regimes around the world have been poisoned, imprisoned, sometimes disappeared or simply murdered. In the ancient world, kings did not take kindly to those who wrote about their faults and failings. Their records were full of nothing but their victories and the spoils of war they took. We have ancient annals from various societies where we can tell that historians did their best to cover up the undeniable messes and failures of their kings and warlords.

But the Bible is chock full of stories about the failings of the most righteous people! Nobody gets away unscathed. We have scared and impatient prophets, priests who lead the people of Israel into idol worship, kings who build great fortunes but are ridiculed for their immorality. Get to Jesus, and He's surrounded with 12 guys, one of whom in a desperate pinch denies even knowing him, one of who literally sells him out to the bad guys, two of whom ask to call down fire from heaven on a village. The best of them is as dense as a box of rocks!

And that's why I love the Bible, and that's why I believe it. It is the story of a great God who patiently and lovingly deals with ignorant, impatient, imbecilic people – and those are the good ones! When I pick up the Bible and read about these people, I see myself. I don't see perfect people. I see broken people made whole by a caring God. And maybe I don't see myself in a drunken Noah because alcohol isn't my thing. But I see my fears in Elijah. I see my pride in Joseph. I see my own sins and temptations reflected in many faithful people. It makes me realize I am not alone. It makes me realize that God can still love me in my weakness. And when I realize that no other religious book in any culture is this straightforward about human nature, I believe what it says.

But finally, the mess of Noah gives us one final thought: *we need a Savior, and God has given Him to us in Jesus*. Noah was a righteous man who believed God and obeyed what God said, and yet his story ends with a most inglorious exit. What hope do we have? Well, we have enormous hope, perfect hope, a hope that drives out our fear and doubt. We have Jesus.

Jesus is in fact the perfect person, the God-man, the one we can always follow, always emulate, always imitate, always strive to be like. And because of His life, death, and resurrection, our failures are redeemed and our worst sins atoned for. Noah wasn't the second Adam, but Christ is. Where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded. Where Adam couldn't obey even the one absolute prohibition he was given, Jesus obeyed throughout His entire life, all the way to the cross. Adam lost paradise; Noah lost his inhibitions and his clothes and his temper. The only thing Jesus lost was His life, for our sakes, and in doing so He gained all who would believe in Him for the Kingdom of God.

Noah cursed his son and his grandson. Jesus became accursed by dying on a tree for us. Noah cried out for Ham's family to become slaves to his other sons. Jesus said in Mark 9:35 that anyone who wanted to be first in the Kingdom had to become last, and the servant of all. And that's exactly what He did, living a life in service to us for our redemption. Noah lived 350 years after the flood, and after a total of 950 years, he died. Jesus only lived 30-some years, and He died, but the Father resurrected Him, and He now lives eternally, our permanent prophet, priest, and king.

So when your mentors fail you and your idols tumble, when the people you trust betray you and those you look up to have a terrible fall, don't despair and don't lose hope. There's a Savior who loves you, who will never fail you or forsake you. As Paul said in our reading this morning, we have the treasure God has given us in jars of clay, which shows whatever power we have is from God and not from ourselves. Turn to Jesus in your bleakest state, trust in Him where you are weak and powerless, and though everyone else may disappoint, you will find Him trustworthy and true forever.