

Sin and Scattering

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[0 : 00] Father, we pray that you'd help us to focus on your word, to work hard at listening this morning, that we might be encouraged by what we hear. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, I wonder if you can guess this person. Who am I? In 1963, I gave one of the most famous speeches in all of history.

No. Close. And I had a repeated refrain which said, I have a dream. Martin Luther King. Yep. So on the next slide, there he is.

So a big rally in Washington, D.C. and the big famous speech, I have a dream. And what was his dream? Well, it was a united America. In fact, he said many things, but one of the lines was, I have a dream that the sons of former slaves and that the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream. And on it goes. It's quite powerful when you listen to it. In other words, his dream was for peace and unity. It's a dream that is echoed by humans across the world, really, particularly in our time where there is such terrorism and attacks like that in the UK and even here in Melbourne.

[1 : 24] And this dream for peace and unity is often joined by other dreams like the end of world poverty, for example, or the curing of diseases like cancer or the restoration of the environment like the ozone layer.

And for Australians, the great Australian dream is still owning your own home, although that is getting harder and harder. In other words, humanity's dream is for everyone to have a healthy, wealthy and happy life, especially ourselves, for those who dream.

And so that's what humanity has worked towards. We have come up with cures to diseases like smallpox, and we are working on cures for cancer. We have abolished most forms of slavery and are seeking to get rid of it all.

We have lowered the percentage of poverty and raised the standard of living. In fact, everyone in Australia will soon have the internet if the NBN ever makes it to you.

What's more, we have created organisations to achieve our dreams, like the United Nations or the Make Poverty History Foundation or the G8 summits where world leaders gather to solve environmental problems and the like.

[2 : 46] And yet for all that, we're still not there yet, are we? Of course, the reason we have gotten this far is that God actually created us with the capacity to do these things, to rule his world, to do good.

So on the next slide, we read this from chapter 1 in Genesis a few weeks ago. Then God said, Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish of the sea, the birds and so on, the earth.

Then God said, Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule. I just read that. So God created mankind in his own image. In the image of God, he created them.

Male and female, he created them. God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number. Fill the earth and subdue it.

Rule over. Dot, dot, dot. The fish are in the sea, birds are in the air and so on. You see, God created us to reflect his good rule over the world.

[3 : 49] That's primarily, not only, but primarily what it means to be in God's image, to work together as man and woman to represent God's good rule over the world.

And that involves filling the earth, as we saw on the slide a moment ago. I mean, it's a bit hard to rule over the whole world if you're all clumped in one part of the world, isn't it?

But the thing is, as we fill the world and represent God's rule, we are to bring him glory. We are to make his name great. We are his image bearers.

And if we rule like God, we'll point people back to God. Make his name great. Give him glory. By the way that we rule. By the way that we behave. It's kind of like children.

Kids can often bring their parents glory by the way they act. I mean, if you see some children who are really well behaved, you often think, wow, what good kids. How do those parents do it?

[4 : 47] And if your kids are not like that, you go and ask the parents for some tips. Or perhaps if they want to trade kids. Well, no, you don't do the last bit. Not in front of your kids anyway.

But you see, children's behavior can bring praise and glory to parents. And it's like that for us. We bear God's image and reflect his good rule in the world.

And by doing so, we are to bring him glory. Praise. That's how the earth was to be filled with the glory of God, you see. By people reflecting his good rule together under him and over his creation.

Yet humanity, as we've seen, didn't do this, did they? As we've seen over the past few weeks, humanity rejected God and his word. And so instead of the earth being filled with his glory, it was filled with violence and evil.

Chapter six. And last week we saw God made a fresh start with the flood, washing away the wickedness of humanity. And then after a drunken episode from Noah, it seems like things are back on track.

[5 : 56] Because as we come to chapter 10, the next section and Noah's sons, we see that they are filling the earth to rule over it. Just like God had said in chapter one.

And so with that recap in mind, we're at point one in your outline, chapter 10, verse one in your Bible. This is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons, who themselves had sons after the flood.

Now here in verse one, the phrase, this is the account of, is literally these are the generations of. And you can see it because he lists generations, doesn't he?

But that phrase marks a new beginning or new section in this book. It's the way the writer divides up his material. And so this new section begins with the generations of Noah's sons.

And the writer lists 70 generations, which come from Shem, Ham and Japheth. Although as he lists them, they're actually in reverse order. So in verse two, he starts with the sons of Japheth.

[6 : 57] And then in verse six, if you're following along, just scanning down the page, we've got the sons of Ham, many of whom end up becoming Israel's enemies, which is probably why the list has more in it than Japheth's list.

In fact, if down the bottom of the page, you can see names like Egypt, where Israel was in slavery for a number of years. Or verse 15, Canaan, who fought against Israel and so on.

And then over the page, we keep going with Shem's descendants. So verse 21, sons were also born to Shem, whose older brother was Japheth. Shem was the ancestor of all the sons of Eber.

And on it goes. From Shem's line comes Israel. Now, there are more generations the writer could have given us. But he lists these 70 to show us that humanity did, in fact, increase in number and fill the earth after the flood.

And in case we didn't pick up on it, he puts it plainly in verse 32. Have a look at the bottom of the page there, the last verse of chapter 10. These are the clans of Noah's sons according to their lines of descent within their nations.

[8 : 07] From these, the nations spread out over the earth after the flood. So chapter 10 has a rather positive tone to it. Here is humanity filling the earth just as God commanded in Genesis chapter 1, which we saw before.

So that they might represent God's good rule as his image bearers in the world and bring God glory. Make his name great. And yet, if we look closely, there are signs in chapter 10 that not all is positive.

So if you just, we're going to do a little bit more flicking. So just turn back a page to chapter 10, verse 8. Chapter 10, verse 8. The first clue that not all is well is that in verse 8, there is a descendant called Nimrod.

Kind of reminds me of Hot Rod Car, kind of cool name. But his name actually means we shall rebel. And in verse 10, what is one of the first cities he makes? Well, it's Babylon or Babel.

And that city of Babylon or Babel in the Bible represents all that opposes God. So that's not positive. And if you just look up the page to verse 5, there's this refrain that tells us that while humanity is filling the earth, they're not ruling as a unified people, but divided.

[9 : 26] So verse 5. There's divisions of clans here.

And now just turn over the page one last time to verse 20, and we see the same refrain. These are the sons of Ham by their clans and languages in their territories and nations.

There's division, you see. Well, down the bottom of the page, verse 31, again, the refrain says, These are the sons of Shem by their clans and languages in their territories and nations.

You see, people are divided into clans and nations and languages. Instead of ruling the world united together under God, they are ruling it divided without God.

There's division. In fact, in verse 25, the name for peleg, I keep saying pegleg, but it's not. It's peleg, actually means division.

[10 : 32] Why? Verse 25, because in his time the earth was divided, you see. And while this chapter appears positive with humanity filling the earth to rule over it, just as God said, it seems they are not doing it as God wanted.

Something has happened to divide them. And so now the writer tells us what happened. The first part of chapter 11 is actually out of chronological order.

He shows us what's happened. And now in chapter 11, verses 1 to 9, he shows why it happened. It wasn't because humanity obeyed God. It was actually because humanity rebelled against God.

So point to chapter 11, verse 1. Now the whole world had one language and a common speech from Noah after the flood. And then 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. And they used brick instead of stone. So there's an advancement in technology.

[11 : 33] 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'll be scattered over the face of the whole earth. Now, at first glance, there doesn't seem to be much wrong with building a city and a tower.

You know, there's an advancement in technology for those days. You know, it seems quite positive. And this advancement in, you know, building cities and towers shouldn't surprise us because God has given humanity the ability to do that.

And yet humanity was always meant to rule with God, trusting in God and following God. But in these verses, there is no mention of God. Do you notice that?

It's all about humanity. They are ruling together, yes, but without God. They're seeking to be independent of God. So we see it in a number of ways.

[12 : 34] First, they move eastward, verse 2. Now, you've got to remember that God was in the Garden of Eden, which was in the east. And so the picture is, here is the garden with God. And they're moving further eastward, that way, away from God.

Secondly, they build a city so that they can settle together and not be scattered over the face of the earth. In other words, they're rebelling against God's purpose to fill the whole earth, you see.

And what's more, they seem to be worried about being scattered. But instead of trusting in God to look after them as they fill the earth, they seek security in themselves and in their city.

At third, they build a tower to reach the heavens. Why? Is it to talk with God? No. It seems they want to rival God because verse 4 says they did this to make a name for God.

No, for themselves. So instead of bringing God glory, they want to bring themselves glory. It's as though they want to lift up their name instead of God's name, as they were supposed to.

[13 : 42] In other words, this city and tower were a symbol of their autonomy, their independence from God. Here is humanity ruling together, yes, but ruling apart from God.

It's all about humanity by themselves. It kind of reminds me of when you try to help little children do something because they're struggling. And sometimes the child will say, no, by myself.

That's what humanity is doing here. I mean, we want our kids to grow up and be independent, yes, but we were never created to be independent from God. And yet this is what humanity is doing.

It's as though they're saying, no, God, by ourselves. But why is this such a problem? Well, two reasons. At first, because it's God who not only gave us life in this world, but it's also God who gives us eternal life in the world to come.

And so if people continue to live in this world without God, apart from God, then they're going to be apart from eternal life. And the Bible calls the alternative hell.

[14 : 51] That's a problem, isn't it? Second, it's also a problem because whenever humanity advances on its own, it does good, yes, but it also does great evil right there as well.

I remember what God said on the next slide back last week in chapter 8, verse 21. It says, never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.

Now, I realize people can do good as well. That's true. But our natural inclination is to be selfish. I mean, just last week, my wife, Michelle, parked her car on the street and then someone backed into it and smashed it and drove off.

Now, immediately you're thinking, yeah, that's normal. And yet on this occasion, they left a note with their name, their mobile number, their license number, the name of their insurer, an apology.

And on the other side was their e-tag receipt with their home address on it. And they even came back in the middle of the day to make sure the note had not gone away.

[16 : 03] Now, why is it that that surprise, that's a pleasant surprise, isn't it? But a surprise, well, why does it surprise us? If humanity was inclined to do good, then that should be the norm, shouldn't it?

That should be a normal story. And yet, because humanity's heart's always inclined to do evil, it's a pleasant surprise, that story. People can do good, yes, but our hearts are naturally evil.

As I've said many times, you never have to teach children to be naughty. It comes naturally. And so if humanity continues to rule without God to direct them, not only will they miss out on life eternal, but they'll also rule in a way that brings not only good, but also evil because of their hearts.

And so God must respond for our good. Point three, verse five. 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.

[17 : 19] One of our kids' favorite stories in the Bible is the Tower of Babel, probably because we read it from this particular children's Bible.

And on the next slide is the page from the kids' Bible. You're not going to be able to read that. Let me read it to you. It says, You could be saying something nice like, Take such a lovely morning and get a punch in the nose because they thought you said, Hush up, you're boring.

You can see why kids liked it. But that's what happens here. God confuses the languages so they can't communicate. And in doing so, it divides people into different groups.

That's what language does, doesn't it? It divides people into those who can speak and understand and those who can't. And by confusing the language and dividing them, God then scatters them to fill the earth as they were supposed to.

So verse 8, So the Lord scattered them from there all over the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel. Babel or Babylon, the word in Hebrew, sounds like the word for confused, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world.

[18 : 49] And from there, the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth, as they were supposed to be. You see, by confusing their languages, God divides them and they scatter.

And this is God's judgment on a humanity who seeks to rule his world without him. And yet, it's also an act of kindness. Remember verse 6, God saw that if they continued to work together, then nothing would be impossible for them.

And so you kind of think, Well, if nothing's going to be impossible, why do you stop that God? Why do you want to stop them doing the impossible? Well, again, it's the human heart.

They may be able to do the impossible in terms of good, but they'll also do the impossible in terms of evil as well. For wherever humanity advances in good, humanity's heart means evil advances right alongside with it.

And so God's trying to slow down evil. Let me give you some examples from history. Humanity has worked together in science and medicine to create cures for diseases for smallpox and measles.

[19 : 57] And yet, at the same time, humanity has used diseases as weapons like anthrax and Ebola. Take Zyklon B, which humanity created as an insecticide, and then it was turned and used by the Nazis in their gas chambers to kill over a million people.

Again, humanity has worked together to do amazing things with technology, like 3D printing. So now we can actually print a human heart, which helps doctors save lives.

And yet we can also print a working gun that can take lives. Fans is in good, but evil is right there with it. In fact, last December, here in Melbourne, police raided a home and seized 14 working guns that were made at home with a 3D printer.

Take the internet. Humanity working together, we can now send a message instantly from here to the other side of the world, which is pretty extraordinary when you think about it. And yet, at the same time, along with email scams and an increase in pornography.

You see, God's dividing and scattering of people, yes, it's a just judgment, but it's also a kindness, because it's slowing down the advancement of evil in the world.

[21 : 20] What's more, by dividing people, God limited their ability to help each other, which again sounds like a mean thing to do, but he did it so that they wouldn't turn and find security in each other and actually turn to God.

If they keep finding security in each other, then humanity will miss out on life eternal. But dividing them means they've got to look somewhere else to God for help. And so find life eternal.

On the next slide, Paul puts it like this in Acts 17. He says, Here is a note of the division that God has done.

Why has God done this? Well, next sentence, God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from anyone of us.

You see, God created different languages and nations and boundaries. Why? Well, so that people might be forced to look to him for help and by looking to him, find life eternal.

[22 : 30] And yet today, sadly, people still don't do that, do they? Instead, people continue to live like those people in Babel. They move further and further eastward, if you like, further and further away from God.

People seek to rule this world or work in this world without God, independently from God, whether it's as individuals or as nations. People still put their hope in humanity to achieve the dream of peace and unity, health and happiness.

And yet, has the United Nations actually united all the nations? Has it ended all war and brought world peace?

Has the movement Make Poverty History actually made poverty history? Have the G8 summits fix the ozone layer? Don't mishear me.

These things are helpful. These things are helpful organizations, as is science and technology. They are good things, but they are limited. For no matter how hard these human organizations try, no matter how hard, or how many, rather, human advancements we make, we will never achieve humanity's dream of total unity and peace.

[23 : 54] Perhaps we'll achieve some of them, but not all of them. Not without God. For humanity cannot reverse the judgment of God which has divided people, nor can it cure the human heart which keeps on doing evil.

But God can in Christ. And so we come to our second reading from Acts 2, which we heard about on the Day of Pentecost, Day of Pentecost, which we celebrated last Sunday, actually.

And we heard how God's Spirit enabled people to hear God's wonders in their own language, language, to symbolize the unity that the gospel of Christ brings. God's Spirit did not remove different languages, but he removed the barriers that those languages created.

And so we read in Acts 2 that people could hear God's wonders being declared to them all at the same time, even though they had different languages. There was a reversal of sorts, you see, from Babel.

And as people in the early church heard about Jesus Christ who paid for their sins and put their trust in him, we're given a picture of what that achieved, of peace and unity.

[25 : 07] So on the next slide is the last bit of Acts 2, which we didn't read. And it says, this is when they put their faith in Christ, all the believers were together.

There's unity. And had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. There's the end of poverty. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. There's joy and contentment and happiness. And what do they do? At the end, praising not themselves, not making their name great, but praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

Here is the reversal of Babel, you see. The reversal that Christ begins by uniting us together as one family, God's family.

It was 1994 and I remember hearing the news about Rwanda. I'm pretty sure most people here would remember Rwanda, where there was two different, main two different tribes, the Hutus, who killed their fellow countrymen who were Tutsi.

[26 : 19] They were the two tribes. Neighbors literally killed neighbors because they were from a different tribe. There was division. And nearly 20% of the country was murdered.

That's extraordinary, 20%. And in 1995, a year later, a pastor I know was conducting a Bible study in Sydney and in it was a Tutsi who had fled Rwanda and had become a Christian and she was in this Bible study group.

And one night in 1995, in walked a Hutu to the Bible study group. She'd come to Australia to study and had become a Christian.

But for this Tutsi who had already been there, in walked the very type of person she had fled Rwanda from. The very type of person who had killed her relatives.

And they looked at each other for a moment and the minister suddenly realized what was going on. But before he could do anything about it, the Tutsi who had fled signaled to the Hutu, come, sit here.

[27 : 26] And they sat down next to each other. You see, they knew Christ had died for them and brought them together into one family, God's family. And so their former division was now superseded by their unity in Christ as sisters.

And there was peace. And not only peace between us and God or between them and God, but between each other. There was joy and contentment. Now the UN cannot do that.

But Christ can. In Christ, Babel is beginning to be reversed. We can have peace and unity with joy and contentment now and health and wealth later in heaven.

which Revelation 21 describes not as the city of Babylon but the city of God. And so if you're here today and you've been living life without God like the people of Babel, if you've been ruling or working in this world independently of God, then do realize where that will lead.

It will lead to judgment just like it did for them. Only this judgment the Bible calls hell. And so do turn and trust in Christ.

[28 : 44] Do put your hope in him for forgiveness and life. And for us who already have, then we are to keep living life with God, under God. We are to keep listening to his word and obeying it.

I know life is busy and cold. I know it's very easy to forget God and do life without God. In fact, there was a senior or leading political advisor in Britain a few years ago and he was quoted as saying, we don't do God.

It's very easy not to do God in life. And yet we are created to live with God, under God, for our good. And so do keep making efforts to read the Bible during the week, to listen to God, to pray to God, to keep living with him and seeking to make his name great.

And not just by praising him with our lips, but with our lives, by the way that we live. Secondly, we are to give thanks for the many good things that God has enabled humanity to do.

I mean, there's some great things, good things, we are to give thanks for. After all, God has given humanity the ability to do them, the brains, the imaginations, the wills. It was part of creating us in his image to rule over the world.

[29 : 58] And so we are to give thanks for them, but we must realize that they are limited in what they can achieve. And so don't put your hope in them. Don't find security in them, for they will never fully achieve true peace and unity, nor complete wealth and health.

Why? Well, as we said, because they cannot reverse God's judgment or cure the human heart. Only the gospel message of Jesus can. And so finally then, if that's the case, then while we are to pray for world peace, we are to particularly pray that the gospel message of Jesus will go out, that more we'll hear about it.

We are to pour our energy into seeing that happen, to seeing it spread. I mean, is that something that you pray for regularly? Indeed, we are to do what we can to support those who proclaim Christ, even take opportunities to share Christ with others, for it's only the message of Jesus Christ that changes lives, starting with the human heart.

Let me finish with this story. I remember, I was about five years ago and I was at a minister's conference up in Bendigo and Peter Costello, the former treasurer of Australia, was there. Peter is a Christian.

He goes to a church in Hawthorne, I think. Anyway, he said something like this, as a human government, we can only tax and spend to change lives and help people.

[31 : 24] That's all we can do. And then he said, but you ministers have the gospel and that really changes lives. Former treasurer, it's the best thing I heard at all conference.

I won't tell you who else was there. You see, he understood the limit of human institutions and achievements and that what really brings peace and unity with joy and contentment for people now and wealth and health for people later is the gospel message of Jesus.

So we'd pour our energy and pray that that would be proclaimed, that more people might have what humanity dreams for, peace and unity.

Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you for the reminder that while humanity has been created in your image and therefore can do great things in this world, we know that we are plagued by sin and our hearts tend towards evil.

And therefore, Father, we know that all human organisations and achievements are limited in what they can do. Yet in Christ we can have true peace and unity.

[32 : 41] We can have joy and contentment now. We can have wealth and happiness and health later. Father, we pray that you'd help us to remember that it's only the gospel that truly delivers the dream that humanity has.

And so help us to do what we can to see that gospel proclaimed. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.