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Genesis 11:1-9, ESV.

⁹ Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

Confusion: *The Gate of God.*

One of the most popular stories from the Old Testament is told in nine verses at the beginning of Chapter 11 of Genesis. After the Great Flood, many nations descend from Noah. God has commanded the following of Noah's family:

"be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it."

His children bear many children, obeying God's command. We are told:

³² These are the clans of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, in their nations, and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood.

God has forgiven and blessed his people. Humanity must populate many nations.

But it doesn't take long for humanity, at least part of it, to lose its way again. As Noah's sons' nations have spread outward, they have spoken a single language, and everyone has understood each other. We are told this:

***11** Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them*

thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” ⁵ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. ⁶ And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸ So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

A group of people decide that they will build a city and a tower, and the top of the tower will reach the heavens. This was an expression that ancient people used for skyscrapers of the time. This was probably six or seven floors, not enough to make an impression on today’s residents of Manhattan. They do it apparently to “*make a name*” for themselves, so they won’t “*be dispersed over the face of the whole earth*”. This means that God has commanded them to spread across the Earth, but instead they want to build their own city and their own tower – and dig in in place. The tower is assumed to be what ancient Mesopotamian people called a “*ziggurat*”, a vaguely pyramid-shaped temple built out of mudbrick; these structures were common from about 4,000 B.C. to 300 B.C. They were popular in Babylon; at the top would be a place to worship their gods. Ziggurats were described as linking Heaven and Earth. So, the idea is that they will build a tower

and a single, permanent settlement to honor pagan gods instead of obeying God's command and thus being dependent on God. God knows, though, that this will just be the beginning of their disobedience. It won't stop with refusing to spread out and to honor the true God. God says:

"Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do."

God concludes that there is one way to end this. He will make these people unable to cooperate on their city and tower project. God says:

"Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech."

Thus, the people are forcibly dispersed. Only now, they will forever speak many languages - and have trouble communicating with each other. Note these words:

Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth.

The word Babel is close to the Hebrew verb to confuse, "*balal*", and so this explanation makes sense. But scholars believe that there is a second layer of meaning to this name Babel because Babylon, which means "Gate of God", is "*Bāb-ilim*" in Akkadian, the language of the Babylonians. Thus, the name Babel is a complex play of words, something we see a lot in Scripture. Babel is a Babylonian pagan temple that God has turned into a place of confusion.

The classic interpretation of the story of the Tower of Babel is that it is about hubris, the dangers of human pride. It causes us to value the things that we believe and the things that we build more than God's teachings and God's creations. The story uses the fact that people seem to get into conflict over resources and have trouble carrying out trade because of the many languages that are spoken. The supposition is that the world would be more settled, calmer, and provide an easier life for all of us if we were all speaking the same language. Of course, along with language, we would include factors like culture and religion, the belief in a single, common God, in particular. This is gone because of human pride. The story also gives an etiology, or origin, for a multi-language world. In the story God arranges this as a punishment, not unlike the punishment God gave Adam and Eve when he cast them out of Eden and told them they would have to take care of themselves from now on – and it would not be easy. In sum, our conflict as the human species is due to our arrogance, the belief that we do not need God. A side effect of this is that God, who started anew with humanity after the Great Flood, has decided to separate himself from the majority of peoples of the world. God promised that he would never have another Great Flood, but God did not promise to never punish again. They are on their own. This is symbolized by the abandonment of the supposedly glorious city and tower.

There are some subtle twists to this interpretation that have been suggested by modern scholars. Some see the tower as representative of the growth of sin in the world, and not as a specific act of sin. God is attacking sin in humanity, not one, single attempt to defy God. The city and the tower are meant to be interpreted in a fully symbolic fashion. Others see this in a completely different way, due to the timing of the writing of Genesis. The traditional, non-historical view is that Moses personally wrote Genesis and did so around 1400 B.C., and that he did this during the wandering in the wilderness on the way to Canaan. In truth, it is believed that Genesis was written between the 6th and the 5th century B.C. – in particular, after the Babylonian exile. Thus, the story is seen as a condemnation of Babylon and its culture and its faith, specifically. Ultra-modern interpretations have even seen the story as a condemnation of colonial powers trying to force a single culture and language on indigenous peoples, and thus, the story celebrates a multi-language world. I personally don't see the Tower of Babel story as fitting this interpretation. I think we need to be careful about using this tale to make judgements about valuing people who are different than us. Of course we should do this. It's just that the Tower of Babel story wasn't written to teach this. I think the author of the story, and we have no idea who this was, used a multi-language, multi-cultural world as a metaphor for a

world that is condemned to ongoing misunderstanding - and thus the need for humans to turn to God for help resolving this.

When I was in L.A. long ago, I was living in an apartment building on a major east-west road called Venice Boulevard, near the beach. It connects downtown L.A. with the beach, perhaps 15 miles away. It was a very noisy place to live. Perhaps a block or so down the street, I can remember an apartment building going up. It was about six or eight stories, I don't remember precisely. I do remember meeting either the developer or someone who was financially involved in its construction. At the time he seemed like an old man to me, but I wouldn't be surprised if he was somewhat younger than I am now. It was on the sidewalk, near this new building, which at this point was just wood framing. I didn't know the man; he just happened to be talking to a small group of people, and I stood nearby more or less eavesdropping. I remember his pride, and at the time it didn't seem to me to be uncalled for. He apparently had a lot of money and was investing some of it in this building. He talked about how big the various units would be, how much they would rent for, and how striking the building would be, compared to the other structures on this rather ugly looking Boulevard. As the crowd thinned, I introduced myself as a grad student who lived in a nearby apartment building. He was clearly excited to have anyone to talk to about his

building, and he started telling me about the siding, the windows, the roof, details that he had been intimately involved in – or at least was very proud of. Then after just a couple of minutes, the conversation ended. I went home and didn't think about this building.

But, some months later, after the roof was built and the particle board siding, that I think is called sheathing, went up, and after only some of the windows had been put in, and before the external siding, and before most of the internal work had been done, construction stopped. I would drive by, and month after month, the building was frozen in time. I eventually moved to Colorado. Then maybe a couple of years later, I went back to L.A. to visit. I drove by this building. Construction had not resumed. The particle board had greyed from the weather. Some of the pieces had obvious splits in them. Eventually, perhaps another couple of years later, I returned, and the building had been completed. To this day I wonder if they replaced any of that rotten particle board, or if they just covered up that sheathing with siding.

When I was writing this message about the Tower of Babel, I thought about this building, which was perhaps about the height, in stories, of the biblical tower. I wondered about how the stoppage in construction had impacted the man I met, whose name I never knew. Had the project gone broke? Had he gone broke?

Was the project eventually sold to someone else? Mostly, I wondered if this man went through a period of feeling emotionally deflated by having his project, something that was so important to him emotionally, grind to halt, with the partly finished building turning gray from the rain and the ocean wind.

There is an interesting New Testament perspective on the Tower of Babel story. Here is the beginning of the second chapter of the Book of Acts:

2 When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

5 Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, 11 both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." 12 And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

Jews from all around the greater Jerusalem area have come to Jerusalem for Pentecost. Some have come from far away, and presumably some are transplants from foreign lands. Jerusalem was a major international commercial area, and a key reason that Israel kept getting invaded is that it was on a major trade route.

Thus, the people in this scene speak many different languages. While this story in Acts does not reverse the multi-language problem introduced when God abandons the developers of the Tower of Babel, it does provide a counterbalance. When the Holy Spirit descends on the Apostles, they preach Jesus' teachings to people from all around the Mediterranean world – and miraculously each person understands God's teaching in their native language. In Acts, we see that the problem isn't the multiplicity of languages and cultures. Misunderstanding that leads to conflict can be resolved by unifying under God. The power of the Holy Spirit is more powerful than the conflict caused by the destruction of the Tower of Babel. We see a reversal of the dispersion ordered by God. God has provided a way to come back together in peace. We also see the power of humility, of people wanting to learn about "*the Way*", the teachings of Jesus, which is greater than the fragile power of human pride on the part of those building a tower that will connect Heaven and Earth. Humanity now has a single human family, regardless of language and culture.

In some ways, the building that the man in L.A. was constructing was a Gate of God, a ziggurat. There is nothing wrong with putting up buildings, certainly not places that provide homes for people. We need people who will build apartments. But perhaps the man I met should have been more excited about providing homes, about beautifying a rather ugly part of L.A., than being so personally tied up in a

building as a personal act of creation. I remember, just before I introduced myself, him excitedly telling the folks he was talking to that he wouldn't stop there. He was going to become a major presence in southern California. This apartment building was the first step in establishing a major construction business. Well, his first step ran into some serious delays that I imagine he did not anticipate.

God is not inhibited by language. No matter how different any two people on this planet are, they are both made in the image of God. Both of these people have a divine purpose for existing. We can build careers, we can build structures, we can build businesses. And, very importantly, we can honor the privilege of being made in the image of God at the same time. I don't want to minimize the problems introduced by history, by many millennia of cross-cultural conflict. This is true not just internationally, but also domestically, within our country. In an age of international migration, of polarized politics, of sharp division even within the Christian faith in the U.S., we have tremendous trouble coming together in peace. We need to meet under the power of God. Pursuing self-aggrandizing efforts to bridge Heaven and Earth only leads to confusion. It's also important to keep a perspective on the long-term importance of what we do. Remember that the grand ziggurat of Babel, which bridges Heaven and Earth, was no bigger than a very modest apartment building today.