

“The Mystery of Sin”
Genesis 9:18-29
December 14, 2014
The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

As we observed before, the narrative of the flood is presented in palistropic or chiasmic form, so this last paragraph we are about to read is parallel to the first paragraph, what is the first half of our chapter 6, which described the world before the flood as what we are about to read describes the world after it.

Text Comments

v.19 The Scripture insists upon the unity of mankind, the descendants of the same parents. The prophets would later deal with the whole world in their prophecies both of judgment and salvation. The Bible may concentrate its attention on the history of the people of God, but it never loses sight of the human race as a whole.

v.20 Scholars, drawing attention to the word “began,” and the way it is used in the Hebrew Bible, render the thought: “Noah was the first to plant a vineyard;” that is he was the inventor of viticulture, the cultivation of grapes, and viniculture, the cultivation of wine from grapes. [Sarna, 65]

The making of wine was so important to ancient near eastern culture that characteristically the origin of viticulture was ascribed in their epics to a god or demi-god, as the Greeks and Romans would as well. Once again, in the Bible it is man who has been given the extraordinary gifts by which to conceive of such an invention, one that throughout the Bible, despite its risks, gladdens the heart. [Waltke, 147] We must never fail to appreciate what an utterly remarkable creature man is, made in God’s image as he is: how extraordinary his inventiveness, his intellect, his power to subdue creation to his own ends!

v.21 Noah's drunkenness is not the focus of this history, but it well illustrates the sin and the sort of consequences that come from the misuse of drink. Some have argued that there is here no attribution of blame to Noah because, as the inventor of wine, he would have been unaware of the effects of drinking too much of it. [Sarna, 65] I have my doubts. Obviously time has passed, time sufficient to grow grapes and to learn how to make wine. Perhaps much more time has passed, since later in the chapter it appears that by this time Noah had a grown grandson. I’m doubtful this was Noah’s first sip of his new invention.

v.22 There has long been a debate regarding the precise nature of Ham's sinful act. Was it simply a profound disrespect for his father, whom he should have covered up to prevent further embarrassment, and certainly about whom he should never have gossiped to his brothers? Or, as others have thought, did Noah's violent reaction to what Ham did suggest that "saw his father's nakedness" is a euphemism for some darker sin. Drunkenness and sexual sin go together often enough in the Bible, but, all in all, it seems enough to stick with the plain words of the text, a disrespect that was revealed both in a voyeurism on

Ham's part, a voyeurism perhaps with homosexual overtones, and the pleasure he took in speaking about it afterward to the insult of his father's name. The word used for Ham's "seeing" in v. 22 suggests not a glance or something accidental, but a stare. [Waltke, 149] The connection between drunkenness and such exposure is made also in Habbakuk 2:15: "Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink...in order to gaze at their nakedness." The behavior of Ham's brothers in v. 23 suggests this interpretation in that they demonstrated the chaste and respectful behavior that Ham should have displayed. The other two brothers behaved in a god-like way. Remember how God covered Adam and Eve's nakedness after their sin.

Though Ham is characteristically listed second in the order of Noah's sons, here he is said to have been the youngest.

- v.25 These are the only recorded words of Noah! The curse falls on Canaan, Ham's son. For Ham's breach of the honor due to his father, *his* descendant will suffer; indeed, as the youngest son of Noah dishonored his father, so the youngest son of Ham will suffer the curse of it. No doubt the assumption is that Canaan will be like his father in his indifference to what is right and will deserve his fate when it befalls him. This is, of course, a principle of family solidarity that will be demonstrated everywhere in the Bible, and indeed is demonstrated everywhere we look in human life still today. *Ancestors largely reproduce their own kind in the moral and spiritual dimension of life.*

If we ask why this attention to Canaan, only one of the sons of Ham, the answer is easy enough to find. When Genesis was being written Israel was on the verge of invading the land of Canaan's descendants. The subjugation of Canaan and its peoples to Israel was the primary outworking of that curse. In the same way, the blessings pronounced on Shem and Japheth primarily devolve on their descendants not themselves.

- v.26 Of the three oracles, only that concerning Shem uses the personal name of God, "Yahweh." Shem is identified in terms of his relationship to Yahweh. [Waltke, 150] Shem, of course, is the progenitor of Israel. In any case, as with Cain and Seth before, the seed is divided into the godly and the ungodly lines of generations.
- v.27 Is the fulfillment of this promise, "may Japheth live in the tents of Shem," finally fulfilled in the ingathering of the Gentiles after Pentecost? I'm not sure. In any case, notice that the divine name "God" is used in the blessing of Japheth, not Yahweh, God's personal and covenantal name, as in the case of Shem.
- v.29 The genealogical record begun in 5:21 is now completed, and the entire narrative of the flood is, in fact, the parenthesis set between these pieces of information about Noah's life. [Waltke, 151]

In a single scene, our narrator artfully describes the world after suffering the judgment of God so severely. And what do we find? The world remains the same place as before: it is populated both by people who find it natural to do evil and by people who strive to obey God, but all of whom remain serious sinners. If we thought that God's grace to mankind, saving the race alive through

the judgment of the flood, would produce a different world, a better world, a more righteous world, we are immediately disabused of that idea.

No; man after the flood was as man before it: quite ready to pervert God's gifts into occasions for doing wrong -- the extraordinary progress of viticulture led not only to the pleasure of drinking wine but to drunkenness and a loss of self-control; quite ready to indulge in lascivious behavior; quite ready to indulge man's extraordinary power of speech to the detriment of himself and others. Surely we might have expected a different result. These were the very people whom God allowed to live when everyone else was destroyed; these were the people who witnessed the destruction of the wicked; these were the people who had disembarked from the ark to find a world washed clean of the human race on account of its sin. They knew they alone had been given the opportunity to begin again. Surely, if there were any human beings in the history of mankind who would have learned the lesson that the way of the transgressor was hard or that in keeping the commandments of God there is a great reward it was those people whom God had saved through the flood, the family of the one man who walked with God and who loved and served God.

But it was not to be. Here we encounter the *mystery of sin*: the utter irrationality of man's rebellion against God, the self-defeating nature of it, the stupidity of it; this willful, even often gleeful indulging in behavior that unmans us, that shrinks us, that strips us of our dignity, our real chance for true happiness, and, above all, our opportunity to live in the fellowship and love of God. We have chosen to be addicts of sin, to give ourselves over to it and, like all addicts, we become incapable of seeing what it is that we have become. It is the great mystery of human life: people so willingly acting to their own hurt and the hurt of others, all the while professing to be better than they are. How can the stupid be so proud? How can people so small so love to strut? Answer *that* question and you will have uncovered the secret of life!

To be sure, man does not admit that he has this problem; we are all involved in a vast conspiracy to consider our disreputable behavior normal and acceptable, even virtuous. Such is the very nature of addiction. Man was then and is now a past master of justifying bad behavior. He will either excuse it in some way, mitigate it, or actually defend it. I read recently that Vladimir Putin admits that his hero, Joseph Stalin, starved millions of Soviet citizens to death in the Great Terror of the 1930s, but, he says, "In other countries worse things happened." Well, we all use that argument, don't we? "I may have made some mistakes, but not as many as that fellow over there." The worst demon in hell but one can use that argument, and no he doubt does.

Lest we miss this point, lest we grow comfortable with the idea of human sinfulness and man's self-destructive tendencies, the terminal foolishness of so much of his behavior, the Bible constantly reminds us that even what we might imagine to be the most powerful inducements are entirely insufficient to convince human beings to give up this infernal spirit of rebellion, to see it for what it is, to hate it, and to seek God's help to overcome it.

In fact, the failure to learn the lesson of the flood is but the first of many such examples of man's resolution to live in rebellion against God, no matter the pain and misery that rebellion visits upon himself. Perhaps you have noticed this phenomenon yourself in your reading of Holy Scripture. It is one of many grand demonstrations that the God who wrote this book is also the

God of human history, able to reveal the same truth in one medium as in the other; is able to *show us* the same truth in human affairs that he has *written down for us* in his Word.

We read in both 6:5 and 8:21, before and after the flood, that the intentions of human hearts are evil by nature, that people's behavior will, therefore, be the effulgence or overflow of hearts that are inevitably rebellious toward God. Man is God's competitor instead of his partner. He resents God's position over him and denies God's rule at every turn. He is embittered by the fact that worshipping himself rather than his Creator invariably proves so unfulfilling. But his frustration notwithstanding, he *will not* submit. He really will cut off his nose to spite his face. In nothing is that fact so powerfully illustrated as *man's penchant to practice his rebellion in defiance of God's goodness to him*. Have you noticed that after every major development in the history of the covenant of grace, the covenant of friendship and family love that God made with his people, there is shortly, if not immediately thereafter some profound violation of that covenant on man's part. God no sooner takes men into loving fellowship and friendship with himself than they find some occasion to spit in his face. Nothing so powerfully illustrates the human condition!

Human history began with God taking Adam into covenant with himself, granting him great blessings, making him great promises, the most satisfying and honored place in the kingdom of God on earth, and granting him the great gift of a woman with whom to share the pleasure of his knowledge of God and fellowship with God. And what did Adam do with that kindness, that generosity, that prospect of such rich and fruitful life lying ahead of himself and his bride? He trampled it under his feet and threw it away. *The mystery of sin!*

And now we have the same thing over again with Noah, even Noah a righteous man who walked with God. No sooner had God made his covenant with Noah, no sooner had God stooped down to show Noah his great compassion toward unworthy and sinful human beings, no sooner had God delivered Noah and his family from the destruction that overtook every other human family, than Noah took God's good gifts and threw them back in God's face. He got drunk and in that stupor and that unmanly lack of self-control and self-possession, he couldn't even keep himself covered and became a snare and a temptation to his own son.

But this is only the beginning of a series of such stunning betrayals of God's goodness to his people. He would later make a covenant with Abraham and promise that man, who had grown up nothing more than a pagan idolater in Ur, to give him and his barren wife a son, to make of him through that son a great nation, to bless the entire world through him and to bring forth from his descendants the Redeemer of the world. God's gracious words were hardly uttered before Abraham was in Egypt, a coward hiding behind his wife's skirts, risking her virtue and the fulfillment of God's promise, trampling on the honor of God in a frenzy to save his own skin.

The same thing happened again when God made his covenant with the nation and people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. God had not only made a covenant with that miserable and benighted people, living under the boot of their oppressors in Egypt, but had brought them out of their bondage on eagles' wings. And what was the result of that great redemption? Why Moses wasn't even down from the mountain where he was receiving the details of that covenant before Israel was cavorting with a golden calf and displaying an almost complete disinterest in the God whose

glory and majesty were being displayed before her very eyes in the thunder and lightning that encircled the mountain.

And what of the covenant God made with David and his house, promising Israel's second king that the King of Kings would come from his lineage and that the name of David, which otherwise no one would ever have known -- it has only recently appeared for the first time in the archaeological remains of the ancient world -- would instead sound forever in the hallowed halls of the kingdom of God. Well might we suppose that following a promise like that, following mercy so great as that, in contemplation of an honor as great as that, David would have been a man who, for the rest of his days, would have walked on ice, so careful neither to offend against the will of God nor do anything that might, in any way, dishonor the astonishing favor that had been shown him. But as a matter of fact the ink was barely dry on the parchment before David was embroiled in a sordid soap opera, behaving like any other cheap oriental despot, stealing another man's wife and murdering her husband -- the better man -- to cover his shameful crime.

And still we are not done. In the Upper Room that fateful and wonderful night, God's covenant of grace was renewed once more, its meaning and its nature and its glory made clearer still. It was given a new sign as the Passover was transformed into the Lord's Supper. With the prospect of the cruelest of all deaths lying before him the Lord Christ renewed his friendship with his people, promised them his Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, and a room in his father's heavenly mansion forever, all to be theirs because he was about to offer his life a ransom for theirs. And what was his disciples' response to all of that? One disciple betrayed him to his enemies; all the rest ran for their lives at his arrest, except Peter who followed his master only to betray him publicly three times.

And these are only the most conspicuous of those occasions when God's gracious condescension, his kindness and his generosity and his love, were answered with indifference, rebellion, or scorn. *That is the mystery of human sin. Even the Lord's best friends, his very best friends, can't seem to help betraying him, dishonoring him, disobeying him, and belittling his goodness and kindness toward them!* And if that is so of his friends, how much more of his enemies! There is that within, dark, sour, and mean that makes unattractive fools of every one of us in this world. And bad as our *behavior* so often is, embarrassing, hurtful, and petty, the *secret thoughts* of our hearts are so much worse. We are humiliated enough by the things we sometimes say and do; we couldn't bear it if *our thoughts* were also known to others. We are our truest selves inside, where no one else can go but God; but there we are at our worst.

Believers in the theory of evolution would have us believe that this dark side of the human condition is the residue of our developmental history, characteristics that we have inherited from the animal kingdom. According to this theory man has inherited from the animal kingdom his mechanisms of defense and aggression, his self-centered instinct for survival, and so on. But this will not do. Evolution cannot explain why we know better, why we feel ashamed of our behavior so often, why we hide our true thoughts from others for fear of their reproach, or why it is possible for us to rise above our selfish and self-defeating behavior. Nor can evolution explain why human behavior is so often so much more perverse than anything that is found in the animal kingdom! *No; it is the inexcusable misbehavior, the petty, dishonorable, disreputable behavior of such an amazing, wonderful, and exalted creature that is the mystery of sin.* It is the giving

himself over to drunkenness on the part of someone capable of making wine in the first place that is the mystery of human sin. It is such ingratitude on the part of those who know very well the virtue of gratitude and how much they have received that they ought to be grateful for. It is the abuse of those to whom we know very well we owe a great debt. *This* is the mystery of human sin.

And until a person admits this fact about himself or herself, that he or she knows very well what is good but doesn't do it on purpose, he or she must remain a stranger to the truth. He must, she must continue to think about himself or herself in a profoundly dishonest way. Everyone has this terrible problem, whether or not he or she will admit it. We live in disreputable ways all the time; every day. We are the palest shadow of what we all know very well we ought to be. We know the good and don't do it. We are hypocrites in forever condemning others for what we ourselves do or fail to do. Everyone else knows this to be true about you; why won't you admit it about yourself? Are you afraid? Do you fear giving yourself over to despair? Don't. Honesty is the first, the essential, step to deliverance. "What comfort can a Savior bring to those who never felt their woe?"

The kingdom of God, the good news of Jesus Christ, the grand message of the Bible is not for the well-meaning, it is for the desperate. It is not for those who imagine themselves so much better than they actually are; it is for those who are thoroughly ashamed of themselves as they ought to be. It is for those who have admitted the whole terrible truth about themselves and now know have nowhere else to turn for relief and for deliverance.

We don't need a nudge; we need a Savior. We don't need to forget our bad behavior or learn to feel better about it; we need to be forgiven for it and, in particular, we need God's forgiveness, for even our worst sins against others are first and foremost contempt for him and his will. We don't need a hand up; we need a new heart; we need to be recreated from the inside out. We don't need to be pointed in the right direction; we need a new record and a new life. We don't need to find ourselves; we need to lose our lives and find a completely new life. We don't need to find some solution to our problem that we ourselves can manage; there is no such solution. And all of this -- the new heart, the new life, the new record -- is what the Son of God came into the world to provide for us. When the angel told Joseph that he was to name Mary's infant son Jesus because he would save his people from their sins, he was summing up the entire human problem and its only possible solution: *our sin and an Almighty Savior to take it away.*

When I last preached on this text my sister Bronwyn, then living in St. Louis, was dying of cancer. In fact, she would die the following Sunday evening. During the last three weeks of her life, I called her every morning and for twenty minutes to half an hour read to her some passage from a classic of Christian devotion or from a sermon by some great preacher, something to encourage her, to strengthen her faith in the face of her soon-coming death, something to give her a sight of heaven beforehand. I would read and then we would talk about what I had read. I was able to do that for her every morning but one through the three weeks of her life. One morning she was too sick to take the call. Those were wonderful mornings and I remain today very grateful to God that we were able to share them. The Friday morning before the Sunday on which I preached from this text I read to her a sermon of Alexander Whyte, a sermon that bore the title, "The Thought of My Fast-Coming Death Often Makes Me Very Unhappy." Whyte had

lifted that title from a sentence he found in the journal of Thomas Shepard, the Puritan pastor, New England pilgrim, and one of the founders of Harvard.

As only Alexander Whyte could do it, the preacher considered the reasons why even devout Christian people can still fear death and why they can be so uncomfortable in the prospect of dying. And, as you might expect, if you know anything about Alexander Whyte, he found the largest part of the cause of our fear to be our troubled conscience. Even we who have been Christians all our lives continue to be shaken by how much sin remains in our lives: sins that we are still committing even at this late date, the sins of long ago that we have never been able to forget, sins of commission and, still more, sins of omission, the things we ought to have done, the things we ought to have been and never were and never did. Relentlessly honest as Whyte always was about our rebellious hearts and our sinful lives, it came as no surprise to hear him say in this sermon:

"The truth is, it is a wonder that any man among us *ever* dies in peace of conscience with so many causes of reproof and remorse crowding round his deathbed."

That is the terrible mystery and the terrible burden of our sin; that even those who hate it and most ardently wish it dead and gone, find themselves still its slave. Even as great a Christian as the Apostle Paul mourned his still so sinful life thirty years into his apostleship. "A bond slave of sin" he described himself.

Well, my sister *loved* that sermon of Alexander Whyte. She was also a relentlessly honest person. She knew very well the extent of her sins; as any thoughtful Christian will, she had a lifetime of regrets, but she also knew that the whole message of the gospel and the whole meaning of the incarnation, the life, the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ the Son of God *was the conquest of our sins and all their baleful effects*. And that, of course, was the theme of that great sermon that I read to her that morning a little more than week before she died.

Those who will admit the truth about their own sin, the folly of it, the mysterious grip that it continues to have upon our hearts, I say those people know that our only hope of deliverance is and must be a gracious, merciful, and faithful God, whose love for us, not ours for him, is the whole and entire explanation for our salvation. To make the point Whyte reminisced about his very first pastoral call when he came as a young minister to be the pastor of Free St. George's, where he was to labor almost 50 years. The young minister had been summoned to the deathbed of an old elder.

"...I see the thing as if it had been yesterday. There lay open on his pillow -- what book do you think? His Bible? No. The *Pilgrim's Progress*? No. *The Saints' Rest*? No. *Rutherford's Letters*? No. I will tell you what it was, for you would never guess. It was the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, and it was open [to] the great chapter on Justification [by faith]. "I am dying on that gospel chapter," he said. And I had no sooner finished [reading] it to him than he fell asleep in Jesus his righteousness." [*Thomas Shepard*, 133]

Now with the power of your imagination can you visualize the scene? Can you hear the Scottish accent as the young minister reads that chapter to the wise old elder, his breath beginning to fail him, his ears straining to catch the words:

“[God justifies sinners] by pardoning their sins and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything...done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone...”

What makes that truth so indescribably wonderful is that we are all in such desperate need of deliverance from our sins and so utterly incapable of delivering ourselves from them. Everything else, I mean *everything else* in your life and in mine is a footnote to this: we are great sinners and Jesus Christ is a great savior.