

Series: "Genesis: The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "Shem's Line in the Continuing Plan of God"

Text: Genesis 11:10-26

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- Some folks with whom I grew up had an interesting practice of determining God's will from the Bible. It worked much like those "magic eight balls" worked mystically to answer questions.
- A Diet Coke leaked in my backpack onto this Bible so its pages don't work quite as well as they used to for this discerning process. (show the "stick-your-finger-in-the-pages" randomly method of biblical discernment).
- The rules of that method sometimes included a "do-over" –a mulligan, if you are a golfer. Sometimes where your finger landed just didn't tell you anything so you could try one more time to hear from the Lord this way.
- When I decided to turn my thoughts to the book of *Genesis* once again, I recalled we had made it to *Genesis* chapter 11. When I checked the record, I found that on March 8, 2020, I had preached my last *Genesis* sermon so far in the series before being so rudely interrupted by an unscheduled virus and the need to avoid each other.
- That sermon was titled something like, "*God Comes Down on Towering Autonomy.*" Uh! Oh! That suggested we had only made it through the first part of *Genesis* 11—the story of an autonomously motivated tower built in rebellion on the eastward plain of Shinar. Indeed, I had stopped with God's scattering redemptive judgment at the tower of Babel.
- What comes next is a list of difficult to pronounce names—a *Genesis* genealogy
- If I had used the random finger-sticking method to choose where in the Bible we might start again in *Genesis*, ending up where we did, I might have asked for a do-over—a Mulligan.

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- Being the moral giant I am, who rarely ever tells a fib, my very first reaction was to skip to the beginning of chapter 12 and to act as if we had already covered that genealogy in 11:10-32.
- For just a short moment, I wondered if I could trick you into believing that. Probably not! Then I remembered how special genealogies are in *Genesis*. What a great place to begin to dig in once again.
- Let's quickly walk ourselves up to this point in the book so we can see how this list of names and ages fits.
- The "beginning" begins, when God the Creator made a perfect environment in which his human creations could fulfill their created purpose of *imaging* him by reproducing and spreading his glorious name, beginning in the Garden, to the whole earth.
- As I wanted to make clear last week, this glory-spreading project of elevating the NAME of the LORD God was no vanity trip. It was instead, God, unselfishly, graciously sharing real LIFE with his human creatures and creation. It was how all of creation could function and flourish with the true experience of LIFE God had shared in making it.
- The first humans—a man and a woman—made so they were perfectly able to carry out this commission to be God's agents of LIFE by reproducing and spreading the growing human family to all the earth, fell to the tempting suggestion of a wily serpent.
- The suggestion was that God might actually be a bit selfish in his love and gracious sharing of true LIFE rather than the creative Father he was pretending to be. God was withholding something from the humans, suggested the serpent.
- Rather than trusting the Creator Lord God 100%, the humans veered off that perfect-trust vector by what seemed like a small 2%. In that one tempting area, they trusted in their own ability to make their own life work and they trusted in their own ability to fulfill the

purpose of their created lives autonomously—that is to do it without a 100% trust in God. They thought their 98% would be enough. They could do the rest and make it all work out.

- Sadly, without yet having much experience in self-deceptive sin-management, the first humans didn't realize they were actually choosing a completely different path for life than their creator had designed for them. What may have seemed a small deviation from faith in God eventually infected all of life and infected all of the new baby humans they reproduced that were meant to fulfill their created purpose of imaging God.
- As a result, they were cast out of the perfect, Garden environment for imaging and constrained from returning by other mere creatures who were innately more powerful obeying God's plan.
- SO, now... ***Was it all over for human beings and their God-imaging purpose?***
- The human family was now infected with the disease of autonomous living—that is, attempting to live independent of trusting God when both they and the world were designed to work only by trusting God.
- Eventually, the third human being—a son, the first human ever to be born of two humans in order to fulfill God's reproductive element of human purpose—killed the next born human. Not a good early start to things! Humanity was badly broken already!
- Then, as other humans reproduced and the human population, meant to spread God's NAME increased, this brokenness was passed on just as certainly as all the genetic physical traits God had built into the first man and woman.
- Some humans, in particular, one lineage of humans recognized this brokenness and instead of autonomously relying on their own abilities to fill life with purpose and significance, they ***called upon***

the name of the LORD." They turned their trust from their own abilities to God's provision and promises for LIFE.

- BUT, sadly, most humans didn't trust God for LIFE and soon the earth was—sure enough—being filled with men and women. But, they were mostly men and women finding new ways to live ***without*** God. This made a big mess of the perfectly created earth-environment for glorifying the Name of the Lord. So, God washed nearly all broken humans away and cleansed the earth with a flood.
- ***SO, now, was it all over for human beings*** and their calling to make the NAME of the Lord great in all the earth—their purpose to spread God's glory by imaging Him?
- Did God start over making a new first man from dirt and a new first woman from that man? No. God protected one man who righteously called upon the NAME of the Lord and his family. They would be the new first humans. However, it was very soon apparent that they remained infected by the disease of trying to live without God.
- So, once again, humans multiplied from this protected man and his three sons, who, by the way, contained all the original, vast, wide variety of human genetics within their reproductive abilities.
- But, sadly, once again most humans began to fill the earth—not with the NAME of the LORD but with autonomy from God for living life. Again, they attempted to create their own lasting purpose and significance rather than trusting in the one God had given them.
- Humans reproduced and reproduced some more—mostly other humans who didn't call on the name of the LORD. Eventually, we find them somehow spread out far enough from each other that dominant genetic traits began to be isolated. Groups of humans—tribes and even nations—began to take on these dominant outward appearances as separating identities. This was true even though all

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humans were still just humans and all humans were still sons of the same Adam and Noah.

- There is a bit of a twist in the story at this point. Did humans spread out this way into separated, more distinct looking and acting peoples, separated into tribes, even speaking distinct languages all on their own?
- No. It turns out that this spreading and dividing was the result of the Creator God once again intervening as humans sought to reproduce autonomous offspring rather than children of faith.
- Moses circles back in the first part of Genesis chapter 11 to explain how the distinct peoples of Genesis chapter 10 came to be. He explains this to the readers. The Children of Israel are a distinct lineage of humans chosen to image God in a world nearly full of autonomous humans who rejected the need for the Creator God. All the different looking, different acting and different speaking humans, who almost all try to live without God, came to be surrounding them after God destroyed their attempt to make their own name through a united, faithless construction project.
- Chapter 11, which we referred to again last week, tells us that rather than calling on the Name of the Lord, most humans trusted in their own name and wanted to make *their* name greater and greater by banding together to build a city with a great tower.
- This was to be a lasting monument to their ***self-made purpose and significance*** as humans. They wanted it to be a glorious declaration for the generations to come of humans they reproduced that "*We don't need the Creator God! We can make **life** without him! We can produce our own **purpose** for existence! We can create our own lasting **significance** to pass on to the next generations!*"

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- In their own words they proclaimed with all the gusto they could muster—with a loud sense of **AMBITIOUS AUTONOMY**—and a collective, rebellious fist shaken skyward at the Creator God, ***"Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves, and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."***
- The CREATOR God responded to this rebellion of once again, deceived and self-deceiving creatures. In Genesis 11:5-9 **READ Genesis 11:5-9**
- And all of God's GOD-LESS people said...? "BaBaBaBaBaBabel!" At least that is now how they sounded to each another—no longer joined in their vain attempt to make a human **name** that would last.
- AND, now, once again, there is an implied question that Moses keeps asking his readers: ***Is it all over for human beings and their created calling to make the Name of the Lord great in all the earth—to spread God's glory by imaging Him?***
- Is God finished with graciously providing lasting purpose and significance to these humans he made who, when they reproduce, mostly reproduce autonomous, God-rejectors rather than those who trust God and call on his name?
- Moses acquainted by personal experience with this question of "starting over." He understands the reason why God didn't do that.
- Many years after Babel, Moses took what felt like too long with God on Mount Sinai for the weak faith of the people of Israel down in the valley to keep trusting God. So, they quickly turned from calling on the NAME of the LORD God who had just redeemed them from Egypt and autonomously turned back to calling on a false god in the form of a golden calf.

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- Remember the conversation between God and Moses at the point where God tells Moses what this faithless, very recently miraculously saved, people are up to in the valley below?
- **READ Exodus 32:7-14**
- God's plan then, as he was teaching Moses by experience, was **not** to give up on filling the earth with his NAME—his glory—his LIFE through the agency of humans—even though—all along through history—antediluvian and beyond—that might seem the easier way to go. God's plan was to redeem humans to LIFE and purpose.
- So, is it all over for human beings as God's agents of his name in creation here at *Genesis* 11:9? No, it definitely is not! And this ***redemptive thread of God*** is why it is not a random accident that stick our finger into the pages of *Genesis* and find ourselves in what might have seemed an unlucky place to resume our study.
- Now, we can know that the purpose of this genealogy is a very important one. Now we know that the genealogy we are about to read carries an important part of the theme of the book. We know it is telling us something about how God worked back then. How he then also worked in the days of the Exodus. And how we should suspect, God continues to work his plan for humans even in our day.
- The editors of my edition of the NIV have chosen to title this section of *Genesis*, 11:10-26, "***From Shem to Abram.***" That is correct as far as it goes. I have entitled it, in the remaining white space, "***Is it over for humans?!? No! God accomplishes His redemptive plan even through many generations!!!***"
- Let's read it—*Genesis* 11:10-26—**READ Genesis 11:10-26**
- We just heard the "account" or the "***toledote***" of Shem.
- The repeated marker in *Genesis*, "***toledote,***" here, if you recall, means something like "what resulted from Shem."

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- It is sometimes translated "*generations*." In my NIV it is translated "*account*," as in the stories or events that resulted from Shem. Here, we probably need to be careful to hold those two ideas together as we think about this important marker in the book. It is about the stories of the lineage reproduced by Shem and his offspring and their offspring and so on.
- I have purposefully used the word "reproduction" a number of times already in this sermon. I've done this because Moses makes it clear in *Genesis* that human reproduction will be involved in God's plan to produce faithful humans who will call upon the NAME of the LORD.
- The important part human reproduction plays is more often indicated in *Genesis* by how it is often the target of attack to disrupt God's plan. We will see that as we go along. We have already seen it back in chapter 6 before the Flood when the forces of evil tried to disrupt righteousness in reproduction. We won't revisit the details here. That was the story of the Sons of God and daughters of men and the Nephilim and the "men of name" or "men of renown" the evil one was trying to develop by perverting righteous human reproduction.
- Oh, and by the way, the Evil and Deceptive One has not stopped working against God by perverting human reproduction—human sexuality in our day. We really don't need to wonder why there are so many attacks and confusions around sexuality. It is because human reproduction is part of God's means for fulfilling his plan.
- The "*toledote*" of Shem is the response to the question: ***Is God through with humans?*** Shem, whose name means "name" will continue a line of humans who will carry forward the pain for humans to call upon the NAME of the LORD in faith rather than trying to live life without God.

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- This doesn't mean every Shem-ite will be a righteous believer who calls on the NAME of the LORD. It means that God will preserve, through many, many generations, some righteous believers so there will be a righteous lineage when it comes time to reproduce—the One human who will be perfectly righteous—the incarnate Jesus Christ. This is God's perfect plan all along!
- This *toledote*—this reassuring record of the humans reproduced in the line of Shem—son of Noah—many times "great" grandson of Adam—this reassuring record tells us after many generations a human named Terah will be produced.
- It then tells us that after 70 years of living, Terah will produce sons. One of those sons will be a boy called Abram. We all know that one day God will descriptively extend that boy's name to Abraham.
- Moses' readers would have known that one day, that Abraham would be reproductive source of when God miraculously reproduces a son through him.
- The Israelites could know that they, as children of Abraham, were the lineage of Shem—the man named "*name*" (pretty obvious!) who was blessed by God to carry on the purpose of lifting up THE NAME of the LORD in all the earth. They could know their purpose. They could know their significance as humans living for God in the midst of a bunch of other humans who chose to live life autonomously rejecting the need for faith in God.
- They *could* know but they often did not.
- Then we, millennia later, can read this. We can continue the *toledote*. We can take it forward until Jesus of Nazareth is born. We can know how he invites us to become children of this lineage by faith—children of the line of Shem and Abram—children of the line of those who call upon NAME of the LORD.

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- We can be children of the lineage of those who know that autonomous living always ends in death. It is always a deceptive and self-deceptive lie that we can have any LIFE apart from God.
- This is who we are—we who know Jesus as our Savior and have been born again.
- From this genealogy, we can have assurance that God never gives up on his plan for humans. God redeems humans and continues to keep them as part of his plan to fill the earth with his name. We can know we are still very much a part of that imago dei assignment even today.
- Then also, from this genealogy, we can have assurance God is at work and has not failed even as that plan takes many generations to reach the culmination of an earth filled with God's glory. That ought to help us, at least a little bit, to **rest** when God doesn't do what we want when we want him to do it. God's plan takes a very, very long view from any individual human's perspective.
- From the ramifications of this genealogy and what follows it in God's Word, we can know that our **personal human purpose**—that is, to live a life that images God for his glory—for his NAME—continues in spite of us most often living in a world that surrounds us with those who reject any need for God—those who swear by autonomy from God.
- From this genealogy and what we know follows, we can know what is our true significance. It will never come from any source other than the one who created us.
- Like the Children of Israel, could have known, we CAN know these things. But do we?
- This **knowing** comes only to those who will call upon the name of the LORD for life—not those who trust they can make their own way.