

Genesis 9:18-29

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[0 : 0 0] scramble by the Sunday tabloids to lure erstwhile news of the world readers, desperate for their Sabbath fix of celebrity gossip and delicious dirt, dished up for their, or dare I say it, our depraved delight. I wonder who will be the winners in this scramble, Sunday Mirror, Mail on Sunday, Sunday Star, or will the much prophesied Sun on Sunday yet make an appearance?

Maybe your response is, who cares? And I, for one, care very little about this particular scramble, and yet I wonder if honesty allows us to protest complete disdain for the titillating gossip that, let's face it, sells in newspapers. The sobering reality is that we are, often against our better judgment, drawn towards the seamy and the salacious, and that attraction only serves to confirm the Bible's description of us and of our fallen human nature. Given that that is so, we would do well to consider, if only occasionally, what our attitude should be in this matter of dishing the dirt, which is the staple of many of these newspapers. And I think this morning is an appropriate occasion to give some consideration to this matter as we mourn or celebrate the demise of the news of the world.

And what I want to do is to consider an incident that is recorded for us in the Bible, where dirt is being dished. And we read of this occasion in the book of Genesis and chapter 9. I'd invite you to open your Bibles to Genesis chapter 9. We'll read from verse 18 to verse 29. Genesis chapter 9, reading from verse 18 through to the end of the chapter. It's on page 10 of our Bibles. We'll read these verses.

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

Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders.

[3 : 0 4] Then they walked in backwards and covered their father's nakedness. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said, Cursed be Canaan. The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers. He also said, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem. May Canaan be the slave of Shem.

May God extend the territory of Japheth. May Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave. After the flood, Noah lived 350 years. Altogether, Noah lived 950 years, and then he died.

The word of God. Now, this passage, by any measure, is an unusual one, and maybe one where it's not immediately apparent what we could learn from it. But I want to consider it, as I say, in the context of all that is being discussed and said concerning the tabloid newspapers, and indeed going beyond that to the printed media and indeed media in general, and what our attitude should be to the kiss and tell, the dishing the dirt that is so much a part of our journalistic culture, if we can speak of it in those terms. Well, this passage that we've read, for us to appreciate it, we need to have a measure of understanding of the context in which this occurs, the historic context, and indeed the historic context is brutally revealing as to the reality of human depravity, and indeed of the oft-confirmed conclusion that the best of men are flawed at best. You see, here we read of Noah. Now, Noah is a legend.

By any measure, Noah is a giant in the pantheon of faith. His faith in the Lord was spectacularly and solemnly vindicated by the flood, and this account, this incident occurs soon after that occasion when Noah's faith, Noah's faith, Noah's deep and profound faith was vindicated, as we've stated. And following the flood, there is a new dawn for humankind, an opportunity to turn the page over to a brave new society that will stand in stark and dramatic contrast to the depravity of the one that had been washed away by the flood.

Well, dream on if we think that is what was going to happen. Well, perhaps there was that opportunity. But you see, the flood washed away the sinners, solemn as that is. But what it did not nor could not do is wash away sin from the heart of man. And so, Noah, the legend, rightly and quite fittingly recognized as a man of God, Noah the legend falls. He falls not from grace, but from the precarious pedestal that his saintly reputation had placed him on. Noah sins. But is Noah's sin the principal concern of this account? Is it not rather his son's sin, Ham's sin, in dishing the dirt of Noah's fall? Well, these are questions we can have in mind as we further consider the passage. I want to look at this account under four headings. First of all, I want to identify the source of the dirt. Then I want to consider what was involved in dishing the dirt. But then there's also the account describing the covering of the dirt.

[7 : 29] And then finally, and briefly, the consequences of the dirt. First of all, then, the source of the dirt. Well, we read there in verse 20 of chapter 9 of Genesis, Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent.

Noah's sin is described in clear language for us here. What was his sin? Well, we read. He got drunk, and as a result, there was a consequent loss of self-control, and so he is sprawled and naked in his tent. There's no reason. The text gives us no reason to go further, as some choose to do, and assume some sexual sin of some kind. I think some read this and say, well, this isn't that serious, so there must be something more. We must read something in between the lines as to some further salacious sin that Noah may have fallen into, and invariably sexual in nature. But we have no reason to do that. The Bible is clear. It tells us, it describes us what happened. Noah got drunk. This was sin. Drunkenness is a sin, and Noah was guilty of this particular sin.

As I say, perhaps for many of us today, and many in the world or society in which we live, the response would be, well, what's the big deal? You know, it's really not such a big deal, but that is not the Bible's opinion. The Bible has a very different opinion. I think particularly the condemnation of drunkenness in the Bible is because of its consequences in the lack of self-control.

We have one example given here, but we know very well how drunkenness can lead to loss of self-control in different ways. The words that we speak, the actions that we take, the sexual sin that we're more prone to, perhaps the violence that we are more likely to be involved in as a result of being drunk.

And so, for these very good reasons, drunkenness is rightly condemned as a sin, and Noah was guilty of this particular sin. What else do we know about Noah's sin? The dirt, if you wish, that was then to be dished by his son. Well, I think we can reasonably suggest that it was a private sin, certainly largely private. We don't know all the details, but the manner in which it's described, he drank some of its wine, he became drunk, and lay uncovered inside his tent. Largely private, I say. It may be that he began to drink and began to get drunk with others and then retired to his tent. Well, we don't know, but it was largely a private sin. Certainly the consequences of him lying uncovered inside his tent does suggest something that was private. Others were not involved in any great measure, it would seem.

[10:52] So, yes, it was a sin, but it was Noah's problem. It was Noah's business to repent of his sin and to seek the forgiveness that God would undoubtedly grant him as he recognized his sin and confessed it to God.

It wasn't anybody else's business. Now, having stated that, that it was nobody else's business, it is true that had Noah not got drunk, then all that followed would have been avoided. And that is a salutary reminder that sin has consequences. You know, we like to live in a consequence-free world where we can do as we please, and there are no consequences. Nobody gets hurt. But that's not the reality. People do get hurt. There are consequences of our sin, even those sins that maybe we think are very personal. And we might say, well, it's nobody else's business. But whether we like it or not, so often others do get hurt by our sin, and sin has its sad consequences. Well, this is the source of the dirt that in a moment we are going to see was dished by Ham, which takes us on to this next part of the account that we want to consider, and that is the dishing of the dirt. Well, the account describes it for us there in verse 22. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. So, who is responsible for dishing the dirt? Well, it's Ham, Noah's own son, one of this holy remnant, one of God's chosen people. The flood had so solemnly and tragically in many ways wiped out humankind with the exception of this small group, this chosen remnant that God protected from the flood. And Ham was one of these. See, the one responsible for dishing the dirt was not some News of the World reporter on the scrounge for scandal. No, it was his own son. It was one of those who formed part of God's people, nor was he some foolish adolescent giggling at his father's drunkenness. No, Ham was a grown man with a family of his own. He is the one who is guilty of dishing the dirt. And what that reminds us, if indeed we need reminding, is that the most respectable and the most religious can be guilty of dishing the dirt. And that includes you, and it includes me. We know this is true because we have seen and witnessed this phenomenon on more occasions than we care to remember. And so, I say to you in this matter, don't think that it's just pagan journalists who are guilty of this kind of things. No, you can also be guilty of this sin of dishing the dirt. The fact that you're a respectable citizen, the fact that you're a Christian, doesn't free you from the temptation of doing what Ham did.

And so, be on your guard and resist this temptation. What did Ham actually do? Well, he told his brothers of the nakedness of his father. There's no mention of him making reference to the drunkenness. Maybe that was just assumed, but what Ham seems to think is particularly worthy of mention, particularly juicy, is his father's nakedness. And so, he tells his two brothers of what he has seen. And again, it rather begs the question, well, was this so bad? Was it so bad that Noah should have been exposed in this way? And perhaps the fact that we ask the question is a reflection of the society we live in that has no issue with displaying flesh, and the more the better.

But we should be ashamed of public nakedness. And this is not simply a cultural taboo, as maybe some would categorize it. But it goes right back to the Garden of Eden, where the covering of their nakedness by Adam and Eve in some way reflected their recognition of sin and their loss of innocence.

God so ordered things that they saw it as an appropriate response to their sin and their loss of communion with God, that they would cover themselves and cover their nakedness. So, as I say, this isn't a cultural matter.

[15 : 51] This goes beyond cultural distinctions that, no doubt, there are in many areas of life. We live in a society that today celebrates and brazenly displays nudity.

And I do wonder, and I wouldn't go beyond saying that I wonder, I wonder if this is not perhaps unconsciously a means of declaring to God that we have nothing to be ashamed of.

We answer to nobody. We do as we please. We're not bound by the taboos of the past. We live as we please. We do as we please. And we have nothing to be ashamed of.

I wonder if the preponderance of public nudity is not in some small way a reflection or a declaration on the part of our society, of who we are and whom we serve or whom we choose not to serve.

And as Christians, of course, we are influenced by, often molded, by the world we live in. I wonder if somebody offered you a subscription to Playboy, would you be interested?

[17 : 01] Well, what would you say? Somebody said, look, I'll give you a free year's subscription to Playboy. What would you say? I imagine most of you here, I certainly hope, would say, oh, I'm not interested in that.

If I said, well, tell you what, not this year's Playboy, but a year's subscription to Playboy in 1965. Presumably you would say, what difference does that make?

I'm still not interested. And yet, perhaps on your coffee table, many of our coffee tables, there are glossy magazines today, a Cosmopolitan or many others, that will have as much or more nudity than you would find in a Playboy of the 1960s.

I'm not suggesting you test that thesis out. You can if you wish, but take my word on it. And yet, we're quite relaxed about it all. And we have to be careful that we are not influenced by these realities that we live in the midst of.

Why did Ham do what he did? We've identified who was responsible. Ham, the son of Noah, one of God's chosen people.

[18 : 14] We've identified what he did. But why did he do it? Why did he do it? I wonder if there are not a number of overlapping motivations. We don't know.

We're not told. But I wonder if there's a number of, as I say, overlapping motivations that would explain his action. Maybe he was wanting to take the high moral ground. And to be able to say, well, isn't this shameful what our father is doing?

We certainly wouldn't do such a thing. Our father who instructed us. Our father who often, as we grew up, told us that we shouldn't get drunk. And yet, look at him, he's drunk. Isn't it shameful?

And so Ham takes the high moral ground. Well, I wonder if there was not simply that appetite for juicy gossip. It was an exciting piece of gossip to discover his father in such a condition.

And he just couldn't keep it to himself. He had to tell somebody. It was so exciting. It was so juicy. It was so delicious to recount to others.

[19 : 16] And so Ham sinks into this behavior of dishing the dirt on his own father. I wonder if there wasn't also an element of self-justification.

Maybe in his time he had known what it was to get drunk and maybe be reproved. And yet now he's able to say, well, I'm not that bad. Look, my father is guilty of this.

So for me to have fallen in this sin, well, it's not such a big deal. Well, I don't know which of these or whether all of these played some part in Ham's behavior.

Really what matters isn't so much, in a sense, for us, his motivation, but what he did. He did it. He did what he ought not to have done. He dished the dirt on his own father.

But the passage, thankfully, does not end there. It continues and tells us of the action of Shem and Japheth.

[20 : 18] What did they do? Well, what they did was they covered the dirt. The dirt was there. Noah had sinned. There's no getting away from that. He was guilty. Ham was guilty of this, perhaps greater sin, certainly a parallel sin of dishing the dirt on his father.

But then we have this happy description of Shem and Japheth. They cover the dirt. You see, gossip, if we draw from this the undoubted applications that we can to this whole area of gossip, for gossip to succeed, it takes two.

It takes two to tango and it takes two to gossip. See, it's not enough to have somebody to tell the story. There needs to be somebody who listens to it and passes it on, or else it dies a death.

And for this particular piece of dirt to be spread required the help of Shem and Japheth. What might they have done in the face of this discovery, in the face of this news that their brother brings them?

Well, they could have gone to see for themselves. And had they done so well, they would have been no better than Ham. You know, we may today condemn the messengers. We may take great delight in pointing the finger at Rupert Murdoch and Rebecca Brooks and Andy Coulson and a whole army of journalists who engage in this type of behavior, of finding the exposes, of kiss and tell, and of sharing with us the private lives of celebrities and others.

[21 : 46] And we can express great indignation at it all. We condemn the messengers, and yet do we read the messages? You see, are we any better if we are quick to read what they provide for us?

So equally with this area of dishing the dirt, even in our own social interactions, if we listen and if we then pass on to others, we are as guilty as the original source.

They could have done that. They could have gone to see for themselves, but they don't. They could have passed on the news to others without going to see for themselves. You know, that's the classic gossip formula.

Ham told me. I don't know if it's true, but Ham says that Noah got drunk and is lying naked in his tent. Don't quote me on it, but that's what Ham's told me.

It might be true. Maybe it's not true. I'm not saying it's true. And is that not how we often justify engaging in gossip? Well, I don't know if it's true, but I've heard that.

[22 : 50] So-and-so has done this, or this other person has fallen in this way. They could have done that, but they didn't.

They could have rebuked their brother and done nothing, and that would have been commendable. You know, when Ham says to them, look, this is what's happened. Noah's naked in the tent. Go and have a look. And they could have said, Ham, that's shameful that you would say that.

You ought not to speak in that way, and left it at that. And that would have been a commendable response. But they do more. What do they do? Well, we read what they do in the passage there in verse 23.

What do they do?

They don't try and justify the action of Noah, but they do seek to mitigate the effects of his sin. What we have here is an exercise in damage limitation.

[23 : 53] They loved their father, they respected their father, and they wanted to lessen his shame and limit the consequences of his sin.

They could only do so much, but what they could do, they would do. And as we think of ourselves, when we see people fall, when we see others sin, what will we do?

And not just those who we are familiar with, not just our friends, not us in our immediate circle, even when people who are out there in the big world of celebrity and we hear of their sin, what do we do?

Do we glory in their shame? Do we take delight in their fall? Do we tut-tut and point the finger? Or do we seek to limit the damage done?

To cover the dirt? Not to spread it, but to cover it. This isn't hypocrisy. This is seeking to help the one who has fallen. For example, it will involve how we participate in a conversation concerning the sin of another.

[25 : 01] Maybe even this morning after our service, we'll go down for a cup of tea, and in one of our conversations it will come up about what somebody has done or what somebody hasn't done. How will you participate in that conversation?

What will your thoughts be? What will your response be? Will you simply go with the flow? How will you participate in a conversation of that nature?

This is what this is speaking to us about. How do we limit the shame? How do we engage in damage limitation for others, as we would hope they would do so for us, when we will fall, as we undoubtedly will?

It may involve more concrete actions of damage limitation, perhaps helping to restore a broken relationship. In a relationship, somebody has sinned. And as a result, that marriage is threatened, that home is threatened, that friendship is threatened.

What do we do? Can we, in some way, involve ourselves wisely and carefully and discreetly in seeking to restore a relationship that is threatened with being broken, and so limit the damage of the sin that has been committed?

[26 : 10] Were we to do so, we would be walking in the footsteps of Shem and Japheth. We think of many today whose lives have been so tarnished and so harmed by addiction of one kind or another.

Perhaps an addiction to alcohol, to follow the flow of the account. What do we do? Do we point the finger and condemn those who are in the grip of such an addiction?

Or do we seek to limit the damage, to cover the shame, to provide help in the measure that we can to such in their condition?

If we do so, then we follow in the footsteps of Shem and Japheth. The Christian impulse to cover rather than to spread the dirt is evidence of a family likeness.

Why do I say that? Because our Father in Heaven, He has wonderfully taken this approach. You see, our Father in Heaven in sending, His only Son, Jesus, has provided a means to forgive or to cover our sin.

[27 : 21] Now, Jesus, of course, does not simply seek to mitigate the consequences of sin. That's all we can do in some measure. He takes upon Himself, He took upon Himself at Calvary the full punishment of all our sins.

And so is able to cover our sin and to cover it with His own perfect righteousness. In the words of the psalmist quoted by Paul in his letter to the Romans, Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him. I'm not suggesting that this incident in some direct way points to the work of Jesus Christ.

But what I am saying is that to be engaged in this type of activity demonstrates a family likeness. It demonstrates an attitude to sin that is consistent with the attitude of God, as He has taken such a glorious initiative to cover our sin and to cover our shame in the wonderful provision of His Son.

What did they do? Well, they covered the dirt. So there was the source of the dirt, the dishing of the dirt, the covering of the dirt, and then finally and very briefly, the passage speaks of the consequences of the dirt.

[28 : 51] There from verse 25 and onward, Noah awakes from his stupor, and he pronounces this curse and this benediction, Cursed be Canaan, the lowest of slaves, will he be to his brother.

He also said, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem. May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend the territory of Japheth. May Japheth live in the tents of Shem. And may Canaan be his slave.

Now when we speak of the consequences of the dirt, here of course we're not talking just about the dirt of Noah's sin, but perhaps even more especially the guilt of Ham's sin.

And what are the consequences? Well, we read of things that maybe at first glance we find difficult to get our heads around. This curse on the Canaanites, the sons of Ham.

Now it's true that in the subsequent history of the Old Testament, the Canaanites became famous for aberrant sexual practices. And it would seem in some ironic way, I suppose, appropriate, that Ham's sin of dishing the dirt on his father is a foretaste, in some sense, of later behavior.

[30 : 06] And yet I think there is in us almost a sense of, well, is this fair? You know, is it fair that this sin of Ham should somehow bring consequences to his sons and his lineage?

And in response to that concern, I think I would limit myself to say two things. We can't exhaustively deal with what is a reasonable concern.

But I would say two things. One is something I've already said, but I'll simply repeat, is that sin, our sin, my sin, your sin, whether you like it or not, whether it seems fair or not, does impact another people.

That's the reality. Wouldn't it be lovely if it wasn't the case? Wouldn't it be good even if we could carry all of the consequences ourselves? But that's just not the way it is. That's not the way it is.

Your sin does affect other people. And you say, well, that's not fair, but that's the way it is. And the sin of Ham does affect his sons as they see his behavior, as they learn from his behavior.

[31 : 06] But the other thing to say is that though there is this curse on the lineage of Ham, this in no way denies those who were part of his lineage to break the cycle. The opportunity for those who were, in a sense, so cursed to go against that curse and to embrace the offer of forgiveness is there for them, was there for them.

There wasn't some impossibility of those who were from that lineage of breaking out from it and being welcomed in to the godly lineage, to those who worshiped the Lord.

But then, of course, not only the curse, there is also in the consequences, the blessing, the blessing that is pronounced on Shem and Japheth. And as our sin does harm others, so our obedience brings blessing to others, and very especially brings blessing to our children and to our children's children.

And so, yet another incentive, if more were required, for us to seek to live lives of obedience to God, not only for the blessing that it brings to ourselves, but for the blessing that it brings to our children, and their children.

Well, as we draw things to a close, and as we maybe look towards the week that lies ahead, well, no doubt in this week that has begun, maybe even today, certainly in the days that lie ahead, you will see, and you will hear, and you will be told, I am sure, plenty of dirt, in different ways, and by different people, and in different media.

[32 : 45] My question to you and to myself is, what will you do with that dirt? Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray.