

*Foundations: Confusion and Chaos*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Matthew 6:22-23; Romans 1:18-21; Genesis 11:1-9*

Our final Scripture reading today is Genesis 11:1-9. May God add His richest blessing to the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. 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.” But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. 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. 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.”

Last Sunday, during our worship service in fact, a new era in the space race began. Virgin Galactic had its first fully crewed spaceflight with its billionaire founder Richard Branson on board. Obviously, we’ve been in space before – some of you here today and watching online can still remember Neil Armstrong landing on the moon in 1969. We’ve been to the moon several times since; we’ve established space stations; we even have Voyager 1 broadcasting back to us for almost forty five years, a decade of that from beyond our solar system.

But last Sunday’s launch marks a new era in spaceflight, one where ordinary people – albeit rich ordinary people – can buy a ticket and fly to the farthest reaches of Earth’s atmosphere, and maybe even beyond. While Richard Branson may have been the first to do it, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos and Tesla’s Ethan Musk are right behind him heading other companies planning on space flights within the next few years. Once, it took the world’s biggest governments to get someone into space safely; now, it just takes a corporation with a lot of money and a billionaire owner willing to fund it.

I’ve been intrigued by the space program and science fiction since I was a kid. If I had money to burn, I’d be interested in a ride. Yet as a student of the space program, I know how dangerous space exploration is. The fatality rate for space missions is 3.6%. Hundreds have died in testing and launch accidents. There have been many near-catastrophes. While research and studies in space have yielded interesting results, it’s hard to balance those results with the immense human and financial costs. And I say this as someone who loves the whole thing!

I mention all this today because there are key parallels between our race to space and the story we hear today about the Tower of Babel. This story that’s about where humanity was 6,000 years ago has so much in common with us today. In 6,000 years, we’ve gotten a lot closer to the heavens, and yet the basic issues are still at play. Have we learned anything? That’s what we’ll look at today, how the Tower of Babel still speaks to the human condition.

You might remember that last week, we explored Genesis 10 and the table of the nations. We got a brief guided tour of where all the nations of the world came from. We saw that out of the descendants of Noah came 70 immediate people groups that scattered around the entirety of the known world. We also saw that God is busy at work redeeming the nations – Jesus had a group of 12 disciples that represented the 12 tribes of Israel, but He also sent out a set of 70 disciples that represented word eventually going out to all the nations, who were once unified as the peoples descended from Noah.

But why did they split up, and why did they speak different languages if they were all from the same origins? Genesis 11 answers those details. Before the split described in Genesis 9, everyone spoke the same way. Not only did they all speak the same language, there wasn't a division of word choices and metaphors and figures of speech. We speak English, and so do the British, but as I've learned watching the recent TV show *Ted Lasso*, there are a whole lot of differences. In Britain, a coach doesn't go to the soccer field to watch practice. The gaffer goes to the pitch to oversee training. Same exact thing, completely different words. Even in the US, you'll order a soda, a pop, or a Coke depending on where you are. The truly ancient world had none of that. Not only the same language, but the same wording. No confusion.

But immediately we start to see a new problem. They start moving east, into the area we think of as Iraq, ancient Babylon, and they start settling. From what we understand of Genesis 10, Noah is still alive. And yet Noah's great-grandchildren have forgotten the command of God to be fruitful, multiply, to cover the earth and subdue it. The command given to Adam, given to Noah after the flood, ignored. The idea of each family finding its own place to settle gives way to this idea of congregating all the peoples together. It doesn't mean that cities are inherently bad; families could still settle near one another. But here we see a complete setting aside of the one basic command God has for them. Like Cain, who started to build a city after being told by God that he would become a restless wanderer after murdering his brother Abel, the ancient children of Ham, Shem, and Japheth have already discarded the wisdom handed down by God.

Elements of the story help us to know the area and people we're dealing with. Shinar was very different from the promised land, where stone was the primary building material. In the plains of Babylon, stone was very uncommon, but the soil was great for brickmaking. And while stone didn't easily lend itself to huge edifices, brick can be used to make massive buildings – the Monadnock Building in Chicago is self-sustaining brick 16 stories tall! But what's also interesting is that there is a lot of wordplay in the Hebrew. It's as if the Hebrew was pointing out how clever the ancient tower builders thought they really were. The “come, let us go down” phrases are virtual tongue twisters you might mix up. It's a clever way to point out how a shared language and shared vocabulary are essential to good communication.

Then comes the rub. The people say to themselves, “Come, let us build a city with a tower that reaches the heavens so we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered across the earth.” The plan is laid bare. It's not just about living together in a city in defiance of God's command to fill the world He gave to them. Their plan is to make a tower, almost certainly a ziggurat, that would establish them as deities themselves, reaching to the heavens in order to reach the realm of God Himself. There is no purpose to the tower other than to establish their greatness. They want to make a name for themselves. It's all about pride and power.

That brings us to something worth thinking about today: *what elements of pride is the Holy Spirit prodding you to remove from your life?* There is incredible arrogance in the creators of the tower of Babel. To think that somehow they could reach the heavens with a tower? And yet pride led them to start construction on this tower to the realm of the gods. They wanted to make a name for themselves – they wanted to be known. They wanted me, today, to be mentioning their names as the masterful architects of this marvelous wonder. But we don't know their names. If we had their names, they would be synonyms for foolishness and hubris. Because pride is what brought them down.

There are names we know because of the immense contributions they made to history. In the history of the church, I think not only of the names of the saints from the Bible, but great leaders and thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, Wesley and Whitefield. In our own day, we have faithful people who are known because they have contributed immensely to our understanding of our relationship with Jesus, folks with serious books, serious smarts, serious credentials, serious change for the Kingdom. People like J. I. Packer and R. C. Sproul, Billy Graham and D. James Kennedy, countless others.

But there are names we know of people famous in the church who have built empires of straw, empires built on cults of personality, famous for being famous, famous enough to avoid serious scrutiny, some of whom whose empires have already come crashing down around them. Their names aren't worth repeating. They built churches not on the foundation of Christ and Him crucified and resurrected, but their egos and their charisma and their charm.

And we see this in the secular world all the time too...have you heard the story about the billionaire CEO who made a good showing for a long time and whose wife just divorced him, sick of all the pride? The question is, which one? Yet we don't learn. We too want to make a name for ourselves. We want to be known, respected, loved, feared, whatever drives us. And pride keeps us from deep relationships. It keeps us from being able to say we were wrong. It keeps us from being able to share the credit. Pride doesn't allow for reconciliation. Pride doesn't allow you to enjoy someone else's accomplishments.

Pride is different from self-respect. Self-respect says, "I am valuable because I am made in the image of God." Self-respect allows us to serve others because our value has nothing to do with position. Pride says, "Your value is based in your accomplishments, your status, and your power." Pride is the main way we today break the first commandment because pride is what makes us into our own little gods. God says, "Because I created you, I know what's best for you." Pride says, "I am my own god; I know what's best for me."

It's easy to miss pride because it's seldom full-blown. Yet it's there in subtle ways we need to watch for. It's thinking that service to others is somehow beneath us, or finding ways to avoid helping others. It's holding grudges when the precipitating events are long past and apologized for. It's choosing to disobey God's clear instructions because we know that our choices are going to be so much fun instead. Pride doesn't have to rule your life to ruin your life.

I have had to fight my pride. When I was young, I was prideful of my good grades. I was a big fish in a small pond. As I got older, got into middle school, high school, there were new big fish in this bigger pond, but my pride stayed. It damaged my relationships when I always thought I was right. It wasn't until college that I saw that I wasn't as big a fish as I thought. And there have been regular reminders over the years that God has sent to keep me humble, to keep me from thinking that I was the master of my destiny, that I could build a website or a church or anything on my own charisma and ego. I'm not as humble as I should be, and the only way I know to stay humble is to keep my eyes on Jesus, who despite being God in the flesh served others and became the least of all for us.

And maybe God is speaking to you this morning about your pride as well. Whether it's forgiving a cranky neighbor for things said years ago or taking a less fulfilling job to have more time with your loved ones, overcoming pride can happen. But it can't happen if the Holy Spirit is not involved, and that's where I'd encourage you to start today. Pray and ask the Holy Spirit where pride might have seeped into your heart somewhere. Let Him change you and open you up to the humility of Christ, who is the perfect model for us to follow.

Back to the passage...God sees what is going on in Babel. God says, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them." There's a double meaning here. One is more obvious – the tower project is just the start. If they can build a ziggurat working together, what they can accomplish and discover will be phenomenal. But that doesn't give us the full motivation for what God does.

The second meaning is that there's no evil they won't be able to accomplish. The tower is a monument to human hubris and power and pride. It is built in defiance of God's desires for humanity. They are heading back into the kind of world that God destroyed in the flood. If in just three generations from Noah they are doing first-class evil, trying to become gods and enter into the heavens, where might they go if they keep it up? No evil they plan would be impossible.

And so God says, "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." This is probably a royal "we," the idea that God is also using the angels to make this happen. We may also have a foretaste of the truth that God is a trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Either way, the main point is, God confuses the languages of all the people groups. Suddenly, where once there was one language, now there are many. Where there was unity in wickedness, now there is chaos and confusion. The building project is scrapped, the tower and the city are left in ruins, and everyone scatters with those who can understand them. God makes it so the only logical thing to do is to follow His mandate.

We still may ask, "Was that fair of God?" We might even ask, if all the racial tensions, wars, slaveries, deaths, were because of the splitting of the peoples into different tribes who only respected those who spoke their language, was God wise in doing so? The truth is, God knew what He was doing. He scattered the peoples to take down the ego and pride they had. Not forever, of course, but He made it so the spread of wickedness across the world would not be as quick and widespread as it was in the days of Noah. All the evils of racism and tribalism are our own fault, our inability to realize the image of God imprinted by God on all of us. God divided us to keep us from great evil; yet we were able to come up with new evils on our own.

It is interesting how we see these things. Babylon in its native language means “gate of the gods.” Babel in Hebrew means “confused.” We see the same thing from different perspectives. The Babylonians would eventually create an empire that would go down in infamy, that will be remembered until the days of Revelation finally come as a wicked, oppressive city full of pride in self and in self-made gods. The Babylonians would call that culture. God would call that confused. And we should be wise to see those things in our culture that are called wise but are actually confused. In our era, we are confused about everything, the nature of who we are meant to be as individuals. And yet our culture calls that liberation. The reality is, we may speak the same language, but today’s culture is deeply confused.

But that’s not what I want to end on today. I want to end on a second main point, one that can go on your refrigerator: *in Jesus Christ, God gives us true unity and a new vocabulary.* I want you to think with me to Acts 2, to the day of Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus. The disciples have been holed up praying in the upper room. Jesus said that He would send them the Holy Spirit at their guide and counselor who would remind them of what He said and lead them into the truth.

These were the disciples that had often been divided themselves. James and John had gotten in a mess of trouble with their mother had asked Jesus to give them special places in God’s Kingdom. They came from different backgrounds, from saucy fishermen to a tax collector that the others probably despised at first for working with the Romans. There were questions about Peter leading them when he had denied knowing Jesus after Jesus’ arrest.

But on Pentecost, everything changes. The Holy Spirit arrives. The disciples are in amazement and wonder and praise God. And the strange thing is, when they go out in public, everyone can understand them. We’re told in Acts 2:5 that there were devout men from every nation in Jerusalem, all hearing the good news of Jesus in their own languages – from Persian to Egyptian to Arabic. It’s on that day that 3,000 people become Jesus-followers, the backbone of the early church. And through them, the gospel spreads past Jerusalem into the rest of the world.

In some ways, the incident of Babel is a real tragedy. But in Jesus Christ, God is reconciling the world to Himself. Through Jesus’ church, the nations divided by so many factors and so many languages and dialects become unified in their love for God’s son. When we become believers, we learn new words like “baptism” and “sanctification,” and words take on new and different meanings, like “salvation.” And through the Holy Spirit’s work in our hearts, we begin to see a change in us where we care more about our unity in Jesus than racial, social, or language barriers that divide us.

May we learn the lessons of the tower of Babel. May we humble ourselves before God and allow Him to lift us up. May we live not in pride but in the unity that Jesus Christ gives to all His disciples. And may we long for the day when we are not confused and in chaos, but with one voice, one heart, and one tongue sing the praises of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ forevermore.