

Prayers

To God

Thank You Lord Jesus, for Your love. Thank You for Your compassion and Your care, and for all the ways you show us this love in everyday life. Above all, I thank You Lord Jesus because You laid down Your life so that the effect of my sins will not hold me in condemnation; instead, Your re-created life is my hope and salvation, and my eternal joy. Your love is amazing! **AMEN**

For myself

Weekly theme: Pray for joy

Make list of the things you are pleased to have achieved in your life. If you find this difficult, then be a bit flexible with yourself on this. Praise God for what He has done through You, for it is His work through you; Alleluia!

For others

Pray for Egypt. It is a large and populous nation with much variety and great potential. Pray for wisdom amongst its leaders in these dangerous times.

Meditation

Don't avoid the truth; the cost is too much.

If you are feeling bitter because of life,
Then talk about it all with others and with Jesus.

If you have been hurt by someone,
Then seek a path that leads to forgiveness.

If you are furious with your brother or sister,
Then don't let it fester, search your own heart.

If you are cursed by the words of others,
Then face them head on, and seek God's help.

If you are pulled down by the sins of the world,
Then stand up against them, in His great strength.

With Jesus there's always a way through;
So I beg you, never, never cease to believe it.

Bible Passage

Genesis 9:18-29

¹⁸ The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Ham was the father of Canaan). ¹⁹ These three were Noah's sons; and the whole earth was populated from them.

²⁰ Noah was the first man to work the soil and plant a vineyard. ²¹ He drank of the wine and became drunk, and lay naked in his tent. ²² Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked, and told his two brothers outside. ²³ Then Shem and Japheth took a piece of clothing, placed it over their shoulders, and walked backwards, covering their naked father. Their faces were turned away so that they did not see their father exposed.

²⁴ When Noah awoke from his hangover and learned what his youngest son had done to him, ²⁵ he said,

"Cursed be Canaan; he will be the lowest of slaves to his brothers."

²⁶ He also said,

"Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. ²⁷ May God enlarge Japheth's land; may he live in the household of Shem, and let Canaan be his slave."

²⁸ After the flood Noah lived 350 years. ²⁹ In total, he lived for 950 years before he died.

Review

This is an extraordinary story line, coming as it does after the great story of the Flood, together with the powerful description of the 'rainbow' covenant made between God and Noah in yesterday's passage (9:8-17). We are turned right back again to consider the darker themes of human life, and it is a reminder to us that despite God's work to destroy sin through the Flood, sin was still embedded within humanity. Much more would be needed for its root to be dealt with and God's plan of redemption completed in Christ.

Because everyone apart from Noah and his sons was killed in the Flood, the whole focus of the Bible story now rests on Noah and his family, especially his sons Shem, Ham and Japheth, but also a significant grandson named Canaan (the son of Ham). These are now the Biblical people from whom all now living descend; as it says at the beginning of our passage, the '*whole earth was populated from them*' (9:19). If we are to follow what happens next, it is worth remembering that before Noah, Adam had three sons; that is, Cain, Abel and Seth. The family line through Cain turned evil and bad when Cain murdered Abel, so the remaining line through Seth retained God's blessing. Something similar happened to Noah's sons, but although the sin committed by Noah's son Ham was not as awful as murder, from our point of view, there is a genuinely dark side to this story.

Today's passage begins happily enough with a relatively light-hearted description of Noah's development of the skill of winemaking (9:20). In Hebrew, Noah's name means 'rest', and his father Lamech is reported to have said of him '*Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed,*

this one shall bring us relief from our work ... (5:29). So in fulfilment of this prophecy, Noah worked the land and instead of receiving the curse of toil (3:17), he was able to enjoy the benefits of his labour, and ultimately, get drunk on his produce, which was wine (9:21)! Things now turned in a less positive direction.

Having drunk too much Noah passed out naked in his tent, and his son Ham saw him in this state (9:22). Now we may wonder what all the fuss is about, for it seems to us when reading the story that there was nothing wrong with what Ham did, that is, telling his brothers. However, ancient and traditional Israelite interpretations of this passage suggest that the word for 'saw' as in '*Ham ... saw his father naked ...*' (9:22) implied much more. For them, the word had sexual connotations, implying that sodomy had taken place. This sounds like a big leap of interpretation to us, but it would certainly explain the horror felt by Shem and Japheth at their brother. Their consequent actions (9:23) were to make sure they could not see their father's nakedness but to cover him, thus ensuring no accusation of sexual assault could be directed at them.

Of course, I explain this not to make any moral judgement about all this, only to try and explain what is otherwise a rather mysterious event. Certainly, the result of this episode is that when Noah awoke and found out whatever it was that had happened, he was furious and placed a curse on the family line of Ham, who we never hear of again in Scripture. In particular, the curse fell on Ham's son Canaan, who is cursed to endure slavery. The story goes some way towards explaining the general anti-canaanite stance of most of Scripture.

Yet again, humanity had been divided by sin, and the terrible curse of slavery that came on Canaan has been a curse of humanity throughout history (9:25,26, and see also Joshua 9:27). We should not forget that this very passage has been used to justify both slavery and apartheid, two of the greatest evils of our times. For this reason, an onus rests on any Christian reader to explain that these curses of Noah do not justify such evils in our own times. Slavery is itself an evil, no more no less, as is apartheid, and they have bedevilled humanity because they are inhuman, devious, wrong, and utterly contrary to God's purposes and design for all humanity. It needs to be said.

These blessings and curses foreshadow the pattern of life in the world that developed in the rest of Genesis, providing a backdrop for the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. By the time of Christ, racial divisions boiled down to the difference between God's people the Jews, and all others, the Gentiles. The New Testament finally and triumphantly declares all racial and social divisions irrelevant in Christ; '*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*' (Gal 3:28). The faith of God's people is that the racial and social divisions of people throughout history are a reflection of sin in the world, not God's eternal purposes. Jesus came to bring people together in redemption and in forgiveness and reconciliation, and this is the Gospel we preach.

Discipleship

Application

The use of this text

It is important for us to explore these difficult texts if we are to stand against the pernicious use of them by those who wish to use them mischievously, as in their use to justify slavery and apartheid. One important message within this passage is that after the Flood, it quickly becomes evident that both good and evil will be present within the generations of Noah,

despite the 'righteousness' God found in Noah himself (6:9). Certainly, God's action plan of Salvation will have to take this into account.

As Scripture unfolds, God will go on to choose people with whom to extend His Covenant relationship with humanity, and he will do this using people who stand within a 'good' line of descent; and the first of these will be Abraham (Ge. 12:1). It is sometimes said that there is no particular reason why God chose Abraham as the founder of His 'chosen people', but in the wider scheme of Genesis and of chapters 9,10 and 11 in particular, it is clear that his ancestry is important. God's plan of salvation does not just arise with Abraham it has been signalled in all these texts we are reading now.

Spiritual heritage

We may not think of spiritual heritage in quite the same way today, knowing what we do about the grace of God through Jesus for all men and women. However, we are sometimes reminded that all manner of good or ill does indeed travel through the generations, and our forefathers were not entirely wrong to believe that there was something of good or evil in this or that generational line, or this or that nation. What we should not do is to try and justify slavery or apartheid today on the basis of these ancient stories about good and evil within family lines. That is to both overplay the text, and fail to account for the fact that although this story is about the beginnings of all manner of nations and races, God has chosen to bless them all, despite the presence of evil, through His people. For in His 'rainbow' Covenant just made with Noah, God is not revealed as a God of wrath and destruction, but of salvation; and He has a plan to deal with all sin, in all people everywhere who are all made 'in His image' and who respond by faith to His Covenant.

Ideas for what to do

- *Think for a moment about whether you have 'cursed' others by pronouncing against them in some way. Curses are not the work of 'witches and demons', but often the injudicious words we say to others and ourselves. How can you and I make sure that we do not 'curse' others?*
- *Pray for those who have no real opportunity to escape the prejudices and racial stereotypes that have been placed on them.*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Have you heard any other explanations of the sin of Ham? What do you think of the explanation given, and what does it 'mean' for us, if anything?.
2. What does this passage of scripture say to us about the use of wine or drunkenness?
3. Discuss the evils that have been created by the division of the nations, and how they may be overcome today.

Final Prayer

Jesus, save us from judging people of other nations without seeing them firstly as people whom You love and for whom You died. Help us to accept that across the boundaries of the nations we each have much to share with each other; so give us the patience to listen. In Your name Lord Jesus, AMEN