

Tower Power

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 November 1997

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] Let's pray. God, we pray that you'll help us to understand the story of the Tower of Babel, to understand the lessons that we need to learn, and give us the wills to put them into practice for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Well, we don't know who built the Tower of Babel. Amen. Presumably it was some ancient form of the Grollo brothers or something like that.

But whoever it was, they were descendants of Noah, and it was built sometime after the flood. But more than that, we cannot really say. It was at the time when there was still one language, and indeed, the point is emphasised, perhaps even one vocabulary, as though almost one dialect of one language.

It was being used. Some suggest that it may be that there is one common language throughout the earth, even if people were bilingual here and there. Sort of like English has more or less become the language of our universe, although people speak other languages as well.

And the story begins by saying that people had migrated towards the east. There's some debate about whether it's from the east or to the east, but probably because of where Babel is, and also because of where the ark landed, the suggestion is that from Armenia or Mount Ararat, where Noah's ark finished up, sometime after that, the people who'd been on the ark began to migrate towards the east, that is, down southeast, I suppose, into what's modern-day Iraq and into Mesopotamia.

[1 : 49] And they came to the plain called Shinar, a level, flat sort of area, as indeed much of Iraq is. Later on, the place where they came to was called Sumer.

Perhaps the name Shinar and Sumer are related. Later on, it's called Babylon, and in our day called Iraq. And the people who migrated there decided to build a city there.

So verse 3 says, 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.

Now, in Palestine, where most of the Bible story exists, they had stones for buildings. They didn't need to bake bricks.

But in Mesopotamia, there's not an abundance of good stone for building houses and buildings with. So they had to make their own bricks. Nor did they have the normal stuff for mortar, but they had plenty of asphalt or bitumen.

[2 : 50] It was plentiful there, as it still is. And so they used that as the sort of mortar to stick their made bricks together. And so they said to each other in verse 4, Come, let us build ourselves a city.

Now, there's nothing wrong with building a city. So far, all is okay. They've not done anything wrong to this point. And there's certainly not anything wrong with building a city per se.

But the problem is, as we'll see, the motives for building the city, the reasons for building it, what they were trying to achieve and demonstrate in building the city.

That's what's wrong with the tower and the city of Babel. And their motives were wrong on three counts. So verse 4 says, Then they said, Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens.

Now, that's the first mistake that these people make. You see, this is more than just an ancient skyscraper trying to be impressive and build a tall building.

[3 : 56] Because to build a building whose top is in the heavens is to build a building which gets to heaven, gets to God's place. And so in some sense, their attempt to build a tower in the middle of this city is an assault on heaven, trying to get to heaven on their own achievement or ability or technology.

Many suggest that the Tower of Babel is like one of those ancient Babylonian ziggurats, they're called. Not something you smoke, but a building that sort of stepped up. You've probably seen pictures.

It's sort of like a pyramid, but it's a bit more of sort of big steps up. And certainly the excavators have found ancient ziggurats which were very high, 300 feet or more high.

They were religious buildings. And possibly what this story is about is the attempt to build a giant ziggurat, which you see is more than just a skyscraper.

It's a religious building. And the one they're trying to build has its top in the heavens. That is, its top in God's place rather than being on this world.

[5 : 08] Now possibly behind the thinking here is that human achievement may attain God's place. That is, through something we do through our own ability, technology or achievement, somehow we can reach heaven.

And nothing has changed. Humanity today is like these ancient builders of the Tower of Babel. Humanity today, if it thinks about getting to heaven, which it doesn't always do very often, but if it does, it usually thinks in terms of ability and achievement to get there.

William Golding, who's well known as the author of a book called The Lord of the Flies, also wrote a book called The Spire. Like The Lord of the Flies, it's a very bleak book.

It's set in medieval England. And it's about the dean of a cathedral wanting to build a huge spire on his cathedral. His crowning achievement, if you like, of his ministry.

And all the experts told him it was a folly because the cathedral structure wouldn't hold such a tall spire. But the building carries on and in the end, of course, inevitably, the spire collapses.

[6 : 20] It's a waste of time. William Golding's book is actually based on this story of the Tower of Babel. And in a sense, he's saying that nothing's changed, even in church or Christian circles.

The attempt to try and produce great human achievement, which somehow gets to heaven, is in the end a folly. But people think the same whether they're building a building or just entering a religious building.

Because how many of us and how many other people think that somehow coming into a church building, let alone a cathedral, somehow brings us close to God. As though a building connects us with God.

But like the builders of the Tower of Babel and like those who built the spire in Golding's book, it's a folly. Because no building gets us to God. No building connects us with heaven.

Whether it's tall, or whether it's just religious and beautiful, or whether it's old, it doesn't do the job. But people think the same sort of thing about getting to heaven through human ability or achievement or technology.

- [7 : 29] Today, the search into space. It's that if there is heaven there, we will find it. As though that's possible through human technology or ability. The builders of the Tower of Babel found out in the end that that was folly.
- And it's the same today. God, you see, is the one who tells us how we reach heaven. And it's not through a building. It's not through achievement or ability or technology.
- We reach heaven only in God's way. And it's through a person, not a building. And it's through the person called Jesus Christ, the Son of Man.
- And you may remember that in John's Gospel there's a vision of the Son of Man like a ladder between heaven and earth and the angels going up and down.
- That's the link between heaven and earth, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, a person, not a building. Well, the second mistake comes in their words in the middle of verse 4.
- [8 : 38] The people have said, come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. That was their first mistake. And the second in the following words, and let us make a name for ourselves.
- Well, how ridiculous. Who were they trying to impress? Think about who else there was. This is one people. Who on earth are they trying to impress by making a name for themselves?
- But do you see the motive of their building? It's self-glory. It's self-grandeure. It's trying to build themselves a reputation that will never be forgotten.
- It's their desire for fame and glory that is the motive for the building of the Tower of Babel. And again, nothing's changed. How often do we hear it said of, usually of parents or grandparents about their children or grandchildren?
- They've done well for themselves. They've made a name for themselves. politicians so often trying to make a name for themselves, trying to have one significant achievement that is theirs.
- [9 : 50] Whether it's Bob Hawke or Jeff Kennett, most of them are fairly similar. One thing to try and give them some fame and reputation, some lasting record, some lasting glory.
- Sadly, it's the same with clergy. I often hear of clergy or read biographies or whatever and they say that Reverend so-and-so's grand achievement was the extension of the church or the building of a new church or the building of a hall or a gate post or something.
- What a lot of rot. But yet so often, when ministry fails or churches fail, they try and build a grand edifice as the mark of their ministry.
- And indeed, sadly, you can pick up the Melbourne Anglican and I reckon every second month. there's a grand building project and I wonder sometimes what the motives are behind it. But none of us is innocent of this either.
- All of us have some sort of longing for fame, reputation, to make a name for ourselves. I remember when I was at school and sitting in the assembly hall each day, I guess, looking around at the honour boards around the school hall.
- [11 : 07] The captain of football, that would never be me. Captain of cricket, oh, if only that were me, but it was never going to be. I made the captain of the 5th 11, but it's hardly the 1sts. The ducks of the school, the captain of the school, the editor of the magazine, my name's not there.
- And when I was a school boy at Scotch, I thought, if only my name would be there one day. And I guess I'm not alone in thinking that. But whether it's childhood dreams or whether it's adult selfish ambition, we're all guilty of that desire to make a name for ourselves, to have a reputation that outlasts us on this earth, to have our name in lights, on an honour board, in wisdom, or in the dictionary of national biography.

But in the end, this passage is telling us that that is folly. The desire to make a name for ourself, the desire for self-glory and fame and reputation and honour is in the end madness and foolishness.

Because God tells us how we can make a name for ourselves. Rather, God tells us how we can be given a great name.

In the very next chapter, which we'll look at next week, God says to Abraham, I will make your name great. And it's clearly a contrast with this story here.

[12 : 34] And whose name after all is great? We don't know the names of those who built the Tower of Babel, whether they were Fred or George or Georgina or whatever. But we know Abraham's name.

And not only do Christians revere Abraham's name, but so do Muslims and Jews. That's why the place of Hebron in Israel is such a trouble spot these days. because it's the burial place of Abraham.

And you see, God's word comes true. The people who try to make a name for themselves, we don't know their names. But when God says, I will make your name great, we still know Abraham's name.

We still know King David's name, to whom God said the same thing. But of course, we also know the name which is above every name. That at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow.

The greatest name there is. And God tells us that in a sense our names will be great in and through Him and Him alone. Not through any accomplishment of our own, but rather in effect as God's gift to us.

[13 : 43] That through the name that is above every name, our names also will be preserved in His Book of Life. And that will last a lot longer than the Assembly Hall at Scotch College or any edition of Wisdom.

The third mistake that the builders of the Tower of Babel made comes at the end of verse 4. They want to build a city with a tower with its top in the heavens and a salt on God.

They want to make a name for themselves. And then thirdly, they want to build this building otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

This building and this city is a search for security and strength. They're afraid of being scattered throughout the world.

Why they ought to be afraid of that we don't know. But what they're trying to do is to build up their own security, to rely upon their own ingenuity and strength for whatever adversity or opposition they may find.

[14 : 51] Now certainly in a plain like Shinar, it's a vulnerable place to live. All the ancient towns and cities are built on a hill. Jerusalem is and every place that's of importance virtually in the Bible is on a hill because it's safe.

You can see around. You can be protected. It's harder to climb a hill to fight a city than it is to fight it on the plain. But here on the plain of Shinar, it's almost understandable that they want to build a city and presumably a wall and maybe a tower to give them some protection.

But the trouble is their motive is that they think that they will have enough strength through human strength, strength in numbers, strength in unity, bringing together all the people and keeping in one spot rather than diversifying or scattering throughout the world.

Indeed, the word that's used for tower is a word that's related to the word strength and might. And so perhaps one of the connotations for the builders of the tower is that they're megalomaniacs.

They're concerned with power and might. Now we might think, what's wrong with this? But their refusal to be scattered around the world is in defiance of God.

[16 : 07] Remember back to Genesis 1, the first chapter, the story of the creation. What did God say to the first humanity that he made? Be fruitful and fill the earth. Multiply.

And in effect, spread out and fill the earth. He repeated that same command to Noah after the flood in chapter 9. And so this emphasis and concern for gathering and keeping in one place it seems is in defiance of God's own command to fill the earth.

More than that, possibly even building a tower to the heavens is trying to build something that was above Noah's flood. So they're trying to exercise a security and strength that will even outwit God.

You see, this is a society that's playing God. This is a society that's saying, we're in charge here. Our own security is sufficient for us.

We'll make our own rules. We'll defy God's rules. We'll run our own affairs. And we'll create our own world order, if you like, because that's in effect what they're trying to do.

[17 : 18] And again, nothing's changed, has it? Thousands of years later in our own day and age, society plays God and defies God's laws. Soon after the Second World War ended, the United Nations began.

This was the grand attempt of a new world order. There would be lasting peace on this earth. Never again will there be a world war, because all the countries would come to a negotiating table as part of the United Nations to stabilize this world and bring lasting peace.

Fifty years on, what do we see? There hasn't been a so-called World War III. But then we must wonder whether Korea and Vietnam and Bosnia and Rwanda and dozens and dozens of other places really don't constitute a grand failure of the United Nations.

Indeed, in the Bosnian War of just a couple of years ago, we saw how impotent the United Nations was to bring about any lasting peace. It was crippled and I think it remains the same today.

The world trying to play God, but in the end it fails. But it's not just in something like the United Nations, but in our space technology, playing God, determining this universe and trying to control it.

[18 : 50] in our DNA technology, in our technology about artificial birth and indeed even artificial death, society playing God, trying to exercise a technological control over this universe, over life and over death.

But of course it's folly. Humanity isn't God and it doesn't exercise the power of God at all. But God tells us where we can find security.

He tells us where we can find peace. He tells us where we can find a new world order. And it's in the Prince of Peace, in Jesus Christ.

He and he alone is the perfect giver of world security and peace. He alone is the good shepherd who protects his people.

So there we are, the three mistakes of the builders of the Tower of Babel. They had a folly about human religion as though their own religion and ability could get to God.

[19 : 59] They had a folly about their own ambition to make a name for themselves and they had a folly about security independent of God. So what does God do?

He doesn't turn a blind eye. Verse 5 is the turning point of this story and it's almost a comic verse. Laughing at these people, the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which mortals had built.

He couldn't even see it from heaven. So much for their grand tower, their ziggurat or skyscraper that's going to reach to the heavens, God has to come down to earth to see it.

Their efforts are ridiculed in that verse. Their efforts are a joke, a fiasco. What an insult to their achievement and grand plans. But I sometimes wonder whether God really has the same mocking of human plans today.

All those things that society and humanity boasts about, its strength, its greatness, its ingenuity and power, I think God is laughing in his heaven. But he doesn't just come down to see it, he comes down to judge it.

[21 : 10] So in verse 6, the Lord said, look, they are one people and they have all one language and this is only the beginning of what they will 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. If their achievement was so small and minuscule that God had to come down to see it, we might well think that God would just laugh and go back to his heaven.

But no, in fact, God takes very seriously their building. Because even though the achievement itself is pathetic, the motives are really significant.

And God is prepared to judge them in the end for their motives rather than their achievement. It's no grand tower, it doesn't represent a threat to God, but their thinking does.

[22 : 20] And it is that which God judges. God says indeed that nothing will now be impossible for them if he allows it to run unchecked.

Unusual words that only occur in one other place in the Bible. people. And there they refer to God. You see, God alone is the one for whom nothing is impossible.

This story, you see, is humanity overstepping the mark, overstepping the mark into God's territory, and God will not tolerate that. And so he judges them.

Even though physically their tower is nothing, God comes to judge their motives. words. And he does it again in a mocking sort of way, or at least the way the story is told mocks the human beings.

Because whose words are effective? The people said, come, let us make brick. Come, let us build a city. Come, let us make a name for ourselves.

[23 : 25] And what does God say? Come, let us go down and confuse their language. And whose word prevails? Well, yes, they made brick.

Yes, they maybe built a city. But they didn't make a name for themselves. But God's word is decisive. When God says, come, let us do this, he does it and it happens. And all the human designs of the first half of the story come to naught.

Because God is God. And the ultimate irony comes in the last verse, therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there, the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Their action in building a city was to prevent them from being scattered. And their very action designed to prevent that happening, in fact, brought it about.

Because God's judgment on their building was to scatter them throughout the world. world. We're told in that last verse that the city was called Babel, meaning a babble or confusion.

[24 : 37] But it's the place of Babylon. That's what the name is. And in the Bible, from this story onwards, Babylon is a significant place.

Babylon is the arch enemy of God and God's people. Later on, as Israel settled in the land and became a monarchy and became quite powerful under King David and then King Solomon, eventually they were defeated by the Babylonians.

King Nebuchadnezzar coming in the 6th century BC and smashing down Jerusalem, destroying its temple, carting off its rich and wealthy people and taking away the temple treasures back to Babylon, the arch enemy of God and God's people.

They are triumphing over God. Babylon came to typify, a name for typifying everything that is opposed to God, everything about humanity that is proud, that is arrogant, that boasts in its own strength, that worships idols and so on.

The prophet Isaiah spoke these words against Babylon. You said, Babylon that is, in your heart, I will ascend to heaven.

[25 : 52] I will raise my throne above the stars of God. I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon. I will ascend to the tops of the clouds.

I will make myself like the most high. Isaiah is quoting the arrogant boasts of Babylon and he goes on to say, but God will bring you down to the depths of the grave.

And when we get to the New Testament, the same thing happens. Because they're almost at the end of the Bible, just as this story is almost at the beginning, comes Babylon again.

Not the real nation Babylon, but the name used to refer to the enemies of God and God's people. Applying here in the end of the Bible to the Roman Empire.

And in particular, the Roman Empire is persecuted Christians. Babylon, you see, in the book of Revelation is the enemy of God and God's people. And towards the end of the book, there is the great triumph of God over evil Babylon.

[26 : 56] Fallen, fallen is Babylon, is the cry in Revelation 18. That's one city. The city that's opposed to God.

The city of boast and arrogance and human pride. But there is, of course, another city. A city that comes right at the end of the Bible. A city built by God and not by humanity.

A city that is perfectly secure, where there is no chance of any threat. It is not vulnerable to attack. It is a city of world unity, where people of every nation and tribe come together.

They're gathered. They're not scattered. And they're gathered around the throne of the Lamb in heaven. It is a city of one language, a united language. Because there are people of every tongue who have come there and sing in unison the songs of praise of God.

Something which in fact began on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. When despite all the different languages that people spoke, they heard the gospel preached in their own. As God began the work of reversing the scattering of the Tower of Babel.

[28 : 15] This city that I'm talking about exercises a unity in that everybody calls on the name of the Lord. And its dwellers, those who call on the name of the Lord, have their names great.

Their names written forever in the Lamb's book of life. This is the city that belongs to the Prince of Peace, the Son of God, the link between heaven and earth, Jesus Christ himself.

Two cities, sharp comparison. As the hymn says, fading is the world's best pleasure, all its boasted pomp and show.

But solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know. That is, that city, that heavenly city, the new Jerusalem or the new Zion.

And the Bible ends with that city. Because God's final word is not a word of judgment or a word of condemnation against Babylon or Babel or those opposed to him.

[29 : 30] God's final word is a word of salvation and grace. Because it's through grace that we enter that city.

Savior since of Zion's city, I through grace a member am. Let's pray.

our God, we pray that you will prevent us from making the same mistakes as those builders of Babel. That we will not think our own ability, religion or achievement can get us to you.

That we will not pursue our own glory and honor and reputation. that we will not seek security by human means, but rather resting in your abundant grace and through your Lord Jesus Christ.

We may know that we belong to his city. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[30 : 51] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.