

Building a Mystery (1)

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Date: 21 January 2007

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- [0 : 00] Let's bow our heads and pray. Our Father, you are the source of all that is good and all that is light, and we pray that you would shine in our hearts through your word now and that you would give us love that endures and faith that holds and hope that trusts in the coming of Christ, for we ask in his name.
- Amen. Amen. Please be seated. Amen. Genesis chapter 10 on page 8. And first of all, congratulations to Julie for such a fantastic job at reading Genesis 10.
- And I have here a box of Smarties because she is such a Smartie. And I'm going to give them to you later, Julie. Thank you very much.
- And if any of you are looking for a name for a newly born child, I understand our Parkside is coming back in in a huge way. I recommend them.
- Now, chapter 10 is a bit of a letdown, really, after the flood, don't you think? And don't you think it's a bit tame after the waves and animals and creation and entire world that's been destroyed?
- [1 : 24] And the flood, I mean, it's very tempting to go back and preach on the flood again. But it's a shock to us because we keep thinking God is there to make my life easy.
- We keep thinking, I'm important. God is not that important. And the flood comes and just washes all this away. And you know that in chapter 9, let's turn back to that.
- At the beginning of chapter 9, God starts again with Noah, his three sons, all their wives, all the animals. And in chapter 9, verse 1, we read this.
- God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And now chapter 10 is the first thing that happens after the flood and it just seems confusing and strange, doesn't it?
- Or am I the only one who feels this? I think it does. It reminds me of that strange old 70-year-old aunt that you see once a year at Christmas time when you go to the family Christmas.
- [2 : 28] You know, as a child, you've got this vague idea that she did something important, but whenever you talk to her, she just, she doesn't make sense. You can't understand what she's talking about. And she speaks far too quietly.
- She seems to whisper to you all the time. It's only as you grow older that you begin to understand that she was the one who rescued your parents in the war. She has an encyclopedic knowledge of you and she paid for your college education.
- So now Christmas is a great joy as you look forward to getting in the corner with Aunt Moses and peppering her with questions so that you might understand yourself. And that is a little what it's like to, I think, to work through this passage.
- We need to take just a few minutes to listen to what this passage has to say. And I want to point out some things about it and then we'll step back. Do you notice as you look at the passage, it begins and ends in the same way?

You see the first verse and the last verse speak about the families of Noah and make reference to the flood. In other words, humanity came to within eight people of being entirely eliminated.

[3 : 41] If it hadn't been for Noah, you and I would not be here today. And as we look a little more closely at the passage, we discover that the passage is a vast map of the whole earth, structured and shaped around the three sons.

You see verse 2, the sons of Japheth. Verse 6, the sons of Ham. Verse 21, the sons of Shem. But as Julie was reading it, I hope, apart from your sympathy for Julie, you were realising how different this was from the genealogy that we had back in chapter 5.

Do you remember how it went, and this person had a son and this person had a son and he died and he died and he died? This is not a genealogy. It's not a flat history.

There's something else happening. And listen to these names again. Look at verse 6, the sons of Ham, Cush, Egypt, Put, Canaan. Again, these are places that we know about, the sons of Cush, Seba, Havala, Sabta, Rama, Sabtaika.

These are countries and geographic areas. Or look down in verse 16. And the Jebusites, they were the people who lived in Jerusalem before David took it over.

[5 : 02] The Amorites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, the Archites, the Sinites, the Arvidites, the Zemurites, the Hamathites. The whole chapter, it's not person after person. It is a combination and a mixture of ethnic, linguistic, political groupings.

And that little list in verse 16 are all people who are Israel's enemies. And we step back and we suddenly realise there are 70 names in the chapter.

Perfect 70. 7 times 10, a complete number. And here is a view of the world with a beautiful symmetry which is crying out to us or maybe whispering to us that this world is not just a bewildering model of divisions and wars and tribal conflicts.

This world is not just Egypt and Canaan and Palestine. It's not just Hamas, Fatah and Intifada. This world is one humanity.

One people from one blood. Every single person living can call Noah Father. And the world in which we live stands under the God of creation and under his word that says be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

[6 : 20] And for all our differences and for all our divisions we are one humanity shaped and formed by the one God. God. It's remarkable really.

In the sons of Japheth, just the first son, there are seven sons, there are seven grandsons. And even as they scatter with their different languages, all the scattering and even the languages are under the sovereign power and control of God.

Now if there are two references in the chapter as I've just showed you that look back to the flood, the first and the last verse, there are also two very important references that hook us into the next section of the Tower of Babel.

Let me just mention them to you. The first is Nimrod in verses 8 and 9. The mighty political man of muscle, the hunter, warrior. Nimrod means we will rebel.

And he uses his power to rebel. And if you look at verse 10, it tells us that the beginning of his kingdom was Babel. We know what's coming. And the second reference is down in verse 25 to Peleg.

[7 : 33] We read there that in Peleg's day the earth was divided. In other words, the story of Babel in chapter 11 took place halfway through chapter 10.

Do you understand what I'm saying? Chapter 11 does not happen after chapter 10. Chapter 11 is there to explain what happens in the middle of chapter 10. It's a flashback.

Are people with me now? Okay, I'll take that as a yes. All right. Well, now this is what the theologians call the table of nations. And I think our question this morning is what's it doing here?

Why does God give a whole chapter to this? Or more importantly, how can you preach on this?

I mean, what is God saying to us? Why does he give us this map of the world? And I think there are three things. If we step back from the passage, there are three things, three questions the passage gives us, three things the passage teaches us.

[8 : 39] And the first and most obvious is this is God's world. And as the spiritual says, he's got the whole world in his hands.

He's got the whole wide world in his hands. He's got the whole world in his hands. He's got the whole world in his hands.

It is like stepping up to 50,000 feet for a panorama of the entire world. And what we see is that the whole human reality and every individual belongs to God.

He made it. He cares about it in a way that's beyond our imagining. Because there is one God and because there is one creator, you and I are fundamentally interrelated to each other because we're human beings.

We're sons of Noah and it doesn't matter whether we're pink or yellow or coffee-colored or black or whatever, we share the same DNA going back to Noah.

[9 : 38] We are united in our humanity. Every single person in this world is created to be the image of God. Every person in every nation derives their life from God and is responsible to God whether they believe in God or not.

Which means, of course, that every tribe deserves to hear about God, the God of Noah. And I think the biggest surprise about chapter 10 is not the nations who are listed, but the one nation that's not listed and that is Israel, God's own people.

Yes, they carry the promise of God. Yes, they're the covenant people of God. But Israel's completely left off the list. She's just one of the nations. She's no better than other nations. Just as Christians are no better than non-Christians and sometimes considerably worse.

It's very important for us, you see. It shows us that God is not just interested in the church or even just Christians.

But God's grace and God's care and God's desire extends to every person of every tribe in every place. And every single nation and every single grouping and every single tribe in this world depends on God and His grace whether they acknowledge Him or not.

[11 : 00] Next weekend, we have Missions Fest here in Vancouver. I think it's the biggest mission festival in North America. And you know what it's like.

The media has this condescending attitude to mission. It's a kind of quaint holdover from the 19th century. Something people did before they had electricity and things to do, important things to do like email.

But God's concern does not stop with you and it doesn't stop with me. And there is no place, there is no part of this world or no person in this world that doesn't deserve His grace and doesn't need to hear of the blessing that God wishes to give from the Sudan to Shaughnessy, from Richmond to Rwanda.

And do you remember at the end of the Bible when heaven opens and we're allowed to hear and we're allowed to see what's happening in heaven. And we read this, there's a great multitude who no one can number from every tribe, from every nation, from every people and from every tongue, singing, standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands, crying out with a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb.

That's the first thing we learn from this chapter. It's God's world. There's a second thing and it's this, God's work in God's world.

[12 : 34] See, let me ask the question this way. If there's one God and if we're made of one blood, why are there so many deep divisions in humanity in chapter 10?

Why does God allow such disharmony? Why doesn't God just close the doors of the United Nation and help us all to get along in some sort of unity?

How can he allow the wars and divisions to continue that tear our world apart where so many innocents suffer? And part of the answer to this begins in chapter 11.

I'll just remind you of the first couple of sentences there. And we are going to deal with this in more detail next week. But we read this. The whole earth had one language.

Few words. As men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar. Shinar is where Babel is. And they said to each other, let's make bricks and burn them thoroughly.

[13 : 36] And they made bricks for stone and bitumen for water, which means they're very clever. They said, come, let's build ourselves a city. Why? They want to put a tower with its tip in the heavens.

Why? They want to make a name for themselves. Why? Lest we be scattered abroad on the face of the earth. I just want to pull one thing out of this.

See, part of the arrogant self-assertion of humanity in the Tower of Babel is to look at God to say, we will not be scattered.

Now, you may ask, what's so wrong with being scattered? What's so wrong with this unity? What's so wrong with binding together as human beings in a unity? And the simple answer to the question is that, do you remember when God created the heavens and the earth and he created man and woman?

In Genesis 1, verse 28, he says to them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And in chapter 9, verse 1, after the flood, he says to Noah, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

[14 : 44] Why is it so important to God that we fill the earth? Does God not like empty planets? I mean, it seems a bit strange at first, doesn't it?

But when you think about it, it's not. Filling the earth is to act as God acts. Filling the earth is part, close to the heart, of what it is to be the image of God.

Do you remember when God created the world? He took three days to do one thing and then he took the second three days to do another. In the first three days, he separated things out. Light from dark, water from dry land.

And what did he do in the second three days? He filled, he filled those things with blessing and with life and potential for good. And when he creates man and woman to be his image, he steps back and he says, I want you to share in this privilege of reflecting my image, of bringing my good blessing to the world, of filling the world, not just populating it, but filling the world with blessing.

It's as though God steps back and says, I have set the boundaries, now you do what I do. Fill the earth with my life. Reflect me to each other and to creation. Steward creation.

[16 : 03] Love one another. Worship. Worship. And what happens at Babel, you see, is humanity says, we don't want the unity God has given us. We don't want the task that God has given us.

We're going to create our own. We're going to bind together and make our own task in defiance of what God does. And it's very interesting. Why do they do it? They do it because of fear, lest we be scattered.

There is a fundamental insecurity about what it is to be human and most of the political, tribal and ethnic unities that there are in the world are based on fear.

These are frightened of being scattered. They're fearful of God's command. They say, God's command can't possibly be for our best.

We cannot possibly trust this to be the best for us. And we make a tower, lest we be scattered. See, just think along this line.

[17:07] The unity can be a wonderful and life-giving thing, can't it? But unity can also be an evil and deadly thing. Tremendous unity within Nazism before the Second World War.

See, there is a kind of unity that submits to the Word of God and seeks to love one another and care for His world. But there's also a unity that finds something outside of God and says, we're going to make that thing our joy.

We're going to make that thing our identity. And we reach up into Heaven and we flick God off the throne and we say, let's bind ourselves around that idea and if you don't comply with that idea, we're going to treat you very poorly.

It's God's world. And since the beginning of creation, God's work for us in His world is not to create a false unity but to fill the earth with blessing and His reflection.

That's why we're here. You live in Vancouver not to take up space and to use precious resources. You and I live here to reflect and to fill this place with His blessing.

[18:12] Living a life that will reflect God to others. Not just, but much more than coming to church. This is about living a life where you are someone who forgives those who wrong you, who is patient, who is tender-hearted, who trusts God, who loves your enemies, who's generous with your resources, seeking to be pure in heart.

This is God's work in God's world. And that's the second thing the passage teaches. And thirdly, there is a final thing, that God's work in God's world takes place in God's way.

You see, I think chapter 10 presents us with a very modern problem. Ever since Genesis 3, when man and woman rebelled in the garden, do you remember what God's promise was in chapter 3, verse 15?

That He will send a seed, one human being, who will overturn the work of the serpent, who will reverse the terrible curse of death and will crush the serpent's head.

And from chapter 3 onwards, we've been looking and looking for this person. But here is the problem. Chapter 10 suddenly opens up and we have a multicultural, multiracial, multilingual, multiethnic world.

[19:34] Millions of people, different languages, different religions. How can God possibly bring blessing to this whole world through just one human being?

You see the problem? It's the problem of the one and the many. Particularity and universality, as the theologians say. How can God reverse the effects of death for people in different tribes warring with each other through one human being when we are so savagely divided?

I hope you feel this problem. This week our global population passed 6.6 billion. How can God possibly deal with all of us individually or in families or in tribes?

How can we hope that one serpent crusher can bring the blessing of God when we are so different and so diverse and so scattered? I want to say if you are new to Christianity, this is one of the most audacious things about Christianity.

That we believe that in this word, the Bible, we claim that God speaks, the God who knows everything and knows every person, speaks with authority and clarity which is one of the reasons why we read it, mark, learn and inwardly digest it and from time to time applaud those who read it.

[20 : 57] But the scandal at the heart of this revelation is that the same God who created all things reveals that there is one saviour, one seed, one human who is going to open the door to the kingdom of heaven.

And in a sense that is the story of the scriptures. When Noah was born his father said perhaps this is the one, perhaps he is the one who will relieve the curse and he was a saviour of some sorts, he was certainly saviour to the animals and the flood, the whole point of the flood narrative is that God saved those people in one way, there was only one place of salvation and we come out of the flood and we come to chapter 10 and the world is so divided and scattered it asks us how can God bring blessing to the world and I want to give you a trailer of the next couple of weeks as we pick this up shall we?

Look down in chapter 11 verse 10 soon as the the Babel narrative finishes we pick up the Shem line again Shem who become the Semites the Israelites in 1116 we read when Eber from which we get Hebrew had lived 34 years he became the father of Peleg his Peleg again but this time we follow his son Ryu and if we follow the line we go all the way down through Ryu and Sereg and Nahor and Nahor and Terah and in verse 26 when Terah had lived 70 years he became the father of Abram and Abram married Sarai and verse 32 sorry verse 30 Sarai was barren had no children and chapter 12 says now the Lord said the same God who spoke in creation go from your country kindred father's house to the land I'll show you I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and I'll make your name great so that you will be a blessing

I will bless those who bless you and him who curses you I will curse and by you listen by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed or shall bless themselves you see Abram's not trying to reach up he's not trying to build a stairway up to heaven it is the promise of God and God comes and says I'm going to make you a great nation and through your seed I will bring blessing to every family of earth again it's the one and the many and although Abram trusted God the world would have to wait for one to come who was not like Noah and not like Abraham but one completely without sin and all the characters of the Old Testament all the great ones of the Old Testament longed to see his day from Moses to Deborah from Isaiah back to Elijah they longed to see the son of Adam the son of Abram who had come to crush the serpent and we read in the New Testament when the time had fully come God sent forth his own son born of a woman human in every way divine in every way so that the Samaritan woman sees him and knows him she says surely this one is the saviour of the world and we are told because God so loved the world he gave his one and only son you see the one and only son comes because of God's love for the whole world that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life and if you think about the whole filling picture we read that all the fullness of God dwelled in him bodily and John tells us from his fullness we have received grace upon grace that's why the apostle

Peter preaches and says there's salvation in no one else there's no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved I think this is the third and final thing that this chapter 10 asks of us it shows us there's a wideness in God's mercy that God has provided salvation a universal salvation for everyone in the one person of Jesus Christ he's the universal saviour and lord which is a terrible scandal only if you think religion is about reaching up to God no one else has come from heaven no one else has lived before God in perfect trust and obedience no one else has offered up a perfect sinless life in death no one else has been raised from the dead and returned to heaven this is God's world and God has work for us to do and it must be done around his way working for pointing to reflecting the glory of Jesus Christ when God raised

[25 : 59] Jesus from the dead he made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places far above all rule and authority and power and dominion above every name that is named not only in this age but in the age to come and God has put all things under Jesus' feet and made him head over all things for the church which is his body the fullness of him who fills all in all Amen Amen Lord you like you like you like you like you like you like you you