



Part 29 – Leaving Babylon

Genesis 11:1-9

The first half of Genesis chapter 11 tells the story of the city of Babel and their attempt to build a great tower to reach to the heavens. The city was founded and the tower begun so that the people might make a great name for themselves (vs. 4). “The primeval history reaches its fruitless climax as man, conscious of new abilities, prepares to glorify and fortify himself by collective effort. The

elements of the story are timelessly characteristic of the spirit of the world. The project is typically grandiose...At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes.”¹

1. The Sins in Shinar

- Vv. 1-4
- As the human population grew in the years after the flood many of the people “migrated from the east” (vs. 2). They settled in the plains of Shinar which are located in the region between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to the north of the Arabian desert. There they founded a great city. We know from chapter 10 that Nimrod, a descendant of Ham, was the king of that city called Babel (10:8-10). The inhabitants of Babel went about building a tower (or ziggurat) as a means to reach the dwelling place of God (vs. 4). These towers or “ziggurats” were not uncommon in the ancient world as people followed their desire to commune directly with the gods or perhaps seek self-deification.
- The passage specifies the building materials which were employed – bricks made of mud and straw because large stones were simply not readily available in that region. It also specifies bitumen as the material used for mortar to hold the bricks together. At the risk of making too much of this I do want to point out man’s long history of employing advances in technology toward sinful ends. Not surprisingly, the settlers on the plains of Shinar were guilty of sins which continue to be common in our own day.

a) They were disobedient to God’s creation ordinance.

- In verse two we are alerted to a problem. A large number of people, perhaps a significant portion of the world’s population at that time, made the decision to settle in one location. To modern ears that does not seem problematic until we remember God’s creation ordinance for the human family to multiply and fill the earth. In verse 4 the motivation behind this act of disobedience is revealed.

b) They were full of pride.

Vs. 4 – “Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.’”

- By their own words, the people of Babel revealed their sinful intentions. They refused God’s creation ordinance that they would fill the earth on the basis that it would weaken their goal of self-aggrandizement. They aimed to make a great name for themselves thus inverting the very purpose of their lives to give glory to their Creator and King.

c) They held to a false religion.

- The settlers in the plains of Shinar sought to have God on their own terms. Instead of a mediated relationship with God, they sought to have God on their own terms, which is what all false religions are. Here, the people imagined that they could build a tower that would bring them into direct contact with God.

¹ Derek Kidner, Genesis (Downers Grove: IVP, 1967) p. 109

d) They sought to break through the boundaries God had established.

- Man is not intended to have direct and unmediated access to God. Sinful people require a mediator. They require a go-between in order to make peace with a holy God. The Tower of Babel, as with other similar ziggurats of the ancient world, was intended to connect humans with their gods. Since the fall, mankind has sought ways to go beyond the limits God has set. They have sought to be a law unto themselves. Essentially, mankind seeks to take for himself what belongs to God alone.
- The transgressions of God's moral law (worshipping God on our own terms, murder, adultery, theft) are all attempts to transcend God's boundaries for mankind. All of the attempts to redefine human sexuality, the attempts to normalize and bless homosexuality, the deconstruction of gender – all of these powerful cultural tsunamis are expressions of man's age-old attempt to break free from God; to be a law unto ourselves.
- It should not be surprising that in both Old and New Testaments, Babylon is used as a metaphor for what is most wicked in mankind. Babylon would eventually grow to a mighty and fearsome city/state. In 605 BC Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. And beginning in 597 BC the larger portion of the population of Judah (the Southern Kingdom) was taken captive and deported to Babylon. In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John uses Babylon as a metaphor for the sinful world's final opposition to God's reign. It is a profound irony that while the engineers and builders of Babel's tower were seeking to rise up to God, Babylon's end will be one of destruction. "For her sins are heaped high as heaven" (**Revelation 18:5**). "The smoke from her goes up forever and ever" (**Revelation 19:3**).

2. God's Intervention

Vs. 5 – "And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built."

- Though an awesome challenge for the builders, the passage exposes the absurdity of their project. God is depicted as having to stoop down to even see what for them was a mighty edifice. This is an anthropomorphism (attributing human attributes or actions to God) in order to illustrate the folly of the tower of builders.

Vs. 6 – "And the LORD said, '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 now be impossible for them.'"

- God's intervention was not an act of envy or competition as some have mistakenly inferred. God's words portray the concern of a Creator and Father, not those of a rival. On the plains of Shinar man once again had attempted to transcend the boundaries set in place by God. Such efforts to break free of God's boundaries always end disastrously as we see so often in our own day.
- God's act of confusing the people's language and thus scattering them was an act of mercy. The people had refused to obey the creation mandate and fill the earth. They had disregarded God's rightful glory and sought to make a name for themselves. They had refused a properly mediated relationship with God and instead sought to stand with him face-to-face as equals. Scattering the people of Babel was a Divine rescue mission from their own foolishness and pride. Indeed, every time the Lord frustrates and brings to an end our sinful schemes he is acting in mercy toward us.

3. The Church as Gathering of the Nations

- Ultimately, God will cast down Babylon and all her immorality, violence, and pretensions. Satan will be cast down along with all who worshiped the gods of this world. Sin will be no more. All tears will be wiped away. The lion and the lamb will lie down together. And life in the new creation will commence with the whole vast company of those God has redeemed from every nation, language, and people. No more will the nations be separated by ethnic or national loyalties. No longer will they be divided by language or borders. But all will worship before the throne of the Lamb who has taken away their sin.
- The veil over this grand and glorious future was lifted if only momentarily at Pentecost. There in the holy city the Spirit of God filled the apostles and gave them boldness to preach the Word of God. And on that day men and women and children from around the known world with all their varied languages heard the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed in their own tongue (**Acts 2:1-12**). On that day, just for a moment, Babel was reversed. And until that great day when Babel's confusion is eternally reversed, the church of Jesus Christ will continue to be the means for the gathering in of the nations.