

“Your Story Has Already Been Written”

Genesis 11:10-32

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The first eleven chapters of Genesis are typically considered to be a separate section of the first book of the Bible having to do with what is often referred to as “primeval history.” That is, these chapters concern the early history of the human race. With the next chapter we enter human history at an identifiable point, at a point where corroborative evidence begins to accumulate. We know more than a little about the ancient near eastern world in the early years of the 3rd millennium B.C. When we begin the Abraham narrative in our chapter 12 a turning point has been reached. The narrative from that point concentrates on a single family with the whole world receding into the background. Universal human history narrows into patriarchal history. [Sarna, 85] On the other hand, it is clear that the author of Genesis thought of the history he was recounting as an interconnected narrative from the beginning onward. The paragraph we are about to read, for example, is obviously “Janus” material; that is, like the two-faced Roman god, it looks both backward and forward. Mention is made of the flood and of figures identified by name in earlier sections and looks forward to Abraham by concluding with Terah, whose generations are the subject of the next book. Remember, in each case, the chapter or *toledot* named after a certain person, in this case Shem, is not about *that* person, but about his descendants.

Text Comment

- v.10 “These are the generations of...” as we have noted is the title of a new chapter, in this case the fifth chapter of Genesis, even though this chapter -- as will be the case for several others -- consists of nothing but a single genealogy. This genealogy is similar in form to the one found in Genesis 5 (Sarna, 85) and in content to the one found in 10:21-31.

Now it is important to notice once again that the genealogy we are about to read is schematized. The narrator has limited himself to ten generations, the same number as the genealogy in chapter 5, obviously omitting any number of generations. If we were to regard this genealogy as complete, all of Abraham’s ancestors would have been living when he was born, Shem would have outlived Abraham by thirty-five years, and Shem and Eber would have been contemporaries with Abraham’s grandson, Jacob! [Waltke, 188]

- v.13 The interesting thing about Arpachshad is that he was Shem’s *third* son. Here he is mentioned alone; his brothers go unmentioned. In other words the lineage being followed is not through the firstborn, but through the one God chose. Divine election is woven into the very fabric of this history. The fact that we read of other unnamed sons and daughters of Arpachshad further underscores this fact.

For those of you who might notice the problem, there has probably been an accidental omission from the Hebrew text upon which our English translation is based. Both the

Hebrew text the LXX translators used 200 years before Christ and the genealogy of Jesus given in Luke 3:35-36 add another name, Cainan, and so another generation between Arpachshad and Shelah. It is in this way that we get 10 generations in the genealogy. [Waltke, 189] Dropping one unit in a long list is a typical copyist's mistake.

- v.18 With Peleg the genealogy of Shem divides again between the elect and the non-elect lines. As you perhaps noticed, the life-spans are shortening precipitously through the genealogy, from Shem's 600 years now down to Peleg's 240 years. At the end Nahor will live but 148 years.
- v.25 Serug is known as a 3rd millennium B.C. Akkadian or early Babylonian place name. It was located some 45 miles west of Haran in Upper Mesopotamia. Nahor and Terah are also place names in Upper Mesopotamia near Haran. Then as now personal or clan names are often attached to cities. Think of Seattle, Everett, Yakima, or Puyallup.
- v.26 Terah had to wait longer to have his first son, foreshadowing the fate of his son and grandson. What is more, he was seventy, a complete number "disclosing the fingerprint of God." [Waltke, 190]
- v.27 Again, a new chapter begins. Verses 27-32 are an introduction to the long chapter that begins here but does not end until the middle of our chapter 25. Again, the chapter entitled "The Generations of Terah" concerns not Terah but his offspring and especially Abraham. In fact Terah will not be mentioned again because he didn't share Abraham's faith. Some of the family names and both Ur and Haran -- centers of moon worship -- suggest that Terah was a worshipper of the moon god Sin. Terah's own name may be derived from an ancient word for "moon." [Sarna, 86]
- v.28 "Chaldean" is a later term for that Babylonian area and people, suggesting that the text of Genesis continued to be modernized throughout the period when the ancient canon was still being added to. [Cf. Sarna, 87] That is, while the OT was being written, its earliest parts were still being updated in small ways. It is as if I were to say that the history of the United States began with the settlement of Plymouth in 1620. Obviously there was no United States in 1620, but from a later viewpoint we think of that history as the history of our country which later was to be called the United States.
- v.29 As we learn later, Sarai was the daughter of Terah by a different mother than Abraham's. This was precisely the sort of incest that would later be forbidden in the Law of Moses. Iscah, by the way, is the only individual who plays no role in the narrative to follow. We know nothing about her. [Sarna, 87]
- v.30 This piece of information anticipates the narrative to come. Sarah's barrenness will prove of momentous importance as the story unfolds. The Hebrew term "barren" means childless, not necessarily infertile. [Sarna, 87]
- v.32 The migration to Canaan does not seem to have begun simply as Abraham's obedience to a divine call, but as a family decision. In any case, Abraham did not travel on to Canaan

until his father had died some years later. According to Stephen, Abraham had heard the divine call when he was still in Ur, which would suggest that he was slow to obey it.

Terah's years were probably 145 not 205, the number found in another ancient Hebrew text and one that comports better with Stephen's recollection of this history in his speech before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:2-4).

You may have noticed how frequently the word "story" appears in both culture and theology nowadays. We are constantly being urged to listen to the stories that people have to tell. Books aplenty have been written to tell the stories of various groups of people. Indeed, narrative or story-telling has become a new technique of the social sciences. And in Christian theology, the biblical theology movement has reminded us how much of biblical revelation comes in the form of narratives. To write theology in terms of the biblical story has become a new preoccupation in Christian scholarship. Richard Pratt, the author of the *Third Millennium* curriculum that Jeff David is using in Cuba wrote a fine book entitled *He Gave us Stories*.

There is certainly something valuable in this new concentration on narrative history and narrative social science. There is something richer and more personal that is gained in reading human stories as opposed to drawing conclusions from statistics. The more analytic approach is often sterile and leaves out of consideration a great deal that matters most to human life and experience.

Most of us have read something of the holocaust, the Nazis' horrific program to exterminate the Jews and the six million Jews who perished in their campaign of systematic murder during the Second World War. That history can be written as much history is: an account of social and political developments, of statistics, of the origin, the implementation, and the conclusion of the so-called "final solution." But some of us heard another account this past Tuesday, a very different kind of account. We sat on stone steps in an outdoor section of the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem and listened to our Israeli guide describe the history of his family, his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. They were all Poles. He showed us pictures of them gathered for family celebrations. They looked so much like the black and white pictures that you have all seen of your ancestors. All but a few of these people were murdered by gunshot or by gas. We heard how they resisted suggestions that they leave Poland and immigrate to Israel in the late 1930s, how they struggled to realize what horrors the German policies toward the Jews portended, and how then they were caught up in the genocide, family by family, and individual by individual, and how just a few of them survived: a little child, given away to be raised by Gentiles for safe-keeping -- a Christian family who, our Israeli guide said with real emotion, had themselves said, "How could we face Jesus if we didn't take this little child" -- and a young husband and father who was taken to Germany as a slave laborer, whose captive status, ironically, was his salvation. The history of the holocaust can be told in that way as well, as a personal story, such as the story of the extended family of Schlomo ben Asher, our Israeli guide. We were all made to feel the impact of that history precisely because we saw it in terms of real people connected to someone we knew and liked and could hear and see the emotion that still moves him deeply though, no doubt, he has told that story many times before, indeed because he so obviously wanted us to hear the story of his family even after all these years. *Stories make history live!*

On the other hand, there are also more sinister forces lurking in this development. Some of the impetus for using stories as a substitute for more formal analysis is post-modern relativism. Once it was denied that there was in human life an objective reality to which we are all subject, once it was denied that there was a meta-narrative or over-arching story of human life in which we must all find our place -- such as the meta-narrative of biblical Christianity: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation -- all that was left was the individual story that each of us can tell of his or her own life. It is all that we have and so there is a greater need to tell it; it is the only way to authenticate ourselves, to give our lives meaning.

Since there is no meaning coming down from above, we have to construct it for ourselves from the bottom up. And, of course, as each person's story is different, so each person's meaning is different. Story-telling thus becomes a way of inventing truth for ourselves. This is my truth; what is yours? The old view was that truth was there to be discovered. The new view is that truth has to be created out of our own experience. But that necessarily means that my truth won't be the same as yours because my story is different from yours. Obviously Christians do not and cannot accept that account of things. Our stories are meaningful only because they are part of *the* story of human life, from creation to consummation.

Still, there can be no doubt that the story of individual lives is of great importance and invariably of great interest. Because we have been made in God's image, because our lives are of moral worth and will be subject to his judgment, our lives matter tremendously. *And our lives are stories.* The Bible itself teaches us to see our lives in terms of their stories by giving us the story of one life after another, each different in so many ways, however the same in the most important ways. There is truth with a capital "T" that defines the meaning of everyone's life, but there is so much that is unique, interesting, and important in everyone's own life story. And in one very important sense the history of the world and the history of the kingdom of God are conglomerations of myriads of individual stories. *In that sense Ralph Waldo Emerson was right: "All history is biography."*

What is made obvious in the Bible in a thousand different ways, but profoundly here in such a text as we have read this morning, is that the narrative of our lives is *a story that God himself has written.* Our lives follow a plot written by God himself. He has ordered our lives in such a way that we are intimately connected with what has come before and with what follows after. We are the product of the past and we ourselves produce the future but in those ways God has already determined, which is a doctrine taught everywhere in the Bible. In the 139th Psalm we read: "All our days were ordered for us before there was a one of them."

Think of the various ways in which this fundamental truth, a truth that absolutely should transform our view of life and our own life, is taught in the genealogy we just read. If you remember, we were told in Genesis 9 that, because of Ham's sin, his descendants would serve the descendants of Shem. That obviously is an illustration of the long reach of our sins and their consequences. But it also demonstrates the sovereignty of God over the march of the generations. He has determined how the future will unfold in one life and one family after another.

Now, we come to Gen. 11 and the beginning of that narrowing of the family tree that is going to take us into the history of Abraham, and, eventually into the Promised Land where, some

centuries later, the descendants of Shem would take possession of the land that at the time belonged to the descendants of Ham. We have, in other words, the plan that God had previously announced, beginning now to take shape, step by step. The genealogy concentrates only on Shem's line; and then, when we come to Eber in v. 16, if you compare 11:16-18 with 10:25-26, you will see that it takes up only Eber's son Peleg and his descendants. It is moving inexorably to Abraham and to his twelve sons and to the conquest of the Promised Land.

God has a plan, and that plan concentrates on certain people, and so the genealogy concentrates its attention on those people, leading inexorably to Abraham, whom God called summoned by his almighty word out of a life of unbelief into a life of faith. As Jesus would have said, Abraham was one of his sheep, and, therefore, when he heard the shepherd's voice, he followed him. We need not get ahead of ourselves. All we need to see is that the history Genesis records is unfolding according to the plan that we have already been told God has for the world, a plan that is going to involve certain specific descendants of Shem. Their stories together make up *the* story.

We were told already in Gen. 3 of the Savior who was to come to deliver mankind from the curse of sin. Now we begin to see the family history of that deliverer beginning to narrow. All of these lives and births and generations have a place in that plan. And, of course, as we read the Bible we will learn that so much more goes into the fulfillment of that plan. How parents raise their children, the experiences that they have as they grow into adulthood, the afflictions and trials through which they pass, and everything else that goes into making the story of a life that becomes the means by which history marches along its appointed path. Here we learn that Sarah was barren, the one deeply personal detail that is going to have huge implications for the story of Abraham and his family and for the progress of the seed as we move down the ages toward the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are being told here with beautiful simplicity that the trial and tribulation of childlessness through which Abraham and Sarah would pass for years on end was no accident. It was the plan of God. Not just who would follow whom as one generation led to another, but the very circumstances of their lives have all been determined beforehand.

It is absolutely true that in these first eleven chapters of Genesis we see God, as it were, adjusting his plans to respond to the actions of men, whether Adam's disobedience or the world's terrible wickedness in the days of Noah. Some have, of course, argued from such texts that God is not in control of human affairs but often finds himself frustrated, disappointed, and scrambling to find new measures with which to keep his plans and purposes moving forward.

As any thoughtful reader of the Bible knows, this juxtaposition of man's free choice and God's sovereign plan is characteristic of the Bible from beginning to end. Man is indeed a responsible agent who can and does rebel against God. He does what pleases him. And he or she must face the consequences of the choices that he or she makes. Human choices are real causes in this world. The Bible teaches this in a thousand ways and with terrible emphasis. *Human life is full of risk!*

But the Bible also leaves us in no doubt that man does not control human history as if God were subject to *his* will, as if God were powerless to prevent man from defeating his plans for the world. We are being shown here in no uncertain terms that history moves inexorably according

to a plan and it is God's plan, not man's; that in the main and in the detail God orchestrates the march of history. *Because God is God, his plans for human life and history are without risk!*

A delightful book came into my hands a few months ago and I've been reading from it from time to time. It is entitled *A Pastor's Sketches* and was written in the 19th century by a prominent Brooklyn Presbyterian by the name of Ichabod Spencer. In these sketches he relates various interactions that he had with folk through the course of his ministry and uses those anecdotes to teach lessons of Christian faith and life. One of the sketches concerns a man who was troubled by what seemed to him the logical contradiction between an absolute divine sovereignty and the Bible's own witness to human freedom and accountability. This problem was standing in the way of coming to faith in Christ, raising all manner of objections in his mind to biblical truth. He had come to talk about the matter with Pastor Spencer and had asked, in that challenging tone people sometimes use with pastors, if he could explain how God was both an absolute sovereign, determining everything ahead of time *and*, at the same time, how man's freedom and personal responsibility could be preserved. If God determines everything, what is left to man and what are his choices but those of a puppet dancing on a string handled by someone else?

He had asked other ministers to resolve the problem and hadn't understood a word they said. Now he had come to test Ichabod Spencer. Other ministers thought they could explain this, he said, could he? Spencer's reply startled him: "No, nor any other man who ever lived."

"This short and somewhat abrupt answer, spoken with great emphasis, produced a remarkable effect upon my mind. A sense of the incomprehensibility of God seemed to burst upon me with great power. ... I felt as if I had suddenly and violently been placed on the other side of the obstruction, which, with others of its kind, had blocked up my path. And although they were still there, and still objects of wonder and admiration, they were *no longer in the way.*" [II, 24-25]

Pastor Spencer went on to say he could prove the truth of *each* doctrine -- God's sovereignty and man's freedom -- but he could not explain how they worked together in the progress of human history. Our minds are too small to embrace and comprehend such infinite truth. The blunt truth is that we don't know and can't know how God rules the world so absolutely while at the same time leaving man to do what he pleases so completely that man remains entirely responsible for the choices he makes; all we know is that that is how in fact God rules the world.

This is made clear already at the beginning of the Bible. Divine providence, God's control of human history in its entirety and in its parts is plainly the teaching of these early chapters of Genesis. True it is that man is in rebellion against God. True it is that this pains God's heart. We have already spoken of that in reference to Gen. 6:6. But it is also true that all of man's rebellion notwithstanding, even that which causes God pain, is part of the divine plan and purpose for the world.

Now we appreciate that unbelievers deeply resent the very idea that they are so completely subject to God's control. It is not hard to understand their resentment. They do not want to be part of a story written by a God they fear and whose holiness they resent. They scoff at the very idea that God rules over them and that they cannot escape his rule, however much the bluster is

whistling in the dark. They may speak boldly of being captains of their own fate, as did W.E. Henley's in his famous poem *Invictus*, a popular piece of Victorian twaddle, but they actually control very little and are helpless, utterly helpless before the grinding forces of human life and experience and their own onrushing death.

But for the Christian this truth -- that life is unfolding according to a script written long before in heaven -- both solemnizes and comforts us. It teaches us to take our lives seriously -- as something of great importance to both God and man, our stories being part of *the great story* of human life -- and it teaches to have hope in even the most difficult of circumstances. Our lives are not out of control; they are never out of control; they are always where God ultimately intended them to be.

How could we resent the fact that God already has in hand not only our lives but those of our children and grandchildren? God is holy love. *Who else would we want writing the story of our days and nights and that of our children?*

Let me give you an example of the way we ought to think about our lives every day, and our place in the midst of generations past, present, and future. Charles Simeon, the great Anglican preacher at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, sometimes took holidays to Scotland. This was somewhat unusual because Scotland was not a tourist destination in those days. The mode of travel was often quite primitive. Simeon's primary transportation was his horse, which carried him far over Highland roads and paths. One June he came riding, in the company of James Haldane, one of the famous brothers who would later give their name to a major spiritual revival in Switzerland, France, and Germany, into the town of Moulin, in the center of Scotland.

As was Simeon's custom, he paid a visit to the parish minister, one Alexander Stewart. Stewart was a learned man, had published a highly regarded grammar of the Gaelic language, and a man of high moral reputation. He preached a pure and high morality. He held to a certain point the doctrines of Christian orthodoxy, but was at that time still a stranger to living faith in Christ and to the experience and the joy of salvation. Simeon was invited to stay at the manse and preach at the communion service the following Sunday. On that Lord's Day evening after that service Mr. Stewart came to see him in his room. They spoke at length, prayed together, and, as a result of that conversation, Stewart's eyes were opened to the gospel of Christ. His preaching immediately changed and some in the congregation were soon changed by it as well and made true believers in Christ. One such husband and wife, who later said "they owed their own selves" to their now converted minister, were the parents of Alexander Duff, one of Scotland's and India's greatest missionaries.

Now, there is just a single glimpse of how God writes the script that comes to pass as one generation interacts with and then succeeds another. God uses a vacationing minister to convert a village pastor, through whose now lively and faithful preaching of the gospel, some parishioners are converted, who then raise their son in the faith of Christ, only to see him become one of the Christian church's most celebrated missionaries. Millions of Christians in India owe their salvation in part to Alexander Duff, his parents, Alexander Stewart, and Charles Simeon all of

whom paid essential roles in the story. God had the salvation of generations of Indians already written into the story when he sent Simeon riding into Moulin that long ago June.

Let the unbeliever resent the Bible's doctrine that God has planned the future down to the minutest detail. You and I should love that knowledge, because it gives us the right to see our heavenly Father's hand in all things, at every moment in our lives, and to know that our lives, the lives of our children and others we love are not lived at a venture. God knows the end from the beginning and all the connections before and after by which we become who we become and by which we influence those who come after us. This knowledge supercharges our daily lives with significance and assures us that, so long as we are trusting in the Lord and seeking to obey and serve him, our lives are a happy part of God's master plan for the history of the world and for the world's salvation.

It transforms life to know that God is in absolute control of the unfolding story of life. The world takes on a completely different appearance when one knows God's hand is turning every page!