

Building a Mystery (2)

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[0 : 00] Well, now let's turn back to Genesis chapter 11, which is in the Bible in front of you on page 8, the Tower of Babel.

And as you do that, I just need to say this is not a low-rise passage. This is not an architectural passage. It's not anti-tall buildings. It's not anti-technology.

It's actually much more about how deeply engaged with our culture God is. And the Tower of Babel explains why Martin Luther King's speech, I Have a Dream, is so important for us and why it will never work.

It explains why we need an organisation like the United Nations and why it will never work. And it explains why this world will always need peacekeepers.

It explains why we use language the way we do and why so many people misunderstand me, which is a uniquely preacher's problem, let me tell you.

[1 : 13] It explains our desire for unity and our failure to reach it. It explains something, I think, of what is behind our absolute fascination and addiction to technology.

And it also demonstrates that those who want to follow Jesus Christ in this world are going to be the true rebels. Because the Tower of Babel is like another garden of Eden.

And now instead of one couple, we have all of humanity united in language and united in purpose and in planning and in technology and in effort. And what they achieve is a monumental, arrogant rebellion against God which has catastrophic results which are with us still today.

Even the structure of the passage, I don't know if you noticed just as it was read, tells us this. The first four verses are about man's plans, human's plans. And then from verse 5, there's a hinge and then we have God's plans and at the centre of the passage is this little phrase, verse 5, and the Lord came down to see the city which is a huge affront to our human pride when we've been trying to build the tallest thing the world has ever seen, you see.

So let's have a look at these two sections. First, the plans of a united humanity in verses 1 to 4 and in verse 1 we start after the story of the flood.

[2 : 37] And if you look at the verse you can see the emphasis is on the complete unity of humanity. One language. Everyone is speaking the same language. Everyone is understanding themselves just as God had given in the beginning.

But then in chapter 2 a shadow moves across the page because they migrate east. And do you remember out of the garden Adam and Eve were evicted east and the Lord set an angel with a sword at the eastern entrance.

And now they're going further and further away from the Lord and they're also going into the land of Shinar which is where Babylon is. And then verse 3 they say to each other come let's make bricks burn them thoroughly and they had bricks for stone and bitumen for mortar.

They come across a problem they solve it. They invent an entirely new technology that the world has not seen before. They're not going to let lack of rocks get in the way of their grand plans.

But it's when we come to verse 4 we see the real purpose. Let me read it for you. They say come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let's make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

[3 : 54] Now at one level on the surface it's a wonderful decision don't you think? I mean the enterprise is completely immersed in spirituality.

They're united and they're building something which has a spiritual purpose. They've brought their spirituality into their marketplace and they're being all that they can be aren't they?

They're living the dream they're building their self-esteem and fulfilling their potential. Thank you.

It's impossible for us I think not to be touched with the dream of unity.

I looked up Martin Luther King's speech the other day and you know I have a dream he says that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

[5 : 06] I mean you would have to have a heart of stone not to be moved by that dream and by that preaching and every tribe and every nation dreams of unity we dream of conquering disease of ridding ourselves of poverty of making a better world for ourselves and a better world for our children and the way we're going to bring it about is by political unity and by technological advance.

If only we could just walk together we would somehow get over our problems. But then why was Dr. King killed in a hail of bullets?

And why does our technological skill so far outstrip our moral ability? And why does every political promise of a new world a new world order end up as a tyranny?

You see God's response to what's happening at Babel is very important because what we're given here in chapter 11 are the three fundamental signs of rebellion that mark every human culture in one way shape or form and mark every individual human heart.

There are three of them. They want to build a tower to the heavens, they want to make a name for themselves and they want not to be scattered. And those three look like this.

[6 : 26] The first is the sin of pride and arrogance and the tool that they use for their pride is their common language. And they're trying to give meaning to the world apart from God.

The second of making a name for themselves is the sin of unbelief. And the tool that they're using is their technology. And what they're doing is they're trying to create significance for themselves apart from God.

And then the third is the sin, it's just flat out disobedience. Remember God commanded them to fill the earth. And the tool that they use is political unity and what they are trying to do is to build a security apart from God.

I just want to spend a moment on each so that we understand them more deeply. See the first purpose is that they will build a tower so high that it's going to reach up and give them access into heaven.

It's an audacious, spectacularly arrogant thing to do because heaven is the place of God. And God had created man and woman in a beautiful garden home and they'd rebelled against God and they'd been evicted from the garden.

[7 : 37] And if you've been here with us over the last eight chapters the pattern is that man and woman continually reject God and continually say we want to play God. And they now want to build a tower into heaven not just to refuse God to allow us, it's not just saying God you can't control my home here, it's saying God we're going to come into your home, we're going to invade your place, we don't need you at all thank you very much, we will occupy, we will be gods.

The other day I was in chapters on Broadway and Granville and as you walk in just beside the front door there is a book rack and there was Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*.

I notice it's been reduced by 30%. I'm not sure what to make of that. but around the back of the rack almost exactly opposite where the Dawkins' book was was a book with this big title *Why God Won't Go Away*.

I felt like grabbing the rack and swinging it round but you'll be pleased to know I didn't do that. See what the builders of Babel are doing is the same thing really as Adam and Eve were doing, they want to cross the boundary, they want to say we don't like the boundary you've made God, we are going to cross it, we are going to replace God with us.

And how do they do it? They just speak, they say come, let us build this tower with its top in the heavens. Simple, exciting, but they now are using their language you see, they're using their language to deceive themselves that they can do more than they really can do.

[9 : 19] Now language is used to defy God. It's the words that bind them together, it's the language that gives strength to their defiance. And because you see it's through language that we give meaning to the world, what they are trying to do is they're trying to find meaning apart from God, in defiance of God.

And that is what our language does, it serves our pride and our arrogance whenever we seek meaning apart from God. That's the first thing they do. The second thing they do is this, they say let

us make a name for ourselves and the way we're going to do it is with our brilliant technology. This is very simple. Who names you? It's the person who brings you into the world. Who named man and woman? It was God. And they are saying God, we are not content with the name that you have given us.

We are so enthralled with our technological brilliance, we've got to create a new name that will bear the magnitude of our magnificence to the world. world.

Now, we need to think about this. This is the problem and this I think is the temptation of technology. Technology is never just neutral.

[10:35] This passage is saying to us that the invention of technologies and the use of technologies is a deeply spiritual exercise. It is part of God's great gift to us to be created as the image of God and to exercise dominion over this world.

But the problem is how we use these things. And if our use of technology is motivated by unbelief, then technology grows in its spiritual significance so that we find significance in the technology and in what we can do with the technology apart from God.

We don't need God. We'll make a name for ourselves apart from him. This is very helpful. I cannot think of any generation in history that has been more infatuated with their own technology as ours. It's not just that we use so much and that we're dependent on it. Mountains and mountains of useless technology. But there has been, I think, a spiritual shift in our culture.

We have grown increasingly besotted with the very idea of technological advance. If something is new, if it's the latest release, it just has to be better. A friend of mine went to a fundraiser recently.

[11:54] It was not a Christian fundraiser. It was for some work in Africa. And they had an open mic during the fundraiser. And all sorts of people came up to the mic and said, I know where you can get a hold of an ultrasound machine.

And I know where you can get a hold of a whole hospital theatre. A friend told me the absolutely unchallenged assumption in anyone's mind was that Western technology was the solution to all of Africa's evils.

You see, our gadgets and our technological toys used to carry the promise with them of a better life. You know, use these toys and you'll spend less time working, more time with family and friends, shorter work weeks.

But we're all slaves to email and to phones and to that thing. What's it called? Blackberry. Which you can use in church. Have I put an idea in your mind?

[13:01] Maybe I should have a little screen. No, no, no. See, I can remember when I bought my first laptop. I was a student at Regent.

And I saved up and I bought this laptop and I put it in the car, put a seatbelt over it. True story. To drive home. And as I drove home, I thought to myself, my life is going to be different now. But you see, each new gadget comes along and offers us something new and wonderful which we just have to have.

Ten years ago, they added digital cameras to cell phones. It was hailed as a categorically positive thing to do. And it's created a whole market of voyeurism, internet sites of humiliation, and it's changed our private lives.

One of the simplest illustrations of this Bron and I had the privilege a number of years ago of going to Israel with a number of pastors from different denominations. We were the only Anglicans on the tour.

[14:10] And we were constantly evangelised. That's for another sermon though. One of the pastors had a camera, a video camera, and he had it up in front of his eye all the time.

All the time. Breakfast, during Bible study, Garden of Gethsemane. He just had this thing going all the time. And I felt very much, when we were on the Sea of Galilee, like hawking it over the side. And he would have been happy with that just so long as it had been filmed, I'm sure. But you see, when he gets home, he's got hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of hours of videotape, but he missed it.

He wasn't there. And somehow technology interferes with our experience. Somehow it changes the experience. It's not neutral. The third, let me just quickly, the third issue in Babel is just disobedience.

We do not want to be scattered. We want to have our political unity. We want to have this security apart from God. And I want to say to you that these three things, these three purposes, cannot be

separated.

[15 : 24] You can't separate pride from disobedience, from unbelief. If it's an action of pride, it'll always be disobedient, it'll always have unbelief involved with it.

And Babel, I think, is telling us something this morning that is deeply practical. The promise of our language and the promise of our technology and the promise of our unity is so powerful because there is a truth in it.

There's a half-truth in it. We are created by God to rule this world, not in defiance of him, but in love with him. And part of this dominion, part of being in his image, is exercising clever technologies and naming and language and use of creation.

But whenever we take God's gifts and use them in a way that we create meaning apart from God or significance apart from God or security apart from God, it always ends up getting us the opposite. Anxiety, futility, emptiness and boredom. We don't have time this morning to develop it, but I think you ought to think through carefully the connection between these three things, language, technology and unity, and how they're used in our culture together.

[16 : 42] Let me give you two trivial illustrations. This week, TELUS announced it's going to offer pornographic photos and videos for their cell phone customers to download.

But in the announcement, they don't call the pictures pornographic. They call them adult. And the article called them naughty. You see what's happening with the language? See, one is we're very mature and the other is it's perfectly innocent.

We increasingly use spiritual language to describe the unassailable progress of medical science, medical miracles, you see. Twenty years ago, Neil Postman wrote this wonderful book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, where he just, he tracked out the effects of television on our conversation. And he says, what's happened in the long term is that television has changed and transformed conversation into an entertainment. That now issues of public discourse that are weighty, they're a thing of the past.

And the solution, of course, is bigger bandwidth and bigger televisions. No, it's not. What is the solution? Well, we come to the second half of the passage and very quickly we look at the plans of the gracious God.

[17 : 57] There's a lovely irony in verse 5. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. You see, here is the highest pinnacle of human achievement.

It's so pathetic and puny, God can't even see it from heaven. See, he's got to come down and see it. It's wonderful, isn't it? Verses 7 and 8.

Come, let us go down. And they confuse their language that they may not understand one another. And that's what he does and scatters them across the face of the earth. That is an act of judgment and it's an act of grace and salvation.

With one word, God divides their languages. And what they had feared most now comes true. Their carefully constructed unity, their brilliant technological inventions, fail.

And from now on, humanity will never be able to globally unite, to pull off that technical coup, to run the world without God.

[19 : 11] And the story finishes with another irony. God renames Babel. In all the languages of this time, the word Babel means gate of the gods, access to the gods.

And God says, no, it's confusion. Every time we demonstrate our arrogance and our unbelief and our disobedience, every time we try and create a stairway to heaven, it ends in confusion.

It's a wonderful passage and I do hope you take it and think it through further today. As we leave it, we need to step back and say that the Bible says we cannot understand this passage unless we see in it double grace.

There's double grace here. And I want to look at two New Testament passages quickly with you to show you. The first is Acts 17. If you turn to the back of the Bible, to Acts chapter 17.

Page 130. The Apostle Paul is preaching to a group who are not Christians in Athens, the Areopagus.

[20 : 21] And in verse 26, he speaks about God and he says this, God made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation.

Why? That they should seek God in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. You see, the racial boundaries, the national boundaries were God's doing in the first place.

And the reason he did it was so that we would seek after him and search for him. It's a great blessing. It's the blessing of frustration, you see. See, the divisions and the frustrations are a massive problem for the world.

But it is a frustration to our pride. And it's a frustration to our false unity and to our pretensions to play God. It's an antidote to our constant attempt to try and destroy the world.

And God keeps reminding us that our true unity is in him, that he will give us a name, that he will open the gate of glory to us. And that the frustrations that we experience tell us that even our finest technological triumphs are foolishness in the things of God.

[21 : 40] Babel tells us that we are always going to live in a divided world. And I think as Christians, we ought to work for unity. We ought to use all the skill and technology and political processes at our disposal for unity, knowing that true unity only comes from God himself.

That's the first grace. And the second grace is a mirror of the day God came down to Babel and confused the languages. And it is the day God came down again in the person of his Holy Spirit, this time to unite languages.

And we go to Acts chapter 2, of course. Back a few pages. Just verse 6.

At the sound, at the sound, the multitude came together and they were bewildered because each one heard them speaking in their own language. The whole world has been gathered there.

I mean, it's very interesting. The nations who are mentioned in the later verses almost perfectly correspond to the nations in Genesis 10. Jesus Christ had died.

[22 : 56] He'd been raised again. He'd gone to heaven. He'd said, go to Jerusalem, wait for the Spirit. When the Spirit of Christ comes, he gives back to us what Babel wanted to try and take for itself.

Genuine understanding. Genuine community and unity, irrespective of skin color and language. The Holy Spirit breaks this barrier because Christ has broken the one big barrier.

So, let me conclude. The dream of Babel, which is a half-good dream, it'll never come about by our cleverness or our technology.

It'll never come about by political unity. It'll never come about except through God. It'll never come about apart from God because it comes from him alone.

It's one of the reasons why language is so important to us in the Christian community. Because the church begins as a new language community in the book of Acts. A new language where real communication is possible because of Jesus Christ.

[24 : 04] So, in our speaking and in our singing and in our praying, we try and do the opposite of manipulation and deception and coercion. And this is the double grace of Babel.

On the one hand, God protects us from ourselves and from the effects of our own sin. And on the second, he gives us his spirit who brings us to heaven, who gives us a name and forms us into a unity.

This is the ministry of the spirit. It is to give us the meaning of Christ in our lives, the significance of Christ in our lives and the security of Christ in our lives.

And Jesus says, all we need to do is to ask him for his spirit and he will give him to us. So, let's do that, shall we? As we kneel and pray. Amen.