

Cursed be Canaan the Lowest of Slaves Will He Be to His Brothers

9: 20-27

DIG: From this story, what is your impression of Noah? Of his sons? How does this compare with the image presented in 6:8-10? What do these contrasting images imply about children respecting parents? About righteousness? Does being righteous mean sinless? What does Noah's prophetic curse mean for his three sons? What does it mean for the Jewish people who are descendants of Shem?

REFLECT: Noah came off a mountaintop experience with ADONAI and fell. Have you ever experienced a letdown after a great experience with God? How did you deal with it? Why is mocking your father so serious, even today (Ephesians 6:1-3)? What is the lesson for you in this story? What new temptations are you facing?

This section is about the nature and destiny of the descendants of **Canaan, the Canaanites**, who would continue to be the enemy of **the LORD's** chosen people, Isra'el. There was a new beginning and a new world, but the same old **sin** was still there. As we read it, our hearts are full of disappointment. And if that is how we feel, think of what **ADONAI** must have felt! As **God** afterwards said about Isra'el: **What more could have been done for My vineyard than I have done for it (Isaiah 5:4)?** As we read this section, we should be careful to apply it to ourselves. It is much easier to feel sad for **Noah** than to be on guard about our own lives.¹⁶⁹

Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard (9:20). *A believer often finds small temptations the most dangerous.* **When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk (9:21a).** Adam fell when he ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (3:6); **Noah** fell when he drank the fruit of the vine. His action is neither condemned nor approved of, but no one can fail to see that this first mention of **wine** in the Bible points to its potentially destructive effects. The Scriptures do not condemn drinking **wine (Judges 9:13; Psalm 104:15; 1 Timothy 5:23)**, but it does say that **drunkenness is a sin (Proverbs 20:1, 23:20; Ephesians 5:18)**. **Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and even though he walked with God for 600 years (6:9), he still had a sin nature.** Mankind had not changed at all. **Noah acted like a pagan (6:5, 8:21).** This led to an embarrassing position and he lay **uncovered inside his tent (9:21)**. And as we know all too well, **drunkenness is connected with nakedness (Lamentations 4:21; Habakkuk 2:15).**

Each of us is dependent on **God's grace**, for even in our highest moments of faith we also have low moments when we yield to temptation. *A believer is never immune from sin.* At those low moments **the LORD** offers us **the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:7).**¹⁷⁰ *And a believer is always liable to experience entirely new temptations.* As we live our lives, evil often takes entirely new forms. We can have a special weakness in our youth that we fight against for years and years, only to find another weakness and sinfulness breaking out in our more mature years.

But why did **God** record the sin of **Noah**? If a man had written **Genesis** he would have either covered up the **sin** by not mentioning it at all to make **Noah** a hero or he would have made **Noah's sin** a great deal more sordid than it really was. But **ADONAI** recorded it for **His** own purposes. First of all, **He** did it to encourage the children of Isra'el when they entered the land of **Canaan** during the time of **Moses**. They remembered that **the LORD** had placed a curse on **Canaan**. **He** had pronounced **His** judgment upon the race. All you have to do is read the rest of the **TANAKH** and secular history to discover the fulfillment of this judgment. **The Canaanites** have pretty much disappeared. Secondly, it was written to let you and I know something about the weakness of the flesh: **For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Romans 15:4).** So this story of **Noah** gives us hope. Since **Noah was a righteous man who walked with God**, and he fell, well . . . maybe there is hope for us also.

Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside (9:22). For both **Adam (3:7)** and **Noah**, sin exposed their nakedness. On the surface, this situation seems innocent enough. But in their culture at that time it was a sign of disrespect and the violation of a boundary. It destroyed the sanctity of the family and made a mockery out of **their father**. When the Bible says that **Ham saw his father's nakedness**, in the Hebrew *there is a negative implication to his looking*. This negative implication is used in **19:26** with Lot's wife *looking back* on Sodom and Gomorrah; in **Exodus 33:20** when **the LORD** tells **Moses** that no one could *see His face* and live; in **Judges 13:22** when **Manoah** says: **We are doomed to die because we have seen God**; and in **First Samuel 6:19** where it says that those who *looked into the ark of ADONAI* were put to death. At the heart of it, **Ham's actions** revealed an attitude of resentment against **God Himself**, a character trait that was bound to show up someday, if not in **Ham**, then with **his children**.¹⁷¹

Ham's sin lies in two areas. First, he apparently stumbled on this accidentally, but he **saw his father's nakedness**. He could have **covered his father** as his two brothers did. Secondly, we have no way of knowing what **Ham** said to his two brothers but we are left with the impression that mocking of some sort was involved.¹⁷² Maybe jealousy was involved. We don't know. But what we do know is **the sin of Ham** will cause the cursing of his fourth son, **Canaan**.

Some rabbis teach that Ham castrated his father so that he would not have a fourth son, other rabbis say that he had sex with his father. The response of Ham's two brothers, however, was quite different.

The two brothers refused to share in Ham's sin. With love, purity and probably profound sorrow, they took steps to cover their father's shame. The verb took is in the singular, because Shem probably took the initiative in the matter: **But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father's nakedness.** Both Adam and Noah were covered by another. In Adam's case the LORD made garments of skin and covered Adam and his wife, and his two sons covered Noah. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father's nakedness (9:23). He was, after all, their father and they owed everything to him. They restored him in the spirit of love and meekness, perhaps not unmindful of the possibilities of sin in themselves. Rabbi Sha'ul would later write: **Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:1-2).**¹⁷³

And what must Noah's sorrow have been when he awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest, the Hebrew word here can simply mean *younger*, and that is probably the better translation because of what Ham, the middle son, had done to him (9:24). We can only imagine the profound sorrow and sense of shame that filled his heart. The phrase, **had done to him**, implies a very negative act. So what seems to be an insignificant accident turns out to be a major event. Noah then uttered a prophecy that was to have long lasting consequences for centuries to come. The prophecy centers on **Canaan**.

Both Adam and Noah's fall each resulted in a major prophecy. Adam's fall resulted in the prophecy of redemption (3:15). Noah's prophecy showed that the natures of his three sons would be continued in their descendants. Therefore, Noah said: **Cursed be Canaan (9:25a)**! There was a curse associated with both Adam and Noah. Because of Adam, the ground was cursed (3:17-19) and Noah cursed Canaan. These next few verses are the only recorded words of Noah anywhere in the TANAKH. Canaan is focused on because he developed Ham's negative characteristics. **Like father like son.** History tells us that the immorality of the Canaanites became great (Genesis 15:16, 18:20-21, 19:4-10; Leviticus 18:1-3; Deuteronomy 12:29-31).

We observe immediately that Noah's prophecy cannot be used to justify the enslavement of blacks by whites (Some have argued wrongly that certain ethnic groups are superior to others. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan have based their racist beliefs on this passage, and have even argued that slavery is God's plan for inferior races). As far as we know, Noah's

three **sons** were Caucasian. But even though some have argued that **Ham** was ultimately the father of the black race, **Noah** did not curse **Ham** but **Canaan**, and *the Canaanites were definitely Caucasian*. Historically, various peoples, including the Jews under **Joshua**, conquered **the Canaanites**. This is doubtless the main intent of **Noah's** prophecy.¹⁷⁴

But why was **Canaan** cursed instead of **Ham**? **Ham's** actions could not be left without repercussions. There are three principles involved. First, **children** are punished **for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate God** (Exodus 20:5, 34:6-7). Secondly, **do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please the sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction** (Galatians 6:8-9a). *Ham sinned as a son, so he was punished through his son*. Thirdly, the mercy of **the LORD** is shown. **The sin of Ham** was punished in only one of his sons, not all four. **The sin of Ham** came to life in **Canaan** and **the Canaanites**, and they acted as their ancestor did. **The rabbis teach that Canaan saw Noah naked and told Ham, therefore, he was involved in the sin. Other rabbis teach that since Ham castrated Noah to prevent him from having a fourth son, Ham's fourth son was therefore cursed.**

The result of the curse on **Canaan** was that **he** would become **the lowest of slaves to his brothers (9:25b)**, but this was because the descendants of **Canaan** lived degrading lives like **Ham**, not because of what **Ham** did. The point is that nationally, at least, drunken debauchery enslaves people. That is why, in **ADONAI's** program to bless Isra'el, the **Canaanites** were condemned. They were to be judged by **God** through defeat in battles as seen in the book of **Joshua** because their actions were in the same pattern and mold as their ancestor **Ham**.¹⁷⁵

The Canaanites became servants to the Jews; the Phoenicians, who were **the Canaanites**, became servants to the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. Carthage marks the final end of **the Canaanites** and the Roman destruction of Carthage brought **the Canaanite** history to an end in 146 BC. *But Noah's words seem to be more of a general than a specific prophecy, that the line of **Shem** will be blessed and the line of **Ham** in **Canaan** will be cursed.*¹⁷⁶

He also said: **Blessed be ADONAI, the God of Shem! So it was the God of Shem** who was blessed and not **Shem himself**. **Shem** will uniquely possess the knowledge of **ADONAI**. Adam had three sons and it was through Seth that **the Seed of the woman (3:15)**, or the **Messiah**, would come; **Noah** had three sons, and it was in **Shem** that the messianic line was established. Therefore, **the Seed of the woman** will come through **Shem** and not through **Ham** or **Japheth**. **Christ** belonged to the race of **Shem** and Semites first spread the word of **the LORD**. But then came the curse: **May Canaan be the slave of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem (9:26)**.

May God extend the territory of Japheth. This prophecy came true because the descendants of **Japheth** extended across Asia and Europe.

May Japheth live in, or dwell in, or have fellowship with, the tents of Shem. We know that in the big picture, believing Gentiles have superseded the Jews in spiritual blessings today. The descendants of **Japheth**, more than the descendants of **Ham**, adopted **the God of Shem**. **The rabbis believe this verse teaches that the Torah would be translated into Greek and the beauty of Japheth, because the Hebrew word for Japheth means beauty in the Greek language.**

Then comes the curse, "**And may Canaan be his slave**" (9:27). The descendants of **Canaan** would be **the slaves** of the descendants of **Japheth**. The fulfillment would be that the Phoenicians, or **Canaanites**, would become **slaves** to the *Greeks* and the Romans. Thus, these verses are the basis for Israel's foreign policy in the land (**Deuteronomy 20:16-18**).