

## Genesis 11:1-9 A Sermon

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We are continuing this morning, and in fact, we are *concluding*, this morning, our initial series on the book of Genesis. We began this series looking at Genesis 1:1 in March of this year [2006] and will be drawing it to a close today by focusing our attention on chapter 11, verses 1-9.

Now, as we saw through last week's study, these verses are a kind of "flashback" which appears in the midst of a description of the descendants of Noah – a description that started in 10:1 and concludes at 11:32, and leaves the reader right at the doorstep of Abram. Moses' purpose in setting the texts up this way is to wrap up the first portion of Genesis – with its creation and re-creation themes – and to put the last items in place before the lights dim, and the curtain re-opens for the next main act in this divine/historical drama called "redemption."

Now, because Moses wants to emphasize the line of Shem and his particular descendant, Abram (Abraham), he relates this account of Babel in the middle of things, rather than at the end. Still, in spite of its position as not the last but the *next to last* section of Genesis 1-11, the story of Babel is very much another important "climax" or highpoint in the plotline thus far. It marks the second time since *the Fall* that God sent a great judgment which affected the whole of humanity.

However, as we saw last week, it is different this time, and deliberately so. In the first great judgment (the Flood) we saw how, with the exception of Noah's family, the result of God's actions was that everyone died. By contrast, in this second judgment, *no one dies*. Clearly God *could* have judged the whole world as severely as he had before. And, as we shall soon see, clearly God would have been justified in doing so. And yet he doesn't. He responds very differently this time. And this is all the more apparent to us *because* the events of chapters 1-7 are still fresh in our memories.

And so, while the account before us this morning certainly has elements of God's judgment about it, there is also a strong illustration of God's mercy amidst that judgment and a strong sense that God is up to something, as he sovereignly works *against* his stubbornly rebellious creation to bring about the state of affairs through which he will work out His promises within the realm of human history. Well, with that as an introduction, let's pray and then listen to the passage together...

The *fallen* world was once a unified place. That's what the opening verses of Genesis 11 reveal. A world that had a common language and a common project and a common

purpose. The common language was whatever language Noah spoke, which his sons would have also spoken, and which their own descendants would have picked up from them. And you have to remember that this story is a *flashback* so it's talking about a time *before* the people of the earth were spread out. And so, as the population grew, they would have continued learning and passing on the *same* language among their children until you had this mass of humanity that was all in one place, speaking a common tongue, and so were united and enabled by that very important fact.

Not only did these people have a common language, they had a common *project*. In their continued migration east, which, mind you, has been going on ever since Adam and Eve were made to leave Eden, they found themselves in a place which came to be known as the "land of Shinar" and settled there. Sometime after settling there, they set about the task of producing both bricks and bitumen (asphalt).

Now some scholars want to say that what we see here is a technical innovation – an *invention* taking place. However, we know from Genesis 4, that these are not the first people to have engaged in a building project but that Cain many years before gained a reputation as the builder of the city called Enoch. And so, in all likelihood, these words are not recording the *invention* of brick-making, but are simply a description of these people taking up that task for the purpose of building another city.

Another thing to keep in mind here is the fact that Moses could have simply told us that these people moved to the land of Shinar and then set about building this great city without going into all this detail about making bricks and bitumen and the story would have still retained its essential impact. However, I suspect that this detail is preserved for at least a couple reasons. Firstly, the people in Moses day, the people who would have first received these accounts, would have known that the standard items for building lasting structures in those days (such as temples, etc.) was not brick and bitumen but *stone and mortar*. Those would have been the materials of choice. Bricks and bitumen were what you used when you didn't have a ready supply of stones around, nor the proper ingredients to mix up a sturdy batch of mortar. Bricks and bitumen were inferior building materials. Adequate, but inferior. They would get the job done, but they weren't glamorous. That reality will come into play later on.

The other thing about bricks and bitumen, especially the brick-making, is that this is something that would have been familiar to Moses and his people. It was only a generation before that the people of Israel had been in Egypt, under the cruel hand of Pharaoh, and charged with the thankless task of producing bricks – millions of bricks. It was a difficult, tedious job and not one that a person would casually enter into.

So, when Moses describes these people as *voluntarily* entering into this very difficult task, he is communicating something *about* these people and about their mindset – he is communicating this specifically to the people of Israel – who know something about the craft of brick-making.

They know that for these Babel-onians to enter into this task they would have to do so

with a pretty high degree of *resolve* and *commitment*. There would have to be a good reason, a sufficient motivation for taking up this very onerous responsibility. After all, *they* weren't slaves. Something other than a task-master's whip was driving them on.

And so the picture is forming of a highly committed, strong-willed people, who are resolved to build this city – even if it means engaging in the difficult task of making every single brick by hand in order to do so. Clearly, these people were unified and committed and sold out to this common project. But why? What was it that was driving them to this?

Well, there were at least 3 reasons why they were committed to building this city with a tower in it:

1) Firstly, they wanted to build a city that reached up to the heavens. Now, if you look at ancient Babylonian architecture, one of the common structures that you will find (and which was the structure which eventually became one of the ancient “Wonders of the World”) was that of a *ziggurat*. A ziggurat consisted of a more or less square structure made of stone, on top of which was built another, slightly smaller, square structure, on top of which was built *another* slightly smaller square structure and so on. And so, a ziggurat was this tower that grew ever upward, narrowing as it went.

Anyway, looking at these ziggurats from any sort of distance would reveal something like a very large staircase - a stairway to the heavens. This sort of architecture was common in Mesopotamian culture and it most likely was the sort of construction, or something very similar, that was going on at the time of this account. Now while it is probably not the case that these city-builders truly believed that they could actually build there way up into the realm where God dwelled, it is *very* possible that they did intend to build something that at least suggested that in a symbolic way. In other words, this city-building was a way of thumbing one's nose at God, placing one's reliance and confidence in your own ability to manage your future by means of your own technological skill and achievement.

Indeed, one scholar has suggested that this is the significance of the *tower* that is mentioned. The idea behind such a tower, that had its “top in the heavens,” may well have been the foolish notion that if such a tower could be built – or even a series of such towers – then these would be a safeguard against any future judgments, like the flood which God might send. As if to say, “We're going to all stay right here and use our skills and abilities to create a city that will protect us and which will neutralize any judgment that God might send.”

Now that may or may not have been the intent behind the tower, but it is certainly possible. At the very least, the other things said by these people indicate that they were a proud, self-assured, arrogant people - a people for whom such thoughts would not be difficult to imagine.

2) So, they were committed to building this city because they wanted to thumb their

nose at God, to show their independence from Him. A second reason was because they wanted to “make a name for themselves.” That is, they wanted to do something which would cause their names to be remembered and honored for all time. They wanted fame and notoriety – and all that went with such things. To be sure, there is nothing *inherently* wrong with having a reputation. After all, in the next chapter God will promise Abram that he will “make his name great.”

But God’s making one’s name great – for His purposes – is very different from a people wanting to make their own name great – for their own purposes – which had nothing to do with God. But this is precisely what the Babel-builders wanted.

3) The third and perhaps most significant reason that they are committed to this common project of building a city is because *they want to avoid being dispersed* across the face of the earth. Now, again, it is not as if hanging out together is an inherently bad thing to do. However, in choosing to do this, *they were contravening the explicit purposes of God*. In Genesis 1:28, in the original commissioning of the man and the woman, God told them to “be fruitful and multiply and *fill the earth* and subdue it.” Later after the flood, in Genesis 9, it is clear that this original commission to be fruitful and fill the earth was still in place.

But these people don’t want to spread out and fill the earth. And so, by choosing to stay in one place they have chosen to reject God’s purposes for them. Further, they foolishly imagine that this great city which they are building will somehow insure that they will not have to follow through with God’s commission.

So, again, there was a time when the fallen world of humanity was very unified. Terrifically unified. They had great resolve and commitment even if it meant engaging in the thankless task of making millions of bricks in order to build a massive city on a plain in the middle of nowhere. And yet God looks upon this unity and oneness of language and purpose and practice – and He *doesn’t like what He sees*. The very reality which John Lennon naively sang about in his song, “Imagine,” or that Vladimir Ilyich Lenin clumsily and disastrously tried to launch in October 1917 – the reality that who knows how many atheistic idealists over the centuries have blabbered on about – that reality actually existed.

And what was God’s response? *He wrecked it*.

As the passage says, “...the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built...” Now, keep in mind that the language here is the language of accommodation, it is *anthropomorphic*, (i.e., language that uses human descriptions and mannerisms to talk about the person of God). God’s “coming to see the city” of Babel is clearly not a visit of discovery – but of action. It’s not like God is wandering around the universe and then suddenly, to his great surprise, stumbles upon this city construction in progress. As the passage says, He came down TO see the city – He is coming to the city with purpose and intent, drawing near to it in order to act, once again, within the created realm of time, space, and history.

More importantly, as Cassuto has pointed out, in using this sort of language of accommodation and talking about God “coming down” to see this city, Moses is employing a bit of irony and sarcasm to make his point. In other words, here were these people, building this allegedly “great” city, a city which they boasted would “reach to the heavens.” And in the face of these sorts of boasts, God is depicted as having to “come down” in order to even look at it.

That is, their “great” city is perhaps not so great after all and has not, in fact, reached the heavens. And yet, in spite of the irony here, God recognizes within these people a potential for evil that he has seen before. While they have not yet reached the heavens with their city, they have demonstrated what sorts of things an apostate, unified humanity might *aspire* to. And so He says, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them.”

Now, as Kidner points out, God’s statements about “nothing being impossible for them” are *not* to be taken as an expression of fear on God’s part that these people might, through their unified efforts, become this unstoppable power – as if there were any power that could rival God’s. Rather, the concern expressed here is that of a Creator and Father for the potential for sin and self-destruction that an apostate and unified humanity might have. After all, this is God who not too long before had passed judgment on an entire creation whose every thought was only evil all the time. The events in Babel were starting to sound a lot like the same song, second verse. Their unity and resolve to join together in resisting the purposes of God would know no limits.

And so, because God is committed to fulfilling his promises and completing his purposes, even when his creation rebels against him, He takes steps to insure that the commission which he has given his creation is carried out. He takes steps to insure that the spreading out and filling of the earth takes place – with or without their cooperation.

Thus, the sovereign God acts to confuse their language – to suddenly and miraculously cause them to begin speaking not one language but many different languages and, as a result, creating a linguistic barrier which becomes very quickly an inter-personal barrier, making communication very difficult. And so, the building of the city, which was an on-going project, came to a grinding halt. And the people who were so determined NOT to be dispersed are, in fact, dispersed anyway. And so ends the account.

For the people of God in Moses’ day, this account would have been significant for a number of different reasons. Starting with some *lesser* significances this account would have served what is called an “aetiological” purpose; which just means it is an account which talks about the *origin* of something, how something came to be as it is. Specifically, this account describes the divine/historical events which lie behind the *dispersion of people* across the face of the earth, as well as the *origins of the various languages* and language groups.

More substantially, these verses were further motivation for the people of God, under Moses, to humble themselves and submit to God in obedience, courageously trusting Him to take enter and take the promised land.

One of the motivations for this found in the particularly *unflattering* picture of Babylon that appears in this passage. Now, for you and me perhaps, the city of Babylon is something of a mystery; not much more than a name that we have heard mentioned here or there. But to the people of God in Moses' day, Babylon was the city of cities – the ultimate city. It was a symbol of power, wealth, and pleasure. Like New York City, Los Angeles, London, or Paris.

And so Babel, this city of great boasting, brought forth these sorts of images and perceptions. And yet this great city which was the epitome of man in all his ability and sophistication, was easily humbled and decimated by the slightest action of God, without God even “breaking a sweat,” so to speak. The God who could do *that* sort of thing to *that* kind of city was the God who was *now calling them to go in and take cities of even lesser significance*.

The other motivation to be found here, in addition to the mocking of Babel – and any city [or individual] like her – is the demonstrated folly of people thinking that they can resist God and somehow get away with it. In Genesis 11:1-9 we see these people rejecting God's commission, and yet God goes on to make it happen anyway – in spite of them. The people in Moses' day have a similar temptation to the people in Genesis 11. Instead of responding obediently to God's commission to go in and take the land before them they might resist and choose to stay where they were and instead build their own city, and their own tower, and make their own, alternative, name for themselves. But, as Genesis 11 makes plain, this would be a foolish and rebellious path for them to take.

For the people of God in our own day, this passage has a number of important applications, all of which we will not have time to explore. But there are a few that I think we can highlight this morning. For starters, and as we have already seen, the judgment at Babel – especially as viewed against the backdrop of the flood judgment – serves to show again God's righteous response to human rebellion, especially concerted human rebellion.

At the same time, however, we see in God's actions a very real display of mercy and kindness to sinners. By introducing different languages into the picture, and so causing the commanded dispersion to happen, God is also preventing them from going further into the depths of godless rebellion to which their unified apostasy would have taken them, if allowed to remain un-checked. And so, what we see here is a kind of “restraining mercy” of God.

Well, this sort of restraining mercy is still experienced in our own day when God uses governments and government officials to restrain evil in the world and so prevent our depravity from taking us into depths of sin to which our society would surely go – except

for the merciful restraint of God. This is God's kindness to sinners on display every single day. We see this in the instructions given in conjunction with the Lord's Supper – that it not be entered into or partaken of in an unworthy manner – why? So, that people might not eat and drink judgment upon themselves. This too is God's kindness to sinners.

Moreover, we see this same reality in the Book of Hebrews when it talks about God disciplining those whom He loves, using such discipline to deter his children from indulging their sinful flesh so that they might see the fruit of righteousness become manifest in their own lives. This too is God's ongoing kindness to sinners, even sinners who call him "Father."

Further, we see through this account the reality that unity is not all it's cracked up to be. It is not the highest or ultimate good. It is not even an inherently good thing. We see in these verses that there are *some* kinds of unity that do not please God at all but which, in fact, do the opposite – they anger him, because they are a unity that is born of a common commitment to ignore or dismiss what God has said.

An entire denomination was brought into being in Australia in 1977 called the "Uniting Church." It was praised and lauded as a step forward, as a great and glorious day for the church which was only ever about fighting and dividing. Sadly, however, at the core of this apparent "unity" was a common agreement to disregard the authority of God in many different areas. Unfortunately, this is the legacy of *most* ecumenical movements.

But it is not just liberal denominations that have this falsely optimistic view of unity, but many people outside the formal structures of the church. As was mentioned earlier, this sort of unity is the kind once envisioned by John Lennon who "imagined" one day that there was,

no heaven,  
no hell,  
only people living for today  
no countries,  
nothing to kill or die for  
no religion  
only people living in peace  
no possessions,  
no greed or hunger,  
only a brotherhood of man

And then, at the end of the song, Lennon assures us that if we could have all these things, if we will just *join him*. In other words, *if* the rest of the world would just be like him, assassinate their brains and adopt his agenda, then "the world will live as one." To put it another way, Lennon's message was, "If everyone would just agree with me, then we could all be unified."

But what is this unity that Lennon “imagined?” It was the same unity that the Babelonians had. A godless, atheistic unity that has about as much chance of success as did that city.

The ironic and sad thing about Lennon is that he lived many years *after* another Lenin, the Soviet dictator, who actually set about creating the sort of world that Lennon imagined – and long before John Lennon was born. A world in which there was no heaven, no hell, no religion, no possessions, etc. There was only the political brotherhood that was the state – a brotherhood of man.

And yet, because the disaster that was the USSR, was still hidden away behind an amazingly impenetrable curtain of lies and secrecy, many misguided persons held this fairly romanticized view of the Soviet Union. It was not until after the events of 1989 that the curtain fell – and fell hard – revealing decades of decay, deception, inhumanity, genocide, and a vast land that is still struggling to recover from the nightmare of V I Lenin.

And yet the durability of human rebellion is amazing, as people continue to imagine that there is still some way, some as yet undiscovered form of technology or government that will allow us to achieve, without God, what the Scriptures show us will never happen apart from God.

A third and final implication for us is to see how the Gospel addresses the specific calamity of Genesis 11. To see this, listen to these words from Acts 2:1-12 – (read this). In this event, which we know as “Pentecost” we are told explicitly in verse 5 that there was gathered together in the city of Jerusalem people from *every nation under heaven*. And, of course, they were people who spoke different languages, still divided by the barrier erected so many years before at Babel.

And then this amazing thing happens. By a supernatural work of His Spirit, God causes the Gospel to be preached in such a way that the language barrier disappears as people hear the apostles telling of the mighty works of God in their own native languages. And so it is that the truth about God – centered in the Gospel – becomes the means by which the effects of Babel are over-ridden and reversed. To be sure, after Pentecost, the separate languages still existed, and so the barriers were still there, to a degree.

But there was now something there which was more powerful than that which separated them. A new kind of “lingua franca” which would enable people of very different nationalities to come together around a common Savior and a common salvation by means of the work of a common spirit. This coming together around the Gospel was a foreshadowing of an even greater and total unity to come – a unity that will be *in step* with God’s glory and God’s purposes, not in spite of them.

And surely you’ve experienced this, right? If any of you have had the opportunity of meeting and talking with believers in another culture, or at least *from* another culture,

you will know this experience of how your brotherhood in Christ creates an instant bond that transcends the barriers of race, language, and culture. You can meet people whom you never seen before and within minutes sense a very real camaraderie and fellowship in the Gospel.

Why is that? Because the Gospel is the one true unification plan that works. It is the means by which God is reversing the effects of Genesis 11 and through which He will unite his redeemed creation around Himself.

So, you want to work for world peace? Preach the Gospel. Do you want the fighting to stop? Preach the Gospel. Do you want the barriers to come down and stay down? Preach the Gospel.

And as we are faithful to do that, the barriers will fall, and people from every tribe and tongue and nation will reverse the flow, the dispersion will cease – as people come into the Body of Christ, the Church, and unite at the feet of a common Savior and Lord.

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