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Genesis 9:18-24

33rd Message

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BEHAVING BADLY, LIVING DIFFERENTLY

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

The news is full of people behaving badly: men behaving badly, women behaving badly, parents behaving badly. Society is titillated by this behavior, sustaining an entire industry reporting on their misdeeds. But this last week it was one such newspaper devoted to reporting the bad behavior of the rich and famous which itself admitted to behaving badly. So today London's *News of the World* ceased publication.

The Bible, too, has plenty of stories of people behaving badly. We've had several already in the early chapters of Genesis. Today we come to another one. It is not always easy to see why these stories are included. Today's story is particularly problematic. As with all these stories we have to pay close attention to the context and manner in which this story is presented.

God's covenant with Noah and all life marked the end of the flood narrative (6:9–9:17), but we're not yet done with Noah. There is one more story about him before his death. This story is bracketed by a pair of genealogical notices (9:18-19, 28-29). The story is introduced by a notice about Noah's sons:

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 whole earth. (Gen 9:18-19 TNIV)

With this introduction, attention moves on a generation from Noah to his three sons. These three sons are the ancestors of the entire human race. From these three sons all the peoples of the earth spread out. This dispersion of the peoples throughout the whole world is the major theme of the next two chapters, including the Table of Nations (10) and the Tower of Babel (11:1-9), as well as the story we encounter today.

This dispersion is in fulfillment of God's purposes for humanity. When God created the first two humans, male and female, he blessed them and commanded them, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth" (1:28). But in multiplying upon the earth humanity had filled the earth with evil (6:1, 5). When Noah and his three sons emerged from the ark, God blessed them also and commanded them, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth" (9:1, 7). The scattering of peoples throughout the earth is in fulfillment of this divine mandate. These next chapters provide Israel with a framework for understanding how the peoples are distributed across the world. Israel is also given another piece of information to help understand this distribution: Ham was the father of Canaan.

Noah's final story ends with a brief notice about his death:

After the flood Noah lived 350 years. Noah lived a total of 950 years, and then he died. (9:28-29)

Noah is a transitional figure. His death marks the end of an era, for it forms the end of the genealogy given in chapter 5, the genealogy of the first ten generations on earth, starting with Adam. But his life also marks a new beginning. For each of the other nine genera-

tions, the second period of their life is marked by the birth of their firstborn, but for Noah it is the Flood. The Flood is a new beginning, marking a new start in the calendar.

Between these two notices, after the end of the Flood, but before the spreading out of the descendants of Noah's three sons, comes our story. It is in two parts: a narrative in which Noah and his three sons are all actors (9:20-24), followed by a pair of speeches by Noah (9:25-27). Though it comprises only eight verses, this story is so problematic that I'll take two weeks on it: we'll look at the narrative today and the speeches next week.

Here, then, is the first part of our final story about Noah:

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... (9:20-24)

Everyone agrees that someone here was behaving badly. But who was behaving badly, and what was the bad behavior? On these two questions there is much disagreement. What is going on here, and why is this little story in the Bible at this point? I am glad that our kids are not in the services today, glad that Sunday School has resumed after a three-week break. There is more to this story than initially meets the eye; it is more than a little racy.

The story moves from Noah (20-21) to Ham (22) to Shem and Japheth (23), and back to Noah (24).

Noah (20-21)

Noah's actions are covered very quickly: he planted a vineyard, drank some of its wine, got drunk and uncovered himself in his tent. At this point I'm supposed to give you a sermon about the evils of drink. There are plenty such sermons available; if you want one, you can find it on the Internet. Noah shouldn't have planted a vineyard in the first place, and he certainly shouldn't have drunk its wine. The wine went to his head, he drank too much and he got drunk. When he retired for the night he was hot, flushed from his wine, so he took off his robe before passing out. He spent the night in his tent, sprawled out and unconscious: a sorry sight. All four actions represent a rapid fall from grace: the vineyard, the wine, the drunkenness, and the uncovering. Sometimes an attempt is made to excuse Noah's bad behavior: since he was the first vintner in history he didn't know the effect that wine would have upon him. This is a very standard interpretation of Noah's actions. But is this an adequate interpretation? Or is it, rather, an interpretation influenced by teetotalism and

prohibition? Might there be a better way of understanding the text, one that fits the context of the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East rather than contemporary opposition to alcohol? Furthermore, we're here in California, not in some dry county in Texas. Let me offer a different reading of Noah's behavior.

This story marks a new beginning. The first word of the story is actually "he began" ("proceeded" TNIV). This new beginning is a positive development. The Flood is over. The earth has been wiped clean. God has commissioned Noah to be a new Adam, blessing him and his sons: "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." He has made a covenant promising never again to destroy all life. Humanity is ready for a new start, ready to spread over the earth.

Noah is described as "a man of the soil," a man of the *adamah*. The previous chapters have shown a complex and changing relationship between man and the ground (*adamah*). God formed man (*adam*) from the dust of the ground (*adamah*). The *adamah* was his origin, but it was not his destiny. God did not create him to work the *adamah*. Instead he planted a garden where he placed the man; there he provided the man with everything necessary for life. It was only after the Fall, when God expelled the man from the garden, that he had to work the ground (*adamah*) for his livelihood. Cain was such a worker of the *adamah*, but, for his sin in murdering his brother, God expelled him even from the *adamah* to live the life of a wanderer in exile from God. But all that has been wiped away. Now there is a new beginning, with Noah as a man of the *adamah*. Will his relationship to the *adamah* be blessed or cursed? Our expectation is that it will be blessed since this is a new beginning under God's blessing and promise.

What does Noah, as the man of the *adamah*, do in this new beginning? He plants a vineyard. There is nothing negative about this. Quite the opposite. The gift of wine was celebrated in the ancient world. Most societies attributed it to a deity: the Greek god Dionysus, the Roman god Bacchus, for example. But here wine is not attributed to the gods, but to humans. It is Noah, a man, who plants the first vineyard. Again, Genesis demythologizes the stories of the surrounding cultures. There is not a multitude of deities to whom are attributed all the gifts of civilization. There is a single God who has endowed his human stewards with creative ability.

This is the second planting of the Bible. After the first creation God planted a garden. Now, after re-creation, it is Noah who plants. Noah is acting in the place of God, serving as his steward on earth. This is a positive role. What he plants is a vineyard, and there is nothing wrong with this. God would later use the vine as a symbol for Israel, describing it as his vineyard which he had planted and nurtured (Isa 5:1-7). Jesus picked up the imagery, applying it both to himself and to his followers: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener [vinedresser]; ...you are the branches" (John 15:1, 5). This is why a vine runs through our window, in both the Israel and the church panels.

Next Noah drank some wine. Did he behave badly here? It takes about four years for grape vines to yield a good harvest. Once you have a harvest, wine happens! It happens quickly. Extensive experiments in my kitchen have shown it takes only a week for grape juice to turn into wine. It happens naturally. The people of the ancient world must have quickly learnt what happens to grape juice when you leave it for even a short time. They celebrated the result and so does the Bible. Wine gladdens human hearts (Ps 104:15; cf. Judg 9:13). When the Lord spreads his Messianic banquet it will include

the finest of aged wine (Isa 25:6). You have to interfere to prevent wine from happening. It wasn't until Thomas Welch invented a method for pasteurizing grape juice in 1869 that fermentation could be reliably stopped. He did it to ensure a regular supply of non-alcoholic wine for communion, something that my European friends have never been able to understand.

There is nothing wrong with Noah drinking his wine. I'm sure he knew the effect the wine would have on him. But how much wine did Noah drink? Did he drink so much that he lost control of himself in a drunken stupor? That's the standard interpretation. Or was it only the right amount so that he felt appropriately good? The Hebrew verb can be translated "to be drunk," but it is also capable of a more positive interpretation. After Joseph revealed his true identity to his brothers, he served them a sumptuous banquet. "And they drank and were merry with him" (Gen 43:34 ESV). Joseph's intent was not to get his brothers drunk, but to make them satiated with both food and wine. When David summoned Uriah home from the battle field, he invited him to eat and drink in his presence (2 Sam 11:13). All English translations say that David made Uriah drunk. But that wasn't David's purpose. He didn't want Uriah to stumble home and collapse drunk on the couch. He wanted Uriah to go home with a merry heart and make love to his wife Bathsheba. Uriah was obviously not drunk, because he was still thinking clearly enough to not go home at all, sleeping instead on a mat with David's servants.

I think that Noah drank enough wine to make his heart merry, but not so much that he got drunk. Then, in the privacy of his own tent, he uncovered himself. What did he uncover? The subsequent actions of his sons show that what he uncovered was his nakedness. Was he simply hot, flushed from the wine, so that he undressed and fell asleep naked? I think that's an insufficient explanation. There are two different Hebrew words for nakedness. One denotes simple nudity; that's the nakedness of Adam and Eve in the garden (2:25). The other denotes the most intimate, vulnerable part of a woman's body. Noah was hot alright: he was hot for Mrs Noah! God had said, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth," and Noah was going to play his part, despite being already 600 years old at the Flood. I'll leave the rest to your imagination. But there's a problem: the text has already told us that the earth will be populated from Noah's three sons, not from Noah himself.

Ham (22)

Next, our attention turns to Ham. We are immediately reminded that he is the father of Canaan. We were already told this in verse 18, so why are we told it again? This fact must have some bearing on the story. Ham saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. So, obviously, Ham had gone into the tent. Why did he do that? He shouldn't have been there in the first place. Perhaps he went in to ask his father something, and saw him sprawled out on the floor, drunk and naked: a pitiful sight. That's the usual interpretation, the moral being that parents shouldn't allow their kids to see them naked. But is that really what happened? Why did Ham go into his father's tent? And what did he see?

Elsewhere, to see the nakedness of someone, especially in conjunction with uncovering their nakedness, means to have sex with them. Does this imply that Ham had sex with his father, that this is a case of paternal incest? Some take that view, but I think it's even worse. The metaphor "uncover someone's nakedness" is always used for heterosexual sex. Furthermore, the nakedness of a woman and

that of her husband are closely related. In the Torah God gave Israel a detailed list of people they were not to have sex with:

“None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the LORD. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is your father’s nakedness.” (Lev 18:6-8 ESV)

So, uncovering a man’s nakedness is the same as uncovering his wife’s nakedness, and vice versa (cf. Lev 20:11, 20-21). Both imply sexual intercourse with the woman. Noah had uncovered his own nakedness, implying that he had uncovered his wife’s nakedness. For Mr and Mrs Noah that was appropriate in the privacy of their own tent. But Ham, having entered the tent, saw his father’s nakedness, suggesting that he pushed his father aside and assaulted Mrs Noah. This was how Ham was going to fulfill the Lord’s mandate, “Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth.” By reminding us that Ham is the father of Canaan, is the biblical author telling us that Canaan is the offspring of this incest?

After this evil deed, Ham went outside and told his brothers. This simple statement also hides a more sinister reality. Ham was boasting that he had usurped his father. This is clear from three subsequent Biblical stories. Jacob’s eldest son Reuben slept with his father’s concubine, for which bad behavior Jacob stripped him of his leadership of the sons of Israel (Gen 35:22; 49:4). When Absalom proclaimed himself king, he lay with his father’s concubines in the full view of all Israel, so as to strengthen his position (2 Sam 16:21-22). When David died, Adonijah asked for Abishag, the beautiful young woman who had kept David warm in his old age, to be his wife. But Solomon interpreted this request as treason and ordered him killed (1 Kgs 2:13-25). All three of these are sordid stories of sexual politics, to which we must add the story of Ham. Like the other three men, Ham used sex to advance his own purposes, to grasp after power. Ham usurped his father’s position and notified his brothers that he was now in charge.

Shem and Japheth (23)

The narrative now turns to these two brothers. After Ham had told them what he had done, Shem and Japheth acted honorably. The pace of the narrative slows down to focus on their actions, which are careful and deliberate. They took a garment. This wasn’t simply any garment, it was *the* garment. Presumably it’s the cloak that Ham brought out as evidence of his evil deed. Shem and Japheth will now use the same cloak to cover the shame. They took the garment, draped it across their shoulders, walked backwards into the tent, and covered their father’s nakedness, meaning, I imagine, that they covered both father and mother. Both had been shamed, both had been violated. These two sons acted with care, grace and nobility to restore to their parents what honor they could. The text adds that their faces were turned backwards, away from their parents’ shame, and that their father’s nakedness they did not see.

Noah (24)

The narrative ends back on Noah. Some time later he awoke from his wine. He knew what his youngest son, presumably Ham, had done to him. We’re not told how Noah knew this. Was he told? Did he have to find it out? In whatever way, he knew what his youngest

son had done to him. Ham’s doing of something to Noah implies something worse than simply seeing his father disrobed.

I’ve struggled long and hard to make sense of this story. This interpretation makes best sense of the metaphors used. It makes best sense of the context: the near context of the dispersion of nations, the mid-range context of Noah and the Flood, the far context of Israel.

The flood narrative (6:9-9:17) is an elaborate chiasm, turning on the center-line: “God remembered Noah” (8:1). The narrative is preceded and followed by stories which also feature Noah. Before the Flood, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were good and they took them for wives; from them resulted the Nephilim (6:1-8). After the Flood, Ham saw his father’s nakedness. If the result of this was Canaan, then these two stories match well, extending the chiasm to the whole of Noah’s life. The Nephilim before the Flood and Canaan after the Flood are the result of men behaving badly.

Such bad behavior requires a response. Before the Flood it was God who spoke in response, determining to wipe the earth clean. After the Flood it will be Noah who responds. The fact that Noah has the authority to do so, both cursing and blessing, reinforces the interpretation that Noah himself has not behaved badly. It is clear that in cursing and blessing he has divine authority to pronounce the destinies of Canaan, Shem and Japheth.

Living Differently

In the larger context, why is this story here in the book of origins? Why was Israel told this? What was Israel to learn? What are we to learn? The usual interpretation is that this shows the Fall of Noah: just as the first Adam sinned immediately, so now Noah, the new Adam, sinned immediately. But I don’t think that Noah behaved badly. Ham is the one who behaved badly, and the result of that bad behavior was Canaan.

We have to read this story in the context of blessing, in the call to fill the earth. This is presumably what Noah was trying to do, and what Ham was trying to do. Noah was trying to do it the right way, but it was not his role. Responsibility for populating the earth had passed to his sons. Ham was trying to do so, but in a very wrong way. He behaved badly and from him would come nations who also behaved badly, as we’ll see when we look at the Table of Nations (chapter 10). Israel was supposed to learn a very important lesson from this.

God brought his people up out of Egypt in order to bring them into Canaan, the land he had promised Abraham. At Mount Sinai, midway between Egypt, their former home, and Canaan, their future home, he gave them his Torah, his instructions for how to live life.

The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘I am the LORD your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for whoever obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord.’” (Lev 18:1-5)

God told his people not to live according to the practices of either their former home or their future home. They were not to live like the Egyptians nor like the Canaanites. Both Egypt and Canaan were

sons of Ham (Gen 10:6). Their descendants behaved the same way as Ham: they behaved badly. Both societies lived depraved lives. But the Lord had given Israel a different pattern of behavior, one that led to life not death.

It is striking that this call to live differently, not participating in the behavior of the Egyptians or the Canaanites, forms the introduction to the list of prohibited sexual relationships, the list of those whose nakedness one is not to uncover.

Why did the Egyptians and the Canaanites behave this way? In both cases they used sexual politics to further their own ends. In Egypt it was customary for the pharaoh to marry his sister. The pharaohs did so to preserve the purity of their bloodline, to preserve the myth that they were divine. The Canaanites incorporated depraved sexual practices into their worship: sacred prostitution, both male and female, bestiality, child sacrifice, all of them condemned in Leviticus 18. Why did the Canaanites do these things? They were trying to make life work, trying to attain blessing. They engaged in fertility practices to get the fertility gods and goddesses to give them fertility. The Israelites should not adopt this approach to life; life does not work this way. God concluded his list of detestable relations with a solemn warning to his people:

“Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the foreigners residing among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.” (Lev 18:24-28)

Because of their detestable behavior the Canaanites had forfeited their right to the land. Israel must be careful to not follow in their detestable behavior lest it, too, forfeit its right to the land.

God called Israel to a completely different way of life, a life of ethical monotheism. Monotheism: there is only one god, not a multiplicity of gods. There is only one God to please, only one God to seek blessing from. You don't have to sacrifice to a multiplicity of gods, trying to coerce them. This is why God repeatedly couches his instructions in the reminder, “I am the LORD your God.” Ethical: this one God cares how his people behave. He calls them to live transformed lives, different from both the lives of their past and those of their neighbors. Blessing would come not from trying to coerce the gods, but from living life the way God intended. If they did so, he would send the rain at the right time, would cause their crops to grow, would give them plenty. But if they behaved badly, he would cause the rains to dry up, the sky to turn to bronze, the crops to fail, and famine to fall on the land.

Similarly, as God's people in Christ, we are called to leave behind the practices of our past and the practices of surrounding society, as we read in our Scripture reading:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above... Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God... Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry... You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips... since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Col 3:1-10)

We used to behave badly, but we are called to leave bad behavior behind. We are called to live a life of good behavior, not to earn favor with God, but because that's what life looks like when renewed in knowledge in the image of our Creator. Sadly it seems that there are many Christians who don't think it important how we behave, that being a Christian is simply about what we believe: do we believe in the virgin birth, in the resurrection? The New Testament repeatedly shows that our behavior matters. God has called us out of a life and an environment of bad behavior in order to live life well, to live life with a transformed character. He empowers us with his Spirit to enable us to do so.

This is why this little story about Ham was given to the Israelites. It was not to show them that Noah failed. It was to show them how detestable was the behavior of Ham, so that they avoid walking in the lifestyle of those descended from Ham. God redeemed Israel out of the midst of nations of detestable behavior in order to live life in a completely different manner. He has called us to live in the midst of an environment of people behaving badly, but to live life in a completely different way, and he wants the world to see that transformed behavior. He has redeemed us in Christ to live life differently, to live life well.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thess 5:23-24)

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