

Foundations: The Table Of Nations
By Jason Huff
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Luke 10:1-2; Acts 14:15-17; Genesis 10

Our final Scripture reading today is Genesis 10. It's a little long for us, but bear with me – we'll understand it soon enough. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “This is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons, who themselves had sons after the flood. The sons of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech and Tiras. The sons of Gomer: Ashkenaz, Riphath and Togarmah. The sons of Javan: Elishah, Tarshish, the Kittim and the Rodanim. (From these the maritime peoples spread out into their territories by their clans within their nations, each with its own language.) The sons of Ham: Cush, Mizraim, Put and Canaan. The sons of Cush: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah and Sabteca. The sons of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan. Cush was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; that is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD." The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad and Calneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city. Mizraim was the father of the Ludites, Anamites, Lehabites, Naphtuhites, Pathrusites, Casluhites (from whom the Philistines came) and Caphtorites. Canaan was the father of Sidon his firstborn, and of the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarites and Hamathites. Later the Canaanite clans scattered and the borders of Canaan reached from Sidon toward Gerar as far as Gaza, and then toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha. These are the sons of Ham by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. Sons were also born to Shem, whose older brother was Japheth; Shem was the ancestor of all the sons of Eber. The sons of Shem: Elam, Asshur, Arphaxad, Lud and Aram. The sons of Aram: Uz, Hul, Gether and Meshech. Arphaxad was the father of Shelah, and Shelah the father of Eber. Two sons were born to Eber: One was named Peleg, because in his time the earth was divided; his brother was named Joktan. Joktan was the father of Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah and Jobab. All these were sons of Joktan. The region where they lived stretched from Mesha toward Sephar, in the eastern hill country. These are the sons of Shem by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood.”

Our lives are filled with filtering out the unnecessary. I see a hundred Facebook posts in a day, but I scroll past ads for piano lessons and old memes and pay attention to posts about the people I care about. I go to about three news websites each day; I click on about four headlines. We turn on the radio and immediately scan to a station playing a song we like. There's a lot of noise in our world, and we learn to get past it to the things that really matter to us.

If we're honest, we filter everything, including the Bible. Sometimes we filter out parts of the Bible we don't like. Other times, we filter out parts of the Bible that are hard to understand, and we definitely filter out parts that are boring. We think, “Oh, OK, that's different, I'll come back to that later sometime.” And we rarely do. We aren't trying to be dismissive; we just don't have the tools to dig deep and comprehend what the Bible is telling us.

Sometimes you need a guide to get you through. We had an afternoon off during our youth mission trip in Pittsburgh, so we decided to go to Fallingwater, an amazing house built by the renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright. It's awesome – the home is built right into a natural waterfall; it adds to the beauty of nature rather than destroying it. But my aunt was with us, and she knows a lot about Fallingwater, and so she gave us a guided tour, telling us about many of the unique aspects of the home. We all learned a lot from her, and it turned out to be one of the highlights of the trip. It was neat on its own, but with a guide, it was so much more. We understood so much more about the home than we ever could have figured out on our own.

Today's passage is the same way. We need the wisdom of those who've come before us to really make sense of what's going on in these verses. John Calvin, the man most responsible for the start of the Presbyterian and Reformed churches in the 16th century, wrote very briefly about Genesis 10 in his commentary on the whole Bible, basically stating that others had attempted much more detailed analysis of the passage, and that he wished them well, but he wrote a few notes and left it at that. One recent commentary wondered aloud if anyone should preach on a passage like Genesis 10. And yet, another commentary said it was one of the most interesting and important in the whole word of God!¹ So what it really takes is finding a trustworthy guide who can lead us through the importance of the passage. And from my study this week, I'm going to try and guide us through just as others have guided me.

So what is going on in this passage? For it to be preserved, God meant for it to mean something to someone. All these names mean little to us. But what is important for us to understand is that this is not a genealogy. Every culture has those, and we've already encountered one genealogy in the Bible in the first nine chapters of Genesis. Genealogies are lists of descendants: "Adam was the father of Cain" and so forth.

This particular passage has no parallel in any ancient literature. No other religious text, no other historian, no one wrote anything like this. It is utterly unique. It's a table of nations. It shows us a picture of where all the peoples of the world came from. We know this because there is an intermixing of genealogies and of place names. We don't recognize this because many of these are ancient towns and cities that we don't have a clue about. Let's be honest – if someone asked me to name ten major cities in Arkansas, I wouldn't know. Almost no one I know could place ten ancient cities that ceased to exist 4,000 years ago on a map!

The list is not just a list of people, though there are some people on the list, but of people groups. Those who have done their homework and diligent research have linked these names with places and peoples far wider than what we'd expect. We get the earliest Saxons settling in Eastern and Central Europe. We have groups heading to Africa. We have the peoples of the Middle East represented. We have the ancestors of Asia and India beginning to find their homes. In fact, the way the passage is set up, we start with those farthest away from ancient Israel, those who would truly be considered Gentiles, and where they landed. Then we move closer to home, to the regions surrounding Israel, some of the peoples who would become Israel's fiercest enemies, the peoples of the cursed Canaan. Then we finally reach the descendants of Shem, from which eventually Abraham, the father of Israel, would be born.

¹ Steven J. Cole, quoting from Dr. Leupold and Dr. Boice, in his sermon on Genesis 10, for which I am indebted. His sermon on Genesis 10 can be found at <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-22-roots-nations-genesis-101-32>.

Before anything else, what we should see here in the uniqueness of this passage and what it is doing, creating a list of nations and showing us where the descendants of Noah wound up, is this: *the Bible is a historically reliable narrative*. No other ancient document has an accounting of how the peoples of the world came to live where they did. It doesn't explain every group and every region, but it gives us enough material to understand that well before the time of Abraham, the people of the world had dispersed far and wide and would continue to do so.

Other ancient histories were concerned with the ancestry of their own peoples, but not others. The people of the ancient world were well familiar with mythologies and fables and legends that sometimes explained the origins of humanity and certain cities. But the table of nations has none of that. It is not interested in entertaining us. It is concerned with establishing that the nations of the world came from the offspring of Noah. It is a supremely factual account.

In fact, it is a myth-breaker. The table stops only long enough to mention the real origins of people who had become legends in their own time like Nimrod. Nimrod, as the founder of such cities as Babylon, might have taken on a myth-like status, a kind of demi-god. But no, the Bible says, he was a real person, not a deity; he did impressive things from an earthly point of view, but he was no angel or demon or god, just a man like every other.

Many liberal scholars have tried to dismiss the early chapters of Genesis as myth, mostly in response to theories of evolution and questions about human origins. They dismiss a worldwide flood or a single ancestral tree. But the details of Genesis 10 only make sense as part of a historical narrative. There's no other reason to write such an in-depth list. And certain facts make sense historically, such as the linguistic similarities found in ancient languages of India and ancient languages traced to ancient Europe. The Bible is no myth. To those who first read the account in Genesis, who recognized these names and people and places, their history was grounded in reality. Most people today do not recognize the Bible as true, but even in these details we no longer really care about, the Bible strives for accuracy and truth.

Next thought that comes up from this passage, which really does resonate today: *we all come from the same family*. We seem bound and determined to splinter off into as many little groups as we possibly can. We divide into nationalities, who came from where. We divide into regions; "I'm from the south; I'm from the Midwest." We divide into states. We divide further into regions within states and regions within regions. In Detroit, you learn very quickly that 8 Mile is the prime dividing line. We were amazed to find earlier this year an Indian restaurant that opened during the pandemic. It's the only Indian restaurant in Macomb east of Schoenherr. We have little group huddles of people, and it's been that way for millennia.

And we're all well aware of the state of our country when it comes to the questions of race and class that we hear on a regular basis. Every group wants awareness; every group wants recognition of their claims. Some are more understandable than others. Many stories are told now of oppressors and victims, of injustices of the past that need to be addressed, of systems that fail certain people groups. There's some truth to some of it.

And yet the big picture we're missing, the story that is only told in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is that we are all the descendants of Adam and all the descendants of Noah. Sin has torn us apart; sin has told us to protect only our own; sin has told us we may take from others who are not part of our group. But the biblical story of Genesis 10 is that all the world's people, scattered throughout the nations, have the same origins.

We are not different species of evolved apes intermingling and mating. We are not more or less smart, more or less strong, more or less capable, because our ancient ancestors came from completely different roots. We may have minor traits that developed over the last several thousand years through genetics and micro adaptations, but we are essentially the same. We are made in the image of God, every last one of us, distantly related but related nonetheless.

And this ultimately means that any form of racism, any form of racial discrimination, any form of judgment based solely on a person's country of origin, is out of line for the Christian. We are reminded many, many times in the New Testament that Christ brings Jews and Gentiles together. In Christ, people groups that once hated each other with bitter passion now live together, work together, befriend one another, marry each other, believe together, worship together. We are bonded together and unified through Jesus.

We started as part of the same family, and through the love of Jesus, we can act like it again. What's more, through Jesus we are adopted into the family of God. Not only are we distantly related in an earthly sense, we are spiritually brothers and sisters in the Kingdom of God. No matter where we come from, that's the case.

What else can we see here? *God loves the nations*. God chooses to bless a special man, Abraham, who we'll read about in a couple of weeks. God chooses to bless the nation that He creates from Abraham. But we'll also learn that all the nations will be blessed through Abraham's descendants. There would be no reason for a table of nations in the Bible if God did not care about the various peoples of the world.

There's another parallel that's extremely important for us to notice. We all know that Jesus had 12 apostles – that corresponds to the 12 tribes of Israel. In the gospels written by Matthew and Luke, Jesus even tells the 12 apostles that they will sit at His table in the Kingdom of God, sitting on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes. But that's not the only group of followers Jesus sends out to proclaim the good news that the Kingdom of God has arrived in their midst.

In our passage from Luke 10 today, we heard about a different group of people Jesus sent to share the proclamation of salvation. How many does Jesus send out? 70. Why 70? If you take a really close look at Genesis 10, you'll count up all the descended peoples from the sons of Noah. And what will you get? 70. 70 nations. This is not a random number. Jesus has an inner circle of 12 that represent the chosen nation of Israel, but He also has an extended circle of 70 that He sends out to all the places He would visit. While the 70 doesn't explicitly go to the ends of the earth to all the Gentile lands, it represents the group that would. The news that Jesus saves is meant for the entire earth, because God loves the nations.

God loved the nations enough to catalogue where they came from and help us see that we are all inter-related. God cares about the nations that He would allow Israel to bless any nation willing to acknowledge her. And God cares about the nations enough that the salvation wrought by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection wouldn't be just for His chosen nation but for all peoples, going back as far as the flood.

But the last thing we're going to discuss is a bit sad, and it's a reality we see every day around us: *we are quick to forget God's miracles and forget God's grace*. Throughout this entire passage, we only have a couple of quick references to God, and they aren't as nice as our translation might indicate. God is mentioned only in the story of Nimrod the mighty hunter, and while our translation says he was a mighty hunter before the LORD, the word in Hebrew can also be translated *against* the LORD. In fact, ancient Hebrew rabbis writing before the time of Jesus took Nimrod to be someone who stood against God; that's why the word "nimrod" became an insult even in modern times.

Remember that the line of Ham was cursed for his sin against Noah, in particular the line of Canaan. Canaan is Nimrod's uncle. Nimrod's story seems to be one trying to repudiate the curse. "Are my people supposed to be the servants of Shem? I'm going to build a vast kingdom instead of bowing down to him!" The cities that Nimrod built would be among the great rivals to Israel along the way – Babylon would stand even after its destruction as a symbol of evil opulence and corruption of God's ways. Ninevah was nearly destroyed by God's judgment, and the infamous prophet Jonah didn't want to go there because they were Israel's enemies.

Even if we were to give Nimrod some grace and say that he was in fact a mighty warrior before the LORD and not against the LORD, where is the remembrance of God? Where are the monuments to God's salvation from the flood? The story of the flood would persist in many cultures, but the story would become myths far removed from the true story of God's grace to Noah and Noah's family. Ultimately, the table of the nations tells us that human nature didn't really change after the flood. No one pursued God; no one worshiped God; the righteousness of Noah and his love God became a fleeting, distant memory.

That's a lesson for us right there, friends. We have been blessed over and over again. We have homes and food and cars and air conditioning and heat. We have entertainment broadcast onto our phones and into our living rooms. We live better than ancient kings, in many respects. Will we be like the nations and forget all God's grace to us? Or will we worship Him, adore Him, praise Him, love Him, pray to Him, and read His Word to us? Even today, many nations are far from God because their ancestors long ago forgot Him. May that not be our fate. May we hold Him close to our hearts every day. As we celebrate communion in just a few minutes, may we be reminded that through Jesus Christ, He is always close to those of us who believe. May we have true belief today.

Next week, we'll look at the tower of Babel and just why many of the nations went their own way. But for now, know that God is God over every nation. Know that all peoples around the world belong to Him. May we live as His people, sharing the good news of Jesus with all we know. May we live in hope, because the God who loves the nations loves us.