

Today we have come to the eleventh chapter of Genesis. I have entitled the message “The Cities of Men and the City of God.” We have already had an introduction to the City of God [read as our Invocation] and we will end the message with a ready of that again, because it is the great hope that stands in front of us. But the first city was a very different matter. Genesis II and Revelations 21:9-21.

The first city: we talked a little about that before. We said that Cain built a city and named it after his son Enoch. But in an historical sense the first real city that you and I would have experienced as one was the city that was built on the plain of Shinar, in the middle of which was built the Tower of Babel. Just by way of an introduction I think that it is right and wise for us to recognize that when we look at the little information that God has given to us through His servant Moses, we should recognize that it is not the righteousness of Noah but rather the fear and pride of Cain that are displayed in the Tower and the city. And we should ask ourselves the question, “How deep is the imprint of fear and pride in the heart of man as he builds his cities, and for what purpose he builds them?” Join with me as I read Genesis II.

*“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 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. 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.’ And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. 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. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.’ So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 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.”*

The account that was given by Moses is both simple and stark. If we add up all the years of fathers to sons in Genesis chapters 10 and the beginning of 11 we learn it was the in the life of Peleg the son of Eber who was born 131 years after the flood that humanity was divided. This is generally understood to be driven by the confusion of tongues brought about at the tower of Babel. So we can reasonably say that it was about 100 years after the flood that all of those alive arrived at the plain of Shinar, usually thought to be southern Iraq. This is what we read in 11:3-4. *“They said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city...’* [here is the important part you want to capture] *“...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.”* In reference to this one of the commentators made the observation from some rough calculations that approximately 30,000 people could be alive by then. Most of them would have been very young. It is likely they needed a place that was safe for the world has now become much more dangerous than it was before the flood. But when we read the account, it is not the need for protection that is mentioned. What we hear instead are two very different purposes for the city and the tower. The first purpose is that they wish to make a name for themselves. The second purpose is they want to keep from being dispersed.

The first thing to think about is “name”. Names are important. Nini and I knew this when we named our first child. You know what it is: you name a child and then wicked children who belong to other people take that beautiful name and shrink it into some horrible nick name. So we avoided that by naming our first son Ian. What could you possibly do with that? Well, he was called “E”! Names, however, the name you are called, the name you have, the name you carry, are important to us, but were more important to them.

Names: Paul wrote a letter to Timothy and in that letter we have a sense of the importance of name from a Biblical perspective. This is in I Timothy 3:2 and 7. This is what Paul says, *“An overseer must be above reproach. . . Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”* What Paul is saying to Timothy is that a man needs to have a good name, that his character needs to stand behind his name so that he can resist any of the insinuations, the temptations, any of the ways that evil one might wish to undermine the quality that man’s character and therefor destroy the quality of his testimony in the community around him. It used to be very important in our culture that you had a good name. In fact if you had a really good name you could conduct business with a handshake because people who knew you knew you were to be trusted absolutely. Our culture as you probably know has moved far from that kind of perception, valuing that highly. And I would have to say that the church itself has fallen away from holding a high expectation and standard for a person’s name and this should be deeply troubling to us. In fact I think that in our day if someone’s behavior falls short of their reputation we are not surprised, but rather than call them a hypocrite the preferred solution in our day is to say that people shouldn’t put on airs. Don’t pretend to be what you are not. Consequently rather than a man aspiring and struggling to live up to their reputation, we counsel one another to aspire to little more than our present level of mediocrity. We do this by saying, “Well, I’m only human.” Beloved I believe that we have forgotten, or perhaps we have rejected the wisdom of seeking to better ourselves by setting high goals and ideals before us, holding ourselves and one another to the highest level of accountability. You and I both know the reality is we are Christians, and therefore our aspiration is to be like Christ. So rather than giving ourselves excuse to fall short, we should strive to encourage one another to rise higher. It is not for nothing, as I am sure we understand, that the church of Jesus Christ has increasingly lost its influence in our culture. There are no doubt a variety of reasons for this being so, but not least among them is the moral collapse of the church, the body of Christ ceasing to aspire to holiness as it seeks to demonstrate the love of God for our neighbors.

Let’s go back again to Shinar. The people of Shinar Plain decided to make a name for themselves. When you read that little account, it is telling that in that account we hear nothing of God or of prayer. It does not say that they gathered together, that they knelt on their knees, that they called on the name of God, that they sought His face, that they looked for His direction. It doesn’t say anything of that at all. It just says they got together and they made a decision. They did nothing about recalling the purposes of God. “Who are we, why are we here, to whom are we accountable, what are we supposed to do?” Nothing of that! More telling, even though it has been a hundred years, not a word is given regarding the terrible judgment that has fallen upon humanity and the fact that they live know in the ruin of what was once a far more beautiful and wonderful world. [There is] not a word! Consequently of course they say nothing about grandfather Noah or the ark or the flood.

You and I looking back at that event through the lens of God’s word, we know their true identity. Their true identity is that they are the children of Noah. They are humanity saved from judgment of God by the one righteous man. You can pause at that moment and say to yourself – and I have drawn this parallel – that is an exact description of us. You and I as Christians have been saved through the One righteous man, That man is Jesus. We are therefore the people of Jesus. We have been saved from the reality of judgment which will lead to an eternal death. Though that judgment stands in front of us, and the judgment stood behind the people on the plain of Shinar, the reality of judgment is no different and should speak powerfully to us. The question then obviously is, do we live in the remembrance of judgment?

Presumably all of that was past and they preferred to put it away. Now they desire to make a new name and to think of themselves in a different way. This was going to be a key element for holding the whole company together. In doing this they of course were turning away from the name they already had from God. Instead of being the people saved, they would be the people of the city and the great tower. This is who they would become. The tower was to reach heaven. Some people speculate that the idea was that somehow they could scale the celestial heights

and actually reach God, sort of like the Soviet astronaut you might recall who flew around the back side of the moon and said, “Gee, I couldn’t find God out here either.” But this is comparable, is it not, to what we read about an angel called Lucifer. You can read about it in Isaiah 14:12-14. This is what Isaiah says about Lucifer. *“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, Son of the Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north...’*” If you know anything about God the Almighty who has created all things, including Lucifer, you know that the angel is insane in making such a claim, to think such a thought. Of course he is insane. Of course the heart blinded by sin is self-deceived. We already have a couple of examples of self-deception reaching insane proportions. How could you possibly think you could hide from God by hiding behind a bush? But [that is what] Adam did. How could you possibly think that you could murder your brother in an open field and God would not know? But [that is what] Cain did. In Ecclesiastes we are told that there are two realities that God has placed in the heart of man. One of them is the sense of eternity. The other is insanity. Every time you and I choose to sin, we are sacrificing our sanity, because to choose to sin is to pretend either that God does not know or that He does not care, and all of us know that neither of those is true.

Looking at the tower we need to recognize that in effect it is the origin or the first expression of idolatry. The tower rising up there on that plain was to have two great purposes. It was to make them strong, and to keep them together. This, however, means that they are asserting themselves first apart from God and then against Him. We recognize of course that these purposes pursued by the people are a direct rejection and defiance of God. You can almost hear the infant’s cry: “It is my life and I will live it as I want to!” What was it that God said we were supposed to do? We were supposed to disperse over the whole face of the earth. What did they say they were going to do? Not!

As important as it is to listen to the builders of the tower and the city, it is more important to listen to what God had to say in response. So turning therefore to God’s response we look at verses 6-8. This is what God says in response. *“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 they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.’”* So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth and they left off building the city.” Let us look at this. The first thing to note is that united humanity will be able to do whatever they set out to do. How many of you follow the advances in technology? Right now I am reading somebody you would never think I would read. It is Peter Drucker, the father of modern management. What is interesting is to recognize how with the skills of management we are able to accomplish more and more and more. Good management brings people together, releases their abilities, encourages them to act and leads to tremendous increase in creativity and productivity. The proof of that is the standard of living for all of the approximately seven billion people living on the face of the earth is rising. It is amazing! If we don’t blow ourselves up or otherwise kill ourselves off, the next hundred years will probably see an unparalleled increase in the material affluence of every single person on the planet. Can you believe that? Of course [it can be]. That however is only a small part of the story.

God says humanity will be able to do whatever they set out to do. This should give us pause. In the opening scenes of the film version of “The Lord of the Rings”, the Lady Galadriel says this: “Men above all things desire power.” That, she explains, is why the ancient kings of Middle Earth were deceived by the lord Sauron into taking the rings of power which while in truth giving them power also brought them totally under the power of the dark lord, so they became slaves. If you are familiar with the myths and the stories of all cultures and the writers of our own civilization you know that this is a common theme, so common as to be universal. As late as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it reached perhaps its most eloquent and compelling expression in the story of Faustus. Faustus was a genius who was enthralled, desiring power that he might gain and be able to do whatever wanted to

do, and in order to gain that power he sold his soul to the devil. For the days of his life he enjoyed unparalleled everything. Then he died, and in his death he was welcomed by Satan.

The point of the story of Faustus was to drive home the profound error people make when they undervalue their identity, our name, as spiritual beings made in the image of God and over value the satisfactions of worldly desires. It is also the truth here, in God’s judgment, regarding the builders of the tower of Babel. When God says nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them, there are two hidden realities inside of that statement. They are critical if we are going to understand that God’s judgment is one of mercy. The first is this: What do you think those people will propose to do, separated from and in defiance of God, rejecting the name of God and therefore the imprint of His character upon their own, letting themselves free, letting themselves loose to following their imaginations and to pursue whatever dreams and fantasies of self-satisfaction might be their own? What do evil people desire to do as they fall ever deeper and deeper into the grip of their desires unrestrained? We have some examples of people who have gained access to incredible power. As mentioned already, those gathered on the plain of Shinar have already forgotten – and by the way it is the habit of humanity to forget – they have forgotten the way things were before the flood. How bad were they before the flood? [They were] inconceivably horrible. There is in humanity a propensity toward evil. That propensity increases both in the intensity and the extent of its application over time especially if there is nothing or no one to restrain it. Evil indulged shrinks the soul so that in the end it wastes itself indulging in petty cruelties and desires. It is important for us to remember that evil men do not do great things, for the evil they do devours them and brings to ruin all that they sought to build. May I simply reference what is happening right now amongst the utterly lost Muslims who call themselves IS [Islamic State], the caliphate. What will be the end of their episode? It will be death and destruction. Quite aside from the utter wrongness of their belief, their total incomprehension of Who God is and how He is, already they have wreaked havoc and ruin amongst their own people in a manner that you and I would draw back and say, “Never, never, never could it happen with us.” Which is exactly what they said in Germany.

As mentioned God says nothing they propose to do is impossible. Having one language amongst them all they can agree and combine their intellect and will and efforts. Again the question is what will such people propose to do. Hitler and the Nazis proposed to dominate the world and to exterminate the Jews. The Russian Soviets proposed to dominate the world and liquidate all those in opposition. Mao Tse-tung joined them. Between them the three of them I think they slaughtered well over a hundred million people. On a less dramatic scale Hugo Chavez of Venezuela proposed to take the earnings from the nationalized petroleum industry and use them to improve the lives of the poor and destroyed the industry. The younger son in Jesus’ parable proposed to use his part of the inheritance to live a life of continual self-indulgence, and then the money ran out. In the case of the prodigal son Jesus says that at a critical point he came to his senses. He regained his rational mind. In contrast we say of people who have fallen completely under the persuasion of evil desire that they have taken leave of their senses. They are insane. That is the nature of evil. You and I both know that this is often the effect of power gained in whatever way or form. Power brings the illusion that we can rewrite the rules of life, that we are no longer held by the constraints and restraints of reality as established by God. That is a lie, of course. It is a lie, but it is the first truth hidden from view. We see this over and over again, don’t we, in the lives of celebrities? What can be more tragic than to see beautiful, intelligent, highly skilled and developed young people end up within five, ten or maybe fifteen years dead of drug overdose, spinning out of control, incapable of handling their lives, losing all sense of rational limits? So God says we cannot let this be.

The second reality hidden from view is that there is in fact a dark lord. His unremitting desire is to bring about the ruin of humanity. The human heart held captive by sin and blinded to spiritual truth is utterly vulnerable to that Lord. This is exactly what is happening in our culture. As it withdraws itself more and more from the knowledge of

God it will fall deeper and deeper into the darkness and less and less capable of functioning rationally. You keep watching the process of self-destruction and self-contradiction unfolding.

So here are the questions we ask: why does God shattered the unity of humanity and what is the effect of his doing so? First we look at Genesis 11:8 for it gives us the answer. *“The Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.”* I think the order of those statements is important. The first is the fulfillment of the command God first gave to Adam and Eve and then repeated to Noah and his sons. What was that command? Multiply and fill the earth. By the way, God has not changed His mind. I have mentioned this before and will mention it again. Although you and I are probably very impressed with the fact that we are rapidly approaching about eight billion people upon the face of the planet, and we will probably be subject to the sways and winds of panic and terror that we are going to over populate and be incapable of supporting that many people, the reality is, as evidenced by every demographic we are on the threshold of a dramatic decrease in population because people are no longer having children. What will our world look like as it has three or four or five times as many people in their seventies and eighties as in their twenties? Kids are expensive. Nini and I have raised five. It is worth every penny, not least because it is obedience, obedience to a God Who has not rescinded the command. It would not surprise me, because my eschatology is remarkably flexible, that if God decides to delay the return of the Lord Jesus, that it will be the children of believers who in the next four or five generations who will populate the earth while the wicked die away, childless. God’s judgments have a remarkable way of accomplishing their purposes in manners less dramatic but no less effective than we anticipate.

The second consequence is more complicated. As we see, the capacity for effective cooperation has been broken and they are incapable of harmoniously working together. The consequence is that they argue and separate. Of course they argue, they are lost. They scatter. I thought about this and it is remarkably like the way Baptists plant churches. You all had forgotten about this! No way. What Baptist do is they get together and they make a big bunch and then they argue and they split, and you have got two Baptists churches instead of one. That is why the Southern Baptists are so many. It is bad theology, but nevertheless. Presbyterians have a long perspective. Being scattered to widely different places humanity has the freedom to discover widely differing aspects of creation and develop ways of living in different manners. I believe that that is pleasing to God. I do not believe that God wants everybody in the world to be like the French or the English or the Swedes or Americans. I believe God delights in the infinite diversity of human creativity as it seeks to utilize the resources of the world to develop culture the understanding that arises out of their interaction with their environment. Someday when the shadow of sin is removed, all of us will be able to be simple be amazed at the remarkable way in which humanity has grown and brought order and perfection to the creation. One of the great joys of the Reformation which has now been forgotten in the negative dust in our secular and apostate age was realizing the liberty to study what they spoke of as the Book of Nature, which they understood to be a clear and magnificent display of the infinite knowledge and power and goodness of God. That is what they meant by affirming that all truth is God’s truth. But under the conditions of the fall when the human heart is corrupted and seduced by misplaced and misconceived desires, humanity is perennially more taken with enslaving and oppressing others than engaging in the hard work of discovery, productivity and creativity. This is the virtual, invariable record of all human institutions. Success breeds both pride and complacency, both of which reach for privilege to protected against any who would disrupt their enjoyment of position and advantage. That sentence is a description of the sorrow of the Christian church in Europe and America. Having achieved dominance at the heights of our culture, we then proceeded to pass laws by which we were protecting ourselves from competition and grew lazy, assuming that our leading position would never be challenged. It has been; we are has beens. We are no longer in charge of our culture, and we should grieve. Someday this will change, The secret dreams of unlimited wealth, unmarred beauty, undisturbed peace and unbroken harmony shared by all are the promise and prophecies of our God. Our heavenly Father is preparing a city, one in which all will dwell. The heart of it will overflow with satisfactions. Revelations 21:9-21.

*“Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, ‘Come. . .’”* Now get this right. Come, you [John the Elder] have just looked upon the most horrific display of judgment by God upon the earth that ever has been or will be. Your eyes and your mind are filled with the horror of that judgment. Now the angel says, “Come here, I want to show you something. I want to show you something that is going to clean all of that away and restore joy in your heart, that is going to let your soul fill up with hope, that is going to be joyous with thanksgiving in the anticipation of the unlimited blessings of God. Come, hear, see what God is preparing for His people. This is what He is preparing: *“I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And He carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed—on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel’s measurement. The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.*

*“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable of false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”*

Beloved, is your name written? If you are here today and you cannot say, “Yes, my name is written, for I have confessed that Jesus Christ is the lamb who was slain for my sin. My name is written for I know that the Father God is the Father of Jesus Christ who died for my sin. I know that my name is written, I have my name written down for the blood of Jesus was shed for me”, then please make that confession now.

Please join me in prayer: Father in heaven, all over this earth there are huge cities. Whether or not they are merely the echo of the tower of Babel or the foreshadowing of the New Jerusalem we do not know. This we know, that You have scattered Your children, the body of Christ, over the whole face of the earth, and we are endeavoring by Your grace to make Your gospel available to every people, tribe and tongue, that no one would come to the last day and not have heard that gospel. And [we know] that that day will come, for by Your grace that day will come, for we live for that day. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application: “The Cities of Men and the City of God”

1. What comes to mind when you think of the Tower of Babel?
  
2. Do you see making a name for yourself as wisdom or as worldly ambition? How do you like to be known to other people?
  
3. When you set about a new task, commitment, project, what do you regularly do to ensure you are not being foolish?
  
4. If an object of worship is generally for purposes of security, a sense of power, a source of inspiration and assurance of self-worth or self-esteem, what are some of the idols of our day?
  
5. Power is a rather tricky concept. It can mean so many different things. What sorts or kinds of power seem significant to you? Which of these might get a person into trouble?
  
6. Has sudden access to power or the realization that you have power ever led you to do foolish things? Have you known others who have fallen prey to power’s destabilizing influence?
  
7. Do you think Satan is real?
  
8. Why did God shatter the unity of the people who were living in Babel and building the Tower? Was this kind or cruel?
  
9. What happens to human institutions and enterprises when they have gained either great, long held or invulnerable power in their area of interest or concern?
  
10. What is your favorite city and what do you most like and dislike about cities?