

BABEL

Genesis 11:1-9

Sunday July 18th 2010 Morning Service

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1. I. A Reliable Account

Can we trust this story? Yes! v1 tells us 'whole world had one language & a common speech'. This belief is found in cultures across the world. 19th C linguists used to regard the notion as absurd but now majority of contemporary linguists believe it is true. And v2 the 'plain in Shinar' where Babel was built: known also as Mesopotamia or Sumer, is full of remains of ancient cities. What Genesis 11 describes is entirely consistent with the archaeological & linguistic evidence from outside the Bible.

2. II. A Society Without God

Events in Babel are not only true but typify how human beings, without God, behave. The name Babylon or Babel is used in the Bible as a symbol of human society without God.

1) Collective Human Will

v3 'They said to each other, Come let us... 'v4 'Then they said Come let us'. This enterprise had a leader (see Nimrod 10:10) but the account of Genesis 11 stresses not the leader but the whole corporate mindset. Here is a collective will: many 100s or 1000s with a common purpose. Keynote of this human endeavour is its confidence is in itself: 'let us make, let us build. .. build ourselves a city, to make a name for ourselves'. This is humanity relying on itself.

2) Modern Technology

Human beings are capable of extraordinary inventiveness. Seem to be 2 stages here. Firstly in v3 they developed brick making. Then v4 this allowed the proliferation of buildings put in one area and much higher buildings. In our day a huge proportion of humanity lives in cities. So in a short time a whole new way of human organisation & living becomes possible.

3) Human Aggrandisement

This collective will and modern technology are tied to an ideology expressed in v4 'Let us build a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves & not be scattered over the face of the whole earth'. About the glory of man. They don't seek security & permanence in God but in themselves & their own plans. In whom or what do you look for your security? Calvin says 'This is the perpetual infatuation of the world; to neglect heaven & to seek immortality on earth where everything is

fading & transient'. Notable feature of the area is the number of towers built there in ancient times. Archaeologists have found 30 multi storeyed towers in Shinar, called ziggurats.

4) Human Defiance

The intention v4 that they will 'not be scattered over the face of the whole earth' is in sharp contrast to revealed will of God. See Gen 1:28 and Gen 9:1 to Noah & his sons 'Be fruitful, increase in number & fill the earth'. God's purpose was that mankind should spread across the earth representing his rule and acting as his agents over the whole created world. The purpose of the builders of Babel was to defy the purpose of God. That's our natural condition: in rebellion.

5) Human Religion

Ziggurats were associated with worship, were temple towers. The Babylonians were associated with worship of the stars: of astrology. Babylon is the place of origin of the zodiac. The tower with its top in the heavens, may well have been devoted to the worship of the stars & the heavens. Our society is given over to worship of money, sport & pleasure, but they function in a similar way. The heart of man is fixed on these things instead of God.

This a powerful mixture: collective will, modern technology, human aggrandisement, defiance of God & self made religion. This is the city man has made.

3. III. A God Who Intervenes

'But the LORD came down' v5. Men do not have the final word. We are created beings living in God's world. That truth will catch up with us all.

1) God Is Great

V5 'the LORD came down to see the city & the tower'. For God to even to catch sight of the tower God has to 'come down to see'. When we grow self importance, or are carried away with sense own ability or achievements, when we parade ourselves on Facebook or on our CV, let us remember God is great & we are not.

2) God Is Aware

God misses nothing. He knew exactly what was being thought & done. Also God is aware of what may result in the future: see v6. Here he indicates vast potential of co-operative human enterprise and with it the possibility of tremendous evil.

3) God Is Powerful

Twice men said 'Come let us' v3,4. But then v7 God says 'Come let us.' God's word trumps men's word.

1) he is powerful to confuse language v7&9. How would anyone set about confusing language? No problem to God. He did it in an instant. By nightfall the whole enterprise is doomed.

2) He is powerful to scatter: v8 & 9. They stopped building & scattered 'over the face of the whole earth'. God's purpose was fulfilled. This double act of power, to confuse & to scatter was both an act of judgement on their evil designs and also an act of mercy. The multiplication of different languages broke men up & constrained the advance of evil & gave time for God's amazing purpose of salvation to be worked out over centuries, beginning in Genesis 12.

But this is not the final word. In Acts 2 group of 120 went the streets of Jerusalem speaking in languages of the world. It was a sign that what began at Babel will come to an end. It was a sign of God's purpose to draw together the nations of the earth & to create a new humanity united as one in Jesus Christ. The climax of whole Bible is a city in Rev 21. 'I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying Now the dwelling of God is with men & he will live with them'. This city comes down from God: and God is at the centre. In the church worldwide we already, in a pale way, reflect that future reality: straddling all the nations, a new humanity bound together in Jesus Christ. At the end of time it is that new humanity, the united people of God with God among them, to whom all the glories of the future belong. Are you part of that city? Because there is nothing more desperately important for you than that you should be.

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