

October 14, 2018

Lesson 7: God Is Always Working

Scripture: Gen. 10:2; 11:10,27,31-32; 12: 1-4

Context:

Following the story of the flood, our lesson moves to the repopulation of the earth. According to the flood narrative, Noah has three sons: Ham, Shem, and Japheth. Our scripture lesson today mentions two of them. Through the lineage of Shem we come to Terah, a patriarch with three sons. Two of those are found in the book of Genesis with stories: Abram and his nephew Lot. Abram and Lot travel with Terah from Ur to the land of Canaan, settling at Haran. It is in the land of Canaan where God tells Abram that he will be the father to a great nation and that they will be a great blessing to the earth. Then Abram and Lot leave Haran for a new land that God promises their family.

When reading these scriptures concerning lineage, it is very tempting to impress a Western understanding of the names and ages given the characters. We would like to think that these names were carved in stone or something to prove that it happened. However, a closer reading reveals that these chapters are more of a verbal map of the world paying attention to the territorial and political realities of the time, particularly the Solomonic period when this text was likely written.¹ Thus, we are to read that these lines are not as much a genealogy as they are an etiology, an explanation of how certain groups of people came from certain places and to whom they were connected.

The opening verses in chapter twelve that characterize Abram's acknowledgment of the Lord point to a new beginning. God is on the go and it is through Abram that God will start a new covenant. Once again, our text moves to a central figure who will be considered a spiritual father to a whole group of people. The text even includes his age as if to make a point about whom God will use and how that age is not a factor. All the genealogies recorded in Genesis chapters ten through eleven point to this figure who will be considered the father of all.

Application

The purpose of the lesson according to the writer is to discover that even biblical genealogies reveal God at work. As I read the purpose, I couldn't help but chuckle as I remembered all the times I've read through the list of names that I knew I would butcher if I had to pronounce them. Often though, I did wonder what was the point to these long lists of names of people who lived a long time ago and some of whom may have been more symbolic than real. Whether in the Old Testament or the New Testament, genealogies make their appearance and can sometimes go on chapter after chapter.

The older I have gotten, the more I appreciate these genealogies. Even though these biblical names often do not mean as much to me, I realize that in a certain time period, these names were significant. The same goes for our own family genealogies. They may not mean much to others, but they maybe very important to us.

I have an uncle who is a genealogist and his hobby is helping others trace their

¹ Walter Brueggeman, "Genesis," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1982), 91.

family history. Since I was a little boy, I have known about the origins of my family and their journey to this country. My namesake, John Hunter, was a Scotch-Irish immigrant who came to this country looking for a new beginning in the Carolinas. Much like Abram his journey was one that took him to a new land, hundreds of miles away from “home.”

Genealogies, if we have access to ours, can tell us the history of who we are today as we look to the journeys of our ancestors. They are important because we can see from where we came from and give thanks to those who are part of that story. We may even be blessed by their stories later on in life.

One of the other things that my uncle did was trace my ancestry line to the Whitefields. My ninth generation great-grandfather was the brother of the revival preacher George Whitefield, a contemporary of the Wesley brothers. When I went to Great Britain for the John Wesley heritage tour during college, one of our stops included the city of Gloucester, the home of George Whitefield. With my little black notebook, I had jotted the names down that connected me to the Whitefields and was hoping that when we visited the home church of George Whitefield, St. Mary de Crypt, I might find the graves of my tenth generation great-grandparents. Alas, the graves had been moved.

The church though had remained much like it did in the past several hundred years. We saw the pulpit where George Whitefield first preached and the baptismal font where he and other relatives would have been brought into the family of faith. It was surreal to stand in the same place where those whose blood flows in my veins once prayed, sung hymns, and listened to the Word proclaimed.

During the course of the visit I saw a sketch of the church on the wall. I asked one of the tour guides, a member of the church, if there was a copy of it I could purchase. She asked why and I showed her my little black book and the list of names there. With tears in her eyes, she proceeded to say that there was no value of the sketch and then she took it off the wall and gave me the picture. The picture now sits in my home and I am reminded in my home library of all the ones who have come before me in the faith.

If you are privileged enough to have a genealogy, do you try to search about the places your ancestors came from and the stories of their lives? If they were people of faith, do you know their story and what was important to them? If perhaps you are new to the faith or do not know your genealogy, what do you plan to leave for your family or those who follow you? The scriptures today remind us that God is at work in our lives and that we are all a part of an “endless line of splendor” that continues from generation to generation.

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