

Lord of Heaven and Earth Genesis 11:1-9



As I mentioned last week would happen, the tallest building in the world, the tower of Dubai, officially opened last Monday. Did you hear news about any earthquakes in the region? Did the tower fall over like a flimsy tower of plastic bricks? Were the languages of the people of Dubai confused? None of these things happened, did they? Even though by my guess, the tower of Dubai is ten times taller than the tower of Babel, God has allowed it to stand—at least for now. God did not give

a repeat performance of Babel and neither will he ever repeat what he did at Babel. It was an act of judgment. It was the Almighty God coming down to see the tiny little tower the great humans had made, and instead of turning it to dust, he confused the languages. The tower of Babel was most definitely a judgment of the pride and arrogance of the people, but as I have been telling you for two Sundays, it was also a gospel story.

Let me show you this gospel story is displayed in an amazing passage from the 17th chapter of Acts.

²⁴“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. (You could say that he doesn’t need tall towers reaching to the heavens or temples built on the top of those towers.) ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. ²⁶From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

Tell me, where do you think the apostle Paul got his information for verse 26? Let’s read it again in two parts.

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth. What is Paul describing here? This is Genesis, chapter one. ²⁷So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.

The people at Babel attempted to subdue the earth, but they had no intention of filling the earth. Therefore, we see that the city and tower construction was a violation of the creation mandate. There is no doubt that Paul had Genesis one in mind when he said this. But what do you think he had in mind in the second half of verse 26? *and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.*

What does this remind you of? I am convinced that Paul is referencing the tower of Babel here. First, he said that God made one nation of men from one man. Where did all of the nations come from? We know they started with Adam, but the nations we have now were formed after the flood and were scattered at Babel. A few weeks ago I explained how people who were scattered

over the earth began to change the genetic diversity by separating themselves from the larger gene pool. Every nation of men, therefore, came through Noah's three sons as they spread over the earth. Second, Paul said that the Lord *determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live*. As the Lord scattered the people at Babel, he was sovereignly determining the exact places that they would live. He determined that the Canaanites would settle in Canaan. He knew that Mizraim would go to Egypt. He knew that the descendants of Japheth would settle in the west to Europe and beyond. He knew that some of the Shemites would stay near Babylon and that he would call Abraham to the Promised Land.



You may remember the Seven C's of History—Creation (Genesis 1-2), Corruption (Genesis 3, the fall), Catastrophe (Genesis 6-9, the flood), Confusion (Genesis 10-11, the tower of Babel), Christ, Cross, Consummation.¹ In these two verses in Acts, Paul founded his teaching on creation and confusion. He summarized Genesis 1-2 and Genesis 10-11 with a single verse: *From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live*. That is creation and confusion.²

In the next verse of Acts 17 we are given a remarkable glimpse into the purpose of the tower of Babel. Why did God determine the times set for them and the exact places they should live?
²⁷*God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us*. Do you see? God divided the languages and scattered the nations so that they would reach out for him. So what we have in Acts 17 is the gospel complete with a foundation of creation and confusion. By scattering the nations, God disrupted their growing sense of independence and rebellion.

But you might immediately ask, “When God scattered the nations over the face of the earth, did this cause them to reach out to him”? With all of the godlessness and idolatry spread throughout the world from the time of Babel until now, one would not easily be convinced that this confusion and scattering actually helped at all. But the problem is that we have nothing to compare it to. We don't know what would have happened had they not been confused and scattered. All that we do have is God's word which tells us that it was necessary and that it was a vital part of salvation history. God confused and scattered his people so that he could redeem his people.

There are several important principles we can draw from these truths. The first is that **judgment is a means of grace**. Was the tower of Babel a judgment upon the people? It absolutely was a massive judgment with consequences that have continued for over four thousand years. Furthermore, how did God judge the Israelites throughout the Old Testament? God used the various nations as a form of judgment. God used the Canaanites, Moabites, Philistines,

Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Ammonites, Egyptians, Edomites; on and on the list of nations and Israel's enemies multiplied over the centuries. God formed each of these nations to humble his people and continuously teach them lessons. But all of these nations arose from the confusion and scattering at Babel. So you could say that the judgment at Babel continued through all of Biblical history and continues to this day. How will the tribulation come about? The entire judgment of the end times revolves around conflict between and among the nations of the world.

There is no question that Babel was a huge judgment, but it was also a means of grace. God accomplished it—*so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him*. As I just said, he did it to teach lessons to Israel and to all nations. Up until the time you die or until the final judgment at the great white throne, you could argue that all judgment is a means of grace. God does not waste his judgment. He does it to get our attention. He judges us to remind us that all of our feeble attempts at constructing our lives is nothing but a tower of plastic blocks. He reminds us that **He** alone is “Lord of heaven and earth” and does not need anything from us. But what he does want from us is worship. He reminds us that the nations and governments of the world are in place at his command and ultimately do his bidding. The Lord even comforts us in judgment. When he pokes holes in the world economy and we worry about losing our jobs and our homes, we worry about what will happen if the economy gets even worse, he comforts us in the knowledge that he knows all, does all and is all. Yes, judgment is a means of grace and we should be glad for it.

Principle number two from the tower of Babel event is that ***only the Lord can make a “name” for us***. Recall that that the builders of Babel had two primary goals—to make a name for themselves and not to be scattered over the face of the whole earth. When it tells us that the people wanted to make a name for themselves, understand that this was about far more than a simple reputation. A person's reputation hits at the core of their identity and purpose in life. Making a name for oneself is about being certain that your life has significance. To make a name for yourself is to be able to tell the world that you matter, your life matters, your life is worth something. You are not just a random mass of cells and biochemicals that will one day return from the dust from which it came. Their tower and their city were the avenue for finding significance and meaning in life.

Isn't this the same motivation that drives us also? Do I matter? Does my life have significance? We may not even be aware that we are asking these questions because our pursuit of significance works itself out quietly in our daily lives. It impacts the way we view our husbands and wives. If we are generally happy in our marriage we feel significant and content, but if we are not happy we begin to wonder if we made the right decision in choosing our spouse. Divorce may not be an option so we mourn our miserable lives in relative silence. Many happy marriages and many bad marriages have one thing in common—each person is looking to their spouse to find meaning and significance. Your identity is wrapped up in the relationship and your emotions, attitudes and actions ebb and flow with the tides of your marriage.

I trust that most of you have recovered from the holidays, from too much eating, too little sleeping and spending too much money. Next month there is a deplorable holiday on the calendar. Can I let you in on a terrible consequence of Valentine's Day? Valentine's Day, the holiday created by the candy makers and greeting card companies, is merely a symptom of our

drippy, mindless romanticism? Mindless romanticism is the kind that Hollywood pushes down our throats every chance they get. These kinds of movies have a typical storyline. The main character is planning to be married and at the last minute a new woman or new man surprisingly enters their life, steals their heart, they fall madly in love and get married. I have seen this pattern repeat itself over and over again. The mindless romanticism of these moves have characters that say things like this: “You complete me.” “You’re my soul mate.” What does this phrase mean—*you complete me*? It means that you are only half of a human without the other person. It means that you lack significance unless you are joined to the other person. That’s a terrible thought, is it not? But that is the kind of thinking that we bring into most relationships, especially close ones like husbands and wives. It’s the kind of thinking that drives Hollywood movies and romance novels. I find that it is especially common among teenage romances because the entire culture communicates this false idea about relationships and most teenagers are not mature enough to know what is happening to them. For that matter, most adults aren’t mature enough to understand this. Marriages should be places of great intimacy and fulfillment, but if you are looking to your husband or your wife to complete you, if you are looking to them to find your significance, then you are looking in the wrong place.

We can also look for meaning and significance in our jobs. Men are notorious for this. Women are notorious for finding their identity in their children. I am speaking in broad categories because certainly some men find their primary significance from their children and some women find it in their jobs, but in general women to look to their children and men look to their jobs. This is so common that I don’t think anyone is exempt from doing this at times. Some are worse than others, but everyone does it to some extent.

We look to many relationships, things and tasks to make a “name” for ourselves and to find significance, but by far the worst place to look for significance is in Christian ministry. Does that shock you? On the one hand you might think that this is the best place to find significance. After all, if we are doing the Lord’s work, busy in ministry and serving and loving others, isn’t this what the Christian life is all about? Here is where the subtle deception creeps in. To make a “name” for ourselves or to find significance in anything other than Jesus Christ is to be deceived.

Let me explain what I mean by going back to Genesis eleven.

Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name (shem) for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

The Hebrew word for *name* is “shem.” Shem was one of Noah’s sons and the father of Abraham, and therefore of the Jewish nation. (As one commentator wrote, there is a “continuous interplay between the name Shem (*shem*) and the quest for making “a name” (*shem*) both in the account of the building of Babylon (11:4) and in the account of God’s election of Abraham.”³) If you have your Bible opened to chapter eleven, turn the page to chapter twelve and let’s read the first two verses.

*The LORD had said to Abram, (we could insert here, ‘the descendant of Shem’) “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; **I will make your name (shem) great, and you will be a blessing.***

Did you catch it? The Lord said to Abram, “*I* will make your name great.” It’s no accident that this immediately follows after the events at Babel. The people wanted to make a “name” for themselves, but God is telling us that only he can make a name for us. This is an issue of eternal significance. For God to make a name for us means exactly what it meant to Abram—that he has called us and chosen us for himself. Living under the new covenant we would say that it means that we are “in Christ”. It means that we have been purchased by his blood; we have been adopted into his family; we have been redeemed from the curse of the law. And none of these are things we do to ourselves, they are done by God for us. Only God can make a name for us. All of our faulty attempts at making a name for ourselves are about as secure as the tower of Babel.

Are you starting to see how this relates to the problem with finding our significance in Christian ministry? As believers, every ounce of our significance comes from Christ alone. It is not based upon what we have done but upon what Christ has done for us. Another way of saying it is that it is not based on what we *do* but on who we *are*—who we are in Christ. But the inherent danger of serving in Christian ministry, whether it is your occupation like mine, or you serve one hour a week in the nursery or someplace, is that we can end up seeking our significance in what we do for the Lord. Do you see? We are still looking for significance in what we do, but since our “doing” and our activity is all part of Christian service, what we *do* for the Lord becomes a subtle substitute for who we *are* in the Lord. We are doing this Christian work and Christian service so we tell ourselves that we are trusting the Lord and finding our contentment in him when in reality, we are only happy because the ministry is good. We are not necessarily trying to work our way to heaven, although that can happen also, but we are working our way into feeling significant.

The subtle danger of looking for significance in Christian ministry is the fact that it looks so much like the real thing. Take our church for example. Those of you who have been with us since the beginning know that we have had our ups and our downs, and now we seem to be in one of the UP times. In the past two years we have doubled in size and many of our ministries are growing and strengthening and deepening. Now what do we do with all of this? Well of course, we rejoice. We praise God and we do our absolute best to not take an ounce of credit for what God has accomplished. But as the guy who spends the most time on the ministry of this church, I am probably the one who is most likely to fall and rise with the ups and downs of the church. I could be happy when things are going well and down in the dumps when we hit a rough spot. And in both cases, I would be dead wrong because I would have sought my significance in Christian ministry, but not in Christ.

But it is so easy to be deceived like this because Christian ministry looks a lot like Christ. I am not looking for my significance in things we know are sinful. I am not looking for meaning in a bottle of alcohol or prescription drugs. I am not looking for other women to make me feel good. I haven’t laundered money from the church to boost my bank account. I haven’t looked for significance in money, sex and drugs and everyone knows that would be wrong. But if I search for significance in Christian ministry, I can easily be tricked into thinking my significance is in Christ when in reality it is in Christian ministry. I feel good because of what I have done for the Lord and not because of who I am in the Lord. I won’t be able to see my own deception because I have substituted Christian ministry for Christ and the two look so similar

that I can't tell the difference. I have been deceived not because the thing that has taken the place of Christ is such a bad thing but precisely because it is such a good thing. Ministry is good, but to the degree that ministry replaces Christ, then is it any better than drugs or alcohol or illicit sex? Do you see? Christian ministry can be one of the greatest sins that no one ever sees. If I am addicted to drugs people either try to help me or they condemn me, but if I am addicted to ministry, everyone pats me on the back and says, "Good job, way to go!" By the way, the same thing happens when we look for significance in our jobs and our families. These are also good things and we are commended when our jobs and our families look good and it is difficult to realize when these good things have replaced Christ, but I think it is even harder to see it when ministry has replaced Christ.

Let me be clear. For some reason, the Lord has largely spared me from what I have just described. Certainly my emotions can ebb and flow with the trend of ministry, but for the most part my significance is not tied up in what I do. But I have seen this happen numerous times. I have seen pastors who get all depressed when fewer people than they expected show up to a church event. I have seen people in ministry devastated when things did not go the way they hoped. I said that our church has doubled in two years but there is a church in town that was twice as big as us and has halved in sized in one week. It is one of the biggest church splits that I have ever seen. We should pray for both of these churches, that God would show them if they have sinned and what they need to do next to heal, but what if something like this happened to us? If my significance is tied up in ministry and the church splits in half, then half of my significance just walked out the door.

Do you see, Christian ministry is a lot like mindless romanticism because we say to ministry, "You complete me." We gaze into the beckoning eyes of ministry and whisper, "You're my soul mate." Christian ministry can be like the worst of harlots because she is beautiful and pure and she seems to have Jesus written all over her, but a harlot is still a harlot. If anything takes the place of Christ it is spiritual adultery.

What is your spiritual harlot? What has taken the place of Christ in your life? Your husband, your wife? Your kids, your job? And these things tend to overlap. If ministry is important to you, then you might want to make sure that your kids are well behaved so that everyone else thinks that you have it all together.

So what do we do with our spiritual adultery? First, we must repent of it. Also, recognize that God's judgment upon is a also a means of grace to you. He wants to show us that we are living by works and not by grace, that we are depending upon what we do for the Lord instead of who we are in the Lord.

Earlier I said it is not appropriate to ever say to another person, "You complete me." But there is one and only one exception to this rule. Jesus is the only person to whom we could say such a thing. As John fifteen says, "apart from Jesus we can do nothing" and I would add, apart from Jesus we *are* nothing. Jesus does far more than complete us in that false romantic sense, he makes us. We are in him. Only he can make a name for us.

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¹ The “seven C’s of Creation” was developed by the ministry of Answers in Genesis and is based upon the common theological idea of 4 C’s—Creation, Corruption, Christ and Consummation.

² Later in the same sermon in Acts 17, Paul included three more of the “Seven C’s”. ³⁰ *In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.* ³¹ *For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.*” Paul summarized Christ, the cross and the final consummation in two verses.

³ Sailhamer, John H. “E. The City of Babylon (11:1-9)” In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 2*. 104. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, © 1990.