



## UNDERSTANDING

## WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Our tour through the Bible now takes us into the Scripture's first two genealogies. Admittedly, for modern readers, a genealogy seems to be just a long list of names—probably not that important and certainly not that interesting. As Biblical scholar N. T. Wright put it, “Reading other people’s genealogies is about as exciting as watching other people’s holiday videos.”<sup>1</sup>

But for the ancient Israelites, a genealogy was more than just a long list of names. Each name told a story and underscored key twists and turns in Israel’s history. The reader who skips the genealogies will often miss out on crucial points God wants to make in the overarching narrative of the Bible.

This is certainly the case with the Bible’s first two genealogies, which trace the descendants of Adam’s two sons, Cain and Seth. In Genesis 4:17-5:32, we see a stark contrast. These two genealogies illustrate two fundamentally different types of cultures: One is characterized by a pursuit of God (Seth’s righteous line), the other by a pursuit of one’s own selfish desires (Cain’s sinful line) (See Sidebar).

<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 23.

### SIDEBAR - A TALE OF TWO CITIES

The first genealogy chronicles Cain’s descendants and illustrates how one man’s sin ripples through the generations (Gn 4:17-24). After murdering his brother Abel, Cain turns his back on God and breaks fellowship with his family (Gn 4:16). The account of Cain’s sin is immediately followed by a list of his descendants, in which we see men and women raising up children who do not know the Lord and whose decisions bear evidence of an ever-increasing breakdown in family life and morality. The genealogy shows how the descendants of Cain are known for polygamy, vengeance, violence and murder, and pride as they name a city after themselves (Gn 4:19-24).

Unlike Cain, however, Adam and Eve continue to seek the Lord. They are blessed with another son, Seth. As a family, they begin to “call upon the name of the Lord”—a Biblical phrase associated with worship (see Gn 12:8, 13:4, and 26:25; Ps. 80:18-19 and 105:1). In contrast with Cain’s descendants, who build up their own name, Seth’s family focuses on God’s name in worship. The birth of Seth heralds a second genealogy in Genesis 5. Here we see how this faithful son of Adam and Eve also fathers a family, but his descendants manifest notably different qualities from the disgraced offspring of Cain.

Notice the stark contrasts. Seth’s family worships the one true God (Gn 4:26), whereas Cain’s line has turned away from the Lord (Gn 4:16). Seth’s line lives in God’s blessing (Gn 5:2), whereas Cain’s family lives under a curse (Gn 4:11). Seth’s family calls on the name of the Lord and seeks to give glory to God (Gn 4:26), whereas Cain’s family seeks to give glory to its members, naming cities after its own children (Gn. 4:17). Seth’s family is characterized by the son in the seventh generation, Enoch, who “walked with God” (Gn 5:22-24); whereas

Cain's line is exemplified by the son of the sixth generation, Lamech, who lives a life of polygamy and violence (Gn 4:19-24).

### Seth's line

- Lives in God's blessing (5:2)
- His family "calls upon the name of the Lord" and gives glory to God (4:17)
- Worships the one true God (4:26) and walks with God (5:22-24)

### Cain's line

- Lives in God's curse (4:11)
- Breaks fellowship with his family and turns away from the Lord (4:16)
- Family characterized by acts of polygamy (4:19), vengeance (4:24), violence, murder (4:23), and pride as it names a city after itself (4:17)

## Why the Flood? (Gn 6:1-5)

So, if there were at least one righteous group of people—the line of Seth—why did God send a flood that punished the *whole* human family?

Our first clue is found at the start of the Bible's account of the flood, which notes that "the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose" (Gn 6:1). Immediately after this, God indicates His displeasure and announces that He plans to punish the whole of humanity: "My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years" (Gn 6:3).

What led God to this conclusion? In order to answer this question, we must take a deeper look at the context and ask, "Who were the sons

of God? Who were the daughters of men? And why would God be opposed to their marrying?"

Whenever we encounter a statement in Scripture that appears unclear, the first place we should look for clarification is the immediate context. In the two chapters that immediately precede this scene, we learned of two genealogies that tell a story of two families with radically different values and lifestyles. Genesis 4 focuses on Cain's family, which is centered on man and has turned its back on God. Chapter five focuses on Seth's family, which calls on the Lord's name and walks with God. But in Genesis 6, "the sons of God" married "the daughters of men," and, as a result, God punished the human family with a flood (Gn 6:1-7).

In light of these two genealogies, Genesis 6:1 begins to make more sense. The "sons of God" would refer to the godly family of Seth, and the "daughters of men" would refer to the disgraced descendants of Cain.<sup>2</sup> The text thus seems to indicate that the sons of God in the Sethite line were attracted to ungodly women from the Cainite line and married them. As the one faithful line of Seth is undermined by the introduction of godless spouses, the covenant family is weakened and God is grieved. The whole earth now has become corrupt, and God sent the flood.

<sup>2</sup> Some have interpreted the "sons of God" as a reference to angelic beings who marry women, but this view seems unlikely. Apart from the fact that angels cannot reproduce like humans (as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas have noted), nowhere in Genesis is the notion of "sons of God" associated with angels, and nothing in the immediate context would point us in that direction.

That the "sons of God" should be understood as the faithful Sethite line is made clearer when we consider how Genesis itself links the notion of being a son of God with the genealogy of Adam and Seth. This is the only genealogy in the Old Testament that begins with a reference to God Himself: "When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God" (Gn 5:1). The genealogy then tells how Adam "became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth" (5:3) and then traces the descendants of Seth all the way down to Noah. The parallel between God's creating Adam in His image and likeness (1:26; 5:3) and Adam fathering Seth "after his image" and "in his own likeness" (5:3) underscores how God has a special father-son relationship with these faithful descendants of Adam and Seth. As Biblical scholar John Sailhamer put it, "The author has gone to great lengths to depict God's creation of humankind in terms of a patriarch establishing and overseeing a family.... Not only is Adam the father of Seth and Seth the father of Enosh and so on, but God is the father of them all." John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 117.

This intermarriage between the faithful and the unfaithful introduces an oft-repeated theme within the Scriptures: that when the hearts of God's people turn toward pagan women, they also turn to those women's pagan gods and immoral lifestyle (see Nm 25:1-3, 1 Kgs 11:1-8). This is the context for understanding the flood.

### A New Creation

The presentation of the flood in Genesis 6-9 echoes the account of creation in Genesis 1. In establishing this parallel, the author of Genesis is trying to highlight the fact that sin is bringing about a *reversal* of creation. In other words, the beautiful order and harmony that God established in the world has been distorted because of sin. We see this borne out in the way the flood account begins by noting how "God saw the earth, and behold it was corrupt" (Gn 6:12). This simple statement stands in dramatic contrast with what God saw at the climax the creation week in Genesis chapter 1: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good" (Gn 1:31). But now, sin has taken its toll, and God's good creation has been disfigured.

Similarly, notice what the Bible actually says about how the flood came about. Many of us may think of the flood as a rainstorm that lasted a long time, but the Scriptures present something far more catastrophic. At the beginning of creation, a watery chaos known as the *tehom* in Hebrew (the deep) covered the earth (Gn 1:2). God's spirit hovered over the waters, separating them to create the sky and the sea, and then taming them to bring forth the land that would serve as a suitable home for humanity.

In the flood, these separated waters come crashing back together, and the watery chaos is unleashed. "The fountains of the great deep [*tehom*] burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened"

(Gn 7:11). This was not simply a prolonged downpour; the language seems to indicate a deluge of water coming from every direction. The chaotic waters of the sea would be swelling over the land, while the waters of the sky would be collapsing upon them. In the flood, God's creation is devastated and all life is blotted out—except for the seed of a new creation, floating in the ark with Noah and his family.

### Noah—One Righteous Man

What do we know about Noah? The Scriptures tell us that he is a tenth-generation descendant of Adam in the line of Seth. In contrast to the great wickedness that was all around him (Gn 6:5), Noah dares to live a different kind of life. He is "a righteous man" who was "blameless in his generation." He was a man who "walked with God" in the midst of a corrupt culture (Gn 6:9-10). Thus, Noah "found favor in God's eyes" (Gn 6:8)—an expression used to describe someone to whom much will be entrusted (see Gn 39:4). This certainly applies to Noah: Indeed, he is about to be entrusted with the future of the whole human family!

In many ways, the flood narrative presents a kind of re-creation, with language that reflects images from the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2. We see this, for example, with the recurrence of the number seven. Just as God created the world and rested on the seventh day (Gn 2:4), so the new creation with Noah and the flood highlights the number seven several times. The story mentions *seven* pairs of clean animals in the ark (Gn 7:2); *seven* pairs of birds in the ark (Gn 7:3); *seven* days before God sends the rain upon the earth (Gn 7:4); *seven* days before Noah sends out the dove (Gn 8:10); and then *seven* more days before he sends out the dove again (Gn 8:12). Finally, the text points out how the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat in the *seventh* month—reminiscent of how God rested on the seventh day of creation (Gn 8:4).

All these occurrences of the number seven in this short account highlight how the flood is not only bringing punishment upon the earth but also bringing about new life, a new hope, and a new creation through a new covenant.<sup>3</sup>

So if there's a renewed creation with the flood, what would Noah's role be in this new world? Noah is like a new Adam, the new head of the human family. Once again, notice the parallels in the Biblical text: Just as Adam is blessed by God, so Noah is blessed by God. Just as Adam was called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gn 1:28), so Noah is called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gn 9:1). And both Adam and Noah were tillers of the soil and given dominion over all the animals (Gn 1:28, 2:15; 9:2, 20).

It is inspiring to see what God can do with one righteous man who dares to go against the grain of a corrupt society and live truly for Him. Noah "found favor" in God's eyes, and God used him to renew all of creation.

### Noah's Family Breakdown

Noah's story doesn't end there, though. The Bible reminds us that even righteous men like Noah always need to be on guard, careful not to fall into sin. Though Noah was a heroic man, he too stumbled, and his sin had dramatic consequences for the entire human family.

We saw how Noah is established as the new Adam—a tiller of the soil, a covenant mediator of God's blessing, commissioned to be fruitful and multiply, and the father of the renewed human family after the flood. But not all the parallels with Adam are desirable. Just as the

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word for "seven" (*sheba*) is significant because it is also a verb meaning "to swear a covenant oath"—or literally, "to seven oneself." The number seven in the Bible, therefore, serves as a sign for covenant. Both in the creation account and here in the flood narrative, we see the number seven appear prominently, pointing to how God is covenanting himself to humanity and creation.

beginning of humanity was marred by Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden, so the beginning of this new human family is tainted by Noah's sin in the vineyard.

And note the similarities: As a tiller of the soil, Adam sinned in a garden by taking the fruit of the tree, and his shame was exposed in nakedness. Similarly, Genesis 9 shows that Noah was a tiller of the soil who sinned in the vineyard by taking too much fruit of the vine, and his shame is also exposed in nakedness (Gn 9:20-23).

The account of Noah's fall in Genesis 9 is shocking not only because of its disheartening report of Noah's sin, but also because of the surprising punishment given to Noah's grandson, Canaan. Consider the account:

Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said 'Cursed be Canaan....' (Gn 9:20-24)

What just happened here? Noah got drunk and his son Ham looked upon his nakedness, so when Noah woke up he cursed Canaan, his own grandson! What is the meaning of this strange story?

### Cursing Canaan?

First, in order to understand Noah's anger, we need to consider what it means that Ham "looked upon the nakedness of his father." When the Bible deals with delicate sexual matters, it frequently uses guarded language. For example, when the Scriptures tell us about Adam and Eve having marital relations, the text tells us that "Adam knew his wife...and she bore a son" (Gn 4:24). The meaning of this idiom is obvious for the mature reader but remains veiled to the young and innocent.

Meanwhile, the scene depicted in Genesis 9 employs similarly veiled language, but to talk about something unnatural and heinous. When Genesis 9:22 says that Ham "looked upon the nakedness of his father," this is no mere indiscretion, like seeing his father bathing. That wouldn't merit Ham's being cursed, much less Ham's son Canaan.

As the context of this passage doesn't reveal much about its possible meaning, we turn to another approach for interpreting difficult texts: looking at the broader Biblical context. In order to understand the meaning of this expression, we should investigate how "looking upon the nakedness" of one's father is used elsewhere in the Bible. And when we do so, we discover that the idiom denotes something quite appalling. In Leviticus 20:11, this expression is used to describe the condemned act of maternal incest: "The man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness."

### Sexual Sin and Political Power

But why would Ham want to commit incest with his mother? And why would he choose this particular moment of his father's vulnerability, when Noah was intoxicated? This might have been a sin of passion,

but it was almost certainly an act of rebellion against the authority of his father and his oldest brother, Shem.

Let's consider the historical context. We've already seen how, after the flood, God gave Noah the mission of ruling over the entire world. In the time of the Patriarchs in the Book of Genesis, this authority would be passed on to his eldest son, Shem. Ham is Noah's youngest son and would not be the successor—unless he were to usurp that power through deceit and violence.

As strange as it may seem to the modern reader, this idea of seizing authority by having sexual relations with the ruler's wife is not unprecedented in the ancient world. When foreign invaders toppled other kingdoms, they typically took the previous king's wives for their own, showing that they had authority over everything the king had once possessed. We see this also in the history of Israel, when King David's son Absalom tries to usurp the throne from his father. After Absalom takes over the capital city of Jerusalem, one of his first acts is to take David's concubines and have sexual relations with them in public (see 2 Sm 16:21-22).

The explanation of incest also makes sense of Noah's response. Ham's son Canaan is cursed by Noah—not for anything he had done, but for his father's action. The context would indicate that Canaan—who was the fruit of this incestuous, rebellious union—would suffer the effects of his father's sin, just as Cain's children bore the effects of the curse laid on Cain when he rejected God.

Noah's sin has consequences. His drunkenness opened the door for Ham to make his move, and Noah's family is left in shambles. Noah's descendants were destined to represent a renewed human family united in the blessing of God's covenant. But the narrative of Noah



## DISCUSSION

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*Genesis 4:17-24; 4:26-5:32; 6:1-3, 8-10, 11-13; 7:11-12; 9:20-27; Leviticus 20:11*

1. **Launching Question:** What do you know about your family history, your heritage and how does this impact you and your family today?  
*Allow the group to discuss.*

**Please read aloud:** Our story this week, contrasts two different family lines. It does so, however, in a subtle way through what are called genealogies. Admittedly, for modern readers, a genealogy seems to be just a long list of names—probably not that important and certainly not that interesting. But for the ancient Israelites, a genealogy was more than just a long list of names. Each name told a story and underscored key twists and turns in Israel's history. The reader who skips the genealogies will often miss out on crucial points God wants to make in the overarching narrative of the Bible.

This is certainly the case with the Bible's first two genealogies, which trace the descendants of Adam's two sons, Cain and Seth. In Genesis 4:17-26, we see a stark contrast. These two genealogies illustrate two fundamentally different types of cultures: One is characterized by a pursuit of God (Seth's righteous line), the other by a pursuit of one's own selfish desires (Cain's sinful line).

### SIDEBAR – A TALE OF TWO CITIES (OPTIONAL)

Let's look at Cain's line first. As you may remember, Cain is one of the sons of Adam who kills his brother Able.

#### Read Genesis 4:17-24

2. As you read the genealogy of Cain, what stands out to you about his descendants? How do they act?

*Answer: Cain's descendants illustrate how one man's sin ripples through the generations (Gn 4:17-24). After murdering his brother Abel, Cain turns his back on God and breaks fellowship with his family (Gn 4:16). The account of Cain's sin is immediately followed by a list of his descendants, in which we see men and women raising up children who do not know the Lord and whose decisions bear evidence of an ever-increasing breakdown in family life and morality. The genealogy shows how the descendants of Cain are known for polygamy, vengeance, violence and murder, and pride as they name a city after themselves (Gn 4:19-24).*

**Please read aloud:** Now, let's look at Seth's line.

(Go to Genesis 4:26 – 5:32. You may read all of this section, OR you can read the following three key verses: 4:26, 5:24, and 5:29.)

3. What is different about Seth's line compared to Cain's?

*Answer: As a family, they begin to "call upon the name of the Lord"—a Biblical phrase associated with worship (Gn 4:26). In contrast with Cain's descendants, who build up their own name, Seth's family focuses on God's name in worship. Seth's descendant Enoch "walks with God" (5:24). Here we see how this faithful son of Adam and Eve also fathers a family, but his descendants manifest notably different qualities from the disgraced offspring of Cain.*

4. How have you experienced these two cultures in your own life, either personally or in others? In what ways have you witnessed the pursuit of God, and in what ways have you witnessed selfishness?

*Allow the group to discuss.*

*Please read aloud:* With these two opposing lines in the backdrop, we now turn to the next part of the story: the flood. As you may know, in the time of Noah, Seth's descendant, God sends a flood to destroy the entire earth. But this leads to a question. If there were at least one righteous group of people—the line of Seth—why did God send a flood that punished the *whole* human family?

Our first clue comes in Genesis 6:1-3.

### Read Genesis 6:1-3

5. So what do the “sons of heaven” do? And how does God respond?

*Answer: “The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose” (Gn 6:1). Immediately after this, God indicates His displeasure and announces that He plans to punish the whole of humanity: “My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years” (Gn 6:3).*

6. This seems like a pretty harsh punishment for getting married. What do you think led God to this conclusion?

*Allow the group to discuss. Don't reveal the answer just yet.*

*Please read aloud:* In order to answer this question, we must take a deeper look at the context and ask, “Who were the sons of God? Who were the daughters of men? And why would God be opposed to their marrying?”

Whenever we encounter a statement in Scripture that appears unclear, the first place we should look for clarification is the immediate context. In the two chapters that immediately precede this scene, we learned of two genealogies that tell a story of two families with radically different values and lifestyles. Genesis 4 focuses on Cain's family, which is centered on man and has turned its back on God. Chapter five focuses on Seth's family, which calls on the Lord's name and walks with God.

In light of these two genealogies, Genesis 6:1 begins to make more sense. The “sons of God” would refer to the godly family of Seth, and the “daughters of men” would refer to the disgraced descendants of Cain.<sup>1</sup> The text thus seems to indicate that the sons of God in the Sethite line were attracted to ungodly women from the Cainite line and married them.

7. How do you think the Cainite spouses influenced the Sethite line? How does this background help us understand why God sent a flood over the whole world?

*Answer: The Cainite spouses led the Sethites away from faithfulness to God and into selfish pursuits. As the one faithful line of Seth is undermined by the introduction of godless spouses, the covenant family is weakened and God is grieved. The whole earth now has become corrupt, and, therefore, God sent the flood.*

*Please read aloud:* This leads us to the story of the flood. Let's keep reading.

<sup>1</sup> Some have interpreted the “sons of God” as a reference to angelic beings who marry women, but this view seems unlikely. Apart from the fact that angels cannot reproduce like humans (as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas have noted), nowhere in Genesis is the notion of “sons of God” associated with angels, and nothing in the immediate context would point us in that direction.

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### Read Genesis 6:11-13

8. Think back to the beginning of the book of Genesis (see Genesis 1:31). How does this compare to what God said when he created the world?

*Answer: This simple statement stands in dramatic contrast with what God saw at the climax the creation week in Genesis chapter 1: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good" (Gn 1:31). But now, sin has taken its toll, and God's good creation has been disfigured. It is the exactly the opposite of how things were in the beginning.*

*Please read aloud:* Many of you have likely already heard some parts of the story of Noah and the Ark, so we aren't going to focus our attention on the whole story. But, I want us to notice what the Bible actually says about how the flood came about. Many of us may think of the flood as a rainstorm that lasted a long time, but the Scriptures present something far more catastrophic.

### Read Genesis 7:11-12

9. Besides just rain, how else is the earth covered with water?

*Answer: Scripture says that the fountains of the great deep were opened. This indicates a deluge of water coming from every direction. The chaotic waters of the sea would be swelling over the land, while the waters of the sky would be collapsing upon them.*

*Please read aloud:* Now, let's compare this to the beginning of creation. In Genesis 1:2, the Bible states that a watery chaos known as the *tehom* in Hebrew (the deep) covered the earth. This is the same word used in the passage we just read. But in the creation account, God's spirit hovered over the waters, separating them to create the sky and

the sea, and then taming them to bring forth the land that would serve as a suitable home for humanity.

10. Knowing this background, what is the Bible trying to teach us about the flood? Is it merely a means of destruction or is it pointing to something deeper?

*Answer: In the flood, the waters that were separated at creation come crashing back together, and the watery chaos is unleashed. "The fountains of the great deep [tehom] burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened" (Gn 7:11). In the flood, God's creation is devastated and all life is blotted out. In establishing this parallel, the author of Genesis is trying to highlight the fact that sin is bringing about a reversal of creation. In other words, the beautiful order and harmony that God established in the world has been distorted because of sin.*

*Please read aloud:* Because of sin, the work of God in creation is now being reversed. But like we saw with Adam and Eve, the story doesn't end there. Let's look back a little bit, and examine Noah, and discover how God plans to bring about a new creation after this catastrophic event.

### Read Genesis 6:8-10

11. What do we know about Noah from these passages?

*Answer: In contrast to the great wickedness that was all around him (Gn 6:5), Noah dares to live a different kind of life. He is "a righteous man" who was "blameless in his generation." He was a man who "walked with God" in the midst of a corrupt culture (Gn 6:9-10). Thus, Noah "found favor in God's eyes" (Gn 6:8).*

*Please read aloud:* The expression “found favor in God’s eyes” is used to describe someone to whom much will be entrusted (see Gn 39:4). This certainly applies to Noah: Indeed, he is about to be entrusted with the future of the whole human family!

Let’s examine an important detail to help us understand Noah’s role. If you look at Genesis chapters 7 & 8 you’ll notice something striking about the numbers used in the narrative: the number seven appears at least four times.

12. Where have we already heard about the number seven in the story of the Bible? And how does that help us understand the meaning of this story? How might the two be connected?

*Answer: In many ways, the flood narrative presents a kind of re-creation, with language that reflects images from the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2. Just as God created the world and rested on the seventh day (Gn 2:4), so the new creation with Noah and the flood highlights the number seven several times — reminiscent of how God rested on the seventh day of creation (Gn 8:4). All these occurrences of the number seven in this short account highlight how the flood is not only bringing punishment upon the earth but also bringing about new life, a new hope, and a new creation through a new covenant.<sup>2</sup>*

13. So if there’s a renewed creation with the flood, what would Noah’s role be in this new world? Who would he be like from the first creation?

*Answer: Noah is like a new Adam, the new head of the human family.*

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word for “seven” (*sheba*) is significant because it is also a verb meaning “to swear a covenant oath”—or literally, “to seven oneself.” The number seven in the Bible, therefore, serves as a sign for covenant. Both in the creation account and here in the flood narrative, we see the number seven appear prominently, pointing to how God is covenanting himself to humanity and creation.

*Please read aloud:* Once again, notice the parallels in the Biblical text: Just as Adam is blessed by God, so Noah is blessed by God. Just as Adam was called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gn 1:28), so Noah is called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gn 9:1). And both Adam and Noah were tillers of the soil and given dominion over all the animals (Gn 1:28, 2:15; 9:2, 20).

The parallels don’t end there, however, and not all the parallels with Adam are desirable. Just as the beginning of humanity was marred by Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden, so the beginning of this new human family will be tainted by Noah’s sin.

### Read Genesis 9:20-27

*Please read aloud:* The account of Noah’s fall in Genesis 9 is shocking not only because of its disheartening report of Noah’s sin, but also because of the surprising punishment given to Noah’s grandson, Canaan.

14. What just happened here? Noah got drunk and his son Ham looked upon his nakedness, so when Noah woke up he cursed Canaan, his own grandson! What is the meaning of this strange story?

*Allow the group to discuss. Note: Don’t reveal the answer yet.*

*Please read aloud:* First, in order to understand Noah’s anger, we need to consider what it means that Ham “looked upon the nakedness of his father.” When the Bible deals with delicate sexual matters, it frequently uses guarded language. To understand the meaning of this phrase, let’s look at how “looking upon the nakedness” of one’s father is used elsewhere in the Bible.

*Note to the leader: the RSV translation will be the most helpful here.*

## Read Leviticus 20:11

15. In light of this passage, what did Ham do?

*Answer: Ham slept with his mother while Noah was drunk.*

*Please read aloud:* But why would Ham want to commit incest with his mother? This might have been a sin of passion, but it was almost certainly an act of rebellion against the authority of his father and his oldest brother, Shem.

Let's consider the historical context. We've already seen how, after the flood, God gave Noah the mission of ruling over the entire world. In the time of the Patriarchs in the Book of Genesis, this authority would be passed on to his eldest son, Shem. Ham is Noah's youngest son and would not be the successor—unless he were to usurp that power through deceit and violence.

As strange as it may seem to the modern reader, this idea of seizing authority by having sexual relations with the ruler's wife is not unprecedented in the ancient world. When foreign invaders toppled other kingdoms, they typically took the previous king's wives for their own, showing that they had authority over everything the king had once possessed.<sup>3</sup>

The explanation of incest also makes sense of Noah's response. Ham's son Canaan is cursed by Noah—not for anything he had done, but for his father's action. The context would indicate that Canaan—who was the fruit of this incestuous, rebellious union—would suffer the effects of his father's sin, just as Cain's children bore the effects of the curse laid on Cain when he rejected God.

<sup>3</sup> We see this also in the history of Israel, when King David's son Absalom tries to usurp the throne from his father. After Absalom takes over the capital city of Jerusalem, one of his first acts is to take David's concubines and have sexual relations with them in public (see 2 Sm 16:21-22).

Noah's sin has consequences. His drunkenness opened the door for Ham to make his move, and Noah's family is left in shambles. Noah's descendants were destined to represent a renewed human family united in the blessing of God's covenant. But the narrative of Noah and the flood ends in tragedy, with his own son Ham rebelling and Ham's descendants being cursed.

After the flood, the human family is given a new land, a renewed creation, a fresh start. We might expect that, with all these changes, men and women would flourish. But the Biblical narrative reveals that the problems facing humanity run much deeper. Noah and his children still struggle with sin and suffer the division and unhappiness that flow from not living in accord with God's plan.

16. Do you ever feel like you need a fresh start? Maybe a new job, a new city, new clothes, or even new friends? What does this story teach us about needing a fresh start, and how might it not be the solution that we really need? And what is it that we really need?

*Answer: We, too, might sometimes think that all we need is a fresh start to get our lives on track and find happiness. But the Scriptures teach that no mere cosmetic change will satisfy our deepest desires. Our problems are not just outside of us; they are most fundamentally rooted within us: our weaknesses, fears, insecurities and sins. Like Noah and his children, we need more than a new environment or a new situation; we need God and His healing power to transform us, so that we can begin to walk in his ways. Only then will we experience the joy and fulfillment in life for which God made us.*