

A Tale of Two Cities

In the Beginning: A Study on Genesis 1-11 Sermon 11

Genesis 11:1-9

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Sometimes books have prologues. Like a prelude of a symphony, prologues introduce keynotes and abiding themes that prepare hearers for what's to come. This is the case with the Bible, whose prologue is Genesis 1-11. These opening chapters are the deep history and deep notes that undergird the rest of history. Here we begin to learn who God is, who we are, and why life is so glorious and so tragic.

As we've studied Genesis 1-11 these past months, two notes in particular have struck me: the failings of human beings and the grace of God the Creator. Genesis 1-11 doesn't read like a modern self-help book instructing readers to draw upon their inner goodness. Though humans are introduced with such honor and dignity, these creatures made in the image of God soon bear the likeness of sin and death: Adam and Eve reject their Maker's wisdom. Cain murders his brother. The generations of Noah desire only evil and violence. And as we'll see today, the descendants of Noah haven't learned from the flood, but seek to bear the image of their own glory, rather than God's. An honest reading of Genesis 1-11 leaves us troubled and skeptical about human nature—about our own hearts and minds. This brings us to the prologue's second theme.

God is not only the Creator, but He's also the merciful sustainer. We see His grace again and again. He tenderly clothes Adam and Eve, protects Cain from harm, preserves creation through Noah and the Ark. And, as we'll see today in the account of the Tower of Babel, even God's judgments upon our sin can serve to scatter us right into His better purposes.

I spent a summer apprenticing with a potter. As I learned how to make bowls on the potter's wheel, I'd often find my unskilled work wobbling and seemingly ruined. Tom, the veteran potter, would come over to help. Instead of throwing out the piece of clay, he'd put his strong hands around it, recenter it, and begin to reshape it. Genesis 1-11 says something similar. Even as things wobble out of shape, the Creator doesn't discard what He's made. He places His strong hands around it, powerfully but carefully reshaping it; He will not give up on this, on us. This piece of clay will, in the end, become the

masterpiece He's planned. Encircling the failures of humankind are the hands of Sovereign Grace. This is the central note that Genesis 1-11 sounds.

Our last study in this prologue brings us to the account of the Tower of Babel, succinctly told in Genesis 11:1-9. Here we will see both these themes, human failure and divine grace, at work. But what I hope we see more clearly is the way these two themes come to be connected in this story. It is not just that there is failure over here, and grace over there—but they are connected. The sinful builders of Babel will be scattered abroad by God. But they are also scattered right into the bigger streams of God's purposes. What we learn today is that, in the hands of the potter, the failures of human plans can be formed into the fulfillment of divine purposes.

Let's turn to this account and see how these themes come together. We'll begin by noting yet another example of human failings—we'll consider the towers men make and why they fail. Then we'll turn to God's actions—considering the City of God, and how it's built.

I. The Towers Men Make and Why They Fail

Building things is not bad. It's part of how God made us. He gave us minds to dream and invent, and hands to design and make. Some of my earliest memories as a boy are of building towers out of blocks. They were *huge* structures—at least to my young estimation.

But man can build for bad reasons, and we see some of these in the story of the City and Tower of Babel. The account of Babel falls into two parts: the actions of man (vv.1-4) and the actions of God (vv. 5-9). Observing from the outside, we see people migrating eastward and settling on a plain in Shinar (Mesopotamia, or Babylon).¹ They invent brick making, then plan together to build a city and a tower that reaches up to the heavens. This may seem innocent enough at first, but keep in mind God's command was to "fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28; 9:1, 7). When we read that people "settle" (11:2), we should be alert. It is made plain that something is off when the text takes us from outward observations into inner motives.

In verse 4 two motives behind their actions are revealed, pride and desire for control.

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 (Genesis 11:4).

The two motives behind the building of the city and the tower are (1) pride, “to make a name for ourselves,” and (2) control (or, striving for security), “lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”

Pride

People are created in the image of God, Genesis teaches. We are “glory creatures,” designed to reflect the glory of God. We are meant to fill the earth with God’s glory as we fill the earth with His good rule and good ways. Here, man is refusing to fill the earth and building an edifice for his own glory. The tower into the heavens underscores their arrogance. The tower in mind is the famous ziggurat in ancient Babylon, which one Jewish writer describes as a

lofty, massive, solid brick, multistage temple tower... that dominated the landscape. Rooted in the earth, with its head lost in the clouds, it was taken to be the meeting point of heaven and earth.... The center of the universe, the “navel of the earth.” In the flat plains of Mesopotamia (Iraq), the ziggurat was like a mountain where man and god might enter into direct contact with each other.²

In Babel, man was striving to be divine—to make an eternal name for himself— rather than humbling himself before God.

Control

Ancient city-building was not just motivated by pride, but also a desire for control and security. Ancient cities had walls around them, and these walls were for protection. They also had storehouses of grain and food. Cities provided security. There wasn’t a “suburban” alternative. Either one was a vulnerable wanderer, a nomadic tribal people, or they were connected to the safety of a city.

In order to follow God’s plans for them, humans would need to venture out into the unknown, which meant trusting God for their security and provision. This is what Abraham will model in the following

chapter. In the account of Babel, humanity rejects both its duty to glorify God and its duty to trust God.

What sin lies behind the things we build? What are the inner motives behind our outward ambitions and endeavors? Even lurking behind seeming noble endeavors—charitable work, striving for good grades, nurturing a family, Christian ministry—there can lurk the sins of pride and a lack of trust in God. Genesis 11 calls us to search out the motives that lie beneath whatever towers we are building.³

In verse 5 God comes down to evaluate their work, and with no small bit of irony:

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built (Genesis 11:5).

They'd built a tower to reach the heavens, but God, who dwells in heaven, couldn't see it. He had to come down because it was so small. There is a type of holy contempt in this act. God is saying, "What you see as big, from my perspective, is pathetically small."

God will, in the ensuing verses, act to stop their progress. He confuses their language so they can no longer communicate and must therefore spread out and go their separate ways. Before turning to a second question—which has to do with the way God builds His city, as compared with the city of man—I want to pause and consider what this story thus far might have meant for the first people who heard it—Israel.

Imagine Israel reading this as they're on the cusp of entering the promised land. Through Moses, God delivered them from the mighty kingdom of Egypt, with its towering pyramids and rich culture. Since then, Israel has been nothing but nomads, wandering in the wilderness. They stand before the land of Canaan, which is marked by its own powerful cities that are built by men.

In this story I think Israel is meant to hear a warning. They will be tempted by the cities of man. Up to this point, they have either been slaves or nomads. The luster of cities will be alluring. God is warning them against the pride and power of man in these places; and God is telling them that even the greatest cities, such as Babylon, are pathetic when compared to Him.

God is also encouraging tiny Israel. In the account of Babel, God thwarts the power of the greatest city of that time—Babylon. In doing so, He is perhaps preparing Israel for a time when they will be in exile in Babylon [and for taking towns in the promised land], letting them know that there will never be a man-made empire that ultimately threatens the power of their Lord.

Let's turn now from the failure of the towers and cities of men—built on pride and control—and ask what this story might tell us about the City of God. Let's turn from human failings to God's grace.

II. The City of God and How It's Built

The Bible often thinks of God's Kingdom as having at its center a great city, Zion, or eventually the New Jerusalem. This is the city where God dwells, His laws go out, and His people dwell in peace and joy. This city is compared in scripture to the city of man, Babylon. I want to highlight three things about how God builds His city, noting especially how they relate to our lives and labors right now.

1. God builds His city with the broken bricks of Babylon

God builds His city not from perfect bricks. Rather, He takes the broken and burnt bricks that once were the walls of Babylon, and He saves, reshapes, and makes them into the glorious stones of the New Jerusalem (see 1 Peter). Let me show you how we see this at work in the account of Babel.

God could have stopped their project by sending fire, flood, or a plague. But instead, He does something as strange as it is strategic; He confuses their language.

Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech (Genesis 11:7).

This confusion of language becomes the means that sends them outward,

So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city (Genesis 11:8).

Here is the irony. Confusing their language accomplishes the thwarting of their plans because if they cannot communicate, they can no longer work together. It also, however, preserves them and sends

them back into the larger purposes of God. Recall that God's first command to Adam and Eve, and Noah post-flood, was to "fill the earth: "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28; 9:1, 7). Now notice how the story of Babel ends:

Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD **dispersed them over the face of all the earth.** (Genesis 11:8-9).

Unbeknownst to the builders of Babel, God has just meted out judgment upon them that simultaneously flung them right into His original plan. God's plan for the world is that humans would fill it—as stars fill the sky—and by doing so reflect His glory throughout His creation. As the prophet says, the earth will be "filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14). When humans settle instead of going out, that glory is not spread throughout creation. And God does not scatter these people to forget them. The driving theme of Genesis 12 through Revelation will be the bringing of goodness to the nations, building these very scattered peoples into the beautiful walls of the City of God.

Briefly, let's notice the theme:

- In Genesis 12, Abraham is called to go out, and God promises to make of him "a great nation." And the Lord says to Abram, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).
- In Isaiah, speaking to Israel His servant, the Lord says: "I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6).
- Jesus, we are told, would die ... "not for the nation [of Israel] only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:51-52).
- And in the passage in Revelation, the scene of the New City, "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" stands before the throne of the Lamb, worshipping. (Revelation 7:9).

Read in the light of God's larger purposes, God's judgment upon the failures of Babel serves to scatter those people right into the stream of His bigger purposes. These failed bricks need not be discarded, but their maker will find them again and fashion them into the very stones of the city of God.

That's the first thing to see about how God builds His city. He does not use perfect bricks. Rather, He goes about the whole earth, picking up the burnt and broken bricks of cities like Babel—bricks like you and me—and He gently fashions them into the City of God.

2. God builds His city by His Word

God builds His City by His Word. Language is an unmistakable theme in this passage, as it opens with “the whole earth having one language and the same words.” It is by this shared language that they are able to unite and build a society and structure a city. And it is only in confusing this one language, that God puts a protective ceiling over man's possible power. There will be no super-state, God says. Because humanity is sinful, God is acting to limit the possible scale of their sin. More dangerous than a sinful nation state, would be a sinful global superpower; the latter risks blotting out the message of the Gospel from the entire earth.

Language is one of humanity's most powerful tools. Through it, we connect with each other, share ideas, and develop plans. Through language, we come to define and understand the world. As a powerful tool, it can be used for good or bad. In Babel, we learn that the true and lasting city will not be built according to the language of man—his wisdom, his definition of reality. Rather, it will be built according to the Word of God.

Just as God “comes down to see the tower” here, God “comes down” again in Exodus 19, this time visiting the wandering people of Israel at Mount Sinai. There, however, God comes down on His terms, and Moses humbly is invited up (Exodus 19:20). And there, in Exodus 20, God gives *His Word*—the Ten Commandments—and it is by that language, that word, that Israel is to be built into a holy nation.

The same is true as God sets out to build the church. Tongues of fire come upon the Apostles in Acts 2, and they begin to speak of the mighty acts of God in the languages of men from all over the world: “There were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven,” and the Apostles speak of God in the diverse languages of every visitor. Here is the reversal of Babel; the people God scattered by confusing their language, He then gathered by speaking to them the Word of God.

Whatever you are building, a resume, a career, a ministry, a family, a life, build it according to the Word of God, not the words of men. The Word of God is God's wisdom, His plans, His revelation about who He is, who we are, and what our purpose is. If something is built according to the Word of God, no matter how events now may seem, it has its place in the City of God.

3. God builds His city around His tower, God's fame

If Babel's sin involved building a tower to their own name, then the City of God will build a tower to the Name of the Lord. In his masterpiece, *The City of God*, Augustine says cities are built around deep desires, lust, and loves. And Rome—the “Babel” Augustine was comparing with the City of God—Augustine says is built around the *libido domanandi*, a Latin term that can be roughly translated as “lust for domination.” The lust for domination is, for Augustine, the driving impulse of fallen man and his society (the city of man). As one modern thinker translated this, the *libido dominandi* is man's “will to power.”⁴

The City of God will be built around God's power. It will be built out of love for God. And the tower at its center, so to speak, will be the exaltation of God's name, lifted high by the praise of God's people. As we read in Revelation, a picture of all nations that have been scattered, united—not around their own name—but the name of the Lord:

Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your **name**? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you (Revelation 15:4).

As the story of Babel closes out our study of Genesis 1-11, it does indeed remind us one more time of the propensity of humanity to run off course. It reminds us of our failings. But it also reminds us of God's grace. Seen from the larger picture of scripture, God scatters the builders of Babel into the broader stream of His purposes. In His hands, their failings are turned into part of His purposes, as He plans to fill the earth and then draw people from every nation into a relationship with His Son. Genesis presents us with a humbling picture of humanity but an equally hope-giving vision of God. Our Maker is our Redeemer: His plans for His Creation will not be thwarted. And those which are His, will not be wrested from His Hand.

Endnotes

1. That this is Babylon is made clear by Genesis 11:9. The waters of the Persian Gulf receded in the fourth millennium and there is evidence of people settling there. This is the area known as the Fertile Crescent. See NIV Study Bible.
2. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 82.
3. I spent some time with a church planter in Boston while I was in seminary. His name was Mark Booker, and he was a great pastor. I asked him once how he dealt with pride and vainglory when writing sermons—how could he do something up in front of people without overthinking their views of him. He told me we could never fully ride our hearts of this bent towards pride and self-glory. Rather, when you see it there during your sermon writing, kneel down, confess it to God, ask Him to remove it, then get back up and keep working.
4. See more on this theme in *City of God* here, <https://minervawisdom.com/2019/03/29/augustines-city-of-god-xi-understanding-the-libido-dominandi/>