

Part 11: Spot the Difference

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I saw a surprising statistic the other day. A group of researchers produced a study of the 180 largest cities in the states. They used the most recent data from the census, and other markers of economic and emotional wellbeing to identify, “The Happiest City in the Country.”

Missoula was #56. But, hidden in that data was one category that shocked me. Missoula was #1 in the nation for suicide rate.

We live in one of the most beautiful spots in the country. We champion diversity and acceptance, and people pay more money to take jobs in Missoula that pay less for the sole purpose of enjoying where we live. But we still have a problem, don’t we?

You might be able to buy property in paradise, you might be able to insulate yourself from what you fear, you might build the career, the family and the peace you want—and yet, life still hurts.

This is why the book of Genesis is so helpful for us. As Noah and his family got off the ark and moved into God’s newly redeemed world—problems and people abounded—but in the midst of it, so too does God’s promise.

Our passage today acts kind of like a “Where’s Waldo?” book. Do you remember those? They were books with printed scenes of people and activity all over. Your job was to look closely at everything going on and find this one guy who looks like a bank-robbing Santa. It’s hard to see him, he almost blends in, but if you’re able to spot the differences—you’ll find him.

That’s the title of our sermon today: “Spot the difference.” There’s a lot going on in our world. There’s a lot that’s good, and there’s a lot that hurts. And everyone has an opinion on what kind of good it’s going to take to solve the pain we all face. But if we can’t learn to spot the difference between God’s promise and the world’s promise—we’ll never escape the same frustration and pain of always looking and never finding.

Our passage today highlights life’s difficulties so that we might see the one difference that really matters. Our main idea today is this: **Life’s many problems point toward the one promise of life.**

Our text today works outward in hope. It tracks the problem and promise in our own heart, the problem and promise in our community, and the problem and promise for the whole world. These are the three spheres we will examine today: **Our Hearts, Our Homes** and the **Whole World**.

Last week we saw how after the flood, the physical world was Eden recreated. All sinful flesh was wiped out, the land had begun to bear fruit again, the sun and the rain marked God’s promise and God’s provision—paradise seemed to be back on the menu.

Things were great—until they weren’t. What went wrong? Well Moses draws our attention right to it: **Genesis 9:18-20**, “The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Ham

was the father of Canaan.) These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed. Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard."

In Genesis 1, God created a perfect world and placed Adam into it. Here, God redeemed the perfect world and called Noah and his family off the boat into it. We might hope that we found Waldo at this point—here's the guy that looked like Adam—but might do better. Just like Adam, he's a man of the soil, or in Hebrew, "Adamah." The new Adam, in the new world? With baited breath—we watch to see if things are finally different.

And while it looks like paradise, there's one important difference. This is our first point: **Our Heart.**

But this new world has the same problem. And it's not a garden issue. It's a heart issue. The serpent's venom runs deep. Noah's not different enough. For just as Adam took and ate of the fruit—look at what Noah did: **Genesis 9:21**, "He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent."

After the bloodshed of World War I, an influential British newspaper called on well-respected philosophers and theologians to write an article answering this question: "What is wrong with the world?"

One pastor responded with his article which I will read in full: "Dear sirs. I am. (Yours sincerely, G.K. Chesterton)."

A perfect world couldn't perfect Noah's heart. The difference we need is not just a new and perfect world; it's a new and perfect heart. And if this passage teaches us one thing it is there's no amount of perfection outside of us that can solve the problems we have in our own hearts.

The world was good, the garden was good, the vine was good, the wine was good—but whether accidentally or intentionally—Noah's heart wasn't.

I want you to think of the things that frustrate and irritate you most in life—and I want you to honestly in your own heart answer this question: "What would make things different?"

My guess is most of our answers involve weapons of mass destruction. While we might not think of it this way, we, subtly, believe a nuclear holocaust would be the best thing for us. The things that irritate us, the things that cause us to be frustrated, the things that turn you into the person you don't want to be are all those things outside of us.

But if we could just find a bunker, invite in a few friends that we like, and nuke everyone and everything else—we'd be good. We'd get rid of those "others" who are always in competition with us. We'd get first pick of where we live, a marketplace open for the taking, a world built the way we want it.

We would finally make the difference we've been waiting for. If we could eliminate those people, ideas, or irritants who get in our way—we really could recreate paradise. We spend our affections, our finances, and our time trying to recreate Eden by eliminating external problems one at a time.

But it didn't get any more perfect than Eden, and it's not getting any more perfect than what Noah walked out into. If you think a perfect world will make the difference you've always wanted—you'll never be satisfied.

For one, it's impossible. I think it's an ironic interpretation of data where the 56th happiest country in the nation can also be the highest in suicide rate. Perfect the world on the outside, but at some point, that heart on the inside is going to die. We can't just close our eyes to that reality.

But second, it's incomplete. The problems in our world are real—but the outside world isn't the sole cause and therefore cannot be the cure.

Remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees who managed to create the façade of perfection on the outside: He says, **Matthew 15:10**, "Hear and understand: It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person," **Matthew 15:18**, "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person."

What comes out of the mouth, and what came out of the boat indicates our problem. We need new hearts. But we don't need a different God for this to happen! God just brings about this renewal in a different way—not from the outside in, but from the inside out: **Ezekiel 36:26-27**, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

Well, where does God promise to do this? The author of Hebrews tells us. He says, because of what Jesus did on the cross, **Hebrews 10:22**, "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

Faith washes our hearts. Faith in Jesus is a heart cleansed by his blood. And when the world around us seems less than perfect, and when our own hearts act in ways that are less than perfect—we are to run to Jesus and find paradise in him. That's the difference you need to see.

And you'll need to see it often. Because you're not alone. This is our next point: the problems and promise in **Our Homes**.

The story of Genesis explains why so many of us view relationships and community as the place of our redemption and restoration. Adam and Eve's hope was in their offspring—and it's that hope that drives us to seek family, friendship and intimacy for ourselves. But sin is not just within our own hearts—it's also in our homes and our communities.

Look at what happens next: **Genesis 9:22-29**, "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 on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, 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; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers." He also said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant." After the flood Noah lived 350 years. All the days of Noah were 950 years, and he died."

Just as sickness is more contagious than good health, so sin spreads quickly and painfully in our relationships. Did you see that progression here: Noah was the only one who got drunk, but Noah's sin provoked Ham (his youngest) to sin, and Ham's sin introduced tension between him and his father and him and his brothers.

What made Ham's sin so serious? I mean, if we're honest, we probably laughed ourselves at what we read. But my guess is those who laugh have never seen with sober eyes the shame and the pain of someone who sinned like Noah.

Noah was drunk, he was shamefully exposed, he acted foolishly—and Ham saw it and laughed, and told his brothers so they might enjoy dad's shame as well. The danger of sin is that you don't have to be drunk to be blind about sin in the lives of others. Brothers and sisters, what do you laugh at? What level of nakedness are you content to see and think nothing of?

Notice the righteous response of Shem and Japheth. They move towards him with a weighty awareness of his sin, a careful desire to not add shame to the sin, and a desire to cover up Noah's nakedness.

Don't let sin stain the way you view suffering in others. Drunkenness might cause someone to act silly—but it's not silly. Nudity might seem sensual and acceptable, but in a sinful world it always leads to objectification, manipulation, and vulnerability.

Sin causes us to value our safety, our pleasure and our entertainment over the human suffering of those who are enslaved to sin's dehumanizing force.

If your hope in your home is that your spouse or your kids will never sin against you, you'll be disappointed. You can't build perfection in Eden, and you can't build it in your community either. If your hope is that you'll never sin against anyone—you'll be disappointed too.

But notice how the same home which compounded sin and shame was also the place where loving care and gracious compassion dwells. This is what the local church and the family of God should be.

Spurgeon once lamented that he never found a perfect church. Then he said, "And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us."

We want the church to be a community who moves towards sinners with seriousness, with sobriety, and with the cloak of God's grace. It's easier to not go into Noah's room. It's easier to walk away and enjoy laughter's false comfort when you do see sin. But true brothers and sisters, true sons and daughters move towards the mess with grace.

Why? Because we know our hope isn't in the community being perfect. But we have a perfect hope for those who are still a work in progress. We don't need to close our eyes and act like things are fine—but the gospel opens our eyes to the needs of others and moves us into difficult places with tender hearts and a strong gospel.

What should that look like here? It should show us the way in which our homes and our relationships might find true hope: **Galatians 6:1-2**, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are

spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Life is messy. Homes and relationships are difficult and often strained—but there's one community that responds differently and that's the church. When Jesus has covered our sins, we can help others know where their mess can be covered and cared for as well.

But now, we need to step back into this story at hand. Because when Noah woke up and realized what had happened, he prayed that three things might happen regarding his sons.

First, Noah asked that God curse Canaan. Just as Noah's youngest son brought shame on him—Noah's curse is that Ham's youngest son would cause him to feel the weight of sin. This would happen by Ham's line, through Canaan, having a third spot among his brothers—he would be their servant. The one who refused to serve would serve.

Second, Noah asks God to enlarge Japheth's line—and asks that Japheth would dwell in the tents of Shem.

And lastly, Shem receives what seems to be a blessing. That line of promise that went from Adam's offspring to Seth, to Noah, it continues here with Shem. The promise and blessing of redemption are uniquely wrapped up in Shem. His hope is different. But notice why it's different.

Shem and Japheth both responded differently than Ham. But the blessing Shem received wasn't because he acted differently. Noah's blessing was not simply because of what Shem did—it's based on who Shem's God is: Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem.

Righteous actions matter—but righteous actions are always downstream of righteous hope. Shem did the right thing—because he had a right view of God. And that righteous, blessed God, was continuing to keep his promise even as sin grew messier. Because of a brother who covered up sin—promise remained.

This is important for us to understand this text. This is what leads us to our final point this morning: the different place of hope for **The Whole World**.

This family story we just read drives us to what follows. It gives us a theological framework to understand the three genealogies that Moses now gives. This genealogy is often called the "Table of Nations," because it tracks how these three brothers populated the whole of the world.

And we now watch this play out because we understand the theological connection between these three. Noah's prayer is the framework we need to see how God filled the whole world.

Notice that emphasis: Moses begins with Japheth's line and concludes with this, **Genesis 10:5**, "From these the coastland peoples spread in their lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations."

Ham's line begins verse 6 which concludes with this: **Genesis 10:20**, "These are the sons of Ham, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations."

And then in verse 21 we read of Shem's line which concludes with this: **Genesis 10:31-32**, "These are the sons of Shem, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations. These are the clans of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, in their nations, and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood."

Whatever problems were in Noah's heart were in Noah's family, and whatever just happened in Noah's family has now become a global issues. Noah's problem, Shem, Japheth and Ham's problem has now become a global problem. But Noah's hope, Shem, Japheth and Ham's hope, has now become a global hope.

This connection changes how we view the whole of humanity in three ways.

First, this world is filled with a lot of people—but it's all part of one family. Every nation that exists, every culture we encounter, every language that is spoken can trace its origin back to this one guy and these three brothers. The diversity of humanity is meant to remind us of the innate unity of humanity. We do not merely belong to one particular race—we belong to a particular family. All people are made in the image of God and all people are from this line that stretches from Adam, to Noah, and these three sons.

Second, these various nations and people groups present a lot of problems to us—but all the problems of human conflict draw from one source: sin. Ham's rejection of his father was ultimately a rejection of God's command and design. And because of Ham's rejection of God—his line was placed in conflict with the lines of his two brothers.

If you have your Bible open, look at Ham's genealogy in verses 6-20. Remember, Moses is writing this book to the Israelites who sit on the banks of the Jordan River having been delivered out of Egypt. But if you'll notice—Egypt is one of Ham's children. Moreover, they are looking into the Promised Land that God is bringing them to—but that Promised Land is full of the Canaanites, and those various nations are all the offspring of Ham's son Canaan. Even more than that, the enemies Israel will face in the future: the Philistines, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians—all of those nations find their heritage in Ham's family line.

There are many people who have used this passage of scripture to justify the enslavement of those who belong to Ham's line. But those who do so have failed miserably in reading the Bible. Because what Moses just laid out for us is that all our various races and ethnicities also remind us of our universal brotherhood. We still wrestle with racism today not because races exist. We still struggle with racism today because sin still exists. And it was Ham's sin, carried out generationally, which lead his family to be the nations who most openly rejected God.

When our hearts are in conflict with God—we will always be in conflict with those around us. But this is a heart condition—not a skin condition. We know this because Noah shows us this. We know this because Ham, Shem and Japheth were all the same. And we know this because sin is not confined to one people group. All of us have sinned. All of us have opposed God. All of us stand under the curse of

God. If you want unity in the world—if you want to celebrate diversity—you’ve got to point to the world to the source of all of our sins, racism and prejudice included. You’ve got to get people back to God.

Here’s why this is so needed today. If you are alive today, you’re part of this table. This is your history. Which means these problems are your problems. And there’s a lot of them. You’ve got issues in your own heart. You’ve got issues in your own home and relationships. Not to mention you’ve got issues with people you’ve never even met. Which means you’ve got a lot of problems.

And while we should address a lot of those problems—Shem laid a cloak and met a real need, and so should we—we need to realize that if you have a problem, then whoever you are in this list, wherever you are in this list—you can spot the promise.

Did you see it? The tent of Shem. Blessed is the Lord of Shem. And look at **Genesis 9:27**, Japheth, I’ve got good news for you buddy. You can find shelter there too. Canaan, you wicked and blood thirsty brother, guess what? Don’t forget what we read last week—God’s promise to Noah was to him and to his sons. You’re still a son. That promise still stands. And whatever problems you might have, however far off you might be—there’s a way back.

Remember Egypt? Remember Nimrod and Assyria? Look at what was prophesied in **Isaiah 19:23-24**, “In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.”

God was going to call everyone back. Even Shem, who had a son named Eber, which is where we get the term Hebrews—he would need called back. The whole nation of Israel would one day fall away and be removed from the land—but the blessed God of Shem would keep his word.

Because one day, Luke gives us another genealogy. And he tells us about the first son of God, Adam, and how eventually Adam’s line got to Noah, and how Noah’s line went to Shem, and how Shem’s line went to Eber, and how Eber’s line went through Peleg and how Peleg’s line went through Judah, and Judah’s line through David, and David’s line through a guy named Jesus.

And just as Shem covered Noah’s nakedness, Noah’s greater son would cover his sin entirely. Jesus’ robe of righteousness covered Noah. Jesus’ tent is the tent of blessing and guess what Japheth, you can come. Guess what Egypt, guess what Canaan, you can come too. Here’s the shelter you need. Here’s the different way to view the hope of the world. Here’s the one promise which is good for anyone who comes—any tongue, any tribe, any nation.

Any erring brother, any wounded heart, any grieving father, any wayward sister, any blood-stained murderer, any Muslim, any American, any Mormon, any Black, anyone one who comes to this one man by faith—you have found the promise that gives life. You’ve got a lot of problems—but here’s the one promise that gives life to any who come to him.

How do we apply this passage this morning?

First, you can realize that as good as this world can get, as wonderful as relationships can be, as big as our human power is—it cannot save you from sin or death. But this Jesus guy can, and you can find your refuge in him right now. There's no problem bigger than Jesus' promise. It is for all and any who come to him by faith.

Second, if that message saves you regardless of where you are, where you stood, what language you spoke, your economic background, your social standing, or your relational status you can bet it will save others too. Lift up Jesus broadly and openly. Realize that you have the promise this world needs to see—tell them of it.