

Babel through the Introduction to Abraham (Genesis 10-11)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis

I. Recap from the Previous Lesson

- a. Even a hero of faith like Noah could fall into drunkenness; so don't think you are above it. We must be vigilant to the end. While the New Testament gives us freedom to drink wine in moderation, drunkenness will disqualify us from the kingdom of God.
- b. Consider the amazing things that happen throughout the Old Testament when faith + water + wood come together. Early Christian writers saw this as foreshadowing God's plan to save us.
- c. In many ways, Noah was a type or pattern of Christ, the one man through whom the world would be saved.

II. Inserted Point – How and Why I Use Early Christian Writers in Teaching

- a. Last lesson I pointed out insights of early Christian writers (Barnabas and Justin Martyr) regarding seeing connections and foreshadowings between Noah and other OT stories and the cross, baptism, Christian salvation and Jesus Christ.
- b. I was asked by someone after the last class, "How do you see the importance of the early Christian writers in how you read the Bible?"
 - i. Good question, since I include quotes from early Christian writers in Bible lessons more than most who teach.
 - ii. Also, early Christian writers often see prophecies and types/foreshadowings that are not mentioned by Jesus or the apostles in the New Testament. What should we do with things like that?
- c. When reading through books of the Old Testament, looking for moral lessons for us or possible prophecies or foreshadowings, I will consider three possible sources. In order:
 - i. First, did Jesus, the ultimate Teacher (**Matthew 23:8**), make any points from this story? (Unquestionably inspired source, from the very Son of God!)
 - ii. Second, did any of the apostles or other writers of the New Testament (Peter, Paul, John, James, Luke, writer of **Hebrews**, etc.) make any points from the Old Testament story? (Also an unquestionable source, inspired by the Holy Spirit; see **John 14:26, 2 Timothy 3:16-17**. In some cases they were taught by Jesus personally as well.)

- iii. A third source I will consider: early Christian writers. (Since they are not inspired, we are free to disregard wherever we believe their insights are incorrect.) However, I personally find some of their insights to be extremely *useful* to consider (as opposed to modern commentators, whom I generally avoid). My reasons for considering what early Christian writers (especially pre-325 AD) have to say:
1. The earliest writers, from the first and second century, in some cases personally knew one or more of the apostles or were disciples of others who knew the apostles.
 - a. Imagine a major Bible conference, devoted to understanding one book of the Bible you had lots of questions about (Revelation, for example). Four concurrent sessions, and you can only pick one to attend:
 - i. In one room you have N.T. Wright teaching (famous modern Christian scholar).
 - ii. In another room Martin Luther is teaching on the same topic (pivotal teacher in the Protestant Reformation).
 - iii. In a third room Thomas Aquinas is teaching (famous Catholic teacher from the Middle Ages).
 - iv. In the fourth room the teacher is Polycarp, a personal disciple of the apostle John (who wrote the book of Revelation). Polycarp also is a native speaker of Koine Greek, the language that the New Testament was written in.
 - b. Given the choice, which room would you want to be in? (I know where I would go!)
 2. Many of the early Christian writers were native Greek speakers. Being extremely familiar with the common Greek of the New Testament era, they are in a better position to understand the original meaning of a word or phrase than later teachers.
 3. Personally, I have found that the early Christians to be refreshing to read. They tend to take the Scriptures at face value and are not inclined to explain away hard or unpopular teachings, unlike most modern Christian teachers. They also tend to treat the basic faith as a sacred trust that was handed

down complete, which they should neither add to nor subtract from.

4. Many ideas popular in the Christian world were not present in the beginning of the church but started later: perhaps during the 4th or 5th century, or during Middle Ages, the Protestant Reformation or even in the 1800's. Personally I want to, as it says in **Jude v.3**, "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints". My goal, to the best of my ability, is to present the faith as it was *originally* understood and preached; not something introduced later.
5. Reading the early Christian writers, I noticed that in many cases, they were more accustomed than modern Westerners to appreciate the allegorical significance of things contained in Old Testament passages.
 - a. Many types or foreshadowing prophecies are explained in the New Testament (like the Passover lamb in **Exodus 12**, or the bronze serpent in the wilderness from **Numbers 21** that Jesus mentions in **John 3:14**).
 - b. However, the early Christians believed that there were also prophecies and foreshadowings in the Old Testament not specifically mentioned in the New Testament. I have found some of the connections that they saw to be particularly striking, for example many of the foreshadowings pointed out by Justin Martyr in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (in ANF v.1).
 - c. On the other hand, some of the connections mentioned by some early Christian writers have struck me personally as a bit speculative.
 - d. If you are interested in learning more about the subject of little-known allegorical style prophecies, Scroll Publishing has *Shadows of Christ in the Old Testament*, an audio CD lesson by David Bercot.
6. So I will share some of the insights from early Christian writers regarding the Old Testament. I hope that you appreciate their insights. However, they are not inspired, nor are they authoritative. **The standard is the Bible only**. It is not 'the Bible + the early Christians'. Wherever early Christian writers may contradict what it says in Scripture, we should reject the point or interpretation of those writers.

- a. My own rule, as in eating a good fish dinner: Proceed carefully. 'Eat the flesh, but don't swallow the bones!'
- b. When a passage could be considered in more than one way, it is helpful to me to understand how it was understood by those closest to the apostles.

III. Noah's Descendants (chapter 10)

- a. Genealogy of Noah's three sons is provided, as foundation for nations to follow.
- b. Japheth's descendants – the coastal nations. The Indo-European people, also sometimes called Aryans, spreading both to the west and to the east through India, Persia and Europe.
- c. Ham's descendants – Africa in general, including Egypt (Mizraim), Libya (Put), Ethiopia (Cush) and Palestine/Canaan (Canaan).
 - i. Ham had four sons; yet only Canaan got Noah's curse.
 - ii. Nimrod the mighty hunter founded Babylon.
- d. Shem is father of the Semites, who would settle in southwest Asia and Arabia: the Jews and Arabs, generally referred to as the Semitic people.
 - i. Eber's line leads down to Abraham
 - ii. Josephus, a first century Jewish writer, said that the term 'Hebrews', an early name for the Jews, is traced back to Heber (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 1, chapter 6).

IV. Story of Tower of Babel (Read **Genesis 11:1-9**)

- a. Elements of the story.
 - i. People want to build a great city and "a tower whose top will reach to heaven"
 - ii. Motivation is human pride: "let us make a name for ourselves".
 - iii. Lord recognizes their great power when unified (one people, one language)
 - iv. **Genesis 11:7** "let Us go down" (similar 'Us' in **Genesis 1:26** which, as noted in a prior lesson, early Christian writers believed reflected the trinity).
 - v. God confuses their language and scatters them abroad. They stop building the tower and city.

- vi. Name 'Babel' from confused languages.
- b. Why was God opposed to men building a great tower?
 - i. God smashed human arrogance. Theophilus, overseer of the church in Antioch, wrote in his letter to Autolycus (c. 180):
 - 1. "Men...took counsel of their own judgment, and not at the instigation of God, to build a city, a tower whose top might reach to heaven, that they might make a glorious name to themselves. Since, therefore, they had dared, contrary to the will of God, to attempt a grand work, God destroyed their city and overthrew their tower." (ANF v.2, p.106)
 - ii. But, Noah built a huge boat, a massive construction project, but God blessed this, as Noah did so to honor and to obey God. God is not down on significant endeavors!
- c. After quoting a passage from the Old Testament Paul said in **Romans 15:4**, "For whatever things were written before *were written for our learning*". What lessons are there *for us* in the story of Babel?
 - i. Unity is a very powerful thing, which can be used either for the greater glory of God, or for man's agendas.
 - 1. Amazing things that have been accomplished through unity.
 - a. President Kennedy announced in the early 1960's that the Americans would put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. (Motivation: national greatness.)
 - b. Hitler pulled together the German-speaking people of Central Europe in 1930's, and almost succeeded in defeating both Europe and Russia. (Motivation: vengeance for what was done to the Germans following WWI and the Treaty of Versailles, national greatness, charismatic leader.)
 - c. Americans unified after Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, put down their differences and unite to defeat Japan and Germany in World War II. (Motivation: common enemy, national survival.)
 - d. Common that more talented sports teams with 'superstars' (basketball, football, etc.) are defeated by less talented teams where the individuals are truly unified and work together unselfishly for the good of the team. (Motivation: to make a name for the team, desire for greatness, a motivating coach.)

- e. Church denominations that are unified often accomplish amazing things for short periods of time, including: raising money, building programs, numerical growth, or planting many new churches. (Motivation can include: a centralized government structure, a charismatic leader, and a desire to make a great name for themselves.)
- 2. Unity among Christians is a good and essential thing! Also difficult to maintain. Jesus prayed for it in **John 17:20-23**; and Paul addressed it as the first problem in Corinth, in **1 Corinthians 1:10-13**. However, being unified is not the goal. Even the wicked can be unified.
 - a. Jews in the time of Saul wanted worldly unity under a human king, a strong leader to pull them together and lead them in battle, just like the nations around them. They asked Samuel in **1 Samuel 8:4-7**, "Now establish a king for us to judge us like all the rest of the nations." When Samuel asked the Lord about this, God's response was, "They have rejected me, to bring to naught my reign over them".
 - b. Jesus told us in **Mark 3:24-25**, "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand."
 - c. Point Jesus was making: even Satan's kingdom must be unified, so if Jesus is casting out demons, he clearly can't be doing it by Satan's power.
 - d. Unity is not necessarily a sign of God's approval. Don't seek worldly unity within the church. However, disunity among Christians is indication of a serious problem!
- ii. Danger of wanting to make great things to glorify ourselves or our group (denominations, movements). To build something that looks impressive, to reflect well on us.
 - 1. There are various ways Satan can destroy the church: through defeat and discouragement, as well as through victory and success.
 - 2. Church must be built to give all glory to Jesus, the only head.
 - 3. Avoid "making a name for ourselves" with a denomination or brand.

- iii. With worldly unity a group can do incredible things (church denominations, sports teams, armies, countries), at least for a while, until the Lord puts a stop to it.
- d. (This next point is based on my personal impression only, so feel free to reject this next point if you don't see it that way!) The story of Babel reminds me of the account of what happened at Pentecost, in **Acts chapter 2**, except in reverse!
 - i. One people in one city become dispersed among many nations (Babel); versus many nations gathering together in one city (Pentecost).
 - ii. One language being confused into many languages (Babel); versus people with many languages confused by all being able to understand one speaker (Pentecost).
 - iii. Building by man from earth to reach heaven, in Babel; versus building being done by God from heaven (Spirit coming down at Pentecost) to reach man on earth.
 - iv. People trying to make a name for themselves; versus God making a people and a name for himself.
 - v. The great 'baptism' (flood) is recorded right before the Babel event; versus happening immediately after the spirit coming down at Pentecost in **Acts 2** (3,000 baptized, start of the church).
- e. The church is described in terms of a great masonry structure, too.
 - i. Peter refers to the church as being like, "living stones being built together as a spiritual house" (**1 Peter 2:5**).
 - ii. Paul uses similar language (read **Ephesians 2:19-22**).
 - iii. We do want to build something great for God, but we must do it God's way for God's glory.
 - iv. Our goal: to become a godly, unified building where each of us is just one stone or brick. The building is to glorify God, not us or our group or 'brand'. Let's not re-create a spiritual Tower of Babel!

V. Lineage from Shem to Abraham (Genesis 11:10-32)

- a. Do some of the names in this lineage seem familiar? They are ancestors of Jesus, mentioned in Luke's lineage of Jesus in **Luke 3:34-36**, which goes all the way back to Adam (through Terah, Abraham, Shem and Noah).

VI. Introduction to Abraham

- a. Why is Abraham important to us Christians?
 - i. He is the father of all the Jews
 - ii. The New Testament begins with Abraham. **Matthew 1:1** begins, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.” **Matthew 1:17** concludes by dividing Christ’s line into three groups of 14 generations each:
 1. Abraham to David;
 2. David to captivity in Babylon; and
 3. Captivity to Christ.
 - iii. He is our father, as well. In **Romans 4:11** Paul says Abraham is “the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised” (the Gentiles), as well as being father to the circumcised (the Jews).
 - iv. He provides one of the greatest examples of what saving faith is, as shown in **Hebrews 11** and **James 2**. In that, he is worthy of imitation.
 - v. Many wonderful promises were made to Abraham that benefit us as well.
 - vi. Many wonderful prophecies and foreshadowings of Jesus are revealed in the story of Abraham.
 - vii. He was the first to discern, from reason and revelation, that the dead would be raised, as noted in **Hebrews 11:19**.
 - viii. His wife Sarah is held up to women by Peter as a great example to follow, in **1 Peter 3:1-6**.
- b. Abraham travels from Ur to Haran to Canaan (**Genesis 11:27-32**)
 - i. Terah was father of Abraham, Nahor and Haran (and Abraham’s wife, Sarah).
 - ii. Abraham and Sarah were originally called Abram and Sarai. Sarai was barren, unable to have children.
 - iii. Terah’s family begins in “Ur of the Chaldeans”, or in the LXX “the land of the Chaldeans”. Generally considered to be in southern Iraq. In **Acts 7:2**, Stephen says he was “in Mesopotamia” (broad term referring to the land of the two rivers: Euphrates and Tigris, in Iraq).

- iv. Terah's family travels northwest up through the "fertile crescent" on the way toward Canaan. However, they stop and settle in Haran, in southern Turkey near border with Syria.
- v. Terah dies in Haran, at the age of 205.
- vi. We will pick up next time with Abraham in **Genesis 12**.