

“The Trouble with Tower Building”
Genesis 11:1-9
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Sermon Summary

Genesis 11:1-9 (ESV)

11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ 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. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” ⁵ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. ⁶ And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸ So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

Genesis 11:1-9 depicts a situation in which unrestrained human capacities are used to move in a direction that ultimately opposes God’s purposes. The tower builders have two key capacities: (1) the ability to communicate (11:1) and (2) the technology necessary to bake bricks (11:3-4). Combined with their desire to avoid being scattered apart and to make their mark on the world, the tower builders determine to build “a city and a tower with its top in the heavens” (11:4).

While some would suggest that the tower builders are engaging in an act of pride in direct opposition of God, there are, at best, hints of this within the biblical text. The background information in 11:1 regarding the shared language of the people and 11:3 regarding the availability of brick and bitumen suggest that what we have is an unrestrained and unguided use of human capacities. In other words, as humans coordinated and leveraged their minds to employ specific technologies, there were able to achieve what they set out to do *without God*.

There is a subtle, though perhaps not ultimate, difference between saying that the tower-builders embarked on their venture without God and suggesting that they did so in opposition to God. By using the former, I am suggesting that the city and tower are less overt acts of rebellion than acts of ignorance. The people respond to a fear or, at least, an outcome they perceive to be undesirable (“...lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth”; 11:4) rather than responding to God. To respond to God, however, would require that the people gathered in the land of Shinar know God and understand the destiny he desires humankind to fulfill (cf. Gen 1:28). It is not clear that the tower-builders have such an understanding.

As such, they find themselves responding to the challenges of a broken world in the best way they know how. Building a city and tower and developing a shared identity as tower-builders seems logical given the absence of other factors or Actors. The response is uninformed (or unrestrained and unguided). While it turns out to be wrongheaded, it seems less an example of rebelliousness (cf. Gen 4:1-16) than of ignorance.

Perhaps the most unsettling part of the narrative is God’s assessment of the situation: “Behold, they are one people, and they all have one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (11:6). These people can continue living as if God is not a factor. Their innate capacities and ability to communicate will allow them to accomplish a great deal without God. It is their capacities and skills that are the problem. They could, so they did.

God's intervention is designed to eliminate the people's means of coordination. Without the same language, their ability to work together was severely hindered and he "dispersed them from their over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city" (11:8). The tower-builders would have accomplished their goal had God not come down to confuse and disperse the people. We can accomplish much without God.

This narrative precedes the call of Abram in Genesis 12:1-9. In this section, God forges a relationship with Abram so that he can reveal himself to Abram. For his part, Abram simply needs to respond in obedience to the Lord and allow God to "make your [Abram's] name great" (Gen 12:2). While Abram does not fully grasp all that this might mean until much later, he proves himself to be a man who fears the Lord (22:12) by "the obedience that is tested to the limit in the command to sacrifice all the promises and render the whole life journey meaningless by offering up Isaac."ⁱ

Left unrestrained and unguided our gifts make us less responsive to God. In discipleship, we commit to being reoriented so that we not only recognize God's presence among us but respond to it in obedience. Unlike the tower-builders whose efforts were not done with any particular awareness of God's presence. Our capacities are, at best, underutilized assets when we are left un-disciplined. At worst, they are a means for us to chart our own course apart from or in ignorance of God.

ⁱ Deryck Sheriffs, *The Friendship of the Lord: An Old Testament Spirituality* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 48; Sheriffs offers a helpful discussion of various motifs in the book of Genesis including "walking before" God and "obedience." He helpfully describes the commonality between "the then of Genesis and the now of Christian discipleship" in terms of faith noting, "Contemporary spirituality is forced to place its faith in the unseen because of the inadequacy of the present" (Sheriffs, *The Friendship of the Lord*, 55).