**The Tower of Babel** April 17, 2016

Genesis 11:1-9

**Coffee / Question:**

On a scale of 1-10, rank how involved you think God is in what happens around the globe.

**Feedback:**

**Read Genesis 11:1-9**

Let’s figure out why this story is so important, both to Moses’ original audience (the nation of Israel) and to us who are reading it 3500 hundred years later.

Verse 1-2.

This story actually precedes chapter 10.

Verse 3-4.

When Noah and his family came out of the ark, God gave them the same instructions he had given to Adam and Eve – 9:1: *Be fruitful and increase in number and… fill the earth.*

The people described in Genesis 11 did not want to fill the earth; they wanted to settle in the Shinar plain. The building of a city was how they planned to prevent themselves from being scattered. And the building of a tower was the way those people thought they could make a name for themselves.

Security and significance are legitimate needs.

But they are needs only God can truly satisfy.

John Piper writes: *God’s will for humans is NOT that we find our joy in being praised, but in knowing and praising God. His will is NOT that we find our security in cities [or anything else] but in God whom we gladly obey.*

*\*The Pride of Babel and the Praise of Christ*

Here in Genesis 11 we learn that the heart of humans after the flood remained unchanged – they still refused to trust God and live life as he said it was to be lived.

Verse 5.

What is meant by that phrase, *“the LORD came down?”*

It is a fair question to ask: does God live somewhere far away?

An important principle of Bible study is to use Scripture to interpret Scripture.

Let’s consider two other passages.

Psalm 139:1-3, 7-8: *O Lord…you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways…Where can I flee from your presence? If I go to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

Does that sound like God is far away and unaware?

So then, how involved; how active is God with and in our lives?

Isaiah 46:3-5

*“Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel,*

*you whom I have upheld since your birth, and have carried since you were born.*

*Even to your old age and gray hairs, I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you. “With whom will you compare me or count me equal?  To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?”*

God is *“an ever-present help in trouble,”* as Psalm 46:1 says, because he is...

EVER-PRESENT. As we saw last week in Acts 17, it is... *in God we live and move and have our being.*

The city and the tower was supposed to be the defining project that would give security and significance to that particular group of people.

But the LORD who sees everything and is everywhere present had to search for it.

Verse 6.

Humans created in the image of God have incredible creative potential, along with a freedom of will to act and to choose.

When humans collaborate for the doing of good, great things can happen.

But as there is a synergy to righteousness, so also, there is a synergy to sin.

God saw into the hearts of those builders, and what he saw there was a great potential for evil…equal to or greater than the evil practiced in the days leading up to the flood.

Verses 7-9.

What did the nation of Israel learn?

They learned why the nations (with their varying languages and cultures) came into existence.

But what did this teach them about God?

God intervenes in history and in people’s lives.

God is never behind the eight ball.

He never has to play catch up.

He never wrings his hands in anguish, saying, “Oh my, what have they done now.”

God is always out front, directing and leading history to his end – the return of Jesus and a new beginning.

And until that moments arrives, he will when necessary intervene to restrain the evil committed by people in this world.

The Lord restrained the people at Babel by causing them to speak different languages. By doing so he curtailed their ability to collaborate – not in the doing of good; but of evil.

The Lord has done similar things throughout history; not to confuse language, but to intervene in circumstances.

Those who do great wrong get caught; they are overthrown.

They are held responsible for their actions and brought to justice.

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The One who formed each of us in our mother’s wombs is active in our lives; but not in the sense that he treats us as if we are robots. He is not like a steamroller who smashes over us.

Different analogies are used in the Bible to describe our relationship with God.

He is like a good father with his child; like a good friend; like a lover.

This is how God actively pursues us and engages with us.

God does not stand on the distant sidelines of our lives, saying and doing nothing.

But neither does he handcuff and drag us off kicking and screaming to do what he says is right. We have been given by God a freedom of will to choose and to act.

Before we come to Jesus… he is active to make himself known to us, in so many ways. He tugs on our hearts; he whispers into our spirit that he is there and looking for us. And he waits for our response to him.

God is patient with each of us because he loves each of us.

He intervenes again and again in our lives because he wants to be in relationship with us and after we begin to follow Jesus he intervenes to help us mature.

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There is a connection that we need to make between Babel, the day of Pentecost and Revelation 7, and this present time where you and I live.

At Babel God divided humanity by language, and in the cultures that resulted.

But when Jesus came to earth, and gave his life in sacrifice on a Roman cross, God redeemed what had been judged at Babel.

Jesus provided the means and the way to rescue humanity in all of their diversity.

In Revelation 7:9 the passage could have said, *“…and there before me [in front of the Lamb] was a great multitude that no one could count….”*

But God deliberately allowed John to see... not a uniform mass of people.

John was shown the diversity of those who stood before Jesus – every nation, tribe, people and language.

How did John know this diversity was there? He looked and he saw.

But is this result of God’s rescue (a unity among humans not seen since Babel);

is it solely for the time of the new heavens and the new earth?

It’s at this point where we connect Pentecost.

When the Holy Spirit came 50 days after Jesus’ resurrection and 10 days after his ascension, keeping all of this in mind, let’s read what happened. Acts 2:5-12.

Pentecost marked the beginning of the reversal of Babel.

At Babel God divided.

At the cross of Jesus, he reconciled and made provision for the heart of humans to be changed. And with a changed heart, could now come a unity among redeemed humans, never before seen or experienced on earth.

And in this present time?

Galatians 3:28 speaks of how those who are in Jesus, regardless of the differences of sex, language, nationality or social standing, *“... are all one.”*

Because of the cross of Jesus, his followers stand on level ground.

Ephesians 3:6 …we are heirs together; members together; sharers together…in the promise in Jesus.

The church is described as the body of Jesus. Other passages state that Jesus’ body is one, and that it’s unity has been created by the Spirit.

Right now, the unity of the church of Jesus is far from perfect.

But it is there nonetheless.

It is a foretaste of what is to ultimately come - a unity not forged by sinful purpose, but a unity realized by the victory of Jesus that made possible the rescue of all who would receive him and believe in him.

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One last thing.

Human nature is bent towards sin.

Humans are naturally proud and selfish.

When a person chooses to follow Jesus they are given a new nature.

And the new nature is God oriented.

As the story of Genesis continued to unfolded, the nation of Israel would learn from the life of Abraham and Joseph that God is near to and present with the humble.

Humbleness or humility is a virtue that is the result of choosing to trust God and to live life like he says life is to be lived.

It is a virtue that cannot be forced.

In that sense it is like the fruit that grows on a tree.

As long as the branch is connected to the tree and the life-giving sap flows to it, fruit will grow.

And as long as a person’s life is centered in God as they follow Jesus, the fruit of humility will grow.

**1 Peter 5:5-6: “Clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.”**

Obedience is something we are expected to put on...like clothing.

It’s something which is visible, obvious; it covers us.

The motivation to choose God’s way comes from the desire to please God and because we rightly fear God – he opposes the proud.

The fact that we are told to “put on…” means this is something we are responsible to do with God’s help.

How do we learn obedience?

C.S. Lewis wrote in Mere Christianity:

*In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that – and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison – you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud you cannot know God.* p.111

Pride refuses to say yes to God.

Pride convinces a person that they know better than God.

Pride energizes a person to do what they think is best for them.

Pride keeps a person self-focused.

C.S. Lewis wrote:

*True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.*

We put on obedience and grow in humility by deliberately and intently focusing on God’s greatness, instead of ourselves.

What is the Spirit saying to you?

How is he wanting to apply this truth in your life?

**“Speak to us Lord.”**

Impress upon us if there is sin to confess and turn away from.

We choose to believe your truth.

Stir awe in us of your majesty and of how your incredible plan of rescue.

Help us to say yes to you and in doing so grow in us the grace of humility.

**The Blessing**

Psalm 112

God also wanted Israel to know that he does not live at a distance.

This was not the first time this truth was emphasized in Genesis; nor would it be the last time. It is a truth constantly repeated in the story of the Bible; which means it is a truth that those who walk with God are prone to forget.

God is near and there is nothing that escapes his awareness.

Not only does God know everything we do; he also clearly sees our motives.

Why this matters is because God is the One to whom all of us are accountable.

Maybe the people at Babel thought “we can do as we please.”

Maybe they thought as William Ernest Henley would write in his poem Invictus, “We are the captain of our own souls.”

But they learned as does every person, that each of us are accountable to God for what we do. Sometimes he lets us go long and far from him. Sometimes he calls us to account much sooner.

But of this we are certain: each one of us will answer to God.

Each one will be held accountable.

God will judge and reward.

The word babel occurs over 200 times in the Old Testament.

Did you realize that most of the time it is translated ‘Babylon.’

There was an actual city and an empire that carried that name.

Jeremiah prophesied its ruin in 25:12: *I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation, the land of the Babylonians, for their guilt, declares the Lord, and will make it desolate forever.*

This prophecy was fulfilled in 130 BC by the Parthians who invaded and destroyed that city and empire.

Additionally, in prophetic literature, Babylon represents mankind’s efforts to build a sensual and materialistic way of life, that excludes God.

Many references are made to Babylon in the book of Revelation.

Chapters 17&18 are the most significant.

Something else the Bible repeatedly emphasizes is the truth that there is no future for evil. It never has; it cannot and it will not win.

Evil has had brief moments in history when it seemed like it succeeded; but that’s all it was – brief moments.

The most intense moment took place when Jesus was arrested.

Listen to how Jesus described it. Luke 22:53: *This is your hour – when darkness reigns.* Darkness had its moment when it reigned. But that reign was short-lived – it was an hour. And that’s how it has always been.

Genesis 11 provides us with the first glimpse of the rise of an organized way of life that excluded God. And the book of Revelation reveals that before the return of Jesus such a rise will be permitted again.

But as it failed in the time of Babel, so it will fail again.

Many times, people who are offended by God will accuse him of doing nothing about the wrong committed by humans on this earth.

But the Bible does not portray God as One who does nothing. There are numerous stories told in the Bible of God acting to frustrate the plans of those who would do evil – Genesis 11 is but one of those stories.

I find it ironic that people who don’t want God to intervene in their lives, accuse him of cruelty if he doesn’t do as they think he should do, when they think he should do it.

What makes this story important?

It explains the beginning and the reason for the languages spoken on the earth.

It provides the historical background for the next major section in Genesis – the life of Abraham.

It explains that the desire to make a name for one’s self is an ancient longing.

It shows how God intervenes to thwart man’s plans when necessary.

It shows one of the way God judges evil is to separate.