

**“THE HIGH COST OF REBELLION”**  
**(Genesis 11:1-9)**

In the classic comic strip Calvin and Hobbes, Calvin – being Calvin – gets into trouble and his mom tells him to go sit in a chair in the corner. Calvin obeys, but he shoots his mom a dirty look and sits and sulks with his arms folded. After a few moments, he looks up to his mom and says, “I may be sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside.” Calvin illustrates to the rebellious attitude we all carry to some degree – that no one is going to tell me what to do.

As we’ve been making our way through the first eleven chapters of Genesis, a pattern emerges that we see repeated three times. The pattern is that God blesses man, man rebels, and man is judged. The first cycle of this pattern is found in chapters 1-3 where God blesses Adam and Eve with a perfect world and environment to live in – He gives them everything they could ask for – yet they rebel by eating of the one and only tree that God forbids. As a consequence of their rebellion, the world is cursed with sin and death. In His grace, God blesses Adam and Eve with animal skins to cover their sins, and allows life to continue, blessing them with many children and grandchildren.

In spite of this blessing, Adam’s descendants grow more and more rebellious and violent, and sin spirals so out of control that God sends a flood to destroy all living creatures on earth, except for Noah and his family. Yet once again – right after judgment – God blesses Noah with a covenant – and the sign of a rainbow – promising that He will never again destroy the earth with a flood.

Guess what happens next... there is yet another rebellion – a third rebellion in chapter 11– that takes place only hundred years after the flood. And like the first two rebellions, this rebellion will result in consequences that linger to this day.

Today we come to chapter 11 and the famous story of the tower of Babel. Most of us are familiar with the story, but there is more to the story that we’ve perhaps considered. Let’s read the account in verses 1-9 and then see what the Lord has for us to learn from it...

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people 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; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people 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.

The story of the tower of Babel comes right after the genealogies in chapter 10 that tell how Noah's three sons – Shem, Ham, and Japheth – spread out in different directions on the earth. Now, in the first nine verses of chapter 11, Moses – the author of Genesis – backtracks to explain the event that caused this scattering of people to take place. These verses form an easy outline. In verses 1-4 we see the rebellion of the people, and in verses 5-9 we see the judgment of God. While the passage ends with judgment, we'll look at some other verses in the Bible that reveal the grace of God in reversing the effects of Babel.

The big question that arises in this passage is exactly what happens at Babel – what did God see in people that made Him come down from heaven and judge them? As I've looked over these verses, I see three actions – three things the people do – that are each driven by a desire for something. These are the same desires that drive people today, and cause them to do the same things.

The first action is that **the people move eastward, which is driven by a desire for independence.** – Verse one says that everyone at this time spoke the same language. It's probably been about 100 years since Noah and his family stepped off the ark – not a very long time – and by this time there are probably several thousand people living on earth.

Verse one says that people moved eastward. This is designed to catch our attention. Every time you see someone moving eastward in Genesis, it symbolizes movement away from God. When Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, cherubim guarded the eastside of the garden. When Cain killed Abel, he went out from the presence of the Lord and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden. When Lot left Abraham he traveled eastward to Sodom and Gomorrah.

In saying that the people in chapter 11 moved east, Moses is saying that they are moving away from God's blessing – they're moving further away from the ideal of Eden and the order and design of God, and they're seeking to live a life apart from God. They move east and settle on a flat plain called Shinar – which today is in the country of Iraq – between the Tigris and Euphrates River – an area the Greeks referred to as Mesopotamia.

Later this area would become the center of the Babylonian Empire. Throughout the Bible – up until the final book of Revelation – Babylon symbolizes the world system that is opposed to and in rebellion against God. The empire of Babylon has long since passed, but it's spirit of rebellion lives on – and according to Revelation, will be prominent in the last days just prior to Christ's coming.

In chapter 10, verse 10, we learn that the leader of the people that moved to Shinar is a man named Nimrod. Nimrod became legendary for his strength and charisma – a larger-than-life figure who became the founder of Babylon, and also the influential city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Both Babylon and Assyria would long be enemies of Israel and several centuries later carry Israel off into captivity. Nimrod's name, interestingly, means "rebel." If you're looking for baby names, you might want to leave Nimrod off the list. Nimrod epitomized the rebellious spirit of Babylon.

Verse 2 says that they "settled" in Shinar, which was an act of defiance. When Noah got off the ark God said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth." I want you to spread out, depend on me, and fill the earth with my glory. But the people, led by Nimrod say, "No, we're going to settle right here, and we're going to build a city," the exact same thing Cain did after he left the presence of the Lord, went to the east, built a city, and settled there.

Not only do the people move eastward and settle, but secondly, **they build a city – an act driven by the desire for security**. Verses 3-4a, 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…”

There’s nothing wrong with building buildings or building a city – God would later establish Jerusalem as His holy city, and the Bible ends with God bringing the new heavenly city of Jerusalem down out of the sky to reside on earth – but the city of Babylon is a secular city – a city built not to glorify God, but to glorify man. Nimrod and his clan say, “We don’t need God to live the good life. We don’t need God to meet our needs. We can build our own city, we can develop our own civilization and culture, and create the ideal world.”

Since there were no stones out on the plain to build their city, they developed the art of making bricks and using tar to bind the building blocks together. They were ingenious, and part of being made in God’s image is the ability to create and design and build – but rather than give God the glory and the credit for their skills and their ingenuity – they took pride in their own accomplishments... “If we can build a shed with brick and mortar, imagine what else we can do – we can build an entire city.”

In the ancient world, cities were built for security – people would band together, build a wall around themselves, and feel secure in their ability to fend off attackers. Those of us who live Gold Beach like the fact that we don’t live in a big city, but at the same time we’re always traveling to Coos Bay or Eugene or Medford to go shopping, to see doctors, and to take advantage of things we don’t have here. Cities have always been attractive because you have everything you need right at your fingertips.

When cities are mentioned in the Bible, they are not portrayed in a positive light. It seems that the closer you move to the city, with its comforts and conveniences and security – the more you become dependent on these things and the less dependent you are on God. That’s why prophets like Isaiah denounced those who depend on horses and chariots and soldiers, and not on God.

One of the reasons God wanted the people to spread out over the earth is so that they would depend on Him – but once you build a city, with all it has to offer, the more you come to depend on it and not the Lord. Cities like New York and Hollywood and Las Vegas – with all their money and power and fame – are mostly godless.

This is why Jesus concentrated His ministry in the region of Galilee – away from the powerful center of Jerusalem – He went to the poor, the uneducated, and the marginalized – those who would depend on Him for salvation. The rich and powerful in Jerusalem were the ones who rejected Jesus. Who needs Jesus when I have everything I need? Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24). Wealthy people tend to depend on their wealth – and self-reliant people have a difficult time realizing their need for a Savior. The same is true for those who are highly intellectual, or famous, or powerful – the more you have on this earth, the less likely you’ll be dependent on God.

Jesus said if you want to get into the kingdom of heaven you must become like a little child, who has nothing to offer God, who is helpless and completely dependent. Their hearts are open and trusting, and they eagerly welcome Jesus. But the builders of Babel are self-reliant, proud, and excited to build a city apart from God.

Third, not only do they build a city, **they build a tower**, which speaks to another desire – **the desire for power and prestige**... “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves.”

Lots of ideas have been set forth as to what this tower was and what purpose it served. Most likely it was what’s called a ziggurat. A ziggurat was a temple with an external staircase leading up to a small shrine on top, dedicated to a god or goddess. Archeologists have excavated several of these ziggurats in Iraq – some that were said to be seven stories high. The word Babel means, “the gate to the gods.” The shrine at the top of the tower was seen as the place where heaven meets earth – and where priest could call upon the gods for what they needed.

The ancient world believed that the closer you were to the heavens – the higher up you ascended – the closer you were to God. The Old Testament prophets condemned the building of pagan shrines on “high places,” where people would appeal to false gods to bless them and make them prosperous. If you needed rain for your crops, you’d make sacrifices to the storm god Baal, and coerce him into sending rain and making your crops flourish. If you wanted children, you’d try to make Ashtoreth – the goddess of fertility – happy so you’d be blessed with fertility.

The tower of Babel is the beginning of this kind of pagan, false religion that sought to control God and manipulate Him into giving Him what they wanted. By bringing God down to their level, they stripped Him of His power and sovereignty and greatness. He became just another way to make their lives comfortable and convenient.

The tower was built not only to gain power, but to achieve **prestige**. They said, “Let’s build a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we can make a name for ourselves.” One of the driving forces in our human nature is to be recognized – to be somebody – to have people look at us and be impressed. I remember receiving some awards in high school, and basking in the delight of what others thought of me. I realize now that they probably didn’t care all that much, but at least I thought they did. Guys also impressed other guys in high school with their cars or trucks. One of my friends had a really nice-looking, yellow GTO with mag wheels, which immediately elevated his status. Others try to impress people with how much money they have, or with how they look, or how many friends they have on social media.

There’s a new epidemic of depression and anxiety among teens and young adults, who look at what others are doing on social media and feel like they don’t measure up. None of this is new, but goes all the way back to the tower of Babel... “Look at me, look at my city – how secure it is – look at my tower – how tall it is – look at my car, look at my clothes, look at pictures I post – just look at me and be impressed.”

You might remember back in Genesis 4, after Cain went eastward and built a city named after his son, that the line of Seth began to “call on the name of the Lord.” They sought to glorify God’s name and not their name.

Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Whatever we do or build or achieve, we are to give glory to God’s name – to build up His name and not our name – recognizing that all our abilities and talents come from Him. We are to have the same attitude as John the Baptist who said, “He must increase, and I must decrease. He must become greater, and I must become less.” God is the creator and we are His creation. Our purpose on earth is not to impress others, but to make God look impressive to others.

In the gospels, Jesus acknowledges the desire to be great – to succeed – to be significant – to live a life that matters – but He defined greatness in the direct opposite way as the world defines it. He says, “If you want to be great, learn to be the servant of all. If you want to be great in the eyes of others, be humble. Don’t look to impress others, but serve them. If you do this, you will be great – I will lift you up and exalt you – and I will reward you in the kingdom with positions of honor. Don’t build towers to make a name for yourself – spread out and serve others and you will be great.”

In verses 1-4 man has had his say and done his thing, and now beginning in verse 5 God has His say. Verse 5... “But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.” Notice the play on words – the people of Babel built up, and now God comes down. God, of course, doesn’t have to come down in order to see what’s going on, but verse 5 is written as a mockery of what the people are trying to do. They think they’ve built this tall, impressive tower – but God, up in heaven, says, “What tower? I can’t see a tower... I better come down... oh, that tower? That little thing?” In other words, God is not impressed.

Verses 6-7, 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.” “Let us” speaks of the trinity – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in heaven who see the rebellion of Babylon and decide to judge their rebellion by confusing their language. The people said, “Let us build,” and God says, “Let us confuse.” He overrules their rebellion.

Speaking the same language is a great advantage, especially when you’re trying to build a city and a tower together. It makes work easier and unifies people together in a common cause. But not being able to communicate with each other brings the work project to a halt. Two guys are working on the tower, and one asks the other to borrow a trowel, and the other guys says, “What? A towel?” It’s hard enough for us to communicate in English, much less a completely different language. The fallout from Babel continues to this day, as our world is divided and separated by various languages, customs, and cultures.

Yet in our lifetimes something remarkable has happened – our world has become significantly smaller and more connected than any other time in history. You can get on airplane and be somewhere halfway across the world in less than 24 hours. You can click a button on the internet and connect with people around the globe. This gets people very excited, and gets them talking about globalization and a new one-world order where we unify economically and politically – the very same thing people attempted to do at the tower of Babel.

The Bible tells us this will happen in the end times leading up to Christ’s return. The book of Revelation says that the antichrist will come on the scene – a powerful, tyrannical leader like Nimrod – and unite the world together. People will be excited that utopia is just around the corner, but they soon find out that the antichrist is a con man – energized and controlled by Satan – who leads one last rebellion to overtake God. Revelation 17-18 says that this one-world order – which not by coincidence is called Babylon – will be destroyed when Christ returns with a sword.

Verses 8-9 says, “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.” God confusing the languages at Babel is a judgment, but it’s also a blessing. God says, “If rebellious people are allowed to keep speaking the same language, it’s only going to lead to more rebellion, more chaos, and more problems for the world. To keep this from happening, I’m going to divide people, and make them spread out over the face of the earth.” Since this is the case, as followers of Christ, we should stand firmly opposed to any form of a one-world government or globalization that seeks to defy God’s judgment at Babel.

The story of the tower of Babel ends with judgment, but as with all the judgments in Genesis 1-11, God in His grace has a plan to bless creation – and His plan begins in the very next chapter – Genesis 12 – where He calls Abraham out from among the scattered people, and from him forms a nation through which He will bless the world. Through the Jewish people God will send the Messiah, who will reverse the effects of Babel, and reverse the effects of the curse of sin and death, by dying on the cross.

Here's the amazing part. When we come to the book of Acts – chapter two – we see the beginning of the church on the Day of Pentecost – 50 days after Jesus' resurrection. There in the Upper Room the 120 believers begin speaking in tongues – in known languages they had never spoken before. The people on the street – many who had come from different countries for Pentecost – were dumbfounded... “They're speaking my language – how did they do that?” What happened at Pentecost is direct reversal of Babel.

At Babel, God confused language and separated people – at Pentecost, God made language understandable and united people. People from around the world – divided by language – heard the good news of Jesus proclaimed in their own tongue and over 3000 were saved. Isn't that great?

God is bringing people back together – not in rebellion, but in worship. God loves unity, but unity that is based on the gospel and promoting God's purposes. What brings you and me together as a church is Christ. We come from all kinds of backgrounds and perspectives, but we come together for the common cause of Christ and making Him known.

Guess what believers did after Pentecost? They spread out and scattered all over the earth – taking the gospel to the furthest regions of the known world. Likewise, God wants us as the church to scatter out into the world – to spread the good news of salvation and make disciples of Christ.

Our unity in Christ is beautifully illustrated in communion, as we gather around the table as fellow believers, bound by our faith in Christ. As we come to the table this morning, we're reminded that in a world that is divided by race and politics and ideology, there is a true unity in Christ – and we celebrate that.

As we come before the Lord's Table, it's an opportunity to make sure our hearts are right before the Lord, and to remove any pocket of rebellion that might be there...

- Is your heart moving eastward apart from God in independence, or is it moving closer to God in dependence and obedience?
- Are you finding your security in a city and the comforts and conveniences of this world, or are you finding your security in God alone?
- Are you building a tower to coerce God to give you what you want and make your life better, or are you letting God be God, and say, “You are God, and I am not. Your will be done, not mine.”
- Are you building a tower to impress others, or are you living to impress God alone?