

From Babel to Pentecost

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn for a while this evening to Genesis chapter 11, looking at these verses 1 to 9 as we've read them.

Let's read for the moment at verse 4, Genesis 11 at verse 4. Then they said, Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in heavens.

Let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of man had built.

These are very crucial chapters for us to understand some main strands of teaching in the Bible. For example, you'll find in these chapters here, 10, especially that list of names, which is very often called the table of the nations, as it's describing the descendants of Noah.

Amongst all that, you find reference to Assyria and also to Babylon, which then takes us into the tower of Babel, which is the origin of Babylon in chapter 11.

[1 : 17] So what you find there really is a description for us about the origin of these two great powers, as they came to be great powers in later times, which are always in the Bible portrayed as the enemies of God's people.

The enemies of Israel, the enemies of God, as they range against him and against his work, against his people in covenant with him. Here are the names rooted here in this table of the nations.

And what you find actually in chapter 11 is something that took place before what's in chapter 10. Because chapter 10 deals with the descendants of Noah through the three branches of these sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

All the descendants of these three sons, as they formed the three branches of humanity, spread abroad on the earth. But chapter 11 actually has an incident where there was an attempt by the children of men, by these very descendants, to actually prevent that from happening.

And it was in terms of God coming down and judgment to scatter them abroad, or at least to cause them to be scattered abroad by giving all of these multiplication of languages which led directly to them being spread abroad throughout the earth.

[2 : 52] In other words, the cause of the spreading out which in a very real sense is what happened as described in chapter 11. And we'll see that there's something else there as well as we go through our study this evening.

Now, chapter 11 and verse 4. You could say that that's the first example or instance of organized humanism, as you would call it nowadays.

It's so important for us that we actually see even those events way back in the mists of early history as recorded in the Bible as still of permanent relevance for the days in which we live.

What has the Tower of Babel, what have these ancient accounts and events that are recorded, what has that got to do with 2016 and with us here at this juncture in history?

Well, this is really, as we've said, what you could call, using the term that's used today, humanism, this is really an organized attempt by these human beings at a certain thing that they're aiming at, they're aiming in fact for significance for themselves and lasting significance instead of doing it God's way, they're going about it by their own inventions.

[4 : 19] Let me just read to you from the British Humanist Association what they give as a definition of a humanist. Humanist, they say, this is from their website, British Humanist Association.

The word humanist has come to mean someone who, and then there's three points, someone who first trusts to the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural and is therefore an atheist or an agnostic.

That's why you find humanism always hand in hand with secularism and with atheism. That's the first thing. Secondly, humanist is one who makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy,

and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals.

Point three is, humanist believes that, listen to this, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose in the universe, to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

That's the spirit of Babel, of the Tower of Babel, of humanity at the time of trying to erect this permanent monument to themselves.

[5 : 53] Because as you look closely at these words, this is actually man's attempt at lasting significance for himself, man's attempt at security for himself.

You could say indeed it's not wrong to say it's man's attempt at immortality without God. Man's attempt to actually base himself properly and build up on it, you see, because this is deliberately saying that this city and its town was to reach into heaven.

It's man aiming high by his own ingenuity and effort but leaving God out of the calculation, out of the reckoning altogether.

And of course, what you end up with, and it's very relevant for our own day as well, what you end up with is the very opposite of what man was trying to achieve.

Because mankind here without God or trying to act without God were trying to achieve this lasting significance and security and immortality for themselves and by keeping themselves together in this manner, by erecting this great city, by preventing themselves being spread abroad as they were intending, that was their aim, that was their purpose, and the outcome was the very opposite because God came and intervened.

[7 : 19] God came and undid their efforts. He actually reversed it and brought about the opposite of what they were trying to achieve.

That is always going to be the case. What man tries to achieve by himself at some point or other either in history or in the final judgment, God is going to destroy.

God is going to bring to nothing. God is going to bring about the opposite of what was being intended. Let's look at these two things tonight.

First of all, man's ambitious project and then secondly, God's appropriate response. Man's ambitious project. Here it is, first of all, in verse 4.

Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in heavens. A city with its top in heavens. Now you look back to the previous chapter and you'll find something interesting there.

[8 : 22] A man called Nimrod in verses 8 to 11 in chapter 10 there. Therefore it is said Nimrod, who was fathered by Cush, was the first on earth to be a mighty man.

He was a mighty hunter before the Lord. Therefore it is said like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord, the beginning of his kingdom was Babel.

Then Erech, Akkad, and Kalne in the land of Sheenar are mentioned. That tells you that chapter 11 really has to be understood before you come really to look at the detail of chapter 10.

Here is the man to whom is attributed the beginnings of this Babel. So it looks like this great mighty man in natural terms was a leader at the time when this attempt was made by the children of men. And it's important that we notice that description. This is not the people of God. This is the children of men they're described as. This is actually humanity apart from God. Humanity deliberately leaving God out of it.

[9 : 25] Humanity not in faith but in the opposite of it in their own ingenuity seeking to bring about this lasting significance. And you notice the word ourselves ourselves and the way that it's actually repeated twice there in verse 4 they said come let us build ourselves or for ourselves a city and let us make a name for ourselves.

We'll see the significance of name in a minute but just focus on the word ourselves or for ourselves because that is very deliberately in the context telling us this is man seeking to achieve lasting fame lasting significance lasting security but independent of God.

Let's do this ourselves. Let's not actually take God into the reckoning at all. That is humanism right now as you see it and as you face it.

Now humanism you might say today as far as the British Humanist Association is concerned they don't have that many members compared to the whole population of the country.

but there are many people that are still humanists really in their thinking without being members of the British Humanist Association and the humanist way of thinking is really pretty much the same as the thinking of the natural man unless people are brought up under the gospel even though that

doesn't necessarily mean that you won't become a humanist but by and large so many millions of people in our own nation are humanist in practice even if they don't belong to this kind of organization so what we're saying is this is actually the world in which we live this is the world that we need to actually confront with the gospel this is the world that you meet when you go out with the gospel this is the humanist world that gathers themselves together against the gospel against the lord of the gospel against the people of the gospel against the church this is the thinking you meet with when you come to witness for Jesus and you try and establish the truth of scripture this is what you'll come across so so often different people will go by different names but essentially it's that humanist philosophy that sets about building without

[11 : 48] God deliberately leaving God out of it because he's not believed in nor as we've seen in that statement such things as an afterlife anything beyond the grave all of that is just put out of the picture altogether it's this life alone and you build to be as happy as you can in it and you help other people to be as happy as they can in it and that's it and that's the spirit of Babel that's the philosophy of building this city and tower in Babel aiming high but without God and now you see it's very inventive as well and that's interesting isn't it in the passage because it's not that these people are without particular skills or abilities some of them have huge ability intellectually and practically in other ways look at what's said there they found a plain in the land of Shinar they settled there they said to one another come let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly and they had brick for stone and bitumen or pitch for mortar even where there wasn't an abundance of what you would normally use to tie stones together securely they found a way of doing it and that's the sad thing that you find so many people discounting the idea of God from their thinking from their mind from their way of life using the excellent intellectual skills that they have and in fact have been given by God their creator but yet using them against

God against his word against his authority against his kingdom these people were given the skills by God as their creator but they're using them in a way that leaves them out of what they're doing and you look at humanism and every other type of atheistic philosophy in the world that you come across in our nation and you find very brilliant minds amongst them some of them of course are big and very famous like Richard Dawkins through writing books and through seminars and through the work that he's doing there is a brilliant mind but God doesn't come into the reckoning or rather when he does it's in order to dismiss it critically from the calculation altogether that's the spirit of Babel aiming to build a lasting monument to human achievement but doing it without

God then notice what they said let us make a name for ourselves after they had said let's make the city let us make a name for ourselves lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth now there's a lot of theology in that especially in the way that it refers to this name business because a name in the Bible is very often something that's filled with meaning people's names especially when they're named in relation to God as many in the Old Testament were of God's people that is but a name really you could say in the biblical sense of it and especially when it's used of God himself it has to do with reputation and what has contributed to that reputation just think about the way that is used for God himself how often the Bible

God himself speaks about his great name now he's not just using the word as a kind of label or a title he's not talking about the different titles that he gives to himself this is actually encompassing every title that he's given himself what he means really is the significance of who he is and what his reputation is as is displayed by his works remember Moses when he was earnestly praying to God after the golden calf incident when God had said leave me alone I'm going to destroy this people and I will make of you a great nation Lord what will you do for your great name what will the heathen say what will this do to your reputation you see for Moses reputation really primarily is God and only

God really has that reputation above every reputation that has to be zealously protected and even when he is there in prayer wrestling with God himself the reputation of God comes before him so mightily and it enters into the experience of every Christian for whom the reputation of God is so seriously important that they watch what they're doing and what they're saying because this reputation is attached to it not just their own reputation or their own name but the reputation of God and you remember David when in that famous chapter in 2 Samuel chapter 7 one of the great chapters in the Bible that stands out well David there you remember as he's talking to God and praying to God and dealing with God he is saying well what people is there like you people there is no people on the face of the earth like this people

[17 : 37] Israel whom God went out to redeem for himself to make for himself a great name to make for himself a reputation how does God make a reputation for himself primarily by saving people not that he doesn't have a reputation in terms of his judgment and justice as well negatively but the reputation is primarily in scripture on the side of God saving God bringing about salvation and bringing people to be saved but you see here there are people saying come let us make a name for ourselves let's look after our own reputation and never mind the reputation of God and the reputation of others who might follow God this is about us this is about ourselves let's build for ourselves a city the tower of which may reach up to heaven and let's make for ourselves a name that's humanism at work mankind trying to make a name for himself a lasting reputation a monument to his own ability and that's the way in which this is so relevant to our age in other words you could say this that the spirit of

Babel and these people at the time is not just simply trying to bring about fame or reputation to themselves it's actually doing it by robbing God of his it's taking what belongs to God a great name and transferring it to themselves and that's what humanism is about because it very deliberately the humanist association is well aware of what the gospel is what the church is who God is in the teaching of Christianity well aware of all of these things because you see them very readily debating such points on whenever you come across their statements or books or whatever they're very up for actually arguing very robustly in favor of their philosophy as an anti-God anti-theistic philosophy and they're very aware of what they're doing they're taking what Christians call as God's reputation and they're taking that reputation and saying no this is we're human beings the glory belongs to us we have the ability every human being as the statement said in the absence of an afterlife every human being can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life their own name their own security their own reputation hasn't our fall in Adam damaged us so much that a human being could come from one moment being in the presence of God and seeking his reputation above all to hiding in the bushes and coming to father descendants whose aim and ambition was their own reputation and that's what fallen humanity is about without

God without grace without God's intervention that's what you find here lest we be and indeed you could say something else about that it's not just opposition to the reputation that God ought to have and deliberately bringing that to themselves it's not just ambition this is actually rebellion because whatever words people can use this is actually rebellion against God against the creator against all that they know of as passed on to them from Noah as their father going right back through the generations this is a dismissal of God deliberately in terms of rebellion and for that reason it's very important well of some importance anyway and significance that the word the word Nimrod this man this man of great prowess who began this whole process of building this

Babel the word Nimrod in Hebrew means rebel that's truly significant the beginnings of Babel and Babylon are rooted in rebellion against God a deliberate overthrow of God's authority and God's law and then it says lest we be lest we be scattered or dispersed over the face of the earth and that too is contrary to the mandate that God gave to Noah when you go back to chapter 9 just look for a brief moment at verses 1 and verse 7 God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth same in verse 7 and you he says be fruitful and multiply team on the earth and multiply in it in other words

God's mandate to Noah to this man who had come out of the ark onto this new world if you like having been cleansed by this flood of judgment that God brought upon it as Noah stood in the door of the ark and as he was leaving the ark this is what God said to him you and your descendants this is my mandate this is my command to you spread abroad and multiply and be fruitful replenish the earth here is Babel saying let's keep this together let's actually act so that we're not scattered abroad on the face of the earth let's act contrary to what we understand the mandate of God to have been and be sure of this the philosophy of humanism whether it's called that or whether it's replicated in other forms the philosophy of humanism is not disorganized it is organized against the gospel it is organized against the mandates that God gives to his people it is organized against what God says to you to go out and replenish to go out and be a witness to him go out and bring blessing through the gospel to other people humanism will say

[24 : 25] I'm going to stand against that I don't believe in God I believe this damages human beings so I'm going to organize myself against this and I'm going to bring it to nothing and instead I'm going to put in its place this human philosophy that will no longer hopefully one day have anything to do with God or the idea of what's divine or supernatural that's man's ambitious project

and it's still being built it's still being attempted it's still going on in humanistic philosophies today look secondly at God's appropriate response first of all it says that the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of man had built this is God's response and it is an actual response to what he saw mankind doing why does it say that the

Lord came down to see the city and the town surely he knew all about it already of course he did he knew every brick that had gone into the building of this Babel and its tower however far up they managed to reach before they finished God knew every brick God knew every hand that had put these bricks into these walls but what it's saying here what it's showing us here is this that when God actually comes down to inspect something that he's going to actually frustrate and destroy he's not doing it without knowledge without taking account of every single thing that's happened God's judgment is not arbitrary God's judgment is not without him taking account of all the details for which he then brings about his judgment the Lord came down to see the city and the tower he came down as a surveyor he came down to actually look at this project in all its detail and he's telling us this so that we'll understand something about

God though he knows everything as he does he will have us to understand that he inspects minutely every single work that we do and if he is going to bring his judgment and condemnation upon anyone it will not be for no reason it will not be without relation to his life or her life God will say to all that he judges to everyone he judges and actually come to be lost in eternity which I hope none of us will ever be you are there for a reason I looked at your life I inspected your life I didn't find in your life the things I commended the things I appeal to you through the gospel to have in your life and because of that there is only one thing for me to do and that is to bring about your condemnation and you know this applies to all human beings that's why we're saying that it's important we see in the context that it's the children of men that are described in other words it actually brings in really the whole human race that's descended from Noah the children of men even if you could say that the line of Shem the line of faith were not as directly involved as the others that's open to question but we'll see in a minute that the line of

Shem the third son of Noah became the line of faith and that's significant but what you find people saying of course is well these details in the Bible these commands in the Bible and all these instructions in the Bible and all these requirements that Christians say God requires of them they have nothing to do with me I'm a humanist I'm not a Christian and the Bible has no relevance to my life so I don't need to live or try to live or try to believe any of these details that's in the Bible they're just not relevant to me I live my life as a humanist and in humanist philosophy and that's what I have as an outlook it doesn't matter God is still God and you see here are human beings in their own estimation and by their own ability and in their own

God given ingenuity trying to actually climb up to heaven and they meet God coming down even if they've said for all their lives up to now I don't believe in God I'm going to build without God still God comes down because God is God and God exists even if people say he doesn't and dismiss him from their thinking doesn't make any difference at the end of the day God is going to be God and when God comes down then God will come down and every single upward attempt of man without God will will at some point meet with God coming down just to prove the fact I do exist and I exist as I have described myself in my world and I will do consistently what I have to do as

[30 : 15] God and we have to try and present those sort of points to people however difficult however much you will find yourself opposed you still have to try and get through and hope that God blesses your witness by saying to people look it doesn't matter what you believe just think what if God is God then these things are bound to be true about him what are you going to do then if when you're halfway up with your building project suddenly you see God coming down in judgment that's the gospel that's part of the essence of the gospel that we seek to witness to and proclaim so God came down to see he came first of all just to give an account of the fact that he wasn't going to act without perfect knowledge of the situation but then he said come let us go down behold he says they are as one come now in verse seven let us go down and they're confused their language now it's interesting that that actually echoes what you find in verse three exactly here are these godless or people trying to act independent of God saying come let us make bricks and here is god saying come let us go down here is man saying come let us mount up and here is god saying come let us go down and it's faint at that stage in revelation but just like in chapter one verse twenty nine you've got language that begins to actually open up the fact that there are more there is more than one person in the god that god is a trinity of persons although you could say here maybe he's speaking

to the angels too that he uses to accomplish things but there is undoubtedly an indication there of trinitarian life and the being of god which the bible then expands on as time goes on through the years god revealed more of that and particularly through the coming of the son of god himself that's another great issue of course that we haven't time to do anything more than mention but just think of this how solemn is it when human beings are saying and busy in carrying out this declaration come let us do this come let us go up and they meet on the way down this trinitarian god in all the immensity of his being in all the wonder of his being in these three persons that are together the one god or a thought to meet that god with nothing but your own ingenuity and your own philosophy and your own attempts in your hand or a prospect but he comes down and he says come let us confuse their speech this is his way of scattering this is the way of bringing about what they were trying to prevent by their own efforts now language is what's mentioned they come and let us confuse their language so that they may not understand one another's speech so the

Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth in other words the dispersal came about because God came down to confuse their languages to confuse them by them no longer being of the one speech language is a unifying feature of any people English unifies yourselves some of your Gaelic speakers Gaelic unifies those who speak Gaelic they unify they're unified under that particular language it has a unifying effect just as English has for those who speak English all who speak English can say they understand one another so they're unified by that fact that's how it was before this attempt in Babel but when God came to confuse the languages and multiply the languages and people then dispersed the confusion meant that they couldn't understand the confusion meant they'd lost something very precious

God had actually intervened and turned things around to bring about the opposite of what they with their own attempt had tried to maintain or bring about when you try and translate from one language to another even experts say that sometimes they get things wrong or sometimes words that they use mean different things in different languages and you have to be careful that when you're in conversation that way and using an interpreter that you're not actually introducing something that will annoy or something that will mislead or something that's confusing for those who are listening in their own language to the interpreter so you can see the difficulties the complexities that arose from this very action of God frustrating man's attempt to build without him he did it by confusing their languages and you notice this word there in verse nine therefore its name was called Babel because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth and from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of the earth well why are we mentioning the word there because it's significant in Hebrew the Hebrew in which the Old Testament was written the word there is very very like the word for name the word for name is shame just like you would say S-H-E-M but it's just two two consonants in Hebrew S and M with a vowel in between shame and the word for place is sham or sham and the reason we're mentioning that is this that it's a feature that actually ties together a few things in this passage because when God is saying the name of the place was called Babel because there there see the word name is very like the word there and what God is saying by that is that it's not so much the place and the name of the place that's important but there in the sense of what happened there the event that took place there the actions that took place there that's what drew the judgment of God It was called Babel because there God confused their language.

[37 : 48] And it was there. It was because of the attempts of man there to live without God. That's what drew God's attention and God's judgment there.

What happened at that point is what God is mentioning. But the word there, as we say, is related to the word name.

And then you carry that into the next verse. And from then on you can read through into the remainder of Genesis. Because the name of this son of Noah, you'll notice, is called Shem. The same consonants as in the word for name and the word for place or there. And what you see by that is that Shem is now mentioned.

Connecting in the very form of the word with what has just been mentioned about Babel and about God's judgment. But it's not the end of the matter. Because as you begin reading about Shem and the generations of Shem, you don't have to go very far on until you come to Terah.

[39 : 01] And then from Terah you read about Abraham. And then with Abraham you're into God's covenant with this individual. Which then opens up the whole prospect of God's saving work in redemption.

In other words, what you find there in the line of faith is pretty much the same as what Paul wrote to the Romans. Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

The sin of Babel did not actually stand in the way of God achieving his saving purpose. Because the place Babel, this shame, this name of the place and this there that took place.

It leads to shame. The name of this son who comes to be an ancestor of Abraham. Who comes into covenant with God by God's grace. And that's why we read from Acts chapter 2.

Because there's a remarkable detail in Acts chapter 2. We need to just be fairly brief with it because the time has passed. But just notice this before we conclude.

[40 : 16] You know what happened there as it's described. This was the coming of the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit in power on the day of Pentecost. And if you look at that chapter, it's so significant.

Where you find in verse 8, these people saying, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? How is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language, Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians?

It's a list that takes you east and then west and then north and then south. And you compare it with Genesis 11 verses 8 to 9 and you see something remarkable happening.

The scattering that's mentioned into all these regions of the earth in chapter 11 of Genesis in consequence of God coming down is reversed at Babylon in consequence of God coming down by the Holy Spirit and redemption.

God reversed Babel for his people on the day of Pentecost. Although, of course, that is Christ's work behind it completely.

[41 : 45] But there you see is God in redemption. Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. What man tried to achieve, lasting immortality for himself, without God.

God frustrated. God did away with. God intervened. They left off building that city. But what God has done in Christ is a lasting building work.

A tower that does reach to heaven. The destiny of his people is there. The city of God that Revelation describes as so magnificent.

Where man's ambition falls so far short, God's grace achieves this redemption.

This significance. This immortality. That's what's come to us through the gospel.

[42 : 55] Let's pray. Our gracious Lord and God, we thank you for the way in which your words so wonderfully captures for us throughout the course of history events that are tied together in your works.

And although we find, O Lord, that element of judgment in the events of Babel, we bless you that these were indeed reversed in the event of Pentecost. That your spirit has come to reside in your people.

That you have come to give them, though they heard in all their own languages, yet there is no confusion. And that confusion has been reversed in the oneness of your people as they come to know your voice.

Blessed to us, we pray your word once again. Amen. And grant that through this week we may give constant thanks to you for the way in which your grace unifies and reverses what sin has done.

Here as we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.