

Real Security and the Call of God

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristchurchEastBay.org. Good morning, I'm Melissa Arosuniega and I'm part of the El Cerrito Kensington Community Group and Oikos Group and the Deacon.

Today's scripture reading is from the book of Genesis, chapter 11, verses 1-9, and chapter 12, verses 1-9, as printed in your liturgy. A reading from the book of Genesis.

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.

They used brick instead of stone and tar for mortar. Then they said, come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves.

[1 : 1 9] Otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth. But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, if as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.

Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth and they stopped building the city.

That is why it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

The Lord had said to Abram, go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you, I will curse.

[2 : 3 2] And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. So Abram went as the Lord had told him and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he set out from Haran.

He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated, and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan.

And they arrived there. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moray at Shechem. At that time, the Canaanites were in the land.

The Lord appeared to Abram and said, To your offspring I will give this land. So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.

From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and I on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.

[3 : 38] Then Abram set out and continued toward Negev. The grass withers and the flowers fade. The Lord of our God stands to our Lord. Good morning Christ Church.

We have these flowers here from our memorial service yesterday for Will Muller, where we celebrated his life and the precious gift that he was to us. And that also means that this is my second day in a row of preaching.

So I need your help a little more than usual. So if you're here this morning, just kind of give me an eyebrow raised or something like that. More than your typical, hmm.

Okay? We're exploring this first part of the first book of the Bible. And we just heard this word in Genesis 11, 8.

So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth and they stopped building the city. And, you know, the initial question is, is God against cities? Is God anti-urban?

[4 : 39] Is he pro-agrarian? And I won't repeat everything we said over the past few weeks, but we'll just say that God created us to live in cities. And that all this stuff you see in these first 11 verses of Genesis 11, with people moving closer together to consolidate the social order, people building city walls to protect the vulnerable and the poor from harm and injustice, people pooling their diverse talents for creative potential, people using language to cooperate and to draw out all the riches of nature and of the soul for both the sciences and the arts, people dividing up their labor to build civilization.

All of that is good. All of that is part of what God intended for his good creation. And God intended cities to be a place where we would collectively reach up to heaven, where we would look for a spiritual center, where we would seek an elevated reality beyond just ourselves.

All that is what our creator God intended from the very beginning. But there's something amiss, right? There's something off kilter here in this story.

And so we want to ask ourselves, what's fundamentally flawed in this city? And what is God's solution for our most basic human problems? And so we want to look at three things.

Surprise, surprise. We want to look at Humanities Babel Project, God's Blessing Project, and Living by the Promises of God. Humanities Babel Project, God's Blessing Project, and Living by the Promises of God.

[6 : 24] You with me? I told you I need your help today. Okay. So Humanities Babel Project, verse 4, says this, that they said, Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.

This tower is actually a ziggurat. It reaches up to the clouds, up to the stars. It's got a shrine at the very top, and it's got this giant staircase coming down from the top.

And it's meant to be a bridge between heaven and earth. It's designed by its builders to make it easier for God, to make it more convenient for God to come down, as if this city and these people can somehow help God be God.

And what we see already is there's this transactional relationship where we're here to help you, God, and you, God, are there to help us, protect us, make us prosper. This is not only a bridge to heaven, but it's also a beachhead.

Right? It's a beachhead for this kind of covert assault on God. We don't want to make a city so that his name will be great.

[7 : 37] We want to make a city so that our name will be great. The strength of our unity is our language. The symbol of our unity is our tower, and we are going to unite together to make a name for ourselves, to seek an identity and a significance independently apart from God.

And we've seen this already. This is a replay of Genesis chapter 3. Remember we talked there about the creator-creature distinction where God is authoritative and he's independent, and we as creatures are derivative and we're dependent.

And yet there in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve said, we don't want to abide by this creator-creature distinction. We want to assert our own autonomous, self-made, self-defined identity.

We want to be the masters of our fate and the captains of our soul without depending on the one who gives us life and breath and everything else. And that's what's happening here, again, in the city on a grander scale.

We're going to satisfy our material and spiritual aspirations independently apart from God. Our language, our ingenuity, our technology, all these good gifts from God, we're going to use these to make a name, make a significance apart from God in our collective achievements.

[8 : 56] And it's kind of confusing because the tower looks religious, you know, and they're pursuing it with a religious kind of zeal, but actually it's a symbol of their own self-centeredness, that we're going to use God, we're going to use the gifts of God to make us great.

We don't really care about God himself. We don't want to glorify God. We want to glorify ourselves. This is a city that's not centered on God. It's centered on the collective self.

And you can really see that in the tallest and highest buildings in any city today, right? They're monuments to our human power, monuments to our money, monuments to our success, monuments to our technology and our reason and our intellect and our science.

We, after all, can split atoms and we can launch rockets into space and we can edit genes and we can create artificial intelligence and we can live by DoorDash.

So who needs God? Who needs to live by his rule and his authority? We can be our own lords and our own saviors. You know, and all the Babel projects from the ancient city to modern cities say, we don't need the rule of heaven.

[10 : 13] We can live without God at the center and we'll be okay. And in verse 5 it says this, The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the people were building.

The irony is that the builders of this tower are so proud that it reaches up to heaven, but God can hardly see it, right? And we know God is capable of perceiving what people are doing without having to reposition himself.

But he intentionally parodies their heaven-storming aspirations by bending down, right? To see the thimble-like grandeur of their puny and pathetic power to preserve their own identity and control their own fortunes and glorify themselves.

And verse 6 says, In other words, If they keep infringing on my divine sphere, if they keep transgressing into the place where only I deserve to be, if they keep putting themselves in my place, living as if I'm unnecessary, living as if they can achieve stability and durability independently from me, as if nothing can shake them, as if nothing can destroy them, then there will be absolutely no end to their arrogant schemes.

They're not going to respect any of the God-given boundaries that I've built into my creation, and they're not just going to try to build a city, they're going to try to build an entire empire in which the Creator is excluded from His very own creation.

[11 : 52] And so, verse 7, That word Babel in Mesopotamia meant the gate of the gods.

But now in Hebrew it means the city of the confused. Right? The metropolis of the mixed up. They sought to make a name for themselves apart from God, and the result is that they now have this infamous name that's the exact opposite of their desires, which is what Jesus taught.

He said, Anyone who exalts themselves is going to be humbled. Well, how do we apply this to our own lives? Application number one is on a corporate and collective level, God's judgment here is not a spiteful move to keep humans divided and dumb.

Rather, this half-built, unfinished, incomplete tower and its dispersed builders show us the power of God's grace who will not allow human autonomy to go unchecked.

But rather, in His grace, He restrains the damage that our human autonomy will cause. And He comes to limit the extent to which human beings will harden themselves against Him.

[13 : 24] And so if God frustrated the human schemes in Babel, how do you think He might be at work in the frustrations and failures of our culture right now?

The weakening of our institutions, the fraying of our social fabric, the polarization of our perspectives, the erosion of our trust, the rising tide of global populism and authoritarianism, the increase of political violence, do we think that God might somehow be at the back of it all allowing us to be disabused of our stability, to be shaken up so that we might be a people who more seriously seek after His name and glorify His name rather than seeking to glorify and make a name for ourselves?

That's application number one. Application number two is that on an individual and a personal level, if you're here today and you've mapped out your future life, you've mapped out how your career's supposed to go, how your plans ought to be, and all the relationships in your life, ask yourself this question, is this plan made under God?

Or is it made apart from God? Because if you plan your life without God at the center, without seeking His blessing, He will, in His grace, allow it to be frustrated.

He'll allow it to come to nothing because He loves you so much. He wants to protect you from you. He knows that you cannot live without Him.

[15 : 07] This is what the Babel Project is all about. It's a foolish errand. It's absurd. So it's interesting to me that God saw fit to put Genesis 11 and Genesis 12 right next to each other, juxtaposing them so that we could compare and contrast humanity's Babel Project with God's blessing project.

God's blessing project in Genesis 12. You see, in the first three, two chapters of Scripture, Genesis 1 and 2, we see God's good creation but then from Genesis 3 and on to Genesis 11, that good creation's fallen into this downward spiral of sin and death and judgment.

And the question at this point is, if the nations have lost their way, then how will God shine His light on us? How will He provide a way of salvation for us? Genesis 12 comes along and Genesis 12 is a new beginning.

Genesis 12 says, For God so loved the world that He gave Abraham. For God so loved the world that He gave Israel. And this is God's counter-initiative to our Babel Project.

And here's what it says in Genesis 12, 1. It says, The Lord had said to Abram, Go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land. I will show you. I will make you into a great nation.

[16 : 31] And I will bless you. I will make your name great. And you will be a blessing. See, Babel's desire to make a name for themselves is in diametric contrast to God's promise to Abraham because only God can give an everlasting name.

Only God is the source and the center of life. And only He gives us a name so that we will glorify His name and not ourselves and our own achievements.

So who is this person that God chooses to bless? Who is Abram? Well, just to trace a line from Genesis 4 last week, we learned about Seth and Enosh and their family line which began to call upon the name of the Lord and through that family line, the knowledge of God was to be preserved among humanity all the way to Abraham's family line.

This was the one ray of hope in a world that was mired in oppression and violence. But if you look at right before Genesis 12, it's very interesting that when God calls Abraham, His family is actually living in a center of lunar worship.

And Abraham's father's name means moon. Right? So the one family that's supposed to be preserving the knowledge of the true God is no longer worshiping the Creator.

[17 : 55] God is worshiping the creation. And by the end of Genesis 11, the last flickering candle of humanity has just gone out. Right? Abraham is lost spiritually.

His wife, Abraham, or his wife Sarah is barren physically. And the human situation is really quite hopeless. And it's at a dead end.

And there's no human power that can bring a change to the violent world in which we're living. But God, but the Creator God who spoke in Genesis 1 and said, let there be light, He's the same Redeemer God who speaks in Genesis 12 and says, Abraham, I'm going to bless you.

The Word of the Lord comes and it creates hope. It creates life. The Word of the Lord calls into existence things that are not. And what this shows us is that Abraham is utterly dependent on God for blessing.

Right? The blessing of God is not something that Abraham initiates. It's not something that he goes to get. It's not something that he takes for himself. But rather, it's something that God gives by His grace.

[19 : 08] Right? Because Abraham's not even looking for it. Abraham's not qualified. He's from an idol-worshiping family. He's compromised. He's paganized.

He's bowing down to all the wrong things. But God in His grace comes and He says, I'm going to bless you and I'm going to make your name great. We have a slide, I think. And what it seeks to show is that our culture operates according to this in-shaped dynamic where we perform and God rewards us.

We offer gifts to God and God responds with blessing. So performance leads to reward. That's the default mode of our culture. But Genesis 12 and really the whole Bible operates according to a U-shaped dynamic.

We can go to the next slide where God gives us grace even though we don't deserve it. God is not waiting for Abraham to change. He's not waiting for him to come up to scratch.

He just blesses him. He just gives him grace which he presumes will lead to gratitude. He just gives him blessing which he assumes will lead to response. And what exactly does God promise Abraham?

[20 : 20] Well, four things. You guys with me? Alright, four things. He promises a people. Verse 2, he says, I will make you a great nation and I will bless you.

And to bless someone, to bless a person means that you give them the power of life, you give them the enrichment of life, you give them the increase of life. And of course, Abraham has no kids.

He's 75 years old. His wife, Sarah, is barren. And God says to him, I'm going to give you a miracle child. I'm going to give you an offspring. I'm going to give you descendants. I'm going to give you grandchildren and great-grandchildren and extended family and tribes and a nation that's blessed with life.

Well, where are all those people going to live? And that's the second thing is God promises a place. In verse 1, he says, go to the land I will show you. In verse 7, he says, to your offspring I will give this land.

I'm going to give you the land of Canaan, the promised land. Your offspring, you're going to live in this land that's flowing with milk and honey. The great nation that comes from you, childless Abraham, is going to live at this crossroads between the most powerful civilizations of the ancient Near East.

[21 : 33] And how will that happen? How will this promised people live and survive in this promised place? Well, the third thing is God promises protection. In verses 2 and 3, he says, I will make your name great and you will be a blessing and whoever blesses you, I will bless.

And then this next part doesn't really come through in the English, but the Hebrew says basically, whoever deals lightly with you, whoever dismisses or disparages you, whoever holds you in contempt, whoever seeks to harm you will be removed from my blessings, will have their life diminished.

I will curse them. So God is saying to Abraham, I'm going to sovereignly protect you, I'm going to actively intervene for your welfare so that you can be confident, so that you can walk unafraid.

And what is God's ultimate plan for his promised people and the promised place and his promised protection? The fourth thing is God promises international blessing. Verse 3, he says, all the peoples and all the families on the earth are going to be blessed through you.

We have another slide. And what this shows is God's gracious blessing is meant to go to all the nations that he made and that he loves. And it's like this hourglass that funnels down through this narrow neck, this narrow passageway through his covenant partners, through this one man, through this one family, through this one nation and through one particular offspring of that nation named Jesus, God's blessing is going to go out and his life is going to go out to everyone else.

[23 : 07] Why does this matter? Because remember in Genesis 1-2, God's people, Adam and Eve, were living in God's place, Eden, and they were enjoying God's protection under his word and they were at rest with God's blessing.

But they lost all four of those things. But now God says, Abraham, through you and through this royal fourfold promise to bring my kingdom from heaven to earth through you, I'm going to begin to reverse the downward spiral of sin and death and judgment.

This is how I'm going to overcome the devastation and alienation wrought by human sin and pride. And how does Abraham respond to God's call and his promise and his blessing?

Well, Abraham says yes. He says yes to God. And that's amazing because God does not give Abraham all the details. God doesn't even tell Abraham where he's going to take him.

He just knows that God is calling me to forsake all that's familiar and all that's secure and all that's comfortable and all that's precious and to abandon all of the things I'm bowing down to, all the things that I'm seeking for blessing in life and instead to enter into a personal relationship with the living God and to exclusively embrace this one true creator God and to have no other gods before him and simply to live by faith in his promises.

[24 : 56] And pagan Abraham says yes and he repents. He converts and he demonstrates his faith in God through his obedience and he left absolutely everything to follow the Lord.

and the question for you today is have you been called? Have you been called out of humanity's Babel project and into God's blessing project?

Are you willing to come out of your old life apart from God in order to enter into a new life with God? And do you want what Abraham has?

Do you want to share in this fourfold amazing blessing that God has given to Abraham? So we talked about humanity's Babel project and God's blessing project but I want to close talking for a moment about living by the promises of God because Abraham doesn't just say yes right?

He does yes. Living by the promises of God. Other scriptures give Abraham the highest honor by calling him the friend of God. He's the friend of God.

[26 : 18] What does that mean? It means that Abraham rebuilt his entire life around the promises of God. It means that Abraham restructured and recenters his whole life on the word of God and the promises of God in personal and practical ways.

And you see it right here in verse 4. So Abraham went as the Lord had told him and Lot went with him. Abraham was 75 years old when he set out from Haran.

He didn't consider himself retired from life with God. And he went out to do something that was not convenient that was not easy that was not comfortable and that was not safe.

He was 75 years old he goes out where there's no secure sources of food and water no police force no justice system and he goes as God sends him into enemy occupied territory to live as a tiny minority in the midst of a majority of unbelieving pagans who are opposed to his faith.

And if Abraham had not done that if Abraham had not acted then we wouldn't be here today. We would not be experiencing the blessings of God through him.

[27 : 30] So what that means is in order to get the blessing and in order to be the blessing we've got to go. We've got to act. We've got to obey. Abraham exchanged what was known for what was unknown and he lived the rest of his life for things that he absolutely could not see.

Right? He did not die with the whole promised people. He died with one child. He did not die with the whole promised land. He died with one tiny little burial plot in that land.

The promises of God had barely begun to be fulfilled. But as Hebrews 11 1 says faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.

And look at how Abraham lives out his conviction of the things that are not seen. It says in verse 6 Abraham traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Morah at Shechem.

At that time the Canaanites were in the land the Lord appeared to Abram and said to your offspring I will give this land. So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. And from there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and I on the east and there he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.

[28 : 54] Why did he do that? Because he knew that in order to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth I've got to go to the strongholds of their foreign gods and the strongholds of all their pagan idols.

That's what that sacred tree at Morah is all about. That's what these mystical hills in Bethel are all about. And Abraham knows that he has to go to those places and he has to worship the Lord there.

He's not building a tower up to the heavens. He's simply leaving behind him altars of costly sacrifice and praise and prayer. Symbolically claiming that this place will one day be filled with people who call on the name of the Lord.

Is that not what we are doing in Berkeley in the East Bay? Verse 8 in English says he called on the name of the Lord but in Hebrew it says he made proclamation of the Lord by name.

And what that means is that the worship of Abraham involved witness. It involved calling on the name of the Lord in the midst of and in the hearing of people who did not believe in this one true God because Abraham felt responsible for them.

[30 : 19] He felt responsible for the peoples and the families of the earth and he said if they're going to get the blessing of the Lord through me then that means I need to share my newfound faith with them.

I need to share the meaning of the Lord's name the attributes of his name the activities of his name. I need to share with them the knowledge of the Lord and the promises of the Lord.

See Abraham's faith was a faith that not only obeyed the word of the Lord but also shared the word of the Lord with others. And it wasn't about making a name for himself it was about making a name for the Lord.

And all of his spiritual offspring who want to be called friends of God must follow suit. You all including me are blessed to be a blessing to others.

God's blessing on you is not an end in itself it's a means to the end of blessing all the nations of the earth and you've been blessed not just so you can know the Lord but so through you many people can come to know the living God.

[31 : 34] And friends we have a greater message to proclaim than the one that Abraham proclaimed. Jesus said in the gospel of John chapter 80 said your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day he saw it and was glad.

In other words Abraham knew that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed through one blessing bearing person a particular son of Abraham and I want to suggest to you as we close that Jesus is a true and better Abraham because he answered the call of God to leave all that was familiar to him all that was secure in heaven all that was comfortable all that was precious and Jesus left his father's house and he went out into the unknown he went out into a very unsafe place and he went out to live by faith and the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen and Jesus created a new people of God by the shedding of his blood and the forgiveness of their sins and the blessing of abundant and eternal life and Jesus would turn the whole world into a place where heaven and earth can come together and where all creation can be the promised land that's filled with the presence and the power and the kingdom of God and Jesus would pour out his Holy Spirit so that we could experience the protection of God and the international blessing of God until he comes again to make all things new and so like

Abraham we are invited to have a faith in things that are already secured for us things that are already promised for us by God's eternally beloved son Jesus and that's why the resurrected Jesus he blessed his disciples and he said go make disciples of all the nations go be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth and know that I'm going to be with you every step of the way as you complete that task and even now friends through the church the call of God the blessing of God the promises of God the life of God the salvation of God is extending out all over the world right now today so friends Abraham built an altar to the Lord in a pagan place full of idols and he made proclamation of the Lord by name to a majority of unbelieving people who were opposed to his faith and that's why he was called a friend of God and that's how we too can be called friends of God the letter of the Hebrews chapter 11 says this and I'll close with these words it says by faith

Abraham made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country for he was looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit Amen