

Making a Name for Yourself

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[0 : 0 0] You may like to have open the Black Bibles at page 8 as I'm preaching from the passage about the Tower of Babel in the book of Genesis.

I used to dream of being a great cricketer. I wanted so much to score centuries for Australia. I used to have a cricket ball in a sock hanging from the washing line.

And in between studying I'd be out there as a high school student hitting away the cricket ball wearing a patch in my father's lawn. Dreaming of scoring centuries for Australia.

Well it was a fairly unfulfilled dream as you no doubt know. You've never heard my name. It's never been on the MCG scoreboard. I once did captain the 5th 11 at school.

And I must say the highest score I ever scored was only two years ago. I made 35. I was very pleased. Playing for the Gloucestershire clergy team against a Welsh clergy team in Wales.

[1 : 0 5] Wales is not renowned for being good cricketers. It would have been easier to become a famous person by spending a bit of money. Because if I'd had 55,000 pounds a short while ago I could have become the Baron of Gilsland.

Now I don't know where Gilsland is but that doesn't really matter. I think the Baron of Gilsland would be a very famous person. He'd have a great name. And apparently he was running out of money so he sold his title.

And somebody bought it for 55,000 pounds and could start calling themselves the Baron of Gilsland. Well that would be an easier way to have a famous name than scoring lots of runs for Australia.

Many of us I guess have some desire to be well known. To have a reputation. Maybe to be famous. At least to succeed. Maybe to have a name that people would know and talk about.

Maybe to have a reputation that would succeed us after we've died. So that people remember us. Often in churches, and this is no exception, there are plaques to recall people from the past.

[2 : 1 0] Some of us perhaps would like our name on a plaque or a school honour board. Or have a building named after us. Or if you're Alan Bond, to have a university named after you. Because we want to be famous and remembered.

Perhaps some of us would like to have our name recorded in the dictionary of national biography. Not that anybody probably reads it. But rather it would be nice to have our name there or in who's who.

Well in the Bible reading this morning. And what the story, the children's story was based on. It's about a group of people who want to make their name great.

That was the motivation for them building the tower. And building the city. Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon 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 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.

[3 : 14] And let us make a name for ourselves. Now there's nothing wrong with a city or a tower. There's nothing wrong with using technology of bricks and bitumen and so on.

To build cities and towers. But what's wrong with this city and this tower is the motivation of the people who built it. For their motivation was in effect a claim to autonomy.

A claim for self-security. These were people who were acting and striving to be independent from God. They were looking to their own technology and skill, ingenuity and expertise.

To make a claim for themselves to be great and independent from God in heaven. Theirs was to be a demonstration of human power. They said at the end of that verse, let us make a name great for ourselves.

Lest we be scattered upon the earth. For they wanted to be gathered. They wanted to be together because there is strength in unity. Theirs was a statement against God. Who had earlier said to humanity, go and fill the earth.

[4 : 22] Scatter abroad across the face of the earth and fill it and multiply on it. These were people defying God. This was in effect an assault against God. A refusal of God's ways.

They built the tower. It was to have its top in the heavens. Heaven is God's place. To build a tower with its top in the heavens was to be an assault on the gates of heaven itself.

To get to where God is. To God's own domain. The ancient Babylonian towers, which many think this is a story about, called ziggurats.

The sort of buildings like we saw in the pictures from the children's story. Were religious buildings. They were buildings to do with their gods. And so that ties in well with the notion that these were people who were building a religious tower.

Who were making a claim on God. Who were making a statement against God. To be autonomous from him and independent from him. These are human beings overstepping the bounds of human limitations.

[5 : 28] They're attempting to supplant God in their life and in their society. And nothing's changed. Their world was much like ours.

William Golding, who wrote the famous book Lord of the Flies, wrote another book, equally bleak, called The Spire. It's the story of a medieval dean of a cathedral.

Who wanted to build the tallest spire in his church or on his church. So that he would be famous. And he built it. The architects debated whether it was safe.

And it wasn't. It's just like the church I was at in England the last three years before coming here. St. Matthew's was built 120 years ago. The older church down the road, two blocks away, was the Roman Catholic Church, St. Gregory's.

It had a spire. St. Matthew's, when it was built, did not. So at the turn of the century, they decided St. Matthew's ought to have a spire. And it ought to have a spire taller than the Roman Catholic Church.

[6 : 31] So they built it one foot taller. It fell down. Nothing's changed. God isn't impressed with this tower of Babel.

God in heaven couldn't even see this tower. We're told in verse 5 that he comes down to have a look at it. And even though the words aren't in the Bible, the words in the children's story actually suggest the tenor of the verse.

What is that extraordinary little pimple down there? Because that's how small it was in God's eyes. It's a futile, feeble gesture at an assault on the gates of heaven.

These human beings are building the biggest building they could ever build. And it gets nowhere near heaven. So much for human achievement. God has to come down to even see it.

It's a mocking insult on human achievement and ambition. The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which mortals had built.

[7 : 36] And the Lord said, look, they are one people. And they all have one language. And this is only the beginning of what they'll do. Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

Come, let us go down and confuse their language there. So that they will not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth.

And they left off building the city. God's words are a parody on the people's words. They say, come, let us make bricks.

And build a tower. God says, come, let us go down. And whose words come to pass? God's in the end. The people build a tower in order that they won't be scattered over the earth.

God says, come, let's go down and scatter them over the earth. And they're scattered. God's word prevails. God's word prevails. The human being's words come to naught. God is the one with the power.

[8 : 36] All the human might, ingenuity, skill and achievement comes to absolutely nothing. Indeed, they're worse off than if they'd done nothing. They built in part out of a motivation of fear that they'd be scattered.

Not only are they scattered by God, but they're scattered with different languages as well. They're worse off than if they'd never started building. God is the one who has scattered them.

And God is the one who does that. This is an illustration of one of the things the Bible says consistently about God. You may remember the words of Mary when she was told that she was going to give birth to Jesus.

The Lord scatters the proud in their conceit. And that's exactly what he's done here. He's scattered these proud people in their deceit. He's a conceit. He's given them all different languages.

He's made a fools of them, really, in the end. He's made a mockery of what they've been trying to do. God is the one who exalts the humble and brings down the proud.

[9 : 38] Time and again, the Bible illustrates it. Time and again, the Bible tells us that that's what God is about. The final irony is in verse 9. Therefore, this tower was called Babel.

Not the gate of God, which is what it should be, but rather loud, meaningless noises. A babble, a confusion of sounds. What a mockery to this great civilization, to this great world power of the time.

Humanity cannot defy God and get away with it. God has the final word. Well, where did these people go wrong?

Their motivation was to be autonomous, independent, self-sufficient, self-secure. They wanted to determine their destiny for themselves.

And all without God in the equation. All the things that they wanted and planned for are the values of our society.

[10 : 43] Our society prizes autonomy and independence. It prizes ambition. It prizes initiative and ingenuity. It prizes determining destiny for oneself.

This was a society playing God. And it failed. And it is just like ours in many respects. Another society playing God.

Whether it's our space technology or our medical technology, we are trying to play God. We are trying to take control. We are trying to be independent of God.

We are trying to show initiative apart from God. But we are not God. We refuse to listen to God so often. And yet God is the one who will have, in the end, the final word.

As he did here. The greatest achievements of humankind cannot forge any link with God. These are people who tried to build a tower from earth to heaven.

[11 : 45] And it doesn't work. And nothing we do from earth will get to heaven. There is nothing we do that can bridge the gap from earth to heaven. But just as in the story God came down, so the only way in history that the gap between earth and heaven can be bridged is when God comes down to earth.

Nothing I do and nothing we do can get us to heaven. It is only when God comes down that the gap is bridged.

And in the end, of course, that's when Jesus Christ is born as a man on earth. These people tried to make their name great.

These people tried to establish themselves as the most important people with the greatest reputations. And they failed. In the very next chapter of the book of Genesis comes a striking story in contrast to this.

There God spoke to one man. To a man called Abraham. And among the things that God said to Abraham in the very next chapter, he said, I will make your name great.

[13 : 08] Whose name is great? The anonymous Babel builders, we don't even know their names. But Abraham, his name we do know.

4,000 years after Abraham lived, he is still a well-known, famous, great man. Revered not only by Christians, but Jews and Muslims as well.

Hence the conflict at Hebron in Israel. All because it's the place where Abraham is buried. Where does greatness come from? Not from people who strive to make their names great.

But it comes from God, who promised Abraham, I will make your name great. And now in our point of view from history, as we look back, Abraham's name is great.

But we don't know any of the names of the builders of the Tower of Babel. But Abraham's is not the greatest name. The greatest name belongs to another man.

[14 : 09] 2,000 years after Abraham and 2,000 years before us. The name of Jesus is the name above all names. For as the New Testament tells us that one day, at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow in earth and in heaven and under the earth.

But his is not the only great name. Because at the end of the Bible, there's a list of names. A list of names that are great and will last forever.

It's written in a book, not on a gravestone, not on a church plaque. There are no buildings named after these people. There are no honor boards. But this book has the list of great names.

It's Jesus' book of life. And in it are the names of those whom God makes great. Not those who've pursued greatness in their own means, but those to whom God gives the gift of eternal life.

And where is this book kept? It's in another city. Not the city of Babylon or Babel. It's not in a city built with human hands, with bricks and mortar.

[15 : 24] It's not in a city built on earth. But it's in a city in heaven. And at the very end of the Bible, there's a vision of this city. And it comes down from heaven to earth.

Again, the only link between earth and heaven is the link that comes from God, not from us. And this is the city that will stand forever. And it's God's city.

And in that city is Jesus at its center. And all the inhabitants of that city worship him, the name above all names. And he has there his book, his book of life.

And in it are the names of all those whom God makes great. All those who have allegiance with Jesus Christ. All those who are followers of Jesus Christ through faith and repentance.

The Bible looks forward to the Tower of Babel being reversed. It looks forward to all the speech of humanity being joined together rather than a confusion of words and language.

[16 : 27] One of the prophets of the Old Testament prophesied that at that time, God will change the speech of the peoples into a pure speech that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord.

That's how our name gets into the book of life. That's how our name becomes great. By calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus and serving him with one accord.

In baptism, which we're about to celebrate, there is an important name. But baptism is not a naming ceremony. It's not the baby's names that are important.

We're not naming them in this ceremony this morning. The names of Chelsea and Cody are not the most important names in a baptism ceremony. But the name of God is.

For each of them, as us, will be baptized or have been baptized into the name of God, Father, Son, and Spirit. That's the name that's important.

[17 : 31] Not Chelsea or Cody or Jack or Fred or Joe or Mary or Flory or anything else. It's the name of God into whom we are baptized as Christian people. It's an outward sign.

The inward reality is what counts. Our allegiance in our hearts to Jesus Christ, the name above all names. Where is your name written?

Where will it be written? In the dictionary of national biography? Or in the Jesus book of life?

Only one of those two books will last forever. And only one of those two books has the names of true great people in it. Jesus book of life.

And our names are in it when we call upon the Lord and serve Him with one accord. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[18 : 30] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.