

The Tower of Babel

Genesis 11:1-9

The last summer before I graduated from college I went to live with my parents who had just moved from New York State to rural Georgia. Thankfully, in God's providence, I was able to find an adequate job for those six or eight weeks I was home. I worked as a carpenter's assistant for a contractor doing some additional construction on the huge dam which had created Lake Hartwell. I was six months away from my Civil Engineering degree and a job which would have given me supervisory authority over the contractor, but for that summer I was the low man on the totem pole for the whole crew.

It was a difficult experience for several reasons, not the least of which was a very difficult language barrier. I had grown up near Buffalo, NY, and though I had spent three years in school in Virginia, I was almost completely unable to understand the southern drawl of these Georgia construction workers. Some of the more humorous attempts to communicate were food items. To make it worse, many of the tools had different names than I was accustomed to, and I was extremely intimidated by the whole environment. At times, communication became impossible.

If you didn't know the Bible, you might wonder how so many different languages got started in the first place. There is really no good explanation, except one. God did it. God brought confusion to men by scattering them, separating them, and isolating them by both their physical location and their language. And he did it as a judgment upon their pride. This story of the Tower of Babel is, above all, a story about human pride. And on the heels of the great flood in the days of Noah, we see clearly that,

I. THE JUDGMENT OF THE FLOOD DID NOT DIMINISH THE SINFUL PRIDE OF MEN.

I believe that the Tower of Babel incident happened about a hundred years after the flood, a conclusion supported by,

Gen. 10:25 "To Eber were born two sons: the name of one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided; and his brother's name was Joktan."

Peleg was born 101 years after the flood. His name means division, and he himself became a symbol of that division. Just a hundred years since the flood. And what has happened to mankind? Did man learn his lesson, and learn the lesson of discipline which every generation hopes all their children will learn? Did mankind learn to obey God and walk faithfully with him?

Well, in a word, NO. Just the opposite. Remember what God had told man after the flood.

Gen. 9:1 "So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth."

Fill the earth. Have children, lots of them. Spread out over all the earth, and fill it. And what did this growing family do? They stayed together in one place. Instead of separating into many units, they banded together. Instead of filling the earth, they built a great city. Instead of venturing out, living by faith in obedience to God, like Abraham would later do, they prepared to glorify and fortify themselves by collective effort.

Why? Human pride. The sinful pride of men. They stayed together to strengthen their pride. They joined forces to preserve their pride.

A. Men actually stimulate one another to be proud.

When they join together, men actually provoke one another to proud arrogance. We still see it today, in the “bigger is better” mentality of this world. Churches have fallen prey to this same tendency, and the prevailing attitude of many huge churches is, indeed, pride. They pride of success, human success. The pride of numbers. The pride of what sheer numbers can accomplish.

Obviously, in the thinking of this world, a church of 300 is better than a church of 100. And a church of 2000 is better than a church of 400. That is the value system of the world. That’s why we build bigger shopping malls, bigger box stores, bigger houses. I’ve seen it so many times in so many circumstances. Bigness provokes pride. A big group of people actually provide one another with mutual stimulation unto pride.

That’s precisely what became of the descendants of Noah.
v.1-2

Then notice,
v.3a “Then they said to one other...”

They provoked each other. They egged each other on. And in this spirit of pride, they sought after great achievements. They would build. After all, if you build large and impressive structures, then you can then boast about them!

v.3

They would use bricks, hardened and strengthened in the burning heat of the kiln. The more common building material in ancient times was stone, and when bricks were used, they were normally only sun dried. These bricks would be superior products, producing a superior building. And they would use bitumen, instead of plain mortar. Bitumen is like asphalt or tar,

which not only cements things together but seals and waterproofs them. Their buildings would not suffer from cracked mortar. They would not leak. They would withstand the elements and endure as perpetual testimonies of human accomplishment. In other words, a symbol of pride.

B. The achievements of men stimulate them to be proud.

As it was then, so it is now. Those human achievements, the product of sinful pride, are further described in,
v.4

A great city! And a great tower. They provoked each other, saying, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens.”

Don’t forget, from our study of chapter 10, that they also had a great leader. A proud leader. A dictator, and a tyrant. A mighty warrior. A man who would hunt down those whom he could subdue and use them for the advancement of his own purposes. His name was Nimrod.

Gen. 10:8 “Cush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one on the earth. 9 He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, “Like Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD.” 10 And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar.”

Babylon was the first center of his kingdom. Babylon is the same place as Babel! This was Nimrod’s great city. This was his crowning achievement, the pinnacle of his quest for power and authority.

Then, in verse 4, we’re given a perceptive insight into the root of pride. This may surprise you, but it may not, either. It is just as true today as it was then, for human nature has not changed! There are many sources of pride, but one of them, perhaps even

the most common and the most flagrant, is insecurity. Fearful insecurity.

C. Fearful insecurity among men stimulates them to be proud.

Now, I don't want to be guilty of imposing modern psychological diagnoses upon the men of Babel, but I can read Scripture and I can identify and label their reaction. They were afraid. They were fearful of being scattered over the earth, fearful of losing the connections with one another that so thoroughly sustained their pride.

Their pride was in the strength of their numbers. Individually, separated, they were reduced to fear. I call that, very accurately, insecurity.

v.4

Insecurity is a horrible thing, then and now. And one of the most bitter fruits of insecurity is pride, for pride is often nothing else than a self-made covering for insecurity. Some of the people who are the most proud and the most self-sufficient, are actually the most insecure. They just don't want anyone else to know about it!

Well, Scripture reveals the weakness of these first Babylonians. They would not trust God, they would not walk by faith in obedience to his commands. Instead, they would hide their insecurity in a blanket of pride.

Illus: I know plenty like that today. Men who have the most fragile egos, who are the most insecure deep down, are often the ones who show it the least on the surface. Those who appear the most self-confident, those who achieve the most, those whose confidence and success seem unshakable--they are often the

most insecure. And they cover it up with pride.

Pride is such a deception. So evil, and so devastating. And humility is so godly. Humility is the opposite of pride.

People of God, it takes little courage to be proud, because pride is but a mask. Pride is a covering, giving you something to hide behind. It is actually quite cowardly. On the other hand, it takes great courage to be humble, because humility is the willingness to live without those masks. Humility is the ability to be vulnerable and to endure a position of weakness. It is the willingness to act with meekness.

The judgment of the flood could not, and did not, diminish the sinful pride of men. Only Jesus can do that. Only Jesus can turn pride into humility. And he showed us exactly what that means, by his own example.

Phil.2:3 "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

So beware of pride! "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

Similarly, beware of the consequences of pride, for as we see here,

II. THE SINFUL PRIDE OF MEN PRODUCES GREAT FOOLISHNESS.

Foolishness is the best word I can come up with to describe what we read in,
v.4

In the pride which covered their fearful insecurity, they tried to do two things--build a city and build a great tower. The tower was really the symbol of the whole city. The Tower of Babel.

They tried to build a tower whose top would be in the heavens. In their sinful pride, they thought that they could do anything. They thought that they could build anything. They thought they could attain to the height of God himself. In their proud and perverted sense of spirituality, they tried to become like God. In their own strength.

Under Nimrod's leadership, Babel would be a carefully planned city, with a self-conscious centerpiece in the skyline. A great tower would dominate. It would be the focal point of the political and religious life of the population, a symbol of their unity and strength. Such arrogant foolishness.

A. The foolishness of trusting in our own strength. v.4a

Illus: Cities often build symbols of their own strength, their pride, in buildings. Great modern skyscrapers often define the pride of a city. But even those buildings can collapse, as we saw with such tragic consequences on 9-11 two decades ago. Even great buildings can be destroyed. They are symbols of pride and of human accomplishment. They are symbols of wealth and power, and ultimately, autonomy. That is, independence from God. They are symbols of those who trust in their own strength to

cover their fearful insecurity. And in our text this morning, it is God who brings the destruction.

The people of Babel built a tower to give themselves the confidence that they would not be scattered. They build a tower to ensure themselves that their city would never perish, that their homes would remain safe and secure.

Such dangerous temptations still continue today. Church buildings and facilities can even become such idolatrous towers. So can our own homes. And our own cities and towns. There are so many ways in which we still glory in the work of our own hands.

As such, this great tower of Babel becomes a symbol of defiance against God, representing the spirit of opposition to God embodied in those whose own gods are themselves. And we know what these Babylonians were really after, don't we? Scripture tells us plainly.

v.4

They wanted a name for themselves. Oh, what foolishness.

B. The foolishness of working for our own glory.

They wanted a name, for THEMSELVES. Let me emphasize that, and make sure to apply this to our own everyday lives. Their goals and objectives were fixed upon their own glory, NOT upon God's. And that is the horrible root of all sin!

Illus: One of the confessions of sin that we sometimes use identifies this so well. These are the words: "We confess that we have not lived as we should. We have lived for our own glory, for our own imagined kingdoms, rather than for the glory and the kingdom of God."

So ask yourself, “How have I done that?” When those words are used as a corporate confession of sin, as yourself that question. How have you lived for your own glory? The answer might be somewhat different for everyone of us, but I suspect that, in one way or another, everyone of us is guilty of that very sin.

We live to make a name for ourselves. Fame. Recognition. A good reputation. For some, that refers to work, to your job, or your career. Are you working to make a name for yourself? I know ministers guilty of this very thing. Making a name for yourself.

Maybe it refers to your work in the church. Are you working to gain recognition? To make a name for yourself.

Maybe it refers to your relationships to other people. Maybe it refers to your priorities, how you use your time or your money. Maybe it even refers to your family. Are you interested in raising your children well, for their well-being and for the honor of God, or are you interested in making a name for yourself? A good question to ask when your children misbehave is this, “Are you concerned about your own reputation? Or about the heart of your child.” Do you punish more severely when your own reputation is at stake? Are you grieved by the wickedness which is revealed in your children, or are you embarrassed by it? Embarrassment comes from this desire to make a name for ourselves!

Tough questions. This temptation is so prevalent, so deceptive, and so deadly! The people of Babel were doomed to failure, for in their sinful pride, they were given to the utter foolishness of trusting in their own strength and working for their own glory. They were so steeped in their foolishness that God was compelled to intervene directly, for,

III. THE FOOLISHNESS OF SINFUL MEN INCURS GOD’S JUDGMENT.

God’s judgment came to Babel with undeniable finality.
v.5-9

Interesting, isn’t it? That which gave the people the most insecurity was the very thing which God inflicted upon them in judgment! They were scattered, and even worse, they were isolated by the barrier of a different language. God is a God of justice!

Notice what it says in,
v.5

Now, don’t think for a moment that, up to this point, God was unaware of what was going on. Don’t think for a moment that God didn’t know what the Babylonians were up too. Don’t think that he was caught by surprise or startled by their sinful motives.

But do realize how specifically we are told that God took notice of them. He intervened. When the Lord “came down to see the city and the tower” it means that he came to pronounce his judicial control and regulation. He came to inflict judgment. The point is that,

A. All of man’s efforts and motives are open before the Lord.

This bold attempt to rebel against the Lord’s authority would not succeed. No,

B. The Lord will not allow men to succeed in their sinful pride.

v.6-7

Mankind, unified by a common language, provoked to pride by

their rapidly growing number, and ruled so very efficiently by the powerful leader Nimrod, would continue to grow more and more proud. More and more autonomous. More and more committed to making a name for themselves.

So it is with the nations of our day, nations such as our far more concerned about making a name for themselves than they are interested in bringing glory to God.

Such foolishness will ultimately incur God's judgment. We read of that judgment upon the proud and rebellious nations so clearly in,

Ps. 2:1 "Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 3 "Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us." 4 He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision. 5 Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure: 6 "Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion." 7 "I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. 8 Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.' " 10 Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. 11 Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling. 12 Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish in the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him."

God will stop the foolish attempts of men and nations to make a name for themselves. And with the Babylonians, he stopped it at the very point of their pride. He confused their languages so

that they would not understand each other. The Lord will not allow men to succeed in their sinful pride.

Again, just try to imagine the power of a unified kingdom of, a kingdom effectively ruled by one tyrant able to communicate with everyone, a kingdom such as Babylon. The truth is that in such a kingdom, communication breeds pride.

There is a very real sense in which we are reliving this sort of process in the communication revolution which we have experienced in the past generation of 40 years or so. Now, via the internet, mankind is growing closer and closer to eliminating the language barrier, and communications continue to exploding. We are constantly in immediate touch with one another, all over the world. Truly it can be said that, in all of human history, there has never been such a dramatic increase in the ability and opportunity to communicate as there has been these past 40 years.

And to be sure, much of that breeds pride among sinful men! Communication is power. Information is power. It is strength. We can see clearly in our own day how communication breeds self-sufficiency and autonomy. And I should say by way of application that the Lord has not promised that he won't again bring a judgment like he did at Babel! He has promised no repetition of a universal flood, but he has not promised that he won't again frustrate the communication ability of mankind. To whatever extent that might actually happens, the abiding truth of the matter is that the Lord will not allow men to succeed in their sinful pride. Instead,

C. The Lord will intentionally frustrate the plans of men which result from sinful pride.

What we have here is an act of intentional frustration.

Now, there is a play on words here, a pun. The Hebrew word for “confuse” is *balal*, which sounds so much like Babel. God confused those who had rebelled against him in their pride.

And he continues to do so. Babel, or Babylon actually becomes a symbol throughout Scripture of a godless society, doomed to judgment. The great climax of that symbolism is found in the book of Revelation,

Rev. 17:3 “So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. 5 And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.”

Rev. 18:1 “After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory. 2 And he cried mightily with a loud voice, saying, “Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird! 3 For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury.” 4 And I heard another voice from heaven saying, “Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues. 5 For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. 6 Render to her just as she rendered to you, and repay her double according to her

works; in the cup which she has mixed, mix double for her. 7 In the measure that she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, in the same measure give her torment and sorrow; for she says in her heart, ‘I sit as queen, and am no widow, and will not see sorrow.’ 8 Therefore her plagues will come in one day—death and mourning and famine. And she will be utterly burned with fire, for strong is the Lord God who judges her.”

It was not the tower in Babylon which reached up to the heavens. It was her sins. From verse 5, “her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.” That chapter continues with a vivid description of judgment, a judgment represented by the Lord’s action in the ancient city of Babel, a judgment of confusion and scattering.

In Christ, however, this judgment is reversed. We see a glimpse of the reversal at Pentecost, when the gospel was preached in all the languages of the world. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the gospel transcended this confusion of language. Salvation came in every language and every tongue. When it comes to the gospel, language is no longer a separating barrier.

And the final victory of Jesus is also represented as a restoration of common language. In a prophecy rich in the language of eternal salvation in Christ, we read in,

Zeph.3:8 “Therefore wait for Me,” says the LORD, “Until the day I rise up for plunder; My determination is to gather the nations To My assembly of kingdoms, To pour on them My indignation, All My fierce anger; All the earth shall be devoured With the fire of My jealousy. 9 “For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, That they all may call on the name of the LORD, To serve Him with one accord.”

“I will restore to the peoples a pure language” means that God will give all lips the same language! Indeed, that will be the day of salvation. The prophecy continues,

Zeph.3:15 “The LORD has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; You shall see disaster no more. 16 In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: “Do not fear; Zion, let not your hands be weak. 17 The LORD your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.”

Such is the greatness of our salvation, a salvation that stands in direct contrast to the judgment upon Babel. And so, people of God, turn from the sinful pride which is in your own heart, turn away from the foolishness of trying to make a name for yourselves, the foolishness of pride, and in the words of,

1Cor. 10:31 “[W]hether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”