

“The Futility of Human Life”

Genesis 11:1-9

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The account of the Tower of Babel is set between two genealogies of Shem. The hope of the world's redemption surrounds the account of its rebellion against God. The non-elect lines end apart from God in transitory kingdoms. The line of Shem heads forward toward Jesus Christ who will build God's eternal kingdom. That line produced the only ancient kingdom that still not only exists today but continues to grow day by day.

Text comment:

- v. 1: The word “language” is the *leitwort* or key word in the passage, occurring in the first and last verses and again several times in the middle. There is an emphasis throughout the chapter on the totality of mankind, the whole world was involved in both the offense and God's punishment of it. [Sarna, 81]
- v.2 Shinar is another name for Mesopotamia. “From the east...” indicates that the narrator's vantage point is Canaan.
- v. 4 The people's ambition is clearly evidence of impiety: a pride that sets itself against God and seeks to replace God in human life. Their statement echoes Satan's promise to Adam and Eve that if they ate of the forbidden fruit they would be as gods. But here pride is mixed with fear; experience has clouded their sense of the future. Pride and fear together in the heart is now characteristic of human life.

The narrator has to explain Mesopotamian building practices to his Israelite audience who built with stone. The rarity of stone in the Lower Mesopotamian plain made it necessary to build with brick; the use of bitumen for mortar added strength and impermeability to the kiln-dried brick. In the Babylonian epics, brick-making is celebrated as a great achievement. [Sarna, 82]

“That we might make a name for ourselves” expresses a search for immortality. But only God can give man an everlasting name!

In the ancient world cities were not built to live in. They were for religious and political purposes. In Mesopotamia such a tower would have been a ziggurat, a massive, solid brick, staircase structure with a shrine at the top, sometimes painted blue to blend in with the heavens, the home of the gods. It would have dominated the city. It was built to represent a mountain, a sacred mountain where the gods were thought to gather. “With its top in the sky” “is actually a cliché in Mesopotamian building inscriptions.” In the paganism of that world it was a religious object, viewed as the gate of heaven. One such ziggurat in ancient Babylon was called “The House of the Link between Heaven and Earth.” [Waltke, 179] In a similar way, “make a name for ourselves” is a typical way of referring to the eternal fame that a king imagined would be his for building such an immense and impressive structure. Obviously one effect of such an immense project

would be to secure the unity of the population, as such a colossal construction would require centralized authority and a high degree of organization. [Sarna, 82-83] R.C. Sproul cutely imagines that as they broke the champagne over the base of the tower the MC intoned, “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind!”

- v. 5 Another of the vigorous anthropomorphisms that litter the early chapters of Genesis. The tower that men thought would reach to heaven God had to come down to see! (Isa. 40:22: 'He sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.') The pagans thought that the gods lived at the top of their towers, but God had to come down even to see their tower! The author is satirizing ancient near-eastern mythology. [Sarna, 83] Once again, the Lord does not execute his judgment without making a careful examination of the facts.
- v.7 The Hebrew verb “to confuse” in v. 7 is a play on the word for “brick” in v. 3. By the way, here is another of those “Let us...” divine statements in the early chapters of Genesis. “Let us make man” was the first in 1:26.
- v. 9: The Hebrew word used here is a pun on the name of the city. The name to the founders of the city meant “the gate of God.” But the Hebrew word that sounds like it means “confused.” We use the term today in a phrase such as “a babel of voices.” [Waltke, 178] The Lord had imposed a more accurate label on that city and the tradition that descended from it. They conceived their city to be the gate of God, but instead it became the site of meaningless gibberish. [Sarna, 84] In the Bible, as you know, Babylon came more and more to symbolize godless society in its rebellion against God. One of ancient Babylon’s glories was a huge ziggurat. But, in Rev. 18:5 it is only Babylon's sins that finally reach all the way up to heaven.

Unlike the flood history, there is no close ANE parallel to the account of the Tower of Babel, though the existence of these ziggurats or towers is well-known and the building of Babylon and its tower is celebrated in ancient sources. What is more, another ancient epic looks back to a golden age when, "the whole universe, the people in unison...spoke in one tongue." [Wenham, p. 236] It continues: "Enki...the leader of the gods changed the speech in their mouths, brought contention into it, into the speech of man that (until then) had been one."

After publishing his great papers on special relativity in 1905, Albert Einstein turned his attention to the problem of gravity. He was sitting in his office chair at the patent office in Bern thinking about the implications of his earlier discoveries for this problem. In a lecture given in Japan in 1922, he recounted what happened next.

“All of a sudden, a thought occurred to me: if a person falls freely, he will not feel his own weight. I was startled. This simple thought made a deep impression on me. It impelled me toward a theory of gravitation.”

“To his close friend, Michele Angelo Besso, who also worked at the Swiss patent office, Einstein described the revelation as “The happiest thought of my life.” ... Ultimately this

would lead him to the development of the general theory of relativity -- a theory of relativity that would incorporate gravitation.” [A. Aczel, *God’s Equation*, 28]

Life can be like that: a sudden realization changing everything. All over the world, every day men and women come to such realizations or sudden recognitions and their lives are never the same. But it is also quite possible that the most obvious facts will never occur to many people. They will go through their lives oblivious to the truth that is staring them in the face. What truth? Well among them this truth: *human life is an exercise in futility*. Here, for the first time, that great fact is set before us. In a historical narrative of events long ago we are given to see the course of human history ever after: man proposing to solve all his problems and to gain immortality and God nullifying and bringing to nothing his efforts with a mere wave of his hand.

The early history of the world now reaches "its fruitless climax" (Kidner) as men, still seeking to establish themselves apart from God, conscious of their powers and abilities but, as well, uncertain of their prospects -- experience has injected a great deal of doubt -- perhaps even aware at the deeper level of the futility of their hope to save themselves -- I say men lay plans to give glory to themselves and to fortify themselves against all possible danger by collective effort and the employment of technology. Let no one decry the technological innovation or the engineering wizardry employed. What the ancients accomplished in their building projects still leaves us astounded, whether the great ziggurats and pyramids of the ancient world, or their astronomical calculations, or their metallurgy, and all without access to the knowledge and the tools we take for granted today. Niel Postman once observed that if computers had been instrumental in getting men to the moon, people would think that it couldn’t have been done without them; but, in fact, it was done without them. And the fabulous accuracy of the architecture and engineering of the pyramids was not dependent on laser or GPS surveying techniques and no computer simulations were employed to plan the structures before building began.

This piece of history, near the end of the Bible's introduction to the nature and meaning of human life, beautifully and timelessly captures the characteristic spirit of man in rebellion against God. As Derek Kidner put it,

"The project [proposed] 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 [or some new digital device or program]. At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes."
[109]

And so the half-built city becomes the perpetual image of sinful man in this world, of man in his rebellion against God. Try as he might to establish himself over against God -- and his efforts have been nothing short of stupendous, in war, in industry, in education, in technology -- his efforts never succeed. There never has been in the history of the world a time in which so many people live as prosperously as they do today, never a time when so many people live to a ripe old age, never a time when ease of travel has shrunk the world so small, but still we are no closer to having saved ourselves than any generation of human beings that lived before us.

Think of the UN building in New York City, another tower, as it were reaching to the heavens. The whole idea was that by collective effort we would bring peace and prosperity to the earth. We would end war and pestilence and create a new and abiding kingdom of man. But the goal remains as elusive, if not more elusive today than at the founding of the United Nations. War and pestilence are still with us; disunity and competition among men have been stimulated by the advance of technology rather than curbed by it. Modern technology has been trumpeted as a development that will unify the race and make possible man's final victory over the forces that still control him. But for the first time in history man has grown used to youngsters shooting up a school, or religious and political activists blowing up a market, killing themselves and hundreds of others instantaneously. For all the marvels of their technology, the ancients couldn't do that! It is as true today as it was those millennia ago that there will be no peace on earth without the Prince of Peace. *That is a realization that ought sooner or later suddenly to dawn on the minds of all human beings: the futility of human life.*

At the end of the day, man is no closer to having saved himself than he was at the beginning. Those ancient tower-builders of Shinar believed in gods -- projections of themselves -- but they did not and would not believe in *God*, the living God, the maker of heaven and earth. The name Babel stands forever as a symbol of the folly, the futility of unbelief and godlessness. The express purpose of their building, as stated in vv. 3-4 is precisely what they failed to achieve.

Man sought to establish himself by collective effort, by joining together against the common enemy, but ended up divided, separated from and at odds with the very ones whom he had hoped would provide his collective strength. And so it has been through the history of our race: the pride and the fear which motivates our attempts to gather together for the glory of man are finally forces too powerful for us to control and they drive us apart and set us against one another. Here is the beginning of all wars and all empires, of economic competition, and of political division.

We seek significance and immortality -- a name for ourselves -- but reap instead alienation and confusion and die at about the same time long-lived human beings have always died. These facts could be nothing more than depressing reality, the plain facts, brutal as they may, but nothing more. It might be that we are all going to die and there is nothing we can do about it. It might be that a realist should accept that human nature is red in tooth and claw and impossible to change. It could be that there is no hope of better things because, as we say so often nowadays, "it is what it is." But mankind seems incapable of that surrender to death, made as we are in the image of the eternal God, longing for life as we must. Franz Rosenzweig was right when he said, "the philosophers remind one of a small child who sticks his fingers in his ears and shouts, 'I can't hear you,' in the face of mortality." [In D. Goldman, *How Civilizations Die*, 234] *But in fact this universal failure to overcome our problems and especially our mortality is the good news of Genesis 11.*

Here is the one hopeful truth revealed in our text: *Babel was not left unfinished, the project did not come to nothing as the result of some impersonal law of human affairs, some social second law of thermodynamics that holds that human life must inevitably fall apart and come to nothing.* Quite the contrary.

The failure at Babel was the direct result of God's frustrating and eventually nullifying their plans. Everything started so well, the newspapers were trumpeting the progress as the tower began to rise. Eager sightseers came to stare at the colossal project and, in the small visitor's center near the construction site, to view the pictures that showed how it would all look when finished. But everything suddenly changed when God came down as we read in v. 5. *God coming down* is the pivot on which both the chapter and the history turn. They were going to make bricks and construct a tower together, but all that was soon forgotten as they were scattered by the Lord to the four corners of the earth.

We don't know precisely how they were scattered, but we can easily enough imagine, as the same sort of thing happens constantly in our own time. There was perhaps some falling out among the movers and shakers -- someone didn't get his way when the design was approved and resented those who had got their way ("You're really going to build a car museum that looks like a slug!") -- or problems developed with the financing -- the newspapers began running stories on the enormous cost overruns that threatened to cripple the project and of how corruption among the contractors had siphoned off millions of public dollars into private pockets -- or perhaps some engineer noticed that the tower was tilting slightly, perhaps through slapdash construction techniques or a failure to secure the foundation -- or perhaps someone decided to build his own tower somewhere else. Whatever it was, soon the infighting became fierce and soon thereafter the entire project crumbled under the weight of the personal hatred and the competition and the lust for gain that has undone so many grandiose human projects ever since. *But however it happened, it was God's doing!* He frustrated their plans at Babel and he has been frustrating man's plans to find his paradise in this world ever since.

The great point of this narrative, dramatically revealed in the narrative structure itself -- first man's words and man's plans and then God's words and God's plans with the pivot between them the statement in v. 5 "And the Lord came down" -- is that *the frustrating of man's grandiose plans*, his determination to escape the curse that God had placed upon his life, *was first and foremost God's own act*. Man was not frustrated so much by his own sinfulness as by the direct judgment and intervention of God. It would be far too complicated to describe and explain, but the Hebrew art of narrative is brilliantly displayed in this account of the tower of Babel, and by various means, the narrator draws our attention to v. 5 as the central point, the turning point in this narrative. Man plans and works, but then God comes to look and he sees what is going on, and then, in the remaining verses the event unfolds at the direction of God to produce the exact reverse of the aspirations that man had at the beginning.

In Hebrew "let us make bricks" in v. 3, "build for ourselves" in v. 4, and "let us mix up" in v. 7 have a similar sound -- and all sound similar to the Hebrew word for "folly." In this way the narrator draws our attention to the dramatic and total reversal that has taken place. God prevented men from successfully cooperating together in anti-God projects.

What we have is one of those great principles of human life, a basic perspective on human life necessary for a right understanding of the world. *Such perspectives are the primary purpose and subject of these first eleven chapters of Genesis*. That fundamental principle is this: *God himself will never let man succeed in his rebellion*, never allow him to establish himself in this world without God, never permit man to set up his own kingdom without it beginning to topple as soon

as it seems to be ready to stand. *That is the realization that must dawn in human mind as that one about gravity did in Einstein's mind!* And this one is much more important because that recognition opens one's mind to so much more absolutely vital truth about God, about ourselves and about our world.

You see, it was God's kindness that he frustrated man's plans to make a name for himself, to build his own kingdom. It was God's kindness that he scattered man to the four corners of the earth. And it remains God's kindness that he prevents man from ever making for himself a permanent home in this world, prevents him from realizing his dreams in this world. You see, man will never seek God unless and until he realizes that what he is looking for and hoping for cannot find apart from God. *God will not let him.* This monotonous failure on man's part to overcome his problems -- the real story of human life in the world -- is God's doing. It is both God's judgment and his mercy.

This is God's world, man is God's creature made in God's image, and God will not permit the godless to make their lives a true success. He will not permit them to overcome the curse that lies upon this world on account of human sin. Such was the lesson these rebels in Shinar learned and so the lesson they have taught to us: they had calculated everything except whether God would permit them to succeed.

It can take time, men can seem to succeed for a while, at they did in Shinar, hopes may spring eternal. William Wordsworth amongst many other English poets and deep thinkers of those early eighteenth century days greeted the French Revolution with delight and great hope: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!!" But then came the Terror and the mass murder and then Napoleon's empire; Wordsworth's tone changed and he wrote instead of "This melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown." The story of the world!

But, I say again, this is mercy on God's part. You may have wondered at the Lord's statement in v. 6. It is something like the statement we encountered in 3:22 when God prevented Adam from returning to the Garden because he might reach out for the fruit of the tree of life and live forever. Is God afraid of what man might achieve? Did God mean that unless he acted immediately, he would not be able to control or suppress man's rebellion against him? No; Of course not! The entire Bible and this passage itself make that interpretation impossible.

What is meant is that if man is allowed to succeed in this arrogant effort to assert himself against God, then further and still more egregious offenses will come in train and man will sink ever more deeply into the habit of unbelief and pride. Is this not true? The one corrective to human arrogance in this world has been all along man's consistent failure to succeed in his efforts to assert himself. This note of foreboding, this concern for what might come from man's rebellion should it succeed, is the mark not so much of the Creator's outrage, but of his concern; his unwillingness to allow mankind to pitch itself into everlasting doom. By frustrating man's hopes and plans against God, he makes a way for man's return to God.

And this too is a note that will be sounded over and over again throughout the rest of the Bible and throughout the story of the church in the world. What is it that makes men and women cry out to God but simply that their lives are not working without him. Why does God so regularly

visit upon human beings the just desert of their sins, except that they might learn before it is too late that sin pays a wage and that the broad road they are walking leads nowhere but to the edge of the cliff. How many are there here, this morning, who would not be here, and would never come here, except that months ago or years ago, God made you feel the want and waste of your life without him? God frustrated you in your plans to build a happy life without him; he defeated your effort to succeed as a human being while ignoring God and his holiness. Indeed, the most dangerous position in the world is to be happy without God. For that man, that woman will not learn until it is too late that to be without God in God's world is the way to certain and eternal woe! We ought to be grateful, very grateful, that we live in a world where God sees to it that promiscuous people get diseases and despair, that greedy people lose their friends, that grasping people always finally overreach themselves, that selfishness and pride go before a fall, and so on. If it were not so, no one would ever be saved!

Remember, he confused the languages of men, but he did so only in order eventually to save many from every tongue, tribe, and nation on the earth. And, to those, we read in Zephaniah, he will one day give a single tongue again. "For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord." [Zeph. 3:9]

Some of you will remember this, others not. During the English civil war, the Puritan army of Oliver Cromwell captured a certain royalist major. He was a particularly noteworthy catch, for he was a man who was both a vicious and very able enemy of the Puritan cause. But, the Puritans, being the Christians that they were, did not perhaps make the best jailers. They allowed this major's sister to visit him in the prison and he escaped in her clothes. A great loss to the cause; or so it seemed.

After the war this same major, who was also a doctor, made his way to a small English village where no one would know who he was and set himself up as the town physician. He was a dissolute man, given to drink and gambling, and soon had lost all he had. His gambling had bankrupted him; his drinking had made him a fool! And then, there at rock bottom, despairing of everything, even his own life, a book fell into his hands, and, in his desperation he read it, and was guided by it to faith in Christ. The village was Bedford, the man John Gifford, the very man whom John Bunyan would later call "Holy Mister Gifford," and to whose preaching John Bunyan would later say he owed his soul. It is this man -- this former wastrel and drunk -- whom Bunyan would later immortalize as "Evangelist" in his *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Are we not grateful to God that Gifford's loose living and his drinking and his gambling brought him to despair? Do we not shudder to think that this man might have remained happy and successful while all the while raising his fist against God? Had God not intervened to frustrate all his sinful plans for happiness, where would John Bunyan have been and where the Christian world without *The Pilgrim's Progress*? And holy Mr. Gifford is but one example of a multitude no man can number of those who will, for all eternity, give thanks to God who did not permit them to build their tower, but instead confused them and scattered them and made them to lose hope in everything in order that they might come to hope in him!