

Monumental Pride

<i>Text</i>	Genesis 11:1-9
<i>Readings</i>	Psalm 2, Acts 2:1-12
<i>Theme</i>	A sovereign God judges the arrogance and pride of mankind by confusing their language.
<i>Purpose</i>	To point out the human pride and arrogance in our culture and to describe God's overall plan and purpose of salvation.

The book of Genesis is divided up into 10 main sections, each beginning with the words “This is the account of...”, or “These are the generations of...” This section we are going to read is part of the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth that begins in chapter 10:1 and goes to chapter 11:9. This is a last look at the nations of the world before the story in Genesis focuses down to the particular people of God. **Read 10:1, 32, 11:1-9.**

Some of you may have been up the Sky Tower in central Auckland. It is the tallest building in the Southern Hemisphere - 328m high - as tall as 37 buses standing end on end! From the top, on a clear day, you can see 80 kilometres in every direction.

It took two years and nine months to build.

It contains 15,000 cubic meters of concrete and it weighs the equivalent of 6,000 elephants.

The tower can stand winds of up to 200 kilometres per hour and would remain undamaged even with an earthquake of 7.0 on the Richter scale.

It is a remarkable building and is a testimony to the imagination and ability of mankind and to the engineering and building skills of all involved.

However, contrast it with the great church cathedrals of the past which were built “To the Glory of God” and usually has a plaque on the base of the building acknowledging that.

The Sky Tower has no such statement; rather it gives evidence of being built for the glory of man and even stands as a symbol of the sin in society.

It has five bars and it also houses two casinos where thousands of people practice their belief that the universe is governed by chance, and gamble away their money hoping for a lucky break.

The Tower is a beautiful sight at night, overlooking the lights of Auckland, but we know that it is a different story down in the lanes and back alleys of the city streets.

At night there is corruption and crime; many are thieves, drunkards, homeless, prostitutes, and homosexuals. During the day people in offices and buildings are working away, but we also know that they are lying, cheating, gossiping and stealing.

Yes, the Sky Tower is a marvellous building, but it is also a symbol of a godless and secular society where people ignore God and seek to build their own empires.

This of course is nothing new. This chapter we have read gives us a striking display of these proud plans of men and of the purposes of God. These are the two aspects we want to consider as we look at this chapter.

1. We see here THE PLANS OF MEN in the development of human civilisation in the world after the flood.

At first the descendants of Noah stayed by Mt Ararat in the region of modern Turkey. But then they moved east in a major migration, presumably because they were looking for more room. They found a plain in Shinar which was the area of Babylonia. This was a rich and fertile valley and they settled there. Chapter 10:8-10 tells us about a mighty warrior and hunter whose name was Nimrod. The first centre of his kingdom was the city of Babylon in this plain of Shinar.

After they had settled there for some time they improved their building techniques. We often look down on the people of previous eras but these people developed a very advanced technology.

Prior to this they had made bricks out of mud and straw and then dried them in the sun. But here they learned to make them by baking them which made them stronger and more durable. In that area they found bitumen or tar and they used this for mortar because it formed a very hard cement.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with technology and engineering in itself, but for these people, and for many today, they were associated with certain sins.

One of these was **their alienation from God**.

There is no mention of God in the passage, no recognition of the Creator, no awareness of the Lord. Instead all the emphasis is on "ourselves" and what "we" are doing. They got so used to dealing with things that they forgot about God. They were so busy looking down at what they were doing that they forgot to look up. This was a secular society - people were going it alone without God, they were independent, self-reliant, autonomous.

That is certainly true of our society as well. This is a secular nation. God is ignored. People do not look up. Their gods are those of their own making. The Christian Trinity has been replaced by the gods of reason, nature and progress.

This is the world view of humanism. This began in the Western world with the Renaissance, was developed philosophically in the Enlightenment and is all pervasive now. The God of the Bible has been set to one side

because people believe they can manage quite well on their own, thank you! They can solve their own problems, they can look after the world by themselves without any interference or help from God. This is the philosophy of the man in the street, of the government and of the state education system. Where is there any mention of God in the TV news, in the lectures rooms of polytechnic or university, in the classrooms of the state schools? God is side-lined because he is regarded as irrelevant. And so the people of NZ live in their own little world of meaning and busyness.

Another sin of that time was **human pride**.

As they developed their technology and improved their engineering skills their plans became more ambitious. They said; "Come, let us build for ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens" (vs 4b).

Scholars believe that this tower was a ziggurat, which was a large multi-storied tower that went up in seven large steps with a temple at the top. Archaeologists can work out what they looked like from ancient records and descriptions and there are ruins of some of these in Babylon.

They explained *their motive* for this: "So that we may make a name for ourselves."

In chapter 6 we read about the Nephilim who were "men of renown". Literally that read; "men of name". The men of Babel, and the Nephilim, wanted to be big names, to have people look up to them, to be men of reputation. And they wanted that in their own right, by their own strength. They were arrogant and proud. They wanted to glory in their own achievements. They were building a kingdom of this world.

We can see this in the history of the world and in the great civilisations that have come and gone - the pharaohs and ancient Egypt, the empires of Assyria and Babylon, Alexander the Great and Greece, the Roman Caesars and their mighty armies - all empires built by men for their own glory. Think of the words of Nebuchadnezzar; "Is this not the great Babylon I have built...by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty." (Daniel 4:29).

In America it was the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre that symbolised man's belief in his own abilities and his pride in what he could achieve. In 1966 the architect of the World Trade Centre, Yamasaki, said that this building should "Become a living representation of Man's belief in humanity, his need for individual dignity [and] his belief in the co-operation of his ability to find greatness." Those words could have been said by the architects of the Tower of Babel.

We know what happened to the Twin Towers, and we know what happened to Babel. This is what will happen to all the ventures prompted by human pride. Eventually they will all end in ruin.

The third feature we see here is a human desire for **unity**.

The other motive for building this city and tower was that it would keep them together. They did not want to “be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” (vs 4b). They disobeyed the command of God who had told them to “be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.” (9:1). They wanted to stay together and were afraid of being scattered.

When people abandon God and do not believe in the Lord Jesus then there is nothing to hold them together, no binding spiritual unity. They knew this and sensed that they would be driven apart by centrifugal forces.

So they sought unity in something else - a common project - building this tower. They sought unity in an outward symbol, an external rallying point, something they could do together.

We see this going on today. Human sin and selfishness tends to drive people apart - there is tension and division and fragmentation.

Look at what happened in Eastern Europe when the USSR collapsed. All those different people fragmented into individual nation states.

Look at the sectarian violence going on in Iraq today, and the tribal warfare taking place in the Sudan.

When people have no unity in Christ then they will seek another means of holding everyone together.

You can see that in the European Union which is tied together around economic benefits. And you can see this in the United Nations which began in 1945 after the Second World War with high ideals and grand hopes. But those ideals were naive and those hopes have been dashed. It is now financially in debt, is overburdened in its bureaucracy, and is hopelessly ineffective in keeping the peace.

The same features at work in the Tower of Babel are at work today because people are still sinful. Human nature remains the same. People today want to be independent of God, they are proud of their own achievements and they are looking for something external to hold them together.

2. But the plans of men will be overtaken by the PURPOSES OF GOD.

In verse 5 we read; “But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building.” There is humour in this. For mankind this was an enormous project, but for God it was so small he had to come down and take a closer look! This reminds us that God is watching over all we do. He has his eye on everything, as we are reminded in Psalm 139. We cannot escape his presence.

God saw humanity united in evil. They had one language, one purpose, one common aim. “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’” (vs 6).

It is not as if they were beyond his control; rather the Lord wondered what on earth they would do next!? What else would they get up to?

As Jesus made his way to Golgotha, with Simon carrying the cross, he spoke to the women of Jerusalem: "If men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:31).

The intent of both questions is the same: If this is what they are doing now, what will it come to in the future?

So the Lord acted to preserve them from further evil. Read verses 7-8...

Here the Lord acted in his grace and mercy, as he had done at other times in the history of the world.

After Adam and Eve had sinned he promised them a deliverer.

After Cain had sinned he put a mark on him to protect him.

After the flood he promised Noah and all humanity that there would be regularity in the world and that he would not destroy the world with a flood.

Here the Lord confused the languages of those people to preserve them from self-destruction. This action was a punishment - it was an act of judgement on the pride and arrogance of mankind. But it was also an act of grace - he wanted to put the brakes on sin and to slow down the development of evil.

God does this today through his Spirit in what we call common grace. He restrains evil so that things are not as bad as they could be. He does this through governments and the police force and the judiciary. He does this by the good work of ordinary citizens, even those who are non-Christians. This is not a saving grace, but it is still an expression of God's favour to the people of the world.

All of this served God's Purpose. He wanted to disperse the people. This confusion of their languages was very effective in achieving that. Imagine if you have a large building project going on; but one day when people turn up to work they can't understand each other. Someone asks for a hammer and he gets a saw; another asks for bricks and gets wood; another orders concrete and get hard fill. No one can give measurements, or read plans, or understand instructions. There will be total confusion.

And that's what happened at the Tower of Babel. They could not understand each other. In the end people got fed up and they decided to move away with their families and others they could understand.

This passage marks one of the most important transition points in the OT: up to this time God has dealt with the entire human race; after this the focus shifts to one man, Abraham, and to one nation, Israel. God called him out of one of these dispersed peoples.

But even when he called him he promised; “all people on earth will be blessed through you” (12:3). The Lord narrowed down his focus and for 2000 years he worked through the people of Israel, until birth, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Then the Lord broadened out his purposes once again to embrace the whole world. He did that with the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which is the New Testament counterpart to Babel.

At Babel God confused the languages of the world; at Pentecost he gave the gift of languages.

At Babel God broke up mankind’s arrogant unity; at Pentecost he established a unity in the church through faith in Jesus Christ.

At Babel God narrowed the focus of redemption; at Pentecost he broadened his work to include all peoples and nations, Jews and Gentiles.

Today men and women are building monuments to their own glory – twin towers and the Sky City. But all of these will eventually fall down because they are based on human effort and pride.

But God is at work. He is building the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and one day will welcome us into an eternal city, the New Jerusalem, whose architect and builder is God.

Amen