

“Toppling Towers”

Genesis 11:1-9

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The movie Babel came out a few years ago starring Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett. A young shepherd boy in Morocco tries out a new rifle by shooting at a tour bus he sees rumbling down the road a half-mile away. The shot hit an American woman, a single gunshot that ends up creating an international crisis and shattering several lives. You end up asking yourself, Who’s to blame for the tragedy? A reckless young boy? His father who put the rifle in his hands? The man who sold him the weapon?

The story of Babel is a story that keeps echoing through time, with the nations scattered and people divided—not only between nations and cultures, but through families and marriages, too.

The story shows we want to make our mark.

The story also shows how we want to make our mark in life. There’s an overpass in Cleveland that’s always covered with graffiti. I’ve seen it painted over four times in the past couple years, and every time, a couple days later, new graffiti appears again. By a week later, it looks the same as it always did. People want to be remembered; one way or another, they try to leave a monument to themselves. It might be scribbling on the walls, building a company, or raising a family, but we want to be remembered.

Genesis 11 talks about building monuments. We call it the story of the tower of Babel, but the tower was only a symptom of something else going on. It’s why Jewish writing about this story doesn’t call it the tower of Babel, but “The Story of the Generation of Division.” The issue at the heart of the story is the danger of pride.

The story doesn’t tell us when God’s judgment happened at Babel, but why.

Now, if you’ve been reading the book of Genesis to this point, you saw how chapter 10 tells about different peoples and languages *before* the tower of Babel in chapter 11. In chapter ten it says,

“These are the clans of Noah’s sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood” (Genesis 10:32).

Then chapter 11 opens with, “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words” (Genesis 11:1).

It’s not like Moses, the author of this book, was confused. He didn’t forget what he’d written one verse before. The point is he has pulled the verses out of chronological order. He begins from what we can see around us—the spread of peoples and languages, and then he tells us how that happened.

The story shows the problem with building towers.

In chapter one of Genesis, God told Adam and Eve, to “multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (1:28). And after the great flood, the command came again. God blessed Noah and his sons, and told them,

“Be fruitful and increase in number, and fill the earth...As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it.” (Genesis 9:1, 7)

God intended for people to spread out and fill the land, to exercise stewardship of the earth, to go where he sent them. But Genesis 11 tells us people made other plans:

“Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’” (Genesis 11:4)

Sometimes our work can become a way of avoiding what the Lord tells us, of not following his word. That is a contradiction of God’s character, because his Word and work cannot be divided.

It seems to be a part of our internal wiring to delight in praise—not in giving it, but getting it. That’s what it is to seek a name for ourselves. But when you need the praise of others, you’re really a slave to them. God wants us to learn to praise him, not to seek praise for ourselves. That’s the path to freedom.

In the same way, it seems like people will try anything to make them feel safe and secure but trust God, and he’s our only true security. We want to be masters of our own lives, captains of our own fate. We think they can take God’s place.

After Muslim terrorists took down the Twin Towers on 9-11, some people thought skyscrapers everywhere would be at risk. But nine years later we’re building as many as ever, always trying to reach higher. When they were built in 1998, the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur were the highest buildings in the world, at 452 meters high, but then the Taipei 101 Tower in Taiwan surpassed them. That building stretches 509 meters into the heavens. And last January, the Burj Khalifa tower opened in Dubai, over 800 meters high, or 2717 feet. That’s over a half mile high!

Now, I don’t think it’s bad to exercise our engineering skills. But it seems like the frenzy to build ever higher betrays more than a little of the ancient pride of Babel. It’s not bad to work, or to leave a legacy of some kind. The problem is, when we build monuments to ourselves and ignore God’s calling in our life. That’s arrogance and running away from God. It’s a loving the praise of people, and loving security.

Most of us aren’t making towers of mud bricks or of glass and steel, but we’re building something with our lives. And Jesus tells us we’re fools if we don’t build our lives on *his* words (Matthew 7:26). What are you building? Are you building to God’s glory, or your own?

The people at Babel couldn’t imagine blessing from scattering, from taking risks, from moving into uncharted territory, from filling the earth as God ordered. They thought they were most secure when they protected themselves, built up their walls, reached for the heavens, announced their own power. Maybe the impulse behind it is fear.

If you’re afraid of not having enough money to make your house payment or put food on the table, you might cheat or steal. If you’re afraid of being taxed too much, you might live together

without being married. If you're afraid your wife or husband doesn't really love you, you might be over controlling and too easily get angry. If you're afraid of being forgotten, you might try anything to get attention, even embarrass yourself. You might try to grab the glory that only belongs to God.

That's too bad. These people had God's promise, but they put their trust in bricks and mortar. Sometimes we put our trust in computers, in satellites, IRAs, in missile defense systems. It's called arrogant self-confidence.

The problem with building a tower, with building monuments to our own greatness, is that they're really only shrines to stupidity, physical expressions of arrogance, putting security and the praise above doing what God says.

The story shows the consequences of disobedience.

Verse 5 says,

“But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building”
(Genesis 11:5).

The verse calls the people “the children of man,” or literally, “the sons of Adam.” It's like he's saying, these people are just doing the same old sin of Adam, who rebelled against God and ran away from him. Adam's messed up nature just keeps on going in his descendents, all of us.

The people think they're reaching the heavens, towering above the earth, but for God to see this puny thing, he has to bend down, like if you want to look at an anthill. God can see just fine, but it's a way of saying God looks down and laughs a human pride. How silly it really is!

So God confused their languages, and the project comes to a crashing stop. The unfinished tower is only a monument to human sin.

“That's why the place was called Babel, because it was there that the Lord confused the people by giving them many languages, thus scattering them across the earth” (Genesis 11:8-9).

What people were most afraid of had happened—they got scattered. And that's how the first section of Genesis ends, a prehistory of the human race. It ends in complete human failure. It's pretty sad.

But that's not all there is to the story. Let's look at some of the lessons for us that the story suggests.

First lesson: You can't undo God's purposes.

God gave the command to fill the earth because he actually wanted it to happen. God is directing all things towards the good purpose he has—for us and for all creation. That means, you can trust he's going to bring it about. That means history isn't just a random set of events, and human life isn't just a bunch of noise that doesn't mean anything. It means everything's building toward the finale God has in mind. It also means we need to follow, or get out of the way, because God's going to make it happen whether we're a part of it or not.

Second lesson: Unity isn't the highest good—doing what God tells us is.

In the name of unity, people do a lot of dumb things. We act like there's really no difference in beliefs. Even now, plans are moving ahead to construct a mosque two blocks from Ground Zero in lower Manhattan. It's supposed to show the real face of Islam. Sometimes you don't go with the flow, you disregard what's politically correct, and you take a stand. Unity in the world is a good thing as far as it goes, but better is to do what God says.

It's the same for in the church. We should work for the peace and unity of the church, but we don't do that at the expense of the truth. We don't water down the good news about Jesus, for instance. There's a bumper sticker that says, "co-exist," and the letters are formed by the symbols of several different religions. Well, yes, we have to co-exist together with people from different religions, but it doesn't mean all religions are the same. We don't pretend they are. And so we do what God says, we serve the world and show them the real Jesus, and that's what the world is really hungry for.

Third lesson: We should give our lives to work that lasts.

The people building the Tower of Babel discovered real quick you can put a lot of time and money into things that don't last. King Solomon says in Psalm 127,

"Unless the Lord builds the house,
its builders labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city,
the watchmen stand guard in vain.

In vain you rise early
and stay up late,
toiling for food to eat—
for he grants sleep to those he loves." (Psalm 127:1-2)

Did you catch the phrase "toiling for food to eat"? It echoes God's words when he tells Adam and Eve in the garden, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food." (Genesis 3:19).

In the end, work can't give you peace and purpose in life. That comes through relationships, and that's why Solomon points to the gift of children. Ultimately, only trusting God, enjoying fellowship with him, doing the work he gives us, only that satisfies in the long run. It's why Solomon would write,

"Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

So, God won't let human arrogance stand forever. God restrains our pride, and he limits our wrongdoing. In fact, he even works out his purposes through people's sin.

In a sense, the story of Babel is completed at Pentecost that we celebrated last week, the day the church began, when the people heard the good news about Jesus each in their own

language. In the end, God even uses human disaster for his glory. And all the peoples of the world belong to him.

Jesus has a claim on all peoples, on every language and nation. He says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:18-19). His power is even more glorious, because it has so many expressions.

In the end, the praise of Jesus is more beautiful because represents unity in diversity. It's not just Arabic, or English, or Spanish, or Russian, or Chinese. The Revelation of John tells us,

"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from *every* nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'"
Revelation 7:9-10).

Chapter 11 closes the first great section of the book of Genesis, and it ends with spectacular human failure. But multiplying the languages ultimately means praise of Jesus will echo in every language on earth. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!