

Genesis 11:1–9

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Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 00] Well, good morning and welcome to Christ Church Chicago as we continue meeting out of doors on this beautiful spring season in our city.

You know, as someone who has lived in the city for 23 years now and raised my family here, as someone who knows you well and your love for the city, isn't it great to come to a text?

Here we are, Genesis 11, 1 to 9, where we see the origins of the city. We see the underlying premises of a city and are instructed in regard to our life in Christ.

It was Lewis Mumford in his classic work on the origins and prospects of the city that described its special function. Mumford writes that our making of the city is about two things, and I quote, maximizing possibilities for human association and passing on the contents of human civilization.

Those two things, human association, human civilization. In other words, Mumford is relaying to us the underlying premise of the making of the city.

[1 : 16] It enables us to make the most of our relationships with one another. And as well, it enables us to leave behind for others to celebrate the glories of what we have built together.

You know, the significance of the Genesis text on the Tower of Babel is that it not only tells the origin story of these urban aspirations, but also what God thinks about them.

And as we will see, God is compassionately committed to confounding our plans to remake the world without him. That's what I'll be arguing for from the text. God is compassionately committed to confounding our plans to remake the world without him.

God is compassionately committed to the world without him. So let's take a look. How did we arrive at the city? What is it that motivated us to maximize life together and leave behind glories of what we have built with one another?

The text reveals two things. Humanity entered into a season where we carried an alternate ambition and we sought a new name.

[2 : 28] Those are the headings for the first movement of our sermon today. An alternate ambition and a new name lie behind the making of the city.

Notice, the story of the city begins at a time when the whole earth had only one language and one desire. Verses 1 to 4. Our effort was to settle down from a life of wandering and settle in to one long-term place for living.

The last phrase in verse 4 is especially telling. Quote, lest we are dispersed from over the face of the whole earth. That was an alternate ambition.

It reveals that humanity was now ready to adopt a movement that deviated away from God's original intention. I mean, we've already seen in Genesis on numerous occasions that God's goal, God's aim, God's purpose was that humanity would multiply and fill the earth.

It was to fill the earth, not to gather in one place on the earth. Chapter 1, verse 28. The very opening words after the creation of man and woman.

[3 : 41] Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The same call comes after Noah and the flood in chapter 9, verse 1. You're to fill the earth.

Chapter 9, verse 7. You're to fill the earth. This repetitive refrain from the voice of God that he wanted us to go to the ends of the earth.

But in the text, we no longer find it our purpose to fill the earth and subdue it, but rather to create a place for ourselves on the earth where we will be secure in it.

The opening line of verse 4 is equally revealing. Notice the opening line of verse 4. Then they said, come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower.

Here it is with its top in the heavens. That's quite an aspiration. This tower that would pierce through the cloth that separates earth from heaven speaks of something about the city's desire.

[4 : 51] More than just security, but self-importance. What stands behind the city then is an aspiration that frees us from the purposes of God to fill the earth.

And it also provides for us a chance to become very much like God. We're going to take our rightful place with him in the heavens above the earth. In the ancient world, you might have said that our endeavor was to dwell on Mount Olympus.

Or you could say, we really wanted nothing less than to displace God. Now, you might say that's an over-reading of the text.

That's an overly negative understanding of the city. But you've got to remember, chapter 11 comes out of chapter 10. And we saw there Nimrod, who was the founder of the city of Babel.

And we learned that Nimrod was highlighted in the table of nations as the first true world leader. That it was Nimrod who sent himself out to stand before the Lord in the face of God to combat the plans and purposes of God.

[6 : 11] And so the city founder of Babel is one who had an alternate ambition. And the alternate ambition was to make a place here where we maximize our relationships with one another.

To make a place here where we throw off the very heavens above and reach to the heights of God. So putting that context then, the Tower of Babel says quite a bit about the story of the city.

Underneath it, philosophically, subliminally engaged with it, is a human attempt to demolish the plans and purposes of our Creator so that we can erect a world in our own likeness.

Our alternate ambition is rooted in an effort to establish our own security and even to steal heaven's swagger. The city, more than anything else, signals then the triumph of human ingenuity.

That's not all. The origin story cannot be told without also emphasizing human autonomy. To alternate ambition, I would add a new name.

[7 : 33] Take a look one more time at verse 4. And let us make a name for ourselves. What exactly is being said here?

About you and me and what we are involved in in this enterprise. In Genesis, making a name for ourselves indicates that humanity was done with living under God as their king.

To make a name for ourselves meant that you wanted to be ruled by yourself. We were casting God off and setting out on our own.

It meant, literally, that we were not going to be called by the name God had given us. Now, for that, you need to realize it's already been stated in Genesis chapter 5, verse 1 and 2, that God created man, made him in the likeness of God.

Male and female, he created them. He blessed them. Here it is. And named them man when they were created. God named his first humans man.

[8 : 54] So to make a name for ourselves is to say I'm no longer going on in life under the name that God had given me. To make a name for yourself, more generally, you know, would be to reject the name that you'd been given.

As a metaphor, it would mean something plausible and at times desirable to set out on your own course.

I'm going to go make a name for myself. It means to say that you're going to make your mark, your own mark. Not the mark you were born with or the mark that you were given at birth.

It's to do your thing. In heightened rhetoric, it means that you are now in control. It means that you're fully an adult. It means that you're no longer under someone's charge.

And this is what lies behind Babel. They wanted to be known by a name of their own choosing. For in doing so, they could build, in one sense, your own independent little getaway from God.

[9 : 58] Ironically, this metaphorical way of speaking about self-naming is now at work in our time with lexical, etymological precision.

We employ it to self-actualize. I will be who I will call myself to be. The changing of the name is what enables you to consider yourself your own and fully human, fully autonomous.

So this entrepreneurial enterprise that the world in the West is in the midst of can be summed up simply by the changing of a name.

And it's an experiment that we are vigorously engaged in now more than any time in our past. Indeed, we are at work ridding the world of words like man, woman, he, she, male, female, and providing autonomously chosen names that actualize life as I would rule over it.

I know this is a difficult thing because it's so personal. And yet, when you read the account of the scriptures, while it is a natural thing to consider, at no place in the scriptures does it really come off as morally neutral.

[11 : 48] That which is natural is not always morally neutral. And I love being in a church where we can continue to have conversation. And we need conversation partners with us as we live in this collective enterprise.

In fact, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all would appeal to the Old Testament scriptures and passages like the origin of the city to begin to indicate, well, what were God's original intentions and designs?

And how do we rightly consider our fully becoming who we are, but in line with what he calls us? I am more than open, willing, even, able, eager to converse with anyone and everyone on these things.

But from human history, it seems that this has actually taken on, this origin story of the city has taken on almost full-org triumph of the city in our day.

We live in a day, simply put, where we've embraced an alternate ambition. We have embraced the authority to make a new name. And with them, the city, you could almost say, is synonymous with autonomy.

[13 : 17] We've succeeded. We've succeeded in cutting ourselves off at the stem. We have freed ourselves from the God of Genesis 1 through 10.

The city is the new soil in which we plant ourselves. It's the ground we feel we can best grow ourselves.

We have pulled ourselves from the root system that marked us in God's garden, whose successive generations of seed were meant to blow to the furthestmost ends of the earth with the aromatic glories of our Creator.

But we have left off his intention, and we have an alternate ambition. We have a new name.

Rather than seeing ourselves as fully rooted plants that possess life in and of ourselves, the Bible would have us recognize that without God, here it is, we are little, if anything more, than cut flowers that have been put nicely into a vase.

[14 : 38] You know, there's a big difference between the flowers that are growing in the soil they were intended to emerge from and flowers that beautify our kitchens and dining room tables.

One is alive and the other is dead. We can cut the flowers, smell the flowers. We can tend the flowers.

We can feed the flowers. But you and I both know that over time, go away for a three-day weekend having forgotten to take out the flowers, and the putrid smells of water emerge, and the petals have all dropped to your counter or your wood table, and you are confronted with the fact that you have merely been tending, giving your life to, securing, that which was already dead.

And that's the unfortunate premise that an unbelieving person enters into when they engage in the full-orbed premises of the city.

What a tragedy. Pulled from the soil and roots that gave us life. Now, quickly seizing in ways that we might have some aromatic sense of our own.

[16 : 10] And yet, God sees all this. He sees all of this in verses 1 to 4. And he's aware that if we succeed, we will remake the world in our own likeness.

We'll be living in a world that fully, finally suits our own passions, which is why the text moves in verses 5 through 8. It moves really to the argument I'm trying to make.

God is compassionately committed to confounding our plans to remake the world without it. Or let me put it in really personal terms. God is committed to confusing your purpose to live outside him.

He's committed to you. And it's important that I say compassionately committed. He's graciously committed. He's enduringly committed. To put the movement of the text in three-dimensional terms, at the time we decided to rise up, God decided to come down.

And he descended from eternal heights at verse 5. He had to plummet ever downward until he arrived at the lowly top of the tower to take a look around.

[17 : 32] And he looked at this newfound human endeavor, replete with a new name, an alternate ambition. And by his actions of creating languages multiplied in that city, he would fulfill his own purposes.

If I was to think of it artistically, human autonomy and human ingenuity are met with a divine conspiracy. And when everyone in Babel woke up the next morning, they suddenly found that the language they were speaking was no longer the language that everyone else in the city spoke.

And by this creativity of God, language, God is the originator of human language.

And by the creativity of God, he conspires in and of himself to compassionately fulfill what he originally intended.

And I should add, it's all because he loves us. What God does in the text is he frustrates us. He fulfills a purpose in filling the earth with us.

[19 : 02] And eventually he's going to get from the further most parts of the earth all the glory he wanted in the first place. Those are the three kind of outcomes that serve his purpose in multiple languages.

Frustration, filling, and getting what he intended from the further most parts of the earth. Let me explain.

Frustration. The word in the text that's used twice is confusion. There is a confusion that takes place.

Verse 9, he confused the language of all the earth. Verse 7, let us go down there and confuse their language so that they might not understand one another's speech.

That's frustration. That's what language does. I know some of you are linguistically inclined. Many of you speak multiple languages. I've always struggled in the speaking of other languages.

[20 : 12] I've been to Kenya and the nature of having to present my material in Swahili was just absolutely overwhelming.

It was like I would enter almost into a panic attack on the plane going over. Language separates us from the ability to fulfill the purpose of the city which to maximize the relationships among us.

there's a separation that takes place by nature with language and so God has done that. He determined to bring an element of confusion into our condition.

He brings frustration into your freedom. Doesn't he? By some gracious act of judgment he will recapture his sovereign intention.

His earth will evidently be filled with the glory of God even if it was our intention to find a single place where he would not exist. Where we could have a city where we could truly call it by our own name.

[21 : 19] So the means by which God accomplishes this confusion is bringing multiple languages into human relationships and as the originator of human language God provided a degree of separation.

separation separation from one another. Think of it this way birds of a feather flock together so too people who share the same language over time they're going to find their own wire.

Sit with one another converse with one another because they're capable of doing life together. It's more difficult now for the world to do one thing given that we have many languages.

Now recently I've just been fascinated to see that technology there's some chip emerging where we've now demonstrated the capacity to translate language in space and time in ways that don't require putting it into text before something audible that it won't be long before you're able to put a piece in your ear and not merely have someone translate for you live time but to have that which is said actually be translated in your ear live time into the language you understand.

I mean we are gloriously ingenious but it's taken us a long time to get to this point from the Tower of Babel but don't think that our ingenuity won't be met with a further divine conspiracy.

[23 : 01] I mean we ought to already know that that even if we did all speak the same language we still are rising around the world with hostility because God graciously will frustrate our desires to build a life without it.

Not only frustration but this movement of God this conspiracy accomplishes his original plan of filling. While we go on trying to find one united place in the world he recognizes that with languages he's found a way to fill the entire earth with people.

They dispersed by language and so when we would not fill the earth but gather together he provides languages in which we end up filling the earth.

That's the whole word there of dispersion. You can see it right at the very end and from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of the earth.

In contrast to let us come and build and make a name for ourselves lest we be dispersed over the face of the earth. God is incredibly created.

[24 : 28] Do what you will do by alternate ambition or new name but he will meet it with a conspiracy equal to the task that will both frustrate our life together and fill out the fullness of his initial design.

Not only that frustration and filling but what I would call the furthestmost ends of the earth. This story sets the stage for what God will eventually do throughout human history.

He's going to get glory. to the furthest end of what he originally created. And nothing will keep him from that.

Imagine you making something but it only returning partial glory to your intention. You would manipulate the creative act that you put in place so that from the furthest most edges of what you made it would redound with a sense of your original intention.

That's what God has done. There's a sense here where this story sets the stage for the rest of the Bible. In fact, there's a wonderful little passage in Zephaniah chapter 3 where he promises to bring this language thing back and he promises to no longer confound the world but there will be a day when we come to him and understand who he is again.

[26 : 19] And that promise in Zephaniah 3 was actually inaugurated by way of beginning in Acts 2. If you're not a reader of the Bible, you'll need to recognize that by the time you're reading Acts 2, the death and resurrection of Christ has already come, the one to whom all tongues will praise, the one to whom all knees will bow.

But after his ascension, it actually speaks about the spirit coming down. And so while human autonomy and human ingenuity may capture what we call the spirit of the age, Pentecost provides the age of the spirit and the arrival of God's intention.

And it actually comes at a time where people were arriving in Jerusalem from further most parts of the earth. So in Babel, you have really in one sense the people coming in, God coming down, and then the dispersion going out at Pentecost.

you have the peoples who have now come back in, and God's spirit comes down, and the language of the gospel now goes back out.

It's this beautiful Rorschach drawing movement of the scriptures. that's going on to the present day, all the way to the ends of the earth.

[28 : 01] And why not? Why should not God get from the fullness of his creation, the fullness of his intention? Having wanted glory from all that he made, why would he not complete it?

Which really begins to inform us, doesn't it? Those of us who live in cities. Let us never adhere to the premises of a city rooted in the soil of human ingenuity and human autonomy.

Let us never give ourselves to thinking that coming alongside that miracle grow model, we will do anything lasting.

But may we, all of us, repent of the human enterprise and recover God's initial design.

I sincerely hope that we will repent of the human urban aim and rebuild around God's purposes.

[29 : 19] I would hope that the church in our city would halt construction on the site of our autonomy so that we can begin rebuilding the plans and purposes that God has for our life together.

Instead of being called by your own name, that you would gladly receive the name of Christ. Christ. And that in that name, you would find your purpose.

And that purpose would catapult this congregation to the furthest corners of the earth with the name of Jesus.

Our Heavenly Father, as we contemplate this morning the city and its origins and the text of Genesis, I do ask that we would submit our minds to the ministry of the Spirit, that we would give our lives to the soil of the gospel, that we would be connected rather than unconnected from all that is truly life, that we would learn to live together well in ways that promote your glory.

We pray this knowing that we're pulled by the Spirit of the age, descended from heaven would make us to be a people of one voice.

[31 : 31] In Jesus' name, Amen.