When Families Fail Us
Genesis 9:18 – 29

Let's pray – Loving Father, you who made us and know the deepest hurts in our lives, would you draw us close to your heart today, comfort us and heal us, we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

INTRODUCTION – When Families Fail Us

There's been a heart wrenching story in the news in recent weeks. A mother suffering from postpartum depression murdered her 3 children aged 5 yrs, 3 yrs and 8 months old, and then tried to take her own life. The mom had sought help but, in the end, the help wasn't enough. She was tried for the 3 murders. A forensic psychologist testified that she was psychotic at the time. 11 jurors believed she could not be held responsible because of her mental illness. 1 lone juror believed otherwise. Although he said there was reasonable doubt, he believed the woman to be evil and would not vote to acquit. A mistrial was declared due to a hung jury. What happens next remains to be seen.

Regardless of what you think or feel about the outcome of the case, the reality is stories like this tear at our hearts because they violate what we fundamentally want to be true.

Families are supposed to be places where we find safety, support, unconditional love, and protection from dangers in the outside world. But the tragic reality is, because we live in a broken world, full of broken, sinful people, families often become the source of our deepest wounds and pain.

Addiction, abuse, mental illness, neglect, all leave their mark.

While hopefully none of us will never do anything as awful and tragic as this mother who was psychotic, even the best among us from time to time make bad choices and the consequences can ripple through our families for generations, as one sin often leads to another.

Though many of us may feel ashamed to talk about the brokenness in our own families, the Bible doesn't hide the truth about the waywardness of human beings and its negative impact on our families. It doesn't hide the fact that family dysfunction is a real thing.

From the very beginning when Adam and Eve first choose to disobey God's commands, human wrongdoing has negatively impacted families. I don't think it would be an exaggeration on my part to say that every single family since creation has had to deal with some kind of family dysfunction and brokenness. But what about Noah's family?

If you have been joining us on our journey through Genesis this year, you'll know we've gotten up to the story of Noah and the ark and the great flood. If you remember anything

about Noah, it would seem reasonable to wonder if his family was somehow spared from all the brokenness we experience today?

After all, Genesis tells us that Noah found favor with God. Noah did everything just as God commanded him to do. And Noah was declared by God to be righteous in his generation.

Noah seemed to be the perfect man, always doing the right thing. So, he must have been the perfect husband and the perfect father. He must have had the perfect family. They shouldn't have had any dysfunction or brokenness in their family, right?

Well, let's look at and see what happened shortly Noah and his family emerged from the ark.

Let's read Genesis 9:18-29.

Genesis 9:18-29

9 18 The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham
was the father of Canaan.) 19 These were the three sons of Noah, and from them came
the people who were scattered over the whole earth.

20 Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded[a] to plant a vineyard. 21 When he drank some of
its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. 22 Ham, the father of
Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. 23 But Shem and
Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward
and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that
they would not see their father naked.

24 When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to
him, 25 he said,

"Cursed be Canaan!
The lowest of slaves
will he be to his brothers."

26 He also said,

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Shem!
May Canaan be the slave of Shem.
27 May God extend Japheth's[b] territory;
may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,
and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth."

28 After the flood Noah lived 350 years. 29 Noah lived a total of 950 years, and then he
died."

In case you missed what happened, let me summarize – After God preserved Noah and his family from the great flood, in a wooden ark, Noah planted a vineyard and got drunk. In a state of vulnerability, he lay naked in his own tent. His son Ham saw him and disrespectfully went and gossiped about him to his brothers. We don't know exactly what he said but we can imagine he perhaps was laughing about his dad or mocking him.

Shem and Japeth however, reacted differently to the situation. They refused to participate in the mockery of their dad. They walked backwards into Noah's tent so they wouldn't see their father naked. They carefully covered up their dad with a garment, never once looking at him or participating in Ham's disrespect.

When Noah awoke from his stupor, and discovered what happened, he cursed not his son his son Ham, but his grandson, Canaan, who was Ham's son. That's a bit odd. You'd have expected him to curse Ham if he was going to curse anyone. But no, he cursed his grandson Canaan. Then he blessed his two other sons Shem and Japeth.

What are we to make of this? The first point that stands out is this.

1. No matter what their spiritual heritage, no family is immune to dysfunction, failure, brokenness or deep disappointment.

Not even Noah's family.

Why is that?

Because the truth is, there are no perfect people in the world. No-one gets it right all the time, not even Noah.

If anyone could have pulled off perfection, we would have expected it to be Noah.

Noah was the most righteous person on earth in his day, the only one deemed worthy to save in the ark. Seven of his family members got to ride his coat tails and escape God's judgement on the earth because of him.

But when the flood waters had receded and dry ground appeared what we discovered was that even though the great flood could wash away all the corrupt and evil people in the world, it could not wash away the sin in even one human heart.

That's why in chapter 8 we read that as soon as Noah and his family stepped off the ark and offered a pleasing sacrifice to God, before this uncomfortable event ever happened, God made a promise to them saying, "Never again will I curse the ground or destroy all living creatures, because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood." (Genesis 8:21)

God knew the condition of our hearts back then, and he knows our proclivity to do the wrong thing, to sin, still today, and yet he is merciful with us.

He has kept his promise not to destroy the earth in a flood all these years since Noah, and he will keep it through all eternity, even though the Bible tells us, "There is no-one righteous, not even one," (Roms 3:10), "For all have fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:26).

We'll say more about God's mercy in a little bit. But for now, we'll just note that -

There are no perfect families, because there are no perfect people on earth. That means no family is immune to dysfunction, failure, brokenness or deep disappointment at some point in time, no matter what their spiritual heritage.

Every family on earth is made up broken, sinful people who struggle to know how to connect with God and with each other. Everyone struggles with things like selfishness and pride and impatience. Nobody is loving or obedient all the time. Nobody gets it right all the time.

So, there is a certain amount of acceptance we must have around our imperfect families. God accepts that we are imperfect, we must learn to do this too. But we sometimes struggle to accept this. We know that we are imperfect and we want mercy for us, but we don't give the people around us the same courtesy. We want them to be perfect, and we get upset when they are not.

We might tend to look at the externals and think other families have it all together, while we might lament the flaws in our own family. Maybe we think, "Oh, what wonderful missionaries they are, oh, look how they serve the poor, oh, what a great preacher he is, oh what a good person she is." While we then negatively compare the people in our own families to these wonderful people out there. The problem is that we tend to judge other people based only on the public slice of their life that we see, not the hidden or private parts that we see in our own family because we are closer to them, but we don't see in their lives because we are not as close to them.

When we come from broken families, we might look at other families around us and idealize them and assume their families are perfect. We might think, "Oh, they must never fight the way we do. They must always understand each other and support each other and get along. Their families must be so much better than ours." But the truth is, they are not. They might struggle in other ways than your family does, but every family struggles somewhere. There are no perfect families because there are no perfect people. And there are no perfect people because of the problem of sin.

The flood could not wash away the sin in human hearts. Only God could do that by coming to earth himself in the person of Jesus Christ, and allowing himself to be sacrificed on the cross to the take the punishment we deserved, so he could forgive our sins and wash us clean.

We've talked in previous messages about how in the flood there was an un-creating that happened, so that God could re-create the world a new for Noah and his family to begin again. Noah was like a second Adam. There was a blessing of Noah's family when they stepped off the ark into the newly re-created world, as there had been a blessing of Adam and Eve in the beginning. There is a sense of closeness in the relationship with God again as he spoke to Noah like he had spoken to Adam and Eve. In Noah's family, God gave the humans a fresh start, a chance to begin again.

But as Noah now plants a vineyard, the result is quite similar to what happened in the garden. Adam and Eve were originally naked and unashamed in the garden. But once they ate the forbidden fruit, sin entered in, their eyes were opened and they felt shame over their nakedness. Noah, drinking the fermented fruit of his vine, uncovered himself so he became naked, as Adam and Eve had been. But there was no going back to the shameless state in the original garden where he felt no shame.

The nakedness that followed Noah's drunkenness, helps us as readers understand that Noah missed the mark of God's intention for him. He sinned, the nakedness that resulted from his drunkenness brought him shame just as Adam and Eve felt shame in their nakedness after they sinned.

In showing us the parallels in these 2 stories, the author wants us to understand that even after being saved from the Flood, human sinless enjoyment of God's good gifts in creation was unsustainable. Just as Adam and Eve had sinned in the garden of Eden and the effects of that sin were felt in all the generations of descendants to come, now too, when given a second chance for a new beginning, Noah also sinned and the effects of that sin will be felt through the generations that follow as well.

And so we understand that because the problem of sin remains on earth, so too does the reality of family dysfunction and brokenness. Which leads us to the next important point.

2. How we respond to the sin and brokenness of others in our families reveals a lot about us.

Ham looked at his father's nakedness and vulnerability went out and gossiped about him, instead of helping him and protecting him and restoring Noah's dignity, and covering up his shame.

In contrast, Shem and Japeth as soon as they heard what Ham said, they took a garment, walked backwards and covered their dad's nakedness without ever looking at him once. They acted to protect Noah with love, and honor and dignity.

The significance of the contrast in the sons' actions stand out more clearly when we remember that the author is showing us what happened after the flood is much like what

happened in Genesis chapter 3 after Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden and realized they were naked and felt ashamed.

With this understanding, we see now that Shem and Japeth acted like God did with Adam and Eve when God made animal skins to cover their nakedness after their sin. In the garden, God treated Adam and Eve with dignity and tender mercy despite their disobedience sin and resulting shame. He covered them up. Shem and Japeth now do the same for Noah with love and tenderness to restore Noah's dignity.

Ham should have taken this approach too. Ham should have followed God's lead. But he didn't.

The Bible talks a lot about honoring our fathers and mothers. In fact, when God later gives Moses the 10 commandments for the Israelites, one of them is to "Honor your father and mother." (Exodus 20:12, Deut 5:16.)

The apostle Paul references this in his letter to the Ephesians where he also says we are to honor our fathers and mothers (Ephesians 6:3). Paul points out there that this is the first commandment with a promise – that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.

Paul also notes though that a relationship of respect goes both ways. He instructs fathers right after this "Do not exasperate your children, instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." Part of bringing up children in training and instruction of the Lord is modeling Godly behavior for them.

The other thing I want to interject here is that we all have a family of origin that we grow up in, but when we come to faith, we also belong to the family of God. How we treat others in the family of God also matters.

How do you respond when you see the flaws of another person, whether in your own family or in the church? When you realize someone you look up to has clay feet? When you see their imperfections?

Ham was critical of Noah, mocking, disrespecting, gossiping, exposing his father's flaws either for amusement or perhaps to feel a sense of superiority. We don't know why he did it.

Shem and Japeth acted with love to protect, honor, and provide dignity to their father.

When you bump into the limitations and flaws of another person instead of broadcasting their shortcomings to others and gossiping about them, will you act with graciousness to help them find a way back to dignity?

Funny story – I heard a guest speaker at Menlo Church tell this story. I don't remember her name, but I do remember the story.

Invited to lunch at a professor's home. Serving spoon slipped and she accidentally flung some buttered cabbage onto the pristine white carpet below. Oh no! She was horrified. What was he going to think of her. The professor said, "Oh, don't worry about it. We do this all the time." And he proceeded to fling more cabbage onto the floor. Can you imagine that, on a clean white carpet.

That is graciousness at its best.

He took a moment to enter into the awful feelings she must have been experiencing to make it different and to heal the moment for her. What a story of grace.

3. Our choices for good or for ill often lead to long-term consequences that can affect generations to come.

When Noah woke up and learned what had happened, he pronounced a prophetic judgement on his grandson Canaan while blessing Shem and Japheth.

The cursing of Canaan and the blessing of Shem and Japeth point ahead to the day when the Israelite nation – the descendants of Abraham, the descendant of Shem - would one day evict the Canaanites and take over the Promised Land.

Why did Noah curse Canaan instead of Ham?

It is common in the book of Genesis to anticipate the actions of later generations in what their fathers do. For example, the stories of the struggles between Jacob and Esau in their youth foreshadow struggles that will follow between their descendant nations the Israelites and the Edomites as we continue to read the Old Testament.

So too, in the sin of Ham, there is a foreshadowing of what will happen in the growing wickedness of his son Canaan's descendants, the Canaanites nation.

It is important to note that Noah did not curse all of Ham's children. Just his one son Canaan.

Certainly not all the Canaanites were cursed. That doesn't fit with what we will later see in Genesis when God promises Abraham, a descendent of Shem, that one day "all peoples on earth would be blessed through him." All peoples would certainly include some of the Canaanites. We'll see that down the road with Rahab the prostitute.

The point here is that there are 2 kinds of responses to human sin and disobedience – one that seeks to restore and heal relationship and another that seeks to exploit it.

“Ultimately the author will show that it is not simply because one is born into a certain family line that he is blessed or cursed. In the figure of Abraham the author will set forth his final case for the way of blessing, “Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” - John Sailhamer. Expositors Commentary.

Ultimately, we will find that it is our faith in God and obedience to his ways that will determine whether we are blessed or cursed. Believing in God and behaving accordingly, acting as God acts, leads to blessings.

4. When our families fail us, our only hope in healing from the wounds of this world is to find our identity and security in God. We can grieve for what we have suffered and lost, but there is hope.

The reality is that as human beings, we are all vulnerable Even when a person finds favor with God, as Noah did, they can still have momentary lapses in judgement or self-control. No human being is above temptation or imperfection[i].

But the contrasting responses we see between Ham and Shem & Japeth illustrate the biblical principal of honoring one another, especially one’s parents. Even when there is a compromised circumstance or a difficult and embarrassing moment, caring for one another, loving one another, supporting one another is a key principle. This is what we are called to do. It leads to blessing in our lives and the lives of those who follow after us, for generations to come.

Despite our human failures, the Bible shows that God’s divine grace is always there working on our behalf. Noah’s overall legacy was one of faithfulness. In the book of Hebrews (chapter 11) Noah is talked about as a man of great faith. He obeyed God. He preserved his family through the ark, he left a wonderful legacy. But he was also human.

That’s part of the tension of dealing with real families. Often there are wonderful things we receive from our families and yet there are things that can hurt us too.

Conclusion

Family hurts cut deeper than any other hurt because they involve a betrayal of basic trust. When the people who are supposed to protect us and help us and nurture us are the very ones who injure us, it can feel traumatic.

No family is perfect, not even Noah’s family, because no human being is perfect.

You might have come from a relatively healthy family, or you might have come from a more dysfunctional family. You don’t have to let that define you. No matter what family you come from, you can make choices going forward that help your family to be healthier. By following God’s example, by learning to live the way God models for us,

we can make a difference and set a new path, whether in our own family of origin or even in our church.

When you find at the end of the day that you are dealing with wounds from a dysfunctional family, go to God with that. Bring it to the Lord. Invite him into that space. The places that hurt. Pray. Seek counseling. Lean into the church body to help you have different experiences. Talk to friends, not in a way to gossip or put down the people who hurt you, or disrespect the people in your family, but in a way to heal. And trust that the One who has promised never to leave us or forsake us, the One who created a world of beauty and then re-created it a new for Noah's family, trust that He can re-create places of beauty in your life too.

"You might not have come from a healthy family, but a healthy family can come from you." (Can't remember where I saw this quote, but it is not original.)

Let's Pray – Lord this story of Noah is complex. As humans we often behave this way. At times we follow you impeccably, with strong faith and good choices, and at other times we slip up and sin. This is the state of our human experience. Our families, whether speaking individually or as a church, struggle with these things as well. Would you help us to follow your lead, in providing love and care and grace to those around us that need it. So that we might be instruments of healing and hope, pointing to a better future ahead. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

BENEDICTION:

Numbers 6:24-26
24 "'The Lord bless you and keep you;
25 the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;
26 the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.'

REFERENCES

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https://biblehub.com/q/why_did_noah_get_drunk_post-flood.htm#google_vignette]\

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[i] I took the opening structure of this and the next 2 paragraphs from the article in Bible hub and added to them.