

“Prophecy and Exposition”

Sermon for 9 June 2019

Texts: Acts 8:29-35; Genesis 10 and Isaiah 52:13-53:12

God has a plan to glorify himself and he has created us to participate in that plan with him! That is the take-away. How do we arrive at that? By rightly dividing the Word of God. First, let’s look at a biblical example of correct interpretation, the dividing..

We have heard the prophecy (Isaiah 52:13—53:13) and then we have this passage from Acts 8:

29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.” 30 Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “*Do you understand what you are reading?*” 31 And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

**“He was led as a sheep to slaughter;
And as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
So He does not open His mouth.
33 “In humiliation His judgment was taken away;
Who will [describe] relate His [family, or origin] generation?
For His life is removed from the earth.” Isaiah 53:7**

34 The eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.

This glimpse into Philip’s ministry is a perfect illustration of how prophecy wants exposition in order to facilitate understanding. First, we have the prophetic word (Isaiah 53:7) or, better, a single verse from the more extended prophetic word we heard this morning. Philip asks, “Do you understand?” Do you understand what this prophecy refers to? What it means? Who is it referencing as its main subject? The Ethiopian eunuch admits he does not when he asks for a guide—an interpreter, or, an expositor.

Right. So don’t we all! *Now keep in mind that I may be talking about a prophetic verse from Isaiah 53 but I have Genesis 10 in the background—it is a prophetic passage which requires some exposition to get at.* There are many points of identification here, and a great need for clarification even in this one verse!

For instance, who **was led as a sheep to slaughter**? And why, and when and where? While Jesus resembled a lamb being shorn, that is not the point. Because the metaphor here is that a sacrifice—the slaughter is not for meat, even if the wool is for the spinners and weavers. It is picture of Christ’s silence before his accusers: **he answered him not a word.** (Matt. 27:14). Not a word in rebuttal, or self-defense, or in repudiation of the lies and distortions. He did not need to defend his innocence because his impending sacrifice was about our guilt, not his. The verse also speaks to the abject humiliation to which Jesus was subjected in being stripped and flogged and beaten. In point of fact, nothing looks quite as humiliated as a shorn sheep—unless maybe it be a poodle, or English sheepdog. **In humiliation he is taken away** refers to Jesus’ state as he is taken away to be crucified.

And Who will [describe] relate His [family, or origin] generation? For His life is removed from the earth seems a rhetorical question. The implied answer is “no one,” no one will bother to concern himself with questions of Jesus’ family, origin or genealogy. He will be utterly cut off, cast out, abandoned. One critical emphasis of Genesis 10 is our genealogical lineage of all the families of all the nations on earth to Noah, in the second beginning, and to Jesus is the ultimate family reunion *at the end of time*.

We may assume that Philip covered this subject material when **beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him**. (v. 35) Let me take this home for you: Philip preached Jesus to the eunuch as the subject of this prophetic verse. Indeed, expositing Isaiah 52:13-Isaiah 53:13 is what all the apostles were doing in Jerusalem as they connected the prophecies in Isaiah specifically to the recent events surround Jesus’ arrest, trial and crucifixion. And, in so doing, they were extending the teaching ministry of the Lord Jesus—his exposition of the Scriptures, begun in his earthly life and continued in his resurrected life. Jesus, the fulfillment of the prophecy, carefully expounded the meaning of the prophecy. Prophecy first, then exposition. And, after exposition, came application: the conversion of the Ethiopian and his baptism.

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Now let’s apply what we have learned from Philip to Genesis 10. It is a prophetic chapter. Indeed, if we were to conceive of the chapter as a Table of Contents to a book, The Kingdom of God: a History. The Table sets forth, from beginning to end, the history of the dispersion of the peoples following the flood, their intermingling, and, finally, their return, through migration, to their center—there is something like a gravitational pull on the movement of the nations as they expand and then contract. That controlling force expresses the purpose of God: he is bringing his Kingdom on Earth. Genesis 10 depicts, in advance, what that process is going to look like—which is why we say the chapter is prophetic! And second thing, the Table of Contents establishes that we do indeed have a common ancestor—his name is Noah—which means that despite racial distinctions, we are all cousins. Very, very distant cousins, mind you, but the whole human race is one family. It originated as one family, and it will consummate as one whole family. The nature of our relationship will resolve from the natural into the spiritual because the family *we end up being* is a spiritually generated one, **a family of faith** and not of biological accident, or genetic relatedness.

I find comfort in this: not only is the Kingdom of God coming on earth but *it is to the glory of God that things proceed in this direction*. God is both in control and His purposes will prevail! Nothing accidental, nothing left to chance. The fact that this proceeds by name, by family, clan, tribe and nation serves two purposes: it establishes the personal reality of it all and it conveys such *specificity* as to reinforce its truth. Psalm 147:4-5 reads:

He counts the number of the stars;

He gives names to all of them.

Or, Calls them all by their name

5 Great is our Lord and abundant in strength;

His understanding is infinite.

Isaiah 40:26 reinforces this assertion:

Lift up your eyes on high

And see who has created these stars,

**The One who leads forth their host by number,
He calls them all by name;
 Because of the greatness of His might and the [a]strength of His power,
 Not one of them is missing.**

Psalm 8:3 adds: an element of pastoral oversight:

**When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
 What is man that you are mindful of him**

Mindful suggests that he cares about and for us, he looks out for us.

And the son of man that you are for him?

God, through Joseph spoke similar comfort: **“So, do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.** (Gen. 50:21) God looks after all his creatures—and especially his children in Christ.

The force of Genesis 10 is this: that what God knows, does, and purposes for the stars is no differently than he does with all the persons named in this chapter—and by extrapolation, does with every living soul that was ever conceived! Everyone, known by name, everyone placed by God—nothing accidental, or by chance, all unfolds by purpose and design. And that is something only God can, and does do!

Picture, if you will, an enormous envelop labeled: “The Kingdom of God: Revelation History.” Let’s look inside this envelope and we will discover numerous packets. Here is one labeled, “History of the World.” Another, “Botanical History of the Plant Kingdom.” Here, “The History of Continental Drift.” Inside each packet moreover, there are files (things on your computer labeled “documents” would correspond). In this last packet, you might find a file labeled, “The Elasticity of the Earth’s Crust: a History of the Compressive Force of the Flood.” Or, “The Expansive Force of the Earth’s Fiery Core: With Implications for the Separation of Shields, Plates—see Continental Tectonics.” And, further exploration, exposes to the investigator, white papers on various events, volcanic activity, wars and ice ages, then resumes of significant figures and spiritual biographies. However, remembering that all of this content is found in one huge envelop keeps things in perspective! It keeps them in one place, and keeps them in order. Management of such a resource would be heaven for the librarian minded(!) and the scholarly souls that make it into heaven!

The Bible, being a library of books, readily fits this envelop analogy. However, the biblical narrative has some distinguishing characteristics. First of all, it is the *character*, the inner man, of the personages included in Scripture *that matters most*. It is not their parentage, their social, physical or historical circumstances—not state of knowledge, psychological health, social standing, race, location or parenting. Jesus, whose character was impeccable, had none of these to his advantages or liability; his triumph was a spiritual triumph of righteousness and moral perfection. The corollary to this emphasis on character is striking: humanity, nation, or the world (including all its diverse ideologies, variant politics and social opinions) *do not do, or even accomplish anything*. Abstractions don’t act, they can’t. Only people act. Only personal entities, whether human or divine agents, actually do anything—people playing things out, making decisions and choosing courses of action gets things done. All this arising from character, persons make changes. The universe is

engineered meanwhile, not accidental. Chains of events in the natural world unfold under a governing authority, fulfilling God's purposes—under divine control. That's also a significant take-away from Genesis 10.

The Table of Contents announces what's to come and this selection out of the bible sheds light on the purposes of God in his creation: his glory, our participation.

Another thing we notice is two *apparently* contradicting movements: a widening of scope over time, and a narrowing of scope within that time frame. This will become obvious when I point out that starting with Noah and his three sons¹. This is the second triad in the opening chapters of Genesis. Of the three sons of Adam, one was a bad apple and the same pattern emerges with Noah: Ham, Japheth and Shem. Ham turns out to be the bad apple and his son Canaan bears the consequences—just like Cain's descendants do of their father. Now if it's any consolation, *and it should be!*, the same proportions apply to another range of created beings—God's angels. Two thirds of them pan out and only one third joins Satan in his rebellion and end up being cast out of heaven. I will say that these figures are actually quite encouraging because the good guys end up outnumbering the bad guys two to one!

So there's a widening as the human family expands, as God renews his blessing on the divine mandate: **Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it**. What follows is, as it were supernaturally enhanced not simply natural! The world is filling up quickly and in very short order there are civilizations, great cities and empires springing up all over the globe! Yes, in every quarter of the people world, these astounding things are happening things like the tower of Babel, and ziggurats and temple mounds as well as vast urban complexes—the ruins of which appear in heaps that dot the globe on every continent. A twenty-one year old woman just completed her tour of every country in the world—setting a new Guinness World Record (her objective!)—over 196 countries!! The number of 71 nations, in Genesis 10 is not as impressive as her numbers but quite a few of those countries/nations didn't exist when Genesis 10 was written down! Besides, the ideal number of 70, which symbolically represents “all the nations” can be arrived at, either by eliminating one apparent duplication, or by justifying the list to only include fathers of nations.

Here's what defines a nation (biblically): one “father,” one assigned place, or land; one language/tongue; an one common culture. So, we note that there are many nations which consist of many tribes, many clans and many, many more families—each united organized under a singular head. And all of this from a man who had three sons! These three sons appear to represent the three major racial groups in the known world which formed in one place and then dispersed throughout the world (in the beginning) and God's purpose is (in the end) to bring them all back together again—re-instituting the unity which we all originally had, as one family with one father, Noah.

Now the second dynamic, contrary to the widening just noted, a narrowing is observed two ways: 1. through time there is this movement towards convergence, as just mentioned, 2. and through a constriction also over time of one people (Israel) narrowing to one tribe

¹ This is the second triad found in the opening chapters of Genesis. Adam and Eve also had three sons: Cain, Abel and Seth. Cain was the loser. And Seth bore the seed of promise.

Judah), narrowing to one family (Joseph and Mary) and, finally coming down to the one son (Jesus). This later movement is, of course, “the messianic descent.” The Lord Jesus—in whom all people will finally be gathered, reunited, and made *one family of faith*. Two remarkable things follow about this dynamic: first, it is specific. It proceeds *genealogically*, factually, by name. And the second thing is the incipient inclusivity of the biblical religion—from the call of Abraham to the return of Jesus Christ—the scope is universal, global. Abraham was to be **a blessing to all nations** not just those he fathered—**and the triumphant Jesus will return as Lord and King of all**.

So the Table of the Nations in Genesis 10 is both a Table of Contents and a *roadmap* to the Kingdom of God which has *come partially* with the advent of Jesus, and is *coming in fullness* when the crucified and risen Lord appears, **and every eye shall see him!** *What is before us spells out the blessings of Shem and Japheth as well as the curse of Canaan. Noah’s progeny is written in terms of families, clans, tribes and nations! And the millions of people involved, as numerous as the stars in God’s creation, are all created, named, placed and individually known by their God.* The gravitational pull, which directs the final resolution—the summing up and cohering of all things in Christ—which brings the outlying peoples (descendants of Japheth who moved to the geographical horizons of the known world—Europe. India and the Americas) back to peoples of Shem (his descendants in the Near East and Asia), all the while being engaged with the servile nations descended from Ham through Canaan (in Africa and also the Near East), a long contentious history of interaction (through displacements, replacements, dispersions, mingling’s and migrations—and not infrequently, through warfare and bloodshed). That movement, that return to the center, in terms of racial unity in Shem and in location shapes the actualization of the Kingdom of God. In the end, it is not about one nation favored above all other nations. And it is not about one nation, or people appointed to serve all other nations. In the Kingdom, all nations become servant nations as they serve one another and as they all serve the one true God.

As Jesus teaches. **He who would be greatest among you must be servant of all!** (Matt. 23:11)

We have to leave it there. Isn’t it gratifying to know that God has a plan, the gospel has a purpose and that we, personally and functionally, get to participate in both plan and implementation. Jesus summed it up in John 14:12-14:

12 Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father.
13 Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it.

Amen