

June 1, 2014

# *The Pride of Man and the Grace of God*

Genesis 11:1 – 9

For those of you who haven't been with us for the past few weeks, we are in a series called Seeing and Savoring the Gospel in the Old Testament. We've started in Genesis, and we are moving through the Old Testament, not line by line, but rather story by story, tracing the gospel story of God's work to rescue and redeem hostile rebels from their sin and guilt and ruin, and restore all of creation. The Bible is one story, start to finish, of God's work in history. What the Bible shows us all the way through, is a staggering panorama of prose, poetry, and narrative, written over a span of 1,600 years by at least forty different authors that has only one leading character – **God**; only one historical perspective – world **redemption**; only one focal figure – **Jesus Christ**. One solid body of harmonious teaching about God and His eternal purpose. We should not make the mistake of thinking the Old and New testaments are somehow unlinked and separate. It is one story – God's story, and the intent of the story is not to talk about us but to talk about God. **The Bible reveals who God is and what He is up to in history. It is not there to point out what we must do, but to reveal what God in Christ has done for us.**

And this morning we come to the story of the Tower of Babel. And as the title indicates, what this story attempts to tell us is something about the pride of man and the grace of God. In the Bible, you find these two always opposing each other as Peter tells us in his letter: *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*. God is always opposing the proud, but He's always giving grace to the humble. And what we see in this text is the third major opposition of God against proud people. He opposed Adam's pride in the garden when he fell to the temptation – *'You will be like God knowing good and evil'*. Adam decided that he was better than God at deciding what was good and what was evil. And then as they took up life east of Eden, we see Lamech setting the stage for all the corruption and violence to follow by pridefully deciding that he would be his own justification, his own savior: *Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold."* And God sends a cataclysmic flood to wipe out prideful man.

Pride is at the root of every rebellion against God. At the heart of it is the desire to assume the rights and privileges that belong only to God. It is an unwarranted belief in your own importance, and it blinds you to see the place that God rightly deserves in all of life. Pride is born out of an inordinate self-love, a drive for self-gratification and a passion for self-glorification. And here in this story we have a clear picture of the outworking of pride. What this text shows us is the anatomy of pride – the attempt to make nothing something, the folly of pride – the presumption that nothing is something, and the remedy for pride – to make something nothing. First of all let's look at **the anatomy of pride**. What does it look like? What is it made of? Look at verses 3 and 4: *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."*

First of all it is **the desire to make nothing something**. Here's the situation. If you read chapter 10 and the last half of chapter eleven, you see genealogies written down there. And in chapter 10 we read that two sons were born to a guy named Eber, Peleg and Joktan. And the Scripture records that it was at that time the earth was divided. Then if you go to chapter 11, you another genealogy and it lists years. And if you pay attention to the timeline there, and you count up the years, you find that from the time Noah got out of the Ark to the scattering of the people at Babel, in the days of Peleg and Joktan, it was only about 100 years.

And up to this point Scripture records that *the whole earth had one language and the same words*, and they were fulfilling the divine mandate to increase and multiply and fill the earth. But in the plain of Shinar, something happened. They stopped and settled down. And they said, 'It's time to make a name for ourselves'. The trouble comes in when we decide to make a name for ourselves. They said, 'Let's build a city and a tower and make a name for ourselves. Let's put our mark on this thing'.

We always run into trouble when we stop doing what God wants and start doing what we want. There is nothing inherently wrong in building cities or towers. In fact that actually mirrors what God is in the process of doing. When we read the end of the story we see the city that God has built coming down out of heaven to the renewed earth and man and God dwelling together in eternal joy in the city of God. The problem is not the action but the motive. Why were they building the city? Why did they want a tower that reached into heaven? Pride – **they wanted to make a name for themselves**. You see, they were rejecting the name God had given them. They didn't want to be the people of God – they wanted to be their own people. They were usurping God's place. Only God has the right to name. He created us, **not** so that we might make a great name for ourselves, but to make His name great – not to glorify us, but to glorify Him. The essence of pride is to make a great name for ourselves – **to take what belongs to God and make it ours**. They didn't feel they had anything and they wanted to make something.

What is your motive for doing anything? What is your motive for being the best at something? What is your motive for seeking to be known for anything? Is it to make your name great? To have people look up to you? To get strokes? From the earliest age, we have something in us that wants other people to notice how cool or cute or strong or handsome or talented or whatever, we are. Ever notice that from the time a child can talk in coherent sentences, the phrase you tend to hear a lot is 'Hey daddy, look at me'? We want to be noticed. We want to be praised. We want to be important. What we don't want is to see someone else praised, someone else noticed instead of us. Listen, there is nothing wrong with taking pride in doing something well. There is a kind of pride that is healthy and right. But there is everything wrong in doing it well **so that** others will praise you.

What we fail to understand is that **our real identity only comes from being named by God**. For all our efforts to define ourselves, to make a name for ourselves, we always end up with names like, liar, alcoholic, thief, adulterer, ego-maniac, fearful, worrier, murderer and many other equally charming titles. Unless we let God name us, we'll always do a really bad job. In fact **the name you make for yourself you won't like**. Take a look at one of the great patriarchs in the Bible – Jacob. His name means 'Deceiver'. And he was. He deceived his brother – he deceived his father – he deceived his uncle – he was always plotting and scheming and he certainly made a name for himself. But one day he met God. And God got hold of Jacob and changed his name. God told him "I'm going to name you Israel". You are no longer a deceiver but a prince. Essentially, God says, "I know you've blown it. I know you're a schemer, but I'm going to make a prince". Abram the exalted father of one, becomes Abraham the father of many nations – Saul the persecutor becomes Paul the apostle. When God names you, it changes you.

What underlies the desire to make a name for yourself? What's at the bottom of this? And the answer is in the last half of verse four: *let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.* And what they're saying is that they are afraid. They're afraid of being scattered, **afraid of becoming insignificant**. They're afraid of being inconsequential – of not mattering. They had a fear that if they were dispersed over the face of the earth they would become in a sense invisible. Why do you think that Facebook is such a big deal? It's a big deal because it speaks to one of our deepest needs – the need to matter – to be significant in some way – the need to make a name, the need to be seen, to be somebody. The essence of being was articulated by Rene Decartes back in the eighteenth century – '*Cogito ergo sum – I think, therefore I am*'. Today the essence of being would be more accurately summed up by '*Vidi ergo sum – I am seen therefore I am*'. That's the anatomy of pride – the desire to make a name for ourselves – to be somebody – to matter – to be significant. In other words, **to make nothing something**.

But that leads us to **the folly of pride** – the presumption that **nothing is something**. Look at verse 5: *And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built*. Do you appreciate the divine humor here? The writer is not telling us that God had no idea what was going on and had to take a trip down to earth to see what was happening. That's not what he's saying here. What this is, is a dramatic expression of the futility of our best effort. These guys said, 'Let us make a tower that reaches to the heavens', and God says here, 'Oh, let me look at that. Wait a minute, you know, I can't even see it from here – I'm going to have to get a lot closer to see this heaven tower'. And what God is saying to you and to me, is that all of our best achievements, all our greatest efforts, all our highest talents, are nothing in light of God's greatness. Take a look at Isaiah 40. *Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.'* Isaiah 40:21-22

And it is not just that we are like grasshoppers in His sight – it's worse than that. Grasshoppers are called grasshoppers because they're down in the grass and you don't even see them. Next to God's omnipotence, and greatness, we are grasshoppers – hidden in the grass. **Our best efforts are less than nothing in God's sight.** What were these guys trying to do? You see the point of the whole story is to tell us the meaning of the word Babel. The whole story is driving to this end. Look at verse 9: *Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth.* The guys that were building this tower said that Babel meant the Gate of God – or literally, a heaven-gated tower. It was a way of entering into God's presence through their own efforts. They were going to get to heaven even if they had to build a stairway to get there. **It is a classic illustration of man's attempt to save himself.** But God gives Babel a different interpretation. And if we understood Hebrew we would appreciate this more I'm sure. But the writer uses this unique literary construction to draw out the meaning here.

You see the same consonants and sounds for the word '**confused**' are the same consonants and sound very much like '**babel**'. And that is very close to the Hebrew word '**nabal**' which means fool. So while these guys are celebrating the construction of the gateway to God, God looks at the greatest achievement of man, and says '**fool**'. When you try to make a name for yourself, when you rely on your best efforts instead of God's grace, the name you get is fool. They thought they had something and God says they have nothing. They were trying to make nothing something and God looks down and says, 'I can't even see it from here'. They were trying to get to gain immortality without God and Psalm 14 tells us: *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."*

One of the important things about this story is what it doesn't say. It is an argument from silence, but it is a powerful one. In all their planning for this city and this tower, what you don't hear is any mention of God. There is absolutely no consideration of God. Even though they are trying to reach God – He doesn't figure into their plans at all. They were very religious – they were looking God for crying out loud. They were probably good people – there's no mention of the corruption and violence we saw before the flood. They probably went to church and everything. **But they were functional atheists.** They were acting as though God were not there. That **He** was insignificant – not **them**. They were planning and scheming as if God did not exist.

And in all their scheming, they had forgotten, or deliberately ignored, two things. They forgot or ignored the promise of God – that God had promised to send them a Deliverer who would deliver them from sin and death. And they were forgetting or deliberately ignoring God's command – His command to fill the earth. In all their planning, they did not include **God's promise and God's command. They left God completely out of their planning.** When we leave God out of our planning, our thinking, our lives, it produces this fear of insignificance, our fear of being nothing, and so we beat that back with our efforts to be somebody, to make a name for ourselves, to achieve something that gives us significance and immortality, and so we build our towers. We fail to take God into our considerations – we forget or ignore His promises and commands.

Where are you? In all your dreams and plans and goals, are the promises of God and the commands of God your foundation for decision-making? For those of you who are Christians, is your life built around the command of the Lord Jesus to go and make disciples and His promises to you that ensure its success? You see '**Go and make disciples**' is very much like the original command, '**Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it**'. In fact you might say that is the New Testament translation of the Old Testament commandment. The goal of both is to bring glory and honor and adoration to God – to make His name great in all the earth. Is that the thing that colors your choices and decisions? Or are you building your cities and towers? **The thing that rescues us from insignificance is to live our lives to make His name great – not ours.**

And in that truth lies **the remedy for pride.** And the only remedy is fairly drastic. It has to be. This thing called pride is so slippery, so deceptive, that a lot of the time we're even unaware that we are prideful, and it takes a massive blow to wake us up. The **remedy for pride** is that God takes what we think is **something and makes it nothing.** *A few years ago there was a famous football coach from the South who was on vacation with his family in Maine. When they walked into a movie theater and sat down, the handful of people there applauded. He thought to himself, "I can't believe it. People recognize me all the way up here." Then a man came over to him and said, "Thanks for coming. They won't start the movie for less than ten people."* The only way to deal with pride is to crush it. Anything less and it thinks it has a chance.

Look at what happens here. We've got two parts to the story. In the first part of this passage we read about mankind's prideful planning to make a name for themselves. And in the second part we read about God's actions to crush those plans. And right in the middle here, verse five, we have the turning point of the whole thing: *And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.* God came down. Right in the middle of their arrogant, prideful, scheming, the Lord comes down. **This is grace.** Grace is God doing for us what we could never do ourselves. And what we could never do ourselves to rescue ourselves from sin, from pride – God does. You have to notice that the Lord comes down, even though nobody asked Him. This is grace – God coming down to us even before we realize the kind of desperate situation we are in. For anything to be done about the Babel in my heart and your heart – ***we need God to come down.***

He has to come down in judgment and in mercy. And you might say, 'I see the judgment alright – but where's the mercy?' Look at verse 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.* In other words, if these guys, all united as one people, are now just beginning to erect monuments to their greatness, what limits will there be? If their pride is allowed to go on unchecked, it will only grow and multiply and there will be no limits to their sin. That is mercy. It is God's mercy not to let us continue in our pride. It is God's severe mercy to arrest us in our prideful course.

And the only way to do that is to crush it. God comes down and confuses their languages and scatters 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.* **There is judgment – and there is incredible mercy.** The judgment of God is always tempered by His mercy. God comes down and divides people into different languages, which leads to different ethnic groups and diverse cultural differences and scatters them over the globe. Which had the effect of not only crushing this rising pride, but short-circuiting the rise of a global, monolithic anti-God state, that would have the power to wipe out all the God-followers. You see God is adamant that His will be pursued and accomplished in the earth, even when people resolutely refuse to follow Him.

He said 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth' and they said 'We're not going to do that' – so God confuses their speech, causes divisions among them and creates ethnic and cultural differences and pushes them out of their city into the rest of the world. He doesn't even allow them to finish. God determined that in order for pride to be dealt with, for the human heart to be humbled and eventually turn to Him, in order for His purpose to be accomplished, that there should be a diversity of languages and people groups scattered over the earth. Mainly I think, because there is a greater impact of sinful pride, a greater danger that humanity would be swallowed up with pride, if we are all one than if we are divided up into different groups. We often think that the diversity of languages and cultures and peoples and political states is a hindrance to world evangelization—the spread of God'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 prone to sin and 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 9,700 people groups and 6,500 languages, not just in spite of it.

What God did, was ***take something they thought they had and made it nothing, in order to make it something.*** That is how He works. God will do nothing with those who think they are something unless He first makes them nothing. Listen to Martin Luther: ***It is the nature of God that He makes something out of nothing. Consequently, if someone is not nothing, God can make nothing out of him. Men make something into something else. But this is vain and useless work. Thus God accepts no one except the abandoned, makes no one healthy except the sick, gives no one sight except the blind, brings no one to life except the dead, makes no one pious except sinners, makes no one wise except the foolish, and in short, has mercy upon no one except the wretched, and gives no one grace except those who have not grace.*** Martin Luther

The **remedy for pride is the grace of God.** You see, we're busy ignoring God in our lives. We're making our plans, living our lives, making our decisions, building our cities and towers – making a name for ourselves. We're forgetting His promises and commands, doing our best to save ourselves, and acting as though He were inconsequential in our lives. We're living as practical atheists. We're not so very different from these guys.

And graciously, God comes down and confuses our lives. He frustrates our plans. Maybe your dreams have been shattered – maybe the bottom has dropped out of your plans and you're confused; your life has not gone as you expected. Why is God letting this happen? What's going on? What did I do wrong to deserve this? Do you recognize the grace of God here? Do you understand that maybe you've trusted in you and not in Him? Is it possible that you have treated God as inconsequential in your life? Do you see that God comes down in mercy and judgment to expose the folly of your plans? To crush your pride and to turn you back to Himself and to His word? To graciously do in your life what you could never do?

Ultimately God dealt with the sin of pride by coming down in the person of Jesus Christ. He left His throne and came down and lived a perfectly humble life, always submitted to the will of the Father. He didn't build His own city. He didn't build a monument to Himself. He didn't seek to make a name for Himself. When the time for His departure was at hand, what did He say? *"Now is My soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify Your name."* John 12:27-28 And He went to the cross. And on the cross, where judgment and mercy meet, He nailed pride to the tree. He died for our sin of pride, of treating God as inconsequential, of living as though there were no God. He died for our sin of trying to make a name for ourselves and trying to make it to God through our own effort. God came down and grace flows out.

Grace flows out to us through His death, through His blood, and when we believe, we are forgiven and through Jesus, the real gate of heaven, we are reconciled once again to God. And God gives us a new name. You see, when Jesus was raised to life again, God raised Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name. And when we by faith, believe in Him, when we rest from our work and believe in His work, and God looks at us, He sees us with that name on us. Over our lives is written now that name which is above every name and God loves us with the same love that He poured out on His eternal Son. He takes something and makes it nothing to turn it into something that resounds to His glory.

*Our gracious heavenly Father,*

*Our hearts are drawn out to You in thankfulness for Your amazing grace and love to us. Forgive us O Lord for taking what belongs only to You and trying to make it ours. Forgive us in Your mercy and compassion for trying in so many ways to make a name for ourselves and leaving You out of our thinking and planning. Help us to see that our best efforts are worth less than nothing in Your sight and crush all the towers we have built for our own glory. Teach us to know that we are well and truly named in Your Son and let us live in such a way that the name of Jesus is lifted high and made great in this world, we pray in the exalted name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*