

## Lecture XIII

### "Noah's Curse upon Canaan"

by

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**"Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without . . . And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. . . . And he said, 'Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.'" (Genesis 9:22, 24, 25)**

From the acceptance of the offering of Abel and the rejection of that of Cain (the grounds and reasons of which have been discussed in the preceding Lectures), I pass immediately to the history of the *post*-diluvian world. Not but that there are several other individuals and incidents in the *ante*-diluvian world both important and obscure enough to excite curiosity and demand explanation. But the extreme brevity of this portion of the Mosaic records (comprehending in the limited space of little more than seven chapters the events of above sixteen hundred years) and the great difference which probably subsisted between the religious and political state of mankind before and after the deluge, must ever prevent our forming any precise objections or giving them any distinct and certain answer.

There are, however, some things of great consequence which preceded the flood, recorded at full length by Moses and upon which, therefore, a more intelligible opinion might be produced. Such are the creation, the fall, and the flood. But the difficulties attending the creation and the flood are principally of a physical nature, while the fall of man, though intimately connected with the attributes of the Deity, yet seems more naturally to be united with the redemption and sacrifice of Christ and, consequently, to belong more properly to the department of *doctrinal* difficulties.

Proceeding, therefore, to the history of the post-diluvian world, the first account we meet with is that of the patriarchal periods and individuals, when the governors of men were rather the heads of families than the

rulers of nations. This portion of history extends from the deluge to the death of Joseph; for the anomalous interval during which the children of Israel were in bondage to the kings of Egypt (who knew not Joseph), and which terminated in their being placed under the dispensation of the Mosaic law, can scarce be regarded as belonging either to the age of the Patriarchs or that of the Theocracy. It is rather a link between the two.

Now one of the first acts of the very first of these Patriarchs affords matter of considerable difficulty and discussion. Escaped from the perils of those mighty waters in which all the rest of an unbelieving generation had been overwhelmed, Noah, in the piety of gratitude, "built an altar to the Lord and offered burnt-offerings on the altar." God, therefore, blessed Noah and his sons, and established his covenant with them and their seed after them for perpetual generations.

Thus loaded with the remembrance of the former, and the sense of the present loving-kindness of the Lord, Noah resumed the labors of ordinary life and "began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. Then he drank of the wine and was drunk" [Gen. 9:20,21, NKJV]." With the freshness of unequalled mercies on his head and the sound of an irrevocable promise of their perpetuity in his ears, he had no sooner gathered of the fruits of his increase than he abused the gracious restoration of the gifts of nature. While thus overcome with wine he lay unconsciously asleep and "uncovered in his tent."

And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. Then he said: 'Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants he shall be to his brethren.' And he said, 'Blessed be the LORD [Yahweh], the God of Shem, and may Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem; and may Canaan be his servant'" [Gen. 9:22-27, NKJV].

Several questions are pressed upon us, as arising out of this transaction. [1] Whence this early fall of a Patriarch so holy as Noah and so lately displaying an instance of pious gratitude to his preserver? [2] Wherein consisted the great iniquity of Ham that it should be so severely visited upon Canaan? [3] And why, if Ham deserved punishment at all, was it not

denounced against himself rather than his innocent posterity? [4] Wherein also consisted the great merit of Shem and Japheth that they should obtain so signal a blessing for the mere performance of a duty? [5] And why, as the conduct of both (so far as we can perceive) was precisely the same, was any difference made in the recompense they received? . . . These are the several points to which we are necessarily to direct our attention. When they have all been duly considered, it will then [6] appear why Moses has chosen this as almost the only incident of Noah's life, subsequently to the deluge, which he thought it requisite to detail.

1. The transgression of Noah must evidently be referred for its origin to that fertile source, the infirmity and corruption of human nature entailed upon man as one of the inevitable consequences of the fall. Upon every child of Adam was that evil fixed; and we cannot, therefore, marvel to find the second universal father of mankind sinning not only after the example but also after the similitude of the first.

Adam fell by tasting of the fruit of the forbidden tree and thus violating the positive prohibition of his Maker. Noah fell by taking of the permitted fruit in a forbidden measure and thus perverting to the temporary suspension of his rational and bodily powers the means intended only for their preservation and increase. In this then the faults of the two Patriarchs differed--that the one consisted in act, the other in degree. But in this they agreed--that in their essence and consequences they were very nearly the same. Both were accompanied by an abuse of the good creatures [creations] of God to purposes they were never formed to serve; and both were followed by a discovery of the nakedness and shame of the transgressors and by the denunciation of a curse upon their posterity.

That curse, therefore, may in both instances be accepted as a sufficient testimony of God's righteous wrath against sin; and we have no reason to require that Noah, any more than Adam, should have been rejected from all future favor for the criminality of a single--and that not a very grievous--fault. For while we carefully abstain from endeavoring to justify the Patriarch by forced interpretations and improbable assumptions, we should equally beware of aggravating his error beyond its due degree of guilt. There is nothing in the language of Moses to countenance the supposition of Noah's ignorance of the power of wine; for why should he plant a vineyard if he knew not the use and the effect of its produce? It is but exposing the cause of truth to its adversaries thus to reason upon principles we are unable to establish.

But we have a just foundation for maintaining that, whatever might be the fault or folly of this single act, there is not the slightest trace of its ever having recurred; and that, in reality, the frailty with which this righteous being was overtaken, reached not beyond that excess which was necessary to overpower his faculties so far as to fall into a deep and unconscious sleep. Throughout the whole transaction we meet not with the remotest allusion to any waking improprieties of which Noah was guilty, or with the most casual expression which could imply the banishment or disturbance of reason on her seat. It was a frailty to be palliated, though not excused.

Now we admit the justice. And we admire the merciful recommendation of the Apostle, when he beseeches the early Christians, that "if any man were overtaken in a fault they would restore such a one in the spirit of meekness, considering themselves lest they also should be tempted." Why then do we not carry the spirit of this precept into our perusal of that word of God of which it forms a part? Why do we not look with an eye of mildness upon the unwilling and solitary infirmity of one so righteous, considering that we also, if we were to be left without any place for repentance for each sin we have committed, would be altogether unable to escape--since we must be daily conscious of our numerous transgressions even in the midst of mercies that are numberless, even under the remembrance of a still more marvelous redemption from a still more serious judgment.

"Therefore you are inexcusable, O man," whosoever you are that visits with severity the sin of Noah--"for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things" [Rom. 2:1].

2. The fault of Noah (as a sin of infirmity) and the sentiments we ought to entertain towards the doer of it (as towards one laboring under the common corruption of our nature) being thus once clearly understood, the fault of his son Ham can scarce be very difficult to apprehend.

If "love covers all sins," and if a tenderness to the failings of those from whom we have received kindness and to whom we owe the duty of gratitude and reverence be of any honor in the sight of men or of any value in the formation of a meek and merciful disposition, then did the son of Noah fail in the possession of this claim to his father's affection and this mildness towards his father's infirmity. To see the nakedness of him to whom he owed his being would, if he had felt the sacredness of the parental character, have been to him a grief; and, lamenting that his eye had been even an involuntary witness to a parent's shame, he would have endeavored to forget and resolved never to reveal it.

But to proclaim it to his brethren was, in fact, to proclaim it openly to the world (for the family of Noah was then the whole world) and to expose without reason or temptation that upon which his tongue should have been forever silent.

Surely he could have been under no incapacity to understand the manner in which he ought to have proceeded. All the opportunities of instruction in the duties which we owe to the author of our life and happiness, which his brethren enjoyed, he also might have embraced. Why then had he not, like them, learned his duty, and why was he not equally ready to practice it? With reverential awe they [Shem and Japheth] looked not upon that which they thought their father would disapprove their having seen; and with filial tenderness they hid from the view of others what they would not behold themselves, because they could not behold it without regret and shame. "But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness" [Gen. 9:23 NKJV].

The historian--by the minuteness of this description, by the anxiety with which he points out their reverential attitude, by the repetition with which he enforces upon our attention the fact that "they saw not their father's nakedness"--seems evidently to mark and approve the respect with which they acted. Why then had not Ham before bethought him of doing the same? Or why, if a mere casual inadvertence had induced him to communicate the situation of his father to his brethren, why do we not find him subsequently participating in their pious deed? Shem and Japheth, we are told, *both* laid the garment upon their shoulders, and both approached with their faces backward. But the name of Ham never once appears in this more commendable part of the transaction. He had been ready enough to tell the same, though he seems to have displayed but little willingness to remedy it. And this his absence from the more amiable task of hiding the transgression he had seen is sufficient to justify the sentiments which Noah, when he awoke from his wine, appears to have both entertained and expressed with regard to the different conduct of his sons.

It is enough to account for the displeasure he [Noah] displayed without resorting for additional motives to the unsupported and traditional tale of Ham having stood at the door to mock. For displeasure, under such circumstances as those we have described, must have been an instinctive feeling in every parent's breast.

It is still possible, however, that the Patriarch's disapprobation, though justifiable in itself, may have been either objectionable in its character, excessive in its degree, or unjust in the object against whom it was leveled. We must now, therefore, in the third place, proceed to examine the nature of Noah's conduct and the manner in which he is represented to have spoken and acted when he awoke from his wine.

3. It is to be observed, then, that Moses, in this part of his narrative, does nothing more than barely relate the words uttered upon that occasion. "Noah," he remarks, "awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, 'Cursed be Canaan.'" We have here a simple statement of facts and words, unexplained by any commentary and referred to no particular motive. The feeling, therefore, which we suppose to have dictated these expressions of the Patriarch, and the object we imagine he had in view in making use of them, are inferences which we ourselves deduce from the pages of the historian; and the historian himself cannot be made justly responsible for the consequences which flow from our conclusions, unless the truth of those conclusions can be irresistibly proved. Yet, in direct violation of this rule, the objectors to revelation have ventured to put the most unfounded construction upon the whole; and [by] ascribing motives to Noah at which Moses never even hints, [they] have contrived to condemn him for improprieties of their own creation.

They first assert that the son alone was cursed for the transgression of the father, and presume that Canaan never would have become "a servant of servants to his brethren" had not Ham made known the nakedness of Noah. They next infer that Noah uttered the curse not in the spirit of prophecy but of wrath, and that Moses represents the Deity as having purposely fulfilled this unjust and angry denunciation. Upon such assumptions they may easily triumph against such a proceeding as "contradicting all our notions of order and of justice;" for if their premises be just, their censure can scarce be too severe. But if it can be shown that their interpretation arises out of an entire misapprehension of the origin of the Patriarch's words, [then] their condemnation must be relinquished as being founded upon no real or solid grounds. This error of theirs, then, it shall be my endeavor to correct by giving as clear an explanation as possible of the nature and object of this memorable curse.

I would maintain then, first, that Canaan was not ordained to become "a servant of servants unto his brethren" as a punishment for the transgression of his father. Wherever the calamities inflicted upon the

Canaanites by the children of Israel are mentioned in Scripture, they are declared to be the consequence and the punishment of their own varied and increasing wickedness. Nor were the chosen people permitted to take possession of the promised land until the iniquity of its former inhabitants was full: "It is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD [Yahweh] is driving them out from before you" [Deut. 9:1, NKJV].

This is the declaration of Moses himself. And, consequently, he is so far from representing the curse of destruction upon some of the descendants of Canaan (and the subjection of others, as for instance the Gibeonites) to the posterity of Shem--as originating in the denunciation of Noah-- that he actually lays down a cause for their misfortunes which is altogether independent of Noah's words, and which would have produced those misfortunes even if Noah had never spoken of them at all.

The true statement of the case is therefore this: Not that the Patriarch's curse was the efficient cause of the slavery of the Canaanites, but that his curse conveyed a prediction of that misery which in the spirit of prophecy he foresaw would, in the latter days, befall a certain portion of the posterity of Ham. Is it not then a plain perversion of Scripture to suppose that the son was punished for the transgression of the father? For would not the posterity of Canaan have proved wicked and have been visited with the same vengeance whether there had or had not been found iniquity in Ham?

And is it not also an equal misapprehension of the truth to maintain that Ham himself was not punished by the prediction of Canaan's slavery? Surely, if there was anything which could torture his parental feelings and wound his parental pride, it was to be told of the humiliation and wretchedness which would overtake his children in some yet future generation. And surely, if there was any mode of convincing him of the irreverence of which he had been guilty and of the merit of the superior tenderness of his brethren towards their father's infirmities, it was to learn that the humiliation and wretchedness of his descendants would consist in their subjection to the posterity of those who had exceeded him in the duties of filial piety.

From these considerations it is evident that Noah's curse was a prediction, and that the prediction inflicted a direct and immediate penalty upon the fault of Ham. He was punished by that melancholy knowledge which the kindness of a benevolent Providence has almost universally withheld from man--the knowledge of that evil the future is to bring. Nor is this a solitary instance in Scripture of the spirit of prophecy being made subservient to

the purposes of retributive justice. We have a parallel case in the rebuke of Isaiah the prophet to Hezekiah the king. Hezekiah, in the pride of his heart, displayed before the ambassadors of Babylon "all the house of his treasures--the silver and gold, the spices and precious ointment, and all his armory--all that was found among his treasures. There was nothing in his house or in all his dominion that Hezekiah did not show them" [2 Kings 20:13, NKJV]. Thus did he betray the vanity of his mind and show that the wonders of the Lord (which had been wrought for his deliverance) instead of humbling him before the Almighty hand of God had through the natural infirmity of the flesh but served to lift him up in his own opinion and esteem.

What then was the method which the Lord took to correct and punish his pride? It was the very method which had been already adopted by Noah towards Ham. He sent unto him Isaiah the prophet, and Isaiah the prophet said,

'Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and what your fathers have accumulated until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,' says the LORD. 'And they shall take away some of your sons who will descend from you, whom you will beget; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon' [2 Kings 20:17,18, NKJV].

It was for the crimes of Judah that Judah was spoiled and led into a captivity in a foreign land. And all these predicted evils would have followed whether Isaiah had prophesied or no. But Isaiah prophesied like Noah, because Hezekiah had erred; and Hezekiah, because he had erred, was punished like Ham with the foreknowledge of the misfortunes which should befall his posterity--misfortunes of which, but for his error, he would have been permitted to live and die in a most blissful ignorance.

To confirm the conclusion we have thus drawn--the conclusion that Noah's curse was but a prophecy of evil to come, and that, consequently, Ham was sufficiently punished by being thus made acquainted with the future evil which would have otherwise remained concealed from his view, we may add that this opinion gives a satisfactory account of the mention of Canaan only as being doomed to slavery. For we shall find by examining the history of the children of Ham that for the posterity of Canaan principally, if not exclusively, was the doom of servitude reserved. All the other descendants of Ham were equal if not superior to those of Japheth and Shem. In Egypt more especially, we know that for ages the Israelites were in bondage to

their brethren the children of Ham. But all this glory of his race was withheld from the view of Ham, and the degradation of the Canaanites was alone revealed in order to punish him for his want [lack] of reverence in the character of a child by the contemplation of the misery which awaited him in the character of a father.

4. Shem and Japheth were free from this want of filial reverence. To them, therefore, there was communicated the blessing of being told the glory and spared the knowledge of the miseries of their race. But the glory of the race of each differed in some respect from that of the other, and therefore also did the blessings which were severally pronounced upon each. Shem was to be the father of the Messiah according to the flesh, and hence we read that Noah declared that "blessed should be the LORD God of Shem." Japheth inherited a large portion of the earth, and his posterity embraced the faith and possessions of his brother, and hence we read that the prediction of Noah was that "God should enlarge Japheth, and that he should dwell in the tents of Shem."

Thus does the principle of interpretation we have assumed solve every difficulty as it arises to view, and explains not only the cause of the curse upon Canaan but the reason also of the distinction between the blessing pronounced upon Japheth and Shem.

5. I know, indeed, but of one difficulty more which can be supposed to attend the opinion we have expressed on this subject. The spirit of prophecy, it may be said, is a favor conferred by Heaven only upon the most holy of men; and yet here we suppose it to have been conferred upon Noah as a consequence at least, if not as a reward, of his intemperance. But what, we may ask in return, was not Noah indeed one of the most righteous of men, and is all his former obedience to be canceled by a single and a casual infirmity?

The foreknowledge of the future then, if ever it was deserved, was deserved by him. But be this as it may, we affirm that the power of prescience, as it was here communicated, so far from being a reward was an actual penalty upon the recipient. In the blessing which God had before bestowed upon Noah, all his children were alike included and no difference was either implied or expressed: "Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying: 'And as for Me, behold, I establish My covenant with you and with your descendants after you'" [Gen. 9:8,9, NKJV]. No separation was here made nor any curse proclaimed nor any preference allowed. All were blessed in general terms, and the particular limitations were not specified

because [they] were not essential to the purpose for which the blessing was given, namely [in other words], because [they were] not requisite to assure man that God would still watch over him in mercy and never again "cut off all flesh" with a flood.

Had Noah, therefore, received no other revelation, he might have gone down to the grave in the pleasing hope that harmony and a mutual and equal participation of the kindness of Heaven would be the lot of all his sons. But this charm of hope was broken as soon as ever the infirmity of intemperance and the discovering of his nakedness by Ham had given occasion to a new communication of God's will. He was then constrained to pronounce a curse upon a part of his own posterity in that of Canaan, to destroy the equality of all his children, and foresee the subjection and servitude of one portion of his descendants to the other.

This was indeed a recompense but no reward--a recompense for his fault, which made him feel the anguish which every parent must experience in looking forward to some impending misery upon the fruit of his loins. Noah, therefore, as well as Ham was visited with judgment in the curse pronounced upon Canaan, and thus the equity of the whole proceeding seems complete.

6. The last point we proposed to consider was why Moses has selected this as almost the only incident in Noah's life subsequent to the flood which he has thought it right to record. It is usually said that it was to encourage the Israelites in their approaching contests with the nations of Canaan. This was no doubt one motive. But a still more cogent reason may be found in the remarks we have already advanced.

One of the great objects of the Scriptures seems to be to detail the gradual development of the primeval promise which declared that the woman's seed should bruise the serpent's head. For this purpose we find each of the more eminent Patriarchs--Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--making (at one period or other in their lives) a formal election of one of their children in whose line this promise should be continued and fulfilled.

Now the first blessing pronounced upon Noah after the flood, made (as we have seen) no such distinction among his sons. Had not, therefore, the spirit of prophecy come forth a second time to supply the defect, a link would have been wanting in the connected chain of individuals designated to this holy privilege--a chain which now reaches from the creation to the coming of Christ. But the narration of Noah's intemperance and prophetic

blessings has filled up what would otherwise have been wanting in the prophetic scheme and justified us, while tracing the lineal descent of the promise, to look to Abraham as its natural heir. Moses, therefore, may be regarded as fully authorized in having selected this circumstance from the rest of the acts of Noah because of its importance to the general purposes of revelation.

I have now shown that Noah's fault originated in the frailty of human nature and by no means deserved the levity and exposure it met with from Ham, who as one of the sons of Noah ought to have been the last to have triumphed over his infirmities. I have also shown that the curse upon Canaan was, in fact, a prediction of the evil which befell his posterity in after times, and that such a prediction--by inflicting upon Ham the unwelcome knowledge of the humiliation and misery of his child--was a direct and immediate punishment of his want of filial reverence. I have still further shown that the foreknowledge of this servitude of the Canaanites must have been a grief and therefore a punishment to Noah. Lastly, I have accounted for the introduction of this incident by Moses because of its essential connection with the general scheme of prophecy. And what more than this can be required to remove every difficulty attending the incident, I am at a loss to imagine.

Under this view of the transaction, it will surely be allowed that we ought no longer to indulge a doubt with regard to the propriety of the predictive curse of Noah, or a censure against the Scriptures for having recorded its utterance.

Lecture XIII from *On Scripture Difficulties* by C. [Christopher] Benson (Cambridge: Printed by J. Smith, Printer to the University, for Baldwin, Cradock, & Joy, London, 1843). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized, and long paragraphs have been divided.