

Tower Power

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[0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, we thank you that you gathered us this morning to worship you in truth and in spirit. Lord, at this moment, as we come before your word, we pray that you will lead us into the truth and help us to live in the truth.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Please be seated. I just returned from a teaching trip to China.

And thank you for some of you who prayed for me. Though it was a tiring trip of 11 days, teaching a course on theology and a weekend course on ethics plus preaching two sermons.

I thank God for every opportunity I have to serve God and his people in this way. Even though I don't have much voices to speak, to share with you. But in this trip, I saw three things.

I made three observations that I found that this experience really touched me and humbled me very much. Firstly, as I stay sort of like quite close to the education building of the church, I can see very clearly one Sunday school classroom, quite a big classroom.

[1 : 2 1] On Monday evening, I saw about 20 over or around 20 people gathering in that room doing Bible study. Tuesday evening, the room was filled with people again, Bible study.

Wednesday, Wednesday, Wednesday, I took notice again. Many people gathered in that room reading God's word. Thursday, people gathered in that room again.

Friday, I did not know what happened because I moved to another place to stay. So I didn't know whether there was a Bible study in that room. But I can see that people hunger and eager to learn God's word.

The second observation that I had was on Wednesday, the day before I left China. I was brought to visit a Bible school, local Bible school. Many people that day in that Bible school, and I talked to the principal, he said, there were about 70 people, prospective students coming to seek for exam in the morning.

And in the afternoon, they will have the interview. And I asked him, how many of them will be accepted to this Bible school? He said, around 20 of them.

[2 : 4 2] And I said, can I have a look at the exam paper? He said, no, you better don't because you will never pass this exam. It really hurt me a lot.

It really humbled me as well. And thirdly, the weekend course that I taught was on Friday from 8 past 8 till 5 o'clock in the afternoon.

The church that I visited under that network, in their local language, they would say under that leaf, there are about 33 churches.

And there are about 200 to 300 Sunday school teachers. To be a Sunday school teachers, you must come for a year of training.

Every Saturday morning, half past 8 till 5 o'clock in the afternoon, you must come for a year of Saturday training in order to be a Sunday school teacher.

[3 : 42] Think about us. The college and the teachers that I visited are having quite different context to ours. But I felt quite comfortable communicating with them since I can speak the language Mandarin.

However, as the theological students there, I taught were mostly local people. All but one spot the local dialect. Though I myself can understand about five Chinese dialects, I really don't have a single clue with this one.

Sometimes I got quite frustrated, especially during class breaks, as their conversations often were in the local dialect. I didn't know what they say, even though I can see their facial expressions very clearly in the ups and downs of their tones.

For me, I strongly felt that language can be a means of communication. But if you can't understand it, it can become a hindrance. Fortunately, I do not need to face these difficulties of communication regularly.

Unlike Paul, who experienced this every Sunday afternoon, during or after Mandarin services. Sorry, Paul.

[5 : 01] I think we need to pray for him more earnestly, so that he will have the gift to understand and to interpret Mandarin. Therefore, this morning, as we look at Genesis 11, the question that I want to ask is, is the confusion of language, and as a result, the creation of many languages, a curse or a blessing?

I believe this is an important and relevant question for us to ask today. Especially right now in Australia, everyone of us here is experiencing multiculturalism and the impacts it brings.

But before we look at Genesis 11, for those of us who are familiar with Genesis, especially chapters 1 to 11, we know that this incident at the Tower of Babel is the last of the stories of the primeval history before the patriarch Abraham appeared on the historical stage.

In the earlier chapters of Genesis, we have met individuals such as Adam and Eve and Cain sinned against God. But now in Genesis 11, as in Genesis 6 during the day of Noah, we are invited to see what happened to community life when the whole community stepped outside the way of God.

Though the people had great ambition to build a city and the tower which reached into the heavens, we see in this passage that something was wrong with this human endeavor.

[6 : 34] It so angered God that he confused the language of the people so that they couldn't finish the project. What happened here? In Genesis 11, I believe we can find two causes to God's confusion of language.

The first is the immediate cause, which was the result of human sinful desire. And the second is the ultimate cause, which was the divine reaction to human sinfulness.

In fact, these two causes are corresponding to the two self-speeches of the passage. Verses 3 to 4, human self-speech. And verses 6 to 7, divine self-talk.

We shall now look at each of these in turn. First, the immediate cause, human desire. The story of Genesis 11 begins with a general statement about the humankind at the time.

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. The whole earth obviously refers to the people of the whole world, and they all spoke one language and the same words.

[7 : 45] But that was going to change. Verse 1 has set the stage for what is going to happen. Verse 2 then describes the nomadic lifestyle of the time.

There were three stages in this process of migration. First, they departed from their previous dwelling place. They migrated from the east. And then they looked for a new place to dwell.

They came upon a plain in the land of China. The land of China refers to Babylonia. And thus, most properly, the people had found a broad and flat plain of Mesopotamia, located on the west bank of the Euphrates, south of what is today Baghdad, Iraq.

And lastly, they settled down. It seems that they had finally found a place to make themselves a home. But what they decided to do is much more than building a home.

Verses 3 to 4 tell us, And they say to one another, Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar.

[8 : 55] Then they say, Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower we've extorted in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves. Otherwise, we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

The people's desire to build something is quite clear from the narrator's command about the particular materials used, which was different from the Israelites. Instead of using stone, they used bricks.

And instead of mortar to seal the stones, they used bitumen to cement the bricks. Therefore, clearly the materials here were ready for some kind of building project.

And verse 4 tells us what they decided to build. A city and a tower we've extorted reaching to the heavens. Since it was quite impossible to build any tower to reach into heaven, particularly in the ancient time.

And this morning, someone reminded me, It is impossible to build higher than five stories if they were using bricks. So it may be best to take this reaching into heaven to mean that for them, they decided to build a very high tower.

[10 : 10] Some Bible commentators have suggested that they were building a temple tower. Though we cannot be 100% sure whether this was the case, their intention was very clear.

Let us make a name for ourselves. Otherwise, we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. No matter how ambitious these people were, their intention contained at least two direct violations to God's will.

First, it is clear from the creation mandate in Genesis 1, verse 28, that God wanted humankind to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.

Chapter 9, verse 1 repeats this mandate again. But here they decided not to do so. They didn't want to be scattered. Clearly, it was a rebellion against God's command.

Secondly, in the Bible, it is clear that God always wants us to leave out His name and bring glory to Him alone and not to anyone including ourselves. For instance, in Psalms 36, verse 9, it says, All the nations you have met shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.

[11 : 31] In Revelation 15, verse 4, Therefore, to make a name for themselves so that people everywhere will know them through their deeds, or simply people everywhere will see this work and leave out their name, is a challenge to God's name.

Again, like Adam and Eve, it was an assertion of human greatness, power, and independence. It was simply another attempt to grasp what is belonging to the Lord, another attempt wanting to be like God.

The Tower of Babel does represent some sort of architectural symbol of human asserted greatness, which was in direct contrast and challenge to the Lord's will.

This sort of attitude and lifestyle, unfortunately, can be found throughout church history or human history. We can see this on Saul, the first king of Israel, who was handpicked by God, but very quickly he established himself above others and even God.

We can also see this in Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylonia, who boasted about his achievements in Daniel 4, verse 30. After all, we can also see this in Roman emperors, Herod, and more contemporary attempts, Hitler, Chairman Mao, Saddam Hussein, and others.

[13 : 21] In fact, this attitude or lifestyle is not limited to kings and emperors. It is often displayed in individuals' lives as well.

I can still remember quite some years ago when I was serving in a Chinese church in Sydney. One day, one of my youth group members who studied civil engineering at a local university, he wore a T-shirt with these three words right in front of him.

Just build it. Just build it. And we know that these words were copied from those catchphrases associated with the sport brand Nike.

Just do it. Just do it. Just build it. Don't care about others. How others think, feel, react. If I feel good about it, just do it.

Just build it. Just do it. Or some other similar forms of catchphrases are simply another expression of what people are wanting to achieve independently of God. Just like those under the Tower of Babel.

[14 : 33] Can you imagine what would the world be if everyone embraces this type of philosophy, attitude, and lifestyle? What would happen if people only serve themselves and do things according to their own interests?

Just like recently I stayed in this church in China. Because there was no town planning. People just built according to their desire.

So therefore, most of the time, the road is getting smaller and smaller. Because the house just building, the houses, the front is getting, you know, it's extending all the time.

And the car just cannot drive in. So you need to park long way away and you just walk on foot. Maybe it also teaches us to be humble as well. But this Tower of Babel, this human desire wanting to be great, independent of God, was the immediate cause for God to confuse their language.

Second, the ultimate cause. God's reaction to their sinfulness. Verses 1 to 4 describe what happened to a group of unified people who migrated to the land of China and began their building project.

[15 : 52] However, in verse 5, the forecast now is transferred to the heavenly realm. It is an insulting statement to this building project. The people desire to build a high tower with its top reaching into heavens.

Yet, the Lord didn't see any tower tops in his backyard, but needed to come down to see what the mortals were doing. I'm saying this figuratively.

Then the Lord responded with these words in verse 6. He 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. In these words, we see that the decision to scatter the people was not due primarily to the building of the city and the tower, but their sinfulness of race and language.

And as a result, what they would eventually be able to do. This is only the beginning of what they will do, such as that the low concern is for the future, the much greater things they will eventually do.

[17 : 06] It simply means that there is no telling what they will do, or just think what they may do next. This is not saying that the people will ever do anything, but that it won't be long, and they will be able to do whatever they like.

This is indeed a scary thought, and with disastrous consequences in view. Nothing can stop them from devising greater sinful schemes. In 1867, Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel created a new high explosive, which he named dynamite.

In reality, the dynamite was not created to kill. To Nobel, he was convinced that his invention would make war too horrible to ever happen again.

But to his surprise and to his horror, dynamite helped to kill more people than ever before. When Nobel saw the real power behind the dynamite, he really regretted what he invented.

And thus, he later initiated Nobel Prize to award scientists and writers who foster peace. Likewise, in Genesis 11 here, To be one people was not a problem.

[18 : 30] To work together and to have this great joint venture was not a problem. The problem was with the destructive and evil desire of the human heart.

Therefore, the Lord's confusion of their language in verse 7 and the scattering of the people from there over the face of the earth in verse 8 can be seen on one hand as God's judgment on these people's rebellion against him.

But on the other hand, it can be equally correct to say that it was God's greatest act that he limited human potential in committing even greater sins.

Therefore, it was both an act of judgment and mercy. If it is the case, the result of many languages may not be a curse.

Indeed, in the arrangement of Genesis 11 and Genesis chapter 10, we can also assume that the creation of many languages was not a curse in itself.

[19 : 37] In Genesis 10, which records the genealogies of the three sons of Noah, in verse 5, it says that these are the descendants of Japheth in their names, with their own language, by their families, in their nations.

And again in verse 20, these are the descendants of Ham by their families, their languages, their names, and their nations.

And in verse 31, these are the descendants of Shem by their families, their languages, their names, and their nations. By looking at this chapter of Genesis chapter 10, it seems that it has already assumed the existence of languages prior to the event of Babel.

I believe it is correct to say that in Genesis 10, the preface to Genesis 11, the many times and languages are not portrayed as a curse by the arrangement of God and part of God's plan.

Therefore, if we look at these two chapters, on one hand, the nations, with their many languages, can be seen as God's judgment of our human sinful desire and act.

[20 : 59] But on the other hand, it can be seen as part of God's providential ordering of His war. Therefore, clearly in God's sovereignty, He can use our shortcomings for His own glory.

Indeed, in the New Testament, the many languages are being used by God for His own glory. For instance, in Acts chapter 2, many times are clearly seen as a blessing in the context of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Pentecost.

Many times are being blessed to bring the gospel to the end of the earth. And in Revelation chapter 7, verse 9, there is also the vision of great multitude of believers coming from different nations, tribes, and people gathering before the throne of God and worshipping Him.

Indeed, this is the fulfillment of prophecy in Zephaniah chapter 3, verse 9, which envisions an end to the confusion at Babel.

In the Old Testament prophecy, it says, at that time, I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech. Then all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve Him with one accord.

- [22 : 17] Verse 9 clearly shows that this story is told to explain how people come to speak different languages and live scattered over the earth. Although the immediate cause of this confusion at Babel and the creation of many languages was judgment of God on people's sinful desire wanting to be great and independent from God.

The ultimate divine cause tells us that it is the grace of God in restraining human sinfulness. In the end, the creation of many languages may not be a curse after all due to God's grace.

But if we read the story figuratively as one author commands, human must leave Babel, its proud dreams, and its God-defying ways if there is hope.

And it is with terror and Abram departing from war in southern Babylonia that the saving history of the patriarchs begins. This reminds me of the hymn Rock of Ages written by Augustus top lady.

Rock of Ages clad for me. The background of this hymn was that every day Augustus top lady needed to walk through a deep slope from church to his home.

- [23 : 47] One day when he was passing through this slope suddenly there was a great storm thunder and lightning. And Augustus got no place to hide.

Suddenly he found on this wall there was a clap on this huge storm so he hid it inside. He found secure comfort in this huge storm.

Later on after the rain he ran back home and wrote down this hymn a great hymn. Let me read to you the lyrics of this hymn.

Rock of Ages clad for me hide me now my refuge be let the water and the blood from your wounded sight which flowed be foreseen the double cure cleanse me from its guilt and power not the labours of my hands can fulfil your laws demands could my zeal nor respite known could my tears forever flow all for sin could not atone you must save and you alone nothing in my hand I bring simply to your cross I cling naked come to you for grace helpless look to you for grace stand by sin to you I cry watch me savior or I die while I draw this fleeting breath when my eye leaps close in death when I saw true realms unknown bow before the judgment throne hide me then my refuge be rock of ages clad for me if there is hope for us today

I believe we need to surrender ourselves to the Lord and come to him and acknowledge that he is our Lord our savior our redeemer and leave our old lifestyle behind and one minute next and