

Genesis 11:1-9 (ES)

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, the reading was a little while ago, so I think it's a good idea to open the Black Bible in front of you. Turn to page 8. We're looking at Genesis 11. Our text tonight reveals the ultimate aspirations of the human heart.
- It shows us in stark terms, when humans are left to our own devices, what we will naturally do. And it reveals God's gracious response.
- All of us here have been blessed with the gift of life. All of us have been made in God's image, in his likeness, to represent him over his creation. All of us have had God breathe his very breath of life upon us.
- In him we live, and we move, and we have our being. And Genesis 11 reveals what humanity naturally will do with God's gracious blessings.
- It's a case study. It's a prototypical text that plays out again and again in every human heart. I've divided it into three parts.
- [1 : 1 5] First, we'll look at life in Babel. We'll then look at God's response. And then finally, we'll look at life in God's kingdom. So let's look first at life in Babel from verse 1.
- Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. It's a good start. It's a picture of human unity. There is one language.
- Humans can communicate universally and therefore collaborate and form a coherent society. Language unites us. We can communicate with one another and therefore we can commune together.
- It's a huge blessing. And so what does a united humanity do with this blessing? In verse 2, they migrate from the east and find a plain in Shinar and they settle there.
- You may remember when Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden, they are sent east. East of Eden. And the flood represents a recreation. It's a restart.
- [2 : 1 7] It's a new chance. God has blessed humanity. And now Noah's descendants strive to return to the garden. A return to Eden.
- To life as it was supposed to be. It's a return to a life of blessing and rest. But in their journey, they stop. They find a nice spot and they decide to settle there.
- And in verse 3, they say to one another, come, let's make bricks and let's burn them thoroughly. And then in verse 4, come, let's build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens.
- And let us make a name for ourselves. Lest we be displaced over the whole earth. Humanity has been blessed by God.
- Noah and his family are saved from the flood. God makes a covenant with Noah and all living things. He blesses humanity and he invites them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.
- [3 : 1 7] But what does humanity do with God's blessings and God's command? They say, let's build ourselves a city and with tower in the heavens.

So that we may make a name for ourselves. That's what we do with God's blessings. Let's make a name for ourselves.

And that becomes their life's purpose. See, life in Babel is a life built upon pursuing your own greatness, your own glory, and your own name.

Life in Babel is receiving the blessings of God. Your life, your family, your community, a shared language, and using all of it. Not for God's purposes, but for your own glory.

The people of Babel decide to use their common tongue, their ingenuity, their technological advances, their community, and their resources to make their own name great.

[4 : 21] What an ancient idea. There was a famous atheist and a comedian named Ricky Gervais, and he was asked by another famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, what gets him out of bed in the morning?

What is Gervais' purpose in life? And he answered, you need to have worth. You need to feel in yourself that you have worth.

Friends, family, a loving relationship. Just because we're human, and that's how we are built. And for me personally, something creative. You need to do something, and enjoy it, and fill your free time, and look back and say, I made that.

It's a pretty good answer. You need to have a sense of self-worth. And for Ricky Gervais, that comes through community, and it comes through creating.

Well, look at the citizens of Babel. Let's build a city with a tower to the heavens. Why? To make our name great, lest we're dispersed over the whole earth.

[5 : 28] It's the same answer as Gervais. Self-worth through community and creating. To live receiving God's blessings, but rejecting him.

That's life in Babel. The purpose of Babel is to make our name great. Did you notice there's no room for God in Babel?

It's about my greatness at his expense. God is not great. I am. That's why the people of Babel want their tower to reach heaven.

Their aspirations are to ascend to heaven through their ingenuity, through their technology, through their shared goals and language, to replace God with themselves, to invade God's kingdom, and overthrow it, so that their name may be great, not his.

Babel is grasping at the serpent's lie that we can be like God. We can attain divinity and all the greatness and glory that entails through our own power, camaraderie, and resourcefulness.

[6 : 39] Let us make a name for ourselves. That's the motto that hangs over the gate of Babel. But it's not exclusive to Babel.

In our world, many people call it the American dream. It's the trajectory that all of us are taught to soar toward. We are told to live life to make our name great.

That transcendence, that heaven, is reached by building ourselves up, by pursuing greatness in any and every facet of life. We celebrate Olympic champions.

We celebrate actors who win Oscars despite their morals. We celebrate billionaires who have made their names great through commerce and capitalism, and now literally ascend to heaven through their own spaceships.

We're raised with a Babylonian outlook on life. We are taught to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and make a name for yourself.

[7 : 45] To attain everything you desire by asserting yourself and reaching for the stars. That prosperity and popularity and pleasure are all within reach for all of us if we would just pursue them.

The tower of Babel can be built, we are taught, and we can be great. We can become like God through our own effort and aspiration.

That is the goal, and that is the promise of Babel. And we see it today everywhere.

I see it in my own heart. It's not that the people of Babel are not religious. It's that their spirituality is self-worship. They are striving for self-glory through work and achievement.

It's a religion of work to glorify themselves. Let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly. And let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top and heavens.

[8 : 55] And let us make a name for ourselves. Let us use our technological advances, our resources, our ingenuity, our collective language, all to make our name great.

Does this sound familiar? It should. One of the most secular places in the world, statistically, is the Silicon Valley in California. It's the global headquarters of the tech industry.

There's a new book I've been reading this week called Work, Pray, Code, that argues the Silicon Valley is not anti-religion, but rather tech companies have harnessed the spiritual hunger amongst their employees to create a new religion that is centered on work, where the place of meaning and belonging and purpose and greatness and faith is where you work.

The author Carolyn Chen writes, Today, companies are not just economic institutions. They have become meaning-making institutions that offer a gospel of fulfillment and divine purpose in a capitalist cosmos.

Companies have adopted key elements of religious organizations. They have a mission, values, practices, ethics, even an origin story, so that the spiritual hunger amongst workers may be harnessed and directed toward making the company great.

[10 : 23] It's a religion of work. It's Babel. Most computer engineers in the Silicon Valley work 50 to 70 hours a week, not just for the money, but because they believe in their work.

They believe that through working, they're making the world a better place, and that they're making a name for themselves. So they find meaning in what they do.

They form deep bonds with their co-workers as they strive for a common goal. Interestingly, in the tech sector, like in Babel, there is a common language. There's code that unites all the companies in a shared pursuit.

Let's build the tallest tower. Let's build the biggest company. Together, let's make our names great. It's a religion of work centered on the self or the community with the goal of greatness, of making a name for ourselves and somehow transcending beyond this mere human existence to a perfect, heaven-like future.

In her book, Chen calls it techtopia, an engineered society where people find their highest fulfillment in their work. But the Bible calls it Babel.

[11 : 40] Let's worship at the altar of work. Let's make a name for ourselves through our work. And in so doing, let's make our names great.

Let's secure our future. And let's replace God with ourselves. The building of Babel is a direct disobedience to the vocation of humanity that God has given us to fill the earth.

So it's not that work is bad. It's not that work is bad. It's that the people of Babel have taken the blessings of God and are now using them to strive for an ultimate goal that's selfish and sinful.

Their work, not a God-given blessing, has now become their idol. They are making themselves great at God's expense through what they do.

God has commanded humanity to be fruitful and to fill the whole earth. To represent God and to bring his blessing to the whole world. But the people of Babel don't want to fill the earth.

[12 : 42] They don't care about the earth or about God or about his purpose for them. They care about themselves. About their own greatness. About their own security. And comfort.

So they build the city to protect themselves from fulfilling God's plan for them. They think if we build Babel and we reach heaven, we won't need to fill the earth. We can replace God with ourselves.

And we can now rule the universe as we see fit. See, life in Babel is a life of disobedience to God. Of building an altar yourself and worshiping at it.

It's maybe the most prevalent religion of our day. Perhaps any day. And it seeps into all of our lives. And it can even contaminate the mission of the church.

It's the worship of self. It's sin. It's a life where you are acting as though you are God. Where your name and its glory is all that matters.

[13 : 42] Where work can achieve for you heaven. Where you build walls around yourself and a towering temple to worship your own vanity. Is that where you're currently living?

You could be living in Babel while being a bishop. Or a parent. Or a student. Or retired. There's a constant temptation for a preacher to be preaching in order to make their own name great and not the Lord's.

See, it's a perennial problem for all of us. Because Babel is our default address. So, ask yourself.

Are you living to make your own name great? Part two. How does God respond to Babel?

Look at what happens to those who live in Babel. We're told in verse five, The Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. Remember, the plan was to build a temple to themselves that is so marvelous it invades and conquers heaven.

[14 : 49] But here we're told that God has to leave heaven and come down to earth to see their city. Despite all the resources and all the technology and the unity of the whole of humanity and willful, selfish, sinful rebellion, God is not threatened in the least.

His throne is unmoved. Heaven is not invaded by human ingenuity. God has to leave heaven and come down to earth just to see our puny tower that does not glorify their name, but rather amplifies their sin and their delusion.

Humans aren't created to worship ourselves. We're made to worship God and to enjoy him forever. We're made to make his name great. This is where life to the full is experienced because it's what we were made to do.

It's how we are built, to quote Gervais. God blesses us so that we may bless him and others in his name. We are to be constantly extending the blessings and the praise of God, not hoarding his blessings for our own praise.

And so God frustrates their plan. He confuses the people. He introduces many languages so they can't achieve the wicked scheme they devise. Humanity collaborating in sin does not lead to glory and security.

[16 : 12] But rather to division and dislocation. Babel is abandoned. Its plans are thwarted. A life spent making yourself great will end in divine judgment.

God remains sovereign in the story. His power is absolute. He is almighty. His purposes will not fail, despite human sin and rebellion.

Humanity will fill the earth. They are humbled. And they are scattered. All the technology and all the resources and all of humanity united in a common pursuit, without God, does not result in the betterment of the world.

Or even in the betterment of humanity. But in rebellion against God. And ultimately, therefore, even greater suffering and pain. And as we look out, that seems to articulate the whole arc of human history pretty well.

Technology cannot save us. A capitalist economy does not save us. The United Nations does not save us. Because our central problem is sin.

[17 : 27] It's Babel's problem. It's humanity trying to make a name for ourselves at the expense of God and his glory. And this story replays in every age, in every nation, in every human heart, as long as sin persists.

This story ends with the very things the Babylonians were afraid of. Humanity is scattered, divided, dislocated, and they're humbled. Building Babel has led to the exact opposite of what the citizens were striving for.

The story ends on a very bleak note. But in the pages that follow Genesis 11, we begin to see God's plan to fix our brokenness.

To heal our division. And to once again unite humanity under his sovereign reign. And God's plan is to pick one person.

An old, unremarkable man named Abram. And through him to bless the whole world. So if you still have your Bibles open, if you look to the next chapter, Genesis 12.

[18 : 36] We read of God's plan to give this unremarkable Abram. The very things the impressive people of Babel were longing for. God says to Abram, I'm going to make your name great.

I'm going to give you a promised land to be your home. God offers Abram security and greatness and blessing. It's all the things the people at Babel aspired to. But without God, they could never achieve.

In Babel, the people want to ascend to heaven to be great. But the way to heaven is not for us to try to get there by our own effort. But for God to come to earth.

To leave his greatness. To become the least among us. To bless us with undeserved mercy and grace. To become less so that we might become more.

And that is what he does. Part three. Life in the kingdom of God. Later in scripture, we find the way to God.

[19 : 40] The way to heaven is not Babel. It's God himself. He is the way. He comes to earth to bring us to heaven. More than that, he's come to the earth to redeem the earth.

And actually bring heaven here. The story of scripture ends with a vision of heaven. Depicted as this glorious city coming down to earth.

The city of God descending and becoming the eternal home for all who believe in him. And in this city, the new Jerusalem. The city of God.

The kingdom of heaven. It's made available to all of us. Not through our own striving. But through God's own son. We find out Jesus is the way.

Not Babel. He is what connects heaven and earth. Because he is the king of the kingdom of heaven. See, Babel is reaching for the kingdom of heaven. And all its glory while rejecting its king.

[20 : 40] But Jesus, heaven's king, comes to earth. And he tells a potential follower at the end of John 1. That if you follow Jesus, you will see heaven opened.

And the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man. Jesus himself is the bridge. He is the tower. He is the way that heaven and earth are united.

It's not our work. It's not our technology. It's not our ingenuity or our resources or our connections or our camaraderie. It's Christ. He makes the way for us to come to the Father in heaven.

Jesus comes to earth not to glorify himself. Not to make his own name great. But to bring praise to his heavenly Father. Jesus has the exact opposite mentality of the people of Babel.

Jesus prays, Father, glorify your name. He teaches us to pray, our Father in heaven. Hallowed be your name. Let your name be made holy.

[21 : 43] Let your name become greater. The night before his death, Jesus says, Not my will, Father, but yours be done. See, at Babel, the goal is to make your name great.

But in the kingdom of heaven, its king, Jesus, shows us the way is to be a servant. To become as a slave sent to serve.

To ensure that God's name is glorified. Jesus embodies this. He's God the Son. And yet he empties himself, becoming a human being.

And as a human, he submits to die for the sins of the whole world. Jesus had no sin. He died for your sin. He died for my sin.

He became sin who knew no sin. That through him our sin may be put away. And remembered no more against us. Contrast the anticipated glory of Babel with the evident shame of the cross.

[22 : 46] But God flips the script. Babel gets buried under God's judgment. It's not a picture of greatness, but of arrogance and sin and shame.

But also Jesus' shameful death on the cross becomes the most glorious event in all of history. Because Jesus emptied himself and humbled himself and sought God's glory above his own.

And he gave his life to submit to God's will. We're told God has highly exalted him. And he has bestowed upon him, listen, the name that is above every name.

So that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow. In heaven and on earth and under the earth. And every tongue, every language confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

To the glory of God the Father. It's Jesus who will undo the sin of Babel. So living life in Babel, living to seek your own glory, will result in frustration and isolation and judgment and shame.

[23 : 55] But living a cross-centered life, a life lived in response to God's grace, offered upon Christ's cross, is a life of humble service to God.

Of becoming a living sacrifice. And despite the appearance of being shameful, small or humiliating, it will result in God's glory within his kingdom.

It's a tale of two cities. Life in Babel is defined by seeking to make your name great. It's the American dream. It's modern self-actualization. And it's a direct affront to the will of God.

And it will result in isolation, frustration, and judgment. But life in Christ, a life lived pursuing the kingdom of heaven, is a life of seeking to glorify God.

It's the life all of us were created to enjoy. It's a life of sacrifice, service, of humility, perhaps of pain, but ultimately a life that leads to forgiveness, to community, to holiness, to fulfillment, and to glory.

[25 : 06] And to finish, I ask a very simple question. In your life, right now, where are you living?

Have you been living following the motives of Babel? Or have you been living following Jesus as he leads you to the kingdom of heaven? And the simplest way to know where you live, Babel or in Christ, is to look at your life and ask yourself, am I living to make myself great?

Or am I living to make God great? Am I living to secure my future? Or to see Jesus' kingdom extended and spread through me?

Friends, build your life on the rock, not on the sand of Babel. Let's found ourselves on the words and deeds of Jesus. Let's live our life for his glory.

Let's live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Praise be to God. Amen.