

Grace in Genesis (iv)

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[0 : 00] Please turn back with me to Genesis chapter 11.

Genesis chapter 11. The grace of God is often found in very unexpected places.

It's found in 1950s New York youth gangs where the evangelist David Wilkerson led many hardened young men and women to faith in Christ.

It's found in that Japanese prisoner of war camp we spoke of this morning, Second World War Burma, where the British Christian soldier Dusty Miller tended to the needs of the dying in the name of Jesus Christ.

It's found in an American courtroom where last month I'm sure you saw a murdered man's brother, John I think his name is, forgave his killer and invited her to put her faith in Jesus Christ.

[1 : 11] The grace of God is even found in a Judean stable and on a Roman cross. And it's even found in the ruins of the Tower of Babel in Genesis chapter 11 and the declining strength and vitality of the human race.

By any stretch, this is a strange chapter. Divided into two chapters, the first deals with the incident of the Tower of Babel, while the second deals with the family tree of Shem, son of Noah, stretching all the way down to Abram.

But what joins the two sections together is God's unexpected grace. In this short series on grace in Genesis, we've looked at his grace at work in Genesis 1, 3, and 6.

But now we want to look at his grace at work in chapter 11. And it seems to me that the message of this chapter is that even at this early stage in human history, despite everything to the contrary, God remains gracious.

He remains gracious, first of all, as mankind descends into foolishness, verses 1 through 9. He remains gracious as mankind, second, descends into weakness, verses 10 through 32.

[2 : 35] And then he remains faithful as mankind descends into barrenness, in verse 30. These are unexpected places to find the grace of God.

In human foolishness, weakness, and barrenness. But then so, so is a stable in Bethlehem. And a cross outside Jerusalem.

First of all, then, in verses 1 through 9, God remains gracious as mankind descends into foolishness. The episode of the Tower of Babel goes down as one of mankind's darker moments, shall we say.

All peoples on the known earth at that time spoke a common language. It was, after all, relatively soon after the flood. As the human race increased once more, it migrated eastward and settled in a plain in the land of Shinar.

We know from other references that the plain of Shinar is in the Old Testament region of Babylonia, the current nation of Iraq. So far, so good.

[3 : 47] After all, the human race is spreading out over the whole world God created and subduing it just as God commanded them. In verse 3, there's the development of new technology among these peoples.

Rather than use stone and mortar, they made cured bricks with tar as the mortar. Theoretically, this combination should make strong structures which are more flexible, less brittle. These are people who in the world of the day are technologically advanced.

It's a mistake to think that it was their technology which made these people foolish, and that therefore Christians should be suspicious of technological advance. Genesis 11 does not advocate a return to nature, as it were, the simple life of the Amish who do everything they can to avoid any kind of technology.

Christians, by contrast, are to be at the forefront of research into new technologies in every discipline of science and medicine and culture.

It's not their technology which renders the people of Genesis 11 foolish. Nor is it their desire to live in a city, as if it's implied that city life is evil compared to village life, which is good.

[5 : 03] Romantic notions of the idyllic, rural life and a return to nature are an imposition into the text of Genesis 11, not a teaching from the text of Genesis 11.

The Bible may begin in an earthly garden, but it ends in a heavenly city. There is both vice and virtue in city and country because there are sinful human beings living in both.

It is not even the technological dream of being able to build a tower which renders the people foolish. It is their motive which renders them foolish.

They want to build a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that they can make a name for themselves and not be scattered over the whole earth. Their foolishness, you see, is in their pride, their hubris, their arrogance, that they, the sons of Adam, can build a tower which will reach up to God in heaven.

Who knows, perhaps by their own devices, so they think, they'll be able to reach into the very throne room of God. And take possession of his kingship.

[6 : 22] But even if they don't, the human race has settled in Shinar. It does not want to spread out over the whole world in obedience to the command of God.

It wants to consolidate its power. It's not the first time the human race has shaken its fist at God and declared its autonomy. We saw from Genesis 3 with its account of the entrance of sin into God's perfect creation.

That the essence of sin is one saying to God, I don't want you. I don't need you. It was that very sin which incurred the curse of God upon the whole earth.

It's that very sin which incurred the flood upon the whole earth in Genesis 6. You know how they say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree? And it's quite clear from what we read here in Genesis 11 that mankind still hasn't learned this lesson.

Mankind still wants to stand proud before God and assert its independence. So here we are. We're in Genesis 11 with the same basic sin as in Genesis 3 and Genesis 6.

[7 : 36] Humanity shaking its fist at God. Its own name is more important to it than God's name. We neither want you God nor do we need you God.

This time it's a tower reaching up to the heavens. Nor a piece of fruit drawn from a tree. But it's the same basic sin. It's the same foundational foolishness.

Mankind wants to know what God alone should know. And do what God alone can do.

And you know it's such patience from God. He does not send another flood to destroy mankind.

Rather he confuses their language so that they cannot communicate with each other. His command was that humanity spread out over the whole earth. And through the confusion of their languages God ensured this tower would not be built.

[8 : 43] And the fist of man may not be as one. I'm not an expert in the theory of language. There are others here who are. I'm not sure whether language shapes one's world view.

Or whether one's world view shapes one's language. However the consequence of God's multiplication of their languages. Is that once again human beings begin to disperse across the whole earth.

They migrate north, south, east and west from Shinar. There's so much we could say about the episode of Babel.

But what I want to take from this point is that despite humanity's renewed opposition to God.

Despite the fist of people being raised against their God.

Despite everything. God remains gracious. In wrath he remembers mercy. Thousands of years later.

[9 : 41] In a city 500 miles to the west of Shinar. Called Jerusalem. God will send his spirit upon the disciples of Jesus on the day of Pentecost.

And they shall communicate one gospel in all the languages of men. Those languages God used to disunite the human race in its opposition to him.

He now uses on the day of Pentecost. To unite the human race in its reconciliation to him. Through the cross and resurrection of his son.

Whereas Babel demonstrated human foolishness in defying God. Pentecost demonstrated divine wisdom in loving mankind. Whereas Babel is one of mankind's darkest episodes.

Pentecost goes down as one of God's redeeming episodes. Little did mankind at this stage in Genesis 11 know. But rather than they reaching up to heaven by their own devices.

[10:53] Salvation would consist in God reaching down from heaven to earth. To them. Babel.

Babylon. Features all the way through the Bible. Until at the very end. When in Revelation the final proclamation is made. Babylon. The great city is fallen.

Fallen. Then shall the grace of God fully overwhelm the pride of mankind. Then shall the sovereignty of God be demonstrated. Once and for all.

Against the sinful humanity. Of the human race. In its constant shaking of its fist against God. Babel. Is a disaster.

But isn't it so true. That in human disasters. We most often see the grace of God. Which remains in our foolishness.

[11:53] God remains gracious. As mankind descends into foolishness. Second. In verses 10 through 32. God remains gracious as mankind descends into weakness.

Weakness. Last month. A remarkable Kenyan athlete. Ed Ed Kipchoge. Ran a marathon in under two hours. Imagine that.

Over 26 miles. In less than two hours. Humankind. Both male and female. Is capable of almost. Almost incredible achievements of strength. We've got people who can swim the English Channel. And back again. A cycle across the world. And run across the Sahara Desert.

Previous generations would have thought. Perhaps such achievements impossible. But today. They really are relatively normal. The lifespan of human beings has risen.

[12:54] From what it was a hundred years ago. To what it is today. Whereas in Jesus' day. The vast majority of people. Did not live beyond the age of 40 or 50. Many children born today.

Will live well beyond their hundredth birthday. Now to live to be beyond a hundred today. Is a great achievement. But in the days of Genesis 11. It was no big deal at all.

People were still having children at a hundred years old. Like Shem in verse 10. Son of Noah. Who went on to live for another 500 years. I know that these lifespans.

Seem unbelievable. But read it here. In Genesis 11. And take up your argument with God. Not me. And so Shem. Son of Noah. Lived for 600 years.

However. By the time we get to the end of the family trees. Listed in Genesis 11. And Terah. Father of Abram. The lifespan of human beings. Has decreased by two thirds.

[13:55] While Hashem lived for 600 years. Terah lived only just a little bit over 200 years. Now of course. Such a lifespan is well beyond our reach today.

But compared to his fathers. Terah died young. As you pass through the family tree. In Genesis 11. People are living not nearly as long.

As they once were. With successive generations. Living shorter lives than those before them. The human race is weakening. That's the point. Its strength is waning.

That's the point. Once strong and vigorous. The human race is losing its abilities. And beginning to experience mortality. On a far more regular basis.

Mankind is descending into weakness. And that is one of the major themes of the Bible. Human weakness. And inability. Young men grow tired and weary.

[14:51] People in their prime are cut down by weakness and illness. The strongest warriors of the Old Testament fall prey to hunger and thirst. Because this is who we are as human beings.

Yes, even the strongest of us. We are like the flower in the field. Which is here today. But tomorrow is gone. Like the clouds in the sky. Our lifetimes only slightly longer than the morning mist.

Because all it takes. All it takes is the smallest virus. Or a tiny mutation. In a group of our cells.

Or a slight genetic abnormality. And even the strongest of us. Are destroyed. And the question is.

Of what use are we in our weakness to God? Of what use is a quadriplegic called Joni Erickson? To God? Of what use is a blind man called the Apostle Paul to God?

[15:58] Of what use is the shortness of the life of the American singer Keith Green to God? In our world where strength and vigor are prized. There's no space for the weak.

No space for the put in spirit. Or the meek. The mourning. Or the one who prefers peace against war. But in the economy of grace.

God chooses the weaker things of this world. In order to confound the stronger things of this world. In our weakness we are made strong.

Because it's when we're weak. We come to recognize the all sufficiency. Of his grace. Yes perhaps you envy the people of Genesis 11.

Their long lives. Wishing that somehow. We could live for 500 years. But 500 years. Living without the grace of God. Is 500 years wasted.

[16:58] The grace of God is often found in places. We wouldn't expect it. In hospices. Among the terminally ill. In people burned out by life's pressures.

In the grieving hearts of lonely widows. After all. If it can be found in the weakness and shame of a cross. On which the Lord Jesus died. It can be found wherever Christ's people.

Open up their hearts to him. And offer him their weakness. Jesus. You know. I've often wondered. Why it is that God.

Sets us. The task of making disciples. Of all nations. Frail. Sinful. Disorganized.

Mortal. Human beings. Like us. why didn't he commission the great angels with this task why didn't he send the angel Gabriel to Garo Hill to preach the good news of Jesus after all the angel Gabriel is perfect and he's mighty and he seems to be eternal his presence would strike awe into the people of our city so why did God not commission them the angels with the evangelization of the nations why did he give the task to us frail, sinful, disorganized, mortal human beings among other reasons I'm sure it's this it's through our weakness his mighty spirit works in converting power it's through our weakness his mighty strength works in converting power surely grace is to be found in some very strange places but especially in the weakness of men

[19:00] God remains gracious as mankind descends into weakness and then lastly in verse 30 God remains gracious as mankind descends into barrenness Genesis 11 30 contains the first occurrence of a word which is found all too frequently throughout the Bible and human history in this verse it's said of Sarai, wife of Abram now Sarai was barren she had no children in his creation mandate God had commanded the first human pair to be fruitful and multiply and it would seem that from Genesis 11 and the family tree the fertility of the human race was still extremely high but now for the first time in recorded human history we find a person who is barren or to use the more literal Greek term which is used to translate this text sterile

God made the human race to reproduce to fill the earth and now for the first time we find someone who is sterile barren and who cannot by force of nature obey God's creation mandate and produce offspring Sarai is the first of millions of people for whom sterility or barrenness has broken their hearts they long to have children but for either physiological or social reasons they have not been able to through scripture we find Abraham's daughter-in-law Rebecca suffering from the same condition and yes Hannah later to be the mother of Samuel Elizabeth mother of John the Baptist we read of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 verse 10 that such barrenness hurt her to the extent that in bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord such for her was the chronic pain of being unable to bear children that her heart was embittered and she wept it was never meant to be this way

God had created a fertile productive human race there was never meant to be such a word in the language of men as barrenness parents were never designed to suffer the loss of such hope either by physiology or by choice Sarai was the first woman in history to have been sterile that seems to be what scripture is teaching and if we as Christians should find ourselves in a situation we need to know that we are not alone in our grief my mother my mother has a phrase that when she speaks about a couple with no children she'll lower her eyes and she'll mournfully say of them no they never got any burns they never got any burns well can grace work here can grace work in the grief and emptiness of a barren womb what can God do when every avenue of productivity seems to be closed can grace be found in a fertility clinic in an obstetrician surgery what's the story with the mighty warrior who's got no arrows in his quiver who's got no children at his table has God deserted these people does his grace lie dormant

I don't want even for a second to offer an answer or make any promises to those among us for whom barrenness is painfully grievous for those of us who as my mother would say well they never got any burns I know I know that every one of us has our own painful issues and that Christ's grace is sufficient for us in our weakness as it's been for God's people over thousands of years however as I can say I can offer you no answers other than to commend you to the grace of Christ as our rock and our refuge however that's not the question I'm asking from Genesis 1130 and the issue of

the barrenness of Sarai we're going to find out soon enough that the God who closed Sarai's womb is the God who later promises that he's going to give her a child through whom all the nations of the earth shall be blessed Sarai daughter of Eve will be mother to Isaac and through Isaac to Jacob and through Jacob to Judah and over many generations to Jesus Christ himself in other words Jesus Christ is writ large across Genesis 1130 in that the impossibilities of human sterility will be overcome by the possibilities of God's grace that the shattered dreams of one woman's barrenness will be more than reversed by one woman's fertility that woman being the Virgin Mary through whom will be born the saviour of the world and the Lord of grace himself that womb closed here in Genesis 1130 shall be opened in Matthew 125 where we read about Mary the blessed mother of our Lord she gave birth to a son and he that's Joseph gave him the name Jesus grace is found in very strange places even in the empty and barren womb of sterility because from the barren womb of Sarai will come the Lord of glory himself and through him a multitude which cannot be numbered the sons of

[25 : 02] Abraham by faith who will gather at the throne of Sarai's greater son Jesus Christ in heaven dressed in the white robes of his righteousness and praising his name forever and ever but it all came about through the miraculous power of God at work in the barren womb of the Sarai we first meet here in Genesis 1130 the grace of God is often found in very unexpected places it's found in 1950s New York gangs where the evangelist David Wilkerson led many hardened men and women to faith in Christ it's found in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in second world war Burma where a British Christian soldier called Dusty Miller tended to the needs of the dying in the name of Jesus it's found in an American courtroom where last month a murdered man's brother forgave his killer and invited her to put her faith in

Jesus Christ the grace of God is found at Babel in God's remaining gracious while mankind descends into foolishness it's found in a family tree as God remains gracious as mankind descends into weakness and it's found in a sterile woman as God remains gracious as mankind descends into barrenness the only reason we can find grace in these places is that we find it first on the cross on which Jesus died that cross which to the world around us is foolishness and weakness that cross which through sterility produced a countless multitude of disciples and the application in closing for us all this evening is obvious God uses the foolish weak and barren among us so that what we achieve in the name of

Jesus is entirely of him so that by his grace he gets the glory just for a minute think of all your own foolishness and your own weakness and your own barrenness and if we thought about them at any length they'd bring us great pain now think of them this way they are God's opportunities to work his grace in you and through you all for the glory of Christ who lived died and was again for us let us pray glory thank you for your