

## Genesis 10:1-32 A Sermon

By [Rev. Scott Lindsay](#)

We are continuing with our study of Genesis, concentrating this morning on chapter 10 in the hopes of concluding this series next week when we look at the story of the Tower of Babel. As perhaps most of you will know, in this book, written by Moses and inspired by the Holy Spirit, we have seen God's description of the very beginning of everything, including the sun, moon, stars, planets, people, animals, and vegetation - everything.

We have seen how after making the first man and woman he placed them in a garden paradise to live. There they were to work and enjoy God's beautiful, abundant world with tremendous freedom and just enough restraint to continually remind them that there was a God - and it wasn't them!

Following this, the man and woman were tempted into rebelling against God, and so challenged His authority. This brought disastrous consequences, bringing themselves - and all their eventual descendants - into spiritual, emotional, and physical ruination and death. Still, the continuing mercy of God was evident, as he, in the midst of pronouncing a judgment upon the serpent, promised that a day would come when a seed or descendant of the woman would destroy that same serpent. Until that day there would be on-going warfare between their respective descendants.

We then traced the progression - or perhaps *retrogression* - of the now fallen human race and the development of this prophesied warfare between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. The first human casualty of that war was Abel, who was replaced by Seth, and whose line grew and expanded in parallel to the line of Cain. And yet, as Genesis 6 makes plain, while there were these two lines, the overall pattern in the world was that violence and sin only increased, and worsened, to the point where God deemed it both *just* and *necessary* that he bring a severe, world-wrecking judgment in the form of a flood.

And yet, once again, amidst this just and justifiable wrath against human rebellion, we see the mercy of God in preserving one family - Noah and his sons and their wives - to escape the judgment and become the foundation of a *re-creation* work that God initiated. And so, as Noah and his family leave the ark, they are given the same commission as Adam and Eve and they are promised a stable world in which to carry out that commission.

And then, as if in lock-step with their predecessors, we very soon see that Noah and his sons have Adam's fallen blood running through their own veins as sin again rears its

ugly head. This results in more curses and blessings being uttered, the re-emergence of the two lines of humanity, and the conflict between them, which will ultimately come to a climax in a second judgment of God in the Tower of Babel.

And so, in many ways, we have seen and are seeing two very similar progressions. An original creation, and then a fall, which ultimately leads to a terrible judgment in which almost no one is spared, followed by a re-creation and a re-entrance of sin which will end in a second great judgment.

But the similarity, which is deliberate of course, only serves to highlight the very different endings. In the first judgment, with the exception of one family, everyone dies and God starts over. In the second judgment, as we will see, *no one dies and God doesn't start over*. So, the original creation account provides the dark background against which the re-creation account stands out with contrasting colors.

In the first creation we see the justifiable wrath of God against human rebellion. In the re-creation account we see the undeserved mercy of God toward that same creation and in spite of the same human rebellion. And one of the reasons it is so clearly *seen as mercy*, is because, thanks to the first account, we have an idea of what we once had, of what we then lost, of what we have become, and what God is capable of. The God who created, could have just uncreated, and yet has clearly chosen not to do so.

I grew up watching my mother, who is, among many other things, a watercolor artist. She has worked in a number of other mediums, of course, but most often it has been painting. One of the things I remember seeing was how she would *get ready to paint*. This involved many things but one of the main things was getting a canvas ready.

She would start with this wooden frame - and sometimes she would have to put that together - and then when that was done she would staple or nail a piece of canvas, stretching it as she went along. After she stretched it, she would then paint this sizing solution on it that would cause it to shrink and become even more taught. And then, after that dried, she would often paint the canvass a solid color - a blue or a green or an off-white - but a solid color which was sort of the base or foundation against which everything else was going to be set.

The whole process took a few days but afterwards she had a great surface upon which she could work to paint the picture she wanted you to see. And all of the preparations and the particular background she chose made doing the painting possible and caused what was painted in the foreground to strike you in a much more powerful fashion.

In some ways, this is analogous to what has been happening in these first 11 chapters of Genesis. Through the original creation, fall and judgment - and all that went with that - we have learned some important things about God, people, the creation and about good and evil, and about mercy and judgment. And then the story re-starts with Noah, and yet we hear the story differently now. The first time, there was no backdrop against which that story could be heard. It was an absolute beginning.

Now we have a relative beginning. We have story that is set against the background of the previous account. And we can't hear this re-creation story without being affected by the first one. We can't get the first story out of our heads; and we're not meant to. Because it is the backdrop, the prepared canvass, against and upon which God is painting this picture which has many names - and one of them is *Redemption*.

To be sure, what has gone on in chapters 1-9 is *more* than a backdrop - much more than that - *but it is not less*. And it does serve an important function and sets the stage for the remaining storyline of the rest of the Bible, as we'll see even more clearly next week. With that as an overstated introduction, let's pray and then have a look at Gen 10:1-32.....

*Father in Heaven, Our Great Creator, we come to you this morning as the objects of your on-going mercies, as those for whom your Son gave his life, as those who were in view when the promise of Genesis 3:15 was first uttered, and even before. And we who have received so much mercy would dare to ask for more right now. We ask that you take what would otherwise be an ordinary act of communication and so inhabit it that it becomes a means of grace to your people - words delivered BY a sinner and TO sinners, by a Son to other Sons and Daughters in your Kingdom. Help us to look not only at these texts but also through these texts - at You - the Author that we long to know better. And we pray this in Jesus name.....Amen.*

As we listen to the passage now, take note of its structure, which is pretty straightforward and which, I think, helps you to hear it:

Vs 1 Introduction

Vs 2-5 That which is traceable to the line of Japheth

Vs 6-20 That which is traceable to the line of Ham

Vs 21-31 That which is traceable to the line of Shem

Vs 32 Summary

With that structure in mind, let's hear the text.....

Now for many people, reading this sort of passage, at least at first, is about as engaging as reading the phone book or a dictionary. And, admittedly, it is not nearly as interesting as a story like Noah and the Flood. But this passage serves an important purpose and, in Paul's words, is profitable for teaching, rebuke, correction and training in righteousness. God saw fit to include it in His Bible, and that alone is reason enough to spend some time thinking about it. As we do, we will look at three things. Firstly, we will look at how this passage fits in with the passages most immediately surrounding it. Secondly, we will try and understand exactly what it is that we are looking at. Thirdly, we'll think about how these verses would have been useful for Israel – and how they are still useful for God's people in our own day.

Firstly, let's think about how this passage fits in with the other passages around it. If you were with us two weeks ago, then you may remember my saying that in Genesis 9:18-29, we have a description of the divine and historical basis for the distinctions between the descendants of Ham and the descendants of Shem. At the time that Genesis was written the descendants of Ham were those nations that now occupied the promised land - the Canaanite peoples. The descendants of Shem were the people of God under Moses, about to enter into the promised land and toss out the Canaanite peoples - by God's explicit instruction.

With the account in 9:18-29 we have then the events which led to the current distinctions between these people. As such it is a kind of historical/theological justification for the people of God to go ahead and do what God told them to do. In driving out the Canaanite peoples, they were simply fulfilling the curses and blessings which Noah had uttered, and which God had sovereignly chosen to honor.

The verses before us this morning are a further development of 9:18-29. At the end of chapter 9, we still have Noah, his sons, and their wives - and that's it. Chapter 10 describes the expansion and development of the world as it stemmed from the three sons - Japheth, Ham and Shem. Now we'll say more about what this expansion really is in a moment, but for now just notice that this as a basic description of what is going on in Chapter 10.

Now, if you have never read through Genesis before, then by the time you reach the end of chapter 10 it would be quite natural to conclude that the description of the expansion of these three lines of descendants has come to an end. However, that's not really the case. If you skip down to chapter 11, verse 10, you see that the description of who descended from Shem, which began in verse 21 of chapter 10 - that description is still going on in chapter 11, verse 10, and continues right through to at least verse 26 of chapter 11.

Sandwiched in the middle of this description of the descendants of Shem - which is clearly the line of descent which we are meant to take the most notice of - but right in the middle of this whole thing is the account of the Tower of Babel, found in verses 1-9. And, if you know anything about the story, then you will know that in this story all the people of the earth are together in one place at the beginning, and they begin spreading out at the end, for reasons which we'll explore next week.

However, what this means is that the realities described in chapter 10 are things which did not occur until after the events of chapter 11:1-9. In other words, Chapter 10 describes how the expansion actually worked out. Chapter 11:1-9 describes why the expansion happened in the first place. So, chronologically, they are not in sequence.

And the reason for this is related to what we have already seen. We have already been through the first creation sequence which climaxed in the flood accounts. All of those things have prepared the way for what will now be the main storyline for the rest of Genesis, and indeed, for the rest of the Bible - the account of Abram, who becomes

Abraham, from whom the nation of Israel will eventually come.

And so, since Abram is the key figure in the launching of this new direction for the bible's plotline, Moses wants to finish out these first 11 chapters by leading you right to Abram. If he had simply started in chapter 10 with the account of the Tower of Babel, then his readers would have been asking - "Wow, where did all the people come from?" - because at the end of chapter 9, it's still only 8 people in the world. And so, Moses chooses, instead to describe how the expansion of people went - to a point - and then uses what we know in our own day as a *flashback* to explain how and why the expansion happened.

Now we've all seen flashbacks many times in the movies - a story is going along and all of the sudden the main character pauses and you are taken back to some previous time where something important is remembered and then, after a few moments, you are brought back to the present and the story picks up and moves on from there. The same technique appears in literature too and this is what is happening here. After a flashback to the Tower of Babel, Moses returns to describing the expansion, keeping his focus on the descendants of Shem and leads the reader right to Abram's doorstep.

That's how this chapter fits in with the verses immediately surrounding it. The second thing then, now that we know how the chapter fits in, is to ask *what this chapter is*. That's a little trickier. And it may be easier to approach this by saying firstly *what it isn't*.

Chapter 10, while in the *form* of a genealogy is not, strictly speaking, really a genealogy. It has some of the things that a genealogy has, but these features are not prominent. For this reason the chapter is not typically referred to as a genealogy but usually as something else - as a "table" or a "list." But what is it a list of?

Well, as you work through the lists in chapter 10, you encounter a number of different things. Certainly you do encounter individual persons, like Cush in verses 6-8. But you also encounter whole tribes or clans of people, which is perhaps clearer in the Hebrew than in the English. You see this in verse 4 where after describing the "sons" of Javan as Elishah and Tarshish (which is also a city name), it says "Kittim and Dodanim."

Now, in English you might think these are just two other people with funny names. But in the Hebrew there are very clear distinctions and the "im" ending is used to describe not individuals but *peoples*. Again, this is not as clear in the English as it is in the Hebrew, but it would in our day be something like this: If I said to you, "The descendants of John O'Malley were: Bob, Ian, the Williamsons, the Irish, Greg, Pete and the Greens." If I said something like that, you would know that in that list was more than just some individuals.

This is what is going on in chapter 10, it just isn't as obvious to us as it would be if we all spoke Hebrew and were reading it in Hebrew. So, the listing here includes individuals as well as tribes or nations. And even the individuals themselves, if you are familiar with biblical history, are names which almost have a double meaning - standing for a person

as well as the nation or tribe that eventually came from that person and took on his name, thus, for example “Canaan” and “Egypt” in verse 6 - which represent both individuals and the nations that come from them.

But not only are there persons and nations listed here, there are also *cities*. So, for example, in verse 10, from among the descendants of Ham comes someone who had apparently gained some reputation which was generally known in Moses’ day - a person named “Nimrod” who was said to be a “mighty hunter before the Lord” - which sounds less ambiguous than the Hebrew which some scholars think should be rendered more in the sense of “in the face of the Lord”.

In other words, his hunting prowess was not something which honored the Lord but was actually a *spiting* of the Lord. Whatever the case, while Nimrod had this hunting reputation that proceeded him, what Moses wants his readers to remember about Nimrod was that he was the founder of places like Babel - which becomes Babylon - and Erech, and Calneh, and Ninevah - cities which would come to figure prominently in the history of the Hebrew people. Later on, other city names are thrown in, including Sodom and Gomorrah, which will soon figure prominently in Moses’ account.

This is the sort of thing going on in this chapter. It happens three times in succession, starting with the descendants who figure least in the storyline - the Japhethites - and ending on the most important line of descent - that of Shem. And at the end of each section is a summarizing sort of statement that we see in verses 5, 20, and 31, and which are very similar.

These summaries all talk about the individual sons of Noah growing and expanding into numerous persons, clans, lands, nations and *languages*. Now, as we saw before, if Moses had placed the account of the Tower of Babel right after chapter 9, he would have left his readers wondering where all the people came from.

So, Moses starts listing out people and nations and how that all went. However, this too would have likely raised a question in his readers’ minds: “Okay,” they might have said, “I can see where the various people came from, but what about the languages? Where did all that come from? After all Shem, Ham and Japheth all came from the same family.”

Thus, Moses’ including the statement about “languages” in each of the summaries in verses 5, 20, 31, is interesting since he hasn’t really mentioned any languages in chapter 10. He has, however mentioned different peoples, which Moses’ people would have known did not speak the same languages. And so, it is that Moses is, by these repeated remarks about *languages* setting us up for chapter 11:1-9, which in addition to explaining the *dispersion*, explains the origins of the various languages.

So then, what is this thing we are looking at - which many have described as “the Table of Nations” - and what is it doing? Well, as you all know, in most shopping malls these days there is, near every main entrance, a lighted directory sign that is intended to help

you navigate your way around the mall. The two main ingredients in these maps are: the diagram of the layout of the shopping center and the big red dot labeled, "You are Here." If all you had was a big red dot on the sign that said, "You are Here," that wouldn't by itself be very helpful. I mean, it might be sort of amusing. I can imagine someone doing that as a sort of joke and placing a hidden camera somewhere to record peoples' reactions to this informative, but useless sign which was pointing out the painfully obvious fact that you were there.

At the same time, having a diagram without the red dot saying "you are here" would not be all that helpful since people would have to do a lot of research before they could figure out where they stood in relation to the diagram. What you need are both the diagram and the red dot. With both of those you can - usually - orient yourself within the big picture and get where you need to go.

These texts, in some ways, serve a similar sort of function. As the people of Israel would have heard this account from Moses, they would have heard a description of the peoples and places that they knew were to the north and northwest of them (the Japhethites), and the peoples and places that were to the south and southwest of them (the Hamites) and the peoples and places that were to the East of them and from whom they themselves had come (The Shemites). And even though they didn't have anything as nice as a lighted directory, or even a paper map, they would have had a general knowledge of where these peoples and places were. And they would have known that what Moses was describing for them was *the world as they knew it* - and that at the center of all these peoples and places was them.

In other words, by this very unique listing which - by the way - is not found in any other culture in the Ancient Near East - but by means of this "table of nations" Moses is giving the people of Israel a mental map of the world, showing them how it came to be, where the different tribes came from, the different cities, even the different languages, and how at the center of all that is the nation of Israel. He is grounding his listening audience and reminding them of their place within the storyline which began in Genesis 1:1 *and*, at the same time, within the world around them.

All of which leads us to the third thing - how these verses would have been, and still are, useful for God's people. From what has already been said, I think that you can see the usefulness of this sort of thing, can't you? This account has a very important *grounding and orienting* function for its readers who were all born in the middle of *a story already in progress*, with all sorts of things going on around them. They don't know how all these things, people, and places came to be, or where they came from, or what it all means.

Life can be a very disorienting experience, especially if you are observant. Like going to an airport for the first time which can also be a very disorienting experience without somewhere there to interpret things for you and guide you through the process.

This account in particular, as well as the whole of Genesis 1-11, served a very important

*grounding* and *orienting* function for the people of Israel. It told them not only *who they were*, but also *who they were not* and *where they stood* in relation to the rest of the world, which, in itself is almost a second function - showing them that they *belonged*, that they were not outsiders to what was going on in the world but were actually at the very center of the whole thing. They *belonged* to this story. They were an integral part of this story. Indeed, they were not “bit” players holding down some inconsequential role but were in fact among the lead characters in this drama.

These verses would also have underscored the fact that this story was actually *going somewhere*, that history was not merely cyclical but was also *linear*, i.e., it is both cyclical AND linear - like a spiral or a “slinky” that as you stretch it has both repetition and direction. I think we miss the importance of this because we all grew up with a linear view of history - i.e., the belief in the idea of progress or moving forward, if you know anything about history, this has not always been an accepted viewpoint (which JB Bury points out in his book, *The Idea of Progress*).

But it wasn't like that in Moses' day. The entire Genesis account was starkly different in this regard than any other history in that time. The stories of the nations around them explained history in cyclical terms - the gods regularly doing certain things, which produced certain effects on the earth and on people - and then doing different things, with different results - only to return to the original things again later on. And this went on and on, constantly, forever and ever, amen. History was, ultimately, this huge rut into which even the gods themselves were stuck.

Over against this, the Genesis accounts stick out like a sore thumb. This is why, among other reasons, God's words to Noah that he will *never again* destroy the world by flood are so significant. The whole notion of a God doing something that he would never again repeat was a radical idea in that day. Nobody thought about God or history in those terms.

But this account, showing the ongoing *progression* and development of the biblical plotline, would have underscored again the reality that not only were the people of Israel major players in God's drama, but this was a drama that was actually going somewhere. And that meant not only were they not stuck in a story that wasn't really going anywhere but that they could expect new things, new developments, interesting twists, etc. Which was all the more reason to pay attention to God since He alone knew what to expect down the road.

And all of these functions which would have been so important and helpful for the people of Israel in Moses' day are just as important and helpful for you and me. In order to see that, however, we need to finish the listing that Genesis 10 begins which only gets you as far as Peleg, in verse 25, as far as the Shemites - or as we would say “Semites” - are concerned. As we have seen before, if you skip past the first 9 verses of chapter 11, you get to a renewed listing which is, this time, more strictly genealogical and which overlaps a little bit with Genesis 10. It does this by starting with Shem and taking you down through Peleg - but then from there gives some additional information

that chapter 10 does not contain, leading you all the way to Abram in verse 26.

But the listing doesn't stop there. Because once we get to Abram, we have to pick up that whole chain - from Adam to Abram - and then locate it within an even larger line - one that gets us to Jesus. This, in fact, is exactly what *Luke* does for us in chapter 3 of his gospel. In verse 23, he starts with Jesus, and then works backward until he ends up with Adam, in verse 38. And so, the entirety of Genesis 1-11 is found, in condensed form, in verses 34-38, and is a subset of that entire section. What's Luke doing? The same thing Moses was doing. He is showing his readers the connections between Jesus and them and the biblical plotline. He is connecting the dots for them, locating the events surrounding Jesus in their own day within a larger storyline which goes back to the very beginning of creation, and beyond.

And you and I are the recipients of all this - the caboose - currently at least - of a long train that goes back to the beginning. And these realities ought to have the same sort of *grounding* and *orienting* functions for you and I, as they did for Moses' people. Because we too were born into the midst of a story already in progress - like walking into a movie that started an hour before you arrived - and we too - apart from God's showing us - would have no clue what is going on here, or how it all works or where it is all going.

Indeed, is this not the conclusion of consistent, thoughtful unbelievers all around us? Countless persons, who do not accept the truth about God, have looked around at this ongoing story into which they have been born, and concluded that there is no plotline, that the world is not going anywhere in particular and there is no guiding hand behind anything. It all seems as confusing and pointless as a cricket match, which, if you've never seen one, can appear to be fairly random if you don't have someone with you to explain how it all actually makes a great deal of sense - once you understand what's going on.

These accounts in Genesis, which provide the people of God with everything they need to make sense of the rest of the story, but these accounts serve the same purpose for us - especially when and AS they are seen with the wider context of Jesus and his ministry. While we have always been, as everyone is, a part of this story, through our connection to Jesus - by belonging to him - WE - and by that I mean "we the church" are grounded and oriented and located at the *center*, at the *heart* of this drama. Now that reality is deeply significant as we live in a world full of people who are "dazed and confused" - lost in the airport of life - who have no idea what they are doing.

Recently I watched a movie titled, "Lost in Translation" which was interesting, moving, numbing and, in the end, a sad, *haunting* picture. In the story there are two main characters. One is nearer to the end of his life. His career, which is in show business, is sort of winding down, his marriage is burdensome and unfulfilling, and he is just sort of bored with life. The other character is a young woman who, seemingly, would have everything in front of her, and who would have every reason to be hopeful and satisfied. But she isn't. And the story has them both placed in the midst of a Japanese culture that is foreign to both of them and which then functions as a kind of metaphor for the whole

movie - two strangers, living in a world that they do not really understand all that well, and to which they do not belong. And so, that is what they are - lost, not only in translation, but *lost in the universe*. And you spend the entire movie waiting for the punchline that never comes or the climax that never really happens. And, in the end, it just sort of fades away - the two people having intersected briefly as they continue to meander aimlessly through the universe, fading away, and disappearing into the crowd. It's a haunting movie.

And so the movie is, in fact, a parable of modern life. All around us are people who are characters in search of a plot, who have no idea that there is a story line out there that makes sense of a confusing world. It doesn't make perfect sense or consistent sense because those who perceive this world - you and I - don't have all of our gauges right or our instruments calibrated properly *and* because, in fact, there are parts of the story, since it comes from the mind of an infinite God, which will always be beyond our ability to fully grasp them.

And yet, that which is beyond us is not enough to derail us from what we can know, and what God has revealed to us - a storyline to which we *do belong* and which has at its center the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the story that the church belongs to, and which it has been given the task of proclaiming and so inviting those around us to understand the plot which may have up to now escaped them and to move from the periphery into the very heart of the story.

This is one of the tragedies of postmodernism or, if you don't believe it exists, relativism, which certainly does. Because the message that comes from these sorts of worldviews is that there are no big stories out there, no over-arching reality that makes sense of all our lesser realities. There are only smaller stories, lesser stories. But the problem is that these stories are never big enough. We were wired for something different. Our individual lives are not big enough to provide any sense of meaning. Our families aren't big enough, our tribes aren't big enough, our nation is not big enough, this world is not big enough. We need a story that includes the entire universe.

Anything less will not do and will not satisfy. And to the degree that we are disconnected from that great story - God's story, His redemptive purposes - to the degree that we are disconnected from *that* story, that degree will we struggle with a sense of lostness and identity. There is a message in that for both believers and unbelievers alike.

Friends, let me challenge you, as strongly as I know how, to give yourself to this, to revel in this, to let this reality so grip you that you cannot NOT tell people *your* story, *this* story, and so invite them to know what you have known, and are still coming to know, as God continues to work his purposes out.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

### **Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine**

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine, please select this [link](#).