

Sermon on Gen. 11:1-9

Sept. 5, 2010

Prayer...

In last week's sermon, we ended with Noah stepping off the ark with his family to begin a new life for himself and humanity. Noah's mission was to take up the command God had given to Adam and Eve, to go forth and multiply. Noah was to care for the animals just as Adam and Eve were supposed to, and God gave Noah the responsibility to establish a fair and just society that cherished life as much as God does. Noah could set out to do all of this with the confidence that God was with him, and if he ever needed a reminder of that fact, Noah could find it in the clouds. To this day, the rainbow remains a universal symbol of promise and hope. Even in the midst of storms and trials, God is with us, and will carry us to brighter days.

So that was Genesis 9. In Genesis 10 we find a genealogy that traces the descendents of Noah's three sons. They did go forth and multiply to an extent, and among them we find the core people groups who occur again and again throughout the Old Testament and in archaeological records. As we turn to chapter 11, we start to see a prominent Biblical pattern that is repeated throughout the Old Testament. Initially, God's people are faithful; they prosper; in their prosperity they forget about God; they decline morally; God warns them that He will discipline them because of their disobedience; He patiently warns them repeatedly; then He finally disciplines them. They repent and return to Him; they grow strong in faith and prosper again; then they take their eyes off God and decline morally, and the cycle continues. So what started with such hope when Noah stepped off the ark gradually turns sour. We should expect this, because as God says in Genesis 8:21, every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. So let's turn to see what went wrong as we look at the Tower of Babel.

Genesis 11:1-9, NIV: ¹ Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

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. 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."

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

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. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth. This is the Word of the Lord.

As we saw a few weeks ago, God disciplined Cain for killing his brother Abel. Part of that punishment was God's decree that Cain be a nomad, always wandering to find food and water. After being expelled from his extended family, Cain disobeyed the Lord in short order by settling down to establish the city he named after his son Enoch. In a similar fashion, here in Genesis 11 Noah's descendents are commanded to go forth and fill the earth, but they don't get too far before they decide to settle down. After a generation at the most, they established a settlement near Shinar, which is a plain northwest of the Persian Gulf.

Now establishing cities in and of itself wasn't what God had in mind, but the cities that are referred to in Genesis 10-11 were especially troubling because they led to even more rebellion against the Lord. The first evidence of this lies in the discussion in verse 3 about using bricks and tar instead of stone and mortar. To us today this seems like a minor distinction. But later in the Scriptures we see that making bricks was thought to be a vain extravagance, especially when it came to building altars and temples. To the Hebrew mindset, it is ideal to use stones that the Lord provides straight from the earth. They are simple and have not been adulterated by excessive human handling. Bricks were seen to be a luxury that was immodest, and later bricks came to be associated with the trials the Israelites lived through in Egypt. Since bricks were commonly used for pagan worship structures, faithful Hebrews wanted to avoid them at all costs.

So here in Genesis 11, we see a touch of pagan influence through the use of bricks. But when we dig deeper, we need to note that cities of this time were not like our cities. Back then, the main purpose and focal point of a city was its altar or temple. Cities were established primarily for pagan worship. There would have been a worship structure in the center of the city

along with a few buildings associated with the temple worship. A wall would have surrounded all of this. Most people would have lived outside of the wall. With this in mind, God's command to Noah and his sons to go forth and fill the earth took on new meaning. If they settled down instead of spreading across the world, they would settle in cities that had been built for pagan gods. We don't know if Babel was the first such city, or the most grievous to God. But either way, its entire existence flew in the face of God's expansive desires for humanity.

We can see this idea in verse 4, which may be the most crucial verse of the passage. The men say, "Let's build ourselves a city." In other words, "We're not building a city to honor God; it's for us, and indirectly or directly it honors some pagan idol." Then they continue by saying, "a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens." How arrogant and presumptuous were they to think that they could aspire to God's presence! They show no humility whatsoever, because a godly person would know that he or she is unworthy to be in God's presence. Jesus Himself did not think that equality with God was something to be grasped, and yet here, those who built the tower had the exact opposite mindset.

But their arrogance is only part of the problem. These slender towers, known as ziggurats, were built of bricks on the outside, and filled in with rocks and dirt. They resembled the Washington Monument, but on a much smaller scale. They also had steps on the sides, so priests could walk up to the top. At the top of the ziggurat was a flat area with a room to host a god when it came down to earth to visit. There would have been a bed, a table, and fresh daily food for the deity. Near these would have been an altar for sacrifices to the god. With the mere existence of this tower, it's clear that the people at Babel had completely lost sight of the God of Noah, who doesn't need a bed or food, and never directed them to worship this way. Instead of man being made in God's image, man made a god in his own flawed image. ///

If that weren't enough, the men in verse 4 continue to say that they want to build this city and this tower to heaven to make a name for themselves. They want recognition and honor, for themselves. In contrast, godly people like Noah want no recognition or honor for what they do, and they humble themselves before the Lord, so He can lift them up in due time. Faithful disciples of Christ desire to obey so they can bring glory to the Lord, so His Kingdom will come and His will will be done. In contrast, the men in verse 4 wrap up their comments by saying that they will make the city and the tower to prevent themselves from being scattered over the earth. They stand in bold defiance against God's desire for them to go forth, and multiply.

The tower of Babel is an often-noted chapter in world culture. Even ancient non-biblical sources record a time when there was only one language among all people, and note the intervention of the gods in causing the origin of different languages. The word “Babel” originally came from the Akkadian language and meant “gateway to God,” which makes sense given the tower’s purpose. What’s interesting is that the Hebrews took that same word and transformed it to mean “folly” or “confusion.” Even modern languages have continued that sense. The English term B-A-B-E-L refers to confusion, and the related word B-A-B-B-L-E means to speak meaningless words.

But we need to keep in mind that the purpose of this passage is not only to explain the origin of various languages in humanity. This passage teaches us what happens when people who are not interested in honoring God congregate together. It’s reasonable to say that the more sinners you have in a room, the more sin that will take place, and the more the sinners will cooperate to sin together. But we’re also reminded that humans tend to take a good gift and use it for corrupt ends. Language is a blessing for us to use as we share our lives together, and worship the Lord in one voice. We sing and pray, alone and together, for the glory of God.

But we all know what happens when language is used for other ends. We take the Lord’s name in vain and cuss, we gossip, we say cruel things, and we fail to speak up when we should. Sometimes we may honor God with our lips, but not our hearts. Sometimes we may pray the prayers in the bulletin, or say the call to worship, or sing the hymns, but our minds and hearts are not in it. Like the people at Babel, we too can be tempted to take good things like language, and use them for purposes that do not please or honor God. In Isaiah 29 the Lord observes, “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.” And later in Matthew 15 Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for being worried about becoming defiled by eating the wrong things. He said instead that the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these are what make a man 'unclean.' The story of Babel reminds us to be careful, because God wants and deserves heartfelt, sincere worship.

So in Genesis 11, God observes that the people who were united in language were up to no good, and in fact were involved in pagan practices and self-glorification. When God confuses their language, it is a form of punishment, but it is also an act of mercy. God prevents them from compounding evil upon evil, prevents them from exacerbating the sins they have already

committed. He also gives them a warning and a chance to repent, a chance to turn back to the mission Noah was given to spread across the earth. If they chose not to obey Him by scattering across the world, He would accomplish His goals for humanity another way, despite them. God's plan to establish His Kingdom is accomplished, with us or without us, through us or in spite of us. It's up to us to be sure that we are obediently, and faithfully, on His side.

Many Protestant churches do not include the Lord's Supper in worship every Sunday. One reason for this is to avoid having this special and holy ordinance become rote and meaningless. When we come to the Lord's table, we don't want to be just going through the motions. We don't want to be taking the bread and the cup just because everyone else is doing it, and if we opted not to, we'd feel awkward or might be questioned. Church traditions are always at risk of becoming habits, things we do without thinking, and even without praying. This is why I always include Paul's words from 1 Cor. 11 in the bulletin prior to our celebrations of the Lord's Supper. He admonishes us to be careful in how we worship and come to the table, because "anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself."

When that passage mentions honoring the body of Christ, it has multiple meanings. It certainly means Jesus's actual body that He laid down for your sake and mine, the same one that was beaten, flogged, and crucified, the same one that was perfectly healed when He was resurrected from the dead. But this passage also refers to the Body of Christ, the Church. In Matthew 5 Jesus states, "if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First, go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." In other words, if we are not at peace with someone, we cannot come to worship and pretend that we are at peace with God. We should not come to the Lord's table to share a meal with Him, if there is someone we would refuse to eat with, or they would refuse to eat with us.

Whether we are considering worship at the tower of Babel, or worship here today through the Lord's Supper, our passage from Genesis 11 must ultimately remind us of God's utter, and glorious, holiness. His very presence is holy. Our careful, thoughtful, prayerful worship of Him is to be sacred. Yes, He mercifully forgives our sins and welcomes us, but that does not mean we

should come casually, and without a reverent, thoughtful mindset. It's only when we reflect upon His majesty and holiness that we see our sinfulness in comparison. Only when we remind ourselves of our sinfulness can we offer the heartfelt, joy-filled worship that God desires and deserves. He alone is the one who has rescued us from our sinful selves, and brought us into His Kingdom of righteousness. May our worship, whatever form it takes throughout the week, always be mindful of His glory, and our desperate need for God's mercy and grace.

Let us pray.