

A City and a Tower Genesis 11:1-9

Well, what are we to do with this story? Liberals scoff at this as mere allegory, a folktale designed to explain how the different nations of the earth came to be. And I suppose if you didn't believe in God, this story would seem more than a bit outlandish – a tower that reached the heavens? A sudden confusion of language? Can we really take this seriously?

But there are quite a few details here that are in fact quite plausible. After all, the earliest brickmaking does seem to have taken place in the same region in which Noah's ark came to rest. The oldest brick structures, made around 7500 BC, have been found in the upper Tigris valley. That's the same river that flows down into the plain of Shinar mentioned in Genesis 11. The Biblical story thus seems to be believable, at least where it comes to geography and building materials.

But what about the tower reaching to heaven? Ancient people couldn't have done that, could they? Remember, the text doesn't say they completed the tower, only that they started it. And the fact is that many ancient cultures all over the world built stepped pyramids or ziggurats. You can find them in Mesopotamia and Egypt, but also in Indonesia and Mexico. And that's exactly what you would expect all the nations of the earth to do, if the last common endeavor of mankind was the building of such a structure.

And make no mistake, building a stepped pyramid of fired bricks would have been a tremendous task for the people of the day. They would have had to experiment with soil types, moisture levels, molds, and baking procedures in order to form bricks that were suitable for construction. They also had to know what sorts of materials to use for mortar. And as we know from working with this building, the type of mortar you use has to be appropriate for the hardness of the bricks. If the mortar is too soft, the structure won't hold together. But if the mortar is too hard, shifts in temperature will crack the bricks and weaken the entire edifice. Brickmaking and bricklaying was so difficult an art that it was completely lost in Europe for over 500 years after the collapse of the Roman Empire.

So, think about what the construction of a huge brick structure would require. Of course, you would have to have engineers who understood how to make bricks and mortar. You would also need a large number of skilled craftsmen to lay these bricks properly. You would need an architect to design and build the structure. You would thus need to have at your disposal a tremendous amount of knowledge.

You would also need to be able to command a tremendous number of people to perform the labor. And because the laborers could not otherwise be occupied with farming or hunting while engaged in such a project, you would have to feed them and house them during the construction process. That, in turn, would require sufficient agricultural efficiency to allow a group of farmers to be able to produce enough to feed their families along with all those laborers who were building the tower. And some sort of government would require some sort of taxes to pay for all that food and lodging and to coordinate the entire operation.

In short, the construction of such a city and a tower would require a civilization – a sophisticated combination of technology and organization. In turn, the construction of such a city and a tower would tend to hold a civilization together, as the same sort of technology and organization would be required to keep such structures in good repair, and to use them for whatever purposes they were intended. That’s why when civilizations collapse, even their grandest buildings fall into ruin.

So, what was the problem with the people building such a tower after the flood? Some scholars say this story is a polemic against the idea of cities themselves, but that doesn’t make sense. After all, God blessed David’s idea of building a great temple in the midst of his royal city. And once Solomon had completed the construction of this temple, God filled it with a great glory cloud, thus announcing His intention to dwell there in the midst of His people.

And cities feature prominently even in the perfect world that is to come. As we read responsively this morning, one of the ways in which Christ illustrated His coming earthly kingdom was a wondrous holy city, one that came down from God out of heaven, one that will one day be filled with the light of the glory of God. No, we cannot say that God brought judgment on the people of Babel simply because He doesn’t like cities.

So, what was the problem with their project? Could it be that they did a good thing for bad reasons? Could it be that, having developed the political unity and the technology necessary to construct a civilization, they placed their faith, not in God, but instead in their organization and their know-how? Could it be that their basic problem was pride – pride in their abilities?

Yes, that seems to be the case, for look at verse 4 – “Let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven, and let us make for us a name.” It’s pretty obvious that their focus is on their own glory – there’s nothing here about doing something that would bring honor to God, is there? Instead of trying to exalt God’s name, they just want to make a name for themselves. It’s no wonder that God brought judgment upon their schemes.

Well, what about us? The Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us that man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. But is that true for us? Is God really the focus of our lives? Is He the reason that we do everything that we do? Which is our greatest desire – that God’s name would be honored or that we ourselves would enjoy a great reputation?

And if we as individuals don’t put God’s glory first, is our civilization any more God-centered than we are? We Americans aspire to many good things – full employment and low fuel costs, clean air and safe schools. The reason that our politicians promise us these things is because they know we want them. But where is God’s glory on our list of national priorities? Sure, we long for God to shed His grace on America. We want God to bless America, but is America really interested in blessing God?

The people at Babel certainly weren’t. But they were also wrong in another of their priorities. Another reason that wanted to build that city and that tower is because they didn’t want to be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth. In other words, they understood that safety lay in numbers, and so they were determined to be as united as possible in order to be as safe as possible.

But where should they have looked for safety? The answer should have been obvious for these descendants of Noah, right? The only reason any of them were alive was because God had kept Noah safe in that ark during the waters of the great flood. It wasn't their sticking together that would keep them safe – it was their sticking with God that was the most important.

But in looking to one another, in looking to their unity for safety, they weren't just putting their trust in the wrong place. They were actively rebelling against God. After all, back in chapter 9, God had specifically told Noah and his sons to be fruitful and multiply and fill up the earth, not just to stay in one place. This in turn was a repetition of the command God had given Adam and Eve – God's intention was always that the whole earth be filled with people made in the image of God.

But the people of Babel decided that their fears overrode God's commands. They preferred the safety they found in numbers to the safety they could have found in fellowship with God. No wonder God brought judgment upon them.

Well, what about us? On this day of remembrance, ten years after those terrible terrorist attacks on our shores, we recall most vividly our own loss of safety. Some of you may remember where you were on that terrible day. How many of us have lost friends or loved ones, either in those terrorist attacks, or in the wars we undertook to avenge our losses and to protect our freedoms? And whenever we drive by the gates of the Grand Gulf Nuclear Station or pass through the increasingly onerous inspection necessary to get on a plane, all of us are constantly reminded of the continued dangers we as Americans face in this post-9/11 world.

But the question for us is at root the same one that faced the ancient people of Babel – where will we Americans look for our safety? Will we look to our armies? The British government with its powerful navy once ruled all the oceans of the world. Now they are unable to keep their own young people from burning huge swaths of their capital city. Will we be able to maintain our military forces as our government faces record levels of debt? Or will we follow the example of the British empire?

Where will we Americans look for our safety? Will we place our faith in our financial system? What bin Laden's goons were unable to do by flying planes into the World Trade Center our government and our financiers did just a few years later, trashing our banks by making risky homeloans to people who couldn't afford to make the payments, and riding the real estate bubble until it burst. As a result, between October of 2007 and January of 2009, the stock market lost almost half of its value. Does it really make sense to place our trust in our banks?

Where will we Americans look for our safety? Will we trust in our unity? In an increasingly pluralistic society, we are often told that the best way to preserve unity is to avoid offending anyone, and that means stifling talk of the exclusive claims of Christ, especially where it comes to what the Bible says about marriage and gender roles. And how is a society that prohibits discussion of God's law in the public square, how is a society that values unity more than purity really any different from those ancient people of Babel?

Well, what did God do when those ancient people put their unity ahead of their need to follow God's commands? Verse 8 tells us that God simply destroyed their unity by confusing

their language. And to this day, mankind remains disunited largely for the same reason. Our separation into different language groups continues to be a major impediment to the proclamation of the gospel, not to mention the improvement of human society.

But the story of the people of Babel reminds us of the perfect justice of God's decrees, a justice we have seen throughout this study of Genesis. After all, when Adam misused the vegetable kingdom by eating from the forbidden fruit, he was separated from it, as thorns began growing in his fields against his will. Likewise, in choosing to listen to Eve rather than God, Adam placed Eve ahead of obedience to God. Because Adam thus abused the gift of marriage, husbands and wives have now become separated from each other in conflict as the shame of their sin causes them to blame one another for it.

In Noah's day, the world was filled with violence, and sin remained in man's heart even after the flood. As a result, man was separated from the animal kingdom, in no small measure to protect the animals from mankind. And finally, at the unfinished city and tower of Babel, because man abused the gift of human society, human society has become hopelessly splintered.

At Babel, the people had intended to make a tower into heaven – "Babel" in the Babylonian language means "gate of god." Because of their pride and their fear, they thought they could, through their unity and their technology, reach up into God's presence, replacing God Himself. But instead, God transformed the place into chaos – "Babel" in the Hebrew language is related to the word "confused." God thwarted their project by turning their unity into confusion.

Yes, we can see God's justice displayed so clearly in this story. But if we look closely, we can also see God's mercy. After all, the people of Babel had intended to use the gifts of civilization, their unity and their technology, for blasphemous, sinful ends. They had intended to do everything in their power to gratify their own pride and to assuage their own fears. If God had allowed them to succeed, no good could possibly have come from such efforts.

And so God, in His mercy, put a stop to the project. God didn't let the people of Babel keep going down the path of sin. Instead, by dividing them into so many different language groups, He made it hard for them to concentrate their sin and thus hard for them to magnify its terrible effects. By separating them, He also made it harder for them to keep on trusting in themselves.

Eventually, by the end of this chapter, God would call Abraham to trust in Him, and through Abraham's faith, and more importantly through Abraham's descendant Jesus Christ, God would begin the process of restoring true unity to the world, a unity not based on pride and fear, but a unity based on trust in God and obedience to His will. For the fact is that no human civilization can last, no human unity can long be maintained apart from submission to the Lord Jesus.

Ten years after our own towers fell at the hands of terrorists, we Americans should be acutely aware that knowledge and order and safety are gifts from God. Will we look to Him to protect us? Or, like the ancient people of Babel, will we keep on looking to ourselves?