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THE ROOTS OF THE NATIONS

Genesis 10:1-32

By

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Genesis Lesson 22

The Roots of the Nations Genesis 10:1-32

In his commentary on Genesis, Dr. H. C. Leupold, includes a section with hints for preaching the passage under consideration. With great hope I turned to see what he would say about Genesis 10, only to read: "It may very well be questioned whether a man should ever preach on a chapter such as this" (Baker Books, p. 380). Yet Dr. James Boice calls it "a chapter that is surely one of the most interesting and important in the entire Word of God" (*Genesis* [Zondervan], p. 337)! After studying it for a few hours, I confess that I was more inclined to side with Dr. Leupold than with Dr. Boice! If I could choose one chapter from the Bible to take with me to a desert island, it would not be Genesis 10. It is history at its most bare; it lists names and people whom we no longer know or care about.

And yet it is a part of the Word of God, which is all profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). So although this may not be one of the most crucial passages for us today, it does provide us with some important insights into the history of the human race. It is the most ancient record we possess of the roots of the nations. It is a bridge between the period we could call "pre-history" (from Adam to Abraham) and the historical times of Abraham and his descendants. And in spite of the pot shots of numerous critics in the past, most Bible scholars have become convinced of the accuracy of Genesis 10. William F. Albright (not a conservative) said that this chapter "stands absolutely alone in ancient literature, without a remote parallel, even among the Greeks, where we find the closest approach to a distribution of peoples in genealogical framework.... The Table of Nations remains an astonishingly accurate document" (supplement to Robert Young, *Analytical Concordance to the Bible* [Eerdmans], p. 30).

The chapter is a genealogy, but not in the sense of Genesis 5 and 11, which trace lineage from father to son (or grandson). Rather, it contains individual names, place names, and many names

of tribes or people groups, some of which may be derived from the patriarch of that group. Thus it is not just tracing individual histories, but the development of nations, especially as they related to Israel at the time of the conquest of Canaan. It isn't a complete catalog of all nations, but rather a list that would help Israel understand the origins of the people they would encounter during the conquest, especially in light of the blessings and cursings of Noah's oracle (9:25-27).

The chapter is divided between the descendants of Japheth (10:1-5), Ham (10:6-20), and Shem (10:21-32). There is debate among scholars as to the birth order of Noah's sons. Some translate verse 21 so that Shem is the older brother of Japheth (NASB), whereas others understand Japheth to be the eldest (NIV, NKJV). There is also debate as to whether Ham was the middle son (he is always listed second) or the youngest (see 9:24). We probably cannot know for certain, but I'm inclined toward the view of Keil & Delitzsch (*Commentary on the Old Testament* [Eerdmans], 1:156) that the birth order is Shem, Ham, and Japheth. In chapter 10, Japheth's descendants are probably listed first because they were the most remote and thus the least important to Israel (which is Moses' common pattern in Genesis, to dispose of the least important matters first). Since the line of Shem will occupy the rest of the book, it comes last.

I'm not going to attempt to work through every name in the chapter. There is a lot of speculation involved in trying to trace every name to a particular group of people, since names change in spelling over the years and from language to language. But we can be fairly certain about some of the broad trends and people movements.

We who are of European heritage are descended from Japheth. His descendants fanned out to the east and west from the probable landing site of the ark in eastern Turkey. It is generally agreed that Gomer's, Javan's and Tiras's descendants moved into what is now Europe; Magog, Tubal, and Meschech moved north into what is now Russia; and Madai was the ancestor of the Medes and Persians, who eventually migrated into India. Thus the Indo-European languages are related, stemming from a common ancestor. The relationship of the languages of India and of western

Europe was largely unknown until the 19th century, when comparative and historical study established their descent from a common language ancestor somewhere in eastern Europe. Yet Genesis 10 establishes this linkage.

The sons of Ham spread out primarily toward Africa. Cush is mentioned often in Scripture, and refers to Ethiopia. One notorious son of Cush, Nimrod, is listed. He moved east into the area of Babylon and Ninevah. (I'll say more about him later.) Mizraim is Egypt, Put probably refers to Libya, and Canaan, of course, to the many peoples inhabiting the land of Palestine during the conquest.

One obvious question from this table of the nations is, Where are the Oriental races? They may be omitted, since the list is not necessarily comprehensive. But they may be related to the Sinites (10:17), which name is still preserved in the word "Sino-" in reference to China (such as Sino-American relations). Another possibility is that some of the Hittites (called Heth in 10:15), when their empire fell, fled eastward into China. The word Hittite has also been spelled "Khittae," from which may come the word "Cathay," another designation of China.

The boundaries of Canaan's territory are described (10:19) because that is the particular region Israel was to conquer. Many of these lesser-known tribes bordered the land of Palestine. Moses wrote this so that Israel would know who these peoples were in relation to God's promises of blessing and cursing on the descendants of Noah.

Of the sons of Shem, Eber is named at the head of the list (10:21) and again later (10:24) because the word "Hebrew" probably comes from his name. Elam was the ancestor of the Elamites, who lived in southeast Mesopotamia. Asshur was apparently the founder of the Assyrians, although nothing is known of him. Arpachshad was in the line leading to Abraham (11:10-26). Lud was probably the Ludbu of the Assyrians, situated on the Tigris River. Aram is the name of the Aramean tribes which lived on the steppes of Mesopotamia (from Allen P. Ross, "The Table of the Nations in Genesis 10--Its Content," *Bibliotheca Sacra* [Jan.-Mar., 1981], pp. 22-34).

A mysterious note is attached to the name of Peleg (10:25, whose name in Hebrew means “divided”), that “in his days the earth was divided.” Most likely this refers to the dividing of the nations at Babel. Thus chronologically, Genesis 11 fits in here, which may be during Nimrod’s time (three or four generations after the flood). If Nimrod built Babylon, then God could have scattered the nations in his time, after which he moved north to conquer Ninevah.

Some have suggested that this division of the earth is a reference to continental drift, the idea that the continents were once together in one great land mass, but have drifted apart. There is scientific evidence to support that theory, although most would date it far earlier than this. But even in the last century, before scientists advanced that idea, some suggested this interpretation. It’s interesting that in Greek the word for sea is *pelagos* (we get “archipelago” from this). If there was a catastrophic upheaval in Peleg’s day, in which the continents moved apart and the seas broke in on the land, both the Greek and Hebrew meaning of Peleg’s name would make sense. But we can only be very speculative on the point.

With that as an overview of these verses, what can we learn from them spiritually? Three lessons:

1. People are quick to forget the one true God.

Verses 1 and 32 both contain the phrase, “after the flood.” You would think that a judgment as catastrophic as the flood would cause people to fear God for many generations after. They should have realized that they could not defy God with impunity. And yet here we have a table of the nations, with no hint that any of them followed the one true God.

It’s overwhelming to think of all these names and to realize that they represent whole groups of people, whole nations, who lived and died, for the most part, without God. Perhaps there was more knowledge of God than we are aware of, but what we know of these nations from later history would not indicate that any of them worshiped the one true God.

Nimrod is a case in point. Apparently his name was proverbial in Moses’ day, so that people compared a powerful man to Nimrod

(10:9), much as we may say, “a dictator like Stalin.” At first glance, you might think that Nimrod was a good guy, since he is called a mighty hunter “before the Lord.” But the point is rather that Nimrod asserted himself against the Lord.

There are several clues which point us in this direction. First, the term “mighty one,” (used three times of Nimrod, 10:8, 9), recalls the powerful, but wicked Nephilim (Gen. 6:4). Nimrod was like them, mighty in their own exploits, but not mighty in godliness. Second, Nimrod was the founder of both Babylon and Ninevah, which later became enemies and conquerors of Israel. If you trace the word Babylon through the Bible, you find that it was first a city and later a symbolic word for a system that exalts man in opposition to God and oppresses man under tyranny.

In Genesis 11:4 the builders of the tower of Babel boasted that their tower would reach into heaven and that they would make a name for themselves. Centuries later, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, boasted in his own great power. He set up a gold statue as a symbol of his glory and power and forced everyone to bow down to it. Later he boasted as he walked on the roof of his palace, “Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dan. 4:30). He exalted himself against God who is the ruler over mankind, who bestows human sovereignty to whomever He wishes (Dan. 4:32). And he used his power to force people to bow before false gods.

Later, in Revelation 17 & 18, we encounter both religious and political Babylon, the great harlot, who exalts herself against God and slaughters the people of God. She is said to sit on many waters, which are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues (Rev. 17:15). The wording reminds us of the families, languages, lands, and nations of Genesis 10:5, 20, and 31. Babylon oppresses the nations and turns them away from God.

For this reason, many commentators suggest that when the text says that Nimrod was a mighty hunter, it should be taken to mean not that he was a hunter of game, but a hunter of men. The Hebrew word is used elsewhere in reference to “a violent invasion of the persons and rights of men” (George Bush, *Notes on Genesis* [Klock & Klock] 1:171). Nimrod used his skill and force in warfare

to build a kingdom for himself at others' expense. Josephus wrote, "[Nimrod] was a bold man, and of great strength of hand; and he gradually changed the government into tyranny, seeing no other way of turning men from the fear of God, but to bring them to a constant dependence on his own power" (cited by Bush, p. 172).

Thus when it says that Nimrod was a mighty hunter "before the Lord," the Hebrew is, "in the face of the Lord," or "against the Lord" (as the Septuagint translates it). Moses is reminding his readers that Nimrod's tyranny did not go unnoticed by God. His name itself comes from a word meaning "we will revolt." He established his kingdom in defiance of God.

Note also that Nimrod was a nephew of Canaan, who was cursed by Noah. James Boice imagines Nimrod, who would have been aware of this curse, saying, "I don't know about the others, but I regard this matter of the curse of God on Canaan as a major disgrace on my family, one that needs to be erased. Did God say that my uncle Canaan would be a slave? I'll fight that judgment. I'll never be a slave! What's more, I'll be the exact opposite. I'll be so strong that others will become slaves to me. Instead of 'slave,' I'll make them say, 'Here comes Nimrod, the mightiest man on earth'" (*ibid.*, 1:332).

An Italian proverb states, "Once the game is over, the king and the pawn go back into the same box." What good is it to become the founder of a mighty kingdom if you do not know the living and true God? Fame and power are fleeting in light of eternity. I have read that Mao Zedong, the powerful Chinese dictator, viewed by many of his people as divine, shortly before his death, said on several occasions, "I am soon going to meet God." Alfredo Stroessner ruled Paraguay as dictator for 34 years. He had named over 10,000 streets and public places after himself. But in February, 1989, he was deposed. The day after the coup, crews were already at work changing all of these names.

No matter how great we become in the eyes of men, the day comes quickly for us all when we must go to meet God. That fact should help us to remember Him all our days and to order our lives rightly before Him. We dare not forget, as Nimrod and all of these nations were so quick to do, that we must stand before Him. There's a second lesson for us in Genesis 10:

2. People are quick to forget the oneness of the human race.

There is one true and living God; there is also one human race which He has created in His image. We all are descended from the same family. We who are theologically conservative sometimes hesitate to talk about the brotherhood of man, because the liberals use it to imply that everyone is in the family of God, apart from personal salvation. But there is a true biblical doctrine of the brotherhood of all men. Paul referred to it in his sermon at Athens when he said that God "made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26). In that same sermon he calls us all "the offspring of God" (Acts 17:29).

If Christians would stop to ponder the implications of this rather dry tenth chapter of Genesis, racial prejudice would be dissolved. I have often been shocked to hear racist comments from Christians. Sad to say, many chapters of the Ku Klux Klan have Christian pastors serving as chaplains! But the Bible is clear that whatever your skin color, you can trace your ancestry back to one of the three sons of Noah. We're all brothers and sisters!

Why then are we so quick to divide from one another and to oppress one another? The history of the human race has been one of power struggles in every level of society and among the various nations. Why? Because the one human race has one basic need: "... there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:22b-23). As God said to Noah after the flood, "the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21). That's your need and mine: to repent of our sin, pride, and prejudice, and to know God's forgiveness, so that His gospel of reconciliation can flow through us to those who have not heard. That's the third lesson here:

3. God wants all people to hear of His one means of salvation.

Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts

4:12). Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross is God's one means of salvation. He wants all to hear.

Perhaps you're wondering, "But what about all these nations before Abraham? They never heard about salvation through Christ." Paul gives an answer in his sermon at Lystra when he says, "And in the generations gone by [God] permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:16-17). God's witness was around them; if men will seek Him, He is not far from each one (Acts 17:27).

Although I admit that it's a difficult problem, we know that God will be fair and just with every person. But the real question we need to face is, *what about us who have heard?* What are we to do? First, we must come to Christ, repent of our own sins, and receive His pardon. Then we are responsible to tell others. His plan is to use His people to tell the message of salvation to every family, language, land, and nation.

We will see in Genesis 12 how God chose Abraham and promised to bless all nations through him and his descendants. From Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob, in the fulness of time, the promised Savior was born. His own people did not receive Him, and so the Gentiles were grafted into the promise; as Noah prophesied, Japheth would dwell in the tents of Shem (Gen. 9:27). Christ has purchased with His blood men "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). Now we, who have received the blessings of God through Abraham, are commissioned to tell the good news of salvation and forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ to those who haven't heard.

Though people are quick to forget God and the oneness of the human race, God wants all people to hear of His one means of salvation.

Conclusion

You can count the number of nations in Genesis 10 in different ways and come up with slightly different figures. Jewish scholars counted 70 (26 from Shem, 30 from Ham [not including the

Philistines, mentioned in passing; 10:14], and 14 from Japheth). Perhaps when our Lord chose 70 to go out to preach the gospel (Luke 10:1), He was saying, "I want a worker for every nation." His Great Commission makes it clear that we are to go to every nation (people group). That is the thrust of the missions movement in our day, to see a church for every people by the year 2000.

Robert Woodruff was a man of vision. At the end of World War II, he said, "In my generation it is my desire that everyone in the world have a taste of Coca-Cola." As president of Coca-Cola from 1923 to 1955, Woodruff motivated his colleagues to reach their generation around the world for Coke. It is no accident that Coke is now sold from the deserts of Africa to the interior of China.

If they can do it with Coke, can't we do it with Christ? I want to leave you with two questions to ask yourself soberly before God:

Am I doing all I can to reach as many for Christ as I can? If not, what am I going to change in order to do something about it? God wants all the nations to hear the good news about the Savior.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some practical ways most of us could be more involved in the Great Commission?
2. Which is more difficult: To give money to missionaries or to tell your neighbor about Christ?
3. How do we know how much we should give to world missions? What guidelines can help us to be faithful in this matter?
4. How would you answer a critic's question, "What about those who have never heard the gospel?"

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