

## Sermon 5, The City Against God: Babylon I, Genesis 11:1-9

God addresses Babylon in oracle delivered by Isaiah: "Thou shalt not be joined with them in burial, because thou hast destroyed thy land, thou hast slain thy people; the seed of evil-doers shall not be named for ever. Prepare ye slaughter for his children for the iniquity of their fathers, that they rise not up, and possess the earth, and fill the face of the world with cities. (Isa 14:20-21 ASV)

Parallels: In Genesis 11, the builders of Babel wanted to make a name for themselves, but they are anonymous. They wanted to build a single city, and yet here God prevents them from filling the face of the world with cities. Why? Because it's not about historical Babylon! In Psalm 137, the children of Babylon are dashed against the stones — slaughter for the children for the iniquity of their fathers!

Great digital paintings of Babylon available at <http://www.kadingirra.com/etemenanki.html>.

"Babylon, by placing itself in the east and on the Euphrates River, is not pointing towards a future Edenic kingdom, but is claiming to be presently Eden. Consequently, just as God called Abram to leave his home for a land he did not know and for a promise he would not see fulfilled (cf. Heb 11:8 – 10, 13), so also future generations of Israelites were not given paradise in the present, but were promised this hope (given certain conditions) in the future." — Ryan Quey

Nebuchadnezzar is described in terms that Jesus then used to describe the Kingdom of God! "The tree that thou sawest, which grew, and was strong, whose height reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to all the earth; whose leaves were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was food for all; under which the beasts of the field dwelt, and upon whose branches the birds of the heavens had their habitation: it is thou, O king, that art grown and become strong; for thy greatness is grown, and reacheth unto heaven, and thy dominion to the end of the earth (Dan 4:20-22 ASV). Compare Jesus' words in Mat 13:32, "when it is grown, it is greater than the herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the heaven come and lodge in the branches thereof" (Mat 13:32 ASV)!

Eden was supposed to be expanded to cover the whole earth: Note that Adam was commanded to "dress and guard" the Garden, and to "fill the earth." In order to simultaneously work and guard the garden and fill the earth, humanity would have to spread the garden so it too filled the earth!

"Babylon exemplifies the arrogant establishment of a rival world order to God's. God then uses Babylon as a trophy of His uncontested supremacy over all that is raised up in competition against Him and of the superiority of His plan for mankind." — Ryan Quey

As is the pattern in Genesis, the **לְרֵי** of the rejected line (i.e., the seed of Satan) is given first (e.g., 25:12 – 18) and the **לְרֵי** of the chosen line (i.e., the seed of the woman) is given last (e.g., 25:19 – 20). — Ryan Quey

From a purely human viewpoint, building a tower as high as the sky is an audacious undertaking, but it seems likely that Genesis views it as a sacrilege. For the sky is also heaven, the home of God, and this ancient skyscraper may be another human effort to become like God and have intercourse with him (cf. 3:5; 6:1 - 4).” — Gordon Wenham

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**Proposition:** At the Tower of Babylon, God broke down humanity's false unity to make room for true unity in Christ.

Last week, we looked together at the Bible's thesis statement. We saw that Scripture tells the story of the conflict between the woman's seed and the serpent's seed. That conflict is traced in two different lines throughout this book of Genesis. In chapter 4, just after our text last week, we see Cain murder Abel and then head eastward to build a city, which he names after his son Enoch. In Cain's line come murder and vengeance, while in Seth's line comes true worship as men begin to call upon the name of the LORD. The two lines come to a climax in the days of Noah, when God judges wicked humanity, wiping them out in a worldwide flood. Only Noah and his family are spared — yet in Noah's son Ham, and in his descendants, the line of the serpent once again rears its ugly head.

The text moves on to tell us in chapter 10 of the origin of human nations and language groups, and how people migrated soon after the flood. It records Nimrod, the one who built both Babel and Nineveh, the two cities which destroyed Judah and Israel (respectively) millennia later. It also sets us up to see the vanity of the entire Babylon project, because we know that despite the efforts of mankind to create an enduring unity, God doomed us to division. As we approach this chapter, then, we already know how things turn out. Just as Cain, Lamech, and the antediluvian generation all disobeyed God, so now humans climactically disobey God.

## **I. United Humanity Builds the Tower of Babylon, vv. 1-4**

The story is set up with a piece of background information: at the time when this incident began, all human beings spoke the same language and used the same words.

### **A. Their Unity, v. 1**

In other words, they were unified! What's the biggest barrier between human beings to this day? The language barrier! If I can't talk to you, then there's not a lot we can do together. Anyone who's been in a foreign country where the dominant language is totally unfamiliar can recall the fear that washes over you when you realize that you're lost and that everyone around you is babbling something you don't understand. But these people could all talk to each other — which is, of course, a key theme of the story.

### **B. Their Journey Away from God, v. 2**

Now, which way were they journeying? The Hebrew is ambiguous. It literally reads something like “away East.” Is that away from the East, i.e., they were traveling westward? Or is it “away toward the East,” i.e., they were traveling eastward? Or is it that they started in a place east of the narrator and that they traveled even farther east? Grammar can't help us here. That's why the English translations are so divided on this question. But contextually, it's very clear that the people were moving eastward. Why? Because in these chapters of Genesis, and indeed throughout the Pentateuch, the entrance to holy places is on their eastern side, and to travel toward holiness is to travel westward. To travel westward is to travel back toward the presence of God. (J.R.R. Tolkien used this same directional symbolism, by the way, in his narratives of Middle-Earth. Where was the home of the Valar — a place roughly corresponding to the Bible's Heaven? In the West. And where did the Dark Lord make his home? In the East.) But to travel eastward, then, is to travel away from the presence of God. The human race, exiled from Eden, is traveling further and further away from the presence of God. But they found a plain in the land of Shinar — the land we call Mesopotamia — and they dwelt there.

### **C. Their Creativity, v. 3**

The serpent's seed excel in technical mastery, and they used their common language to form a plan to “brick bricks,” as the Hebrew has it. (This whole passage is full of the most delightful wordplay.) They didn't have stone, so they used brick. They didn't have mortar, so they used asphalt. By the way, the second of these resources is still the glory and the curse of the Middle East. Right here, in Genesis 11, we see that petroleum was used to foment trouble in the Middle East, way back in the primeval period before historical records begin.

But the point Moses is making here is not that fossil fuel will kill us all, but rather that the ingenuity of human beings, particularly when united, knows no bounds. Think about it. What would consider to be the optimum building material for monumental architecture? Most of us would choose stone. The Parthenon. St. Peter's Basilica. The Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C. The Campbell County Courthouse. What are they all made of? Stone. But the absence of stone didn't slow down these humans at all in their quest to create the biggest and baddest piece of monumental architecture the world had ever seen.

### **D. Their Goals, v. 4**

Why? What possessed these folks to park themselves in Shinar and build a monument to their own greatness?

#### **1. Security in a City, v. 4a**

The first thing they wanted was a city. What do cities provide? Security. Power. Wealth. Cities are the drivers of human culture. Which locale has more symphony orchestras, Wright,

Wyoming, or Denver, Colorado? Which locale has more art museums, more fancy restaurants, more of just about everything? To ask the question is to answer it. The lifestyle of a nomad and the lifestyle of an urbanite are just about as different as two lifestyles can get. These people wanted an urban lifestyle.

## **2. Access to Heaven, v. 4b**

They also wanted a tower with its top in the heavens. Now, what was that all about? Ultimately, they wanted to make over against the Garden of Eden a rival place of worship, a rival way of access to God, a rival path to Heaven itself.

How do we know that this wasn't just an innocent ambition to build a nice 80-story office tower? Because you can say that without mentioning Heaven. You can say, "I want to build a tower." But to add that you want a tower whose top is in the heavens takes things, literally, to a whole new level.

Remember, we saw two weeks ago that Eden was a place where God was and that it was a mountaintop. But the way back into Eden was barred. Yet humans are not very content to live without the divine, without the transcendent. We are made to worship, and we will find something to worship. This tower of Babel was nothing less than an attempt to create a new path into heaven. If it was built along the lines of a later Babylonian ziggurat, as seems likely, then it literally was built like a stairway to Heaven, once which humans can ascend and gods can descend.

So what's the big deal? Isn't this a laudable project, to seek God and find a way to be with Him? The answer is no, it's not a laudable project. Put squarely, it's an attempt to get to God on humanity's terms. It's an attempt to get into Heaven without God's help or even His consent.

Babylon saw itself as the original cosmic mountain, the place of communion with the divine. And God's verdict on it is an unqualified negative. Why? Because these proto-Babylonians were worshipping the wrong gods, in the wrong way, at the wrong place.

Brothers and sisters, it is vital that you see this. A tower with its top in the heavens is not a neutral building. It is a rival to God's right to control access, an attempt to say, "God, we don't need you. We can succeed on our own, unlock our divine potential on our own, and be very religious on our own."

Is God opposed to human unity? Is He unwilling to have human beings in Heaven? Not at all! He sent His Son to bring peace on Earth, to unite all things in Him. Jesus brought the thief on the cross and millions of others into Heaven with Him and is continuing to add to that number all the time. What God is opposed to is false worship!

How do you seek God? On your terms, or on His? The Tower of Babel is a naked attempt to get to God on our own terms as human beings. It's a way of saying, "Our expulsion from Eden doesn't matter, because we have technology that can introduce us to the divine." How do you resist this Babel spirit? By worshipping God rightly, on His terms. By seeking Him according to His own word, not according to the suggestions of Satan. By accepting His promise and looking for the future hope which it gives.

You see, the tower of Babel promises Heaven now, without grace, without suffering, all strictly on the basis of human effort. If that's the religion you're ultimately pursuing, then you are part of the serpent's seed and an enthusiastic endorser of the Babel project. Don't be! Don't join this attempt to create a tower with its top in the heavens.

### **3. A Name for Themselves, v. 4c**

And don't seek a name for yourself! This is another motive the Babel-builders had. They wanted to find fame. They wanted to be known. And they didn't want to submit to the name God Himself would give them. How ironic, then, that every one of them is anonymous. Nimrod may have built the tower of Babel — he reigned in Babylon, which was the beginning of his kingdom (Gen. 10:10). But the text never tells us whether he was before, during, or after the tower project. You see, any attempt to make a lasting name for yourself apart from God is doomed to frustration and failure! Some people love fame. You might like the idea of being remembered long after you're dead and gone. But the word of God is clear: if you pursue such a thing on your own terms, rather than on God's, then you'll miss it. You don't name yourself; God names you. God controls your identity. Don't live for fame!

### **4. Unity in a Particular Place, v. 4d**

Finally, these Babel-builders were determined to avoid being scattered over the whole Earth. Yet filling the earth is exactly what God commanded Adam and Noah to do. Why? Presumably they sought security in numbers. But regardless of the motive, the result was that they didn't obey God! What they sought was unity, because unity is the opposite of being scattered and being scattered is what they most feared.

What's wrong with that? Well, it directly violated God's command. But more than that, it was a unity united around the wrong thing. What should humans be united around? Around their deepest purpose, which is glorifying and enjoying God. And what does Babylon unite human beings around? Around success without God. Around false worship. Around evil, ultimately. We'll get there when we see the portrait of the Whore of Babylon in Revelation 17-18.

Thus, though humanity was indeed united around this project of building the Tower of Babel, it was a false unity. It was a wicked unity. It was a unity against God, and attempt to reach the divine on human terms.

## **II. God Scatters Humanity away from Babylon, vv. 5-8**

And thus, God intervened. In order to protect the human race from itself, in order to prevent this spirit of Babylon from manifesting itself in its fullness, He stopped the building in its tracks. He broke down the false unity to make room for the true unity in Christ.

### **A. His Ironic Descent, v. 5**

Notice the irony of this turning point in the story. God had to come down to see this puny tower! In fact, throughout Genesis God comes to investigate what humans are up to before passing sentence. He was willing to take a good look at this Tower of Babel.

### **B. His Amazing Endorsement, v. 6**

His endorsement of humanity is unparalleled. I like to think of these words as the puff on the back of humanity's dust jacket. Just as books are published with recommendations from other authors and "big names" on their back covers, telling you why you need to read this book, so the human race has a puff from God Himself. His verdict on us: We can do absolutely anything, as long as we all agree. If we're united, nothing is impossible for us.

Can you believe it? Do you see the glory of man? Do you see how stunningly gifted we are, how much God has given the human race? We are so overdosed on the works of man that the wonder of it can hardly touch us. Yes, we know how ludicrous it is to think of even the highest animals imitating us. We think the very idea of monkeys earnestly studying us, founding universities and awarding each other degrees in anthropology, is beyond absurd. Of course it is. No one has ever seen a dog build a dog house, or been watched by a bird who has a habit of

traveling for its hobby of people-watching. Yet the fact that we've covered the face of the earth with roads, the world with cities, the oceans with ships, and our streets with traffic is so commonplace to us that we hardly even notice it. Yet all that humanity has done is only the beginning of what we could do, if only we could all get along.

It is indeed a great and glorious thing to be a human being. It is an amazing gift to have these latent capabilities, and to have them endorsed by God Himself. Do you ever stop and thank God for making you a man or woman? Do you think rightly about the glorious capabilities of the human race? The spirit of Babylon wants to hijack those capabilities and use them for the degradation and destruction of mankind. It was that Satanic spirit that manifested itself in the Holocaust, in the atrocities of 20th century communist revolutions, and in contemporary Venezuela. Babylon claims to glorify people, but it actually devours them.

### **C. His Intra-Trinitarian Consultation, v. 7a**

How did God respond to humanity's consultation? He condescends to mirror them. Just as the Babel-builders had said, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them," so God says "Come, let Us go down. Who is He talking to? Some say He's talking to the divine council. But it was God alone who confused human language, and therefore it is best to understand this verse as being an intra-Trinitarian consultation. The Persons of the Godhead spoke to one another and went down together to break down this false unity. You see, human beings can do anything if they're united — but it's God alone who is actually united. Humans sought a false unity, but God has true unity. The Father agrees with the Son and the Spirit 100% of the time.

### **D. His Judgment on Human Language, v. 7b**

How did God break down this false unity? By dividing the languages. He broke us into people groups, tribes with mutually incomprehensible languages. And He did it to prevent us from uniting around the wrong thing.

### **E. His Destruction of Humanity's False Unity, v. 8**

God scattered the people over the whole Earth, just as it was supposed to be. Their vain plans for unity and permanence were shattered, and instead, they were scattered. God will not allow false unity to stop His plans.

This is the last word of the primeval history — almost. It shows the deepening of exile. Humans have been banished from the presence of God, banished so far that they cover the whole earth. Their project to get to Heaven on their terms has been thoroughly destroyed by God Himself. That, brothers and sisters, is always the fate of the city against God.

## **III. Shinar Becomes Babylon, v. 9**

The final verse sums up the whole account. It tells us how Shinar got its new name, and emphasises that it was from Babylon that people were scattered over the face of the whole earth.

Let's look at this new name for a minute.

### **A. Babel: "Gate of God"**

The word Babel means "gate of God" in Babylonian. What an idea! Surely, this further reinforces my contention that the tower was all about getting back into the lost presence of God on humanity's own terms. According to the Babylonians themselves, their tower was a gateway to the gods!

### **B. Babel: "Babble, Confusion"**

But in God's eyes, and to speakers of Hebrew, the name signifies something totally different: confusion. The name of the city was called "Confusion" because there God confused human language.

This is God's verdict on humanity without Him. It is nothing but confusion. It claims to have a way of accessing the divine, a way to achieve Heaven. But it is just confusion and misery.

You know, the word "Jerusalem" means "City of Peace." How appropriate, then, that the great enemy of Jerusalem is named "Babylon." God is the God of Peace; Babylon is the city of man, the city without God, and thus the city of Confusion. Where would you rather live?

### **C. Babel: The Target of God's Judgment**

Finally, this text reminds us that Babylon originated as a real, historical place and attempt to reach God and find security on man's terms. But that attempt met with God's judgment, and every renewed attempt for the same thing has met His judgment. He will not let us find unity and security, considered as ultimate goods, apart from Him. Should we pursue peace on earth? Of course. But we must remember that God's hand is against Babylon and will always be against Babylon.

So where do things go from here? Does the primeval period end like this, in despair, with human beings driven away from God, homeless vagabonds and wanderers without a name or a place? Are we doomed, or damned, to confusion? Well, look at the next verse. God gives us the generations of Shem, and through Shem, Abraham. Abraham is God's answer to Babel, and we will hear about God's promise to him next week. But for now, the choice is yours. You can choose the way of Babylon, the way of getting to God on your own and finding security on your own. Or you can find the true unity which is found only in the line of the woman's seed, and live as a follower of Jesus Christ. He is the real tower that will lift you up to Heaven, the real ladder Jacob saw. Don't believe the lie of Babylon. It was false millennia ago, at the dawn of history, and it's still false today. Believe the truth of God. Submit to His plans, His terms, and you will be blessed. He promises. Amen.