

The Pride of Babel and the Praise of Christ

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Our theme in this series is [*Spectacular Sins and Their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ*](#). Today we come to the spectacular sin of the building of the tower of Babel. Lest you think this is too distant and irrelevant to your modern life, ask these questions: Where do all the languages in the world come from—and all the people groups? Are they the result of sin? Are they a good idea, full of potential for the glory of Christ and the joy of God’s people? Is it good or bad that there are separate, independent political states that are often in conflict? What does God think of a monolithic super-state? Will he prevent one? Will the world end with one? And personally, what is your own root sin, and what does God think of it? What has he done to rescue you from it? All of that and more flows out of this text.

“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 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. 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.” And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. 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. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 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.” Genesis 11:1-9

A Perplexing Matter Answered

Let’s begin by clarifying one perplexing matter of context. Genesis 11:1-9 seems to describe the origin of languages. But careful readers of Genesis notice that in chapter 10 the peoples and languages are described already *before* the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. For example, look at Genesis 10:5: “The coastland peoples spread in their lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations.” Then you get to Genesis 11:1 and it says, “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.” The author knew what he was doing. He has not forgotten in 11:1 what he just wrote in 10:5, 20, and 31 (just two verses earlier).

The solution is to recognize that the author has not put these two stories in chronological order. He first describes the spread of the peoples and languages in chapter 10 and then he describes the origin of that diversity in Genesis 11:1-9. Sometimes, when you have something shocking to say about why an event happens, you put it at the beginning of the event, and sometimes you wait and put it at the end of the event.

After the flood God had said to Noah in Genesis 9:1, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” That’s what chapter 10 describes. It was happening as peoples and languages multiplied. It looked like a simple fulfillment of God’s command. It looked like obedience. Then Genesis 11:1-9 drops the bomb on us. It wasn’t obedience. They weren’t spreading. They were clustering. God came down and shattered their disobedience and made their clustering impossible. He confused their language and broke humanity into many peoples and languages.

Two Great Sins Exposed

Let’s dig in here for a few minutes and see what the sin was and then what God’s judgment was before we ask how all this is designed for the glory of Christ. Genesis 11:1-4:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 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. 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.”

The key statements are in verse 4: 1) They aim to build a city. 2) They aim to build a tower in the city that reaches to the heavens. 3) They aim to make a name for themselves. 4) They aim not to be dispersed over the whole earth. The first two of these correspond to the second two. Building a city is the way one avoids being dispersed over the whole earth. And building a tower into the heavens is the way one makes a name for oneself. So the city and tower are the outward expressions of the inward sins. The two sins are the love of praise (so you crave to make a name for yourself) and the love of security (so you build a city and don't take the risks of filling the earth).

God's will for human beings is not that we find our joy in being praised, but that we find our joy in knowing and praising him. His will is not that we find our security in cities but in God whom we gladly obey. So the spectacular sin of man is that even after the flood, which was a thunderclap of warning against sin for Noah and his descendants, it turns out that we are no better after the flood than we were before. The human condition is just like it was with Adam and Eve. They will decide for themselves what is best. They think they can even rise up and claim the place of God. This is the story of mankind to this very day apart from redeeming grace.

Adam's Sin Replayed

Two things in verse 5 signal that man is about to be put in his place. “And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.” First, notice that he calls them “the children of man,” or translated another way, “the sons of Adam.” The building of this city and this tower are similar to what Adam did when he rebelled against God and ate of the tree. The sinful nature of Adam goes on in his descendants—including you and me.

Holy Scorn Displayed

Second, notice that it says, “The Lord *came down* to see the city and the tower.” This is holy scorn. The author mocks the tower by saying that God had to *come down* to see it. This tower is so far from being in heaven, God can't see it from heaven. Of course, God can see everything everywhere. But when you want to show the ludicrous nature of man's God-belittling pride in his little achievements, you take some risks, and you speak with irony and you describe God as peering down in search of this great tower “with its top in the heavens.”

Global Aspirations Limited

Now what will God do in response to this spectacular sin of man who is refusing to fill the earth with God's glory, securing his life in a city, and trying to exalt himself to the place of God? Genesis 11:6-8:

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. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech.” So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

Notice what God says in verse 6: “Behold, they are one people and have all one language.” That signals that God is not only about to divide their language, but in doing so is about to divide one people into many peoples. He is about to multiply languages and peoples. So it says in verse 7, “Come, let us go down and

there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." In this way, God dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

So his response to the presumption and arrogance of man was to make it harder for man to communicate and thus to unite in God-belittling global plans. God has built into the world a system by which the pride of different groups of people restrains the pride of other groups of people. God knows the immense potential of human beings created in his own image. And he has given them amazing liberty to exalt themselves and design their own security systems without trusting him. But there are limits. Thousands of languages around the world and thousands of different peoples limit the global aspirations of arrogant mankind.

Christ's Glory Designed

Now turn with me to the question of God's global design in this for the glory of Christ. Keep in mind the principle we have leaned on repeatedly: When God permits a thing he does so for a reason. And that reason is part of a plan. God does not act whimsically or haphazardly or aimlessly. So when he permits this spectacular sin of the pride and presumption and rebellion on the plains of Shinar, he knows exactly what he is doing and what his response to it will be. Which means that the peoples and languages of the world are not an afterthought. They are the judgment of God on sin, and at the same time they are designed by God for the global glory of Jesus Christ.

So we ask again: How does this spectacular sin and its consequence in the divided languages of the world serve to magnify the glory of Christ? Here are five ways.

1) Christians Guarded

God's division of the world into different languages hinders the rise of a global, monolithic anti-Christian state that would have the power to simply wipe out all Christians. We often think that the diversity of languages and cultures and peoples and political states is a hindrance to world evangelization—the spread of Christ's glory. That's not the way God sees it. God is more concerned about the dangers of human uniformity than he is about human diversity. We humans are far too evil to be allowed to unite in one language or one government. The gospel of the glory of Christ spreads better and flourishes more *because* of 6,500 languages, not just in spite of it.

2) Pride Destroyed

Here is a second way that the story of the tower of Babel glorifies Christ. Suppose someone asks, "But isn't there going to be in the last days a great global government where Christians are in fact persecuted everywhere?" The answer is yes. In the Last Day, God will loosen the restraints that now hold back this evil. The Anti-Christ—the "man of lawlessness" as Paul calls him (2 Thessalonians 2:3), the "Beast" as John calls him (Revelation 13:3)—will rise with great global attraction, and there will be horrific persecution of Christians. But here's the link with the rebels of Shinar. The tower they built was called the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:9).

The word *babel* in Hebrew occurs over 200 times in the Old Testament and is translated "Babylon" in all but a few. When the writer says in Genesis 11:9, "Therefore its name was called Babel (*babel*), because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth," it's a putdown of the great city of Babylon. It means that Babylon, with its vaunted towers and walls and gardens and idolatry, is a pitiful effort compared to God. And this name "Babel" or "Babylon" is the name given to the city of the Beast in the book of Revelation (14:8-9). And in this, the glory of Christ shines because, even though for a brief season Babylon is drunk with the blood of Christian martyrs (Revelation 17:6), she will, just like the tower of Babel, be put to naught. Here's a description that marks her out as a latter day "tower of Babel."

Her sins are heaped high as heaven. . . . As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning, since in her heart she says, "I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see." . . . Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come. (Revelation 18:5, 7, 10)

So, yes, in the Last Day, God will loosen the restraint he has put on the nations. They will swell with the pride of Babylon. Christians will suffer. And then, in one instant, Christ will come from his infinite heights and slay the man of lawlessness with the breath of his mouth (2 Thessalonians 2:8). And Babylon will be no more. The pride of man will be eliminated from the earth. The story of Genesis 11:1-9 is a foreshadowing of that. The victory there and at the end is the victory of Christ.

3) Every Group Claimed

Here is a third way that the sin of Babel and God's judgment on it leads to the global glory of Christ. The authority and power of Jesus is magnified because he lays claim on every language group and every people. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:18-19a). Yes, in response to sin, God has divided the languages and the nations. But in the end, it magnifies the authority and power of Christ to make disciples in every language. His power is all the more glorious because it breaks into so many different languages and peoples and brings salvation.

4) The Gospel Glorified

And the same must be said about his gospel in particular. The message of his death and resurrection. The message of forgiveness and justification. Romans 1:16: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*" A great part of the glory of the gospel is that it is not provincial. It is not a tribal religion. It breaks into every language and every people. If there were no diversity of languages, if the spectacular sin of Babel had not happened with its judgment, the global glory of the gospel of Christ would not shine as beautifully as it does in the prism of thousands of languages.

5) Jesus Praised

And finally, the praise that Jesus receives from all the languages is more beautiful, because of its diversity, than it would have been if there were only one language and one people to sing. "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth'" (Revelation 5:9-10). "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10).

It was the spectacular sin on the plains of Shinar that gave rise to the multiplying of languages that ends in the most glorious praise to Christ from every language on earth. Praise the Lord, O Bethlehem, let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

The spectacular sin of those who built the Tower of Babel was used by God in spite of the pride of the wicked people. Where do all the languages in the world come from—and all the people groups? Are they the result of sin? Are they a good idea, full of potential for the glory of Christ and the joy of God's people? Is it good or bad that there are separate, independent political states that are often in conflict? What does God think of a monolithic super-state? Will he prevent one? Will the world end with one? And personally, what is your own root sin, and what does God think of it? What has he done to rescue you from it? All of that and more flows out of this text.

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