

# God and the City

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[ 0 : 00 ] Living God, we believe that you inspired the writing of this text we've just heard read. And now I pray in your mercy and grace that you would help us understand why.

And that we would be brought into that place that you've intended your people to be brought by this text. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

We come now to the conclusion of our series of studies in Genesis 1-11. To the last chapter of what I have been calling the story that makes sense of our stories.

That is, we now come to the end of the first half of the Bible. Throughout this series, I've been saying that indeed the Bible does have two halves.

Yes, Old and New Testament. But more essentially, Genesis 1-11 and Genesis 12 to Revelation 22. The first half of the Bible ends with a story about God and a city.

[ 1 : 10 ] Turns out, so does the second half. Both halves of the Bible end with God and the city. Now, here is how I'm going to invite you to grapple with Genesis 11 this morning.

I will first simply make a number of observations about this text. And then, I will seek to unfold what the text is saying to us city builders in the 21st century.

So, first, I'm just going to go through a number of observations. And then, come back and try to suggest what this text means to us as city builders in our century.

So, let's begin with a number of observations. Genesis 11, verse 1. Now, the whole world had one language and a common speech.

From the larger context of the story, especially from the genealogy in Genesis 10, which sets up this story, we know that the author of Genesis is not saying that all humans spoke one language, only one language.

[ 2 : 24 ] Rather, the author is saying that different people groups of Genesis 10 understood and spoke one language, even though the people groups themselves had their separate dialect.

In Genesis 10, the chapter before, the three sons of Noah branch out into three different family trees. And the author of Genesis says, they were separated into the lands, everyone according to his language.

Three different times for each of the three sons. They were separated into the lands, everyone according to their language. So, the phrase, the whole world had one language and a common speech, means that the whole world could communicate in one language.

Much as today. Most of the nations of the world can communicate in English to one degree or another, even though the nations of the world have their own languages.

Another observation. This name, Babel. Tower of Babel. It originally meant the gate of the gods. The city called Babel turns out to be ancient Babylon.

[ 3 : 39 ] And at the time of the writing of Genesis 1 to 11, Babylon was touted as the center of the universe. Located where it was at the coming together of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

It was the cradle of civilization. Babel, gate of the gods, becomes confusion. It's new meaning. The story, therefore, is contradicting the Babylonian creation story, which said that Babylon was the center of the world from the foundation of the world, from the original creation.

Gate of the gods? The way to get to the gods? No. It's a place of great confusion. Another observation.

Tower. Verse 4. Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches into the heavens. Archaeologists tell us of those huge buildings the Babylonians and others built called ziggarettes. You've probably seen pictures of them in history and sociology textbooks or in magazines like National Geographic. Huge staircase structures built supposedly so people could climb up them into heaven.

[ 4 : 54 ] One of the most famous ziggurats was built in honor of the god Marduk. In order for people to be able to reach into heaven. And it was built as a place for the gods to come down if they'd like to.

Interestingly, the name of the Marduk tower was the house of the foundation of heaven and earth. The name of another nearby tower was the house of the link between heaven and earth.

You can see then that the building of the tower of Babel is not just about archaeology and engineering. It is fundamentally about the quest for transcendence.

The desire to touch transcendence. Another observation. Creativity. The building of the tower is, yes, problematic theologically.

But the building of the tower is also an expression of the creativity the creator has built into the human species. Like God, we too are builders.

[ 6 : 01 ] A dream trip for me would be to go around the world and visit the tallest buildings of the world. Sharon and I have seen, at least from the street level, the Willis Tower in Chicago.

The old Sears Tower. Which is 442 meters tall. I also want to see, however, the Petronus Towers 1 and 2 in Kuala Lumpur.

452 meters tall. And I want to see the Shanghai World Financial Center. 492 meters tall. Notice, by the way, the name of that tower.

World Financial Center. Something's happening in the world. And I want to see the Taipei 101 Tower.

509 meters. And I want to see the Lotte World 2 Tower being built in Pusan City, South Korea, to be completed in 2013. It's 510 meters.

[ 7 : 00 ] One meter higher than the Taipei building. And I want to see the Burj Khalifa Tower in Dubai. 828 meters.

Fabulous testimony to the genius of humanity created in the image of the creator of the universe. Just think of all that goes into building these structures. So, another observation.

Bricks. Verse 3. Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly. And then, a follow-up comment. They used brick instead of stone and tar for mortar.

That follow-up is added because the people of Israel did not use brick and tar. They built their houses and temples with stone and mortar. Using bricks was, to the Israel mind, not a very wise thing to do.

Even though the Babylonians and others thought of making bricks as a technological advancement. In the Akkadian story of brick building, the making of bricks is celebrated with this elaborate religious ceremony.

[ 8 : 11 ] Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly. Boy, you better. You better bake them thoroughly. Or they will not hold together.

The author of Genesis is calling our attention to bricks as a way to say that as grand as this tower building project is, it is built on a shaky foundation.

The fundamental material is inherently weak. Bricks do not last long against the elements. Bricks do not stand the test of time. The author is telling us that even if God had not interfered in this project, it would have one day crumbled because it was inherently weak.

Thus, another observation. Eastward. Verse 2. As humans moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar, Babylon, and settled there.

Eastward. Move eastward. This is more than a geographical observation. In Genesis, the move eastward always signals separation. You move east to separate from something or someone.

[ 9 : 22 ] So, when God drives Adam and Eve out of the garden, they move eastward. When Cain leaves the presence of God, he moves eastward. The emerging world population moves eastward, meaning the population is separating itself from something.

It's separating itself from God. One Old Testament scholar puts it this way. By this spatial term, the narrative also conveys the metaphorical sphere, meaning the Babelites are outside God's blessing. They're moving eastward. Thus, another observation. Name. Also verse 4. Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches into the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves.

Now, in the Bible, naming implies having a degree of dominance over that which is named. In the beginning, God names humanity.

God names Adam. Adam does not name himself. God then lets Adam name the animals. Come, let us make a name for ourselves.

[10:35] The city and tower builders are wanting to exercise dominion for themselves. So, French sociologist Jacques Ellouf says in his *Meaning of the City*, the rebellious people are tired of being named.

They are tired of being the recipient of a name. They want to name themselves. This is not about making a reputation. This is not building fame for oneself.

Naming oneself is a way of declaring independence. The Babelites want to be independent of this God who names us. The building of the city, the building of the tower are all about wanting to make a world on our own apart from God.

The city, the tower, the name are all about trying to find significance and security on our own. So, twice in the text, the author uses the term ourselves.

Let us build ourselves a city. Let us make a name for ourselves. We will make life work on our own. Indeed, we are going to break through transcendence.

[11:42] We are going to break through into the presence of God. A tower built into heaven. And we are going to do it on our own. Built on bricks, says the author of the text.

It is all built on bricks. The quest for significance apart from God is built on bricks. The quest for security apart from God is built on bricks.

The quest for immortality, which is what the city and tower are finally all about. The quest for immortality apart from God is built on bricks. So, one more observation.

The structure of the text itself. The way the story is put together. Like so many other biblical stories, this story is crafted chiastically.

That means it doesn't go in a straight line. Rather, it goes in an inverted V. And the point of the inverted V is found in the center and not at the end.

[12:43] Now, I have printed for you in the order of worship, Bruce Waltke's reconfiguring of this chiastic structure. A. All the earth one language.

B. People settled together there. C. Said to each other. D. Come now, let us make bricks. E. A city and a tower. And X. And the Lord came down.

Then E prime. The city and the tower. D prime. Come now, let us confuse. C prime. Do not understand each other. B prime. People disperse from there.

And A prime. Language of the whole earth. So you can see that A and A prime belong together.

The whole earth. B and B prime belong together with the word there.

C and C prime together with the word each other. D and D prime belong together. Come now, let us. E and E prime belong together. City and tower. All leading to X in the middle.

[13:43] The big point. And the Lord came down. Come, let us build a tower that reaches into heaven. And the Lord came down to see the tower.

Do you see what the author is wanting us to see? We build our magnificent towers. 100 meters, 300 meters, 500 meters, 800 meters tall.

Very tall. Very, very tall. And very small. Very, very small. So small that the God of heaven has to come all the way down to find it and see it.

It's a very humbling word. So, what is the Tower of Babel story saying to us city builders in the 21st century?

How does this part of the story that makes sense of our stories make sense of our stories? Hubris. The last chapter of the first half of the Bible is about divine response to human hubris.

[14:57] Divine response to the human propensity to take life into our own hands. Divine response to the human arrogance that crosses boundaries.

The God of the Bible is not opposed to building towers and cities. I think the cityness would have eventually emerged in the garden. As the population grew, so would be the need for infrastructure, for plumbing, for transportation, for ways of moving goods and services.

Being city is not the problem. It's the hubris in building the city that is the problem. Now, we've seen this hubris throughout our studies in Genesis 1 to 11.

We've seen this crossing over the boundaries. Adam and Eve cross over the boundary and they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They grab for what they think is going to make them become like God.

Cain crosses the boundary and murders his kid brother. Lamech crosses the boundary and takes two wives to himself and then he boasts of taking revenge on a little boy who wounded him. The angels cross the boundary and take wives from the daughters of the sons of men.

[16:13] And then, in the building of the tower, humans try to cross the boundary. Humans try to storm the gates of the gods and get into heaven themselves. I think this explains God's speech in verse 6.

Then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Now that humans are using their technological creativity to storm heaven's gate, they will stop at nothing.

Another way to say the message of the story of the Tower of Babel is to say that there has been a shift in center from the Creator to the creature, from the living God to human beings.

And that is the problem. The problem is not the building of cities and towers. The problem is the shift in center that's driving the building of cities and towers.

Again, God is not offended that human beings build buildings and towers. God's not jealous of building towers and cities. God's concern is that apart from Him, it finally does not work.

[17:25] As we've seen from the first chapter of the first half of the Bible, we were made in such a way that it only works. Human society, human existence only works if the Creator is the center.

No other Creator is big enough or strong enough to hold it all together. Which explains the strange line at the end of the city builder's speech.

It's verse 4 again. Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches into the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the earth.

Literally that is, lest we be scattered over the face of the earth. Let us build a city, let us make a tower, let us make a name, lest we be scattered. They are in some way already beginning to experience the consequences of this shift in center.

Even their one common language and their one common project to build this tower, even in all of that, they feel insecure. They sense that it's really not working, lest we be scattered.

[18:37] Now, the person that helped me see this the most is Helmut Thielica. In his book, *How the World Began*. I'm going to read from it and listen carefully because I think Thielica here nails it.

He gets that. He writes, Perhaps some of you have already noted a passage that crops up somewhat hiddenly and enigmatically at the very beginning of our story.

Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top into the heavens, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. Hence, long before the judgment of dispersion fell upon them, people already had a premonition, a dim fear that they might break apart and that even their languages might be confused.

They sensed the hidden presence of centrifugal dispersive forces. He goes on. This arises from the fact that they have suffered something that might be called the loss of center.

And now that they have banished God from their midst, they no longer have anything that binds them to each other. Always the trend is the same.

[19:52] Wherever God has been deposed, some substitute point has to be created to bind people together in some fashion or other. You start a war, perhaps, in order to divert attention from internal political dissensions.

Or you start build a Tower of Babel in order to concentrate people's attention upon a new center. Or you whip them together by terror, those who will not stay together voluntarily. Or, he wrote this in 1949, or you utilize the powers of suggestion, propaganda, and ideology in order to generate the feeling of community by means of psychological tricks and thus make people want precisely what you want them to want.

all of these are substitute times, conclusive attempts to replace the lost center with a synthetic center. But the attempt is doomed to failure.

The centrifugal forces go on pulling and rending and a hidden time fuse is ticking in the piers of all the bridges. of this human-built society.

And then he continues, in a society which has lost its center and consists not more, much more, of interest groups, employees' associations, and labor unions, tenants' and homeowners' associations, we call it a pluralistic society without realizing the fateful Babylonian curse that lies behind the pluralism.

[21:19] In such a society, fear and distrust prevail precisely the centrifugal forces which exploded with a vengeance at the Tower of Babel. And then Talica writes this, At all events, it no longer

requires a thunderbolt from heaven to drive people apart.

Since they have become godless, the ferments of decay and disintegration are at work everywhere even without a blast from heaven. Again, we see what we've seen in this series, that judgment, divine judgment, is always God simply giving us the full implications of the path we've chosen for ourselves.

The story of the Tower of Babel tells us that the centrifugal forces set in motion by this shift of center will pull us apart. David Akeman can then say, if you will live without God as the center, you will have no center at all.

And there's where we are in the 21st century. If God is not the center, then there is no center. God is not the center of God.

God lets the centrifugal forces pull us apart. God confuses the language. The gate to God becomes confusion. And God does this to keep us from this insane assault against reality.

[ 22 : 52 ] to keep us from ruining our lives on the path of naming ourselves in independence from God. And God scatters the peoples all over the face of the earth.

And the story ends. Tower half built, city half built, story just ends. As we have made our way through Genesis 1 to 11, you may have detected a pattern to the stories.

The stories follow the same cycle. And the cycle is grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. God comes in grace, humans rebel in some way, and then judgment comes, which humanity was warned about.

And then, unexpectedly, new grace. God offers new grace to the rebelling humanity, undeserving humanity.

So, it's grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. So, the story of Adam and Eve. Grace. God calls people into being and gives them everything we need to live fully human and fully alive.

[ 24 : 17 ] But then, they begin to believe the serpent's twisting of God's word. And they become suspicious that God is withholding something that we need. And so, they rebel. They decide that they will take life into their own hands and live independently of God.

And then, judgment, just as God warned. Life begins to unravel. Paradise is lost. The garden becomes a cemetery. And then, God offers new grace.

Adam and Eve continue to live in spite of the threat of death. God clothes the shame-filled naked humans. And God promises one day that the seed of the woman will be born who will crush the head of evil.

Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. Did you see that? Cain and Abel. God, in grace, gives Cain a brother. Cain rebels by murdering Abel.

Cain runs off to form a city, to go to this place where he thinks he will no longer have to deal with God. And then, there's new grace. God graciously establishes a protective relationship between God and Cain, and God enables the rebel to build a city to take care of his family.

[ 25 : 27 ] Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. Noah and the flood. Although the avalanche of sin continues, God graciously still gives humans all they need in order to live.

Humanity rebels again at even greater levels. The angels rebel, and society becomes more and more decadent. God responds by a cleansing flood involving the removal of a protective barrier. And then, new grace. God spares Noah and his family and begins to re-people the earth through Noah. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. Romans 5.20, where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.

And then, the tower of Babel. Grace. God gives humanity all this incredible creativity. Humans rebel, they use it wrongly.

God responds in judgment. He scatters the builders. He frustrates their attempt to build a human-centered society. and then, the end.

[ 26 : 34 ] Grace, rebellion, judgment, period. No new grace. The nations are scattered over the face of the earth, alienated from each other, arguing over boundary lines, wrestling with access to natural resources, always preparing for war.

Grace, rebellion, judgment, end. no new grace. But, it can't end there.

Can it, Lord? Lord, is your forbearance with rebellious humanity now exhausted? The camera turns away from this panoramic view of all the nations of the world, and narrows the focus, big time, away from the nations of the world to one couple in one nation.

It's stunning. All the nations scattered over the globe, still rebelling, still wanting this no-center kind of existence. And then the camera, slowly but surely, zooms in on one elderly couple in the Ur of the Chaldeans, in what is now modern-day Iraq.

At that time, the Ur of the Chaldeans was a big city, 500,000 people. They had an extensive library, a postal system, comfortable two-story houses.

[ 28 : 17 ] It was a polytheistic, polycultural, pluralistic city. Some 300 deities were worshipped in the Ur of the Chaldeans. And the city was dominated by this temple reaching to heaven.

The camera zooms in on this elderly couple in the Ur of the Chaldeans, named Abram and Sarai, later to be named Abraham and Sarah.

Genesis 12, verses 1 to 3. The Lord said to Abram, Leave your country, your people, and your father's house and go 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 and in you all the peoples of the earth will be blessed.

What's going on here? Simply and profoundly this, new grace for the city. God's call on Abraham and Sarah of Iraq is God's new grace for all the cities of all the nations scattered on the face of the earth.

[ 29 : 27 ] I will make your name great. All that the Babylonites wanted to do on their own by making a name for themselves God will do. God will rebuild the fallen world.

God will build the great city. The first half of the Bible ends in judgment. And the second half of the Bible begins with new grace.

The cycle is not broken. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. In you all the peoples of the earth will be blessed. Now it would take some time for this new grace to unfold like 2,000 years.

Until the camera zooms in again on another couple of the line of Abraham and Sarah. A couple in Bethlehem of Judea.

The camera zooms in on Joseph and Mary and finally only on Mary. A virgin who is unable to conceive on her own.

[ 30 : 34 ] That's the note by the way on which Genesis 11 ends. Genesis 11 verse 30 and Sarah was barren. God's new grace for the city begins through a line of people who are barren.

Who are humanly helpless. Abraham and Sarah would try to get pregnant for 25 years. And then when they were well past the time of being able to bear children, God graciously intervenes and enables Sarah to conceive.

So are we surprised that when the whole enterprise reaches its climax, we meet a virgin? That is the way grace works. God comes to do the new work of grace when we finally realize that we cannot do it ourselves.

Let us make for ourselves a name. I will make your name. And the ancestor of Abraham and Sarah conceived.

a virgin conceived. And gives birth to a son. The seed of the woman. The one in whom all the peoples of all the nations will be blessed.

[ 31 : 53 ] But who is this seed? Who is this son? Who is this Jesus? Go back to the structure of the closing chapter of the first half of the Bible.

it's all crafted to focus on the Lord came down. The Lord came down much further down than the Babylonites ever realized.

Much further down than the author of Genesis ever realized. The Lord came down. The divine response to human hubris is divine humility.

The Lord came down. Jesus is the Lord came down. and in Him the city can finally find a center. The true center. In Him we find our significance and security. In Him we find our unity. In Him we find all that we city builders have been longing to find with our building of towers.

[ 32 : 55 ] We need not construct some kind of structure that will bring us into heaven. Heaven comes down. Heaven comes down. all the way down. And because we can now live around the true center the judgment of Babel can be lifted.

Confusion can be removed. Fifty days after He rose from the dead Jesus pours out His Holy Spirit upon this new community forming around Him as the center.

And people from all over the globe hear the news spoken spontaneously in their own languages.

Pentecost is the reversal of the judgment of Babel. The Lord came down all the way down bringing

new grace to the city.

And one day there will be another come down. The one who came down is going to come again. And with Him another come down. the last chapter of the second half of the Bible and I saw a holy city.

The new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God made ready as a bride for her husband. And in the middle of its streets a river of the water of life.

[ 34 : 12 ] On either side of the river was the tree of life. There shall no longer be any curse and they shall see His face and His name shall be on their foreheads.

It is for that city that we city builders were created. It is that city that Jesus the true center calls us to seek.

As Abraham did he sought the city which had foundations not bricks whose architect and builder is God. The cycle did not break.

Grace rebellion judgment new grapes. Jesus of Nazareth the Lord come down is new grapes for every city of the world.