

Genesis 11:1-26 “One Little Divided Family”
Psalm 136
Acts 2

May 10, 2009

At the Tower of Babel God “came down” to judge the pride and folly of men.
They thought they could build a tower up to heaven.
But God revealed the confusion in their hearts
by turning it into a confusion of their voices.

Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.
The builders had twisted hearts.
And so the judgment that comes upon them is the twisting of their tongues.

Psalm 136 unites our tongues in its constant refrain,
“for his steadfast love endures.”

Psalm 136 begins with creation,
giving thanks to God for his wondrous works
in forming the heavens and the earth.
But then in verses 10-15 it focuses on God’s special work of redemption
in the Exodus – how God redeemed Israel.
Then in verses 16-22 it reminds us of how God gave Israel the land
and gave them an inheritance.

Verses 23-26 then conclude with a reminder that it is *this God*
who remembered us and rescued us from our foes.

Give thanks to the God of heaven!
For his steadfast love endures forever.

(Sing Psalm 136 – read Acts 2:1-21)

Acts 2 speaks of the reversal of Babel.
In Genesis 11 the twisted hearts of the builders resulted in twisted tongues.

Now, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit brings all tongues back together
in pouring forth the praises of God!

All nations now hear the mighty works of God proclaimed
because the resurrection of Jesus reverses the curse of Babel,
as the Holy Spirit untwists our hearts
and gives us voices to praise the living God.

But if we would understand the reversal of Babel,
then we should first understand what Babel was all about in the first place.

The literary structure of Genesis helps to communicate the point of the book.

Genesis consists of an introduction (chapter 1) and 10 parts.

Each part begins with “these are the generations of...”

2:4-4:26	“These are the generations of the heavens and the earth”	(1)
5:1-6:8	“This is the book of the generations of Adam”	(2)
6:9-9:28	“These are the generations of Noah”	(3)
10:1-11:9	“These are the generations of the sons of Noah”	(4)
11:10-26	“These are the generations of Shem”	(5)
11:27-25:11	“These are the generations of Terah”	(6)
25:12-18	“These are the generations of Ishmael”	(7)
25:19-35:29	“These are the generations of Isaac, the son of Abraham”	(8)
36:1-37:1	“These are the generations of Esau”	(9)
37:2-50:26	“These are the generations of Jacob”	(10)

We are currently in part 4 and by the end of today we will have finished part 5.

But look at the flow of Genesis:

the first three parts took us from the goodness of creation
through the fall into sin and the spread of corruption,
resulting in the destruction of the earth in the cosmic Flood.

Indeed, the whole pattern of redemptive history is laid out in those 3 parts.

God has promised that he will not destroy the world again by a Flood,
and so something else will have to be done about sin.

Because sin (plainly) has not gone away.

If anything, it is just getting worse.

And so the remainder of Genesis is about how this one big (not so) happy family
is divided – again and again.

But these divisions are part of God’s plan
for how he will bring all nations to himself.

The generations of Terah (part 6) will show how God chose one of Terah’s sons,
Abram.

Then the last four parts will contrast two sets of sons:

Ishmael and Isaac,
Esau and Jacob.

In each case, God chooses the younger son,
passing by the elder, not because of anything they had done,
but simply because of his own purpose and plan.

And in each case, the election of one will result in a narrowing of the covenant promise.

In Noah’s day, the blessing of Shem meant that one-third of Noah’s family
was heir of the promise.

(And as we saw last week, there was at least some hope for all but Canaan)

But already last week that was narrowed down to Eber,
who was only 1/20th part of the Semites.

By the time you get to Abraham, you are seven generations further down the road.
The election of Abraham means that the covenant promise
has been focused upon one man out of a world population
that has been estimated at around 30 million.
But it gets narrower still!

Because not only is the covenant promise narrowed to Abraham,
but even within the Abrahamic peoples it is focused upon Isaac
(who was only one of Abraham's eight sons),
and only half of Isaac's line,
as Jacob is chosen rather than Esau.
The Ishmaelites, the Midianites and the Edomites
will continue to interact with Israel throughout the scriptures,
as well as their cousins the Ammonites and the Moabites.

Why is God dividing humanity?
If, as we saw last time, God's purpose is to bring Japheth into the tents of Shem,
and even to have mercy on the Hamites,

why does the election of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
result in the narrowing of God's covenant promise?

Well, let me tell you a story...

It is a story in two voices:
First, the words of the people,
Second, the words of the LORD.

1. The Tower of Babel (11:1-9)

*1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.
2 And as people migrated from the east,
they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.
3 And they said to one another,
"Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly."
And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.
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."*

What is going on here?

They are building the great city.
They are building the City of Man.
They are not seeking to glorify God.
They wish instead to "make a name for ourselves."
But they also *fear* something:
"lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

I want you to see this,
because this story – the tower of Babel –
is at the heart of every great city in human history.

When Israel's spies went into the land,
they came back and reported in Deuteronomy 1:28 –
“The cities are great and fortified up to heaven.”
The cities of the Canaanites are like Babel.
How can we prevail against the great city?

Jonah was told to go to the “great city” of Ninevah,
echoing the language of Genesis 10.
But the great city makes a name for itself
and for its king.

And does a king make a great name for himself?
In two ways –
by waging war,
and by building things.

Great kings throughout history have been known for two things:
wars and buildings.
A great warrior only becomes a great king if he builds something that endures
as a lasting monument to his name.

In Genesis 11 it appears that humanity is not yet divided,
so there is no need, it would seem, for war.
Instead they move straight to the building phase.

And they seek to build a tower with its top in the heavens.
The tower, or ziggurat, in the ancient world
was considered to be the gate between earth and heaven.
Indeed, the word “Babylon” means “gate of God.”
Invariably the ziggurat-tower has a religious focus.

Though here their chief concern is for their own name.
It is therefore no accident that the author of Genesis
makes no mention of their names.
While their monstrous folly is retained in the pages of scripture for all time,
their names are forgotten.

Once again, we see that arrogance and pride are joined with fear.
Every great city wishes to make a name for itself.
And every great city fears that it will be dispersed.

How does a great city express its control and power?
How does it avoid being dispersed?

One way that a great city does this is through language.

In Daniel 1:2 Nebuchadnezzar brought the captives back to “the land of Shinar.”
Given that “the land of Shinar” is only used a few times in Scripture,
this points us back to Genesis 11.
The captives of Judah have been captured by Babel.
Indeed, in Daniel 1 we are told that they were forced to learn
the literature and language of Babel – of the Chaldeans.

He who controls language controls the minds of the people
(so far as that is possible!).

When Alexander overthrew the Persian Empire he successfully established Greek
as the language of diplomacy throughout the region.
As long as Latin was the language of the church,
the papacy could seek to establish control over the whole western church.

The book of Revelation also speaks of Babylon the Great as “that great city”
some have identified Babylon with Jerusalem – others with Rome –
but there is a reason for the ambiguity:

Babylon is any city that fits the description!

Any city that seeks to make a name for itself,
any city that seeks to dominate others,
any city that seeks to bring the nations under its control,
is Babylon.

It may imagine itself a beneficent power,
but the drive to make the world “safe for democracy”
is simply another way of saying, “under American influence.”

The United States has made a name for itself.
She has built monuments of pride and of folly.
She has established her language as the common language of diplomacy
(with help from Britain).

The most benevolent empires in history –
even those empires which sought to be overtly Christian
(the Roman emperors after Constantine,
Charlemagne and the medieval Holy Roman Empire,
the British empire, and (to some extent) the United States)
all these are still a part of the city of man.

And every time they try to make a name for themselves
they invoke the curse of Babel:

*5 And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower,
which the children of man had built.*

I want you to see something here.

They think that they are building this grand, majestic tower up into the heavens.
But the LORD, who sits in the heavens,
apparently can't quite see that itty-bitty little from up there!
He has to "come down" to see it!

*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.*

When humanity unites,
it is remarkable what we can accomplish.
When we work together and share ideas
we are able to do incredible things.
When humanity is divided we are so busy fighting each other
that we don't have time to pool our resources.

But as we have united larger groups of people and divided our labor more and more
we have acquired more and more power.

But it comes at a price.
God says, "nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."

Some may think of this in terms of the great good that we can do:
cure diseases and feed huge populations –
all the marvels of modern technology.

But the same technological advances have produced weapons
that could blot out all life from the earth.
Truly, "nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."

And so God speaks.
The voices of the city of man cannot compete with the voice of the LORD.

*7 "Come, let us go down and there confuse their language,
so that they may not understand one another's speech."
8 So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth,
and they left off building the city.
9 Therefore its name was called Babel,*

Whereas “babilu” in Akkadian means “gate of god”
babel in Hebrew means “confusion.”

God takes the pride and arrogance of man,
and turns it into confusion.
Their hearts were twisted and proud.
Now their tongues are twisted as well.

*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.*

Why is God dividing humanity?
He divides humanity in order to frustrate our ambition and pride.

And this is the way sin works.
The thing we want most is the thing that we cannot attain.
The thing we fear most is the result that we cannot avoid.

On the plains of Shinar they wanted to make a name for themselves,
but their name is forgotten.
At the tower of Babel they feared being dispersed over the face of the earth,
but that is precisely the result of their folly.

Babylon the Great becomes imbecilic babbling.

It would be easy to show these same sorts of ironies
throughout the history of the City of Man.
Nation after nation has demonstrated this.

But I don't want to let you off the hook!
We too easily point to the follies of the Romans, the Russians,
and even our own nation.

But the problem of Babel is firmly fixed in our own hearts as well.
Even the church can become a “city of man”
where we seek to establish our own name.
We can even clothe it in pious language:
we seek to establish a Michiana Presbytery for the glory of God
and the kingdom of Jesus Christ!
But that can be a cloak for the same pride and arrogance
as the nameless king who built the ziggurat on the plains of Shinar.

Am I simply seeking to make a name for myself?
Are we trying to build our own kingdom?

Or as someone has so aptly said it,
“are we just playing at church?”

How do we know?
How can you tell whether your heart is twisted?

Well, what are we afraid of?
That will tell us an awful lot!

Are we afraid of what visitors will think of us?
“We need to do something to convince them to come back.”

Why?

The moment we start worrying about whether visitors come back
is the moment that reveals that we are thinking about our own kingdom.
If we were thinking of the kingdom of *Jesus*
then we would ask, “how can we show the love of Christ
to all those who come within his gates?”

If this is *his* kingdom, then we should be concerned with what he has called us to do!

What do you fear?

Or are we afraid of confrontation?
“If I say something, I may alienate them...”

We’ve been seeing throughout Ephesians in the evening service
the importance of “speaking the truth in love.”

I need to do a better job of this.

Gregory the Great, in his *Book of Pastoral Rule*
comments that the pastor may at times refrain from confronting sin,
but he *may not* “let it slide.”
Rather, when he overlooks the failings of his flock,
he should always let them know that he is overlooking it.

Too often I have just let it slide.

Are we just playing at church?
Are we seeking to build a name for ourselves?

If we are, then our worst fears will surely come upon us!
And we will be dispersed over the face of all the earth.

But if we humble ourselves and seek first the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ,
then we will also be dispersed!

You see, there are two *kinds* of diasporas.
Two kinds of “exile.”

There is the dispersion of judgment,
in which God overthrows the foolish plans of men,
and then there is the dispersion of election,
in which God establishes *his* city.

But the building of the city of God
does not particularly resemble the building of the city of man.

God’s city is built by the weak and lowly.

In 1 Peter 1 Peter addresses the “elect exiles of the dispersion.”
You are *elect exiles*.
It is not just that you “happen” to be in exile.
You were chosen to be exile!
Your exile is part and parcel of your election!

You have been dispersed precisely because God’s purpose in election
is no longer the fragmentation and narrowing of the covenant promise.

Therefore, if we seek first the Kingdom of Christ,
then we will be dispersed as we go forth to the nations!
Not the dispersion of judgment,
but the dispersion of mission.

But in Genesis 11 we are still seeing the narrowing of the covenant line.
And that narrowing is seen clearly in part five of Genesis,
the generations of Shem.

2. The Generations of Shem (11:10-26)

10 These are the generations of Shem.

When Shem was 100 years old, he fathered Arpachshad two years after the flood.

*11 And Shem lived after he fathered Arpachshad 500 years
and had other sons and daughters.*

12 When Arpachshad had lived 35 years, he fathered Shelah.

*13 And Arpachshad lived after he fathered Shelah 403 years
and had other sons and daughters.*

14 When Shelah had lived 30 years, he fathered Eber.

*15 And Shelah lived after he fathered Eber 403 years
and had other sons and daughters.*

16 When Eber had lived 34 years, he fathered Peleg.

- 17 *And Eber lived after he fathered Peleg 430 years
and had other sons and daughters.*
- 18 *When Peleg had lived 30 years, he fathered Reu.*
- 19 *And Peleg lived after he fathered Reu 209 years
and had other sons and daughters.*
- 20 *When Reu had lived 32 years, he fathered Serug.*
- 21 *And Reu lived after he fathered Serug 207 years
and had other sons and daughters.*
- 22 *When Serug had lived 30 years, he fathered Nahor.*
- 23 *And Serug lived after he fathered Nahor 200 years
and had other sons and daughters.*
- 24 *When Nahor had lived 29 years, he fathered Terah.*
- 25 *And Nahor lived after he fathered Terah 119 years
and had other sons and daughters.*
- 26 *When Terah had lived 70 years, he fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran.*

I should mention that the LXX adds an extra name in the genealogy in verse 12,
the name of Cainan, in between Arpachshad and Shelah.

It is possible that a Jewish scribe (somewhere after the time of Christ)
accidentally omitted the name of Cainan
(it would be easy to do in a list like this).

It is also possible that the Greek translators added the name,
but this is less likely (since the LXX was a pretty careful translation of Genesis).

But just as in the generations of Adam (chapter 5) there were ten names,
so also here in the generations of Shem there are ten names.

Also, in each line the seventh is crucial:

the seventh from Adam (Enoch) walked with God;

the seventh backward from Abram (Eber) in Gen 10:25 is said to have been alive
in the time when God divided the nations (probably a reference to Babel)

And each of these genealogies ends with a triad of sons:

Adam had three – Cain, Abel, and Seth

The Cainite Lamech had three – Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-cain

Noah had three – Shem, Ham, and Japheth

And now Terah has three – Abram, Nahor, and Haran

We know from the text that most of the families had more than one son,
but only one is named (maybe not always the oldest, either).

In these four cases we hear about three sons.

Why?

Perhaps it is to avoid the sense of inevitability.

Certainly there is an emphasis

on how God holds us accountable for what we do.

Cain was rejected because he refused to worship God,
and murdered his brother instead;

but Seth and his son, Enosh, called upon the name of the LORD.
But there is also an emphasis on God's sovereign election.
Why did God choose Shem rather than Japheth?
Why did God choose Abram rather than Nahor?

No reason is given other than God's sovereign choice.

Part 5 of Genesis (the generations of Shem)
also shows us the continual narrowing of the covenant promise:
from Shem to Eber,
and from Eber to Abram.

This narrowing will continue:
to Isaac and to Jacob.

Then, when Israel fails to live faithfully before God,
the covenant promise narrows even further to David and his descendants,
finally coming to the Son of David, the true Israel, the Seed of Abraham,
the Seed of the Woman, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And in the temptation in the wilderness
Jesus is tempted with the temptation of Babel.
If he will bow the knee to the devil,
then the devil will give him all the kingdoms of the world.

But Jesus answers with the answer that Deuteronomy gave to that temptation:
You shall worship the LORD your God and him only shall you serve. (Dt 6:13)

And in this answer Jesus demonstrated the truth of the words
that he would speak later to his disciples:
Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you. (Mt 6:33)
For Jesus, his refusal to seek first his own kingdom –
his refusal to take the shortcut offered by the devil –
resulted in all these things being added to him.

Because Jesus took the path of seeking first his Father's kingdom,
and because he humbled himself and submitted himself
even to the death of the cross,
therefore God has highly exalted him
and has given him the name above every name,
“that at the name of Jesus, every knee would bow
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord
to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:10-11)

And so in Jesus, where all the covenant promises come together in one man,
the covenant promises then begin to expand out to every nation under heaven.

Where the story of the OT was a gradual narrowing
from all humanity in Adam to the singular promises to the Son of David,
the story of the NT is the expansion of the promise
to all the earth.

Or to say it another way,
the OT shows how Israel was taken out of the nations;
the NT shows how the nations are grafted back into Israel.

Therefore we see how every nation must humble itself before the Great King.
Because while the builders of the tower of Babel
thought they could build a gate to the gods,
our Lord Jesus Christ has been raised up where Babylon could never reach.

He who sits in the heavens laughs at the pretensions of earthly kings.
Because he has established our Lord Jesus Christ as the King of kings and Lord of lords.
Those who are wise will bow the knee to him know –
because one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord.
Now you may do it in faith and repentance.
But if you don't, then one day you will do it as the subdued enemy
cringing underneath his feet.

And in token of our desire to do this now, let us sing Psalm 2.