

Text: Genesis 11:1-9

Title: "God and the City"

(Tenth, and concluding, in a series of studies in Genesis 1-11: "The Story That Makes Sense of Our Stories")

We come now to the conclusion of our series of studies in Genesis 1-11, to the last chapter of what we have been calling "The Story That Makes Sense of Our Stories".

That is, we come now to the end of the first half of the Bible. I have been saying throughout our series that the Bible has two halves. Yes, the Old Testament and the New Testament. But more essentially, Genesis 1-11, and Genesis 12 to Revelation 22. The first half of the Bible ends with a story about God and a city. So does the second half. Both halves of the Bible end with God and the city.

Here is how I invite you to grapple with Genesis 11:

- ❖ I will first make a number of observations about this text
- ❖ And then, I will seek to unfold that the text is saying to us city-builders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Let us begin with a number of observations.

(1) Genesis 11, verse 1 – "Now the whole world had one language and a common speech". From the larger context of the story, especially from the genealogy in Genesis 10 that sets up the story, we know that the author of Genesis is not saying that all humans spoke only one language." Rather the author is saying that different people groups of Genesis 10 understood and spoke one language... even though each people group had its own dialect. In Genesis 10, the chapter before, the three sons of Noah branch out into three different family trees. And the author of Genesis says, "they were separated into the lands, everyone according to his language". Three different times for each of the three sons, "they were separated into their lands, everyone according to his language" (10:5, 20, 31). So, "the whole world had one language and a common speech" means that the whole world could communicate in one language. Much as today: most of the nations of the world can communicate in English, to one degree or another... even though the nations have their own language.

(2) Another observation: this name "Babel" originally meant "gate of the gods". The city called Babel is ancient Babylon. At the time of the writing of Genesis 1-11, Babylon was touted as "the center of the universe". Located where it was near the coming together of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, it was "the cradle of civilization". "Babel" – "gate of the gods" – becomes "confusion", the new meaning of the term. The story, therefore, counters the Babylonian creation story which said that Babylon was "founded at the time of the original creation" (Bruce Waltke, Genesis, 180). "Gate of the gods"? The way to the gods? No, a place of great confusion.

(3) Another observation: "tower". Verse 4 – "come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches into the heavens..." Archeologists tell us of the huge buildings Babylonian (and other peoples) built called ziggurats. You have likely seen pictures of them in history and sociology textbooks, or in magazines like National Geographic. Huge stair-cased structures, built supposedly, so people could climb up them to the heavens. One of the most famous ziggurats was built in honor of the god Marduk in order to reach into the heavens... and to make it easier for the gods to come down, if they would like to do so. The name of the Marduk

tower was, "The House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth". Another nearby tower (in Larsa) was called "The House of the Link between Heaven and Earth".

You can see that the building of the tower of Babel is not just about architecture or engineering; it is foundationally about the quest for transcendence, the desire to "touch transcendence".

(4) Another observation: creativity. The building of the tower is, yes, programmatically theologically the building of the tower is also an expression of creativity the creator has created into the human species. Like God we, too, are builders. A dream trip for me would be to go around the world and visit the tallest buildings of the world. Sharon and I have seen at least from the street level the Willis tower in Chicago the Sears towers, which is 442 meters tall. I would also like to see the Petronas towers 1 and 2, in Kuala Lumpur- 452 meters. And also the Shanghai world finance centre- 492 meter. Notice by the name of that tower "**world**" financial centre. Something is happening in the world. I would like to also see Taipei 101 tower – 509 meters. And I also want to see the Lotte world II tower, in Pusan, South Korea, to be completed by 2013 – 509 meters, one meter taller than the Taipei!!

And I would also like to see the Burj Khalifa towers in Dubai 828 meters!! Fabulous testimony to the genius of humanity created in the image of the creator of the universe. Just think of all the things that go into the building of such structures.

(5) So another observation "bricks". Verse 3 "come let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly" and then a follow up comment they used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. That follow up is added because the people of Israel did not use brick or tar; they built their houses and temple with stone and mortar. Using bricks was to the Israel minds not a very wise thing to do. Even though the Babylonian, and others, thought of making brick as technological advancement. And the Akkadian stories of tower building, the making of bricks was celebrated by a ceremony (Sarna benesis, 82).

"Come let us make brick and bake them thoroughly. Boy, you better.... you better bake them thoroughly...or they will not hold together."

The author of Genesis calls to our attention to "bricks" as a way to say that is grand is to project a tower building, which is built on shaky foundations. The foundational material is inherently weak. Bricks do not stay long against the elements. Bricks do not stand the test of time. The author of the story is saying that even if God had not interfered in this project, it would have one day crumbled.

(6) Thus another observation: "eastward" verse 2 "as humans moved eastward they found a plain in Shiner (Babylon) and settled there"

Eastward ... move eastward more than just a geographical observation. In Genesis the move eastward always signaled separation; moving away from something to someone. When God drives Adam and Eve out of the garden they move eastward (3:24). When Cain leaves the presents of God he moves eastward (4:16). The emerging world population moves eastward meaning the population is separating itself from something meaning it is separating its self from God. One OT scholar puts it this way: "By this spatial term the narrative also conveys a metaphorical sphere, means " to Babeliter" are outside Gods' blessings" (Matthews, Genesis 1-11; 26, 246). Eastward.

(7) Thus, another observation: Name, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that / we may / make a name for ourselves..." In the Bible, naming

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implies having a degree of dominion over what is named. In the beginning, God named humans; God gives Adam his name; Adam does not name himself. Then God lets Adam give names to all the animals (2:19-20). "Come... let us make a name for ourselves." The city and tower builders, want to exercise dominion for themselves. French sociologist Jacques Ellul says in his book "The Naming of the City": "The rebellious people are tired of being named, of being the recipient of a name. They want to name themselves" (17). This is not about wanting to gain a reputation, it is not about a quest for fame. Naming oneself is about declaring independence. The Babelites want to be independent of the God who names us.

The building of the city, the building of the tower are all about making our own world apart from God. The city and tower and naming are all about trying to find significance and security on our own. Twice in the text we hear the word "ourselves": "Let us build ourselves a city" (11:4) "Let us make a name for ourselves" (11:4). We will make life work on our own! Indeed, we are going to break through to God's realm!" "... a tower that reaches into heaven" (11:4) And we are going to do it on our own.

Built on bricks, says the author of Genesis; it is all built on bricks. The quest for significance apart from God is built on bricks. The quest for security apart from God is built on bricks. The quest for immortality apart from God. That is what the city and tower are finally all about. It is built on bricks.

(8) One more observation: The structure of the text itself; the way the story is put together. Like so many biblical texts, it is crafted chiasmically, Rather than going in a straight line it is moving in an inverted V. It moves in such a way that the "big point" of the story is not at the end but in the middle.

I have painted in the sermon notes Bruce Walters understanding of the chiasmatic structure.

A All the earth (*kol-ha'ares*) one language  
B People settle together there (*sam*)  
C Said to each other (*re'ehu*)  
D Come now, let us make bricks (*haba....nab la*)  
E A city and a tower  
X And the lord came down  
E<sub>1</sub> The city and the tower  
D<sub>1</sub> Come now.... let us confuse (*haba....nab la*)  
C<sub>1</sub> [Not understand] each other (*re'ehu*)  
B<sub>1</sub> People disperse from there (*sam*)  
A<sub>1</sub> Language of the whole earth (*kol-ha'ares*)

A and A<sub>1</sub> belong together – "the whole earth"  
B and B<sub>1</sub> belong together – "there"  
C and C<sub>1</sub> belong together – "each other"  
D and D<sub>1</sub> belong together – "Come now... let us"  
E and E<sub>1</sub> belong together – "city and tower"

Leads to X in the middle, to the "big point" – "and the Lord came down." "Come, let us build a city and a tower that reaches into the heavens." "And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower."

Do you see what the author of the story wants us to see? We build our impressive towers... 100 meters, 300 meters, 500 meters, 800 meters. So very tall, so very, very tall. But also so very

small, so very, very small. So small that God has to leave heaven and come down to see it! A very humbling word.

So what is the Tower of Babel story saying to us city builders at this time in history? How does this past, “the story that makes sense of our stories,” make sense of our stories in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Hubris. The last chapter of the first half of the Bible is about Divine response to human hubris. Divine response to the human propensity to take life into our own hands. Divine response to the human arrogance that crosses boundaries. The God of the Bible is not opposed to cities and towers. “City-ness” would have eventually emerged in the Garden. As the population grew, as too the need for infra-structure: plumbing, power, transportation, housing, the moving of food supplies, the exchange of goods and services. Being “city” is not the problem. It is the hubris in the building of cities that is the problem.

We have seen this hubris throughout our studies in Genesis 1-11. This crossing of God-given boundaries. Adam and Eve cross the boundary and take from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” They grab for what looks like a way of “being like God” (3.5). Cain crosses the boundary and takes the life of his kid brother. Lamach crosses the boundary and takes two wives, and boasts of getting revenge in a young boy who wounds him. The angels cross the boundary and take wives for themselves from the daughters of humans. And then in building the city with a tower, humans try to cross the boundary and storm what they think are the gates of heaven.

Which explains God’s word in verse 6: “then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.” Now that they are using their technological creativity to storm heaven’s gates, they will stop at nothing.

Another way to state the meaning of the Tower of Babel story is to say that there has been a shift in centre. From the Creator to the creature, from the loving God to mere human beings. That is the problem. Not the building of cities and towers. But the shift in centre driving the building of cities and towers. God is not offended by building cities and towers. God is not jealous of humans expressing and creating. God’s concern is that apart from him it does not finally work.

As we have realized from the first chapter of the first half of the Bible, we were made in such a way that it only works, human existence, and human security, only works if the Creator is the centre. No other centre is big enough or strong enough, to hold it all together.

Which explains the strange words the city-builders say at the end of their speech. Verse 4: 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.” Literally, “lest we be scattered.” “Let us build a city, let us build a tower, lest us make a name. . . lest we be scattered.” They are in some way feeling the consequences of the shift in centre. Even in their “one common speech” and one common effort to build a tower and make a name, they feel insecure; they sense it is not really working.

“Lest we be scattered”

Helmut Thielicke is the one who helped me see this. In his book “How the World Began.” Listen:

Perhaps some of you have already noted a passage that crops up, somewhat hiddenly and enigmatically, at the very beginning of our story: "Let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens. . . "lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." Hence, long before the judgment of dispersion fell upon them, men already had a premonition, a dim fear that they might break apart and that even their languages might be confused. They sensed the hidden presence of centrifugal, dispersive forces.

This arises from the fact that they have suffered something that might be called the "loss of center" and that not that they have banished God from their midst the they no longer have anything that binds them to each other. Always the trend is the same: wherever God has been deposed, some substitute point has to be created to bind people together in some fashion or other. You start a war, perhaps, in order to divert attention from internal political dissensions and thus create a new solidarity by making people feel that they are facing a common threat. Or you build a tower of Babel in order to concentrate people's attention upon a new center by rallying them to united and enthusiastic effort and this way pull together the dispersive elements. Or you whip together by terror those who will not stay together voluntarily. Or you utilize the powers of suggestion, "propaganda," and "ideology," in order to generate the feeling of community by means of psychological tricks and thus make people want precisely what you want them to want.

All of these are substitute ties, conclusive attempts to replace the lost center with a synthetic center. But this attempt—this *experimentum medietatis*—is doomed to failure. The centrifugal forces go on pulling and rending and a hidden time-fuse is ticking in the piers of all the bridges.

A hidden time-fuse is ticking in the piers of all the bridges. Thieclicke continues:

In a society which has lost its center and consists of not much more than interest groups, employers' associations and labor unions, tenants' and home-owners' associations—we call it a "pluralistic society," without realizing the fateful Babylonian curse that lies behind this pluralism!—in such a society fear and distrust prevail, precisely the centrifugal forces which exploded with a vengeance at the tower of Babel.

Do we understand now that this story is something like a compendium of what we experience every day in ourselves and all around us? For a moment God opens the armored strongbox and lets us see the secret survey map of the course of the world.

At all events it no longer requires a thunderbolt from heaven to drive people apart. Since they have become godless the ferments of decay and disintegration are at work everywhere even without a blast from heaven.

Written in 1949.

Again, we see that judgment is always God simply giving us the full implications of the path we have chosen for ourselves. The story of the Tower of Babel tells is that the centrifugal forces set in motion by the shift in centre pull as apart. So David Atkinsin points out "If you will live without God as the centre, you will have no centre at all" (The Meaning of Genesis 1-11; 182).

And so God lets the centrifugal forces have their way. God confuses the one language. The "gate to the gods" becomes Babel, "confusion." God does it to keep us from further assault on reality. To keep us from ruining our lives on the path of "naming ourselves" in independence from God.

And God scatters the peoples. . . " all over the face of the earth" (11:9).

And the story ends. Tower not finished. City half-built. The story just ends.

As we have made our way through Genesis 1-11 you may have detected a pattern to the stories. The stories repeat the same cycle: grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. God comes in grace. Humanity rebels in some way. There judgment about which humanity was warned. And then unexpectedly—new grace, God offers new grace to the rebelling and undeserving humanity. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace.

So the story of Adam and Eve. Grace—God calls humans into being and gives them everything we need to be “fully human and fully alive.” But they began to believe the serpent’s twisting of God’s word, and they became suspicious that God is withholding something they need. So they rebel—they decide to take life into their own hands, and live independently of God. Then comes judgment, just as God said it would. Life began to unravel. Paradise is lost. The garden becomes a cemetery. And then God offers new grace! Adam and Eve remain alive in spite of the threat of death. God clothes the shame-filled, naked rebels. And makes a promise that one day “a seed of the woman” will come and crush the head of the serpent. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace.

So too the story of Cain and Abel. God in grace gives Cain a brother. Cain rebels and murders Abel. Cain runs off to make a city where he thinks he will not have to deal with God. And then new grace: God graciously establishes a protective relationship between God and Cain. And God enables the rebel to build a city to provide for his family. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace.

Noah and the flood.

Although the avalanche of sin continues, God graciously gives humanity all we need to live. Humanity again rebels at even deeper levels. Angels rebel. Society grows more and more decadent. God responds by a cleansing creation with a huge flood, caused by the removal of a protective barrier. Then new grace! God spares the life of Noah and his family. And through Noah begins to re-people the earth. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace.

Romans 5:20 “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more!”

Then the Tower of Babel. Grace – humans are given the capacity to create. Humanity rebels. God responds in judgment. God scatters the builders. God frustrates their attempt to build a human-centered civilization. And then the end. Grace, rebellion, judgment. Period. No new grace. The nations scattered over the face of the globe. Alienation from each other. Arguing over boundary lines. Wrestling with access to natural resources. Always preparing for war. Grace, rebellion, judgment. End. No new grace.

Is that it? It cannot end there? Can it, Lord? “Is God’s gracious forbearance now exhausted?” (G. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 149)

The camera then turns from its panoramic sweeps of the scattered nations. And narrows the focus. Big time. Away from the nations of the world to one couple in one of the nations. It is stunning. All the nations scattered over the globe. Still rebelling. Still under the judgment, suffering the inherent consequences of their “no center” way of life. And then the camera slowly zooms in on an elderly couple living in the Ur of the Chaldeans, in what is now modern day Iraq. At that time, Ur had a population of 500,000, a big city for any time in history. It had an extensive library. A postal system. Comfortable two-story homes. A polytheistic pluralistic city – some 300 gods were worshipped there! The skyline dominated by a huge temple tower.

The camera zooms in on the elderly couple in Ur named Abram and Sarai, later to be named Abraham and Sarah.

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Genesis 12, verses 1-3. "The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse, and in you all the peoples on the earth will be blessed.'"

What is going on here? Simply and profoundly this: New grace for the city!! God's call on Abraham and Sarah of Iraq is God's new grace for all the cities of all the nations scattered over the face of the earth!!! "I will make your name great." All that the Babelites wanted to achieve by making a name for themselves on their own, God will do. God will rebuild the fallen world. God will build the city we seek.

The first half of the Bible ends with judgment. The second half of the Bible begins with the new grace! The cycle is not broken! Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. "In you all the peoples of the earth will be blessed."

It would take some time for the new grace to unfold. Like 2,000 years!

Until the camera family zooms in on another couple of the line of Abraham and Sarah. In Bethlehem of Judea. The camera zooms in on Joseph and Mary. And finally just on Mary who is a virgin. Unable to conceive on her own.

Same note on which Genesis 11 ends. Verse 30: "And Sarah was barren; she had no child." God's work of new grace for the city begins through a barren line, a humanly helpless line. Abraham and Sarah would try to get pregnant for 25 years! And then, well past the age of child bearing, God gives grace to conceive. So are we surprised that when the long process finally comes to its climax we meet a virgin?

That is the way it is with grace. God comes to do His new work when we finally realize that we are not able to do it. "Let us make a name for ourselves." "I will make your name great."

And the ancestor of Abraham and Sarah conceived. A virgin conceived! And gave birth to a Son. To the seed of the woman promised in the Garden! The one in whom all the peoples, all the nations of the world will be blessed!

But who is this seed? Who is this Son? Who is this Jesus?

Back to the structure of the closing story of the first half of the Bible. It is crafted to focus on "and the Lord came down." And the Lord came down. Much "further down" than the Babelites realized. Much further down than the author of Genesis realized. The Lord came all the way down. The Divine response to human hubris is Divine humanity. The Lord came all the way down. Jesus is "the-Lord-came-down."!!

In Him the city finds its centre...its true centre. In Him we find our significance and security. In Him we find our unity. In Jesus we find all we are longing for in building our cities and towers. We need not construct towers to take us into heaven. Heaven came to us! Heaven came down. All the way down.

And because we can now live around the true centre, the judgment of Babel can be lifted. Confusion can be removed. Fifty days after He rose from the grave, Jesus pours out His Spirit upon the newly formed community centered in Him (Acts 2). And people from all over the

world hear the good news spoken simultaneously in their own languages! Pentecost is the reversal of the judgment of Babel!

“The Lord came down.” All the way down. Bringing new grace to the city.

One day there will be another “came down.” He who came down will come again. And with Him another “come down.” The last chapter of the second half of the Bible. “And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). “And in the middle of its streets, a river of the water of life. On either side of the river was the tree of life... And there shall no longer be any curse... And they shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads”. (Rev. 22:1-4).

It is for that city that we city builders were created. It is that city Jesus-the-centre calls us to seek. As did Abraham; Hebrews 11:10: “he sought the city which has foundations” – not bricks – “whose architect and builder is God.”

The cycle did not break.

Grace. Rebellion. Judgment. New Grace. Jesus of Nazareth. “The Lord came down.” He is New grace for the city.

END.

Canadian composer Margaret Clarkson wrote a hymn that captures what I want to pray right now. The words are in your order of worship...and will be on the screen behind me. Will you please stand and cry out for our city?