

Genesis 11.1-9 – The Tower of Babel

So we're continuing our series looking at the opening chapters of Genesis. And here, in the middle of lists about the origins of nations of the ancient Near East, is this little passage about the Tower of Babel. It's only short, but it's a little complicated and raises a bunch of questions. For one, what is it doing here, which I'll talk about later on, but also – and this is the thing that used to make me wonder a lot – what is it that God has against teamwork? All these Babylonians are saying to each other, "Let's bake some bricks and build a city and this massive tower," and because of their common language and their common purpose, for them the sky's the limit, quite literally. But then for some reason God doesn't like the fact that "nothing they plan will be impossible for them", thanks to their working together, so he judges them by confusing their languages to scatter them everywhere.

Now, you'll know that if you're ever reading Scripture and you find yourself coming up with all sorts of questions, it's time to stop and wrestle with it rather than just pass on by. All of Scripture is there for a reason, and just like the passages we've already looked at in this series, this narrative tells us something about what it means to be human. Here, the important message is that being human means including God. Being human involves God.

How does that play out here? Well, for that we're going to have to delve a little deeper and read a little closer to find out what's really going on. As you can see from my sermon outline that's in the newsheet there, there are two issues that the author is telling us about, two issues that stop us from involving God in our lives. Firstly, there's the problem of following your own plan and, secondly, the problem of not following God's plan. These are really closely related, but they deserve to be looked at separately, because sometimes we can end up failing more on one side than on the other. So, first of all, following your own plan. Let's look back at our passage and take a closer look.

This all takes place in a place called Shinar. Its more common name is held back until the end where the author makes a joke about how it's now called Babylon because everyone from there started babbling in all these different languages. But there's more to it.

Have you ever wondered why it always seems to be New York that comes under attack in action movies? If it's not giant monsters like King Kong, the weather like in The Day After Tomorrow, rocks from space in Deep Impact, or

heroes trying to save the world in The Avengers, New York suffers a lot of damage.

This is not only because it's a big city, so it makes it more exciting. It's that New York is an icon of America. It's known as a centre of American civilisation and culture across the world. And that's what Babylon is like here. It's clear that the author has heard of Babylon. It's a place of incredible buildings made with innovative technologies, making bricks since they didn't have access to stone on the river plain. It's a massive place, so impressive. Anyone would be proud to have built such an achievement.

But that's precisely the problem, the pride. "Come," they say, "let us build a city and make a name for ourselves." It's all about them and what they have achieved. It's all about them being able to survive on their own, without the need for God. They don't trust God. What's more, they can't trust God because of their fear, "otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." I'll talk more about that in a moment, but it's because of this fear that the Babylonians develop a fortress mindset that shuts out everyone else not like them, including God. This is when the good things of unity and teamwork turn bad, when they're used for selfish reasons. Especially when it's not just one person, but it's a whole culture and a whole society that's decided to base itself on faith in human achievements rather than faith in God.

You don't have to look far to see that our society has also decided to be like this. Professor Edwin Judge, from Macquarie Uni, recently said that "the contemporary West is a bit like Christianity's overconfident 'teenage son', inescapably made in the family likeness but rebellious and certain his parents have given him nothing". Our society would still like to have morals, to help the needy, give compassion and equality to people, and maybe even be spiritual (whatever that means), just so long it's without Jesus, thank you very much. And that can be a hard voice to speak against. When there is one language and one speech where everyone says, "Come, let's make a city without God," it's hard to make our one little voice heard that says Jesus actually matters, that "unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain". If their message is the only thing we hear, we could start talking the same language ourselves. We could become convinced that the strongest thing in the world is humanity working together.

But of course that's not true. Look at what happens next. God comes down to see what this lot is up to. It's not that God is far away and doesn't know what's

going on. What this is emphasising is how much bigger and more magnificent and more powerful God is. The Babylonians reckon they've made this massive city with a tower that's so tall you couldn't see the top of it. But to God, it's so small that it's like he has to stoop all the way down and get a magnifying glass out to be able to see it, like their tower is the size of one of his toothpicks. He is so much greater than us on so many levels, even our biggest achievements. So if ever it seems like all the ideas and voices in the world around us are drowning out the call of Jesus, remember that they cannot even compete with God's power and majesty.

That doesn't stop people trying, though. We all, in so many ways, try to run our lives without involving God. We like to think of ourselves as the king of our kingdom, the queen on her throne, the boss of our lives, but we're not. Being human must involve God at the highest level. There's a name for pretending to be the ruler when there already is one, and that's treason, and treason must be punished. God says, "If they have become to do this, then nothing they plan will be impossible." Seeking to live without God in charge of lives is sin on its most basic level. From this all sorts of other sins sprout. So not only is God punishing them for their treason, he is also taking steps to prevent anything further from developing out of this godless situation.

And he does this by mixing up their languages. Now, this seems kind of random. Why confusing languages? Well, it's kind of poetic, really.

I know many of you at some time or other have tried to learn a different language, so you'll know there's different levels of difficulty depending on what you're doing in that different language. Reading is fine, because you can take your time, maybe use a dictionary to look up words you don't understand. But when it gets to speaking with and listening to a native speaker of that language, it's a whole lot more difficult. Speaking is bad enough. Pronounce something wrong and they might be rolling around laughing because you've been saying how delicious their window is when you really meant cake. But listening is something else. They're going at what you think is a million miles an hour, using all these words you've never heard of, and you have to really concentrate just to keep up. And it can be really frustrating. Listening is hard.

But it's so important, because listening forms the basis of any good relationship. If you're taking the time to listen to someone, you're taking the time to put them first, to understand their opinions, their needs, their expression of their emotions. These guys here in Genesis have stopped

listening to God. They've stopped putting him first, stopped listening to his word. They have broken their relationship with him. So in the same way God has stopped them listening to each other, and I say that because "listening" is the word underlying the "understand" there in verse 7. They no longer understand one another because they are no longer listening to one another.

Interestingly, listening comes up a lot in our reading from Acts chapter 2.

"When they heard this sound (of the apostles speaking in different languages), a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one **heard** their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: 'aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us **hears** them in our native language... we **hear** them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" To bring his word of salvation to the whole world, God overcomes the language barrier that has divided people for so long. Now all these Jews from around the world weren't dismissing what the disciples were saying, thinking it wasn't for them if it wasn't in their language. This was something for them, all of them. The gospel creates a new community far different to the one we saw in Babylon. This is a true community, one that involves God. Even though we're from scattered areas all over the world, we are united by faith in Christ, not on a selfish unity based on fear.

But what were the Babylonians so afraid of? Why did they feel the need to build a little closeted community shut up against everything? This brings us to our second part, the problem about not following God's plan. Look back in Genesis again at verse 4. They say, "Come let us build a city and a tower, otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the earth." They're afraid of being scattered. They want to stay safe and secure where they are. But is being scattered such a bad thing? True, God uses scattering as a form of punishment, for example when he sent the Assyrians against the northern tribes of Israel because of their sin, and scattered them throughout the Assyrian empire. But remember what God said to the humans back in chapter 1: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." And again after the flood, in chapter 9, "God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.'"

God wanted people to be moving into other areas, to bring his likeness into all parts of the world. But the Babylonians were too afraid. They didn't trust God, so they didn't listen to him, and instead listened to and trusted each other.

God wanted to push them out of their comfort zones so they could walk closer with him in faith, rely on him more rather than themselves, but they said no.

Now, that doesn't mean that God's plan fails. God always makes his plans happen. And he'll either do it with you, or he'll do it spite of you. The question is what end do you want to be on? Do you want to be on the end that doesn't involve God or the one that does? Do you want to be scattered in judgment like the Babylonians, or do you want to be scattered but in community with God and your fellow believers, like the guys from Acts?

This is not just a matter of becoming a Christian, though. We can't just think, "Silly Babylonians. If only they had been Christians, then they wouldn't have had this problem of not following God's plan." Christians do this too.

Sometimes even more so because we know we should be listening to what God is asking us to do. Like I said, God wants to push us out of our comfort zones so we can learn to trust him more. But we don't like being uncomfortable. We like to stay safe, doing things we like to do, spending time with the people we like to spend time with, worshipping God in the ways that we like to worship him. How often do we come to church and sit in the same seat, near the same people, switch off in the same parts of the service, go and have the same cup of coffee and chat with the same people. Then we go home, say the same prayers, read the same comforting bits of the Bible, and somehow think that that is living by faith. If we do the same thing day in, day out, if we only mix with the same sorts of people, if we only stick to the things we know and like, then we are never going to grow. And God wants us to grow in our faith, he wants us to grow to be more like him.

A friend from Queensland recently told us about his old church. They'd recently relocated, and they had a new pastor who was full of big ideas about the new opportunities for the church in their new neighbourhood, and he was really excited and passionate about spreading the word of God. But the old guard of the church, the people who had been there for ages, didn't like it. It wasn't that they disagreed with him theologically. They didn't like the change. It might have meant having to do things a bit differently, or having different sorts of people in their church. It made them uncomfortable and afraid. Unfortunately, they started a smear campaign against the pastor, spreading all sorts of negative stories about him until he left. That's not godly behaviour. That's Babylon behaviour. That's lack of faith in action.

We can't let ourselves fall into that sort of trap. We have to be open to God asking amazing things of us, even if it's difficult. I mentioned before about where the Tower of Babel passage sits in Genesis. It's in the middle of other verses about the movement and expansion of people after the flood, which makes sense. But if you have a look again at our story, you'll see that there's no grace in it. When Adam and Eve were sent out of Eden, God gave them clothes to wear. When he wiped out the world during the Flood, he kept a small group of animals and people alive to repopulate the earth. But here there's nothing, and that's because in the very next chapter is the story of these guys, Abraham and Sarah. Hebrews 11 sums it up well: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he didn't know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country... and by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise." God called them to share in his plan to bless the whole world, his plan to make a new community of faith joined together by loyalty to God. And they listened to God, and stepped out in faith to wherever he led them.

That's what we should do, step out in faith, be willing to be challenged and changed by God, and I mean really willing, not shutting off any area of our lives, including God in them all. I think the best place to start is right here in church. I know from experience, moving interstate and trying to find a new home church, that churches can be really cliquey. People form into little groups of like-minded individuals that it seem impossible to break into. Someone might chat with you for a bit, but eventually – almost with relief – they go off to find their friends, or you'll be welcomed on week one but not on weeks two or three. I know that some people can float around, isolated and alone, in a church for years simply because no-one will take the time to get to know them. So here's my challenge for us today, just after we finish our surveys. At morning tea/supper, go and have a talk to someone you've never talked to before. Break out of those little groups and experience what it's like to have such a wonderfully varied community that we have here.

Now, I know that not everyone is a social butterfly that can talk to whoever, and that a lot of us – and I'm in this group too – actually find it pretty scary going up and talking to strangers. What if they don't like me? What if they're mean? What if it's just really awkward? Well, this is a perfect opportunity to take one step of faith and trust in God. Anyway, everyone here has been

listening to my sermon too, so they'll be looking for an opportunity to be open and welcoming.

Our unity as the church – not just here but all over the world – is not based on the fact that we share the same sorts of hobbies, or the same cultural background, or we're at the same stage of life. If you want to join a group like that, there's plenty of common interest groups out there. Join one of those. The fact is that our unity is based on the same faith that we all share, the fact that our lives, and the life of the church involves God on every level. This is who we are meant to be as humans, a community of faith focussed on him. So let's not be dragged down by any fears we may have. Let's not be discouraged because what God is asking us to do looks uncomfortable or scary. Let's step out in faith as together we bring the blessings of God to the world.