

Build the kingdom * Genesis 11

November 7, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

I thought I would bring in props today. Can you guess what we're going to talk about? The Tower of Babel. That time when people built a tower up into the sky in order to make a name for themselves.

And to be honest, the tower probably looked more like this (a ziggurat <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/11755/recreation-of-the-etemenanki-in-babylon/>), than it did like this (a vertical tower <https://www.nps.gov/places/000/desert-view-watchtower.htm>). We often think in Western terms, like – straight up and down tower – but this being in ancient Mesopotamia, it was probably a ziggurat, like a stairway into heaven.

But you know what, the shape of the tower isn't really that important; the issue is the state of the tower builders' hearts. And that's where this passage speaks to our lives. Because at its heart, it's all about priorities. Whose plans am I trying to accomplish? God's or my own? Am I so caught up in my own purposes that I forget to consider God's purposes for my life? Whose reputation is more important to me? Mine or God's?

Turn with me to Genesis 11 and we'll so see how those question emerge from the Tower of Babel. Genesis 11 in your Bibles.

Now this is happening just after the Flood account and so really we should start in chapter 9. Remember last week, Noah and his family got off the boat and what did God say to do? 9:1 Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "*Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.*" (Gen 9:1 NIV). And then He says it again in 9:7. Now that they're off the boat, God wants His people to go out into all the world to take care of the world and to carry His blessings to the farthest reaches of the globe. That's job number one for the people in the new creation. The million dollar question though is - will they do it?

Well, let's see. Chapter 11.

NIV Genesis 11:1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. (Everybody could communicate with one another; there was no need for translation, no risk of misunderstanding because everyone used the same language).

Now some of the people moved eastward and they found a plain in Shinar – that's the region of Babylon – which is in modern day Iraq.

And the people looked around at this plain and thought 'this looks like a pretty sweet place to live.' They were close to rivers for transportation and the plain was actually a flood plain, which meant that the rivers would often overflow and put this nutrient rich sediment onto the land, making it good for farming.

So they said – 'you know what? No more traveling. Let's just settle down here.' And so they did.

And (verse 3) 3 They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly. They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar." The only problem with living in a flood plain is that there's

not much stone, but there's lots of mud. So they came up with the brilliant solution of baking that mud into bricks and using it for building.

And once they'd figured that out, 4 Then they said, "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."

Now this is an interesting statement because it reveals both the hopes AND the fears of the tower builders. On one hand, they want to build a tower, high into the sky, 1. So that if there's ever another flood, they can just climb up out of the water, but 2. Even more importantly, so that they can make a name for themselves. If they can build a tower into the heavens that rises above the mud of the flood plain, then everyone will know how awesome they are.

On the other hand though, they are clearly fearful people. They want this city to bind themselves together, so that they will not be spread across the face of the earth. They've travelled enough thank you very much and they're going to settle down here in the Mesopotamian mud.

Back in the sixties (1967), Derek Kidner put it like this - The primeval history reaches its fruitless climax as man, conscious of new abilities, prepares to glorify and fortify himself by collective effort. The elements of the story are timelessly characteristic of the spirit of the world. The project is typically grandiose; men describe it excitedly to one another as if it were the ultimate achievement—very much as modern man glories in his space projects. At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes (4b).

Kidner, D. (1967). *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 118). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

The tower builders decide to put down roots and stretch up into the sky to stay in one place and show off their ingenuity.

But there's a problem, isn't there? Because what's job number one for these people? To spread God's blessings into the world. Certainly there's nothing inherently wrong with the desire to settle down, but, doing it for your own glory and to prevent the blessings from going any further is counter to God's good purposes.

And so, verse 5,

5 But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building.

Now this, I think, is really funny. Because these guys down on the ground are building the tower and it's towering above them and they think 'look what hot stuff we are building this gigantic monument to our own greatness up into the sky...' and God's gotta get down on His hands and knees to see what they're doing. Really shifts your perspective doesn't it? 'The LORD came down to see the city and the tower...'

6 The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.'

7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

Now listen - God's not being a killjoy here. It's not like He's jealous and afraid He's going to lose prestige because of these people; the issue is that, with this whole group of people together, it's actually magnifying their sinful desires to make themselves greater than God. Their unity is actually increasing their capacity for sin and so God says 'let's nip this in the bud. Let's separate them by language so that they don't get carried away chasing their own glory and in so doing fail to spread the blessings of God throughout the world.'

Back in the fourth century, Saint Jerome put it like this: "Just as when holy men live together, it is a great grace and blessing; so, likewise, that congregation is the worst kind when sinners dwell together. The more sinners there are at one time, the worse they are. Indeed, when the tower was being built up against God, those who were building it were disbanded for their own welfare. The conspiracy was evil. The dispersion was of true benefit even to those who were dispersed" (Homilies 21).

And so, to keep the people from bottling up and overshadowing God's goodness...

8 So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.
9 That is why it was called Babel--because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world.

(Again, there's kind of a funny thing going on here, because in the Babylonian language, 'babel' means 'Gate of God' (very stately and majestic) but in Hebrew it means – babble, folly, confusion.)

God wasn't about to let them hoard His blessings and thwart His purpose and so He confused their languages and sent them out into all the world. That's the story of the tower of Babel.

Now, to pick up the language of our series, that's how it started – how's it going? How does this story intersect with our lives?

Well, let's think about it. The commission to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth is clearly done; people have set foot on almost every corner of the globe, but is there any other commission that may still be in play?

The Great Commission, right? As Christians, we are called to go out into all the world to make disciples of all the nations and to teach people about sin and salvation and redemption.

See when God confused the languages, it created disunity amongst the nations. People who all spoke the same language were all of a sudden drawing lines between 'us' and 'them' on the basis of language.

But when Jesus died on the Cross, He wasn't just uniting God and man; He was uniting nation to nation.

At Pentecost, when God enabled the disciples to speak languages from all over the world, He was beginning the task of reversing what happened at the tower. He began drawing people back into unity – unity with different languages, yes – but unity founded on the redemption of sinners that Jesus accomplished. I remember being at church in France and hearing ten different languages spoken, all by believers bought by the blood of Christ and realizing just how good and far reaching God's Good News really is.

Ephesians 2:14¹ says that on the cross Jesus was tearing down the walls between nation and nation so that we could unite behind something bigger than our own selfish plans. He was tearing down dividing

walls so that we could unite behind the Kingdom of God. And so we have this blessing to share with the world – the offer of forgiveness and redemption and belonging in the worldwide fellowship of sinners saved by grace.

What are we doing with that call? Sharing it with the world? Or bottling it up to keep to ourselves? Are we so caught up in our own little pet projects that we forget to share the blessings of God with the people around us and the world at large? Are we so concerned that people think well of us that we fail to show them that God is good?

I follow a guy on Twitter (Ed Stetzer, Billy Graham Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism at Wheaton College) who often tweets before he speaks – ‘Pray that we make much of Jesus.’ Are we so concerned to make much of ourselves that we overshadow Jesus’ name? Or are we more concerned to show that God is good?

It’s for that reason that I want to sum this whole message up like this – build the Kingdom, not the tower. Build the Kingdom, not the tower.

The tower stands for everything that is self-centred and self-sufficient. It is pride and defiance and a focus on human achievement. It is human endeavour that ignores God’s universal purposes and focuses on things that are really only important to a limited number of people. The tower stands for anything that puts God in second place and makes you look like the king of the world.

Are there areas in your life where you are building your own little tower? Where you are saying ‘God, I know what you’ve called me to do but I don’t really care because I’ve got more important things to do?’

Or are you committed to building the Kingdom? To sharing the blessings of God with the whole world? Kingdom builders don’t trust in their own strength or glory; they say ‘all I have is Christ and that’s more than enough.’ I’d encourage you to look at your life – your work, your career, your family, your hobbies - look for ways that you can harness what you are already doing in order to extend the grace of God into the world. How can you ‘make much of Jesus’ in the office, in the field, on the road, in the kitchen? We have a wonderful blessing to share – forgiveness, restoration, belonging, unity that stretches over racial and linguistic divides – we need to share that with the world.

Now, before I close, I think that there’s one more angle that we need to consider, because the Tower of Babel – and the Great Commission for that matter – is not just about individuals; it’s about communities. The tower builders were working together to build something; what is it that we as a church are building – a tower to keep us safe or the outward looking Kingdom of God?

I remember a pastor that we had back in Hamilton who said that when he began at that church (Philpott Memorial) he called it ‘Fortress Philpott’ because the mindset of the people was entirely inwardly focused. It was all about doing what was good for THEM, all about circling the wagons and working for their own benefit.

But that’s not what God calls us to, is it? He doesn’t intend for us to hunker down behind our own little walls in order to entertain ourselves; He wants us to go out into all the world, carrying the blessings of Jesus to our neighbours. I think that it would be very easy for a church like ours to build our own little tower, turning inwards and helping ourselves, but I think that we do have a good posture towards the outside. I think that our mission team does a good job of pointing us outwards and our mission budget

keeps us contributing to the worldwide mission of God. So let's keep that up and keep on building the Kingdom as a church.

Our towers will only last so long; God's kingdom will last forever. Build the kingdom, not the tower.

ⁱ 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.