

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

A GOOD MAN'S SIN

Genesis 9:18-29

By

Steven J. Cole

May 5, 1996

Copyright, 1996

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from
The New American Standard Bible,
Copyright, The Lockman Foundation

May 5, 1996
Genesis Lesson 21

A Good Man's Sin Genesis 9:18-29

It's always shocking and sad when a good man sins. When I hear of a Christian leader who has fallen, my initial response is usually, "I can't believe it! How could it happen?" Somehow I want to believe that if a man has walked with God for years, he builds up an immunity against sin. I want to hope that if I walk with God long enough, the day will come when temptation automatically glances off me.

But it just ain't so! After walking closely with God for years, George Muller used to pray, "Lord, don't let me become a wicked old man." When I first read that years ago, I thought, "There's not a chance!" But I've come to understand his prayer. There isn't one of us, I don't care how long you've been a Christian, who doesn't face the constant struggle against sin. You never become invulnerable.

Noah is "Exhibit A." He had walked with God for over 600 years! In a wicked world, Noah stood alone for God. He was the only man on earth whom God saw fit to save from the judgment of the flood. The opportunity to launch a new beginning for the human race stood before him. And what happened? He got drunk and uncovered himself within his tent. Shocking! Disgraceful! Unbelievable! Is this the same Noah?

Some have tried to exonerate Noah by arguing that he didn't know about fermentation, and got drunk accidentally. Other explanations have been suggested. But since drunkenness and nakedness are always presented in the Bible in a shameful light, we must conclude that Noah sinned. Noah's sin shows us that ...

1. Even the most godly are prone to sin.

If you condemn Noah, saying to yourself, "How could he do that?" you don't know your own heart. When it comes to godliness, Noah was top of the line. He was the most righteous man on the earth before the flood. Centuries later, through Ezekiel, God

listed Noah, Daniel, and Job as three of the most righteous men in history (Ezek. 14:20)! And yet Noah got drunk and lay naked in his tent. "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

Past godliness doesn't guarantee future godliness. You don't build up an immunity toward sin. Neither age nor maturity provide protection against temptation. We must walk in dependence upon the Lord daily.

Noah's sin also teaches us that we are often the most vulnerable when the pressure is off. When he was surrounded by wickedness, Noah lived righteously. But when the storm was over and he and his family were the only ones on earth, Noah fell into sin. When the pressure is off, our guard comes down. Constant vigilance is the price of victory over sin. Those who live righteously before God know their own propensity toward sin and live in constant dependence upon the Lord.

Ham, Noah's son, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers. They carefully covered up their father. When Noah awoke, he knew what Ham had done to him and utters a curse, not against Ham, but against Ham's son, Canaan. This raises many questions: What did Ham do? Was it all that serious? If so, why wasn't he punished? Why is Canaan cursed for his father's sin? Why wasn't Noah punished, since he's the one who started it all?

These questions have sent commentators scrambling for answers. Some say that Ham's seeing his father's nakedness is a euphemism for more serious sin, perhaps sexual abuse. Others say that he had sexual intercourse with Noah's wife and that Canaan was cursed because he was the fruit of that union. The problem with these views is, the text says that Noah uncovered *himself*, but when the Bible talks of sexual violation, it uses the phrase to uncover someone else's nakedness (see Leviticus 18 & 20).

So the most likely answer to the question, "What did Ham do?" is that he looked upon his father's nakedness, either with lust or with delight and amusement. He went and told his brothers, not in a spirit of grief and concern, but with the attitude, "Hey, do you guys want to see something funny?" His flippancy toward his father's nakedness revealed two things about Ham: He had no shame

and grief toward moral failure; and, he disrespected his father, whose honor he was quick to trample on. The text gives great detail of how the other two brothers carefully walked backward so as not to gaze on their father's nakedness as they covered him (9:23). This accentuates their sensitivity and reverence in contrast to the brazenness of their brother.

In our morally loose culture, we're probably more likely to be puzzled by Shem and Japheth's actions than to be shocked by what Ham did. We shrug our shoulders and ask, "What's the big deal? So he saw his father's nakedness?" It is precisely this reaction that shows us what we need to learn from this text:

2. We all easily become calloused toward sin.

Really, don't you think, "What's the big deal?" Ham just looks on his father's nakedness and his own son and his descendants get cursed. That seems a bit extreme, not to mention unfair! But it seems to me that our attitude reveals our own callousness toward sin. We are so used to having moral filth dumped into our living rooms every night through the 21 inch sewer line (TV) that we don't even know it when we see it. Even worse, we find humor in it when we should be horrified.

I've never watched the current most popular TV shows such as "Seinfeld," "Friends," and "NYPD Blue." But I have read descriptions of such shows in the American Family Association Journal, and even the descriptions are too gross to share from the pulpit. These shows (and many more) are raw filth! I'm going to make a statement that may step on some toes, but I stand behind it: If you watch such filth, you will *not* become a godly person! I used to paint houses, and after a few hours, I couldn't smell the paint. Surrounded by the stench of sin, after a while we don't notice it. The only way to grow more sensitive to sin is to be in the Word daily and to avoid exposing yourself needlessly to the evil around us (Rom. 16:19).

Ham's sin shows us that sins which don't seem big at the time can have far-reaching consequences, not only for ourselves, but for our descendants. A trickle of sin in a parent can become a flood in his descendants. Noah's drunkenness and impropriety led to Ham's irreverence. Ham's sin led eventually to the corruption of the Ca-

naanites, who practiced orgiastic, sensual worship, cult prostitution, and homosexuality.

But *what of the problem of Canaan being cursed for Ham's sin?* Several things can be said. First, like it or not, we must recognize that *the sins of parents do affect their children and grandchildren*, sometimes for many generations. Some think that this is unfair, so they reject God. But taking God out of the picture doesn't solve the problem. It is an observable fact of life, whether you believe in God or not. Even if you take God out of the picture, you still have the unfair fact that some children are loved, while others are abused. Some children are cared for, while others are neglected. Kids often suffer because of their parents' self-centered, sinful lives. It's only when you put God into the picture that there's any hope, because through the gospel those children have a chance to break out of the cycle of abuse and to raise their children properly.

Second, we need to see that *Noah's words are more of a prophecy than a curse*. Noah is giving a thumbnail sketch of the course of world history through his sons. He may have based his prophecy in part on character traits he had already observed in his grandson. But beyond that he is speaking an oracle under the inspiration of God, predicting the course of nations, not of an individual. He is not putting a "hex" on his grandson, so that Canaan could not help himself. Nor is he fixing the fate of every person descended from Canaan, as if individuals could not escape the curse. Rather, he is predicting that Canaan's descendants would serve the descendants of Shem and Japheth.

Contrary to what some have taught, the black race is not descended from Canaan. His descendants were those peoples dwelling in the land of Canaan when Israel conquered the land under Joshua. The prophecy was fulfilled under Joshua and Solomon, both of whom put Canaan's descendants in forced service to Israel (Josh. 9:23; 1 Kings 9:20-21), and later when the Romans (descendants of Japheth) defeated the Phoenicians (descendants of Canaan) at Carthage (146 B.C.).

Also, to understand this curse on Canaan, we need to remember that *the Canaanites were not innocent people* who unjustly suffered under a curse imposed on their ancestor. They were a morally corrupt people whose sin far exceeded that of their ancestor. While

God sovereignly ordains all things, people are accountable for their own sin. When God ordered Moses to kill all the people dwelling in the land of Canaan (which Israel never fully carried out), it was God's judgment on their gross, unrepentant sin (Gen. 15:16). They were not innocent victims.

Finally, it helps us understand this difficult passage if we fit it into *Moses' theological purpose in writing Genesis*. Moses was writing to a stubborn, disobedient people who were inclined to return to bondage in Egypt rather than to conquer the land of Canaan. He was about to die and would not be leading them into the land. He wrote the Pentateuch to show Israel *God's pattern of blessing on those who obey Him and cursing on those who disobey*. He wanted to motivate Israel to endure whatever hardship was necessary to take the land and to keep themselves from the moral contamination of the Canaanites.

Note that our section starts off by mentioning the three sons of Noah from whom the whole earth was populated (9:18-19). It makes a special, double reference to the fact that Ham is the father of Canaan (9:18, 22). Since the next chapter states this (10:6), it isn't needed here unless it is making a special point to Moses' readers, namely, to trace God's pattern of blessing and cursing with reference to these three branches of the human race, with special reference to the Canaanites, the corrupt people Israel would soon be facing in warfare.

Israel undoubtedly had heard of the moral corruption of the Canaanites. When Moses' readers saw the words, "Ham was the father of Canaan," they would have said, "Yes! Ham's corrupt conduct reveals him as the true father of Canaan." In Leviticus 18, the evil deeds of the Canaanites (which Israel was to avoid) are described repeatedly with the words "uncover" and "nakedness." While these descendants of Ham and Canaan had gone far beyond what Ham did, no Israelite could fail to make the connection. The seed of Ham's sin had come to a full harvest in his descendants through Canaan. So Moses' purpose was to warn Israel of the evil practices of the Canaanites, to trace their sin to its source, and to justify their subjugation through holy warfare. They were a people under God's curse because of their sin. (I'm indebted to Allen

Ross, *Bibliotheca Sacra* [July-September, 1980], pp. 223-240 for much of the analysis above.)

Let me move from explanation to application:

1. *Be careful not to allow a family member's sin to trigger sin in you!* Noah's sin triggered Ham's sin, which triggered Canaan's sin, which can be traced to a corrupt nation centuries later. Sin is a lot like a nuclear chain reaction. One person's sin leads to the next person's sin, etc., until there is a trail of devastation. Perhaps you had an alcoholic parent or abusive parents. It's easy for you to react to their sin by sinning yourself. Or if your mate is self-centered and treats you poorly, it's easy to counter by being self-centered, rather than to respond with the love of Christ. Whenever you're wronged, whether in the home, on the job, or in the church, it's easy to retaliate rather than to obey God. So be careful not to continue the chain reaction of sin.

2. *If you're from a godly home, be careful not to trifle with spiritual things!* Ham had probably helped his father build the ark while the neighbors laughed. Outwardly, he went along with the program. But in his heart, he hated his father's righteousness. His heart was really with the world, not with his father. Even though he saw the horrors of God's judgment through the flood, he was delighted when he finally saw his father sin. It gave him reason to justify his own sinful desires.

If you're from a Christian home, you need to make sure that your faith in God is yours, not just the faith of your parents. Your parents' faith won't do for you. You need to trust in and obey the Lord because you fear Him and want His blessing, not just because Dad and Mom are Christians. If one or both of your parents fall into sin, you must be careful not to react with more sin of your own. You will stand before God all by yourself some day. You won't be able to hide under your parents' faith or to blame them for your own disobedience.

3. *It is important to honor your parents, even if they've failed.* The fifth commandment, to honor our fathers and mothers, is repeated by Paul (Eph. 6:1-3), along with his reminder that it is the first command with a promise, "that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth." This command does not just apply to

children living at home. Ham was married with at least four sons when he despised his father and brought this curse on his descendants. Respect for parents, even for sinful parents (which includes all!), is at the core of well-being both for individuals and for society. Like Shem and Japheth, we may have to cover some of our parents' sins, but we bring God's curse on ourselves and our grandchildren if we disrespect our parents.

But, perhaps you're wondering, *What about the consequences of Noah's sin for himself?* He pronounces a curse on Canaan, but nothing seems to happen to Noah. But the epilogue is a rather sad conclusion to a great life. After the flood and Noah's sin, nothing else is recorded of his life. He lived 350 more years and died. During those remaining years, he had to live with the knowledge that one of his sons was not walking with God and that his grandson would inherit a curse stemming from his own drunken behavior. Noah himself is set forth as a warning to everyone about the dangers of drunkenness.

4. *Beware of the dangers of alcohol!* This is the first mention of wine in the Bible, and it's not a pretty picture. A godly man like Noah was trapped by its subtle but potent influence. Getting drunk didn't result in a good time, but in shame, a curse, and slavery (which is still often the case!). While the Bible does not prohibit a careful use of wine, it repeatedly warns of the dangers of drinking and it condemns drunkenness as a deed of the flesh, warning that the one who practices it will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:21). Because drunkenness (= "alcoholism") is such a widespread problem in our country, I urge you not to drink at all. You can't become an alcoholic if you don't drink! If a Christian who is tempted by alcohol is led back into drinking by seeing you drink, you have caused him to stumble and have sinned against Christ (Romans 14).

Thus Noah's sin shows us that even the godly are prone to sin. Ham's sin and the curse on Canaan show us how easily calloused toward sin we all become. But we can also learn something from Shem and Japheth's action:

3. We need not yield to temptation and we and our posterity will be blessed for following the Lord.

Shem and Japheth's action of carefully covering Noah's nakedness shows their fear of God and their respect for their father. As a result, Noah pronounces a blessing on them. The blessing on Shem is actually directed to the Lord, but it reveals that the Lord (Yahweh = the personal, covenant name of God) would be the personal covenant God of Shem and his line. This was fulfilled in that Abraham and the Jewish nation, and later Jesus the Messiah, came from the line of Shem. Canaan (which comes from a word meaning "to be humbled") served Shem in that the Jews displaced the Canaanites in the land of Palestine.

Japheth is blessed with the words, "May God enlarge Japheth (Japheth means "enlarge"), and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant" (9:27). This was fulfilled in that Japheth's descendants spread into the north and west, throughout Europe and eventually to America. The words about Japheth dwelling in the tents of Shem are on one level an expression which implies "friendly sharing of his hospitality and so of his blessings" (Leupold). But beyond that this is the first glimmer in Scripture of the grafting in of the Gentiles to the spiritual blessings of Israel. We who are Japheth's descendants have truly been blessed by dwelling in the tents of Shem!

The application of Shem and Japheth's action for us is that we don't have to yield to temptation. When Ham came to his brothers and told them of their father's condition, they easily could have joined in the mockery. But instead they feared God and respected their father and thus did not sin. Ham couldn't blame his sin on his father, because his two brothers showed that there was another option. They and their posterity were blessed because they chose to obey God. If you want God's blessing on your life, on your children and your grandchildren, then don't yield to the sin which so easily enslaves us, but yield yourself to God, as slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:16-22).

Conclusion

The bottom line for each of us is:

Though we are prone to sin, we can obey
the Lord and experience His blessing.

Ask yourself, "Do I want God's blessing in my life and for my children and grandchildren?" I don't know how anybody in his right mind could answer any way but "Yes!" The way we experience God's blessing is through obedience to Him. "That's the problem!" you say. "I'm so weak I have trouble obeying."

But the first step toward obedience is to recognize that you are not strong, you're weak. You are prone to sin. Recognizing that drives you to depend on the Lord, who is able to free you from sin. We need to realize that if we know Christ, we *can* obey Him.

A pastor told of how a man came to him to discuss a chronic sin problem in his life. He revealed the whole sad story in detail--how long it had been going on, how he fell into it, and all the things he tried to do about it. He had been to many counselors who had explained many things to him, but nothing had worked.

He finally asked the pastor, "What do you think I ought to do?" The pastor replied, "I think you ought to stop doing it." This shocked him. "That's amazing," he said. "'Stop doing it, huh? How about that!" What impressed the man was that the pastor thought he *could* obey God on the matter. (Told by John Blattner, *Pastoral Renewal* [Nov., 1985], p. 54.)

Christ came to free us from sin; so if you know Him, you can stop sinning! My guess is that some here need to do that. You've been messing around with sin, and you need to deal with it. Senator Phil Gramm says, "Balancing the budget is like going to heaven. Everybody wants to do it. They just don't want to do what you have to do to make the trip." Obedience to the Lord is like that, too! We're all for it, but we don't want to pay the price. But if we want God's blessing for ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren, we've got to get serious about obedience and get tough on our sin.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do we think that we will somehow build up an immunity against sin the more we grow in Christ? Is there any truth to this?
2. How would you answer the charge that God was not fair in cursing Canaan? Is God unfair to cause children to suffer for their parents' sins?
3. Can all Christians obey God? What would you say to someone who said, "I'm too weak to obey"?
4. How can we as Christian parents help our children to walk personally with God?

Copyright 1996, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.