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## Lesson 21 — THE CURSE OF CANAAN



*And When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers."*

*[Genesis 9:24-25]*

The Scriptures often portray some strange and unusual events in history, but God has revealed them for a reason. If something strange is mentioned in the Bible, usually that means it is important.

One of the most peculiar accounts in the early chapters of Genesis is Noah's curse upon his grandson, Canaan. On the surface, it seems that Noah's son, Ham, simply stumbled in on his drunk and naked father and experienced an awkward moment before going back outside to tell his older brothers.

When Noah finally awoke, he immediately sensed something shameful had happened and commenced to calling down curses — not on Ham though — but on one of Ham's sons — Canaan. Patriarchal blessings and curses carried significant weight, and Noah's curse of Canaan was exceptionally harsh.

If you are thinking that Noah's reaction seemed a little extreme, you are not alone. After all, didn't Ham just make an honest mistake? And what was Noah doing drunk in the first place? Even if Ham did dishonor his father, or even made light of the situation, did that merit a generational curse from the family patriarch?

Unlikely ... unless there is more to the story.

Once again, we must remember that every account in Holy Scripture is included for a reason, so we can be sure that this peculiar event, though strange, is significant to the overall narrative of redemptive history.

To establish the context, let us read the story once again.

- ❖ Read Genesis 9:20-27. What particular details stand out in this story? What did you notice about this passage that you haven't noticed before? Explain.

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## Getting Drunk is Never a Good Idea

The first detail that immediately jumps out is Noah's drunken stupor. Apparently Noah didn't just have a glass of wine with his dinner or get a little tipsy. He was hammered drunk — so much so that he didn't even bother to cover up in his tent but crashed naked on the bed.

One of the unique characteristics of God's word is that it paints the heroes of the faith in real and living color, revealing both their good and bad. The Scripture does not embellish nor attempt to sugar coat the truth. We can often learn from the negative examples in the Bible as much as from the positive ones. Noah certainly provides a negative example here.

Yes, Noah was a man of faith, righteous in the sight of God, but also a man susceptible to the desires of the flesh. And this particular sin put Noah in a vulnerable situation and brought some devastating consequences to his family.

And just in case you wondered ... the Bible has no prohibition against drinking wine or alcohol in general, although it repeatedly and clearly classifies drunkenness as a sin. [see *Proverbs 23:20-21, Ephesians 5:18*] Even Jesus turned water into vintage wine and was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard for associating with a rough crowd. The Scriptures do caution mature believers to use their freedom wisely, however, so as not to cause a weaker brother to stumble.

## What Really Happened?

The language in Genesis 9 is specific and intentional for a reason. Noah was drunk and uncovered in his tent, and although the Bible says that Ham simply "saw" his father's nakedness, there is most likely more to the story. We can get some helpful clues when we examine God's laws against sexual immorality in the book of Leviticus. Notice how the phrase "*uncovering his nakedness*" is used repeatedly to convey the seriousness of sexual sin.

- ❖ Read Leviticus 18:6-8, 20:11-21. What can you learn from these passages? Do you believe Ham's sin was sexual in nature? Why or why not?

With the Levitical laws providing the backdrop for Genesis 9, the picture begins to come into focus. Most certainly Ham did something more than simply see his naked father and then run tell his brothers for a good laugh. As inappropriate as that may have been, it is apparent that Ham did something far worse. Ham must have performed some type of disgraceful,

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incestuous act. Based on what we know from Leviticus, for a man to commit incest with his own mother or even his step-mother, he has “*uncovered his father’s nakedness,*” and was deserving of death.

Granted, there has been much conjecture among scholars concerning the nature of Ham’s sin. Some reject anything sexual in nature, while others have proposed that Ham perhaps committed sodomy against his father, Noah, because of the fact that the Bible says Noah immediately knew what Ham “*had done to him.*” Although it isn’t clear, there is one option that makes the most sense.

If Ham’s sin was sexual in nature — which seems to be the case — then it most likely involved a shameful act of incestuous rape with his own mother, while his drunken father lay unconscious. Such a heinous and perverse act would have warranted Noah’s fury and explain why he pronounced such a serious curse. Also, it would help explain the other side of the mystery regarding Canaan.

## **The Apple Doesn’t Fall Far from the Tree**

To make matters even more confusing, when Noah awakes from his drunken stupor to realize that Ham had done such a wicked thing, he pronounces a curse — not on Ham personally — but upon Canaan, the fourth-born son of Ham. But why Canaan and not Ham? Why Canaan and not the other sons of Ham, such as Cush or Egypt? This mystery is not easily answered.

The first matter is to determine if Canaan had even been born at this point in the narrative. At the very least a few seasons likely had passed since the family left the ark because it seems Noah had time to plant a vineyard, yield grapes, and ferment wine. We don’t exactly know how many years had passed, but even if this episode was several years removed from the flood, would that have given Ham and his wife enough time to produce four sons?

The truth is that we don’t know if Noah was pronouncing a curse on his grandson, Canaan, that was already born, or if Noah was prophetically cursing one of Ham’s future descendants that had yet to be born. Another interesting theory is that perhaps Canaan was the result of Ham’s incestuous act with his mother.

*“If Ham’s crime is understood as maternal incest, it becomes possible to explain Canaan’s origin as the fruit of that union. Canaan is cursed because his origin was a vile, taboo act on the part of his father; and Ham is identified as “the father of Canaan” (vv. 18, 20) because the narrator wishes to signal the reader that this narrative explains how Ham became “the father of Canaan.” [Dr. Darrell Pursiful]*

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Canaan's curse was that he and his descendants ultimately would be inferior and subject to both of his brothers — Japheth and Shem — and their descendants. Of course, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel would become direct descendants of Shem, whereas we learn in Genesis 10 that Canaan was the father of the wicked people groups and giant clans who settled in the Promise Land, such as Sidon (Phoenicians), the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Girgashites, the Hivites etc... [Genesis 10:15-17].

In other words, the primary enemies of Israel would be the direct descendants of Ham (Egypt) and more specifically, Canaan, and the curse of Canaan would be at the heart of the conflict for the Promised Land. Canaan's curse is so important because it provides the backstory behind the perpetual enmity between God's people, Israel, and their worst enemies, the Canaanites. It is also worth noting that both Egypt and Canaan are directly identified as the originators of the shameful acts of sexual perversion prohibited in Leviticus 18 and 20. In other words, like father ... like son.

*"You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes." [Leviticus 18:3]*

Interestingly enough, there is another familiar story of drunken incest in the Scriptures that results in the birth of two nations that become hostile enemies of Israel. Lot's own daughters got him drunk and shamefully uncovered his nakedness, which produced two sons — Ammon and Moab [Genesis 19:34-38].

Sadly, because of Israel's own rebellion, the curse of Canaan became Israel's own curse.

- ❖ Read Genesis 10:15-17 & 15:18-21. How are the descendants of Canaan connected to the land God promised to Abraham?
  
- ❖ Read Exodus 34:10-16. What warning did the LORD give to Israel at Mt. Sinai? How are the descendants of Canaan described?
  
- ❖ Read Joshua 23. What was the consequence of Israel intermixing with the inhabitants of Canaan? How is this connected to the curse of Canaan?