



Let Us NOT Make a Name for Ourselves Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #14

Genesis 11:1-9

David Sunday

May 3, 2015

Father, we pray that Your purifying power would cleanse our thoughts and attitudes, and that Your strong hammer would break apart whatever is hardening in us. May You rain fresh insight into Your Word upon our lives so that we may move forward from this place more invigorated to serve You in this world and to make much of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus. We want to be all about Him and we want to be all for You, God, our Father. We need the empowerment of Your Spirit. We plead that You would come now; enable me to preach; enable us to hear; enable us to truly be Your body, worshiping You and loving one another in this time and place for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Happy Anniversary, New Covenant Bible Church! It is hard to believe five years have gone by since we formed together to bring glory to God through Spirit-transformed lives by the beauty and power of the gospel of Jesus. So much has happened. We have gone through so much together in these last five years and God has been good to us.

Did you notice CNN and FoxNews failed to show up to televise this occasion? Not even the Chicago station, WGN, showed up. Where are they? Apparently, we are not much. Apparently, we are not doing a very good job making a name for ourselves. Are you okay with that?

This is the last Sunday in this series in Genesis 1-11. Lord willing, we will return later this year to the narrative of Abraham. When I thought about what to preach on this Sunday, I first thought about choosing a special text for our anniversary. Then I realized this text is perfect for a day like this in the life of a church. The story of the Tower of Babel has a timely message for us, both a warning of an attitude that we must always determine to avoid and a re-orienting of our hearts to the mission that God has for His people.

Let's read Genesis 11:1-9 together and approach God's Word, expecting that He is going to speak to us today about what He wants from New Covenant Bible Church as we enter into the second half of our first decade of life together as God's people. Hear the Word of the Lord.

¹ Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.
² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ 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." ⁵ And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. ⁶ 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."
⁸ 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.

"Come, let us... Let us... Let us..." Did you hear those words repeated throughout this passage? What is it that we mean as a church when we say, "Let us do something"? What is the message God wants to impress upon our hearts today from this passage? New Covenant Bible Church, let us not make a name for ourselves. May that never be our ambition or purpose.

Do you see what the people of Babel were aiming at in verse four? They wanted to make sure they would not be dispersed over the face of all the earth. Did you see in verse nine that the very thing they sought to avoid was brought upon them by the Lord? The last words we read were, "*And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.*"

This was God's judgment for their pride, self-aggrandizement and passion to make a name for themselves. However, there was mercy in that judgment, because it is how God spread the people over the face of the earth so that His name and glory might ultimately be known among all the nations. Even by the end of chapter 11, we see that God called a man named Abram. All of a sudden, this narrative of Genesis that covered a long period of history in chapters 1-11 is going to funnel down and focus closely on the life of a man through whose faith God brought blessing to all the nations and families of the earth. For a minute, I want us to look at the context of Genesis 11, and then we are going to look at the nature of the sin of Babel. We will also look at the Lord's response and some applications for our lives.

The Context of Babel

First, let's consider the context. We cannot understand this passage without understanding that God has a heart for all the nations of the world. We see in this section of Genesis that God populates the earth after the Great Flood. In Genesis 9:1, God shows His mercy by reiterating the command that He gave to Adam at the beginning of creation: *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth"* (Genesis 1:28).

God has a heart for humanity to flourish. When Noah and his sons step off the ark, they are the only living human beings on the face of the earth. Genesis 9:18-19 says, *"The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed."*

That brings us to chapter ten, where we see a "table of nations"—70 in all. We get a fascinating account of how the descendants of Japheth, Ham and Shem spread abroad to the North, South, East and West and form nations all over the globe. Chapter ten speaks of a diversity of people groups, but they all have a similar origin. They all come from Noah and his sons, and they are dispersed throughout the world because of God's plan to bring His redemption to all the nations.

Let's pause there for a minute and remember this truth: God has a heart for the nations. God is not threatened by diversity; neither should we be threatened by diversity. It is a wonderful thing to see different peoples, groups and nations, realizing that God's gracious plan includes all of these people.

It is an exciting time to be living in America, because God has brought many nations to us. I was just thinking of my own neighborhood, which is eight miles north of here. To our south, we have neighbors from Mexico. To our east, we have neighbors from Macedonia. To our west, two doors down, we have neighbors from China. Across the street from them are neighbors from Southeast Asia. It is the same in nearly all of your neighborhoods as well. As you go to stores up and down Randall Road, you meet people from all kinds of people groups and nations.

God's plan is to bring His blessing and glory to all these peoples. In chapter ten, we see that each of these nations had their own language. However, look at how chapter 11 begins: *"Now the whole earth had one language and the same words."* So chapters 10 and 11 are not in chronological order. Chapter 11 is like a flashback, focusing on a particular point in time. It was probably the time we read about in 10:25, where we read of one of Shem's descendants named Eber. From Him came the Hebrew people. We read there, *"To Eber were born two sons: the name of the one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided..."*

If we were only left with chapter ten, we might think the peoples and languages multiplied in obedience to God's command to fill the earth. We might think this all happened in obedience to God, but chapter 11 presents us with a bombshell. In chapter 11, we discover that the people did not walk in obedience to God. They did not spread out to all the world as God had commanded. Instead, we read in 11:2, "*And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.*" Shinar is in the Fertile Crescent. The people basically said, "We've gone far enough. Let's settle down here. Let's make ourselves at home."

God, Who loves to have His glory spread over all the earth said, "No, I'm not going to let that happen. I'm not going to let you cluster here and establish a civilization for your own glory. Instead, I'm going to make sure that My purposes are accomplished. I'm going to make sure that My glory is represented in all the earth by My image-bearers."

God confused their language and scattered them over the face of the earth. So God accomplished His purpose in Genesis 11, but He brought that purpose to fruition through judgment. God brought salvation through judgment. That is a theme we see over and over again in these first 11 chapters of Genesis, as well as other places in the Bible. That was the context of Babel.

The Sin of Babel

What was the sin of Babel? Let's first look at a new technology in 11:3. Moses, who wrote these words many years later, said "*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.*" I looked up the pronunciation for the word "bitumen," and there are three different ways to pronounce it. I didn't even know what it was. It is a slimy, tar-like substance that you can find in the swamps of the Fertile Crescent.

They found this tar-like substance and said, "Wow! We have really arrived now. We have this slimy stuff and we can make bricks! There is no telling what we can do now that we can make these bricks." Moses kind of made fun of them. Mankind had stone by Moses' time and stone can do much more than bricks can. However, as they discovered this technology, they thought to themselves, "Oh boy, we can do something great now!"

Verse four helps us get to the heart of their sin. They said four things:

1. "Come, let us build ourselves a city"
2. "And a tower with its top in the heavens"
3. "And let us make a name for ourselves"
4. "Lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth"

The first and fourth aspirations complement one another. “Let’s build ourselves a city so that we won’t be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” They longed for security in numbers. The middle two aspirations also correspond to each other. “Let’s build a tower with its top in the heavens, so that we can make a name for ourselves.” Fame! We are going to live forever. Everyone will know our name and praise us. So there is a love of security and a love of fame and praise that drove their hearts.

Underneath it all was pride. Their pride expressed itself in an unwillingness to do what God commanded them, which was to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth—spread through all the earth—so that God’s glory would be known in all the world. Instead, they said, “We are going to settle here. We aren’t going to live for God’s glory, but we are going to make a name for ourselves. We are going to proclaim our greatness. We are going to grasp at the throne of God in heaven and see how high we can reach.” Instead of “Glory to God in the highest!” their mantra became “Glory to man in the highest!”

Pride is driven by a desire for power, being on top of things and being seen as the one on top of things. We see it in nations and cities. What is the Eiffel Tower? Or the Sears Tower in Chicago (or whatever it is called now)? Or the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the tallest tower in the world? What are these, if not expressions of human greatness, signs of pride and proclamations of power? “Look at what we’ve achieved!”

That same power game that tears apart nations and brings conflict in the world is going on in our own lives. Who doesn’t want to be on top? Given a choice, who wouldn’t say, “I want to be the one giving orders rather than the one taking orders”? Pride is a desire to be above dependence on God. It is to live as if you don’t need Him. It is to be self-sufficient. It is to be able to reach Him on our own merits. It is to be able to climb into heaven and say, “I did it my way.”

Pride also produces paranoia. There is always the fear of not being known. “What if no one recognizes or esteems me? I must make a name for myself. I’m not safe until I have a little more power than I presently have. That fear of anonymity and being unknown, unrecognized and ordinary can detach a person and a church from reality. Delusions of grandeur start to take over.

We see that in this narrative in verse three. Moses was thinking, “They’re not really going to be able to build a tower that reaches the heavens with those slimy bricks. It’s not going to happen.” But they thought they could. They were deceived by foolish bravado and were unrealistic. When you are in the grip of that kind of pride, it leads to grandiose ideas that are

doomed to fail sooner or later. That is what happened in Babel. There was a love of security and fame driven by human pride.

The Judgment of Babel

What was Heaven's response to this? We see it in verse five: "*And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.*" That is Heaven's response. Don't you love the irony of that statement? While the people of Babel boasted of their monumental achievement, God said, "Wait a minute. I'm sorry, but what is that tower you were talking about? A big, huge tower that is going to reach into the heavens? I can't see it from up here. It's too puny! I will get down on My hands and knees. No, I still can't see. I guess I'm going to have to go down to take a look."

When you stand on Jackson Street and look up at the Willis Tower, it can be dizzying in its grandeur. However, when you are flying in over Lake Michigan at 20,000 feet toward O'Hare International Airport, it doesn't look so big anymore. It looks pretty puny. When you go on Google Earth, how close do you have to zoom in before you can even see it? It's not very impressive from Heaven's perspective.

Of course, God sees and knows everything, but this is the One Whom Isaiah spoke of when he said, "*It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in*" (Isaiah 40:22). In the words of another person, "The Lord must draw near not because He is near-sighted, but because He dwells at such tremendous height, and their work is so tiny."

It is like what we read in Psalm 2. While they boasted of their accomplishments, He Who sits in the heavens laughed. He laughed at the folly of humanity, thinking, "We can become like God! We can reach the heavens." The Lord held them in derision as He does in all prideful human endeavors. The Lord resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. In the words of Al Mohler, "The Lord did not just go down and see this thing they had done. The Lord went down and undid this thing they had done."

What would it have been like the next day when they came together to continue their work on the city? They were working on a number of projects, but suddenly they could not understand one another. It is kind of like at our marriage retreat when we lined up six people in a row and only the person at one end could see the clue on the screen. No one could talk and they had to act out whatever was on the screen in a charade-like fashion. It was ridiculous and hilarious. When we cannot communicate with one another, we are a mess.

What would it be like if I came in to work tomorrow morning to find Dan Leeper speaking Portuguese, Dan Huff speaking Albanian, Reba speaking Chinese, and Donna, of course, speaking Russian and French (she is bilingual)? I would wonder, “What is going on here?” I would then email the elders but receive responses from them in 40 different languages. We are not going to get anything done in this place if we cannot communicate in the same language.

That is how the Lord scattered them over the face of all the earth in verse nine. It wasn’t hard for God to do that. Just a little tweak in the brain or change in the tongue and, all of a sudden, all of their pomp and arrogance was brought to a screeching halt. You can imagine all these little families beginning to travel away from Babel in every direction over the face of the earth until they end up like the Table of Nations in Genesis 10. They were all divided from one another and suspicious of one another, because they could not forget the day they came to work and everyone made fun of them, grunting at them and making unintelligible noises. The seeds of all the conflicts among nations were sown here in Genesis 11.

Isn’t it interesting that the very thing they sought to avoid—dispersion—is what happened to them. God dispersed them in confusion and disunity. Babel is the origin of the city, Babylon, which we read of throughout the Bible. If you were to ask a Babylonian, “What does your city’s name mean?” they would say *Babile*, which means “the gate of heaven.” However, a Hebrew would say, “We know what Babel means. It means confusion because that is what happens when people try to be like God. Confusion ensues.”

The dispersion itself was not the judgment. We must understand that it was God’s will all along for the people to be dispersed and fill the earth. That was not the judgment. Rather, the judgment was the confusion and conflict that led to the dispersion. It was the multiplication of languages and tongues, preventing people from uniting in defiance against Almighty God. God would rather see human beings scattered and divided than to see them united and defiant toward Him.

The Implications of Babel

I heard J.I. Packer ask three really good questions in relation to this narrative. I want to take adapt them somewhat, but the original inspiration for these questions comes from him.

First, do you personally embody anything of the attitude of Babel in your life? Are you in the grip of human pride? What is going on in your heart? Are you trying to make a name for yourself? Are you intoxicated by this idea of your own power and supremacy, needing to be on top and looked up to? Do you have the feeling that you must be bigger than you are, thinking, “I must move up and get more power than I have at the moment”? Do you know anything of the

paranoia that concern brings? There is a fear that “I may be unknown.” Manipulation can flow out of that. You manipulate people in order to get what you want.

What would others say about you in our church or in your home or workplace if they were honest? Would they see pride in you, leading to passion for power? That kind of pride disrupts churches. There are very few things that can rip apart a fellowship more than pride. Remember the Apostle John spoke of Diotrephes, “*who likes to put himself first*” and who loves the preeminence (3 John 9). That attitude causes all kinds of trouble in churches.

Do you recognize that passion for human pride in yourself? If you do, recognize this: Heaven came down to earth to save you. You don’t climb to heaven. Heaven came down to you. The temple was torn from top to bottom to allow you to enter into the presence of God. God’s Son humbled Himself, not just to pardon you from the sin of pride—yes, He did it for that—but He also did it to deliver you from the grip of pride over your life. That is an exhausting, fruitless, and destructive way to live. Jesus came to save you from that. “Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden. Pride makes you so weary. I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am meek and humble in heart. And you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29-30). Jesus is able to deliver you—to give you a new heart that is now ruled by true humility. May it be so for you.

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:15 that Jesus “*died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*” Thank You, Jesus! You died so that we don’t have to live for ourselves anymore. You died so that we don’t have to make a name for ourselves anymore. We don’t have to worry about that anymore. We can live to make much of You, our Savior.

Second, do you experience anything of the *anathema* (or the curse) of Babel in your life? What was the curse? They were scattered not in unity but in confusion, isolation and hostility toward one another. That is the way the world is today, searching for unity, oneness and peace. People are lonely, alienated and living in hostility toward one another as a result. You might live every day feeling like, “No one really knows my name or cares about my joys and sorrows.” The good news of the gospel is Jesus came to be your Friend and your Brother. He came to bring you into a family of believers.

John 11:51b-52 says that the high priest, Caiaphas, “*...prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.*” He didn’t know what he was talking about when he said that, but isn’t that a beautiful picture of what Jesus died to do? He died “*to gather into one the children of God who*

are scattered abroad”—to bring us into God’s family, a new community that is not ruled by human pride, but rather sacrificial love. That is the kind of church we want to be.

Third, do we embrace God’s alternative to Babel? What is God’s alternative to Babel? It is the church, the new community that Jesus died, rose, ascended at the right hand of the Father and poured out His Spirit to create. Do we embrace that new community? It could only happen through Christ. However, by His death and resurrection, Jesus is gathering together a new humanity, a people who are called by His name and who seek to make His name great in all the earth.

Do you remember the day of Pentecost in Acts 2? This passage tells us about the birth of the new community. What do we find in Jerusalem on Pentecost? People from all different kinds of nations. What did God do? He gave the apostles the gift of tongues to proclaim the mighty works of God in the languages of the people, so that all the nations can now understand the great things God has done in Christ and be gathered into one body. What do you see at the end of Acts 2? It is a church characterized by self-sacrificial love and a beautiful picture of people who walked in love. Each one shared what God had given to him/her for the building up of the entire body. They were released from the shackles of pride and God “*added to their number daily those who were being saved*” (Acts 2:47).

Do you embrace that new community? Are we living like that new community together as a body? Listen to Revelation 7:9-10:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

This is God’s alternative to Babel. The nations are now gathered in one common purpose, and that is to bring glory to Jesus Christ. This is God’s will for His church. This is God’s will for us—that we would exist, not to make a name for ourselves, but to make His name great. His name is the only one that is worthy.

Let’s be warned today from this passage and let’s be exhorted. Let’s be warned about how not to gather together as God’s people. It is a wonderful thing when God’s people gather together, but it is an ugly thing whenever we gather together to make a name for ourselves and to get our own needs met. Whenever that stench of pride starts to infect a gathering of God’s people, it gets nauseating. It is nauseating when we get impressed with our own bricks and mortar or impressed with our Bible knowledge and doctrinal purity. “Look at us. What a great

church we are!” Whenever we start to preserve something so that we can feel good about ourselves, God says, “Oh, no, that is not why I called you to gather.”

I’m thankful when I think about New Covenant Bible Church. I don’t see a bunch of people who are impressed with themselves, and that’s good because we aren’t very impressive. We are just normal sinners redeemed by a great Savior. He is the One we want to make impressive through our lives and ministries. He is the One we want to make much of. Yes, we enjoy being together, but may we never be too focused on our own comfort and security, thinking, “What’s in it for me?” Remember that we have been gathered together to be scattered into the world to make disciples of all nations.

One of the prayers I have as a result of this passage today on our fifth anniversary is that there will be a few of you who won’t be here with us on our tenth anniversary. I’m praying that God will call a few of you to go to the nations of the world and make Christ known. Some of us need to join Josh and Natalie Kegg, who have gone to plant Christ’s church where it is not known amongst the Rajong people in Indonesia. Someone needs to go to North Africa to the Reef Berbers, where a movement of the Spirit is happening in Algeria. We pray that it will spread over into Morocco and that the church will blossom and flourish there. Someone needs to go and carry on the work that has begun there. That’s what the church is all about.

Will God call some from our midst to go to the nations? All of us need to open our eyes and see that the fields are white unto harvest (John 4:34-38) and that the nations have come to us. Right in my own backyard is Macedonia, Mexico, China and Southeast Asia. We exist to make the glory of God known in all the earth. That is why we are here. It is not to make a name for ourselves, but to make much of the only Name that is worthy. May God give grace to our church to continue to do that for His glory.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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