

GENESIS 10:21-32

(THE TABLE OF NATIONS, PART 3: THE SONS OF SHEM)

In one of the first sermons I ever preached, I quoted the preface to the Gideon's New Testament Bible. It's good to be reminded from time to time about things, so I'd like to quote that today. As I do, listen to how the author, who is anonymous, so delicately and yet rightly describes the Bible and what it means to us –

The Bible contains the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe, and practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's charter. Here Paradise is restored, Heaven opened, and the gates of hell disclosed. *Christ* is its grand subject, our good the design, and the glory of God its end. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet. Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasure. It is given you in life, will be opened at the judgment, and be remembered forever. It involves the highest responsibility, will reward the greatest labor, and will condemn all who trifle with its sacred contents.

Beautiful words which come from a contemplative soul. One who clearly understood the greatness of God's word and the depth's which it delves into...the very mind of God and the very heart of Christ.

Introduction: I decided to quote this today because the Bible does reveal different things and they may affect us in our walk at various times of our life. It is filled with many major subject areas and one of them is one which all Christians should hold dearly to. That is, of course, the grand subject, Jesus Christ.

From the earliest words of the Bible, right to the last sentence, Jesus Christ is on prominent display. He is the center and focus of our faith and He is the One who reveals the unseen Creator to us.

In the process of going through the stories of the Bible, there are specific ways God reveals Himself. When we look for these various keys during our studies, we can see how He opens each new passage that comes to us.

I called this Progressive Revelation. In other words, God is progressively and succinctly revealing Himself in a way which makes even complex issues understandable.

Step by step we make a journey as we read the Bible and just like opening door after door to get closer and closer to the middle chamber of a building, as we read the Bible, we open one door after another until we reach the very heart of God and the inner workings of His Mind.

In this Progressive Revelation there is a particular way that God narrows what He is doing, leading us to Jesus Christ. I was going over some sermon notes by a man named Ray Stedman and he used a term which nicely summarizes one particular avenue of revelation and so I am happy to adopt it into my own terminology.

He calls it "God's Funnel." As you certainly know, a funnel is used to narrow the path of something like a liquid or powder or pebbles or sand or whatever. By using a funnel, you take something broad and unwieldy and you direct it into a definite and sure path.

God uses a funnel type of pattern throughout much of the Old Testament to eventually direct our attention to a particular event and Person in human history.

Along the way, He branches off shoots from the main story, such as in Genesis 4 when Cain and his line are mentioned. But after going off on branches, the story returns to the main line and proceeds... down the funnel.

We left the ancient world behind in the flood and started out the new adventure with Noah and his three sons – Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Then the story went into a branch about what Ham did to his father and then to Noah who pronounced a curse and blessings.

After that, we came here to Chapter 10 and read about two branches, Japheth and then Ham. Now God is returning to **the funnel** with Noah's second son, Shem.

Remember this type of pattern as you read the Bible and you will see how branches are mentioned when they will somehow affect the funnel and then the funnel will be returned to. Eventually, the funnel will come to King David and God's promise to him about an eternal kingship through one of his descendants, a promise which forms our text verse for today.

Text Verse: "When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. ¹⁵ But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took *it* from Saul, whom I removed from before you. ¹⁶ And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever." 2 Samuel 7:12-16

May God speak to us through His word today and may His glorious name ever be praised.

I. Blessed be the LORD

The **funnel** that leads to Jesus started in Adam then went through his son Seth, and we have followed it through to Noah and now it will narrow again to Shem. When Noah pronounced his curse and blessings, it was Shem who received the spiritual blessing and primacy over the rest of Noah's seed.

"Cursed *be* Canaan; A servant of servants he shall be to his brethren."

²⁶ And he said: "Blessed *be* the LORD, The God of Shem, And may Canaan be his servant.

²⁷ May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant." Genesis 9:26-27

Going back to a previous sermon, we saw how Noah's words here have come true in each case. And, it is the line of Shem which leads to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and then to David. The funnel narrows and branches come in and out of focus each step of the way, but the main line is always maintained.

Why is this information so important and how do we take it in? What is the meaning of doing it this way? I guess the question we could ask is this, "Is God arbitrarily choosing people and rejecting others... is He showing favoritism as He narrows His funnel?"

The answer isn't as easy as a yes and a no. God has a plan to reconcile the world to Himself and He is doing it through real people who really lived. But along the way He is giving us insights into the human condition and what does and doesn't please Him.

When we get to the book of Ruth, we will see a story about a real human family who has real tragedies and real joys. One main character of the book, Ruth, is outside of the line of Israel and yet she is brought into it and eventually becomes an ancestor of Jesus.

So was there favoritism in her case? No. There was a response to faith, just as there was a response to Abel's faith and a rejection of Cain who lacked it. At the same time, there is a sort of favoritism involved towards people in the Bible as well.

Once God establishes his covenant with a group of people, like the sons of Israel, they partake of the blessings of that covenant whether they individually have faith or not. The rains would fall on the disobedient sons of Israel and water their crops just like they did on the obedient sons. Likewise, the disobedient would often receive the same protection as the obedient.

Today in Israel, there are those who have called on Jesus and those who haven't. Some of them will and some of them won't. But God has returned all of them to their land and they all benefit from His grace. So in a physical sense, God seems to show favoritism, but in the spiritual, each has to come to Him individually, by faith.

But guess what, it's the same for all the people of the earth. None of us deserve to be born at all. Some of us are born to nice families and some to bad ones. Some of us are born in a nice location like Siesta Key and some in places like Nowheres'ville, USA. The world may seem arbitrary and unfair, but Ecclesiastes says –

I returned and saw under the sun that—The race *is* not to the swift, Nor the battle to the strong, Nor bread to the wise, Nor riches to men of understanding, Nor favor to men of skill; But time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For man also does not know his time: Like fish taken in a cruel net, Like birds caught in a snare, So the sons of men *are* snared in an evil time, When it falls suddenly upon them.

Time and chance... that is where we stand, even if that time and chance is directed by God. In other words, the chosen line, God's Funnel, which leads to Israel, is a microcosm of the world at large.

In the end, whether Jew or gentile, unless we approach God by faith, we have no true share or inheritance in Him, just the temporary earthly blessings which fade away when we die. Paul explains this in the book of Galatians and uses Abraham, the man of faith, as an example of this faith leading to favor –

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

II. From Shem to Eber

Back in Chapter 9 we looked at this verse –

Now the sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And Ham *was* the father of Canaan. These three *were* the sons of Noah, and from these the whole earth was populated.

When we were there I asked you to note the part that said “Ham was the father of Canaan.” No one named Canaan had even been mentioned to that point and so we received a key that he would become a central point of focus at some later point in the Bible.

We’re about to see the same thing happen again –

²¹ And *children* were born also to Shem, the father of all the children of Eber, the brother of Japheth the elder.

The table of nations has discussed the line of Japheth and the line of Ham. It now turns to Shem, the son with the spiritual blessing which came from Noah and the line which is a part of God’s Funnel. And the first thing we see in this godly line of Shem is the mentioning of Eber – who hasn’t been mentioned at all until this point.

As unusual as it may seem, Eber is actually Shem’s great, great grandson. And yet despite this, he is brought into the picture at the same time that Shem’s son’s are to be mentioned – one of 70 names mentioned in the Table of Nations.

Following this key, we can note that Eber will be mentioned again and that he will have importance in the story as God’s funnel is directed toward Christ. Eber means “yonder side” or as a verb: to pass or cross. This name will become important later in the Bible.

Also in the verse we’re looking at, it says that Shem is “the brother of Japheth the elder.” One thing I recommend when doing Bible studies is to have people bring different translations and when they notice a difference from what is being read, they should call it out.

In this verse the NASB says, “Also to Shem, the father of all the children of Eber, **and the older brother of Japheth**, children were born.” This is an incorrect translation because Shem is younger, not older than Japheth. Pay attention to the details...

It says in Genesis 11 that Shem was 102 years old after the flood. Noah had his first son at 500 and the flood was only a year long. This means that the firstborn was Japheth. Little things like this might seem unimportant, but they aren't when we look at how things happen in the Bible and why.

The difference between Shem being the firstborn or not is important because it falls under the doctrine of divine election. God has passed over the firstborn in order to continue **His funnel** through his chosen line regardless of order of birth.

²² The sons of Shem were Elam, Asshur, Arphaxad, Lud, and Aram.

Shem means "name" or "fame." He is the father of all of the Semitic peoples of the world. Today this includes Jews, Arabs, and others. When we hear the term anti-Semitism, it is usually being applied to Jewish people, but it is far more encompassing than that.

After Shem, the Bible mentions his five sons. The first one mentioned is Elam which means "eternity." His line has led to the Elamites and Persians of the world today.

Asshur is mentioned next. His name means "a step" or "strong" and he has led to the Assyrians and Northern Iraqis of the Middle East.

The next son is Arphaxad which means "I shall fail as the breast." His descendants have become the Chaldeans mentioned in the Old Testament, the Southern Iraqis, the Hebrews, Moabites, Jordanians, and other groups of people in the general area.

The fourth son mentioned is Lud, which means "strife". They have become some of the groups in Asia Minor and North Africa.

And the last son mentioned here is Aram, which means "exalted." They have become the people around Syria, Lebanon and some other spots of the Middle East, Africa, etc.

All of these people have come from Shem and they are still very active figures on the world scene today. From Shem the three major monotheistic religions of the world are derived – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

²³ The sons of Aram were Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash.

In 1 Chronicles 1:17, these four sons of Aram are actually listed as sons of Shem. One of the sons, Uz, is certainly an ancestor of Job of the book of Job because in Job 1:1 we read this –

“There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil.”

It’s not known with certainty who wrote the book of Job, but if it was written by him or someone from his tribe, then it is a rare work in the Bible because that book and only a couple others were written by non-Jewish people.

We know that Luke wasn’t a Jew and yet he wrote both the Gospel of Luke and Acts. These two books make up almost a third of the New Testament which makes his writings exceptional.

Just so you know how to tell that Luke wasn’t a Jew, in Chapter 4 of Colossians, Paul gives a list of people and then says this –

¹¹“These *are my* only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are of the circumcision; they have proved to be a comfort to me.”

Only after saying this does he bring up Luke and others, meaning that Luke wasn’t of the circumcision, meaning a Jew.

III. The nations of Shem

²⁴ Arphaxad begot Salah, and Salah begot Eber.

Here now we will see where God’s funnel leads from Shem to his son Arphaxad and then down the line. First the sons of Shem were mentioned

and after that came the side branch which were the sons of Shem's son Aram. They were specifically listed because the sons of Aram play such a large part in the later pages of the Bible as they interact with the chosen line of Israel.

²⁵ To Eber were born two sons: the name of one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided; and his brother's name was Joktan.

We'll stop at this verse to mention one of the sons of Eber who is Peleg. Unlike the other names in this account, Peleg is mentioned **with** specific information – “for in his days the earth was divided.” This has to be in here for a reason and the reason can only mean one thing. Let's look at a few possibilities and see which is right.

The first is that the earth was divided, meaning the physical earth and the continents. This is a very popular view concerning Peleg. You've heard about continental drift. This view is held by many people who say this is what is being referred to here. The land masses divided and the people were separated according to them.

Support for this view is that Peleg in Hebrew means “division” but in Greek it means “sea.” The word *archipelago* comes from this. The Greeks called the Aegean Sea “Archipelago,” or the first sea, drawing the name from this man, Peleg.

The second possibility is that that the earth was divided according to people groups, not geography. Which is correct and can we really tell? Peleg is Shem's great, great, great grandson and was born 100 years after the flood, or in the year 1758 Anno Mundi.

We know this from the account of Genesis Chapter 11 which records the generations of Shem. Between Chapter 10 and Shem's genealogy though is recorded the Tower of Babel, which we will look at next week. This account is specifically placed there to show us the division of the people by languages.

In other words, the division of the earth when Peleg is mentioned is speaking about the division into individual languages and this is why the accounts are placed in the order they are placed. Again, God is progressively revealing to us what is occurring and why.

The Tower of Babel occurred during Peleg's life and the nations of the earth were divided accordingly at that time. Peleg means "division" and his brother Joktan's name means "small."

²⁶ **Joktan begot Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah,**

²⁷ **Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah,**

²⁸ **Obal, Abimael, Sheba,**

²⁹ **Ophir, Havilah, and Jobab. All these were the sons of Joktan.**

³⁰ **And their dwelling place was from Mesha as you go toward Sephar, the mountain of the east.**

These people are found to the east of the land of Israel. They settled around Arabia, Yemen, and even along the Indian Ocean as far as India. Last week we learned about Sheba and Dedan, sons of Ham. In this verse today we hear about another Sheba.

It's not 100% sure which one is the ancestor of the famed Queen of Sheba who came to visit Solomon, it could be that because of intermarrying between the lines of Shem and Ham, the name is reused here as a descendant of the other Sheba.

³¹ **These were the sons of Shem, according to their families, according to their languages, in their lands, according to their nations.**

A second ago I said, Shem's line will be brought up again in Chapter 11. This is to show God's Funnel as it is directed from Shem down to Abraham, the man of faith. He will become the example of justification by faith according to Paul's writings.

God has been working through time and history and slowly unfolding His beautiful plan and we skip or quickly pass over each step at our own great loss. Even with the many details we've looked over, we have had only

touched on the vast amount of information that about these many people in Genesis chapter 10.

Despite this, we're now at our final verse of the chapter and our last verse for the day –

³² These were the families of the sons of Noah, according to their generations, in their nations; and from these the nations were divided on the earth after the flood.

Noah came on the scene in Genesis 5:29 and this is the last we'll hear about him until much later in the Bible when he is mentioned in short accounts. He served his time and now quietly departs from the scene in a verse which is more speaking of his sons than him.

He will be mentioned in the book of 1 Chronicles, by Isaiah and Ezekiel, and then by Jesus, the author of Hebrews, and by Peter. Noah was a man of faith and a faithful man and he is acknowledged as such by God in His word.

In the end, the lesson of Noah is one that we all need to take to heart. God loves the people of the world and He will carefully and tenderly look after them as they faithfully call on and trust in Him for their safety and deliverance.

From Noah to the mentioning of his sons we see a transition and in this transition is a division of the world. All people come from Noah and from him we take one of three routes – through Shem, the spiritual son, through Ham, the son of physical achievement, or through Japheth, the intellectual son.

Now I'll turn to the writings of Ray Stedman and quote his reflective thoughts on these three and how they point to us as individuals and members of the human race. A race of people created in God's image and for His glory –

“There are three divisions of mankind, as there are three divisions in man, in you. To each of these divisions is given the responsibility for meeting one

of the basic needs of man – spiritual, physical, and intellectual. In each one of us these same three divisions are found. We each have a capacity to worship; we each have a capacity to reason; and each has a capacity to **create**. These are the things that distinguish us from the animals. This is the image of God in man.

Each of them needs to be held in perfect balance. The world is in a state of confusion, uncertainty and despair because the balance God intended has been left unfulfilled, so, in your individual life you are in a state of confusion, despair, frustration, weakness, or whatever it may be, because you have neglected to fulfill the three-fold capacities of your own nature. You can only do so as they are kept in perfect harmony, one with the other.

It is wrong to think of man as essentially spiritual. He is also intellectual and physical. It is wrong to think of him as being essentially physical, and to develop the athletic abilities to the neglect of the others; he is also spiritual and intellectual. The interesting thing is that in the Bible the intellectual is put last. If the order of scripture obtains for the individual as well as for the race, the order within us is also Shem, Ham, and Japheth. First the spiritual, then the physical, then the intellectual.

In that order mankind finds its complete fulfillment. If we understand ourselves we will also understand the world around us. The glory of the gospel is that it addresses itself to mankind exactly on those terms. We find ourselves entering into fulfillment, into excitement, into a dramatic sense of being what we were intended to be, when we open our lives to God through Jesus Christ, making that our first priority; then developing the physical life, taking care of physical needs, physical demands; and through these two working together, developing the intellect to an understanding of ourselves..." Thank you Ray Stedman.

Now that we're at the end of the account of Noah and the Table of the Nations, I'd like to again give you an overall brushstroke of the curse and blessing given by Noah. I realized this as I was preparing an earlier sermon. This will show how these things have literally been fulfilled in the pages and layout of the Bible.

Basically what we have in the Old Testament is information given by God to the Jewish people. Even though Genesis comes before the calling of Israel, it is part of the Torah, or the five books of Moses received at Mount Sinai. All the way through the Old Testament, Israel is the focus of the story as it leads to Jesus.

And then in the three first gospel accounts, we see Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament on our behalf. In other words, what is said there is written under the Old Testament and is directed to the Jewish people, not the church. It wasn't until the night of the crucifixion that Jesus established the New Covenant in His blood.

In the New Testament, Paul calls the church and our life in Christ "a mystery" which had not been previously revealed. The gospel of John, although written mostly under the concepts of the Old Covenant, carries a mixture of Old and New Testament and so it forms a transition to the understanding of Christ and the church.

After John is Acts and it completes this transition. Acts starts where? In Jerusalem. And it ends where? In Rome. The first 12 chapters of Acts can be subtitled, the Acts of Peter, and then from chapter 13 to 28 they can be subtitled the Acts of Paul.

I'll show you some parallels of this from Acts. God put these parallels there to show us the transition from Peter, the Apostle to the Jews, to Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles –

1. Peter's work began by the Holy Spirit (2)
1. Paul's work began by the Holy Spirit (13)

2. Peter was thought to be drunk and & then explains himself (2)
2. Paul was thought to be mad and then explains himself (26)

3. Peter's first sermon begins new section of book (2)
3. Paul's first sermon begins new section of book (13)

4. Peter has a time of work, preaching, and then persecution (2-11)
4. Paul has a time of work, preaching, and then persecution (13-19)

5. Peter has trouble after healing a man lame from birth (3)
5. Paul has trouble after healing a man lame from birth (14)

6. Peter says, "Silver and gold have I none" (3)
6. Paul says, "I have coveted no one's silver or gold" (20)

7. Peter's shadow heals (5)
7. Paul's handkerchief heals (19)

8. Peter is arrested in the temple and taken to Sanhedrin (4, 5)
8. Paul is arrested in the temple and taken to Sanhedrin (21-23)

9. Peter confronts Simon the sorcerer (8)
9. Paul confronts Elymas the sorcerer (13)

10. Peter performs an exorcism (5)
10. Paul performs an exorcism (16)

11. Peter raises Tabitha from the dead (9)
11. Paul raises Eutychus from the dead (20)

12. Peter lays hands for reception of Spirit (8)
12. Paul lays hands for reception of Spirit (19)

13. Peter worshipped (10)
13. Paul worshipped (14)

14. Peter imprisoned with miraculous escape (12)
14. Paul imprisoned with miraculous escape (16)

15. Angel stood by Peter (12)
15. Angel stood by Paul (27)

16. Peter called by vision to preach in Caesarea (10)
16. Paul called by vision to preach in Macedonia (16)

17. Peter's success brings Jewish jealousy (5)
17. Paul's success brings Jewish jealousy (13)

18. Peter heals the bedridden Aeneas (9)
18. Paul heals the bedridden father of Publius (28)

19. Peter ordains deacons (6)
19. Paul ordains elders (14)

20. Peter is "filled with the Spirit" (4)
20. Paul is "filled with the Spirit" (13)

Along with these many parallels, Paul in his writings says four times that he is the Apostle to the Gentiles and twice that Peter is the Apostle to the Jews.

Right after Acts, the first letter is Romans. The baton is passed from Shem to Japheth who will carry it for 2000 years while Israel is under punishment for rejecting their Messiah. Paul's last signed letter is Philemon which is followed by what... by Hebrews.

The letter is directed to the Hebrew people. After that is James which is written to the 12 tribes scattered abroad – the Jewish people. Immediately after James are Peter's two letters and he writes to "the pilgrims of the dispersion." He even writes from Rome where the book of Acts left off.

After these letters, the three letters of John are introduced which follow the same pattern as his gospel – a mixture of Old and New Testament concepts which form a transition to the understanding of Christ and the church.

After that is the letter of Jude which is a near summary to the book of 2 Peter and which speaks on identical themes. Finally is the book of

Revelation which is written to the church in the first three chapters and about Israel in chapters 4-19.

From the time of Jesus' return in chapter 19, we see the merging of the two bodies into one in the millennial reign from Jerusalem and then the eternal state.

In other words, if you stand back and look at the overall picture of the Bible and then look at Noah's blessing to his sons, it is Japheth who resides in the tents of Shem. This means that Japheth would share in the same spiritual legacy as Shem. And it has – for 2000 years. But dwelling in the tents of someone means that you are encompassed by them.

Shem is the banner carrier of the spiritual legacy from Genesis through the first half of Acts. From Acts chapter 13, until Philemon, Japheth carries the spiritual legacy. But from the book of Hebrews on, the spiritual banner is returned to Shem.

And this will be literally fulfilled at the rapture of the church when Israel, descended from Shem, will again be the spiritual focus of the world's attention. We already see the world lining up for that.

All of this has come from the blessing of one man to his three sons in the foundational book of the Bible. It is an amazing and beautiful story in the unfolding revelation of God's eternal word.

The Line of Shem

Children were born also to Shem
The father of all the children of Eber
Eventually Jesus would descend from him
And he was the brother of Japheth the elder.
Shem's sons were Elam, Asshur, Arphaxad, Lud, and Aram
And the sons of Aram were Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash
The Arabs come from these boys, some have their own harem
And others today spend shekels, which is the form of Israeli cash

Arphaxad begot Salah, and Salah begot Eber
And to Eber were born Peleg and Joktan too
Peleg is a name for us to remember
Because in Peleg's time the earth was divided into who's who
Joktan begot 13 sons, a whole big bunch indeed
Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, and Hadoram too
Also Uzal, Diklah, Obal, and Abimael, were of his seed
And Sheba, Ophir, Havilah, and Jobab round out the whole slew.

These 13 were the sons of Joktan, a mouthful for sure
And they dwelt from Mesha to Sephar, the mountains out east
Of these sons of Shem some lines still endure
According to their nations from the greatest to the least
And so we finish listing the line of Noah's blood
All carefully given according to their generations
From these the people were divided after the flood
All from these sons who have become the world's nations
What a treat to know what God has done
Carefully leading us through many generations
And making His funnel which leads to His Son
Who would become the Savior of the Nations
Oh great and awesome God
Help us in thy light to trod
Keep us on the path of glory
And may our lips spread the gospel story
To You our highest praise we sing
For You have created us for Your praise and for Your glory
And so on earth may every living thing
Proclaim the great marvel of Jesus' victory

Hallelujah and Amen!

Next week - Genesis 11:1-9, The Tower of Babel