

The Tower of Babel: Genesis 11
Ben Reaoch, THREE RIVERS GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH
Sunday morning, July 15, 2007

This morning's message is going to be a tale of two cities. Not Paris and London in the 1700s, as in Charles Dickens' story. The story I'm talking about began in Genesis, and the story is still unfolding today. It's the tale of two cities. The city of man, and the city of God. Often it is symbolized in Scripture by the city of Babylon and the city of Jerusalem. And the question for all of this morning is: What city do you live in? Is your citizenship in the city of man, or in the city of God? St. Augustine in the early 400s A. D. wrote a book called *The City of God*, and he describes these two cities, the city of God and the city of man. And he says that each city is founded on love. The city of God is founded on love for God. The city of man is founded on love of self.

We're going to read in Genesis 11 the tragic story of those who attempted to build the tower of Babel. And even though God totally shut them down, we look around our world today and we see men and women who are still trying to build that tower. They're still trying to construct the city of man. They're still trying to make a name for themselves. But the city of man will not survive. Babylon will be thrown down in the end. The city of God is the city that has foundations. That's the eternal city, the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem that we look forward to.

Let's read these verses in Genesis 11 and see the folly of trying to invest in the city of man. And then I pray we will see the glory and the joy and the delight of investing everything we have and everything we are in the city of God.

Chapters 10 and 11 of Genesis record the nations that descended from Noah. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And in chapters 10-11 we can trace their descendants all the way to Abram. So these chapters are the link between the story of Noah in chapters 6-9 and the story of Abraham and his family in chapters 12-50, which is the rest of the book.

Chapters 10-11 are genealogies. But there are two parentheses interjected in the course of the genealogies. The first is in chapter 10:8-10 that tell us of Nimrod who was "the first on earth to be a mighty man," and it says that "the beginning of his kingdom was Babel," along with several other cities. The other thing to notice in chapter 10 is that it refers to the peoples being dispersed and having different languages. But it's not until chapter 11:1-9, which is the second parenthesis within the genealogies, that we learn what caused the dispersion and what brought about the different languages. In this section at the beginning of chapter 11 Moses is stepping back to explain what has happened here. And what has happened is the tower of Babel. The tower of Babel is what has caused these divisions and the different languages.

Up until the tower of Babel, everyone spoke the same language. And sometime after the Flood a group of people decided to settle in the land of Shinar in southern Mesopotamia. In verse 3 these folks begin to devise a plan. You can feel the excitement and the anticipation and the eagerness they have for this project. There was a gleam in their eye as they said, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And while there's nothing wrong with wanting to build a city, or even a tall tower, verse 4 reveals the evil intentions of their hearts. "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.”

Notice what they wanted and what they did not want. They wanted to make a name for themselves. They wanted to build this city and a tower reaching up to the sky in order to be something, in order have fame and fortune and acclaim. They wanted people to say, “Wow, check out that tower. Check out that city! The people who built that are amazing!” That’s what this group wanted. What they did NOT want was to be dispersed over the face of the whole earth. In other words, they did not want to obey God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (1:28; 9:1). They didn’t want to go fill the earth. They didn’t want their group to be broken up and spread around to different parts of the land. They wanted to stick together, and they thought a good way to achieve that would be to build an impressive city where they could all live.

How did God respond to this situation? Verse 5 is somewhat sarcastic in the way it describes God’s descent to observe this city and tower. It says, “the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.” The subtle and sarcastic point is that the tower didn’t amount to anything in the eyes of God. It all depends on your vantage point. It all depends on your point of view. Viewing the city from the ground, it may have seemed pretty impressive. As they built the city and the tower, they figured they were doing something pretty spectacular. But this verse gives us the picture of God bending down, like you or I might bend down to look at an anthill, and He is unimpressed.

In fact, it’s worse than that. He’s not only unimpressed, He is angry at their prideful effort to make a name for themselves. So God punishes them. Verses 6-7 are very similar to God’s response to Adam and Eve in chapter 3, where “God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—’ therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden” (3:22-23). In 11:6-7 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.”

The Lord observes their unity and their will to rebel against Him, and He decides to do something about it. He decides to thwart their plans, because He knows that if they are left to themselves their sin will only increase and intensify. Not that they posed any threat to the Almighty God, but they certainly posed a threat to themselves. God chose to restrain their sin in this remarkable way. This is common grace. God is restraining their sin. He confused their languages in order to destroy their unity. And He dispersed them “over the face of all the earth.”

God always wins. Before the Flood it looked as though the seed of the serpent was going to triumph. But God, after waiting patiently for decades, had no difficulty wiping out every living thing in order to start afresh with Noah and his family. And again, here, it looks as though sinful humanity is rising up successfully against their Maker. But God easily confuses their language so that they can’t continue.

Remember what these people wanted and what they did not want. They wanted to make a name for themselves. They failed. Their work on the city ceased because they

could no longer communicate. The whole system broke down due to God's miraculous punishment that He brought on them. So they didn't get what they wanted.

On the other hand, the very thing they feared is what ended up happening. What they did NOT want was to be scattered over the face of the earth. And that was the other thing that God did to them to break up the rebellion. He dispersed them over the face of all the earth. Since they didn't obey God's instruction to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, God brought it about in a different way.

God's plans never fail. He is always in complete control, and what He determines to do He will most certainly do. And from the beginning when God created Adam and Eve in His own image, it was His intention that mankind fill the earth in order to reflect that image. You see, we are here to reflect the glory of God. The reason you exist and the reason I exist, is to be a mirror that reflects God's greatness out into the world. It's like we are little mirrors positioned at a 45 degree angle, and God's image shines down on us and then is reflected out around us. God's plan has always been to fill the earth with His image, and it's fascinating to see how He uses this sinful and prideful event at the tower of Babel as the occasion for creating different languages and spreading mankind throughout the earth. God is up to something here! He permitted this rebellious uprising. It was part of His plan, and it was through this event that He gave mankind different languages and dispersed them to fill the earth.

The builders of this city did not get what they wanted. Rather, what they feared would happen did happen. And in all of it God's purposes prevailed. The city of man was defeated on this occasion, and it will be defeated ultimately on the last day. But the city of God will prosper.

I want to contrast the city of man and the city of God in a couple ways. First of all, the city of man seeks a name for itself, but the city of God appropriately exalts God's Name. They built the tower of Babel to make a name for themselves. And Babel is the archetype of Babylon, which is used throughout Scripture to represent the city of man. In the book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar shows us the mindset of Babylon in the starkest of terms. He was the king of the Babylonian Empire, and he had accomplished great things from the world's perspective. This is what he said: "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" (Daniel 4:30). That's the city of man. That's love of self. That's pride. That's making a name for oneself. It's what so many people are trying to do with their lives, but it's the last thing that will make anyone happy.

The city of God, on the other hand, opposes human pride and self-centeredness and exalts the only Name that is worthy of praise. This is the lesson that we need to learn and relearn and be reminded of day after day. The universe does not revolve around me or you. The universe revolves around God. It's not about us. It's about Him. He made it that way! He wants to get glory in everything He does. God is displaying His greatness and calling forth praise from His creation. He is revealing the greatness of His Name.

The events of our lives are not for the purpose of making a name for ourselves, but to be part of God's plan to make a Name for Himself. Everything God does, He does for the sake of His Name, for the sake of His fame, for the sake of His glory. In Isaiah 48 God says, "For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it

for you, that I may not cut you off. . . . For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another” (vv. 9, 11).

That has to be one of the most God-centered statements in the Bible. God is making a Name for Himself, and those who are citizens of the city of God will consciously participate in magnifying His Name. But those who are in the bondage of selfishness and pride will work to make a name for themselves. And in the end they will utterly fail.

What is the focus of your life? When you talk to other people is it as though there are arrows pointing at you, and neon signs that say, “It’s all about me!” Think about the amount of time you spend talking about yourself. Or think about how you spend your free time. Is it mostly self-centered activities? If I sit down with you and all I want to do is talk about myself. And all my activities are based on what I like to do, what pleases me, what makes me comfortable. Those are neon signs flashing, “It’s all about me!”

Our desire should be that our lives display one arrow that points straight to God. “It’s about HIM!” And when we talk to others we’re interested in their needs and desires and hurts and struggles. And we talk about God’s glory and the truth of God’s Word, and how that relates to their particular situation. It takes the focus off ourselves and puts the focus on God.

Don’t try to make a name for yourself. Don’t think of your education or your money or your looks or your athletic ability or your possessions or your accomplishments, and think that you’re something. None of those things are worth anything in the grand scheme of things. They aren’t worth ANYTHING if you’re trying to use them to make a name for yourself. If you’re doing that, then you’re only putting yourself under the judgment of God.

Don’t try to make a name for yourself. It won’t happen. It’s meaningless. And there’s no lasting joy in it. Instead, get yourself out of the way and experience the thrill of delighting in God’s fame. He is the One who has a Name. He is glorious. It’s not about us. It’s about Him.

The second contrast I want to make is this: the city of man brings disunity and frustration and exhaustion, while the city of God fosters unity and joy and rest. In Genesis 11 God confused their languages in order to destroy their unity. Previously, they could understand one another. They were unified. They were working hard to make a name for themselves. But their work was exhausting, and their plans were frustrated. Isn’t that what happens when things revolve around me. When we’re trying to make a name for ourselves. When selfishness is at the center of it, then it’s never enough. We’ll always want more, we’ll want something different, we’ll want what that person has. Which leads to exhaustion and frustration. And it will inevitably drive a wedge between us and others, because each person in the city of man is looking out for #1. So the city of man brings disunity and frustration and exhaustion.

But the city of God fosters the opposite of all these things. The city of God fosters unity and joy and rest. At Pentecost we see God overcome the confusion of the languages as He established the church, which was very diverse, but unified. Acts 2 describes Pentecost, and it says that the apostles “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (v. 4). Then the Jews from “every nation under heaven . . . came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and

astonished, saying, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?’” (vv. 5-8).

It was God’s good intention to create various languages and people groups. In the city of man those differences bring disunity and confusion, but this miracle at Pentecost shows how these things can bring unity in the city of God. In Revelation 5:9 the Apostle John sees in his vision a heavenly worship service where they are singing a new song to the Lamb, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” You see, the division that happened at Babel is being overcome in the church. The Bride of Christ will one day include in it individuals from every people group of the world. Individuals of every language, coming together in unity and harmony and great joy to worship our Savior Jesus Christ. What caused frustration to the rebels will bring great joy to the saints.

Also in the New Jerusalem, the city of God, which is heaven, we will enjoy eternal rest. We will enjoy pleasures forevermore at God’s right hand. As Revelation describes, there will be the river of the water of life running through the middle of the city and on either side the tree of life and we will see his face and his name will be on our foreheads (22:1-4). For all of eternity we will experience unity with the other saints, and we will have great joy and rest in His presence.

Think about your own life. Think about your work. Whether it’s in the home, outside of the home, or as a student. What city are you trying to build up? In your work, in your labor, in your toil, are you building up the city of man, trying to make a name for yourself? Or are you pouring your life out to exalt the Name of God?

I want to close with an application for our church. As most of you know, we are actively seeking a new location for our services so that we can draw more people into our fellowship and have a greater impact on this city. Back in January we presented our mission statement, which is on the front of your worship folders: “Three Rivers Grace Community Church exists to delight in the beauty of God’s greatness, to proclaim the truth of God’s Word, and to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world.” Connected to that third point is our desire to have a downtown location which would be more accessible for people all around the city, and would be more visible to more people. We want this church to grow. We want more and more people to delight in the beauty of God’s greatness, and hear the truth of God’s Word, and have a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And for those reasons I would love to see this church grow tremendously in the months and years to come. Let’s pray for that and work toward that and take risks to that end.

At the same time, though, we must hear the warning of this passage. We need to make sure that our efforts to grow this church and have a greater influence in Pittsburgh are driven by the right motivation. We’re not here to make a name for Grace Church. We’re here to exalt God’s Name in Pittsburgh. The temptation is so subtle and seductive, and it’s easy for church leaders and church members to fall into it. If the Lord wills, and our church does grow significantly, it will be tempting for us to think that we did that, and we will want to take the credit for it, and we will think we’ve made a name for ourselves.

I pray that the message of the tower of Babel will ring in our ears at those moments of temptation, and we’ll remember that anything built to make a name for

ourselves will crumble. Those efforts are completely futile. Oh, let's pray that God will protect us from wasting our lives, or wasting the blessings He has given this church. As the Psalmist says, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1). So let's labor, not for our name, not to build the city of man, but to glorify God's Name and build up His city. As individuals and as a church, may we find the eternal delight of beholding God's beauty and magnifying His Name.