

98-08-30a

As we continue our worship this morning, turn with me for a scripture reading to Psalm 90. We are in this reading, anticipating our study this morning in Genesis, where we will begin chapter 12, where the career of Abraham begins. And with that in mind, we are transitioning from the study of the early pre-patriarchal history found in Genesis to the days of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his sons.

And we're going to note this morning several of the new emphases that begin in Genesis chapter 12. And we have some of these ideas in Psalm 90, which, interestingly, is labeled a prayer of Moses, the man of God. We generally think of the Psalms as belonging to David and Asaph and some by Solomon.

But this is, in fact, the record of the prayer of Moses, the man of God. This is, in fact, an extract, perhaps, of what we find in Deuteronomy chapter 33, or an expansion, it's on a related theme. But this Psalm begins, Psalm 90, Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. You turn man to destruction and say, Return, O children of men. For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday, when it is past, and like a watch in the night.

You carry them away like a flood. They are like a sleep. In the morning they are like grass which grows up.

In the morning it flourishes and grows up. In the evening it is cut down and withers. For we have been consumed by your anger, and by your wrath we are terrified.

You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. For all our days have passed away in your wrath. We finish our years like a sigh.

The days of our lives are seventy years, and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow. For it is soon cut off and we fly away. Who knows the power of your anger? For as the fear of you, so is your wrath.

So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Return, O Lord, how long? And have compassion on your servants. O, satisfy us early with your mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Make us glad according to the days in which you have afflicted us, the years in which we have seen evil. Let your work appear to your servants, and your glory to their children. And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands for us.

Yes, establish the work of our hands. It's a very powerful psalm, a very powerful prayer. It is full of ideas that cry out for expansion and interpretation.

It's not our subject this morning, but you do, I think, see the overall theme here of what's going to take place in our earthly life. Some of these same ideas occur in the book of Ecclesiastes, where the lifespan of man is considered, and what is accomplished during that life. What is it that counts? When you stand back and look at life from birth to death, you can, as Shakespeare put it, strut and fret your hour on the stage.

And from a human perspective, often it is sound and fury signifying nothing. You get the idea that it means a lot to the person as they're strutting about, waving their arms, and making great protestations. But when the play is over, it's all a vapor.

How can we redeem the time? How can life be made to count beyond the moment? Moses considered this both personally and nationally for Israel. And in looking at the issue of sin, the issue of God's judgment during life especially, and the desire to be the recipient of God's mercy rather than God's discipline, and trying to look beyond this life. What is it that's important in life? This is the question that is proposed and answered for us in the next several chapters of Genesis.

We're embarking on a new section as we turn back now to our study in Genesis. The very end of chapter 11 is a transition from the story of the Tower of Babel and the Table of Nations that we have seen in the last few weeks through the genealogy of Shem down to the birth of Abram. Because we now find a shift in focus.

Really up to this point, the entire human race has been under consideration. The genealogies have treated all lines. You have the genealogy of Seth, but you also have the genealogy of Cain.

You have the genealogy of Shem, but you also have that of Ham and Japheth. And we treat the human race as a whole. It's small.

God's discipline falls on the entire human race. God's call falls on the entire human race. They're all treated as a unit.

Even when under the leadership probably of Nimrod, you have the virtually entire population of the world moving down to the plain of Shinar and building the Tower of Babel. God looks at the efforts of all of these individuals and comes down and frustrates their plans. So he has his eye, so to speak, and the focus of the narrative is on everybody in the human race.

From this point forward, however, we have the genesis, if you will, of the line of promise. And now we're not going to get the details of civilizations in other parts of Mesopotamia or Assyria or what will later be Asia Minor. Now the narrative is going to narrow its focus to what we often call the line of promise.

The patriarchal history is different in that respect because we're going to now only see the other parts of the human race as they come into contact with those that are chosen by God, those that are seeking relationship with God and responding to His call. And the others, there's no mention made of whether or not they have any interest in the things of God or whether they have any attention by God in terms of blessing or discipline. It is only as they come into contact with Abraham and his descendants that they return to the stage that we view here in Genesis.

So in that sense now, the human race has expanded. We have the table of nations, which indicates the neighbors and the distribution of all of these cousins and more distant relatives of the descendants of Shem and particularly of Abraham. Why is that? Why do we have the Tower of Babel story, for example, and the unity of everyone going down and building the tower in Babel and then God's particular... This is the last time God really effects a universal action.

He comes down and sees what the pretty much entire human race is up to at Babel and He turns it to confusion. From now on, we're going to see God dealing particularly with and through the line of promise, Abraham and his descendants culminating in the nation of Israel. And this, as we transition away from that section, also suggests to us another question.

Why is it, do you think? You remember the Tower of Babel story. You remember from the very beginning with Adam and Eve, God said, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And the violation of that idea, when man says we're going to stay in one place and make a name for ourselves, God says if they do this, nothing that they propose to themselves will be out of their reach.

They can do whatever they want to do. Why is it so necessary? This is a very profound and significant action that God takes in scattering mankind. Why is that important? Why not have everyone in one place? It would seem to be convenient for the purposes of observation and blessing and discipline and so on.

Why does God want mankind to be scattered? Why is it important enough for him to come down and confuse the languages and force man? He doesn't give man the option of staying together in a one government, one location operation. Why is that? It would seem to be much easier. Suppose that the Tower of Babel had not taken place and for nine generations you have the expansion and growth in this area of the plain.

Then by the time you get down to Terah and Abraham, you have God saying to Abram, get thee up from Shinar and from the city of Babel and get thee unto a land which I will show you. So Abraham packs up and leaves this den of iniquity so to speak and goes off and he won't have any problems when he goes down to the land because it's vacant. Everybody's living up in the plain of Shinar.

If you think about that, the answer begins to suggest itself. It's important that the power of evil not be concentrated in one place, that there not be a monolithic concentration that is difficult to break out from. By dividing something, you reduce its power.

And this is true in I think of the game of chess. If you want to prevail in chess and you're beyond the grade school level of playing chess, you know that there is a principle of isolating and then conquering a piece. If you want to capture your opponent's queen, you have to first of all trap it.

You have to get it off by itself, away from the covering power of the other pieces. And you take this all the way down to the pawn level. Sometimes you have to win the game pawn by pawn, piece by piece.

And in order to have the ability to capture a piece, you've got to separate it from the covering, protecting power of all of the other pieces. You have to be able to capture it in such a way that you come out ahead and you don't lose an equivalent amount of material when you do so. There is a principle that emerges from this observation.

Interestingly, it's important for these people, even though they are godless, to be scattered throughout the earth. It provides a context. It provides a bunch of neighbors, other people to interact with.

When Abraham ultimately goes to the land of Canaan, are there already people there? Yes, there are. There is the opportunity for commerce. There is the opportunity for alliance or for warfare.

There is the requirement to make decisions and to interact with those people. And in so doing, to manifest either faith or the lack thereof. There is interaction with these people.

If everybody is concentrated in the plain of Shinar, and they're all doing one thing, it's going to be exceedingly difficult for Abraham to leave because there's no infrastructure. There are no merchants or other people along the way. You're entirely on your own.

You're going out into a barren, uncultivated, unpopulated land, and you're in complete isolation from everyone else. If Abraham goes down there and has nothing but his own family, there is no context for his life. There is no interaction.

The opportunity for decisions is much less. So the dispersion of the human race does a couple of things. First of all, because we know that it fulfills God's desire and God's mandate, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

God wants the earth filled. He wants man scattered over the face of the earth. He doesn't want them all in one place.

What are the practical outworkings of that? Well, this is going to make a context for the

people of God to maneuver around in. There are going to be neighbors. There are going to be the sons of Heth to purchase land from.

There is going to be the nation of Egypt to go to in times of famine. There is going to be surrounding cultures and competing civilizations and so forth in which the people of God are going to circulate. And this is important.

They're not going to live their lives in a vacuum. And we know that this is important in the plan of God for believers in every generation of history. We don't pack up and go to a desert island someplace and live in a vacuum.

The Bible tells us that we are in the world. We face issues that come to us in the world. When Jesus Christ came, he didn't take his disciples out to the wilderness by the shores of the Jordan and live there and promote a Christianity or a religious life, a spiritual life, that says, come ye out and be ye separate and get thee away from everybody else and insulate and isolate yourself from the rest of the world.

Jesus circulated freely within cultures and within nations and even went outside of Israel to the far side of the Jordan, to the north of the Sea of Galilee, to the northern coasts up in Tyre and Sidon and so forth, and through Samaria and dealt with people other than even Israelites. And it's a reminder to us that the desire of God is for us to face contact with others in the world. This is part of the resistance, part of the fabric of life that gives us the opportunity for application and for faith.

And this has practical outworkings in the way we think about things that might at first glance seem to be unrelated. What about child raising? Do you want to find an environment for your children where they are insulated and isolated from the rest of the world? Do you want to create for them a germ-free bubble where they don't come in contact with any of the rest of the world? This is a place where we would meditate on what God has done in human history recorded in the Bible. He has never taken his people and insulated and isolated them from the rest of the world.

He has in fact scattered the human race throughout the world so that wherever you go you encounter them. And there's not a monolithic presence or polarity where the plain of Shinar is the evil place and the land of promise in Palestine is the land of blessing. It's not that simple.

It's not that clear cut. Wherever you go there are going to be these shades of grey. There are going to be nations where they are predominantly evil.

And yet you find Hittites and you find Canaanites and you find residents in Moab and in Jericho who despite their national origins choose for God. You find the mixed multitude that's going to come out of Egypt with the Israelites. But anywhere you go you're going to be faced with fellow human beings and therefore faced with decisions and

opportunities for application and for choice.

And this is a necessary part of God's plan. God doesn't put us in isolation. We don't get evacuated from planet earth at the point of our salvation.

It is necessary, even though people are evil, even though situations and circumstances that we encounter have bad components, it is obviously a part of God's plan that these situations exist throughout the world and that anywhere you go you're going to encounter them. So if you stop and meditate, why does God want the human race to fill the earth? Why does God see to it? He overrides human volition. He doesn't give man the ability to stay in one place.

This is an overruling action on God's part. And he ensures that the earth is filled and that men scatter. But watch for this as we go through the next several chapters of Genesis because we see in this transitional section at the end of chapter 11 the genealogy of Shem.

You have nine generations from Noah down to Abram. And in those nine generations and as a result of what happens at the plain of Shinar when God confuses the languages and scatters the human race into groups far and wide, that by the time of the call of Abram, interestingly Abram is not the son of Shem. You have these nine generations.

This gives an opportunity for the regions to be populated and for there to be an infrastructure of agriculture and cities, roadways, commerce, oases that have been built, wells that have been dug and so forth so that there is a context, there is a framework and a fabric for the life of Abram and his descendants. And this is a necessary part of the plan of God. And he is inevitably going to encounter these people and he is going to have some victories and some failures as he does so.

But this is the nature of life, the way God has designed it. We're supposed to encounter opposition. We are supposed to encounter decision points and choices.

God hasn't put us in a germ-free clean room to live our lives before him. It is necessary. It's a part of God's plan.

And it is one of the constants of the plan of God that we encounter things that might at first glance seem to be cursing and then watch the wonderful grace of God as he turns cursing to blessing. And those things that would seem to be pressures and opposition turn out to be those forces against which our faith exercises itself to stimulate our growth and our personal fulfillment of the call of God. So, a little transitional note there.

The necessity for what God does in the plan of Shinar becomes evident as we see the career of Abraham. As we pick up our study this morning, at the end of chapter 11, we saw that in verse 10 we had the genealogy of Shem given. We have Arphaxad and Salah, Eber, Peleg, Reu, Sirug, Nahor, Tira, and then Abram.

And as I've mentioned before, there is an obvious link. Adam is the father of three sons, Cain, Abel, and Seth. He, of course, stands at the beginning of a particular era of human history.

Noah is the father of three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. He is at the beginning of a particular era of human history. And then you have Tira, who is the father of three sons.

You have Abram, Nahor, and Haran in verse 26. And it is interesting that verse 27, which is really where the chapter break ought to be rather than after verse 32, this is the genealogy of Tira. Ele toledot is the Hebrew phrase that we find repeated many times in Genesis.

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth. These are the generations of Adam. These are the generations of... This is another one of those formulas that signal to us a break, a new section of the account and indeed of history in general.

So Tira begets Abram, Nahor, and Haran. That's repeated in verse 26 and verse 27. So you get the idea that we're getting the knuckles on the side of the head here.

Pay attention. You've got three sons coming from this man. This is a signal.

This is a flag saying, Okay, we've passed a milestone. We're moving into a new section. Then we have some interesting details here at the end of chapter 11.

This is the genealogy of Tira. This is where we begin this morning. Tira begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

Haran begot Lot. We know just from our previous experience that Lot figures prominently in the subsequent story of Abram. So we find out something about him.

He is introduced early on. You see this happen a lot when you watch a movie or read a book. We're conditioned.

There are certain rules. Hollywood used to have a set of rules that have changed somewhat, but back in the old westerns you could tell by the color of someone's hat sort of what camp they were going to be in. There are certain unwritten expectations that we have when we watch a movie.

If you see someone commit a really heinous wrong, they abuse a child or they mistreat a woman or whatever, in the standard, and there are movies that violate this, but generally speaking you know that somewhere later in the movie this person is going to really pay for that mistreatment. They're not going to come out and survive and the hero be killed at the end. They're going to get their comeuppance.

They're going to die some horrible death. Well, we know and we are sensible to some of these rules. When you're reading a story or watching a movie and you see certain

characters introduced, you have the feeling that you're going to see this person again.

This is not an accident. It's not a loose end that's introduced and then it's never brought back into the fabric of the story. So this simple statement here at the end of verse 27, Haran begot Lot, we think, hmm, this is significant.

And of course because of our familiarity we know that it's very significant. But we find out why here in the next few verses. Haran died before his father Tira.

This means in front of or actually it literally means on the surface of, which it doesn't mean before in the sense of chronology. He died before his father did. It means he died, his father observed it.

It was like coming before the Lord idea. This was something that was a big issue in Tira's mind. Here his son, in all likelihood his eldest son, the scion of the family, the heir apparent, died before his father Tira in his native land in Ur of the Chaldeans.

Ur, if you have a map in your Bible that shows this, if you go to the back of your Bible and look at the first few maps, Israel in the time of the patriarchs or some such thing, hopefully you have a map that will show the relationship. I have in the back of my Bible map one is the nations of Genesis 10. And it shows the distribution, and I also gave this to you as a handout a few weeks ago that indicated in the table of nations where these various descendants of Noah settled.

And you may or may not have a map that shows the location of Ur and of Haran, but many people, we have become familiar with the geography of this region, the physical geography through the Gulf War and the various ongoing conflicts and so forth over in the Middle East. But you know in the Middle East where the Mediterranean Sea is. You've got Italy and Greece and Asia Minor and so forth up to the north and northeast of that sea.

And you know that you've got the land of Canaan and you've got Iraq and Iran and so forth in there. And then as you travel due east from the southern coast, from the northern coast of Egypt, the southern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, if you go straight east you eventually hit another body of water, the Persian Gulf. With that in mind, if you can imagine traveling west and a little bit north from the Persian Gulf, from the northern extremity of the Persian Gulf, if you go just not very far you find the historic location of Ur.

Ur is actually in what we would call today southern Iraq. It is not all of that far from Babylon, which is straight northwest. If you draw a line from the northern or the northwestern corner of the Persian Gulf, if you draw a line pointing northwest, halfway between north and west, just draw that line.

On that line, close to the Persian Gulf, you will find Ur. Quite a ways further up from that,

on that same line, following more or less the path of the Euphrates River, you will find Babylon. And at the extremity of that line, where it has its closest point of approach to the Mediterranean Sea, you'll find Heran.

These three cities lie more or less on a line that generally follows the Euphrates River for quite a ways, or bisects the land that is bordered by the Euphrates and the Tigris. So, you have Ur and Babylon just on the southern side of the Euphrates River. Heran is north of the Euphrates and south of the origins of the Tigris.

So, if Tira, with his family, is leaving Ur, and this of the Chaldees is a note that was made later, obviously there weren't any Chaldeans, because there was no Chaldea in these early days, but this is a reference for later readers to understand the region. There are a couple of different sites that are called Ur or Urartu and so forth in the early region. So, to clarify for later people, in the same way that we're saying Babylon and Ur are in modern day Iraq, they're saying this is Ur that is now in the Chaldean region.

But, of course, there weren't any Chaldeans there. But Ur of the Chaldeans tells us that this is the Ur that's close to the Persian Gulf. But this trek of Tira and his family is going to more or less follow the path of the Euphrates River up past Babylon to the northern extremities of the Euphrates River.

There's a town called Mari, where we found a lot of ancient Mesopotamian records and clay tablets that give us some insight into the roots of the Hebrew language and so forth. And then on north and slightly west, we find Haran, and this is where Tira and his family travel. Throughout this region, if you want to take the time to dig through the archaeological evidence, many of the names, in fact, most of the names that you find in the genealogies of Genesis turn out to be place names or turn up as either personal names or place names in historical records.

These ancient clay tablets from Nuzi and Mari, from Ebla, from many of the other ancient libraries that have been excavated, they translate these cuneiform things and they find, well, Abram was a fairly common name, Mahor and Tira, and many of these other names turn up in these ancient records. For many, many centuries, it was unknown whether there was any record of these things outside the Bible, but modern archaeology has turned these up. A lot of the wags who used to say, well, this is just Hebrew mythology have been put to silence, of course, mostly long after their death, by archaeology that has turned up the fact that these are, in fact, real places evidently named after real people.

So, once again, if it needed it, which it doesn't, the Bible, the biblical record is vindicated. Returning now to our record here at the end of chapter 11, it tells us that Haran died before his father Tira in his native land in Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took wives.

The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milca, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milca, and the father of Isca. This tells us a couple of things. First of all, Haran, who died, had a daughter named Milca.

So, Nahor marries his niece. He marries his brother's daughter. You've got three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

Haran has a daughter, Milca. She marries her uncle, Nahor. We also know from later instances in Genesis, it's not specifically mentioned here, but Sarah is also a daughter of Tira.

She doesn't have the same mother that Abram has, but Abram and Sarah are both children of Tira. So, they are half-siblings. Sarah is Abram's half-sister.

This reminds us that in the early days of civilization, even here nine generations after the Flood, intermarriage is okay. Later on in the Levitical law, marrying one's half-sister is prohibited, and intermarriage of close relatives is unthinkable under the Levitical code. But in these early days, it is not yet a problem.

In fact, it was a necessity in many ways. But it also tells us that this family was close-knit and could not find compatibility in the surrounding neighbors. Whoever their neighbors, their friends, their social circle in Ur, they didn't find anyone there of like mind to marry into.

They're taking their wives from within their own clan and indeed from within their own family. And it tells us that they saw themselves as distinct and different from their culture. One of the things that we've learned from archaeology is that both Ur and Haran were big centers of lunar worship.

In fact, the names here, if you trace their Mesopotamian roots, are references to the moon god and to the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia that talked about the moon god marrying and having a daughter. Some of these names, even within the family of Tira, are taken from, for example, Sara's name is the name of a daughter of the moon god, and Milka is the name of the wife of the moon god. So you have these derived names and you see the emergence of the family of Tira out of this culture and society that is all focused on moon worship.

This, of course, is a holdover from what began in the plain of Shinar with the construction of the ziggurat, which was designed for astrological worship and is oriented to the stars. It has its head up in the heavens. It's a place of observation and a desire to obtain truth from a source other than God.

And his revealed word and his revealed plan. And so even after the scattering, this idea of independence from God and the desire to engage in pagan worship is prevalent. And Tira, to his credit, gets himself up out of Ur and he goes to Haran.

Because we find here many of these details. It tells us about the wives in verse 29. We don't know any more about Iska.

She's mentioned here and what that means. She doesn't turn up again. We don't know if there's an indication that this is Lot's wife.

This would be Lot marrying his own sister. But there's no way to tell anything about Iska, although hers is another name that's associated with the culture and the region there. But in verse 31, Tira took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife.

And they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan. And they came to Haran and dwelt there. Now if you think about that geography I gave you a minute ago, you've got the Mediterranean Sea.

If you're looking at a piece of paper thinking about this or you're looking at a map, you've got the Mediterranean Sea on your left. You've got the Persian Gulf on the right. You know that Ur is over here roughly due east of the Mediterranean Sea, just north and a little west of the Persian Gulf.

And you've got Haran way up north, up the path of the Euphrates River, and then even north of that. So Tira says, okay, we're going to pack up, we're going to leave Ur, and we're going to go to the land of Canaan, which is due west. He said, okay, well, there's some pretty barren wilderness between there, so maybe he wants to follow the river and he's going to go up.

It's going to be an inverted V. It's going to be like a private's chevron. An inverted V. He's going to go up, follow the Euphrates, and then he's going to cut back down the coast of the Mediterranean and come to the land of Canaan. So Tira says, okay, let's all pack up.

We're going to leave Ur. We're going to go to the land of Canaan. So he gets up and he makes the right-hand leg of the upside-down V and he gets up to Haran, but then he stops.

He says we're going to the land of Canaan, but he never goes. He stays in Haran, and it says they came to Haran and dwelt there. So he doesn't finish the southwestern leg of the journey.

Something distracts him in Haran. Maybe he's tired of traveling. Maybe he really likes things in Haran.

But Haran is just like Ur. It's another big center of moon worship. It's just like what he came from, but it's different.

So he's traveled up there and he stops, and he stays there. And it tells us in verse 32

that the days of Tira were 205 years, and Tira died in Haran. This is a subtle but powerful indictment of Tira.

You get the idea from this. Tira could have been Abram. Could have been Abraham.

You get the idea that if he had completed his purpose and gone to the land of Canaan, he would have been the one whose title goes to the descendants. All the Israelites claim Abraham as their father. How come they don't claim Tira as their father? He got up out of Ur, but he only makes it halfway.

Why is that? What happened with Tira? And why is it that Abraham is going to receive the call in chapter 12, verse 1? We're going to pause here and take our break, and when we come back, we'll investigate that.