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Genesis 11:1-9 – Babel

Read Genesis 11:1-9.

I have often imagined a world where everything and everyone were exactly alike. I have thought to myself I wish that everyone thought exactly like I do and that they had the same interests and the same desires. At the very least, I have thought, things would be perfect in my marriage. If only Dana wanted to watch all sports on television, if only the girls loved putting their seat belts on, if only I did not have to guess what other people were thinking, but they thought just like I do.

I have imagined this world where if everyone just had the exact same language, looked exactly alike and so on everything would be better . . .

This is pretty much the situation that the world had arrived at by Chapter 11 in Genesis.

Chapter 10 explains that following the flood, Noah and his family multiplied prolifically. In Genesis 10:5 it says, **“From these the maritime peoples (*which was Noah and his family*) spread out into their territories by their clans within their nations, each with its own language.”** And then it goes on to tell the descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, creatively referred to as the Shemites, Hamites and Japhethites.

At the end of Chapter 10 it says, **“These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood.”**

But things have changed when we get to our passage in Chapter 11. Our passage begins with **“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.”**

So we go from the several territories and clans and nations with different languages to “one language and a common speech” with a common settlement.

And based upon what I was sharing when I began . . . seems like a good thing. Everyone together with similar characteristics. It seems like that is what community is about. If we could just get everyone to look alike, and speak alike, and be alike then things would go well.

In Genesis 11, all these similar people decide to undertake a project together. Verses 3-4 say, **“They said to each other, “Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.”** They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 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 for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”**

On Friday, Steve Johnson wrote the E100 Devotion on this passage and when he was preparing the devotion we were discussing this passage and by all estimates it initially seems that what the people are doing is good. It seems like community. You get a bunch of people together and you rally everyone around a common mission. In this case they all get together and decide they are going to build a city with a giant tower in the center of it.

That sounds like the type of thing that people do. In my home town, the dead center of town is the court house which also happens to be the tallest building in town. Thousands of cities in Europe were built around a cathedral in the center of town with an enormous steeple as the centerpiece.

And these biblical people were going to build their city the right way. They were going to build with bricks instead of stone and they were going to use tar for mortar. The text says they are going to do all this to make a name for themselves and so that they would not again be scattered all over the earth.

We can relate to this. We often have this desire to make a name for ourselves. **We have a similar saying, “make a name for yourself.” When you go to college, “make a name for yourself.” When you play sports, “make a name for yourself.”**

Since 1997 Purdue's football players had not worn their names on the back of their jerseys because Joe Tiller did not want them making a name for themselves, but only for the team. Danny Hope changed that this year and the players had their names on their jerseys.

God was not too happy with the people of Shinar's efforts to build a city and a giant tower in our passage. You could probably say that God wasn't too happy with Purdue's football team this year either.

The passage says that God came down to check out the city and the tower. He wanted to see what they were up to. God was not impressed.

God finds exactly what the text has already described. All the tribes and territories and nations with different languages that had grown from Noah and his family have now reverted back to one place and one language. God desired multiplication and the spread of people all over the earth, but the people wanted to stay in their safe mode of homogeneity.

They have made everyone alike and now they are building a monument to themselves. They had taken the natural diversity that existed through the generations and stripped it down to a homogenous society that celebrated not the infinite creativity of God . . . but themselves.

I have told you before that when I was in college at Illinois, myself and 5 other guys were asked by a national fraternity to restart a their fraternity at Illinois. So there we were 6 freshman guys that were just learning the ropes of college life, who had just met one another, and we were trying to get an organization off the ground. I can remember at some of our early meetings **sitting around a room strategizing on what type of guys we would target to build our fraternity.** As we each described our ideal member, we realized that we were describing people exactly like ourselves. I pictured small town white guys. Another guy was picturing yuppie suburban guys. Another was hoping for first generation Americans . . . and so on. In our minds we were all imagining an organization of 100 guys just like us.

As we reflected on what we were describing we realized that while it might be comfortable to be in a fraternity with a whole bunch of people just like us. It would not be good. **Now I was not able to theologially process what was happening in that room during those meetings at the time, but I think we were getting a glimpse of human sin battling the intentions of God.**

Thankfully, we chose to go every direction in our fraternity recruiting efforts and we assembled a diverse group of guys that not only made me uncomfortable, but helped me to see the richness of

developing relationships with people that had experiences and processed information radically differently than I did.

In this passage God comes down and sees that the people of the earth have sacrificed their God-given uniqueness and are worshipping themselves. And God sees the city and the tower, monuments to themselves, as just the beginning of what they could do . . . and so he hits the reset button in effect.

The text says that God, **“Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.”**

Let me just point out here, something that you may have noticed as you have been doing the readings in the E100 this week. There are several places in Genesis where God is referred to in the plural. For instance, when God created humans in Genesis 1, God says, **“Let us make man in our image . . .”** And here too God is referred to in the plural. **“Let us go down and confuse their language . . .”** Even in Genesis we see evidence of the trinitarian nature of God. God has always been Father, Son and Holy Spirit and this trinitarian nature is evidenced by this language.

At the end of our passage God resets everything and scatters everyone into diversity again . . . not because unity was a bad thing, but because their unity had been gathered around the wrong center.

At different points in history people have completely missed the point of this passage. They have interpreted it as if diversity was a bad thing. As if God had punished the people by scattering them over all the earth.

For instance, theologians in South Africa used Genesis 11 more than any other text to defend apartheid, or the system of racial segregation enforced by the government. They interpreted it to mean that it was good that God had confused the people through their different languages, so that they could no longer understand one another and as a result could live and develop separated from one another. In truth, of course, the exact opposite eventually happened. One group dominated the whole situation. The ideas, values, and convictions of one group, dominated the lives of all people.

I do not believe God's scattering of the people in Genesis 11 was a punishment . . . it was a restart. Like when God hit the restart button with the flood, God hit the restart button here. God's original intention was diversity and the punishment present in this text is the cease and desist order that God gives the people when they have made everyone just alike.

When people rally around themselves and worship their own identities and abilities tragedy always ensues. And if the whole world went down the path of self-absorption together . . . they would destroy it together. **I believe that God saved them from themselves. Sometimes God brings confusion in order to stop self-destruction.**

I really believe we have a modern example of the destruction that mass self-absorption and homogeneity can do. When Adolf Hitler ascended to power, his vision was to see a perfect German race. For him the success of German depending on its proliferation of a uniform, homogenous Aryan race. One language, one common speech, one purpose to make a name for themselves. Hitler even said once, **"We do not want any other god than Germany itself. It is essential to have fanatical faith and hope and love in and for Germany."** And it led to mass destruction.

I honestly believe that God's scattering of the nations prevented events like the Holocaust from being worse. That if God had not scattered the people . . . the entire world could have been destroyed in a mass Holocaust type of event.

But you see the problem inherent in all trying to be just alike . . . as Hitler said, we become our own god. **We develop a fanatical faith and hope and love in and for a city we can build, a tower that reaches the heavens, or ourselves.**

Unity in thought, word, and action may be a worthy goal. But what is the focus of that unity? God separates humanity and makes them different, not to prevent them from uniting in community with one another, but so that their community can be recreated around God and godly principles. **God's confusing the people's language was a gift. Our diversity today is a gift.**

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has put it this way. **"It is precisely when we are divided, when we are forced to face the otherness created by the separateness of language and place, when we see the**

otherness in someone's face, and hear it in her or his language, that we are reminded that we too are only human beings, creatures, not gods, not universal, not in the heavens."

I believe that recognizing our commonalities generally point us to ourselves and recognizing our diversity points to God. Let me say that another way. God is found not in our likeness, but in our uniqueness . . . in our recognition that we each individually are only glimpses of God's creative genius. It is only together, in all our diversity, that we even begin to see a fuller picture of the enormity of God.

Let me give you an example. **When I was growing up in the Catholic church, and I have alluded to this in the past, I believed that God was a distant authority figure that loved me based upon whether I was good or bad.** God was to be awed out and respected and to be feared. You didn't turn around and look behind you in church . . . you didn't disrespect the priest . . . you didn't set anything on top of the Bible and you definitely did not miss mass.

And that is what I understood about God. And it was definitely not all bad . . . God is to be feared . . . we are to be in awe of God . . . He is not our equal. **But that is not the whole picture.**

As I went away to college and met other Christians . . . Christians with other traditions and other emphasis, I discovered that God is not distant, but wants a personal relationship with me . . . and that he loves me unconditionally, yet wants me to make good decisions.

The point though, is that if I had only hung out with people like me in college . . . I would have never discovered the other attributes of God. Interacting with people with other experiences and backgrounds deepened my understanding of God. My focus moved from me and what I know about God to God and what I discover about Him through people different than me.

The passage ends by saying, **"That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth."**

In this passage, the world's cultural diversity is represented as God's design for the world.

It is important to recognize too, especially as you are reading through the E100 passages each week that they are connected. The Bible is telling one story of God and each part is related to the other. This story of people who want to make a name for themselves is a precursor to what comes next – **the story of Abraham, who is not to make a name for himself, but to allow God to make his name great.** The next chapter – your E100 reading for tomorrow – begins with Abram's call from God.

Chapter 12 begins, **“The LORD had said to Abram, “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 great, and you will be a blessing.”**

Notice the contrast that has been setup. The people in Babel set out to make a name for themselves . . . God tells Abram that HE will make his name great. One is human prompted and the other is God prompted.

God created human beings at the beginning of Genesis and told them to multiply and to fill the whole earth in all their diversity. In Babel they give up their uniqueness and congregate in a new city to build monuments to themselves. But God scatters them and then emphasizes through His call to Abram . . . that the only way one is to truly make their name great is by and through God's initiative.

There is another biblical text that should be examined with relation to this story of Babel. In Acts 2, at Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit transcended language barriers, but at the same time maintained the differences that languages reflect. True unity is connection to God and to each other through the Holy Spirit. God shatters us into a diversity of voices that requires us to communicate through the language of the Holy Spirit to be made whole. The language of the Holy Spirit requires us to see past the differences.

At Pentecost, the Babel story is reversed. The wound of Babel begins to be healed. People no longer have to become like one another, to think and talk and act like one another, but by the Spirit they become able to understand and accept the other as other.

Acts 2 says, **“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under**

heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"

The Holy Spirit enables them to understand one another . . . not to give up their differences, but to understand each other and God more deeply by and through them.

This is remarkable and powerful. I have more in common with a Christian Iraqi or Afghan than I do with a non-Christian neighbor down the street.

Those looking on at what was happening in Acts 2 have varied responses. Some were bewildered, some were amazed, some were perplexed, some mocked. When radically diverse Christians unite around Christ by the Holy Spirit . . . our world has a similar range of reactions.

God's historical purposes do not envision a homogenized humanity but human unity in diversity.

Fear of the unknown, strange places and faces, and the uncertainties of the future may force us to desire to want to run towards creating communities, or even a country or world, of people exactly like us . . . but that is not God's purpose. God's will for his creation is diversity. The diversity in his other creation should be a testimony to this.

The Bible ends with a beautiful picture of what God desires. Revelation 7:9-12 says, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

May we truly be God's people . . . a people that do not run from our differences, but into them so that we may more deeply understand our infinite Creator.

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