The Table of Nations

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[0:00] Our scripture reading this morning is from Genesis, the book of Genesis, the end of chapter 9 through chapter 10. And I'll just read a portion of that text.

And so we'll begin with Genesis chapter 9, verse 24 through chapter 10, verse 1. So if you'd like to turn there in a hard copy of the Bible, there's Bibles all around the church.
Please do feel free to grab one of those. It's always great to have a hard copy of the Bible in front of you when we study it together and think about it together. It's also printed in your bulletin and the words will appear on the screen as well.
This is the Holy Word. Well, our reading this morning from Genesis 10 was and is a big genealogy. And you come to genealogies, as the old saying goes, and they can sometimes be a recipe for a Sunday morning nap.
But we say today, by no means. This is no boring genealogy because it's the Bible, but also because genealogies are not boring at all when you look at them closely and really understand what they're doing and how God's used them in the Bible.
[1:05] And so we're in a series on Genesis 4 to 11 called Grace Amid the Ruins. And the questions have been the same every time we've gathered around these texts.

What's wrong with us? The answer of Genesis 4 to 11 is it's sin. Sin is a disease of the heart. And it's really a predator. That's the way Genesis 4 puts it, a disorder, desire that seeks to dominate us, and we must not let it.
And then the second question that has come up over and over again in Genesis 4 to 11 is who is going to save this world from the problem of sin and evil? And that comes up from the promise, the first gospel promise in Genesis 3.15, which says that one day the seed of Eve would crush the head of the serpent.
A child, a son would be born. And so we're asking the question, who is that one that will deal with the problem of sin, the very thing that is so wrong with humanity and with the world?
Hence, genealogies. Genealogies come up in the Bible so often because the Bible is tracing the question, who is the one that is to be born, the seed of the woman that would crush the head of the serpent?
[2:18] And so Genesis is actually constructed as 10 different genealogies. That's really the structure of the book of Genesis. And so that line that opens chapter 10, verse 1, these are the generations of, shows up 11 times across 10 genealogies.

And this is the fourth genealogy that we have so far in the Bible, and we've looked at three of them already. Far from boring genealogies here, we've got the table of nations, the origin of all people groups, not only in the ancient Near East, but also still today.
And so this genealogy tells us so much about problems that we are still facing in God's providence on this Remembrance Sunday about all the conflicts that are going on in the world.
There's so many lessons here for us that matter right now. And so let me draw out three of them. And the three are this. First, we see here that brothers are in conflict.
Secondly, that we are equal. And then lastly, we'll look at the one who broke down the wall of hostility. So first, what we learn here is that there are brothers in conflict.
[3:32] So we read from the end of chapter 9, verse 24, and we learn that Noah, after the flood, has three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

And we picked up right at where we ended last week, and that's that Ham, one of the sons of Noah, has committed great evil against his family. And we won't rehearse all that that meant from last week.

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But he has brought shame again into the world after the flood. Because Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth all brought their hearts off the ark, and their hearts, we read at the end of Genesis 8, are sinful, we expected that after this, what seems almost like new creation after the flood, there would be a fall story, like Genesis chapter 3.
And that's exactly what we looked at last week, a fall story, where even in Noah and his family, through his passivity and his son's willingness to commit such a great evil, to let sin rule over his life, shame has re-entered the world, so to speak, signaled in that visible sign of nakedness that we saw in Genesis 3, and again in Genesis 9, that speaks of what's going on in the interior life, the shame that we bear when we have guilt.
And that's what's just happened. And so, an angry father, Noah, who has to also be angry at himself, how much was he, we don't know. But he turns and he curses, not Ham exactly, but Ham and technically Canaan, Ham's son.
[5:02] And so you can see that in chapter 9, verse 25, Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servant, will he be to his brothers? And then right after that, in verse 26, you expect him to say, But blessed be Shem and Japheth, because they covered over the nakedness of their father, the shame we talked about last week of sin.

But that's not what the text says. If you look at it closely in verse 26, he says instead, Cursed be Canaan, blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem. And so the blessing he gives, the worship he gives is to God.
And what's happening there is this juxtaposition that's taking place, that's participating in the whole of what Genesis has been doing. And that's that the fundamental antithesis in this world is not actually between two brothers.
It's between the work of God, the Lord, blessed be the Lord, in redeeming humanity through the one offspring of the woman Eve, and the curse of sin that sin brings about in this world, that is in this moment simply represented by Ham's evil.
And so the conflict here that we're being told, and not cursed be Canaan, blessed be Shem, but cursed be Canaan because of sin, blessed be the Lord, is this battle that's going on throughout redemptive history, world history between the offspring of the woman Eve and the sin of the serpent.
[6:28] And that's why the blessing is chosen and written in this way. And so within that, blessed be Shem because blessed be the Lord and Japheth. And so Japheth and Shem are honored for what they've done and covering over their father.

And here Ham is cursed through the lineage of Canaan because of what he's done. And these are the words, remember, of an angry dad after a great evil had been committed against him and his wife and his family.
Now that leads into this genealogy, the table of nations. And if you were to go through and count the number of nations that are listed here, you might not be surprised to find out that there are 70 nations listed because the importance of the number seven in the Bible.
And that means that we're being told here, this is not every nation that existed in the ancient Near East. This is not every people group that came up out of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. But this is a comprehensive representative list of the majority of the people groups that come out of Shem, Ham, and Japheth.
And here you've got just a list of where all the people groups went. Now, if we use more visuals at St. C's, we don't in sermons, but we would put up a map maybe and mark so you could see all the different places that all the nations went.
[7:41] But just very briefly, Japheth, the first that's listed here from verse 2 to 5, his people groups that come out of his lineage go into Asia Minor, which we now call Turkey.

Paul will call it Asia Minor in the New Testament. And they go all the way into places like Armenia and Persia. And one of the names on the list is Tiras, one of his sons.
Tiras is the old name for the Etruscans, which is the Italian peoples that come eventually into Italy. And so you see how far Japheth's people spread east and west all over the world, including the people of the coastlands.
And then after that, you've got the list of Ham from verse 6 down to 20. And his people spread into North Africa. That's Cush. And then, of course, Egypt. We know Egypt. And then Canaan.
And so the text actually follows the people of Canaan, the Canaanites, in a counterclockwise motion. So if you were to map every people group that's listed here, you would find out it's a

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counterclockwise motion around the entire area that we would eventually call the Promised Land or Israel.
[8:46] And so he's mapping them all the way down in a massive circle down into Saudi Arabia and back up into Lebanon and Israel, the Levant, around the Jordan River. And so you can see the widespread of these sons that come out of each of these families.

But then, all of a sudden, unexpectedly, in a genealogy, normally not the case, we have a little moment of a narrative.
So this is a genealogy. But then in verse 8, there's a genre shift. And that is not normal for genealogies. And so that is where the writer Moses wants you to cast your gaze. That's where he's showing you this is what's really important is the genre shift into a narrative.
And here it is in verse 8. Cush fathered Nimrod. And then he tells a little story. He was the first on earth to be a mighty man. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord.
And so it said, like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord. Now, I would imagine Nimrod was not pleased with his parents for that name. It's a tough name to have to live with. Maybe that's where we get the negative sense of a name like that.
[9:52] But Nimrod, you look at the text. Verse 9, it says, Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord. And you think, wait a minute. He was before the Lord. Is this like Noah who was before the Lord, who was blameless in the sight of the Lord?

And the answer is that you've got to know what the word Nimrod means in Hebrew. And it's a parable unto itself. The word Nimrod in Hebrew means we will rebel.
And so it's telling you a story like the story of Genesis 3, like the story of Ham in Genesis 9, just through his name. And then when it uses the phrase, he's a mighty hunter before the Lord, that phrase, mighty hunter, shows up exactly in Genesis 6, verse 4, to describe the men of renown that were told in Genesis 6, caused the violence on earth that corrupted the whole earth and caused the judgment of the flood to come.
And you see what it's saying? It's saying that through this man and his lineage, the earth will become again as corrupted, as broken, as sinful, as in the days of the flood. So it's a completely negative picture of all the sin that Nimrod and his family will bring about into the world.
And so, dear reader, dear reader of the Old Testament, if you have read the Old Testament, then these names should jump out to you that come from his lineage. And so just after that, we read that the beginning of his kingdom is Babel.
[11:15] Come back next week. And then keep going. What is Babel? Babel is proto-Babylon. It's the, Babylon is the representative antithesis of all that is good in the world throughout the whole Old Testament and New Testament story.

Babel becomes a symbol of evil, of course, across the Bible. But then after that, we learn from that land in verse 11, his people went into Assyria and built Nineveh.
Now, if you are an Old Testament Bible reader, you should know now that it is Babylon and Assyria that come out of Nimrod's decisions. And those are the two great enemies of God's people all throughout.
And look, it keeps going. You could talk about Egypt, who's going to enslave Israel not long after this. And then after that, eventually, the Canaanites and the Philistines list. All from this lineage.
And you say, boy, this is like the boss list of a video game. Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Nineveh, the Canaanites. If you know the rest of the Old Testament. And so what one of the scholars says about this is that this is, bear with this phrase, but symbolic ethnogeography.
[12:23] And what they mean by that is that right here at the beginning of the Bible, we're almost being painted the whole story of the Bible through the lens of this genealogy and the battles that are going to take place between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent that are going to come.

And you say, well, with who is this conflict going to take place? And then there it is, verse 21. To Shem also was born the children of Eber.
And Eber is the first way of saying the word Hebrew. And so here we have Babylon and Assyria and Egypt and the Canaanites and Nineveh and the Philistines.
And then verse 21 in conflict with the children of Eber, which is the Hebrews. And so you can see how this is telling you almost the story of all that's going to take place later.

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Now, you look at this text. What does it mean? And you look at this text and by first instinct, you think this is a conflict between bloodlines that have been separated from each other.
[13:25] And it is tempting to look at this and read it how we might naturally read it. And I say naturally because this is the way it has been read so often in human history that the line of Ham, the line of Canaan, the line of Nimrod by bloodline, by DNA is bad.

And, you know, that there's good bloodlines and bad bloodlines. And they're set against each other in this moment right here. And what we call this grand error in world history, including sometimes sadly in church history, is race essentialism.
And race essentialism says that by way of DNA, by way of bloodline, there are certain ethnicities that have traits that are just true of them no matter what. And some of those traits are a dispensation, a proportional bent towards evil.
And that logic has been used so often. And unfortunately, this text has been used many times in world history to say things like that. And so consider Richard Dawkins. Richard Dawkins reads Genesis 10, the great atheist that so many know, like Christopher Hitchens.
And he says in his book, The God Delusion, that this text shows us that the Bible is racist. And unfortunately, there's also been people who profess to follow Jesus, and so often in world history, that have used Genesis 9 and 10 to look at the curse of Ham and say that because the African people groups and nations come out of Ham's curse, Canaan's curse, that it justifies slavery historically.
[15:03] Just one of those, there's a man by the name of Bob Jones, Sr. in the States, who gave an Easter address on the radio in 1960. And the question that he asked was, is segregation scriptural?

And he used Genesis 10 and Acts 17 and Deuteronomy 32 to say God has fixed the boundaries of people, groups, and nations, and segregation is taught as clear as anything that was ever said.
And this genealogy has been one of the primary places that racism has been justified, where this text has been so exploited for centuries.
And so in the academy and the university world, we call what at a popular level we call racism the sin of ethnic partiality. And so this text has been used in that way so often. Now, as much as we would like to think that we're past this in contemporary 21st century culture, many of you will probably know very well that race essentialism, or we could call ethno-nationalism, or kinism, which is a way, a movement that tries to justify segregation, is only surging in popularity again.
And it is because this has been a sin that the human race has never been able to get away from.
And one great scholar who wrote a book called The Curse of Ham, a Princeton scholar, he says that when he studied the way this text has been used and studied different nation and people groups all throughout history, he writes, every culture has always claimed that some other ethnicity is inferior to them.
[16:41] And what we see in distinction is that everybody effectively says, I'm better than somebody. It's a universal disposition of the human heart, and it just changes on who it is that you point to to say, I'm better than them.

And so what we learn here is that from the beginning, after the flood, there is a conflict between brothers that results in a conflict between people groups and a conflict between nations.
And it's a sin in the human heart that has always been with us and still is. We, because of our sinfulness, have the instinct to degrade those that are distant from us and not like us.
Secondly, however, what does this text actually teach? This text actually teaches that we are equal.
What the table is meant to show us here is the exact opposite of these evil ways that it's been used.
Let me say it like this. The curse of Ham, the curse of Canaan here, like any issue of curse in the Bible, is never an issue of DNA. It's never an issue of biology.
[17:44] It's never an issue of skin color, but only an issue of morality. So what constitutes a curse in the Bible? We'll go back to Genesis 3, and what constitutes a curse is sin.

Not who you are, what you are, not what people group you come from, but the curse is upon who?
Not just Ham, not just Canaan, but every human being from the time of Genesis 3 because of our moral problem at the bottom of our souls.
And so the words of God to Canaan apply to all of us. He says, sin is crouching at the door of every heart, not just of the individual heart, but of entire cultures too, because we know very well, as we remember today, that entire cultures can get swept up in great sin.

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And that's not an issue of DNA. That's not an issue of biology. It's an issue of sinfulness, of mere morality. And he says to Canaan, you must not let that happen. You must rule over it.
So what's the difference in the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent? It is nothing but this. It's those who come in repentance, acknowledging their sinfulness, and then those who embrace sin to the uttermost.
[18:49] That's the only difference in designation here that we see. So the table, as Walter Brueggemann puts it, one scholar, he says, the table of nations here gives us an unparalleled ecumenical vision of human reality, that we are equal, and we're equal in more ways than one.

And let me give you a couple of them, a few of them. First, we see here the interrelatedness of all peoples. Boy, does this text not teach the opposite of what it's been used for. The interrelatedness of all peoples.
We all have the same ancestry. Everybody came from Adam's paternity, and then, of course, from Noah. Shem, Ham, and Japheth, they're brothers. They have the same biology. They have the same DNA.
They're from the same ancestry. And so in Christian thought, we want to say what is true. And what is true is that there is only one race, and that race is humanity.
We are one race, but there are many people groups, many ethnicities. And so we use the word race at a popular level to describe actually ethnicity.
[19:52] There is one human race with many ethnicities, but how are ethnicities formed? Well, they're formed by moving a long way from each other and adopting new forms of language and marrying other people groups.

And there is no ethnicity that doesn't come from this one paternity, the singular DNA that comes from Adam and Eve and then from Noah and his family. So listen to Herman Bovink. He says this, the unity and equality of the human race is a certainty in Holy Scripture, but has almost never been acknowledged by the peoples who lived outside the circle of the Bible in the ancient world.
The Greeks considered themselves autonomous in bloodline and proudly looked down on all the, quote, barbarians. The contrast is found in virtually every single nation.
Now, boy, what's striking is this. Let me ask you today, if you come today wrestling with the question, does God exist? I want to ask you a question. On what presupposition can you base the equality of all peoples?
And that's such an important question because I would imagine here, we all believe that humans are equal in dignity and value. I would imagine we all probably will say something like that. But if you study history, what Bovink just pointed out is that you'll know that that's very rare.
[21:06] Most nations, most people groups have never actually thought that. And if you say, well, okay, but I don't ground it on history, I ground it on nature. If you don't believe in God, you have to ground it somewhere.

Do you ground it in nature? Well, you look at a nature and you see by way of study, sociology or whatever type of study of nature you want to take on, that actually when we look out at each other, we're all different.
Even in this room, we know that all of us have different abilities in different ways. So if you base it on a study of ability, boy, if you look at it nature and you look at it history, you have nowhere to base this claim.
But actually, the truth is that as much as the culture shouts today, we are all equal in dignity and value, it is because the culture in this modern city, Edinburgh, is standing on the basis of the Bible. We believe that and you believe that because of Christianity, because only Christianity has taught us with such clarity. The second way that we see we're equal here is because Genesis 4 to 11, where the table of nations, these genealogies sit, over and over again, remember, repeats the line of Genesis 1, 26 to 28, that we were all created in the image of God.
[22:18] And so even back in Genesis 9, verse 6, that's sort of the headline for what we read in Genesis 10. And it says, God says, you shall not murder because you were all created in the image of God.

And so the fact that we are equal in dignity is because we were made in the image of God, crowned with glory as human beings. We are the crown of creation and that's the basis. And so what the Bible is doing is actually subverting any sense that the problem with Babylon and with Egypt and with Assyria is biological.

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And that's the second little moment in this genealogy that I think Moses is crying out and saying, look at this, is in a little bit later when we read about Shem.
So if you look down at verse 21, you can see that the sons of Eber were born to Shem. And then it goes on from there and says in verse 25, to Eber, the Hebrews was born who?
Two sons, the name of one was Peleg. And then there it is, the break in the genealogy, another story, a very little story, just one little clause. For in his days, the earth was divided.
[23:26] Do you know what that's saying? That's saying that one of the sons of Shem, Peleg, a great name again, he was there at Babel when all the events of Babel took place.

What's the point? Here's the point. Look, Father Abraham has had many sons and we know how important Father Abraham is in the history of the Bible. And if you were to walk a circle around Old Town, you would pass two mosques, a Jewish synagogue, 15 or 20 churches, some open, some closed, Christian churches.
And all of these different religions look and say, Father Abraham in some way, shape or form. We know how important Abram was and still is in so many people's minds in our world. But that little reference to Peleg, in whose day the division at Babel occurred, is saying that the sons of Shem were at Babel just like the sons of Ham.
And they did it too. And we'll see that next week. And do you know, if you keep reading after that, there's in Genesis 10 and 11, a genealogy and then a break and then a genealogy.
Why? Because it's trying to get us to Abraham, the one who was called out from darkness into light. And where does Abram come from? Abram, a son of Shem, was called out of a place called Chaldea.
[24:46] Abram was a Babylonian. Abram was a polytheist. Abram was worshiping the other gods. And it's from him that the whole of the Bible and redemptive history flows through the covenant.

In other words, what's it saying? Saying, look, we're equal in more than one way. You are equal in dignity. You are the crown of creation, human being, all 70 of these nations, and you're equally bad. There's no partiality with God.
Equally sinful, equally at the same time, the crown of creation. And so the Bible is going out of its way to subvert any sense of reading the table of nations in any other way. And so we finish with this.
Who is going to be the one to save the world from the conflict of the brothers? Who is going to be the one? And we know there is one who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.
I would mention that subversion story that the Bible actually is going out of its way to subvert any sense that there's a distinction in DNA and biology and bloodline that causes evil in this world.
[25:50] But I want you to think, but we could list so many moments. One of them is how the Ninevites are listed here. But if you open the book of Jonah, Jonah is the real Ninevite.

The Ninevites repent before the Lord. They put on sackcloth and ashes. They say, we want to be of the seed of the woman. And it's Jonah who hates God and is angry with God for what he's done. And you see how much the Bible is subverting that story of DNA and biology.
But where does this ultimately happen? Well, you open Matthew chapter one. And you read about the mothers of Jesus. Advent is coming soon.
And you read about the mothers of Jesus. And the second of those is a woman by the name of Rahab. And she was a Canaanite, a daughter of Ham and Canaan, a prostitute.
And because she repents and she turns to the Lord, she becomes a mother of Jesus Christ himself. And it's a subversion story of everything you think, everything that's naturally instinctive to the sinful human heart to think those people are worse than me, I'm better, is being entirely flipped on its head in the biblical story.
[26:59] And that is most of all when we look to the one, Jesus Christ, the one who has divided, who has broken down the dividing walls of hostility. In Genesis 9, we have the curse of Canaan.

But remember that the Bible begins with a curse that comes upon every one of us because of our sinfulness. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. And God promises in Isaiah 10 and chapter 11 that one day, that even Israel, because of its sin, because of its embrace of paganism and polytheism, would be cut down like a mighty tree.
And all that would be left would be the stump of Jesse, but that one day, the stump of Jesse would fill the earth with the knowledge of the Spirit. And that in that day, the people groups of all nations would gather together around the stump of Jesse like the waters cover the sea, a reversal of the

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flood story.
And Jesus Christ is that stump of Jesse, the son of David. And you come to the Bible and you realize because the ground is level at the foot of the cross, Galatians 3 says, Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming the curse that we all have over us, for us.
[28:17] And that in him, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, to all people. The dividing wall, Ephesians 2, has been broken down. And I just want you, as you read through the New Testament in your own morning prayer in times like this, notice how often Paul comes back to the unification of Jew and Gentile because of the power of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Ethnic partiality, racism, dividing people by bloodlines and supposing that they are less than. What is that sin? That sin is this. It is looking out and thinking, this person is less the image of God than I am.
And Jesus Christ at the cross reunites, breaks down every dividing wall and invites you to reconcile. And so I want to ask you some questions. Jesus asked you, who is my neighbor?
And boy, he said, to the miserable Samaritans in the time of the first century, that is your neighbor according to the mind of some. But I want to ask you questions like that this morning.
Is there, I'm asking myself this, is there anyone that I regard as less than the image of God than I am in my life? Even if only in my quiet thoughts.
[29:35] Am I like Jonah? Do I believe I'm equally a sinner with every other person in this world? Equally a sinner, equally in need of grace? Or am I like Jonah that looks at those people, the Ninevites, in any way, shape, or form?

Is my sin in my mind more respectable than the sins of the people that I look down on? Is there a dividing wall still in my heart against a people group, a nation, a culture?
Is there a heart even of avoidance where I'm careful to protect myself from the charge of racism or ethnic partiality, but I still avoid certain types of people and won't move towards them?
Is there a refusal in my life to reconnect even with somebody that has sinned against me? I won't forgive them, I won't move towards them, and does any of that have anything to do with the type of person they are in any way, shape, or form?
Let me ask a positive question. Am I glad that the guest list at the wedding supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19 includes all the nations? Am I glad about that?
[30:44] Christ calls you out from ethnic partialism in any way, shape, or form, any type of partialism, and says, come sit at the table of the nations at the banquet feast of the living God, which is the table of Jesus Christ.

Partialism grows in our hearts in all sorts of ways. Jesus Christ has broken that wall. And so let's walk in that vision. And the church is a representation of that vision that is to come.
So I'll finish with the words of Revelation 7, 9. A great multitude that no one could number from every nation, from every tribe, from every people and language, is standing in that day before the throne and before the Lamb.
The table of nations, Genesis 10, is the guest list of the new heavens and the new earth. Let us rejoice in that. Let's pray. Father, help us to see partialism in our lives.
And we ask that contra our sinful instinct, we would see ourselves as equally the crown of creation and equally sinful in need of repentance in need of restoration in need of unification.
[31:51] So we thank you for the cross that Jesus has broken down every dividing wall of hostility. And we pray that we could live that vision out now as a church, as your people, that we would look across the room and move towards those that maybe we have been hesitant to move towards.

It starts here, so Lord, we ask that it would start here. And we pray that for the anointing of your spirit toward that end, even as we sing in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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