



GOD'S END, MAN'S BEGINNING

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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 Genesis 11:1-9; 27-32
 First Message
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This morning we begin a new series from the book of Genesis. We will examine the very taproot of our spiritual life, the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Bible declares that if we have faith in the Messiah, then we have been *adopted* as sons of Abraham (Gal 3:7). That spiritual adoption creates a bond that is even stronger than our physical lineage. In this series we return to the very bedrock of our identity. We will discover how the kingdom of God breaks into our ordinary lives, how it calls us out of a dark world and invites us to journey to a new land. We will see how in the midst of that journey, faith is born and tested so that we learn to trust in a God whom we cannot see but who is intensely present. And we will see how all of this can occur even in the midst of unhealthy, dysfunctional families. These stories provide a map of human history, and a personal framework to reveal where our faith will ultimately take us. Read them, speak of them, and let them shape your life and the lives of your children.

Here in Silicon Valley we could say that the backdrop for the story of the life of Abraham is like a high-tech venture, one that encompasses the whole world, rivaling anything in history. Sadly, the story ends almost as quickly as it begins, and in the wake of its demise, we hear the voice of God breaking into history.

I. In Search of a Name (11:1-9)

A. Man's Action (11:1-4)

Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words. And it came about as they journeyed east, that 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 used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name; lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." (NASB)

The narrator frames his story with the phrase "all the earth" – a signal that we are about to embark on a lesson that has universal implications. But these lessons are not optional. What is about to happen will affect the whole world. The story is set against the backdrop of the natural sense of unity (emphasized twice) which the whole earth enjoyed at that time, a unity which was based on the gift of language: "one lip, one set of words." Language, the crowning gift of God to man, is

what makes communion possible between God and man. When language is properly employed, man indeed becomes most human. Sadly, however, in this account language becomes the means by which man attempts to usurp God's rightful place, defying the cosmic order. This story depicts man's ultimate reach for autonomy, the very apex of evil, and, as a consequence, his ultimate end. As we begin our study it is my prayer that we will be equipped to recognize this seductive spirit that still dominates our world.

The first clue that something is wrong is the mention of the *direction* of humanity's journey as they search for a home. The narrator says, "They journeyed east." This is reminiscent of Adam and Eve who, after their sin, were forced

to settle in a land "eastward" from the Garden (3:24). When Cain was cast out from the presence of God after he had refused God's instruction (4:7), he went to dwell in a land "east" of Eden. When Lot divided from Abraham and sought for himself a land "like the garden of the Lord," he moved "eastward," while Abraham remained in the land... In the Genesis narratives when people go "east," they leave the land of blessing (Eden and the Promised Land) and go to a land where their greatest hopes will turn to ruin (Babylon and Sodom).¹

"Going east," then, becomes symbolic of man's attempt to "build" his own Eden, without God. When God calls Abraham from the Ur of the Chaldees, however, he will travel "west" to the land of promise.

So the builders settle in the broad plain of Shinar. From that spot, they prepare to glorify and fortify themselves through a massive collective effort, a huge undertaking. Instead of spreading out over the earth, as God commanded in Gen 1:28, they remain in the plain. And from that exact spot (*sham*) they plan to make a revolutionary breakthrough and *build* a city whose tower reaches into the heavens (*shamayim*). As they speak with one another one can almost feel the shared collective energy ("Come-now!...Come-now!") and camaraderie ("each man with his neighbor"). The call goes out for everyone to join in: "Let us bake, burn, and build!" The Hebrew rhymes, rolling off their tongues in hypnotic cadence, are even more acute than their English alliteration. Fokelman captures their spirit: "Look at their energy, their enthusiasm and their ambitious plans! For one moment we are caught up in the collective enthusiasm and expertise. There is true synergism here, people working

and almost singing in their collective enthusiasm...unity is their strength, concentration is their slogan."² What is about to happen here will be an ultimate achievement.

The most common building material in Palestine is the stone found in great abundance in the hill country. But stone was exceedingly rare in Mesopotamia, as was common mortar. Lacking the best building materials of stone and mortar, then, the builders come up with the innovative solution of bricks and bitumen. And instead of drying the bricks in the sun they invent a new technology — baking them in ovens at a high temperature, thereby enabling them to bear more weight. Many times in Akkadian texts we find the art of brick making celebrated as a gift of the gods for temple building. Sarna explains that

In Egypt and Palestine the mortar was of the same material as the bricks. But only in Mesopotamia was bitumen used extensively for building purposes. Due to the poor quality of the fuel it was not possible to obtain high temperatures for the kilns. As a result, bricks were quite fragile and porous. To counteract this, a bituminous mastic was used to add to their compressive strength and impermeability.³

Mesopotamian high-tech! But what the text wants us to focus us on is *how* their new innovations come about. As they creatively weigh the words “stone” (*leaben*) and “mortar” (*chomer*), new words are born, “brick” and “bitumen,” (*lebenah* and *chemar*) — mirror images of the original. The very notion of baking the bricks also springs from the words themselves, associating bricks (*lebenim*) with baking (*lebenah*). So “burning clay can supply them with the building material they urgently need and that bitumen or pitch can be the indispensable mortar.”⁴ Again we see how important the gift of language is for their grandiose plans. Language itself creates imagination and gives birth to new technological realities. And language easily unites the diverse worlds of their dreams into one vision. From this place (*sham*) they will build a tower to the heavens (*shammayim*) granting them a glorious name (*shem*).

But not until the very end of their advertising campaign do we hear the motivation that is driving this project: “Let us make for ourselves a name, lest we be scattered over the face of all the earth.” “Let us make for ourselves a name” has a jarring ring about it. The builders want a tower to reach into the heavens to create for themselves a name. The word “tower” (*migdal*) is derived from the word “to be great” (*gadal*). Therefore the tower “is material proof that men want to be great, greater than they are or are asked to be, that they want to make a name for themselves by reaching out for the heavens and thus to be like God.”⁵

But pride is not the sole motivating force driving their quest. Fear, the fear of being scattered over the face of the whole earth, is a secondary concern. So this great building project betrays not only presumption,

but “insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes.”⁶ The builders want to be like God, yes, but they are terribly afraid of being human. Vulnerability and dependence keep us human, but dispersion and diversity can be a healthier thing for our souls than collective power. I wonder how much of the building that goes on in our own valley thrives on the twin motivations of pride and insecurity. This text is not saying that it is wrong to build and create, or that technology is evil. Rather, it pointedly asks what it is that drives our building efforts.

I sense that many of our children labor under the weight of this tower. As they grow up in this highly competitive valley, they continually hear the message that it is not enough to be a normal kid, they must make a name for themselves. They have to strive for perfection in academics, athletics, and service. And maybe, just maybe, if they are good enough, their names will be heard in “academic heaven” and they will be able to go to college. I’ve seen that pressure break many a student.

How does God respond to such presumption? To learn this, the narrator transports us into the heavens.

B. God’s Reactions (11:5-9)

And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth.

Verse 5 marks the turning point in the story. Confronted with this concentrated human assertion designed to subvert the cosmic order, God acts swiftly and decisively. There is a touch of the absurd in man’s defiant act. It is ludicrous for the builders to think their tower (i.e. *greatness*) can reach into the heavens. With a stab of irony, the narrator says that God has to take a lengthy trip down from heaven before he can even get a glimpse of this so-called “magnificent” tower. The highest achievements of men are pathetic in the eyes of God. The only thing from Babylon to reach heaven is her sins (Rev 18:5). Notice that in the presence of God, these megalomaniac builders are given back their rightful names as mere “sons of man.”

God sees the tower, studies it, and weighs its true value. Not only is it absurd in his eyes, it also raises grave concerns about the direction that humanity is going. This is merely the first thing men propose⁷ to do with their concentrated power, independent of God. God will strike hard at the root of this evil lest nothing be too

difficult for them. So, in direct opposition to man's plans and purposes, God makes plans and purposes of his own ("Come-now!"). And his will cannot be thwarted. With but one word he strikes at the root and breaks their ability to communicate as one.

The great irony is that if language is the tool used by men to exalt themselves, God will use language to bring them down: "Come-now! Let us go down there and *confuse* their language." All it takes from God is a mere consonant or two inserted and rearranged into the schemes of men to completely undo them. "Let us *confuse*" (*nabelah*) replaces "let us *bake*" (*nilbenah*) and "let us *build*" (*nibneh*). Like a bug in the software, one tiny glitch strategically placed in the machinery and this start-up is quickly shut down! The building project is abandoned, and the unfinished building gets its name, *Babel*. But instead of greatness, *Babel* is an "anti-name" meaning "confusion." The story ends with the builders being given over to their worst fears. The very dispersion they sought to avoid occurs from that very place (*sham*) where they sought to storm the heavens (*shamayim*).

The poet Laurance Wieder captures the power of God's word in his imagery.

But said, then done.
On Shinar's plain once burst
Confusion from the sky, a whirlwind
Hurtling whistled, swamped, dispersed
The people into many nations.
Language lost, a weighty thud
And screech of men in hail of bricks
Puffed dust upon the plain as thick
As polar snow, as fall monsoon.

Where once prayers said were unison,
And conversations harmony,
We now mistake our dearest loves;
Crowds muddle in cacophony.
So far from being of one name
We clash, strive, swindle, beat and blame
The other for not being nearer
To ourselves, or speaking clearer.
Nimrod's grave magnificence
Redounds as naked arrogance.

So mankind is confined to dispersion and wandering, and with this the creation of diverse national entities that cannot be united by human effort. *Babel*, confusion, and with it, distrust, and a world history of countless wars. Yet, this text warns that alienated diversity is better than a collective unity arrayed in opposition to God. In that state man is kept vulnerable, humble, and in his place. And if we forget *Babel*, a mere glance at history reminds us of the unspeakable horrors that result when egomaniacs seek world domination and use their collective power for "Final Solutions." So the apostle Paul writes, "He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation,

that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him" (Acts 17:26-27).

Against the backdrop of God's judgment of the building project the kingdom of God is born. The "two great lines of the descendants of Shem divide in the two sons of Eber (10:25). One ends in Babylon, the other in the Promised land."⁸ One depicts man's end; the other, God's beginning.

II. Sought by the NAME (11:27-32)

Now these are the records of the generations of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran; and Haran became the father of Lot. And Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Abram and Nahor took wives for themselves. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. And Sarai was barren; she had no child. And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there. And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran.

Where will the new Eden be found? A careful study of the literary structure of the genealogy gives the key to where and how the kingdom of God is born. Framing the genealogy is the *death* of parents: Haran died (verse 28), and Terah died in Haran (verse 32). Then, as we move closer to the center, we find the *taking* of wives (verse 29) bracketed with the *taking* of children on journeys (verse 31). The kingdom will break into human history in the natural course of life's ordinary events, the things that make us human – death, marriage, and children — not in high-rise towers, but in transient tents.

From that larger context we then arrive at the very *center* of the genealogy, the place where it all begins. Yet, we are not prepared for what we are about to read. The details are as shocking as they are brief. We find there the name of a woman, not a man. And we learn that she is barren. This is revealed not once, but twice. The echo of pain cries out to emphasize the point. The kingdom of God is not found in the corporate efforts of men to build for themselves an everlasting name, but precisely at the place of our greatest human weakness, where we are barren and broken. It is not for the high achievers but for the insignificant who have learned to weep. This is the place where God births his kingdom. In fact, all three matriarchs, Sarai, Rebecca, and Rachel, were barren. And, precisely because they were barren, each one had to learn that the kingdom of God is impossible to achieve by human effort. It is by pure gift, born right in the center of their pain.⁹

The builders of Babylon strove to create a name for

themselves, but God will give Abraham a great name as a gift. Babylon's builders journey east to build their private Eden, but Abraham will journey west to be *given* a new land. Driven by fear, they concentrate and congregate all human relations in one project, but Abraham will be forced to separate from every earthly relationship to be blessed, and to be told by God, "Do not fear." They seek to build a tower reaching to heaven to usurp God's glory, but Abraham's grandson will see God's glory on a ladder. God doesn't need a tower to descend, only a small stepladder whose top reaches into heaven. And when heaven descends, he uses language to capture the event in sacred memory and names the place Bethel, "*the house of God.*"

Last weekend I traveled to the Oregon coast with several of our men to join in a men's retreat. The subject of our study was the David story and his related psalms. Our goal was to give each man a voice at the end of the conference to share his own psalm. After listening to fifty men pour out their souls in psalms of poetry, I was struck that not one man spoke of his glowing achievements. Rather, each one dug deep into the center of his soul and brought up what was most painful. As they spoke, every word was dense with emotion and washed in the beauty of tears. And as the symphony of vulnerable voices continued to play, heaven came to earth, and we were left with the climactic scene of two Jews staring into each other's eyes, set free with the words, "Father, I forgive you." Sadly, we had to disperse again,

but we felt more human than ever, unified by a common language of love and humility. On the flight home I thought of the words of Zephaniah 3:9 being fulfilled in a little place called Rockaway Beach:

"At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord." (NRSV)

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1. John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 134.
2. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis, Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1975), 14. I have been greatly helped by Fokkelman's work for many of my observations on this text.
3. Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis, The World of the Bible in Light of History* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 72.
4. Fokkelman, 27.
5. Fokkelman, 19.
6. Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1967), 109.
7. Wenham points out that this verbal form (*zamam* - to plot) is used in this tense (*niphal*) only in one other place, Job 42:2: "no purpose of Thine can be thwarted." "This Job parallel suggests that only God may plan without limit. Man is not supposed to emulate his creator in this way." Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word, 1987), 240-241.
8. Sailhamer, 134.
9. Psalm 127 is Solomon's commentary on this text.