

The Tower of Babel

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 September 2023

Preacher: Nate Taylor

[0 : 0 0] A few things by way of introduction before we pray and look at this passage more closely. The first off is context is always helpful. Right before Genesis 11 and Genesis 10, what you get is this list that's called the table of nations.

There's all these different nations that are listed from the descendants of Noah and his children. And it's spanning a very long period of time. And each of the main sections of chapter 10, it ends with this refrain.

Clans, languages, and nations. And since it refers to different languages, I think what makes most sense then is when you get to Genesis 11, it's going back.

It's like a flashback and it happens sometime in the midst of Genesis 10. Right in the listing of all of these different tribes and clans and languages and so on.

The author of Genesis is pulling out this story for theological reflection and to make a point to his original audience. The second thing to point out is that in chapter 10 of Genesis, amidst this table of nations, one guy who stands out is a man, a mighty hunter named Nimrod.

[1 : 2 0] Nimrod. In Scotland, if someone's kind of a buffoon, does that mean Nimrod? Do you use that phrase or is it only in America? We only use it in America. Bugs Bunny called Elmer Fudd in Looney Tunes a cartoon.

He says, oh, you poor little Nimrod. And Elmer Fudd's a hunter, so he's making fun of him. So in America, if you call someone in. If somebody calls you a Nimrod when you're visiting America, they're not being kind.

But here, he's this mighty hunter, and he's also one who builds and starts these different empires. And so it mentions starting the city of Nineveh, which is the capital of Assyria.

Later, which is going to be the nation which brings the northern kingdom of Israel into exile. And then it also mentions that he starts this city of Babel.

Our passage is about the Tower of Babel. Now, here's the interesting thing about the Tower. There's lots of interesting things. One thing to note about that word Babel. Did you know in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for Babel occurs over 200 times?

[2 : 2 5] Maybe if you've read through your Old Testament, you're like, I only remember Babel being in chapter 10 and 11 of the book of Genesis. And that's right. The only time it gets translated as Babel is in Genesis 10 and 11.

Do you know what it gets translated as? What does it get translated as? What does it get translated as? Babylon. Babylon. So what it's seen as, whether it is the literal start or what comes from Babylon, it is seen as the precursor to that.

And Babylon throughout the Bible, you know, they take the southern kingdom of Judah into exile. But if you even read into the New Testament, if you go to the book of Revelation, Babylon is the antitype to the city of God.

It is like the city of man par excellence. And so, as you see it laid out here, the Tower of Babel perfectly summarizes that. And what you would find in ancient places like Babylon, if we can go to the next slide, they found this inscription on a stone.

It's highlighted. If you looked at it, it's just kind of etched into a stone. That's Nebuchadnezzar II. And what is next to him is what's called a ziggurat. A ziggurat would be a temple of worship.

[3 : 36] And this one's like a seven-tiered one, I think. And it's, you know, it's got these steps that are going up. And at the top would be the place of worship. Right?

And so, many commentators would believe, and biblical historians, that when it's mentioning the Tower of Babel, it's most likely, you know, they're trying to build the biggest ziggurat ever.

Okay? And you could find different examples of ziggurats all over the ancient Near East. Kind of the idea is, what you can see, is it's like a stairway to heaven.

Right? If God is in heaven, we're going to get as close as we can, go up the stairs, go to ascend, and hopefully he'll come down and we can worship him. So, is God just not a fan of towers?

Is that the point here? Let's look at it more closely. Let me first pray for the preaching of God's word. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would condescend to us right now and speak to us in words that each of us can understand.

[4 : 35] Would you speak pointed words to our hearts so that we can find the security our insecure hearts long for? We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, here's the outline for tonight. Three points. First off, man's insecurity. Second off, God's intervention. And then lastly, Babel's inversion. Okay? So, first off, man's insecurity.

So, when we start in Genesis 11, humanity is on the move, and they settle in this geographical region called Shinar. And verse 3, I'm saying, you know, what's their plan?

Verse 3, let's make some bricks. But not like anybody's ever made bricks before. We've got a better plan. Why make bricks? Verse 4, let's build a city. And in the middle of that city will be a tower.

Right? Why do they want to build a city and a tower again? Verse 4, so they can reach heaven and make a name for themselves, lest they be dispersed over the face of the earth.

[5 : 36] Now, what's the problem with their plan? A few things. First off, what has God tasked? This is why it helps sometimes going through a book of the Bible. You can jump in and preach from God's word, but also if you go through it, you can start to remember some things.

What has God tasked humanity with in Genesis chapter 1, and again after the flood in Genesis 9? What does he say to Adam and then to Noah? Be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth.

What are they afraid of? Being dispersed over the face of the earth. The problem isn't that people are settling and building homes. It's they are disregarding God's purposes.

They clearly think that they have a better plan. And their fears and their insecurities show up. They say, lest we be dispersed. Now, how many times would you and I rather come up with our own plan for life, lest something happen that we can't control?

And they want to use their God-given gifts, but not for God's purposes, right? That's the first thing wrong with their plan. They're going against God's plan for humanity. They're saying, uh-uh, that's too scary.

[6 : 47] You know what we should do? We'll be way more secure if we ignore that and we just settle in one place. The second thing that's wrong with their plans is they want their tower, it says, to reach to where? The sky?

No, to reach to heaven. And, you know, it might seem silly to us, but ancient people, they thought that these ziggurats, these towers with the temple on top, it would be like a bridge between heaven and earth.

The idea was that the deity, you know, you build it as high as possible so that their deity, whichever god they could worship, would come down into that top part. There would be like this little room that the god could come to and they could worship and sacrifice and things like that.

But the people of Babel, even more so than any other old idol worshiper before them, they don't want to just build a tower that reaches to the heavens for the god to come down.

They want to get up to heaven themselves and knock, knock, knock on heaven's door, as it were. And many commentators, they point out that what's going on, it's not just rebelling against God on earth, saying, mm-mm, we're going to be in control here.

[7 : 58] It's like they even want to go up and dethrone God in the courts of heaven itself. It's this mocking of God saying, we don't need you. We don't need you.

In fact, we're going to come to your home. We're going to kick you out. We will tame God and we will make him our servant. What is any sin but this, right? The creature trying to elevate themselves above the creator.

Okay, so they're ignoring God's purposes. They're trying to dethrone God, live without regard to him, take over. Third thing wrong with their plan, it says in verse 4, they want to make a name for themselves.

Now, is there anything wrong with having a good name? No, Proverbs 22, 1, right? A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches. That's not the sort of name that we're talking about here in Genesis 11.

This is the desire, what you're seeing in the hearts of the people of Babel. It's a desire for immortality. Born for eternal life, humanity still wants to go on forever. And even though death is coming, they want a name that's going to echo throughout the ages.

[9 : 02] We're going to build this thing and it's going to be so great, no one is ever going to forget us. We will be as eternal as we can possibly be. You can almost imagine they're laying the bricks of this ziggurat and they're saying things like, Oh, this is one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.

Look at what we can do. Look at what we can build. They don't want to just feel good about the tower and the city. They want the world to recognize their awesomeness. In verse 3 where it says, they say, come let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.

In the Hebrew, it literally says, let's brick bricks and burn burnings. It's how you make something intense is by repeating it. And it's almost like a chant, right?

They're going, hey, we're going to make our name great. We're going to brick bricks, burn burnings, brick bricks, burn burnings. Look at us. Look what we can do. They even have this new technology, bitumen for mortar.

Check us out. We're so great. Not only that, you know, other people, they would make their bricks by leaving them to bake out in the sun. Pfft, losers. We at Babel, we bake our bricks.

[10 : 12] Our tower is stronger. And we can make it faster. All these technological advancements. We can make an artificial mountain in a plain. In the plain of Shinar, we're going to build our own mountain.

Who needs God, right? We can conquer the world. We can conquer heaven, too. And maybe you're sitting there being like, you know, like, how primitive, right? They didn't, you know, they didn't have the science that we have.

They could think that they could do something like that. They could think they could get up to heaven and be secure. What is most of humanity's strivings other than the Tower of Babel, right?

Secular humanism is kind of like the new religion. It's life without religion, but it's basically the new religion in the West. In Scotland in 2019, I haven't seen new statistics, there were more humanist weddings than Christian weddings.

That's kind of the new view. And within the humanist movement is basically religion isn't needed, and humanity is the ultimate goal. Humanity's flourishing. Nothing beyond that.

[11 : 15] No need for transcendence or anything beyond us. In fact, we can just live on our own, right? And we can make a name for ourselves.

And you know what happens in that is you have a bunch of young people who are growing up in a society like that, and what are they searching for? Transcendence. Like there's something more out there.

It's not just all in front of us. Make a name for yourself. Try it. See if that will actually satisfy you. You have a bunch of people in this world who are disillusioned. Who are depressed.

Because the world has promised them just make a name and you will feel good. And on their own they struggle. You know, we're just going to create this new technology that will lead us to a utopian dream, right?

And maybe we're not trying to build ziggurats and things like that, but all our energy and our hope and our imagination in this world gets poured into something like politics.

[12 : 12] If we just sort it out, if we just get the right politicians and right political party, then we will be okay. If they would just listen to us, everything would be fine.

It's fraying. Now it's interesting though, the Bible, it doesn't just point out critique of those unbelievers. The Bible has this penchant, this prophetic penchant of pointing the finger then at God's people too, because we grow up in this society and we struggle with the same things.

This is what basic religion at its heart of when we don't want to actually believe the gospel, what do we want to do? In my own goodness, I will make it up to God.

I will climb the ziggurat. I will get up to him. I will show him that I'm worth it. I can do it on my own. In other words, I don't need God. Very, very religious people act like they don't need God and they don't need forgiveness.

They don't need him to come down. In fact, just in their own, whether it's through their own poverty of spirit, their religious fervor, they can make it up to God.

[13 : 16] And in that too, what's the desire in all these things? We all want to feel secure. We want to feel safe and control. We want control. And they want control because they have a kiln and tar for mortar.

And they've constructed a man-made mountain. And we feel like we can be everywhere with FaceTime. And we can know everything because we can Google it. And we can get whatever we want by purchasing it on Amazon.

And in life, what happens is then we make no room for God because we're just bent on building these towers of security. Or maybe better, towers of insecurity.

And you might be asking, maybe a better title, instead of man's insecurity, what about man's pride? Yeah, that would have worked too. But what is pride other than insecure people trying to find security?

You want people to notice you and your achievements. Why? Because you're insecure and you need other people's approval. You want to be in with a certain group of people.

[14:17] Why? Because you're insecure and desire the safety of others' opinions. You know, you walk around and you want to feel better than other people. Why? Because you're insecure. And your ego can't handle failure.

You want to be great so that we feel secure. And we wonder, what if I'm not great? What if I'm not secure? Fear and insecurity, they drive our pride.

So that's the first thing. We see that man's insecurity displays itself in pride and wanting to displace God. How does God respond? Second thing, God intervenes. God intervenes.

Many commentators, they point out that what you have in Genesis 11, 1 through 9 is what's called a chiasm. It's a nerdy Bible term, but I can explain it to you.

Next slide here. A chiasm is named after the Greek letter chi, which looks like an X, right? And the basic idea is that the top mirrors the bottom, and the main point, X marks the spot, right in the middle.

[15:20] Okay? So I'm going to go through Genesis 11, 1 through 9 and show you the chiasm. I tried to kind of simplify it in some ways. You know, sometimes they're looking at it in the original language and things like that.

But I think the point is very clear is that this artful construction, if you read some commentaries, they find a chiasm everywhere. I don't know if that's really necessary. But I think it's very clear in here.

And when we see that, then we can see the main point of Genesis 11, 1 through 9. Okay? All right. So, next slide. You can see verse 1 and verse 9 mirror each other. Verse 1, the whole earth had one language, right?

Verse 9, the Lord confused the language of all the earth. Okay? You see how those are kind of mirrors of each other, kind of playing off of each other? Then the next one. Verse 2 mirrors verse 8.

Verse 2, people come to Shinar, and they settled there. And in verse 8, God dispersed them from there. Okay? Next one. Verses 3 and 7.

[16:16] Come, let us make bricks. And then God says, come, let us go down. Okay? Next one. Verses 4 and 6. We can do anything.

And then God says, nothing's going to be impossible for them. Now, that's what they're basically boasting. We can just do whatever. Oh, no, nothing they propose will be impossible. Okay. You ready? X marks the spot.

You can kind of see how it goes in. It's like one side of the X. Verse 5. The Lord came down to sea. Hmm. The Lord came down to see the city and the tower.

That is the thematic center of Genesis 11, 1 through 9. I don't know about you, but if you heard that, maybe you're going, that doesn't seem like that big of a payoff.

Like, what's the big deal? Like, where's, you know, I want a bit of drama. Where is it in that? Well, here's the idea. Here's what's going on. Let me put it another way. The people at Babel are so proud of their achievements and what they can do.

[17:17] And this massive tower that they can build that is stretching as high as they can, has ever been seen, into the heavens. And God has to come down to see it.

You can almost, like, imagine God's in heaven. He's like, Gabriel, get the binoculars. Somebody built something. In fact, let's go. Let's go down and look.

In all of this human achievement and hubris, in these insecure people looking for security and trying in life to show their pride and make a name for themselves, for God to even see it, he has to come down.

They built this huge ziggurat. God created Mount Kilimanjaro. They make this tower of human autonomy.

And their greatest achievement, they're impotent and puny before the creator, God. Don't get me wrong. God delights in our efforts, uses our efforts.

[18 : 23] But achievements done in pride to make a name for yourself that you think will last, God is not impressed with.

What does God say in response? Verses 6 through 8. I'll go back to the outline now. Behold, they are one people and they have all one language and this is only the beginning of what they will do.

And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language so they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth and they left off building the city.

Now, in this passage, I don't know about you, I've got a few questions. First question, why does God punish them? Is it that bad?

Like, you know, they're just building a tower. Couldn't they have just built the tower and gone up to the top and been like, oh, oxygen is thin up here, you know, learned their lesson? What's the big deal? Does the punishment actually match the crime?

[19 : 28] There's a lot we could say, but maybe a simple illustration would be best. You know, imagine you've proposed the love of your life and you've gotten married. And the first thing that you do is you build a home for your wife and you and your future children.

You've dug the footers, you've laid the foundation, you've attached the siding, you built the gazebo, you know, you cultivated the garden. All of these things and the whole time imagining a life with your wife and future children and things like that.

Longing for it. What does your spouse do? As soon as he moves in, kicks you out of the house, marries someone else, and not just that, but pretends like they were the ones who built the house and lives without regard to you.

Totally forgets you and all that you've done. Would you be a little bit upset in that situation? Yes, right? Yeah, yeah. That's just a fraction of what humanity is doing in the Tower of Babel and in sin to the Creator God.

The analogy breaks down, right? But the tower building at Babel is a mutiny and a betrayal to a God who's built a world for his people. And he's invited us to join with him in cultivating this world.

[20 : 43] And so now he's intervening in his judgment. It's a deserved judgment. Second question, though. Why does God seem so worried? Right? It just said, you know, they built this tall tower and God has to come down to even see it.

Right? They think they're so awesome and God's like, yeah, whatever. Right? And he comes down. So what's the worry? Because I don't know if you, as you read those parts, it almost sounds like if I don't stop them now, they actually will make it up to heaven.

Is that what's going on? He says in verse 6, This is only the beginning of what they will do. Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. You know, the idea is that God is judging their pride and at the same time he is preventing man's pride from going too far by confusing their languages.

Just think about human history. Every scientific discovery, right? Get all these scientific advancements and you get nuclear bombs. You get pyramids, who built them?

The slaves. In our passage, God sees that things are going downhill. But if you remember Genesis 9, what has he promised? I'm never going to wipe out the earth and judge it and start over again.

[21 : 54] Right? And so what he does then, his judgment comes as confusing their language. Kind of dividing their rebellion against him and he scatters them and he prevents them from continuing in this unified project of futility.

They want a name and what do they get? Babbling confusion. I don't even know their name, pronounce their name. It's like me trying to pronounce some of these Gaelic names, right?

Last question. Is God's intervention his mercy or his judgment? Which is it? Is God's intervention at the Tower of Babel, is this his mercy or his judgment?

I think the answer is both, right? God judges humanity's pride but his judgment is a mercy in that it stems the tide of us destroying our lives and the lives of others thinking that we can make a name for ourselves.

And that it will give us security that we long for. And you know what God doesn't do to the Tower? I always think this is a really interesting thing. They abandon this project as he intervenes in his judgment and it just stays there.

[23 : 01] Incomplete. Like a monument to the futility of humanity trying to live apart from God. Just see it there.

Maybe I could be so bold as to ask you. What are the ruined towers in your life? Those that are left there half built. That if it wasn't for God's intervening judgment and mercy, you would have completed.

But he's led you away from. There's a documentary about a pop singer named Amy Winehouse who was a drug addict and she actually died from an overdose. And in it, you know, you can see her going off the rails and her mom says at one point, someone needs to save Amy from herself.

And what they do is they have this intervention. And is the intervention a mercy or a judgment? It's both, right? It is saying, listen, this leads to death.

This will lead to death. But it's a mercy in that what Colin was mentioning this morning, someone who speaks the truth in love. So needed. Reflect on your life.

[24 : 14] Now, how many of us wouldn't even be here at church this evening unless God, whether weeks ago or years ago, made you feel the waste of your life without him?

He frustrated your plans to build a happy life, towers of pride, towers of insecurity. He intervened and he ruined that and he brought you to your knees.

And that was the sweetest mercy you've ever felt. So first thing we see is man's insecurity displaying itself in harmful pride. Second thing, as great as that tower was, it's puny compared to God and he intervenes in judgment and mercy.

I don't know, you get to the end, you're like, is there any hope? It's kind of like a downer of a story here. Like everybody just gets judged and dispersed and they can't understand each other. Last point is Babel's inversion.

This is kind of the question we should be asking at the end of the Tower of Babel account. What is God going to do about the nations? Right, we've had this table of nations and these people building these different nations and you've seen all this pride and insecurity and God has judged them and you're wondering, like, he's already brought a flood and it's like the last little flame is about to flicker out and go out on the nations.

[25 : 33] What on earth is God going to do? Well, I mentioned earlier that the story of the Tower of Babel, it is sandwiched between the line of Shem.

You get the line of Shem, Tower of Babel, line of Shem again. Do you know what the name Shem means? It means name. So you get between these two generations of a guy named Name, a people who are trying to make a name for themselves.

And Shem's line keeps going, if we could follow through. We'll come to this at some point later. And it comes to a man named Abram. And his family, it says, they worship the moon in an area called Ur of the Chaldeans, which is the general region where Babel is.

And it's from there that God again comes down. And he gets Abraham and he calls him. And what does he promise him? That he's going to make his name great.

Amidst this world that is trying to find a great name for itself, God comes and says, the only way that you're going to get a name that will transform you and change you and actually make you secure is if I give it to you.

[26 : 53] And he doesn't just promise that to make his name great. He says that from Abraham, listen, Abram, you are going to be a blessing. I'm going to bless you so that who will be blessed?

The nations. So if you're reading through Genesis, you come to the end of the Tower of Babel, and you're like, what's going to go on with the nations? What is the hope for them? And you get a guy named name.

And from him comes Abram. And God promises to make his name great and promises that through his family will come a nation, will come a people, will come a king who will be the hope for all the other nations.

Now, Israel, their identity then is part of the people, the family of Abraham, is to be a blessing to the nations. Do they do this very well? You get different times.

At the end of the book of Genesis, there's this man named Joseph who goes down to Egypt, and it's because of his wisdom and God working through him that he saves basically modern civilization from a famine.

[27 : 53] Even his family comes down to get food and saves the people of God through that blessing to the nations. You get a prostitute named Rahab who attaches her name to Yahweh, and she finds blessing.

You get this Moabite woman named Ruth who comes into the people of God, and from her actually comes a king. But the story of Israel again and again is that they fail in their mission to be a light to the nations.

Right? And instead, what do they desire to do? What do the prophets say to them so many times? You're not only failing in your mission to be a light to the nations, you just want to be like the other nations.

And the indictment against so many of the bad kings in Israel is that they don't tear down the high places. Now, it wouldn't be ziggurats, but it would be these places of worship up high on mountains.

Same idea as a ziggurat. Worship the God up as high as you possibly can. And so you're wondering, just like, well, maybe God's going to just give up.

[28 : 55] Israel's failed. What's going to happen to the nations? And let's put Zephaniah 3.9 back up on the screen. This is what the prophet foresees.

For at that time, sometime in the future, God's going to do this. I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord.

Wow. That's what God's going to do. How's he going to do that? You get to the end of the Old Testament, and you don't know. It's kind of left there hanging. What's he going to do with his people, and what's he going to do with the nations?

We turn the page to the New Testament, and again, God comes down. Heaven comes to earth. The word became flesh. He left his father's throne above, so free, so infinite his grace, emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race.

It's not striving that gets us up to God, but rather, again, he has to come down. You're never going to be able to build a tower tall enough, and he does.

[30 : 01] He comes down. Heaven comes to earth, and at the cross, mercy and judgment kiss, judging humanity's pride and rebellion, and yet his intervention is the sweetest mercy you and I have ever experienced.

And he goes up to a mountain after he's risen, and he tells his group what to do what? To go in to make disciples of all the nations.

What's God going to do about the nations? He sends his son. Heaven comes down to go to the nations and to make disciples. And so this group, probably still feeling a little insecure as he ascends back to heaven, and they're waiting, and be like, what else is God going to do?

They gather in an upper room at the Feast of Pentecost, and they're sitting there, and again, God comes down, his Holy Spirit, like tongues of fire upon their heads, and they go out, and they get this boldness.

This boldness that comes, rather than from being so self-focused, they're actually looking at other people, and they go out, full of the Holy Spirit, and they do what? They speak in other languages.

[31 : 10] In fact, if you read Acts chapter 2, you have another table of nations. It lists people who have, this dispersed people of God, who have gone from all over the known world.

All of these nations have all of a sudden in Jerusalem, and they're amazed because they're going, I can hear what they're saying in my own language. It's like this inversion of Babel.

And the promise is in Revelation 7, after this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

So what are you and I supposed to do with this? Well, first off, rejoice and be glad. The answer to Babel comes in the call of Abraham, and the blessing of Abraham has come to the nations.

The fact that we're worshiping Yahweh in English tonight should fill our hearts with joy and confidence. What else? No, God is the one who makes your name great.

[32 : 24] And he desires to do that. He desires to secure you with his love like it talked about in Zephaniah 3, to rejoice over you and me with loud singing. If you try to find, make your name great on your own, you're going to find it's worthless.

So abandon that tower. Leave it half built if it needs to. And come to Christ. What else? This is why we go out and we call others in. Now is the time for the nations to come in.

This is why we send missionaries. This is why we plant churches. This is why we gather and preach the gospel. This is why we have warm space. This is why we reach out to our neighbors. Because this is God's plan for the world. And the last thing is just a warning.

To stop building your life in your own effort. Pursue good things and do it apart from dependence on God. That is exhausting and it's confusing.

It's like trying to build a tower to heaven. And God has to come down to even see it. So why not give up that futility and come and taste mercy?