

Naked Noah and the Cursed Son

Genesis 9:18-29

Sunday, August 9, 2020

This seems like a very humiliating moment for Noah. It's his last mention in Genesis, outside of genealogies.

Here's how we were first introduced to Noah in Genesis:

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God. ¹⁰ *Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Genesis 6:5-10)*

Noah and his family build the ark; they and two of every creature come onto the ark; the flood waters rise they set sail on the ark; the flood waters recede and they are fully delivered.

So much of the last several years of Noah's life have been ark related. What is he supposed to do next?

²⁰ *Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard.*

Cheers, Noah!

²¹ *When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent.*

Well that's a shame, Noah!

This is where we get hung up. The story for us tends to stop here. We learn good things to this point. We learn that God uses flawed people to accomplish what God wants done.

We use this story as encouragement. Including this poster I've seen passed around the internet:

- Jacob was a cheater
- Peter had a temper.
- Noah got drunk.
- Jonah ran from God.

It continues listing biblical leaders and their flaws, concluding *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Corinthians 12:9.)

This is inspiring! Thank you, drunk and naked Noah, for reminding us that anyone can be used by God.

But this is not where the action is placed. There is no judgement spoken towards him here. The writer even goes as far to indicate that he's the first person to make wine. It's within the realm of possibility that this is a complete accident. He's given an excuse – new to making wine, Noah makes an oopsie!

As an elementary school student I got myself a morning off of school because I decided to serve myself my own medicine with a bigger spoon than what I was supposed to. So I get it. I understand Noah's predicament. You're trying something for the first time, you're bound to make mistakes. You get the day off school, or you end up drunk and naked. Things happen!

Here's where the REAL action takes place in Genesis 9.

²² Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. ²³ 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.

We get distracted by the drunkenness and the nudity. But this is where the real action takes place. It's not Noah's actions that get the attention. It's the action of his sons that get the attention.

Ham sees his father naked, walks away, and tells his brothers.

Shem and Japheth, the other brothers, put a covering on their shoulders, walk backwards into the tent, and cover him, making sure they do not see a thing.

It is this lack of action by Ham, and the action of Shem and Japheth, that the author is trying to draw our attention to.

Then come the consequences of these actions. First comes a curse:

²⁴ When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, ²⁵ he said,

*“Cursed be Canaan!
The lowest of slaves
will he be to his brothers.”*

Noah doesn't just curse Ham – he curses his son! He curses his offspring!

Then comes a blessing:

²⁶ He also said,

*“Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem!
 May Canaan be the slave of Shem.
²⁷ May God extend Japheth’s territory;
 may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,
 and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth.”*

Genesis is very concerned with family lines and what people are the founding members of what tribes and nations. Genesis is all about blessings and curses. And these blessings and curses seem to come up over the smallest of actions.

Can you imagine being in Ham’s position? Noah screaming at Ham: “Ham, how about you show me some respect!”

And in Ham’s mind he must be thinking: “Dad, how about you put on some pants!”

As petty as this all seems, this is the place where the family splits apart. This is where the rival tribes of Canaan begin. This is where this rivalry between nations covered in the first 5 books of the Old Testament begins.

This small inaction of Ham becomes a very important origin story for the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is not just a small family dispute. This isn’t even just an ugly family dispute. This is a moment that impacts the founding of nations and the animosity between nations.

As an aside, this is a passage that has been manipulated and abused to justify slavery. It has been used to defend that certain people groups are above others. **Let me say very clearly – this passage is certainly not doing that.** Any translation or teaching that tells you this should be viewed with extreme suspicion and dismissed!

But it still is a passage that details the split between what will be the nations of Canaan and Israel.

That’s the big level stuff – the forming of nations and rivalries. But what about a more personal application? What do the actions of Ham, Shem and Japheth have to say to us?

The story seems to be all about dignity. Do we treat other people with dignity, no matter how they got where they are?

How often are we like Ham? How often do we observe someone in trouble, only to walk away giggling and saying “what an idiot” to our friends? How often do we share memes or videos of poor or mentally ill or marginalized people just to have fun at their expense?

Do we mock people significantly affected by mental illness.

Do we laugh at other cultures?

Do we look at people that are poor or marginalized or incarcerated as less-than us, and treat them mockingly as a result?

Maybe Ham isn't mocking Noah here, but he is certainly quick to tell his brothers about it. And he is certainly passive in his response to Noah? When do we see a problem and just inform someone else? When do we pass by something and say, "Well someone ought to do something about that!"

Jesus seems to address this in his parable of the sheep and the goats. The goats were those who did nothing – who saw needs and ignored them. The king says to these goats, these Hams,

Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

⁴² *For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,* ⁴³ *I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'* (Matthew 25:41-43)

The King gives a SIGNIFICANT curse because of inactivity. Because of seeing a problem and doing nothing!

But then the king addresses the sheep - the Shems and the Japheths –

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ *For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,* ³⁶ *I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*

The sheep – the Shems and the Japheths – are given a significant blessing because they saw problems and did something about them.

Those small moments where we see a problem and can do something to address it: those are not insignificant! They can have far reaching consequences!

I can almost guarantee you that the times I have actually made a difference in someone's life are those small, unremarkable moments where I extended a tiny bit of dignity. Moments where is just simply paid attention and just did something. And the times when people impacted my life most for Christ were those that extended a little bit of dignity when I needed it most.

So we do we see people at their worst and mock their lack of dignity?

Or do we see a lack of dignity, and do our best to bring dignity to a humiliating situation?

Jesus Christ, who left aside all dignity to hang naked on the cross on our behalf, compels us to treat others with great dignity and grace, whether we think they deserve it or not. He has done everything to extend dignity and grace and worth and honor to us. The very least we can do is extend a fraction of that dignity and grace and worth and honor to others.