

## Canaan and the Tower of Babel

Genesis 11

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

We've been talking loved ones, about how God created the nations and especially how he peopled the earth after the flood. And in connection with the way the nations developed, we studied in some detail, the record that was given of a strange incident in Genesis 9, so you might want to look at that. It's the incident where Noah became drunk drinking the wine out of his own vineyard and how Ham, one of his sons came in and saw him naked and then kind of, from what we can gather, made fun of it to the brothers. And you get that in Genesis 9:22, "And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father," Noah, "and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father."

So they of course felt that their father required that honor and they were ashamed of what Ham had done, kind of making fun of seeing his dad naked. "Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, 'Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers.' He also said, 'Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.'" And that whole series of promises and curses and blessings does explain a great deal about how the nations developed in later years. And last Sunday you may remember that we tried to explain the curse that was put on Canaan and of course explain that the curse was actually put on Canaan because of Ham's lack of honor to his father Noah. And so I, you remember, shared this was a curse on Ham and it fell on his sons.

The significance of that for those loved ones whose grandparents and great grandparents didn't come from Ireland but came from Africa, and who are here tonight, is that some of Ham's sons were Africans. You can see Cush was the father of the Ethiopians, Egypt of the Egyptians, Phut of the Libyans, and Canaan of the Canaanites. So if you say that the curse came upon Ham himself then all Hamites, as it were, came under that curse. And I was drawn into that, I'll show you in a moment how, I was drawn into saying that also; "Yes, of course the curse came upon Ham." It's evident in the early days how the Carthaginians and the Phoenicians even though they had an initial success in world politics, yet very quickly Japheth and his descendants, that is all of us, us Europeans and Americans, we very quickly became the rulers of the world. So it works out in that way.

Except that you have to read verse 25 as it stands. And in fact God is very careful about this, "He said, 'Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers.'" Even though Ham was the son that dishonored his father it is interesting to see that God put the curse upon Canaan, Ham's son. In other words, he put it only on one of Ham's sons -- Canaan. That was the son that begot the Hittites and the Amorites, and the Girgashites, and the Hivites, and all the people that inhabited the land of Canaan. And there the curse is immediately evident in history, if you just keep your finger there on in Genesis and look over to Joshua 9 it's very obvious how the curse fell upon Canaan and his descendants.

In Joshua 9:23 Joshua is speaking to the Canaanites in the land of Canaan that the Israelites had begun to take over and he says "Now therefore you are cursed, and some of you shall always be

slaves, hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God.” “Some of you will always be slaves for the house of my God.” And that makes sense, the curse was put on Canaan, Joshua is speaking to the Canaanites and he’s saying, “Some of you will always be slaves in the house of my God.” And in history that worked out, in the history of the Jews in the land of Canaan, some of those peoples were always, during their lifetime, slaves.

Now of course, what I was drawn into and I’ll show you in a moment how, I was drawn into the normal interpretation which is that the curse was put on Ham and all the Hamites and that includes of course, all the Africans, and all the loved ones here tonight who are descendants of the Africans. And I would like to say that I take that back -- and I’ll show you how I got into it. All you have to do is read the English Bible there as it stands and you’ll see this curse was not put on the other sons of Ham, but was put on Canaan.

So let me show you how I entered into it and why it’s important to read the Bible and go gently on the commentators. I’ll try and point it out to you; this is [Eric] Sauer, who is a very good man and normally a very reliable commentator. See how he begins, “The accursed and unblessed condition of the Hamites.” Then let’s just jump down to the second paragraph, “In the most fateful manner the history of the world has corresponded to this prophecy. In Palestine through the Semitic Jews especially under Joshua, and Solomon, the Canaanites were subject to it” and that’s right “and in Syria and North Africa as Phoenicians and Carthaginians,” and then he gets into the other sons of Ham you see, “They were conquered by the Japhetic Persians, Grecians, and Romans, but the other Hamites who were not indeed cursed,” so he admits that -- he admits the other sons of Ham were not cursed, “but the other Hamites who were not indeed cursed but were assigned to a lack of blessedness. After a prosperous development in the beginning especially under Nimrod, later by the Phoenicians and Egyptians, have again, and again, had to groan under the yoke of oppression, especially the Negro.” You’ll excuse that word, he wasn’t born early enough to know how he should call us -- I don’t think we care too much what they call us if they respect us. “Have again, and again, had to groan under the yoke of oppression especially the Negro, the last particularly in America after the introduction of slavery. Not until after the North American Civil War of 1861 was slavery abolished in the United States. Even now it still prevails in a great portion of Central Africa, especially in the Mohammedan states.

Now the weakness of the whole statement is that he takes us from a lack of blessedness and he turns that into a curse and says, “The rest of the Hamites -- you see that explains why there was slavery among black people.” In fact, that’s not fair and it’s not correct exegesis. In fact, the curse was not put on all the sons of Ham at all. It seems to me plainly it was put on Canaan and the Canaanites and it seems there’s no justification for saying that the slavery that so many loved ones among the black people suffered was due to this curse. It seems to me, no; it was due to our downright sinfulness.

Now, you can see how that was carried on by other commentators. Some of you know that I use another man called Kiel who is a German. You can see a little more of the elaboration of it. “Although this curse was expressly pronounced among Canaan alone,” and he admits that, “The fact that Ham had no share in Noah’s blessing either for himself or his other sons, was a sufficient proof that his whole family was included by implication in the curse.”

Now, that’s a guide to yourselves -- no, it wasn’t sufficient proof and I think I can share why they are drawn into that. Even if it was to fall chiefly upon Canaan, and then you go on and you’ll extrapolate from that and you’ll say, “History confirms the supposition. “The Canaanites were

partly exterminated and partly subjected to the lowest form of slavery by the Israelites that belonged to the family of Shem and those who still remained were reduced by Solomon to the same condition. The Phoenicians along with..." and again, he gets into the other sons of Ham, but it fits history so you kind of rewrite the Bible to fit the history. "And the Egyptians who all belonged to the family of Canaan were subjected by the Japhetic Persians, Macedonians, and Romans, and the remainder of the Japhetic tribes either shared the same fate or still sigh like the Negroes for example, and other African tribes beneath the yoke of the most crushing slavery." And so it's interesting how you're drawn into a misinterpretation by history -- and you can't actually do that. You can't look at history and try to look back and make the Bible fit it. You have to interpret the Bible as it stands.

What I would like, really, to share with you tonight, is the blessing that it was to me last Sunday evening as I reflected upon it, when some of the brothers and sisters who are being talked about here, came up, and their attitude to me was that which builds authority in Jesus' body. It wasn't, "Oh, that must be wrong," in spite of the fact that it's a terrible thing because obviously some people use that word that is applied to the Canaanites, "You will also be slaves," to actually apply it to black people and say, "You're always meant to be slaves." And they came up not with that attitude to me at all, and I appreciate your love, and your kindness, and your trust in me as your Pastor. They were just asking me, "How do we interpret this? And how would you interpret that?" And I remember Bob Scott who studied black history in Ghana for a while and he said "There was an English professor who showed how a Hamite had been actually on the throne of the Roman Empire." And yet he was very loving and kind, he wasn't telling me I was wrong, he was just saying, "Now, isn't that interesting?"

I would like to tell them how much I appreciate their love, because I really didn't sleep all of Sunday night because I felt there was something jarring in even what I had shared. And yet it came from these dear fellows [indicating the commentaries] and they have always seemed so solid. So I would like to thank you for your love, and your kindness, and of course to say to all of us if you love those of us who are in authority and pray for us, it gives us the best chance to seek truth instead of ending up self-defensive. But I would like to thank the loved ones, who are descendants of these dear people here, for their kindness to me in that regard.

Now, does anybody want to question? Oh, I'm sorry I would like to say I think where the misinterpretation comes from is an overwhelming prejudice that probably existed very strongly in parts of the evangelical church and had that kind of attitude and takes advantage of the misinterpretation about Ham to kind of justify an attitude of prejudice. Any questions on it loved ones, or anybody see it any better than I'm saying it?

[Question Inaudible]

Obviously, what we're talking about is the movement of races and nations and we're not saying this happened to every individual. But I agree Linda, even if you're talking about nations and races, it's simply truth is truth and I would love all of you at least to be able to answer plainly on that issue; the curse was on Ham, was not on Ham's sons, but on Canaan, on one son, and that son begot the people in Canaan.

[Question Inaudible]

Bob is saying we tend not to understand Africa before the slave trade, and the difficulty is we take

all our understanding of this from the time of slavery in America.

[Question Inaudible]

I thought it meant what one of these commentators said, “And partly subjected to the lowest form of slavery by the Israelites.” I thought -- that’s what it meant -- it simply meant the lowest of the low of the Canaanites. That’s what I understood. The Hebrew language tends to do that, it repeats. The Hebrew language is not very subtle, as many of you probably know, not like the Greek language is, but the Hebrew language is rather a mechanical language concerned with what you see, and touch, and hear and in order to emphasis intensity it tends to just repeat the same word.

[Question Inaudible]

It seems to me that God did that because he knew what was going to take place in the life of the descendants of Shem and that they would be entering – the promised land would in fact be Canaan and that the whole thing would work out that way. And in fact, there is something that we can’t explain, that we don’t know, in what way Canaan was related to Ham, whether he was his dearest and his youngest son and therefore most precious to him or not, but there is obviously some inner causation there that brought that about. It certainly makes sense of the later history but it seems to me it’s even deeper than that. There must have been some way in which Canaan was the apple of his father’s eye.

[Comment] I’ve read a lot of commentaries and so many of them, so many of the books on Socrates deal with what they see rather than what the Bible says. They actually believe what they see and not the Bible.

What was interesting was the three of us were kind of all – well, they weren’t –embarrassed. I was embarrassed because in Ireland – we had prejudice against other people, but we didn’t have prejudice against people who had different color of skin to us. So it was a strange situation that I came into in America and we were equally – well, I was more embarrassed, we were all kind of feeling strange about it and that was what blessed me so much, that you men were ready to say “Good, we go with the Bible whatever it means.” And that means so much.

It seems to me if we are people of God’s book, and if we love this book even if it destroys us, then he will bless us. That’s what made such a difference to me; not merely your trustfulness in me, but your readiness to go in the direction of the Bible whatever. Now loved ones [Martin] Luther said, “The church must sit at the bar of Holy Scripture,” and we’re always going to be right if we do that, whatever it means for us.

Well loved ones, what we should do now is turn to the next chapter and try to look just for a few moments at the whole account of the Tower of Babel. And I would just remind you that God’s plan for us in this world was that we would use our free wills to walk with him in a close intuitive friendship and to develop the world in the way he had created it to be developed. And you remember Adam and Eve rejected that -- rejected God’s friendship -- and used their free will to begin to establish their own ideas of what was right and what was wrong, and they began to develop the world for themselves according to what they thought was good and what they thought was evil.

The result of that was that they ended up destroying each other. Cain killed Abel, and then you

remember there was a development of violence that developed right through the years and ended up with Lamech who seemed to slaughter whoever he wished. So when the earth was filled with violence like that, by men using their free will against each other, God came down and destroyed the whole place with a flood. Then after the flood subsided, about a year later, God took Noah aside and gave him authority, and gave him the first law. It was the law of capital punishment in order to keep men and women from destroying each other so that they would have as much opportunity as possible to receive Jesus' Spirit.

Now, what happened when God gave that authority to man is recorded in this chapter, 11:1, "Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there." Now what's interesting about that is Shinar was mentioned just on the other column there of that page Chapter 10:9. In fact verse 8 gives you the genealogy, it talks of the first man who became an oppressor, "Cush became the father of Nimrod; he was the first on earth to be a mighty man. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord," and you remember we said the Hebrew really means "against the Lord" "he was a mighty hunter against the Lord; therefore it is said, 'Like Nimrod a mighty hunter against the Lord.' The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of Shinar." In other words, that was the first great imperial kingdom where man took the authority that God had given him and he used it to oppress others.

It might be good to mention to you that the giving of authority was obviously also the working of something in other men's hearts that would make them submit to that authority. You need to see it that way, you need to see that it wasn't simply authority but obviously God worked something after the flood in men's hearts to enable order to be brought among them. So there is authority today and there are people ready to submit to that authority outside of Jesus because it's a mark of common grace that is given to all men and so that's what we're talking about, not just the authority, but the readiness in other men to submit to that authority. And so verse 3, "And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.'" And so they rose up in pride and where they had before used free will to destroy each other now they used this authority, and the principle of authority, and the tendency of others to submit to that authority to rise up in pride and to make a reputation for themselves.

They wanted to hold themselves together. Again, it was the desire to be God: "Let's close ourselves in so that we can't be scattered so that we can do whatever we want." And then in verse 5, "And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, 'Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.'" And God saw that he had given them power to engineer genes, he had given them power to develop computers, he had given them power to probe space, he had given them power to change things, and he had given power actually to take over the universe. He knew they had that power and now he saw them using the authority that he had given them to begin to move in that direction and he knew of course, what they would do would be to fill the whole universe with their own selfish proud image.

So in verse 7, "Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." Because he knew if you let them go on it wouldn't be long before they would create such havoc in the universe as a whole that nobody would ever have a chance of meeting Jesus or of Jesus even being born. "So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the

earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.” And all of our history is a vain attempt to correct that, to correct that scattering.

That wasn't the origin of nations. The origin of nations was as was outlined in Genesis 10, but that is the origin of many different languages. And the purpose of it was loved ones, to prevent men and women gathering together with such power of authority that they would take over the whole universe and fill it with their own selfishness and pride and prevent even Jesus being born in the earth let alone anybody ever touching his Spirit, so God scattered people. At the beginning he gave them free will; they used it in violence to destroy each other so he destroyed the whole earth. Then he gave them authority and laws and they used that to rise up against even him and to rebel and take over the universe and so he came down and scattered them. Instead of destroying the earth, you remember he promised he would never again do that, he brought about this scattering.

Now loved ones, it has had great repercussions. Maybe you'd look back at verse 1, “Now the whole earth had one language and few words.” Some people say it was Hebrew, some people say it was Aramaic, it probably was some ancient language that there is no trace of today. But it did mean that we had not only one language in so far as the same vocabulary, and the same grammar, and the same phraseology, the same syntax, but it also meant that there was at that time a unity of mental concepts. You remember how words are what convey thoughts; you can't have a thought without words. You can have an aspiration in your spirit without words but you can't have a thought without a word. So when God divided the people up and scattered them throughout the earth, and scattered their language so that they could no longer understand one another into actually far more than a thousand languages and dialects, he also brought about a separation of mental concepts. And it's very interesting that that still exists today.

There are concepts that I noticed you in America have that we don't have in Britain and there are concepts that we have that you don't have. There are ways in which we think very differently about things. You will very quickly mow down an old building, perhaps rightly, we'll not quite worship the old building but we'll think a lot about it. Now, on your side that's a great advantage, you get rid of the slums. It's bad when it comes to knowledge. In one way you often feel, “We're the first race that ever inhabited the world. We've just thought this thought for the first time and that makes American thought and philosophy very exciting.” The bad thing about it is that you think nobody ever knew anything before you were born and so there's a tendency to downgrade the past and often not to learn from the past and often a lack of humility towards the past.

Now often in Europe we have a great respect for the past. It can often paralyze thought and paralyze research, but it is a very different way of looking at things and its part of what makes it difficult for us to understand each other when we meet in operations or organizations like The United Nations. It's interesting, the language conveys concepts that often we have no word for, “hupomone” is something that I think Clyde, you referred to this morning, “hupomone” is a Greek word and it really means – “hupa” is under and “maino” becomes remain, is to remain under. And really “hupomone” is to remain under a trial as long as God wants you to. We do our best in English, we translate it patience but it's terrible, you know, patience. Well, patience isn't the translation of that deep word at all. That deep word has a sense of suffering, a sense of sticking at the thing, and keeping on keeping on that patience barely touches the edge of.

So loved ones, one of the things that happened when our language was confounded was the uniformity

of our mental life was broken and divided. That applied to conceptions in religion and philosophy. The nation differs from nation in its concepts or religion and philosophy. In many ways we seem almost to produce mutual contradictions in our philosophies. In many ways you with your belief in pragmatism that if it works it's right, in many ways that's so good but often of course, it can drive you into the very place which begot communism "if it works it's right" and it drives you away from the absolutes. Often there are philosophies in the old countries that make life almost impossible as far as progress is concerned. And so there was a division in concepts of religion and philosophy.

There was also, when the languages were divided, there was a sense in which we parted from our knowledge of God. There was a degeneration of faith and religion that took place at this same time because the original knowledge of God was through nature and through conscience, and through history. Adam would tell his sons what had happened, and Seth would tell his sons what had happened so there was a three-fold revelation of God in nature, and in conscience, and in history.

Now when the nations were separated like that those are the three areas where the heathen religions went astray. And so if you go right through the Pagan religions you find that they go astray in one or other of those. You look at the Babylonian account of creation and it is a dreadful deterioration of the original historical account in Genesis. Or you begin to look into the idea of God in Hinduism and you see that it is all confused and contorted and distorted in connection with nature; there's a mixture of God as being one with his creation and God at times being separate from his creation. But that's where the heathen religions have gone astray.

Conscience has been distorted utterly in many of the religions. Many things that Mohammad allows are things that were not allowed in the Bible at all, and so there was a scattering and deterioration as far as religion was concerned. It was interesting that in some way men still hungered after God. That's in Romans 1:20, "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened."

So even so in some sense they hungered after God, yet they did not give thanks to him as God; they ceased to thank God for what he had done for them, and so they began to drift away from him and moved into a lot of the nature religion. They started to have dreams and they sensed that there was some reality in the dreams because they could see images move and so they felt there was some kind of spirit life beyond the world. And they saw also that at death when a man lay on a cold slab there was something had departed from him, so they had the idea of spirits from that. And then they saw of course, the branches of a tree move in the wind, and they saw the water at the end of the village street moving over the rocks, and they sensed now there is movement there, and there is movement in dreams, and when movement ceases in a person he's dead, now there must be spirits in these things that move. And so you remember, animistic religion developed as they started to worship the spirit of the well, or the spirit of the mountain, or the spirit of the stream. And in this way the heathen religions are all a deterioration of the original revelation.

That might help some of you who in philosophy have been sold the old liberal idea that the whole world started off in polytheism and gradually evolved into an elevated monotheism. No, teaching of scripture is that God revealed himself as one true God to all men and then as they were scattered through their disobedience the polytheism developed. And so that came about not only through a mentalist conception but of course there was demonic activity also, because Satan had his spirits

out in the world, and he was able to create real spiritual deception as people began to think there were spirits in nature.

So you come against the kind of thing you get in Acts 16:16 where one of the apostles came against that spirit in the slave girl. It's Paul you remember, "As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. She followed Paul and us, crying, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.' And this she did for many days. But Paul was annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, 'I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour." That was one of the spirits that served the whole movement of prophecy in the heathen religions. So there was not only a scattering of language, but there was a whole deterioration because of it, and a whole sinking down from the original concept of God.

Then it brought international tension too; men and women, in some way, tried to get themselves together again and so throughout the history of nations you get that centrifugal force of the empires; the great Nimrods, the Nebuchadnezzars, the Cyrus', the Napoleons', all drawing people together in a coercive way. So you get them being brought together and yet there's the centrifugal action all the time of this original scattering taking place where there's this movement for nationhood that began especially in 1848 as far as Europe was concerned -- the whole declaration that we are separate peoples.

And of course that found itself in its most extreme form in Matthew 24:6, a form that we know very well because it's the extremist example of that centrifugal force where they're whirling around so fast that they're being scattered as the years pass. Matthew 24:6, "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars." And so there have been increasingly the wars that men got into because of this scattering. And yet loved ones, the whole goal of God is unity; he scattered in order to destroy the counterfeit unity -- that's why he scattered us. Because we were pulling ourselves together in a counterfeit unity that came from the coercive power of our own wills over each other and it was a wrong use of authority. His will is that we'll come together through the willing submission of our wills to Jesus, that we may all be one even as he and his Father are one.

So even in the midst of God's judgment here is the beginning and the preparation for salvation. It makes sense of course, of history, because this false unity began in the city of Cain, carried on in this land of Babel or Babylonian, and carried on right down through history in the control of the Babylonians, and you get a lot of that teaching in Daniel, and then carried on down even to our present age. And then when the Antichrist comes it will find its completion because the Antichrist will come and say, "I will bring unity into this absolutely dislocated international situation." And he will actually complete the whole Tower of Babel again and bring it together and then Jesus will come in the second coming and will destroy the Antichrist and will manifest his own body, which is God's original intention for unity among the nations. You can see what God did at the end of the Tower of Babel incident if you look at it in Chapter 11.

Genesis 11:10, "These are the descendants of Shem." God had tried to reveal salvation to all men and now he finally committed them to the judgment of the Tower of Babel to being forever scattered and disunited and he turned to one particular race, the descendants of Shem. When you read right through you come to that great watershed in history in verse 27, "Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram." And that is the beginning of a whole new development in God's world when he turned finally from man as a whole, and he turned to a special race, the race of the Semites or the Hebrews, the descendants of Abraham.

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we thank you for the indications in your dear word of the dangerous developments in our very own society and our own world. Lord, we thank you. Thank you that we are not men and women who have no light for our feet -- that you have given us your word which is a light to our feet and enables us to read history and to know what is happening. And above all our Father, we thank you to see that it is all finally under your control, that nothing happens that you do not know about or that you have not under your control.

So Lord, we thank you for this chapter and we thank you for this very incident whereby you stopped us when we were about to destroy ourselves again. We thank you Lord, for our own lives; that you've time and time again given us another chance. And we thank you Lord, for the way you've forbore with us, and shown patience with us, and long suffering. We thank you for the things you've saved us from individually. We thank you Lord that you have preserved us to this day and this time so that we'll still have the chance to receive Jesus as our Savior. And Lord, when we look at all the trouble you've gone through, all the pain and agony to give us this chance, we see we stand on the blood of many men and many women and we owe many people a lot, to be able to sit in this room and hear your gospel. So Father, we thank you. Thank you for all your love and all your care and patience with us and Lord, we do want to receive Jesus and to allow him to be the Lord of our lives, which is the whole purpose of your making us. Lord, we thank you.

And now the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and ever more.