

THE CURSE ON CANAAN (1)

A Meditation on Genesis 9:18-29

The passage before us will be interpreted based on our presuppositions. I know I talked about presuppositions in the last chapter, but I want us to contemplate two more examples that have direct bearing here. Many evangelicals believe that drinking any alcoholic beverage is wrong—even though such a belief is not taught anywhere in the Bible. Furthermore, they believe that drunkenness is one of the worst sins. To be sure, the Bible explicitly condemns drunkenness (Eph. 5:18). Yet the flip side is that God has given “wine to gladden the heart of man” (Ps. 104:15). Like many of God’s good gifts, there can be proper enjoyment and use or wretched abuse.

At the same time, many evangelicals, who have been reared on a steady diet of irreverent sitcoms, such as the Simpsons, Married with Children and Family Guy, where parents, particularly dads, are regularly mocked and portrayed as idiots, scarcely give this wicked behavior a second thought.

Given these presuppositions (which I’ll clarify in a moment), our text is understood this way: Noah was a righteous man, but then he turned away from God. When Noah awoke from his drunken stupor and heard about his son Ham’s sin, he overreacted and cursed Canaan.

The two underlying presuppositions of this interpretation are 1) Drunkenness is one of the worst sins imaginable; 2) Disgracing a father is no big deal. As a result, some have called this passage the Fall of Noah. However, if you want to make a parallel with the Garden of Eden, what you have is *not* the Fall of Noah, but the Fall of Ham. One point to consider right up front is that the ensuing curse for this fall is not upon Noah, but upon Ham’s son, Canaan.

The correct presuppositions are 1) Drunkenness is a sin. I’m not excusing Noah’s indulgence or minimizing his inebriation. But, 2) the heinous sin of this passage is Ham’s dishonoring of his father.

Once again, we need to return to the Scriptures and allow God to teach us about the wickedness of not treating an elder with the utmost respect. When Elisha was going up to Bethel, some small boys “jeered at him, saying, ‘Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you bald head!’ And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the LORD. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys” (2 Kgs. 2:23-24). This should make us think twice before we ridicule an elder. Proverbs 30:17 says, “The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures.” “Wow, that’s harsh,” people say with their eyes wide-opened. But why do we think the instruction of the Bible is harsh? Because we’ve been uncritically looking at honoring elders and fathers through the twisted perspective provided by our rebellious culture. We idolize the “rebels without a cause,” while Moses called for their stoning (Deut. 21:18-21). One has to wonder if we could be any more out of sync with the Scriptures than we are today?

Once we view this narrative through proper presuppositions, three lessons, at least, can be gleaned. First, our sin affects our children. Ham is the guilty party, but he isn’t named in the curse. The curse doesn’t fall on him, rather it falls on his son and all his descendants, the Canaanites. Canaan and his posterity are cursed with servitude, slavery: “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers” (Gen. 9:25). Unless you have a covenantal mindset this will seem unjust. “Ham’s the one who sinned,” thus many think, “so his son shouldn’t have to bear the brunt of his father’s wickedness.” But if our thinking was more in line with the Bible, we would simply recognize this as the natural consequence of a father’s sin. Legion examples could be cited, but remember King Hezekiah’s sin of proudly showing the king of Babylon all the treasures of his house? Isaiah prophesied that as a result some of Hezekiah’s own sons would become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon (2 Kgs. 20:12-19).

If you think this curse is wrong, the truth is your individualistic presupposition is wrong. You have to harmonize two biblical ideas: God works with *individuals*, as individuals, *covenantally*. He has since the very beginning, which is why Adam sinned, and we’re still experiencing the curse. Yet there is a positive side to covenantalism. “But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments” (Ps. 103:17-18). Since God blesses and curses children based upon the actions of their father, this should inspire holiness.

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The second lesson I'd like us to consider is that we reap what we sow. Before looking at the consequences of Ham's sin, I'd like to focus in on the sin itself. We're told that Noah "drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside" (Gen. 9:21-22). Note that Noah is *in his tent*, or in the privacy of his house. This means that either Ham intentionally invaded his father's privacy to find fault with him, or he accidentally stumbled upon Noah's nakedness. Either way, he goes the next step and blabs about it to his two brothers—perhaps with glee.

The principle of Proverbs 17:9 should have been followed at this point: "Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats the matter separates close friends." The parallelism is plain: Love covers an offense, while hatred repeats the matter. Ham is not honoring his father, but showing hatred for his father with his disrespectful gossip.

It's fascinating that even in this curse that resulted from Ham's wicked action we catch a glimpse of God's mercy. God, speaking through Noah, could have cursed Ham, which would have meant that *all* his descendants would be under the curse. Instead, the curse is limited to only one of his four sons (Gen. 10:6). There are several examples in the OT where the whole family line is cursed, so this is a merciful "limited curse." And we should stress that the pronouncement of the curse (as well as the subsequent blessings on the other two brothers) was the result of Noah's proper Spirit-led authority being exercised. So don't think for a minute that when Noah realized what his youngest son had done to him that he over reacted and cursed him in a fit of irresponsible rage.

Ham reaped what he had sown. This is *lex talionis*. Ham was a bad son, so he was punished with a bad son of his own. Sometimes parents will say to their disrespectful children, "I hope you have a child someday who will treat you exactly like you're treating me right now." Whether that is the right thing to say or not, in a real sense that is the curse of Canaan. And, it is highly probable that God may in fact bring about such a situation. So children (at any age; remember Ham was a married adult man), ask yourself this question, "Would I want my son or daughter to treat me like I'm treating my mother and father?"

The final lesson under consideration is that our future, in large measure, is determined by submission to those in authority over us, especially our parents. And I say especially our parents in light of the fifth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12). If there is any doubt about the relevancy of the fifth commandment for today Paul ends all discussion: "Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land" (Eph. 6:2-3).

Due to Ham's failure in this regard, Canaan is cursed with slavery, instead of being blessed with dominion. The blessing that Noah bestowed on Shem and Japheth, could have flowed to Ham as well. "May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant" (Gen. 9:27). In the Hebrew there is a play on words. Japheth means enlarge, so God will enlarge Enlarge's blessings. Shem is blessed as well: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant" (vs. 26). This blessing is actually upon the *God* of Shem, who is praised for what He will do through the line of Shem, with the culmination of blessings being the coming of Jesus Christ.

Why is Shem given this incredible privilege? Because his behavior was consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. "Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness" (vs. 23). Shem and Japheth didn't need to do this, since Noah was lying in the seclusion of his tent. They could have just told Ham, "Stay out of dad's tent! You have no business invading his privacy!" But they went the extra mile, and took a garment (this could be translated "*the* garment," which would indicate it was the one Ham brought to them) restoring their father's dignity and office. They were going to ensure that nobody else would be able, accidentally or otherwise, to look upon their father's exposed shame. This is a beautiful image of the gospel. It's the same thing that God did for Adam and Eve with animal skins.

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