

By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them
A Timely Admonition from an Ancient Narrative
A Sermon on Genesis 9:18–29

By Joseph E. Rolison

In the summer of 1925, J. Gresham Machen, then professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, delivered a series of lectures on the topic of faith at Grove City Bible College. Those lectures later were published in the form of a book entitled *What Is Faith?* As careful students of church history will recall, Machen was concerned to promote the purity of the church, particularly in her calling to herald such non-negotiable doctrines as the virgin birth of Christ and the inspiration and authority of Scripture, in opposition to the modernism and liberalism of his day.

Among those essential doctrines of the Christian faith is the necessity of regeneration, or being brought from spiritual death to spiritual life by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord Jesus Christ insisted on the new birth (or birth “from above,” depending on one’s translation of *ἄνωθεν* in John 3:3) in his interaction with Nicodemus. The significance of the new birth in the history of redemption was such that Jesus expressed surprise that Nicodemus, a “teacher of Israel,” did not “understand these things” (John 3:13).

In Machen’s time, however, ministers and teachers in the Presbyterian Church USA had begun to reject the essentials of the Christian faith, such as the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth and the substitutionary atonement of Christ; not surprisingly, the necessity of saving faith in Jesus Christ for communion with a holy God became a casualty of liberalism’s advance. The need to be “born again” presupposed that one was dead spiritually; “saving” faith implied that one was lost and in spiritual danger; faith “in Jesus Christ alone” frankly admitted that one was incapable of saving oneself. In an age that championed (deified?) man’s native abilities while rejecting the supernatural, it came as no shock that Christ’s insistence that “You must be born again” was met with scorn—even, sadly, from heirs of the robust, evangelistic heritage of confessional Presbyterianism.

Regrettably, Machen’s generation was not unique in its need for a renewed emphasis on the importance of faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, or for that matter in its need for reiteration of the doctrine of progressive sanctification and its relationship to salvation (another subject that Machen treats in his Grove City lectures). In our own time, and even within the family of conservative Presbyterian churches, the urgency of preaching the new birth to all people—including the children of believers—has met disfavor among some who claim to adhere to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Although the so-called “Federal Vision” movement has resisted tidy arrangement into a unified, all-encompassing system of belief, some of its proponents have eschewed the mere suggestion that covenant children—the children of professing believers in Jesus Christ—should be called to repent of their sins and to believe on Jesus Christ alone for forgiveness from the earliest days of their lives. Their appeal to such passages as 1 Corinthians 7:14 (“as it is, your children are holy”) induces them to make assumptions about the nature of this “holiness” and about the status of covenant children themselves that simply lack biblical warrant. Such a perspective invites believing parents to speak, in the first place, words of spiritual ease, not of *dis*-ease, to their children: an arrangement that, in the end, is every bit as lethal as that of liberalism.

The related doctrine of progressive sanctification,¹ which some Reformed teachers and ministers have reformulated in recent years in such a fashion as to make it biblically and confessionally unrecognizable, likewise

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1. Consider, for example, Paul’s use of *οὖν* (“therefore”) in Ephesians 4:1 as he calls the Ephesian believers to lives of obedience to Christ *in consequence* of their salvation by grace through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8–10). Cf. also Westminster Confession of Faith ch. 13.

demands a fresh hearing in the church today. For example, one popular Presbyterian minister recently has contended that the believer's sanctification consists in nothing more than dwelling on his justification (in clear opposition to Phil. 2:12–13, for example, and to Westminster Shorter Catechism question 35, among other portions of the standards).² In the face of such confusion on these two basic tenets of the Christian faith, we rightly follow our Master and ask, "Are you teachers of Israel and do not understand these things?"

Indeed, the history of Israel—reaching back even to her primeval origins—serves as an insightful corrective to the errors in our own time of failing to preach to our covenant children the importance of repentance, the necessity of faith in Christ, and the life of holiness. To that end, this sermon will explore Moses' account in Genesis 9:18–29 of Noah and his three sons leaving the ark and beginning to dwell again on the earth. This narrative exposes a clear line of division between believers and unbelievers—the blessed and the cursed—that runs not merely between the hull of the ark and the waters of judgment, but even among the human passengers in the ark itself (the "visible church" of that time). This post-fall division, now basic to the human family and existing within the confines of the visible church, manifests itself in two critical ways: in one's response to sin and, eventually, in one's eternal destiny. In view of the stakes, the church today must take up anew Machen's subject of faith and confront the world—and the church—with the timeless proclamation: "You must be born again."

HUMANITY IS DIVIDED INTO TWO LINES
—FROM ONE FAMILY

The pursuit of genealogical information has long fascinated human beings, from the days of recording births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths in a grand family Bible to the recent phenomenon of online "family history" Web sites. The book of Genesis itself presents a genealogy of the people of God from the very beginning of time: the ten *toledoths* ("generations") of Genesis, which are Hebrew genealogies, begin with a "genealogy" of the heavens and the earth (2:4), continue through Adam (5:1) and Isaac (25:19) and culminate with Jacob (37:2). They not only include the family of God but

also encompass the entire family of humans, in Adam, dwelling in the realm of God's creation. It therefore is incumbent on the person who aspires to know his origins to investigate the divine record in Genesis.

In the overarching "family history" of the book of Genesis, 9:18–19 might easily be overlooked, shuffled into the supposedly "arid" category of mere factual information. As the inspired Word of God, however, these verses not only come from God to man but also in fact teach that all human beings in the post-flood world derive from these three sons of Noah. As God again entrusts to man vice-regency over His earth, Moses instructs the reader that He does so beginning with these men and their descendants (with Noah as "another Adam," as we shall see in a moment). Their history is our history.

Especially telling as we explore these verses are the numbers three, one and two (listed advisedly in this order). The number three has a straightforward explanation: Noah had three sons, and all three emerged with him from the ark. The Lord has preserved their names for us, and as the next chapter reveals, the nations descended from these brothers. The math is simple enough. But the numbers one and two carry weighty implications for all who follow Machen in asking, "What is faith?" And, we would emphasize, "Is faith necessary for all who would commune with God?"

The three brothers of one family, under one father, emerged from one ark, which was the only appointed means of deliverance from the deluge of God's judgment on a world of rampant godlessness. Genesis 6 presents an ante-diluvian setting of comprehensive wickedness; note the use of superlative language in 6:5: "God saw that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was *only evil continually*." Only Noah "found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (6:8), which indicates that the church at that time was—proportionately speaking—as sparse as the unbelieving world was populous. In a demonstration of covenant fidelity to His church (per His promise of a conquering seed to come from the woman in Gen. 3:15), the Lord preserved Noah by means of the ark, His appointed vessel of deliverance. Yet fascinatingly, and perhaps to the utter amazement of modern, individualistic Americans, Noah was not the only human being called to the ark. The reader has been told nothing at this point about his wife or about his sons or daughters-in-law, but the Lord commands Noah to take them with him onto the ark. While the passage has not divulged to us the character of these three sons, it does reveal something about the manner in which God ordinarily works in His world: through families.

2. "Sanctification is the daily hard work of going back to the reality of our justification—receiving Christ's words, 'It is finished' into new and deeper parts of our being every day." Tullian Tchividjian, "What To Preach To Yourself Everyday," <http://www.pastortullian.com/2011/03/26/what-to-preach-to-yourself-everyday/> (accessed 27 August 2014).

The family is the most basic unit in society, and Scripture underscores the importance of the family in God's outworking of redemptive history. On the positive side, it is not only the Philippian jailer who was baptized after his conversion to Christ in Acts 16: the members of his household likewise were privileged to hear the Word of God and to receive the sacrament of baptism (Acts 16:32–33). Similarly, the Roman centurion Cornelius heard the Word and was baptized along with his kinsmen and near friends (Acts 10:24–25). From a more somber perspective, Joshua 7 recounts the sin of Achan in burying loot beneath in his tent; yet his family and animals also are put to death with him for this sin. In all of these instances, the actions of the head of household have profound implications for others within the household. Scripture does not state that every member of the jailer's or of the centurion's household was truly a believer, nor are we informed explicitly that every family member of Achan's would have assented to his evil-doing. The solidarity of the family in an external, covenantal sense, however, is unmistakable. It is not surprising, then, to read of God commanding the one man, Noah, to take his entire household onto the ark. The Lord sets profound value on the family under its fatherly head.

The number one represents not only Noah, however: it also describes the manner in which God preserved the visible church through the waters of judgment. God gave Noah specific instructions for the construction of the ark, indicating that the manner of deliverance for Noah and his family was not open to their ingenuity or inclinations but rather to the sovereign Lord God. Put bluntly, Noah could not have survived the flood by framing a tree house or learning to swim. If he were to emerge unscathed from God's wrath poured out on the earth, he would have to do so according to God's appointment. There was only one way for the church to be saved from the judgment of God: to enter into the one ark.

This brings us to the other number for consideration: two. Admittedly, the bare word "two" does not occur literally in this text; but it does have a profound conceptual presence in the passage. Genesis 9 relates that Noah had three sons, each of whom (according to chapter 10) had his own children living in their own lands and families (cf. Gen. 10:5, 20 and 31). One naturally might wonder about the distinct tastes and cultural tendencies of those descendants in the same way one delights in the exploration of different nations and cultures today. What did Javan eat? How did Ludim conceive of hospitality? (Or did he?) The diversity over time would have been a sociologist's playground.

Sociological curiosities, however, only distract from the real division between these three sons of one father who emerged from one ark: the stark line of demarcation between the Godly and the ungodly. As our exposition will reveal below, Ham responds to his father's shameful state with disrespect and immodesty (as would an unbeliever), while Shem and Japheth unite in an act of reverence and kindness toward Noah (per the biblical expectations for believers). Their reactions to Noah's inebriated nakedness were polar opposite, and Noah's sober pronouncement over his sons reflected a spiritual evaluation of their contrasting actions (and, surely, the beliefs that lay behind them; cf. Luke 6:44). Three sons, all from one believing father, were all delivered through the flood in the one ark appointed by God. But two of those sons responded respectfully and graciously to their father and to his sin, while one was content to look on his father's nakedness and to publicize it to his brothers.

What does this history mean for Machen's heirs today? It means that we must take seriously the apostle's declaration that "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (Rom. 9:6, NASB). Certainly the sovereign Lord has willed to include Gentiles in His one church, but Paul's purpose in this section of Romans 9 is to rid his readers of any notion that salvation is inherited biologically, or that mere outward connection to the covenant community, or even to a covenant family, ensures that one truly is a child of God in Jesus Christ. This never has been the case: Paul employs the example of Isaac and Ishmael, but we might peer even further back into redemptive history to the sons of Noah. The sons' descent from the loins of their one father, and their invitation to and presence in the one instrument of deliverance from the flood (not to mention their first-hand observance of so cataclysmic a judgment), were not guarantees of their inclusion into the invisible church. As the apostle John writes, those who were given the right to be called the children of God were born "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12–13).

Genesis 9, while instructive, is not the first instance of the two-from-one phenomenon in redemptive history. Following the Lord's promise in Gen 3:15 that there would be warfare between the seed of the serpent (Satan) and the seed of the woman (finally, Jesus Christ), Moses describes the murder of righteous Abel by his wicked brother Cain (Gen. 4:8; cf. Matt. 23:35, 1 John 3:12). Both sons came from the same parents; both grew in the same womb; yet one worshipped God aright whereas the other was rejected by the Lord—and

responded to that rejection not with repentance but with the calculated murder of his Godly brother.

In Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45–49, Paul explains the historical and theological background to the reality of the “two-camp” division of humanity found in the earliest chapters of Genesis. The apostle does not partition the human race into those who were born into believing households from those who were not; he instead enumerates a more basic and pressing point of separation among men. In these verses, Paul asserts that every member of the human family, descended from Adam by ordinary generation (thus excepting our Lord Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Virgin Mary), is naturally dead in the eyes of God—regardless of his or her spiritual heritage. One cannot appeal to genetics or to community membership for a right standing before God, because the first community into which a person is born is the fallen family of humanity, with the covenant-breaking First Adam as the father of us all. Transfer from that native family into the family of God and the “household of faith” (Gal. 6:10) comes only by the gracious act of adoption, by which believers in Jesus Christ, the last and faithful Adam, “are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of, the sons of God” (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 34). Until such legal transfer takes place by the grace of God, a person has no claim to sonship in God’s family—regardless of the human family in which one has membership.

Despite the diversity of cultures and of nations in the history of mankind, there have always been only two responses to sin: turning toward it, or turning away to seek covering in Jesus Christ. And so there have only been two destinies for mankind: blessing in Christ the Savior, or cursing in one’s rebellion and sin. In view of this most basic separation of humanity, Machen in *What Is Faith?* insists on the need for men and women to be convinced of sin and compelled by grace to believe on Jesus Christ: “The companionship of Jesus is possible only to those who say first, in deep contrition: ‘Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord,’”³ and later, “The beginning of the Christian life is not an achievement, but an experience ... faith is always a conscious condition of the soul ... there is, moreover, a volitional aspect of faith” (Machen, 197).

To reiterate, families matter to the Lord. Those who grow up in a covenant household and within the visible church enjoy certain external benefits, just as those who are outside the visible church ordinarily grow up bereft

3. J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 141.

of those benefits due in part to their parents’ unbelief (Moses’ unexpected mentioning of the fact in v 18b that Ham is the father of Canaan hints at the importance of the family to God, as Ham’s sin will impact his descendants negatively). Shem, Ham and Japheth had certain spiritual benefits held before them as children of righteous Noah: their father himself was a “preacher of righteousness” in an age of untold vice (2 Peter 2:5); they were preserved with Noah through the waters of the flood (and thereby had the sacrament of baptism held before them symbolically; cf. 1 Peter 3:21); they literally saw both the severity of God in judgment of sin and the goodness of God to preserve His church on the earth.

Such were some of the spiritual benefits of being physically “in Noah” and “in the ark.” Yet those benefits—precious as they were against the sinister backdrop of unbelief in the ancient world—ultimately held no value for Noah’s sons unless they led the men to a more fundamental realization about themselves: “Although I am ‘in Noah,’ I am also ‘in Adam.’ What must I do to be saved?” Still today, this is the urgent question facing every member of the human family—even (and, we would contend, most pointedly) those reared in the covenant community.

THIS DIVISION AMONG HUMANS IS EVIDENT IN RESPONSE TO SIN

Progressing in our exposition of Genesis 9, verses 20–23 present the reader with Noah’s drunkenness and nakedness and his sons’ opposing responses to their father’s actions. As the passage indicates, true believers do sin, sometimes grievously. But Moses’ narrative also presses home that the Godly and the ungodly are distinguished by their irreconcilably different reactions to sin: Ham clearly cherishes Noah’s occasion of wrongdoing, while his brothers seek to cover their father’s nakedness in an act that is reminiscent (in a non-salvific way) of the Lord’s own response to Adam’s sin in Eden. As the Westminsterian understanding of progressive sanctification has endured various assaults, overt and subtle, from within the Reformed community, we are wise to frame our own response to sin—particularly within the covenant community—in a manner that comports with the righteous and not with the accursed.

Verse 20 begins hopefully: “Noah began to be a husbandman” (or “a man of the soil”); the Hebrew *אֲדָמָה* indicates that Noah was resuming man’s role as God’s vice-regent on the earth, originally entrusted to Adam. In Genesis 1:26, God declared His intention to create man in His own image and to grant man

dominion over the creation while remaining under His lordship. Psalm 8 poetically and evocatively celebrates this exalted role given to mankind, whom the Lord has “crowned with glory and honor” and “given dominion over the works of (God’s) hands,” having “put all things under his feet” (vv 5b–6). What is astounding is that even after the fall, and despite man’s seemingly bottomless capacity for evil (Jer. 17:9; Gen. 6:5), God still has invested man with this responsibility within His created order. The torrent of God’s wrath, which obliterated all human and animal life except that which was on the ark with Noah, had not removed His purpose to have an image-bearer on the earth.⁴

Noah plants a vineyard in the process of fulfilling his role as another Adam in a new world, which marks a hopeful new beginning for humanity. Some present-day American Christians, particularly in the Southern states, might wince when reading of Noah’s labors in the vineyard; despite the effects of the Temperance movement in some places, Scripture plainly states that wine is a gift from God as it “gladdens the heart of man,” and our Lord Himself turned water into wine at the wedding celebration in Cana of Galilee (to name but two passages that posit the inherent goodness of God’s creation in the fruit of the vine). Noah, then, begins to do a good work in cultivating the earth as the Lord’s image-bearer.

But the narrative takes a disappointing turn in verse 21, as Moses recounts the drunkenness of Noah after partaking of the fruit of his labors. We might fairly ask: Did Noah know at this time that drunkenness was a sin before God? To be sure, we have no written record to this point in Scripture that God counted drunkenness as a transgression of His law. To this question, we would point to later revelation (all of which was “breathed out” [2 Tim. 3:16] by the same, triune God), which warns the reader to be careful in his consumption of wine in view of the seriousness of the sin of excess in drink (e.g., Prov. 20:1, 23:29–35; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:18). Moreover, the law written onto tablets at Sinai enshrined what already had been etched on the heart of man by virtue of his being *imago Dei* (Rom. 2:15; cf. WCF 19.2). Further, the Westminsterian understanding of Scripture’s teaching on “good and necessary consequence” (cf. WCF 1.6) leads us to conclude that just as Noah had been given some instruction in the proper worship of God (Gen. 8:20), so he would have known the sinfulness of inebriation (and, for that matter, of being uncovered). In drinking wine beyond measure, then, Noah sins against God (and thereby demonstrates that he is not the man to bring “rest” to God’s people, despite his father’s hopes in naming him [Gen. 5:29]).

Compounding Noah’s sin of drunkenness is the fact that he lies “uncovered in his tent” (Gen. 9:21). Such language evokes thoughts of Adam and Eve in the aftermath of their violation of the Covenant of Works: after they ate of the forbidden fruit, they “knew that they were naked” (Gen. 3:7) and sought to cover their sin and shameful exposure before God with a self-manufactured apron of fig leaves. Their newfound, miserable condition contrasted starkly to their estate at the end of Genesis 2, when the man and his wife were naked before God and before one another but “were not ashamed” (2:25). From the fall of man onward, “covering” has taken on redemptive significance: God Himself slew an animal in order to cover Adam and Eve with skins, providing His remedy for their shame instead of their paltry, insufficient efforts to hide their sin and themselves (Gen. 3:21); later, God would cover His people in “robes of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10; cf. Rev. 19:8), even the very righteousness of Jesus Christ. Although it was not possible for righteous Noah to lose his right standing with God (cf. Mal. 3:6; Phil. 1:6), his drunken nakedness provokes grievous memories of the fall and snuffs out any hopes for a sin-free world after the flood. Although Noah remains in communion with the Lord, full salvation will have to come from another.

Holy Scripture, and secondarily the Westminster Standards, echo the theme of indwelling sin in the life of the believer (cf. Romans 7; WCF 13.2) such that no Christian in this lifetime will conquer sin completely in his walk with the Savior. Although Christ is the believer’s sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30), earnest followers of Jesus will continue to battle the corruption that remains in us until we depart this body and our souls are made perfect in righteousness when we go to be with the Lord. Genuine disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ sin regularly and, on occasion, sometimes grievously. In this instance, when Noah—a man noted in his generation for having “walked with God” (Gen. 6:9)—aggravates his drunkenness with nakedness, we are reminded of the Lord’s warning to his followers: every believer must “watch and pray” in view of our prowling and roaring adversary, the devil (1 Peter 5:8), who seeks our undoing. Even David, a “man after God’s own heart,” was not immune to the corrupt enticements of his flesh. Peter denied his Lord three times after having insisted to the

4. In what ways does Noah, the “man of rest” and “man of the soil” (Gen. 5:29, 9:20), fulfill—and not fulfill—the role of a “second Adam,” and how does he anticipate the work of the Last Adam, who himself was found in fashion as a man and gave rest to his people? Such an investigation promises a rich harvest but sadly is beyond the scope of this sermon.

Lord that he would in no case forsake Jesus. These honest and wrenching narratives impress upon us the possibility of serious sin within the visible church—even from those esteemed as leaders and examples.

But how is such sin to be treated by the church? In the antediluvian world, the Lord God Himself provided the paradigm for addressing man's transgression in Eden: He first confronted the erring churchman, Adam, and his wife with their sin; after eliciting their confession and promising the Gospel in embryonic form (Gen. 3:15), the Lord (of His own sovereign, gracious initiative) covered the man and his wife with skins (as mentioned above). Later, our Lord Jesus Christ outlined the process for confrontation and for restoration in Matthew 18, with a view toward containing knowledge of the sin to as few churchmen as possible. Our Lord's intention in this process was to evoke sincere repentance from the sinner; even if this process of restoration should result in the impenitent wanderer being esteemed as a "Gentile and a tax collector" by the church, this step would serve the good purpose of evangelizing the transgressor. Paul exhorted the Galatians to restore a fallen brother in the "spirit of meekness," taking heed that those engaged in the restorative process would not engage in transgression themselves. The "restorers" were to be "spiritual ones" (οἱ πνευματικοὶ), who were to assume a spirit of "meekness" rather than one of harshness and arrogance. Scripture does not balk from man's propensity to sin against God, even egregiously; yet the God of Scripture pursues the wayward one, seen in His Old Covenant dealings with David and in Christ's New Covenant handling of Peter (cf. 2 Sam. 12:1–13; Psa. 32:3–5; John 21:15–19).

With the divine example in mind, we observe in Genesis 9 an unmistakable contrast in the ways in which Ham, and Shem and Japheth, address their father's sin and shame. If the tree is known by its fruit, then these sons' responses in this situation offer precious insight to their creeds and character. Importantly, the only substantial biographical information that Moses provides us (in addition to the sons' own descendants) is their conduct in this delicate situation.

Ham, who is the "father of Canaan" (a biographical note, repeated for emphasis, which alerts us to the fact that Canaan will "appear" later in the narrative even though he himself is not literally present in this scene), "saw the nakedness of his father." But what does Moses mean by "saw the nakedness?" Did Ham simply walk in

on his father as though he were on a routine visit and catch a glimpse of his father's naked body? Or is something more involved?

Some commentators have interpreted "saw his father's nakedness" as a euphemism for homosexual activity; the suggestion would be that Ham raped his father. A major difficulty with this view, however, is that the same terminology is used of Shem and Japheth's action of walking backward into the tent so that they would not see their father's nakedness.⁵ A correct understanding of Moses' meaning does not require such extraordinary interpretative leaps. In the first place, it is better to translate נָרָא, which is in the imperfect tense, as "Ham was seeing his father's nakedness." Ham did not merely intrude on his father's privacy, witness an embarrassing sight and turn his eyes away. Quite the opposite: he saw his father's compromised state yet refused to turn away his eyes. He studied the scene—so well, actually, that he was enabled to go outside and announce (נִסְּרַם) the scene to his two brothers. One wonders: in his walk, however brief, to see his two brothers, did Ham have sufficient time to contemplate how he had disrespected his father and what he was about to do in publicizing his father's sin? The sequence of events surely allowed Ham space to pause and to think about a proper response. Instead of seeking to cover his father respectfully, though, Ham seized the moment as an occasion to further expose his father to shame and to celebrate sin.

Because Ham's response to Noah's sin contradicts the Lord's approach to sin both before and after the flood, believers today—particularly those in the confessional Reformed churches—must take care to evaluate their own treatment of sin in the life of the church (and in their individual lives). The believer's covering by the blood and righteousness of Christ necessarily leads to a changed life that is the result, and not the grounds, of his new and living relationship with God. In his Grove City lectures, although Machen was concerned that Christians not put the proverbial "cart" of obedience to God before the "horse" of justification in Christ, he nonetheless asserts, "What the Christian has from God is not merely a new and right relation to Him in which the guilt of sin is wiped out, but also a new life in which the power of sin is broken; the Christian view of salvation is vital as well as forensic" (Machen, 165). The divinely wrought "heart transplant" (cf. Ezek. 36:26) gives believers a new and different estimation of sin (sin from their pre-conversion life, as well as sin generally), as Paul writes in Romans 6:21.

In view of these truths, is it not disturbing that the doctrine of progressive sanctification has gotten short

5. Cf. Richard Belcher, *Genesis* (Focus on the Bible Commentary Series; Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2012), 100.

shrif or even been diminished through reformulation in some Reformed circles? Is sin being treated too lightly? Some Reformed ministers lately have reduced sanctification to nothing more than the contemplation of one's justification; curiously, such assertions often are peppered with general (and perfunctory) confessions such as, "I am such a big sinner," rather than by specific, thoughtful confession to God of particular sins. Such brief, catch-all "confessions" are so broad and superficial as to call into question their gravity and sincerity. One wonders if sin is being handled flippantly, as a trivial thing that is easily "confessed" to and covered by God, something not worthy of real grief or of the effort of mortification. If this is our estimation of sin, if we "think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the error great,"⁶ are we spiritually any better off than Ham?

Ham's brothers Shem and Japheth, on the other hand, evidently grasped the odiousness of their father's sin and their responsibility to reverence him and to promote his spiritual good. Twice Moses relates in verse 23 that Shem and Japheth "went backwards" into Noah's tent as they carried a covering on their shoulders; the repetition of the fact that they walked backwards, together with the explicit statement that they "did not see their father's nakedness," suggests that they did view sin as sin—and their father as their superior, to be treated with "love and tenderness" (WLC 125).

The Hebrew text ("laid it upon their shoulders") is "long-winded" so that it captures the effort involved as Shem and Japheth respectfully covered their father's body.⁷ Looking back to our discussion of Genesis 3 and God's covering of Adam and Eve, we might infer that Shem and Japheth pursued the divine pattern for addressing transgression. To be sure, their actions did not purge Noah of sin or truly "cover" his nakedness in the sight of God: only the blood of Jesus Christ, foreshadowed at that time by the sacrifice of "clean" animals, could remove the stain of sin and guilt. Only Christ's obedience could pay the cost for their disobedience and account them right before God. This situation always has been the case for the people of God. Still, their approach to such a grievous occasion causes us to think of God's own actions in Eden. Sin surely merits death for the sinner; but by the grace of God, through the covering that He has provided in the Lamb of God, His believing people have life.

It is fair, then, to infer that these faithful sons regarded sin rightly; refused to engage in Ham's levity both toward their father and his nakedness; and actively engaged in the process of addressing his sin in a Godly manner. Their father's blessing on Shem and Japheth,

and the subsequent unfolding of redemptive history in a way that manifested that blessing (particularly in the coming of Christ through Shem's lineage), should spur the covenant community today to a similarly Godly approach to sin. It is an eminently Godly undertaking to confront sinners, be they ourselves or others, with firm yet loving graciousness and to pursue their repentance before the Lord Jesus Christ. In his epistle, James tells us that the one who turns a sinner from his ways "covers a multitude of sins" (James 5:20). Will we grieve or gloat when a fellow churchman—especially an elder—falls into sin? Will we have the courage to confront and to mourn specific sin in our own lives and in the lives of others, to whom we are bound through union with Christ? Will we then direct ourselves and others to the Lamb of God, who alone can cover our sin and "make the foulest clean," or will we seek their humiliation and degradation? Our answers to these questions in the ordinary course of church life tell much about our actual knowledge of the One who, in his Incarnation, "made himself of no reputation" (Phil. 2:7) so that his sheep "might have life, and that more abundant" (John 10:10).

HUMANS ARE DIVIDED IN TERMS OF THEIR DESTINIES BEFORE GOD

Machen's subject matter in *What Is Faith?* is no mere academic exercise. At stake are life and death, Heaven and hell, blessing and cursing. So the one who believes on Jesus Christ for salvation has a "blessed end," even if his faith is "weak . . . there is one thing it will do; it will bring a sinner into peace with God" (Machen, 251). The adverse also holds: for the one who does not trust in Jesus Christ for salvation with a sincere, fruit-bearing faith, there is only the prospect of the wrath of God abiding on him. Note that Machen—following Holy Scripture—does not posit a third category of humans before God the Judge. Either one believes (however feebly, yet by grace) on Christ and is accounted righteous by God in the Savior, or he does not believe and is under God's curse. We are not at liberty to posit any other destinies for human beings.

This division is evident in Genesis 9:24–27, as Noah awakens from his drunken sleep, learns what his sons have done to (or for) him⁸ and pronounces cursing and blessing appropriately. It should be noted that only

6. Thomas Kelly, "Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted."

7. So Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco: Word, 1987), 200.

8. Although the text does not say, it is most reasonable to infer that Shem and Japheth informed Moses of what Ham, and consequently

the Lord may judge humans in an eternal sense (James 4:12), but He has given power and commandment to His ministers on earth to pronounce His judgments from Scripture (the so-called “keys of the kingdom;” cf. Matt. 16:13–19). Although this event in the life of the church takes place well before the Incarnation, it appears Noah (a “preacher of righteousness”) is pronouncing a verdict that is grounded in the revelation of God (however incomplete at that point in redemptive history). Should there be any question of God’s evaluation of sin and of righteousness, the inquisitor need only look to the flood for a resounding response.

Curiously, Noah pronounces a curse on Canaan, the son of Ham—not on Ham himself, who perpetrated the sin. As we have observed, Moses twice has mentioned that Ham is the father of Canaan, a biographical detail that seems out of place earlier in the narrative. This seemingly unnecessary and oddly situated fact, though, assumes enormous significance in verse 25, for it is Ham’s son and not Ham who is cursed. While scholars have offered several suggestions as to why the curse fell on Ham’s son and not on Ham personally, the strongest is that Noah is practicing talionic justice (justice that “fits the crime;” cf. Exod. 21:23–25): Ham did not observe God’s law for generational respect of elders, so his generations after him would suffer the consequences of his sin.

For Canaan to be cursed meant that he remained under divine disfavor due to his violation of God’s covenant (here, the law as written on the heart, from the Covenant of Works).⁹ To understand his punishment, we might consider an earlier event in Genesis that illuminates the divine cursing. As a consequence of Adam’s sin in Eden, God pronounces a curse on the ground “for (Adam’s) sake,” so that it will yield thorns and thistles in addition to fruit and flowers (Gen. 3:17) in the post-fall age.¹⁰ Fruit-bearing and work remain possible, but they will be greatly hampered by the curse. Blessing and cursing appear later in Israel’s history in a particularly memorable passage. In the context of promised blessings and curses for keeping or for breaking God’s covenant, the term אָרָם is used in Deuteronomy 27:26 to summarize the penalty for all who do not continue in the law. The apostle Paul explains the gospel to the

Galatians in covenantal terms: the obedient Christ has redeemed believers from the curse of the law by being made a curse for us. His manner of death drives home this reality, for crucifixion was reserved for those under God’s curse (Deut. 21:23). Canaan, therefore, had no expectation of God’s blessing but instead faced the prospect of life under God’s wrath. His low estate in comparison to his blessed relatives would be evident in the fact that he would be a “slave of slaves” to Shem and to Japheth, intensifying his punishment. Their earthly condition generally bore out both the physical and spiritual aspects of Noah’s pronouncement for their sin. Because Ham was a servant of sin (John 8:34), his children would be servants to his brothers’ children and eventually would be overtaken by them (cf., e.g., the destruction of Jericho in Joshua 6). And Ham’s descendants by and large were the enemies of God’s people and not among the redeemed.

Shem and Japheth, meanwhile, enjoyed Noah’s blessing on them for their obedience, and for this reason we seek to drive home the incomparable and abiding significance of one’s relationship to Jesus Christ. Noah pronounces his first blessing not on Shem but, in another unexpected turn, on the *LORD God* of Shem. How is this good news for Shem, whom we might have anticipated would receive the blessing? It is good news indeed, because the fact that Shem’s God is blessed means that his God is to be worshipped and praised above all others. The Lord is able to create and to destroy, and in His hand are blessing and cursing. Because Shem, by grace, is under God’s covenantally faithful protection, he is blessed in the exalted Lord (Psa. 146:5). The apex of Shem’s blessing comes in the promised Seed of the woman, who is descended from Shem through Shem’s son Arphaxhad (Luke 3:36). Jesus Christ eventually gains the victory over sin, hell and Satan, and all who trust in him share in his victory (Col. 2:15; 1 John 5:4). As part of his blessing in the Lord, Shem shall have Canaan as his servant (as promised in the curse on Canaan in 9:25). To be sure, the nations frequently would vex the people of God (see, for example, Judges 1), but the full account of redemptive history tells that the Seed of the woman has crushed the head of the serpent, and he now claims the nations for his inheritance (Psa. 2:8).

Japheth, for his part, enjoys something of a “talionic blessing” in view of his obedience: God will “enlarge” or “open” him (“Japheth” can be translated “opening”), and he will dwell in Shem’s tents and thereby have access to the salvation found only in Shem’s descendant, Jesus Christ. Genesis 10, the so-called “Table of Nations,” reveals that Japheth’s descendants inhabited the

they, had done to him during his period of inebriation. See Belcher, *Genesis*, 100.

9. “Curse has the idea of banishment from the place of blessing.” A. P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 145.

10. Note also the talionic justice evident in the play on words in Genesis 3:17: because of Adam’s sin, the ground (Heb. *adamah*) is cursed by God.

coastlands and islands. Although they might appear geographically remote from Shem and his blessing, the inspired psalmist calls on the islands nonetheless to rejoice and to be glad at the Lord's sovereign dominion over all things and people (Psa. 97:1). When Shem's seed comes as God's Servant to save His people, his saving work will extend even to the remotest islands (Isa. 49:1–6). All those who "dwell in Shem's tents" spiritually enjoy the same blessing as Shem: reconciliation to God through Christ and the promise of His covenant intimacy now and eternally, with Canaan being trodden underfoot.

The remaining verses in chapter 9 relate Noah's lifespan and death, and the chapter would appear to be closed matter-of-factly. But as we already have learned, this narrative is anything but ordinary. It takes unexpected turns (Ham's son absorbing the curse for Ham's sin; Shem's God, not respectful Shem, being blessed by Noah), and if we are not careful we will miss the deeper richness, and even the thrilling invitation, tucked away in the most-unlikely of places: verse 25.

In this verse, Noah pronounces a curse on Ham that includes the evidently grim prognosis of his future servitude to his brothers. From Shem's perspective, of course, this curse is a blessing. Peeking ahead to chapter 10, Moses—invitingly for Shem—enumerates the geographic boundaries of Canaan's settlement in 10:19. As the account of God's dealings with His covenant people through the lineage of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob unfurls, we learn that the Lord has promised the good land of Canaan to His precious treasure, Israel (Gen. 17:1–21). So when Moses includes an apparently minor detail about the boundaries of Canaan, who is bound to be the servant of the blessed Shem, he in fact is reminding the Old Covenant people of God of the gracious and felicitous oath that God has made to them and to no others. This is an invitation to fight the good fight of faith and to seize God's promises.

What, though, could be hopeful for Canaan in this passage? Cursing, enslavement, judgment, sin: his horizon seems bleak. Yet in verse 25, and in its connections to Genesis 10:6–19 and Joshua 2 and 6, we find a promising link not only with Genesis 9:18–19 but indeed with Acts 2:21 and Galatians 6:16. In the cursing of Canaan, which doubles as an invitation to Shem to conquer those lands and peoples per the covenantal promise of the Lord, Canaan actually is afforded a hope that he otherwise would not have. It seems counterintuitive, to be sure. But through the crisis of impending judgment, at least one of Canaan's descendants comes to seek refuge in Israel and aligns with the people of God.

In Joshua 2, we learn that Israelite spies come to Jericho to scope it out in advance of the army's attack on this Gentile city. There, a prostitute(!) named Rahab lodges them and supports them in their intelligence efforts against her own city, because—by grace—she had heard of the mighty, redemptive deeds of God on behalf of His people and therefore feared Him, even believing on Him and acting on her faith (much like blessed Shem). Although a descendant of Canaan, Rahab revered Jehovah and sought His protection from the onslaught of His people in holy war. In seeking her own deliverance from God's people-on-the-attack, Rahab also secured the deliverance of her household (Josh. 6:17). Moreover, Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 hold her up as an example of saving faith in action, and Matthew 1:5 mentions her place in the genealogy of Shem's blessed Seed, Jesus Christ. It is clear, then, that just as physical descent from righteous Noah did not ensure Ham's true salvation, physical descent from Canaan did not seal one's damnation. As the church goes into all the nations to make disciples of Jesus Christ, teaching the whole counsel of his Word, the account of Rahab should fuel our missionary endeavor. Likewise, the church militant can rest on Christ's promise that "the gates of hell will not prevail" against her: a promise fulfilled even in ancient times in the life of believing Rahab.¹¹

The lessons in Genesis 9:18–29, then, help to clarify certain issues that have presented themselves in some Presbyterian and Reformed quarters and—we would pray—rectify erroneous belief and practice. Should members of the visible covenant community evangelize their children in addition to those outside the church? The account of Ham's primeval irreverence, coming as it does well before the story of Esau's notorious foolishness, warns us strictly against presuming on our children's salvation. Noah, a "preacher of righteousness," might well be first in line to assure us that not all evangelized children of the covenant actually respond to the Word of Truth. Yet we can be certain that the solution is not to refuse to evangelize them. After all, God ordinarily brings sinners to new life through the preaching of the Word of Christ (Rom. 10:8–15; cf. WCF 14.1). And as certainly as Ham stands as a warning against presumption, Shem and Japheth are encouraging invitations to preach the gospel to our "house churches" from the earliest moments. Machen himself sought to capture the wonderful pattern of God in which He ordinarily

11. Even the mention of the Ninevites in Genesis 10:11, somber as the genealogical context might be, suggests to the keen reader that God one day would show concern for that great city as well, compelling His prophet Jonah to go and preach repentance to them.

builds His true church through covenant families: “The children of Christian parents, in particular, often come to trust Christ as their Savior almost as soon as consciousness begins; these children of the covenant know the grace of God almost as soon as they know sin” (Machen, 129). This privilege—indeed responsibility—of evangelism begins in the household of faith.

As the church turns her face to the unbelieving world, the account of Rahab’s confession and deliverance ought to galvanize her mission. Just as the Lord did not bind Himself to save all who were members of the visible covenant community that was Noah’s family, neither did He preclude the possibility of calling Canaanites into the invisible church. In the ordinary course of obedience to His commands (to take the land in Joshua’s day; to make disciples of all nations in ours), the Lord uses His covenant people to unfold His wonderful, secret will in saving the entire body of Christ.

The proclamation of righteousness to all, both within and without the covenant community, demands that the church treat holiness of life, and the matter of sin, with utter seriousness. A cavalier approach to the righteousness of God and to the reprehensibility of sin will not serve our evangelistic endeavor; it will only call into question the integrity of our confession of the faith and undermine our missionary labors (cf. 1 Peter 2:11–12). Why would anyone be compelled to the Savior if he or she were enticed, by the examples of the professedly “saved,” to treat sin lightly?¹²

Machen reckoned it the “greatest personal question ever asked by a human soul—the question: ‘How shall I be right with God; how shall I stand in God’s sight; with what favor does He look upon me?’” (163). The matter is as crucial now as then. Have we ourselves answered this question? Are we, in word and deed, pressing this question to those near and far? Our faithful answers do more than mark us as heirs of Machen, noble as that title is. They mark us as heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ, to be glorified with and in Him in the blessed age to come. ■

In Brief: Excerpt from Machen’s What is Faith?

There are those who shrink from a consideration of these great questions of principle; there are those who decry controversy, and believe that the Church should return to its former policy of politely ignoring or taking for granted the central things

12. See the incisive and timely discussion of holiness as integral to a faithful Christian apologetic in K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 144–145.

of the Christian faith. But with such persons I, for my part, cannot possibly bring myself to agree. The period of apparent harmony in which the Church in America found itself a few years ago was, I believe, a period of the deadliest peril; loyalty to Church organizations was being substituted for loyalty to Christ; Church leaders who never even mentioned the centre of the gospel in their preaching were in undisputed charge of the resources of the Church; at board meetings or in the councils of the Church, it was considered bad form even to mention, at least in any definite and intelligible way, the Cross of Christ. A polite paganism, in other words, with reliance upon human resources, was being quietly and peacefully substituted for the heroism of devotion to the gospel.

In the face of such a condition, there were some men whose hearts were touched; the Lord Jesus had died for them upon the cross, and the least they could do, they thought, was to be faithful to Him; they could not continue to support, by their gifts and by their efforts, anything that was hostile to His gospel; and they were compelled, therefore, in the face of all opposition, to raise the question what it is that the Church is in the world to do.

God grant that question may never be silenced until it is answered aright! Let us not fear the opposition of men; every great movement in the Church from Paul down to modern times has been criticized on the ground that it promoted censoriousness and intolerance and disputing. Of course the gospel of Christ, in a world of sin and doubt, will cause disputing; and if it does not cause disputing and arouse bitter opposition, that is a fairly sure sign that it is not being faithfully proclaimed. As for me, I believe that a great opportunity has been opened to Christian people by the “controversy” that is so much decried. Conventions have been broken down; men are trying to penetrate beneath pious words to the thing that these words designate; it is becoming increasingly necessary for a man to choose whether he will stand with Christ or against Him. Such a condition, I for my part believe, has been brought about by the Spirit of God; already there has been genuine spiritual advance.... God save us from any smoothing over of these questions in the interests of a hollow pleasantness; God grant that great questions of principle may never rest until they are settled right! It is out of such times of questioning that great revivals come. God grant that it may be so today! Controversy of the right sort is good; for out of such controversy, as Church history and Scripture alike teach, there comes the salvation of souls.

It is with such an ultimate aim that we consider the question, “What is Faith?”

J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 40–43. ■