

“FRUSTRATED EFFORTS”

This well-known passage comes at the end of the part of Genesis that is sometimes referred to as the primeval history. Genesis divides into two distinct parts: primeval history and patriarchal history. The term “patriarch” is used to refer to the great fathers of the nation of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve sons. Chapters 12-50 are called the patriarchal history because they are devoted to those figures and their stories. They contain the history of the origins of the people of Israel. But the first eleven chapters of Genesis are different. In them, the focus is upon God’s dealings with all mankind, and not just with the people of Israel. Those chapters are called the primeval history because they tell us about the earliest human history. The account of the tower of Babel comes at the very end of the primeval history and just before the transition into the patriarchal history. And this is very significant, because the next chapter begins to tell the story of how God made Abraham into a great nation and made his name great. You can see the contrast between the call of Abraham and what is said about the people in this passage. In chapter 12, it is God who promises to make Abraham’s name great, but in chapter 11 the people try to make a name for themselves. In these two chapters we see two cities set up against one another: the city of man and the city of God. This passage shows us that man builds his city in hopes of bringing glory to himself. But chapter 12 says that the only city that will truly reach to the heavens is the one that is being built by God himself. In the words of Psalm 87, “On the holy mount stands the city he founded... Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God.”

The builders of the tower of Babel gathered together in the land of Shinar and determined to build their tower-city there. Shinar is a name for the land that would eventually belong to the kingdom of Babylon. Babylonian cities were built around ziggurats, great manmade mountains of brick that had a temple on the top. In the Bible, Babylon is one of Israel's fiercest enemies. It was Babylon that destroyed the temple and carried Israel into captivity in 586 BC. The Scriptures often present Babylon as the epitome of godless and prideful humanity. We see this in the book of Isaiah, where the king of Babylon is described in these terms: "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'" [Isa. 14:13-14] And then in the book of Revelation, Babylon is the name given to the ungodly world kingdom that will rise up against the Lord and his people at the end of history. Here in this text we see the origin of that evil empire.

The sin of the tower builders is very clear: they wanted to exalt themselves. This is a paradigm example of the worldly spirit. It is a picture of man glorying in his independence and in his own accomplishments. And it is an attitude that dwells within each and every one of our hearts. We all struggle with pride. We all want to be exalted. As John Calvin put it, "there is no one who does not cherish within himself some opinion of his own pre-eminence." [*Institutes*, 3.7.4] There is no arguing against that truth. In one way or another, we all think that we are better than others. This is even true when we

admit our sins and failures, because at those times we end up taking pride in the fact that we are more aware of our sins than others are of theirs. As Augustine once said, “no one who has not declared war on [the love of praise] can possibly know how strong it is.” [Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 201] And as C.S. Lewis put it, “If you think you are not conceited, you are very conceited indeed.” [*Mere Christianity*, 114] In many ways, pride is the very essence of sin. It is, in Lewis’ words, “the complete anti-God state of mind.” [109] You remember what it was that caused Eve to succumb to the serpent’s temptation: it was the promise that she would become like God. She wanted to take God’s place. And that is exactly what the people who built the tower of Babel wanted. They wanted to make a name for themselves. But it was not their place to do so, as we see in God’s covenant with Abraham in the next chapter.

It is true that men have built cities, established empires, amassed fortunes, and garnered fame. But just take a look back at the great people from ages past, those men and women who truly established themselves in this world and made a lasting mark upon it. Where are they now? Who has their wealth now? What good is their fame doing them now? Try as we might, it is impossible for any man to make a lasting name for himself. But in Christ God gives his people a new and glorious name. He makes us a part of a lasting city, a city whose architect and builder is God. As Jesus says in Revelation 3, “The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God...and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new

name.” [Rev. 3:12] We cannot build cities that reach to heaven, but God can and will bring one down to us out of heaven.

It was not just pride that motivated these people to build their tower. They were also afraid. They were afraid of being scattered over all the earth. Perhaps they feared that this would make them too weak, too vulnerable, too isolated. But it was what God had commanded them to do. Over and over again in Genesis, the Lord commands mankind to multiply and fill the entire earth. But these people did not trust God. They didn’t believe his Word. And their fearful lack of faith led them to directly disobey God’s command.

It is important that we realize that there is a close relationship between unbelief, fear and disobedience. When we doubt what God has said in his Word, we begin to have many fears. Will I have all that I need? Will I be left all alone? Will I be happy? And this is not only true for individuals, but for churches as well. Will our church survive? Will we keep getting new members? Will there be enough money? And when we start to worry about such things, we end up doing what the builders of the tower of Babel did: we take measures into our own hands. There is the young Christian man who desperately wants to be married but has not been able to find a faithful Christian woman with whom he is compatible. Over time, he begins to worry that he will never find anyone to marry. And so he ends up taking matters into his own hands. He pursues a relationship without someone who causes him to drift away from the Lord. Or there is the church that worries that biblical ministry and biblical worship are too serious and too demanding to be

effective in our modern world. And so it determines to take matters into its own hands. It decides to spice things up in its worship and to start giving people more of what they want in its ministry. You can see how it works. Lack of faith leads to fear, and fear leads to disobedience.

The second half of our passage tells us how the Lord intervened and frustrated the efforts of these tower builders. The text says that God came down from heaven to see what they were doing. Now obviously, God did not really have to come down to see what was taking place. But the text says this in order to make an ironic point. These people thought that their tower was going to reach up to the heavens, but it was so puny that God had to come down in order to see it.

Verse 6 provides us with God's assessment of this project: "Behold, they are one people, and they have 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." This does not mean that God, the maker and ruler of the universe, was threatened by the things that a unified humanity might be able to accomplish. Instead, it tells us that God understood the danger in allowing man to continue in such collective and prideful efforts. The danger was not to God, but to the continued existence of mankind. If God had not intervened, man's sinful efforts would have kept on multiplying exponentially until human wickedness was so great that judgment could no longer be held back. But God had promised after the flood that he would never again in the history of this world allow man's sin to cause him to bring a judgment on the same scale as the great flood. And so

the Lord dealt a heavy blow to man's cooperative efforts by confusing human languages. He frustrated their grandiose efforts.

This is the eventual fate of all of man's prideful endeavors. The Lord will not allow man to succeed in his independent efforts to establish himself in this world. Those who live for themselves and for their own glory will meet the same end as the confused builders in this passage. They think that they are making such fine progress as they lay brick upon brick. They step back and observe their wonderful accomplishments. But one day they will find that they are completely paralyzed and unable to proceed any farther. God will not let them finish their tower.

It is true that there are many times in this life when it looks like the wicked are prospering. Evil people often make a lot of money doing evil things. Selfish people often find great success precisely because they only care about themselves. But we need to remember that God uses the prosperity of the wicked to harden and confirm them in their sin. We can even see how this is true in an earthly sense. Success and fame can be a great curse. How many times each year do we learn of another celebrity who is addicted to drugs, or loses custody of their children, or is arrested for a crime, or dies of an overdose or by suicide? And when it comes to spiritual matters, just try to imagine what wealth and fame do to a person's soul. Is it not almost always the case that the rich and powerful and successful are completely unable to see that, before God, they are spiritually destitute.

Think about this from another angle. What if God had let the people finish the tower of Babel? What if God had not confused human languages? All mankind would have been given over to prideful self-exaltation. There was great mercy in the judgment that God rendered in this passage. It prevented the human race from succeeding in sins of unimaginable magnitude. And where would you and I be if God had permitted us to succeed in everything that we ever wanted to accomplish? We need to remember that there is great mercy in the ways in which God often frustrates our efforts to do the things that we want to do.