

WHEN THE THING THAT'S DRIVING YOU IS WHAT'S HOLDING YOU BACK

It's possible to read this story as the kind of thing a Jewish Grandpa might tell the little ones as they sat under the stars around the campfire at night asking where all the nations and languages came from. That's part of it but not the main point of it. The point of it is that just as the rainbow should be a reminder of the promise of God, the confusion of languages should be a reminder of the pride of man and the intervention of God. Not the healthy pride of appreciation for hard-won accomplishments but the far more sinister self-will that resists God's will, the touchy, sensitive, passionate, driven sense of self-importance that drives us to make a name for *ourselves* even at the expense of God's priorities. In his classic book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis devoted a chapter to it and called it "*The Great Sin.*" In that chapter, which is highly recommended, He said; "*the essential vice, the utmost evil is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness and all that are mere flea bites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete: anti-God state of mind. It is pride that has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began.*"¹ Lewis wondered if his readers would think that was an exaggeration. It probably doesn't matter if you think pride is the chief cause of all our misery. It is undeniably a big cause of too much of it.

*The story of the Tower of Babel in **Genesis 11:1-9** shows us that.*

I. PRIDE IS A TENACIOUS MALIGNANCY IN THE HUMAN STORY.

It runs through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. In **Genesis 3** the sin of Adam and Eve is that they want to be like God. They want to decide for themselves what is good and evil. *That's pride.* In the story of Cain and Abel, you see how sinful pride goes deep into the human heart. In the story of the flood, you see how the contagion of arrogance and violence spreads widely throughout the world. In the story of the tower of Babel, you see how tenacious and persistent it is. Even though God judged the whole world and started over with Noah as the generations come and go, pride reemerges in new ways and reasserts itself in opposition to God. That never works out well.

Genesis 11:1-4 tells us how the whole earth had one language after the flood and they began to migrate east and found a place to settle in

the land of Shinar between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, what was called the Fertile Crescent, and became Babylon. **Verse 3-4**, *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. ⁴ 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."*

"Let us make a name for ourselves"! We know well what that means.

A. Pride is an unhealthy focus on your own importance.

Pride drives us to make an impression- a name. A relatively recent study at UCLA revealed that fame is *the thing* most highly valued by 10-12-year-olds – it was way ahead of benevolence, community, and achievement.² Fame! It isn't wrong to want to accomplish great things or to be appreciated by good people. But it is dangerous if you want it so much - too much. And it is so easy to want it too much isn't it?

It's a heavy burden. And it does not bring satisfaction or peace.

In the Pursuit of God. A. W. Tozer wrote:

The labor of self-love is a heavy one indeed.... As long as you set yourself up as a little god to which you must be loyal there will be those who will delight to offer affront to your idol. How then can you hope to have inward peace? The heart's fierce effort to protect itself from every slight, to shield its touchy honor from the bad opinion of friend and enemy, will never let the mind have rest.

It tempts all of us. Even those not obsessed with clawing their way into the limelight understand this obsession. We react so immediately and defensively to criticism or any perceived slight, or disrespect. We smile politely when other people get ahead or get noticed, but part of us groans inside as if the success of others comes at our expense.

Pride drives us to find some fig leaf so we can cover all our insecurity. In **Genesis 3**, after the fall Adam and Eve are naked and ashamed. They sewed fig leaves together to cover their insecurity. All our Towers of Babel, the things we try to build to make a name for ourselves, are glorified fig leaves. We want to cover up the vulnerability we hate so much with some accomplishment in which we can take pride. We often have a ridiculous exaggerated desire for our own glory, and we put all kinds of misguided effort into achieving it or guarding it.

The irony is that with pride the thing that's driving you is what's holding you back from what God has for you because ...

B. Pride stubbornly resists submission to God.

*Look carefully at **verse 4**. There are two things they are going to do and two motivations for doing them. They are going to build a city and build a tower. The tower seems to go with making a name for themselves and the city with keeping them from being dispersed over the face of the earth. There is a particular reason this is a problem. In **Genesis 2** God had given Adam and Eve the command to *fill the earth*. Then after the judgment of the flood In **Genesis 9:1** what do we read? *And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them. "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.* To disperse over the face of the whole earth was precisely what God wanted them to do and explicitly told them to do. They didn't want to do it and said, "no".*

We understand them. don't we? To disperse. and spread out and fill the earth would be difficult. Uncertainties and hardships would have to be faced. Friends might have to part. So they got together. and the collective decision was. "This place looks good. Let's just stick together and build something here." Pride doesn't always manifest itself in the raging envy that murders a brother or the widespread violence that preceded the flood. Sometimes it shows up as just a subtle, subdued, but stubborn resistance to submission to God.

*Pride robs us of something we can't afford to lose. There is a story in the Bible in which the holy prophet Samuel confronts the proud king Saul. Saul did not do what God told him to do. Instead, he tried to compensate with sacrifices. **1 Samuel 15:22** And Samuel said, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams."* Have you ever done something - and you know you were wrong and should offer a sincere apology but instead you just try to make up for it without the pain of owning up to it? That's pride.

If you were there on the plains of Shinar with your friends, family, and community, would you hold on to your comfort and security, or would you hold all those good things loosely and say to God. *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven?* Would you give up the comforting charms of the plains of Shinar to set out to fulfill a mission God had given to some ancient relative? Pride likes to say "no" to God.

A third truth about this kind of pride is that...

C. Pride hides in our motivations.

There is nothing wrong *in principle* with building a city. There is a saying: *God made the country, man made the suburbs, but the devil made the city.* That's not actually in the Bible! In fact, at the end of the Bible, the culmination of the story of redemption is when the holy city comes down out of heaven. God isn't against a city because it is a city or a tower – even one with its top in the heavens.

Some things wrong in themselves but with some things it depending on the motivation. Is it good to pray, fast, give to the poor? It depends on *why* you are doing it! Jesus talked about men who did those “good things” to be seen and praised by men. He said they were like whitewashed tombs. They looked good on the outside but were full of rotteness on the inside. It's possible to turn a good thing into a bad thing by doing it for the wrong reasons.

One of the most common commands in the Bible is “Do not be afraid” but pride is one thing we should fear. Because pride is so often hidden in our motivations we need to be careful even fearful of pride. Be cautious about judging other people's motives but be ruthless about examining your own. Be fearful of pride so you can be faithful to God. One of the reasons we keep encouraging people to walk the ancient paths of prayer, listening to Scripture, time alone with God, worshipping together and Sabbath is because those ancient spiritual practices give us opportunity to reflect on our motivations and align our lives with God's purpose. These spiritual habits are not just rules to keep but tools to help us deal with the tough problem of our hidden pride. If we do not deal with it, God will.

In the second half of the story God shows up. The point is, not only is pride a tenacious malignancy in the human story but....

II. PRIDE PROVOKES THE INTERVENTION OF GOD.

Verse 5: *And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.* The Bible is talking about real events in the most ancient ages of history, but it is using poetic non-literal language to make critical points memorably. There is definitely irony; there is even a sort of sarcastic humor, one commentator called it a joke, in that they were going to build a tower whose top reached heaven but from the perspective of God's majesty it's so pathetically tiny he has to come down from heaven to even see the tiny tower!

It doesn't say God came down and suddenly discovered the city. He knew - came down *TO* see it. He's like a judge exploring the facts before declaring his sentence. The builders are called *the children of Man; literally that's the children of Adam. They are of the earth.* God has to come down to see the tiny tower of the children of Adam. He isn't challenged by it but he will not let it stand.

God intervenes and ...

A. God's intervention is merciful.

Verse 6 says, *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. ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech."* God isn't threatened. God is concerned. Unity is often a good thing, but unity in a misguided plan is a dangerous thing. Better to slow the progress with the checks and balances of diverse languages peoples, nations, and perspectives. Collective arrogance is more hazardous than difficult communication.

When it says *nothing will be impossible for them* the concern is not that they will cure cancer and eradicate polio but that they will collectively blow up the world, and pollute the planet, mess with genetic human engineering – look we can make a two-headed dog – what kind of new people might we make? The danger is that in our proud attempts to create a utopian future we will forget God's guardrails and make a monster, an oppressive, collective, global nightmare.

In Revelation, at the end of history, that happens. There is a united world in humanistic pride and rebellion against God is realized under the antichrist. It is called Babylon the Great. What we have in the story of the tower of Babel is God, very early in history, mercifully frustrating human language to slow the growth of evil on the earth and to unfold his plan of redemption on his timetable. In the fullness of time, God will relax his restraint on our arrogance and allow it all to come to its full ripe expression. Then the end will come.

What's true on the larger scale of human history is also true in your life. The things that frustrate you, the disorienting disappointments are often merciful interventions from God not only for his glory but also for our good. We have to trust him.

God's interventions are merciful.

B. God's interventions are powerful.

God effortlessly accomplishes exactly what he intends. **Verse 8-9**, *So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ 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.*

What should we learn from all of this?

There is a political lesson here. This is a story about collective pride. When collective pride takes root in our politics we can expect God's intervention. Whenever pride is preeminent God is indignant, and he will intervene. As God's children, we have to work hard to think clearly and critically. God alone deserves our highest loyalty.

There's is a personal lesson here too. In many places, Jesus and others in Scripture tell us God *resists* the proud and *lifts up* or *gives grace* to the humble.³ In **Matthew 23:12** Jesus says. *Whoever exalts himself will be humbled. and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.* In **1 Peter 5:5** Peter says: *"Clothe yourselves with humility for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* The Christian leader, John Stott was right. He said, *"Pride is your greatest enemy, and humility is your greatest friend."* That's the lesson of the tower of Babel; *"Pride is your greatest enemy. and humility is your greatest friend."* **Be fearful of pride and be humble with God. Be fearful of pride's hiddenness and be faithful to God in humility.**

Conclusion

It's hard for us to accept that but it is foundational to the story of God and the struggles of life. Humility is the way we rightly receive from God what we foolishly try to grab for ourselves in our pride. In the very next chapter of Genesis, **Genesis 12** God calls a man named Abraham to follow him and God begins again with him and in the opening verses of the very next chapter - when God calls him he says *"I will make your name great."* In contrast to the people of Babel who wanted to make a name for themselves, on their own terms, the LORD promised Abraham, *"I will make your name great."*

That promise is fulfilled not only in the dramatic story of God creating the nation of Israel through the descendants of Abraham but ultimately through Jesus, who is THE SEED of Abraham.

In **Philippians 2** Scripture tells us God has given him a name above every name. In **Revelation 3**, Jesus says, *The one who is victorious ... I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God: and I will also write on them my new name.* Through Jesus God gives us what we can never build for ourselves: the significance and identity of his own name, the security and safety of his holy city. You cannot build a tower to heaven, but you can believe in the one who came down from heaven to save you. Jesus has a name above every name because he humbled himself to become one of us and died on the cross to pay for our sins. God lifted him up, and made him Lord and Savior for all who turn and trust in him.

Acts 2 tells us that the day of Pentecost God gave us a little foretaste of the reversal of Babel. Men from every nation heard and understood the gospel in their own languages. In Revelation the final reversal of Babel comes when there is a great multitude in heaven, from every tribe, and people, and nation and language standing before the throne of God, praising him and saying *Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb (Revelation 7:9-10)*. Nothing cultivates true humility like realizing that if we will trust in him, God in his grace will give us a name we do not deserve.

Charlotte's Web is the story of a pig named Wilbur. Wilbur is scared of the end of the season, because he knows he's going to end up on the dinner table. Wanting to ensure this won't happen, Charlotte a spider that lives in Wilbur's barn, begins to spin webs calling attention to the pig's virtues. Wilbur is astonished to find notes about how "wonderful," "radiant," and "terrific" he is. He is especially moved by the final characteristic Charlotte attributes to his name: *humble*.

"Well," Charlotte asks Wilbur, "what do you think?"

"It's a great word," answers Wilbur. "It's just—"

"Just what?" Charlotte asks.

"Is it the right word? Is it true? 'Cause I don't really feel like I deserve any of the things you've written about me."

Charlotte responds, "Then it is the perfect word."⁴

Humility lives in the awareness that God has given you what you do not deserve. That awareness is the ultimate antidote for the arrogance of pride and for the Christian it inspires trust, obedience and gratitude.

Amen.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Shuster Touchstone edition, 1996), 111

² <http://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/kids-want-fame-more-than-anything-222803>

³ Psalm 138:6, Proverbs 3:34, 11:2, 29:23, Matthew 23:12, 1 Peter 5:4-5, James 4:10

⁴ *Charlotte's Web* (Paramount Pictures, 2006), directed by Gary Winick; submitted by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky