

“The Tower of Babel,” Genesis 11:1-9 (Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, November 19, 2017)

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. <sup>2</sup> And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, “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.” <sup>5</sup> And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. <sup>6</sup> And 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. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” <sup>8</sup> So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

## PRAY

Today we wrap up our fall study on the book of Genesis, and we come to the account of the tower of Babel. We read in verse one that at one point in human history, all people spoke the same language. It certainly makes sense if we are all descendants of the same family.

But over the years many have pointed out a seeming contradiction between chapter eleven and chapter ten. In Genesis 10:5 we read about the various nations that descended from Noah and spread throughout the earth: “From these the coastland peoples spread in their lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations.” Something similar is said in verse 20 and verse 31.

How do we reconcile the statement that there is one language on earth in Genesis 11 with all these statements of multiple languages in Genesis 10? The answer, I believe, is that Moses, when he wrote this part of Genesis, did not write it in strict chronological order. For some other, thematic purpose, Moses gives the table of nations in Genesis 10 and then tells us in Genesis 11 why there are all these nations in the first place.

There is nothing wrong or misleading about producing material that’s not in chronological order. And I think we need to give Moses the benefit of the doubt that he was not an idiot, that did not write Genesis 10 about all these languages, go and take a nap, wake up, forget what he just wrote, and then pen Genesis 11 about there being one language on the planet. If the Bible were that poorly put together, we wouldn’t be reading it all these thousands of years later. It wouldn’t universally be considered a masterpiece. A lot of Bible critics have accused the biblical authors of being just that dense, but I think that sort of accusation can only come from lazy, sloppy, careless thinking on the part of the critic.

Psalm 19:7 says, “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple ...” And Psalm 119:99 says, “I have more understanding than all

my teachers, for your testimonies [again, “your law”] are my meditation.” Nothing helps you understand the world around you like the Bible. The Bible is God’s Word, it comes from God, and we come from God – God created us. So the more you study the Word, the more insight you have into the human condition.

And I can’t think of another passage in all the Bible that better describes what it feels like to live as a human being in this fallen world than the story of the tower of Babel. It shows us three things: first, what we want. Second, why God stops it. Third, what God gives instead.

First, what we want. Let’s read verses 2-4: “<sup>2</sup> And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. <sup>4</sup> Then they said, ‘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.’”

When I think of someone “making a name” for themselves it’s so that other people know who they are. But here all the people on earth **together** want to make a name for themselves. Who are they trying to get to recognize them? It must be God – who else is there who could know their name?

So the tower of Babel is about human pride, pride that asserts itself against God. That says to God, “This is my life, not yours. I want to be in control.” However, when this pride shows up in our lives, I think it rarely shows up so obviously. Perhaps there are a few sociopaths who actually say, “I am god. I am in control of my own fate.” But for most of us I think it manifests itself differently.

We all do want to make a name for ourselves, but the way it shows up in our lives is **in the desire to know that we matter**. We all want to make a name for ourselves in that we all want to know that we are special and are valued for who we are.

Every human being’s greatest fear is not to be hated. Not at all – if people hate you, and they go out of their way to tell you they hate you, then you must be fairly important to them. You must take up a fair amount of their thought life. They may hate you, but at least they know you. Our greatest fear, instead, is to be ignored. To not be known. To be so insignificant that you don’t matter to anyone.

This is why children so often behave badly. Their thinking is negative attention is better than no attention. The last thing they want is to be ignored. This is why solitary confinement will eventually drive prisoners insane. We want to be known, we need the attention of others.

Young men and women want to go out and make a name for themselves as good students, as good athletes, or as desirable to the opposite sex. Older men and women want to make a name for themselves by making money, having prestigious careers. Parents want to be known not just as parents, but as good parents, with obedient, well-behaved children, children who are successful and polite. Elderly people want to be known as ones who have lived well and who have wisdom, whom the younger people can come to for counsel.

We want to be known, we want to know we matter and we are special. And if we can't do it through traditional measures of success like grades or touchdowns or money, we'll try some other way. When I was in college *Rolling Stone* magazine decided to do a story on the party culture in American universities. And here's how they went about finding their story: they went to what was then number one party school in the United States according to *Princeton Review* (a publication that has nothing to do with Princeton University, but as somehow made a name for itself with its annual "party school" rankings. I have no idea what else they do). This year it's Tulane. Ole Miss is often in the top ten. But twenty years ago it was Florida State University. *Rolling Stone* then decided to find the number one party fraternity at Florida State, which they said was ATO. Finally, they asked around for the number one partier at ATO, who turned out to be a guy named Bert Kreischer. There were probably 30,000 students in Tallahassee then, but as *Rolling Stone* followed him around for a couple of weeks it did seem like the entire student body knew Bert Kreischer. He'd walk into a bar and everyone would say, "Bert!" He had made a name for himself.

We want to matter. We want significance. We want to be known. If you say, "Well, J.D., I know some people who don't do anything to try and be known. They just watch sports or are always on their phones shopping. Or they go to the woods every chance they get – they can't be happy unless they are hunting. They are miserable around people. They don't want to be known." Yes, they do – it's just that they don't think they ever will be known, so they do those things to cope, to try and escape their situation. It's escapism.

Everything we do falls into one of two categories: either it's something we do to make a name for ourselves or it's trying to cope with the belief that we never will have a name. At the heart of overwork, over-parenting, over-achieving (on one end) and at the heart of escapism, whether it's sitting on the couch, watching nothing but television, over-eating, or addiction (on the other end) is a person trying to deal with the longing to be known, to matter. Speaking of addiction, the best addiction counselors out there will say that simply getting someone into rehab and getting someone clean will never solve the problem. All people need meaning and purpose in life, and so long as you lack that you will never thrive – you'll only cope. It's just that some of us cope in more traditionally "productive" ways than others.

We all want is to make a name for ourselves, but our attempts to do that on our own ***will never work***. Let's read verse 5: "And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built." This is, as John Piper puts it, holy scorn. Of course, God didn't *have to* come down to earth to see the tower. He's God – he sees all, he knows all. But Moses, in phrasing verse 5 the way he did, is mocking the people in Shinar. They put all this effort into building a tower whose top is supposed to be in heaven, and yet it's still so small and insignificant and pathetic that God can't even see it from heaven. He has to come down to earth to see this cute little, tiny tower man built.

Build the highest tower you want, you'll never reach God in heaven. Back then, the towers in Shinar (which are called ziggurats) might have reached 200 feet in height. Today, the world's tallest building is a little over 2700 feet tall – the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. But say you could build

a building 27,000 feet tall, 270,000 feet tall, *you'd still never build to heaven*. You might as well try to fly to the moon with your arms as to try and build to heaven. It can't be done.

We all want to make a name for ourselves, but no matter how hard we try and no matter how much in the world's eyes we might succeed, *it won't work*. Years ago a woman named Cynthia Hymel wrote an article in *The Village Voice* in which she describes this phenomenon. Tim Keller has often used this quote in his books and sermons. Cynthia worked in New York City in the 1970's and got to know three actors when they were still unknowns – while they still tended bar and waited tables and so forth. Then she saw them get famous, and she wrote this: “I pity celebrities – no I really do. [These three actors] were once perfectly pleasant human beings. But now their wrath is awful. I think when God wants to play a really rotten practical joke on you he grants you your deepest wish and then laughs merrily when you realize you want to kill yourself. [These celebrities] pushed, worked, and the morning after each of them became famous they wanted to take an overdose. Because that giant thing that they were striving for, that ... was going to make everything okay, that was going to make their lives bearable ... happened, and they were still them. The disillusionment turned them howling and insufferable.” They tried to make a name for themselves, and in the world's eyes they did make a name for themselves – I didn't give their names but they were and still are world famous – but it didn't help. It didn't solve the problem. It didn't give them the name they were looking for.

Second, why God stops it. Let's read verses 6-8: “And 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.’<sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech.’<sup>8</sup> So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.”

For a long time I read that as if God is worried about or even jealous of man. God does say “nothing will be impossible for them.” Is he worried that man might evolve to the point to where he will rival God?

No, what God means is that *no sin, no degree of sinful self-sufficiency will be impossible*. If this early in human history the people of Babel are already looking away from God for a name, for meaning, to feel like they matter, then if God allows it humanity will just plunge all the way off the cliff and to their destruction. God knows they can't make a name for themselves and if they keep trying all together it will ruin them.

God does not view them as rivals, but as a father views his children. So God, before things go too far, before the people get too far away from God, comes down and stops them. God's coming down and confusing their language and scattering them is not an act of jealousy, but of love.

And friends, if you threaten to go too far into self-sufficiency and sin, so far that you can't return, ***God will come down and scatter your life, too***. When he does it will be an act of love. He'll turn your life upside if he must to get your attention.

Sheldon Vanauken [van auken], nicknamed “Van,” was born in Indiana, is best known as a writer and for his relationship with his wife, Jean Davis, nicknamed “Davy.” Van and Davy met in college, fell deeply in love, and were secretly married because Van’s father objected to them getting married so young. They were agnostics. They were so in love that they made a vow that they would share everything in life: all their interests, all their friends, all their work, so that nothing would ever separate them. They even decided not to have children because they were afraid the different experiences of fatherhood and motherhood would separate them.

After World War II they moved to Britain so Van could get a graduate degree, and there they met a group of Christians that included C.S. Lewis, and Davy became a believer. In the spirit of their vows, Van started going to church with Davy, but was rather reluctant about it. Yet they were still madly, deeply in love. And then, after seventeen years of marriage, Davy at age 40 contracted a virus and died. Obviously Van for several years wondered where exactly God was in all this. If God loved him, why would he let this happen? But then, after a little more time, Van himself, also with the help of C.S. Lewis, became a Christian.

Then he wrote a book about all these experiences, and in it he called the relationship he and Davy had and the vow they shared “a pagan love, invaded by Christ.” He came to see the kind of exclusive devotion which they for another as, frankly, selfish and ultimately destructive to them both. He became convinced that God loved them too much to let them continue in it. And in that book he wrote, “I cannot escape the impression that Somebody was being very gentle with us. Perhaps she had to die—for me, for our dear love, for God. And I had to live with grief, for God. But He was, perhaps, as gentle with us both as He could be.” The name of Van’s book is *A Severe Mercy*.

Maybe you feel like things are falling apart right now in your marriage, with your kids, with your money, with your health. If that’s happening, I can’t tell you for sure why, but maybe you are trying to make a name for yourself with those things apart from God. If that’s the case, the kindest, most loving thing God could do is deal you a severe mercy. If he loves you, he’ll scatter you, because often that is the only way we will ever find him. “I Asked the Lord,” by John Newton (wrote “Amazing Grace”):

I asked the Lord that I might grow  
In faith, and love, and every grace;  
Might more of His salvation know,  
And seek, more earnestly, His face.

’Twas He who taught me thus to pray,  
And He, I trust, has answered prayer!  
But it has been in such a way,  
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favored hour,  
At once He’d answer my request;  
And by His love’s constraining pow’r,  
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel  
The hidden evils of my heart;  
And let the angry pow'rs of hell  
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed  
Intent to aggravate my woe;  
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,  
Blasted my [soul], and laid me low.

Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,  
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?  
'Tis in this way, the Lord replied,  
I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ,  
From self, and pride, to set thee free;  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,  
That thou may'st find thy all in Me."

And that's the key. Friends, have you gotten to the point where you admit you cannot make a name for yourself? That you can't do anything that convince you that you matter and that you are special? Everything, sooner or later, fails? Do you understand that?

If so, ***you're in a good place***. If so, it really doesn't matter what kind of severe mercy you've been through. Because third, you can receive what God gives. We can't climb up to heaven and make a name for ourselves, *but heaven can come down to us*. That's the Christian message, that's the gospel – the good news is that though you can't get to God, God has come to you.

In Jesus Christ God came down to earth, and he came to do two things: *first, to give us a name*. Jesus Christ is fully God and he is also fully, completely, one hundred percent man (and I use the word "is" deliberately, because Jesus lives today). And he lived a perfect life. He never tried to make a name for himself. Instead, he totally relied on the Father in heaven to give him one. At one point in John's gospel Jesus says, "I only do what I see my Father doing." We read, in Matthew 3:17 that when Jesus was baptized a voice spoken from heaven who said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Talk about knowing you matter and that you're special! A big, booming voice in the sky saying, "You are my son."

You say, "I want that. I'd like to be known by God like that, to have that affirmation." Oh, friends, in Jesus Christ you will! Isaiah we read where God says: "I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off." Isaiah 56:5. In Jesus Christ, God knows us. In Jesus Christ, we are his sons and his daughters. ***He gives us a name***.

How? Because on the cross, as Jesus died, we read that he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It’s the only time he addressed the Father in heaven as “God.” What happened? *Jesus lost his name.* *The only way Jesus could give us a name was to lose his.*

God is determined to punish sin. We are sinners, so we deserve punishment. But rather than give us what we deserve God gave his Son in our place. If we trust Jesus, that he is our substitute, that we deserve the cross but Jesus took it for us, then we get the name Jesus lost on the cross.

You may not realize it but what you want more than anything else is for God to look on you and smile. You may not realize it but what you desperately want is to know that God approves of you. You’ve been looking for approval all your life – from your parents, from the opposite sex, from your coaches, from your teachers, from your friends – and even when you’ve gotten it, it wasn’t enough.

But because Jesus was perfect, because he was perfect for you on the cross and as you on the cross (in your place on the cross), you can know with certainty that when God looks on you he approves. He gives you a name. If that ever becomes real to you, it will give you access to joy and peace and strength for living life like nothing else in the universe.

“And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.<sup>8</sup> He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.<sup>9</sup> It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” Isaiah 25:7-9. If you trust in Jesus, you’ll be in that crowd, rejoicing in your salvation. You’ll know that God is your God and you have his name.

*Second reason Jesus came down from heaven: to gather his people.* God came down from heaven to scatter at Babel. It sounds kind of harsh when you first read it. But when Jesus comes down he gathers his people. John 12:32: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

And we see this really fulfilled at Pentecost. In Acts 2, we read that fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, at the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, the earliest church – made up of about 120 believers – is gathered in an upper room, frightened that what happened to Jesus might happen to them. But then the Holy Spirit comes on them in power, and all of the sudden they are enabled to speak other languages. Real languages of the world that they have not studied.

All the Bible scholars point out that this is the reversal of Babel. At Babel, God confuses the language of men so they are scattered and cannot grow too great in their sin. The unity of man at Babel was a false unity, that would have only led to mankind’s ruin. At Pentecost, God enables men to speak different languages so the good news of Jesus can be preached all over the world and all people can be gathered together for the glory of God. The unity at Pentecost is the true unity, the unity of church from all over the world coming together as the body of Christ.

Christianity has always been a missionary religion, because the good news of Jesus Christ is not just for one race or people, but all peoples. In Revelation 5:9-10 the apostle John has a vision of heaven, and we read that in heaven, “[T]hey sang a new song [to Jesus], 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,<sup>10</sup> and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.’”

Christianity has always been a missionary religion, so we must be a missionary church – praying, giving, going – until all have heard the good news and all God’s people are gathered in. We have to do our part. We must be focused and ready to work and sacrifice.

But we can afford to sacrifice, because in Jesus Christ we have a name. An everlasting name that cannot be cut off. The more you glory in that name the more enjoyable and satisfying and glorious the work of gathering God’s people will be. PRAY