

Genesis 11:1-9

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it would be great to turn back to page 8, Genesis 11, to the story of the Tower of Babel, so familiar to us.

And as you're turning back to that, I just wanted to show you one of the favourite books in the short household. This is called The Just So Stories, written by Rudyard Kipling, and they're children's stories about such meaningful topics as how the camel got its hump, and how the leopard got its spots, and how the elephant child got its trunk.

And he wrote the elephant child story because he had a niece who just came up to him all the time and asked question after question after question after question. So the elephant's child is filled with curiosity and asks question after question after question.

And he calls it satiable curiosities. And the little elephant child couldn't help poking its nose into everyone else's affair, asking question after question after question.

And finally, he was sent down to the great grey, green, greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever trees until the crocodile grabbed his nose and pulled and pulled and pulled and pulled and stretched his nose until it let go.

[1 : 2 4] And that's how the elephant got its trunk. Let's pray. It's a children's story. It's not true. But the reason I mention it is because so many people look at Genesis 1 to 11 as though they are just so stories.

Children's stories to try and explain why the world is the way it is today. You know, why we no longer live in a garden paradise, why we have a seven-day week. And nowhere is this more true than in the Tower of Babel.

Many people think it explains why we speak different languages and have different nations. That's not why it's here in the Bible. This is the last action of combined humanity and it reveals the grace and mercy of God triumphing over human arrogance.

It explains why every culture and every civilization and every one of us dreams of unity but are never able to get there.

That every attempt at unity, every attempt at finding security and identity and meaning apart from God will fail.

[2 : 4 1] Every dream of unity that does not have the God of the Bible at its center and doesn't take into account the sinfulness of our human hearts will always end in futility and frustration and battles and even war.

This week I was reading comments on the news and I came to someone making a comment on war in Ukraine and he said, Until mankind somehow manages to banish its inbred tendencies for violence against its own kind, the wisest course of action for nations desiring peace is to prepare for war with superior military strength.

I think Putin would like that. And then right underneath it were some comments about Will Smith hitting Chris Rock.

Right underneath it with no irony. Martin Luther King galvanized a nation with his dream of equality and brotherhood and fellowship until he was shot to death.

The Olympic stated goal, and I quote, is to cultivate human beings through sport and contribute to world peace. And while we enjoyed the Olympics early this year, Russia was massing troops along the border of Ukraine.

[4 : 02] The UN Charter signed by nations at the end of 1945, at the end of the Second World War. You remember how it opens? We the peoples of the United Nations determine to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.

There's not been one year since then when there hasn't been war. We want unity and we want peace and we want connection with each other. We want to create a more equitable future.

But every attempt we make ends in frustration and more division, which does not mean we should stop trying, but it means what we really need is Genesis 11.

Because one thing is clear as we come out of Genesis 10, that we do share a fundamental unity as human beings. We are all children of Adam.

We are all children of Noah. But do you remember last week at the centre of chapter 10, we meet this mighty warrior and kingdom builder named Nimrod. And Nimrod means we shall rebel.

[5 : 11] And he builds, it's exactly what he does, he builds Babel and he builds Nineveh, two cultural centres opposed to God and his people. So when we come to chapter 11, it is a flashback back into the middle of chapter 10.

And it is describing the grand human attempt to find unity and meaning and identity, not just apart from God, but in defiance against God.

And the passage has two sections and I've got two headings. The first, verses 1 to 4, I've called the human project. And the human project is removing and replacing God.

And like all these stories in Genesis 1 to 11, it's beautifully told with a great deal of restraint and reserve.

And if you read it on the surface, you might wonder what the fuss is all about. In verse 2, a group of people are tired of migrating. They're tired, they're sick of trying to fill the earth, as God told them.

[6 : 16] And they find a lush valley and they decide to settle down. And they develop very clever technology for building. And they unite in their desire to build a city with the tallest possible tower up to the heavens, a cultural centre for their lives and development.

And what could be wrong with that? Does God hate cities? Does God hate high-rise buildings? Is God against new technologies?

You'd be amazed at how vastly different Christian views are on that very question. So some want us to believe, some Christian leaders want us to believe that cities are evil.

The first city was made by Cain in reaction to God's curse. The second is here, Babel. It's certainly a substitute for God. And they say, even the city of Jerusalem, where God made his name to dwell, rejected and executed the Son of God.

And it's true that Babel becomes Babylon, which does become the picture of economic social power in defiance against God. So they say cities are basically a symbol of pride in human arrogance.

[7 : 33] And the only reason we should live in cities is because that's where people are and we should try and reach them with the gospel. Others want us to believe that cities are the way of the future for us as believers, that they are God's will for the blessing of the world.

And they usually take as their starting point. The verse in Jeremiah that says, we should work for the peace, the shalom of the cities, that Jeremiah prophesied to the exiles in Babylon.

And they apply it straight to our city situations now. And they point out that heaven is pictured as a new Jerusalem, the city of God.

And we ought to encourage every Christian living outside cities to move into cities, really, to bring about the kingdom of God through art and science and architecture and cultural making.

And that's why so many churches today have in their vision statements something about we exist for the transformation of the city. And there are truths in both views.

[8 : 42] There's elements of truth in both of those views. Human cities do bring about the best and the worst in humans. And increasingly, the increasing proportion of the world are living in cities.

But my main trouble with all this is that's just not what Genesis 11 is about. We need to look more closely. So look down at the first verse. The passage begins by telling us the whole earth had one language, the same words.

Literally one lip, one word. The great gift God has given us to be his speech partners, to reflect our dependence on God, to communicate, to cooperate, to praise.

And where does the passage end? In verse 9, the Lord confused the languages of all the earth and from there the people dispersed over the face of all the earth. Why? Why does God do this?

It's not because he hates cities or high rise. If we go back over that early section, there are some very dark hints. The first is they're travelling eastward.

[9 : 47] Remember, eastward was the direction... Sorry. Eastward, right? Toward Toronto. That was the direction that... LAUGHTER That Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden.

That was the direction that Cain was sent after he was banished. But more important is this idea of settling. In chapter 1, remember God said, be blessed and commanded, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

Then in chapter 9, verse 1, he repeats that. Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. So it wasn't God's will yet to settle down.

He still wanted to fill the earth. But it's when we get to verse 4 that the real motives of building the city and the tower are exposed. And there are two of them.

The first is that they want to build a tower with its top in the heavens. This is not just sustainable high-rise. This is not about reaching their potential in urban innovation.

[10 : 53] They want to invade the place of God and take over from God. Heaven is the realm of God. This is the Garden of Eden 2.0. They want to occupy God's place.

They want to replace him with themselves. Not just removing him from their calculations, but replacing him. They're not just constructing a city and a tower without God, or even just in defiance against God, but to exchange places with God.

They want to be God. That's the first motive. And the second is they want to make a name for themselves. So that the city is not going to have over its gates to the glory of God.

It's going to have over its gates to the glory of us. And this is another version of the cosmic lie. That God cannot be trusted.

When he says, I love you, and here is my grace, you can't trust God. You can't rely on it. He speaks with forked tongue. You can't rely on God's approval and his acceptance, and so you have to find, we have to find our own.

[12 : 00] We have to replace God's opinion with human admiration and applause and adulation. Because God's estimation and God's valuation is not enough for us.

We don't want the identity that he's given us as children of Adam. We want to establish our own identity, our own security, our own significance. We want to be God's.

And this is what we do. So self, so unselfconsciously, so naturally, without even thinking. We build centers for our identity and security in something other than God.

We do it all the time. We can do it as a religious, we can do it as a church. And then we call other people to unify around our towers with the expectation that if they do, we'll make a name for ourselves and gain great approval.

And one of the key marks that this is happening is how public language shifts away from what is true and what is good to something different and very current that has a different compass on what's right and wrong.

[13 : 13] It offers a way of standing together without God. And what happens is if you don't conform to this, you're a bad person and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. And for several years now, TED Talks, the organization TED Talks, have devoted a great deal of time and money to a project they call the City 2.0.

And if you're interested in this sort of thing, they have a little video. It's about a minute and a half. It's one of the slickest videos I've ever seen. And it's a collection of the most up-to-the-minute faddish language.

And so much of it really is appealing. They say, and I quote, Dream the City 2.0. A place for empowering, nurturing, connecting, reducing carbon footprint.

An inclusive and innovative and soulful place. Combine the reach of the cloud with the power of the crowd.

Dream me. Build me. Make me real. A City 2.0. And we have a sign-up sheet at the back for anyone who wants to. And it's heaven on earth.

[14 : 30] It's not just that there's no mention of God. The dream has replaced God with our current desires. Even though so much of it's good. And of course, God is not against creativity or innovation or success or new technologies or high buildings.

I mean, the ability to do these things was given by him in the first place. Babel is teaching us something very practical. That the promise of language, the promise of technology and unity is so powerful because it's always half true.

We're all children of Adam. We're created by God to care for his world, not in defiance of him, but in love for him. So whenever we take God's good gifts and try to find meaning apart from God or significance and security apart from God and replace God, it will always produce exactly the opposite of what we're trying to do.

An anxiety, an emptiness, a futility. And then it'll lead to oppression and totalitarianism. It's always the result of trying to remove and replace God.

And that is the human project. So what is the divine purpose, secondly? And here we move to verses 5 to 9. How does God respond to this?

[15 : 46] And what he does, God's purpose is to redeem and restore humanity. If humans want to remove and replace God, God wants to redeem and restore us as humans.

So if you look down at verse 5, in verse 5 everything changes. We now no longer look at things from a human point of view. We're looking from God's point of view. And God looks down at the highest pinnacle of human achievement in science and technology and engineering and architecture.

And it's so puny and insignificant, he has to come all the way down from heaven just to even see it. It's teasing human pride. The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of Adam had built.

They thought they would reach up to heaven to replace God. But the Lord God is so high, he has to come down a long way even to see the city. And then God says this, verse 7.

Come let us go down and there 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 and they left off building the city.

[16 : 58] With a simple word, God confuses language. And humanity is divided now into different peoples. Which is where we are today.

And even when you speak the same language, we are most divided. We don't like to listen to each other unless you confirm my prejudices. What they most feared came true.

Their carefully constructed unity. Their brilliant technology fails. Because humanity will never be able to unite and pull off that technological coup of running the world without God.

So why does God do this? And I want to say there is an element of judgment here. But it is much more about mercy and grace.

And I think there are three answers. Why does God do this? Why does God confuse the languages to disperse them? And the first reason is in verse 6. It's to protect humans from our own foolishness.

[18 : 02] They are one people, the Lord said. And they have all one language. This is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing they propose will now be impossible.

It's not that God is threatened and insecure. It's not as though, you know, God is frightened of suddenly being muscled out of heaven and overrun by the human project.

And we've seen this all along, haven't we? These are the words of the Heavenly Father who can see the almost unlimited potential for evil and harm. Should we be left to our own devices?

Or should we create our own unities to replace him? It is a gracious measure, protecting us from our own insecurity, from our self-idolizing, trying to make a name for ourselves.

It protects the world against one global monolithic center and unity for our sinful lostness to permanently remove and replace God. Now, I just need to say, you can have unity in all sorts of things.

[19 : 07] Some unities are neutral. Some unities are helpful. But any unity that tries to build a stairway to heaven, tries to get back to the garden, that promises heaven and earth without the cross of Jesus Christ, becomes an idol and will be obstructed and overthrown by God because it delivers the opposite of what's promised.

So God acts out of mercy to try and protect us from ourselves. But there is a second reason why he does this. And God takes this step toward restoration.

He makes many languages around the world so that we would seek after him. Do you remember when the Apostle Paul was in Athens speaking to the philosophical elite?

He turns to this point and he reveals the fundamental unity of humanity and then reveals why God has divided us. In Acts 17, he says, That God determined from one human every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and boundaries of their dwelling places, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. You see what Paul is saying. He's saying it's the very tension between our desire for human unity and the boundaries that keep us apart, that make us long more for human unity, tell us that we are looking for a greater unity, a God-given unity.

[20 : 46] Let me say it a different way. The fact that unity is so elusive and that we long for it so much shouldn't make us naively optimistic to the next scheme we come up with, if only we just believe.

Nor should it make us cynical or despairing. The tension in us means that we were created for a greater unity. This is C.S. Lewis' point.

You remember his quote, If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is I was made for another world. So the very frustration of our aspirations for unity is God's gift to us.

It's an antidote for our constant attempts to play God to stop us destroying the world. And it keeps reminding us that our true unity is in God alone, that he has given us a name, that he has opened the gate of heaven to us, and that even our finest technological triumphs, in the end, show our impotence and foolishness in the things of God.

The Bible teaches us that we live in a divided world, where we should work for unity. You know, we ought to use all technology and skill and all the political processes at our disposal, knowing that true unity comes from Christ alone, who restores us to God.

[22 : 13] So that's the second reason God does this. It's so we would seek him. And the third reason, and I finish with this, God takes this step at Babel to bring greater glory to his son.

It's after the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus. We come to the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem in Acts 2, and we read that the whole world is gathered in Jerusalem.

And then Luke lists the place names of the people who are there in Jerusalem, and it is exactly the same list as the nations in Genesis 10, but it is in reverse.

Isn't that interesting? And as the risen Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit, he creates a new community with a new unity, and it's a unity of those who are redeemed through the death of Jesus Christ.

And the first thing that happens is the 120 disciples go out into the street and tell the gospel, and everyone hears it in their own language. It's the reverse of Babel.

[23 : 22] Because since Christ has died and been buried, he's broken down the wall of hostility, this new community shares a unity in Christ that transcends all our pride and prejudice.

And while the gift of the Holy Spirit is permanent, the gift of being understood in every language is only temporary. Rats. But it's a sign that all authority belongs to Jesus and that we need to make disciples of all nations, that the gospel is transcultural, that it can be translated into every language, because Christ is not a local deity or a tribal lord, but he is the lord of heaven and earth.

And I think this leads to the greater glory of Christ, because when we get to heaven in Revelation 7, we sing the praise of God in our own tongues.

I grew up in Africa, and in Swahili there are things that you just can't really translate into English. For example, if you come to a scene, a most beautiful mountain scene, and you want to say it feeds my soul, the phrase is chakula chamacha, which really means food for the eyes.

And I think, because Christ is beyond human praising, one of the great ways of adding to his glory is praising him in all our different tongues and languages, different aspects of him with different idioms.

[24 : 56] And here is the thing. When heaven comes down, the city of God comes down out of heaven, and Christ comes again and takes us to be with him, when we sing praise in our own tongue, we will also understand each other.

And I take that from an Old Testament book of Zephaniah, where God says, at that time, I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord in unity.

Amen.