

Genesis 9:18-29

Introduction

What are your proudest achievements? Perhaps it might be a qualification you've gained, or some sporting success, or something you've done in your career. Perhaps it might be your golden wedding anniversary, or maybe your children.

On the other hand, what are you most ashamed of? Something you've done? Something you've said? Perhaps even something you've thought? How would you feel if that was posted on social media for everyone to know about? I wonder how Noah would have felt if he knew that his indiscretion would be recorded in the Bible for all future generations to know about. It's not his finest moment. And yet this story has a great deal to teach us.

So, without being judgemental of Noah, we're going to look at it carefully together now. And the first thing it teaches us is that, this side of the flood, sin is still our greatest problem. That's our first heading: sin is still our greatest problem.

Sin is still our greatest problem

Please look down at verse 18. **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.**

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.

As we pay attention to the details of this story it becomes clear that there are parallels with the story of Adam, which we're meant to pick up on.

Adam was made from the soil. We were told in chapter 2, verse 7, that **the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground.** It's Adam. Then in chapter 3, verse 19, God says to Adam after his rebellion in the garden: **'By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.'** So when we're told, here, that *Noah* was **a man of the soil**, we're being prompted to see a connection.

That connection is strengthened as we read on and discover that Noah planted a vineyard. In chapter 2, we were told that God took Adam **and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.** And just as Adam tended the garden full of all kinds of trees bearing fruit, so, here, Noah tends a vineyard.

Likewise, just as God told Adam and Eve to **'be fruitful and increase in number'** and to **'fill the earth and subdue it'** (1:28), so we're told, here, that from the three sons of Noah **came**

the people who were scattered over the whole earth. Adam and Noah were both individual men whose descendants would fill the earth.

In other words, we're being told that this is a new beginning for the human race. Noah is a kind of second Adam. This is tremendously exciting. This is a fresh start - a new stage in creation.

At least, it *would* be exciting if it weren't for the next verse...because the similarities with Adam don't end there. Just as Adam sinned, so does Noah. Adam sinned by eating fruit from a tree. Noah sins by drinking the fruit of a vine. When Adam sinned he became aware that he was naked and he felt shame. When Noah sins he exposes himself inside his tent, to his disgrace.

It's so very disappointing. Since we were first introduced to Noah in chapter 6, we've come to know him as a righteous man, who was blameless among the people of his time, and walked faithfully with God. We've seen his courage in obediently following God's instructions to build the ark and then board it with his family. We've seen his patience as he waited for God to speak after the flood had abated. This man's a hero! And yet his story ends with this sorry tale of sin and failure. We might wonder why it's included. Surely, this little misdemeanour could have been left out and forgotten about. We might rather it had been. I take it, however, that God caused this story to be recorded for a good reason - and that is to show us that, this side of the flood, sin is still a problem for even the most godly of men.

In the world we live in today, godly people still sin. It's a theme we find appearing again and again in the Bible. As we read on, we discover that Abraham lies about his wife not once but on two occasions, rather than trusting in God's protection. Moses kills a man. David commits both adultery and murder. And it goes on.

Sin walked onto the ark with Noah and it walked straight back off again. The flood cleansed the world of human wickedness but it was powerless to cleanse the human heart of sin. This side of the flood sin continues to be our greatest problem. And these verses contain a warning for us about the *nature* of sin.

Sin *can* involve desiring bad things. But it can also involve desiring good things more than we should. Consider the story again.

Noah plants a vineyard and makes wine. He takes a sip and it tastes good. In fact, it tastes very good. There's nothing wrong with wine. Psalm 104 speaks of the food that God causes to grow from the earth, and it says this: **He makes grass grow for cattle, and plants for people to cultivate - bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts.**

Wine gladdens human hearts. That's a good thing. There's nothing wrong with wine - it's one of God's good gifts to us. But there *is* something wrong when we desire wine more than we should. The prophet Isaiah says: '**Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine and champions at mixing drinks...**' (Isaiah 5:22)

We sin when we desire good things too much. Noah tasted that the wine was good...very good. One sip led to another and another and another until, eventually, he lay unconscious and half-naked on the floor. We might ask where God was in Noah's thinking as he drank his wine.

Our desire for good things becomes sin when it replaces our desire to walk obediently with God.

Wine is a good thing. But when we desire it more than we should, it can lead to drunkenness.

Food is a good thing. But when we desire it more than we should, it can lead to gluttony.

Sex is a good thing. But when we desire it more than we should, it can lead to immorality and adultery.

Rest is a good thing. But when we desire it more than we should, it can lead to laziness and sloth.

Only you know where the pinch point is in your life.

This story is showing us, once again, the wickedness of the human heart - we can even turn the enjoyment of God's good gifts to us into occasions for sin. Whilst this *is* a new beginning for Noah and the human race, these verses are disappointing, to say the least. They cause us to keep longing for a solution to the problem of sin. And as we read on, we discover that hope is found in the God of Shem - our second heading.

Hope is found in the God of Shem

Please look down at verse 22.

Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backwards and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked.

When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said, 'Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.' He also said, 'Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend Japheth's territory; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth.'

After the flood Noah lived 350 years. Noah lived a total of 950 years, and then he died.

Here is another similarity between Noah and Adam. Just like Adam, Noah has three sons: two of whom do what is right, one of whom doesn't.

We're not told what Ham was doing in his father's tent but his response to what he discovers there is wrong. He finds his father passed out on the ground, lying uncovered and exposed. He *could* have quickly taken stock of the situation, grasped what had happened, covered up his father's nakedness and then said no more about it. That would be the respectful thing to do. But instead, he seems to find the sight of his father unconscious and exposed an amusing one. He sees his father's nakedness and rather than covering him up he exposes him further, so to speak, by running and telling his brothers.

I have to admit that my children think it's hilarious when I do something silly. Invariably, they run off to find my wife, Rachel: 'Guess what Daddy just did!' they exclaim, and then tell her all about it. This is in a different league altogether though. Ham fails completely to treat his father with the respect he deserves and increases his father's shame.

Shem and Japheth, on the other hand, treat their father with honour. They find a garment and then, somehow, whilst walking backwards and turning their faces in the opposite direction, they manage to place it over their father without seeing his naked body or, it would seem, without tripping over him or injuring him.

Noah eventually wakes up, no doubt with a very sore head, and he discovers how Ham had broadcast his shame. We're not told how he discovers that but presumably he learns it from Seth and Japheth. And in the verses that follow we get his only recorded speech in the whole of the Bible. The words he says in response to what has just happened take the form of a curse and blessing, although they're probably better described as a form of prophecy. They look beyond the present time to the future relationships between the descendants of these three brothers. And what's significant about these words is that they reveal where hope is to be found in the face of ongoing sin. As the Bible confronts us with the reality of sin, it keeps pointing us to the source of hope.

So where is this hope to be found?

Well, clearly, it isn't to be found among the descendants of Ham. Ham's wickedness foreshadows the wickedness of his descendants, the Canaanites, who Noah describes as cursed. The Canaanites are well known in the Bible for their godlessness. They keep popping up as enemies of Israel and are ultimately defeated by them. This line isn't where hope is to be found.

Nor is it to be found among the descendants of Japheth. They *will* experience blessing but only through their association with the descendants of *Shem*.

Here though is where hope is to be found: it's by looking to the descendants of Shem. Just as, in chapter 5, the Bible's focus had been fixed on the family line of Seth, from now on the Bible's attention will focus in on the family line of his descendant Shem (from whom we get the words 'Semites' and 'Semitic').

Clearly, among the three brothers, Shem is given priority. And his actions are cause for praise. Look at Noah's words again. And notice that he doesn't praise Shem himself. Rather he praises the *God* of Shem. Verse 26. **He** (that's Noah) **also said, 'Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem!'** The implication is that Shem, like his father Noah, already has a relationship with God. And Noah attributes Shem's good behaviour to God, and he praises God for it.

Well, this is slightly surprising. But I think we find the reason he does so when we consider one more similarity between Noah and Adam. In Genesis 3, we're told that after Adam and Eve had sinned they hid from God, because they were aware of their nakedness and shame. But then, before banishing them from the garden, we're told that God made garments of skin for Adam and Eve and clothed them. It was an act of grace. God covered Adam and Eve's shame with a garment. And that's exactly what Shem has just done here. He's covered his father's shame with a garment.

As Noah reflects on what has just happened, he sees in Shem's actions the gracious hand of God. Through Shem, God has covered Noah's shame, just as he had previously covered Adam's shame. And so Noah praises **the LORD, the God of Shem**.

Perhaps Noah also sees that God's gracious purposes for humankind will now continue through the family line of Shem.

And *we can see* in Shem's actions a foreshadowing of one of his descendants, whose own actions would provide a final and lasting removal of shame for all his people.

The psalmist writes: **Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.** (Psalm 32:1) And that blessing is found supremely at the cross of Christ, the Son of God and a descendant of Shem. He died on a cross so that your and my transgressions can be forgiven and our sins covered.

Noah might have despaired when he woke up and realised what had happened. He must have felt so guilty and so ashamed. Yet instead of despairing, he praised God for his grace. And hope is found when we do the same.

We don't stop sinning when we come to faith in Christ. Sin is still a problem for the believer. When we become Christians, we don't stop being sinners. We don't suddenly become perfect. Rather, we receive forgiveness. We are still sinners. But we are forgiven sinners.

Of course, we begin to fight sin in a way that we hadn't done before. With God's help, we can make real progress against sin. Yet, nonetheless, sin remains. Each day we fight it. Each day we fail. And each day we find grace at the cross of Christ.

The danger is that we haven't grasped that truth about the Christian life. And then when sin comes along, and perhaps a terrible sin, we despair and give up.

If you are struggling with sin, keep fighting in the strength that God provides. But when you fail - which you will - and especially when you fail in a spectacular way, don't despair...because there is full forgiveness for all your sin, and mine, at the cross. The blood of Christ covers it all. The Bible doesn't condone sin or encourage us to be indifferent towards it, but it does promise grace. When we're confronted with the sinfulness of our hearts, rather than despairing and giving up, we need to keep coming back to the cross in repentance and faith, to receive grace. The Christian life starts by grace and is sustained by grace.

Hope lies not in our ability to live good lives but in God's willingness to cover our sin with grace. He *is* willing...even at great cost to himself...the death of his own precious Son on a cross. And that knowledge should cause our hearts to sing with the praises of the Lord, the God of Shem.

Let's pray.