

4. It won't be like this always: Because judgment is not God's last word

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Date: 27 September 2006

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[0 : 00] Well, turn with me, if you would, one last time to Genesis, chapters 10 and 11, really, and a little bit of chapter 12. We begin today on page 7.

So we're still very near the beginning of the story of the Bible. But like last week, we're going to trace it through a little bit so we can get an idea of what's going on. You'll remember, if you've been here the last two or three weeks, that these are the stories that tell us how the world became as it is today, how we know it is today.

If you look at the beginning of chapter 10, verse 1, you'll see that it begins a great list of names, 70 names exactly, very stylized, a complete number, representing all the peoples of the ancient world, as descended ultimately from the sons of Noah.

These are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Look down to verse 21. To Shem, that's the third of Noah's sons, the father of all the children of Eber, the elder brother of Japheth, children were born.

Elam, Ashur, Arphaxad, Lod, and Aram. Not such popular names today. The sons of Aram, Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash.

[1 : 22] Never met anybody called Mash, have you? Arphaxad fathered Shelah. That's a man, not a woman. And Shelah fathered Eber. Now, look at this.

To Eber were born two sons. The name of one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided. His brother's name was Joktan. And from verse 26, we get the story of Joktan's descendants, but nothing about Peleg.

Why is that? Well, it's because, as we've seen, chapter 11 interrupts the story, doesn't it? Peleg, you'll see the little number one there, tells us the footnote, means division, because in his days the earth was divided.

And we get the story interrupted to tell us a little bit more about the procedure of the earth being divided. And that's the story of the city of Babel. We've read that two or three times now.

We won't read it right through today, but you'll remember. It's the story where the people of the ancient world defied God. God had said, spread out through all the earth, colonize the whole earth, fill it and subdue it.

[2 : 31] And they said, no, thank you very much. We found a very nice place to dwell in the plains of Shinar. Let's stay here and build cities. We'll forget about God. We'll put him out of our mind and we'll do our own thing.

And that's what the story is all about. And people have been doing that ever since. And of course, at that time, God judged the world and scattered the world. As chapter 11 says, chapter 11, verse 6, they're one people and have one language.

This is only the beginning of what they'll do. Nothing they propose to do will be impossible. So God comes down, scatters them, scatters their culture and their language.

And then we pick up the story again in verse 10. Do you see? We're back to the descendants of Shem. Let's not go through all those funny names again, but go down to verse 16. And after Eber had lived 34 years, he fathered Peleg.

And verse 18, when Peleg had lived 30 years, he fathered Reu. And now we get the whole list of Peleg's descendants, as we might expect.

[3 : 39] My goodness, we really are having noise pollution today, aren't we? Until we get to verse 26, when Terah had lived 70 years, he fathered Abram.

We then get a little bit of backtracking about Abram's family. But look down to chapter 12, verse 1. Now the Lord said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

And I will make of you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you I will curse.

And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Well, keep your Bible open just there.

We've been asking the question these last few weeks, if you're new and this is your first week, we've been asking the question, why is the world as it is? Why do we live in such a paradoxical world, a world of love and of beauty and of fulfillment and of hope?

[4 : 57] And yet at the same time, as we all know, a world of hate and of ugliness and a world of frustration and a world of despair. Why?

These two things. We know they're true. Well, the book of Genesis gives us the answers. Actually, the whole Bible gives us the answers, but the book of Genesis begins to tell us that the world is wonderful as it is, as we know it to be, because it is a world under God's bountiful blessing.

God created a good world, a perfect world. He created a world with a great purpose for glory and for the blessing of mankind. That's why we experience so much glory.

And yet, that's not the whole story, is it? No, Genesis also tells us of the rebellion of mankind again and again and again from the very beginning.

It tells us about the spoiling of God's world and of the curse that God's judgment brought into the world because of that spoiling. And that's the dark side. That's the other side that we also know only too well.

[6 : 07] And here's the difficult thing. The Bible is clear. We are responsible for it. But God has not abandoned his world.

He hasn't left man on his own to utterly ruin the world. He hasn't left humankind to totally destroy and annihilate themselves and one another. No. God has judged the world in mercy in order that he might preserve the world and go on blessing the world.

And yet the truth is, and we saw this last time, it's a solemn message, there will come a time when God will ultimately judge the world.

Not to preserve it, but ultimately to destroy it. There will come a time when the world of humankind, the city of man, will be destroyed.

When every Babel, every Babylon, every society in total opposition to God will be no more. We've got to take that seriously. That's the message of the Bible.

[7 : 12] The Bible is exceptionally clear. It's insistent on that point. God is a righteous judge. And a righteous judge cannot leave evil and wickedness unjudged forever.

Not even God can do that. We read about that last time. We read the graphic portrayal in the book of Revelation. The vivid images. But, it's something that the whole Bible is very clear about.

But in this last study today, I want to trace another thread, if you like, through the Bible. It's a greater thread. It's a brighter thread. Runs all through the storyline of the Bible, right from the beginning to the end.

In fact, it is the very heart of the Bible's whole purpose. And it's this. Listen. With God, mercy triumphs over judgment.

Mercy triumphs through judgment and it triumphs beyond judgment. With God, mercy is greater even than His judgment. You see, the whole Bible story that lies between the story of the scattering of humankind in Genesis chapter 11 and the final judgment on Babel or Babylon at the very end of Scripture, in between, we have the whole story of God's unfolding plan of redemption, of redeeming grace, of God's sovereign, triumphant gospel, His good news of salvation.

[8 : 42] That's really the message of the whole of the Bible. And it takes us, in fact, beyond even the end of this world. This world, with all its shortcomings, with all its failures, with all its downright evil, it takes us beyond that into eternity, into a whole new creation altogether.

That's where the story of the Bible takes us. And it's not just a story of, well, a little bit of mercy here for some people inside God's great story of judgment.

No, it's actually quite the reverse in the Bible. It's a story of God's mercy that envelops judgment.

All God's judgments occur within His great mercy. God's grace surrounds even His judgments so that judgments serve God's greater purpose of salvation.

That's the wonder of the Christian faith. Martin Luther, one of the great reformers, put it this way, God sometimes fights against us with His left hand, but He always fights for us with His right hand.

[9 : 51] And that's the message of the Christian gospel. You see, the God who comes down here in Genesis 11 in a merciful judgment at the beginning so as to preserve the world, so as to preserve the earth from the evil of humankind, this same God is the God who ultimately comes down in an ultimate merciful judgment to save and to redeem the whole hopeless world of humanity.

And that's what the whole point of the Genesis accounts are here. They're to light up for us right at the very beginning the purpose of God's promise of salvation for the whole world. And it begins right here in chapter 11 as we've read straight after the judgment of Babel.

You see, from this point onwards, from this point onwards, we leave the whole world and all its peoples behind for a while and the story focuses right down just onto this one man, onto Abraham, onto this one family, his descendants, the people of Israel.

And by the way, that narrowing down to the story about Abraham, that's not an afterthought. It's not that God's reacting to the disaster and the sin of man. No, that's perfectly clear from what we read that this has been there right from the very beginning.

That's why we have the interruption of this narrative. We get down to Peleg and then God stops to go back to just explain a little bit more about why the world happened to be as it is and then he carries on his story.

[11 : 23] The story of God's salvation isn't an afterthought. It's the whole purpose of God. So we didn't get Peleg's grandsons and so on in that first list but we do after the story of Babel and we go right on to this person, Abraham.

Now you've heard of Abraham. I bet you everybody in this room is heard of Abraham. I shouldn't think any of you have heard of Joktan or any of these other funny names, Arphaxad and all these people but you've heard of Abraham.

Abraham as he's called here. And that's because Abraham is the beginning of God's new story here. The rest of the world is left behind a little bit and the focus comes right down onto this one man.

But in the story of this one man lie the seeds of God's answer to the whole of the world's problems.

So I want you to look very carefully with me at these few verses at the beginning of chapter 12 and let's just see what God calls this man Abraham to do and to become.

[12 : 35] Let me put it this way. God calls Abraham to put his back to the city of man and to leave the city of man behind him and to seek everything with God and God alone.

Abraham. Just look at chapter 11 verse 31. Abraham leaves Ur of the Chaldeans according to God's command and he goes to the land of Canaan, the place that God tells him to go to.

In other words, Abraham leaves behind his home and his security. He leaves behind the city. Babel gave birth to daughter cities and one of those cities was Ur of the Chaldeans.

So Abraham leaves behind his home and his security. He gives up his city. Chapter 12 verse 1. He leaves behind his country and his kindred at God's call.

In other words, he leaves behind his very identity, his posterity. His name is given up. And he goes off as a wanderer with God. He leaves his father's house, we're told.

[13 : 42] His family. The place of belonging. The place of common culture and common language. And he leaves it all behind, turns his back on it.

Now isn't that very striking? Given what we've already read in Genesis chapter 11. Everything that human civilization was seeking in these cities that they were building, in Babel cities, everything that humans are still seeking today is exactly what God tells Abraham he has to give up.

He tells him to go and live in tents so he'll be homeless and have no city. He tells him to go and be a wanderer. Somebody without any identity or fixed abode.

He tells him to go and be an alien, having no belonging, no common culture, being absolutely out of place with everybody else in the place that he's living. Abraham has to turn his back on the whole world of human society, the whole civilization.

Everything that the world is desperately seeking, Abraham has to say, I no longer seek. Everything the world thinks that it can offer Abraham, he leaves behind.

[14 : 57] And yet, God promises Abraham that if he turns his back on the world and seeks these things in God alone, he will find everything.

He'll find everything that the world was seeking and much, much more. Do you see what God promises him? In verses 2 and 3, these are some of the great foundation stones of the whole gospel.

These are some of the great verses of the Bible. Do you see them? He promises to Abraham an everlasting name. I will make of you a great nation.

I will bless you and make your name great so that you'll be a blessing. God promises Abraham a true and secure identity forever if he follows him.

He promises Abraham a universal family. Do you see? I will bless those who bless you and in him who dishonors you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

[15 : 54] I will make you great, a great nation, a universal family. All the relationships and the security that he needs God will give him forever if he follows him.

He promises him an eternal home, a land that I will show you, a place where he'll belong forever, not just for a little while.

See, Abraham discovered that in God's economy, God's ambitions for mankind are far, far greater than man's ambitions are even for himself. That's an extraordinary thing.

We're all seeking all of these things in so many ways and yet God says, I've got even greater ambitions for you. I don't want you to have this just for a little time. I want you to have it forever.

But it can only be found in following God. man is looking for glory in his own city, you see, but that glory is feeble, it's fleeting.

[17 : 00] But God is looking for glory for mankind in his city, in a city that lasts forever. Something that's enduring, that's eternal, that's unfading. God offers Abraham far more than the world could ever offer and more than even the world thought it wanted.

An eternal name, an eternal family, an eternal home. How did Abraham take possession of these things? Let me read to you from Hebrews chapter 11 verse 9.

By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

For he, listen, was looking forward to the city that has foundations. The city whose designer and builder is God.

God promised all these things to Abraham if he turned his back on the city of man and turned his face towards the eternal city that God himself was building. And Abraham grasped hold of it by faith.

[18 : 10] He followed God and he found the enduring city. We see, we've already seen, haven't we, that our world isn't so different from Abraham's world. It's not so different at all, is it?

Ever since Babel, people have been seeking exactly these same things. People are today desperately seeking a sense of identity in the world. They're seeking for security.

We're all seeking significance. Who am I? What's the point of my life? What am I here for? Where am I going? People are seeking these things in all sorts of places, all of the time, in all kinds of different ways.

But most of the time they're just not finding it. And the reason for that, God says, is you can't find these things in the city of man. You can't. They're not there. The city of man is fleeting.

And we know that. Even the most powerful people on this earth, even the wealthiest people on this earth, they can't deny the last enemy, can they? The enemy of death. If you have enough money, you might be able to beat the wrinkles, but you can't beat the worms.

[19 : 20] You know that. But here's the other side of it. But ever since the time of Abraham, we've also had the same promise.

The God who promises a name, who promises real identity that lasts. The God who promises family, real significance, real belonging that lasts forever.

The God who promises a home, the real security that the world can never give us forever. The God who promises it in his city. The place that he's designing, and the place that he dwells.

Isn't that extraordinary? That's the good news of the gospel. But listen, we've got even better news, better news than Abraham ever, ever had. You might think, well, what could be better news than that?

That's a pretty extraordinary promise that God gave to Abraham. Well, you're right, it is. And in one sense, nothing could be better than that. But we have the same promise, but made more certain, made more sure, made more solid, because we have seen the promises of God from Genesis chapter 12, verses 1 to 3.

[20 : 36] We have seen them fulfilled. We have seen them fulfilled in the God who has come down once and for all in merciful judgment, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled the promise to Abraham.

So that through Abraham's seed, through Jesus Christ, all the nations of the earth should be blessed. So that all who trust in the God of Abraham through Jesus Christ could also turn their back on the city of man and find by faith entrance into the city of God.

The city that God promised to Abraham, the city that God has achieved through Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that's the message of the whole Bible.

That's the good news. That's the gospel. God has acted once and for all in a merciful judgment in Christ, in the judgment that God bore in himself on the cross of Jesus, bearing away our sins, so that the mercy, so that the blessing promised to Abraham could come to all nations, to come to all who have believed in Jesus.

That's the message that you read again and again on the pages of the New Testament. Paul puts it this way, writing to one of the churches in Galatia. Christ, he says, became a curse for us, so that the blessing given to Abraham might come to all nations through Jesus Christ.

[22 : 04] He says, if you're in Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, you're heirs of the promise. The same promise, the same wonderful future, but better, more secure, because it's been accomplished.

And Paul says, that's the promise for you. It's not just God's word to Abraham. He promises you a name, and a family, and a security, and an eternal home.

And it's been accomplished. It's been accomplished in history through Jesus Christ. A death that rescues you from this present evil age, from the city of man, and a death that raises you with Jesus Christ in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus, in the city of God forever.

Abraham, you see, believed God, we're told. He saw it all from a distance. He put his trust in God. And he reaped all the blessings of Jesus' death and resurrection.

But we see it in its full glory. We look back on it. And so we're far, far more sure. It's a reversal of the curse of Babel. That's, by the way, what the whole story on the day of Pentecost is all about.

[23 : 21] Do you remember Peter's preaching in Acts chapter 2? And there's people from all the nations of the world gathered in Jerusalem. And what happens? Everybody hears the message in their own language. It's a reversal of the scattering of the people of the earth, drawn together, once again, through Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham.

And that's where the story of the whole Bible ends. I'd like you to see it just as we close. If you want to turn to Revelation chapter 7, page 1032. Here's a wonderful story.

It's a picture of the new heavens and the new earth. It's a picture of the new world that's coming when Christ returns. It's a description now not of the city of man, but of the city of God.

And it's a wonderful picture. It echoes these tables of Genesis chapter 10 where we read about people and tribes and nations and languages.

It tells us that the world hasn't been forgotten while God has been carrying out his purposes through the people of Israel. Look at verse 9. Here's John looking at the new world, the city of God, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[24 : 33] I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands.

What are they saying? They're crying out with a loud voice, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

You see, peoples and tribes and languages and nations united worshipping one God through the Lord Jesus Christ, through the fulfilment of the promise given to Abraham.

That's the only place that the world is ever going to be united. Never in the city of man, only in the city of God. It's just not possible in this world.

But the story of the Bible, the story of the gospel is the triumph of the city of God over the city of man. By the grace and by the mercy of God. By the wonder of God's love poured out for sins on the cross of Jesus Christ.

[25 : 43] So that sinners, sinful people like you and me, so that we through Jesus can share the blessing of the promise to Abraham.

So that we like Abraham can turn our backs upon the city of man and follow Jesus Christ into the city of God. The city that lasts forever. The city that's built and designed and inhabited by God.

So that we can find the identity and the security and the home and the belonging and the joy that the people in this world, all of us, are looking for.

Friends, the only place that you can find that security now and eternally is in that city. It's in the city of God. It's in the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the only place that can be found.

Nowhere else. So aren't you glad if you are, by grace, a member of Zion's city, aren't you glad that you are there? That you have these things?

[26 : 52] And if you're not, surely, surely you want to be. You must want to be. You'd be mad. You'd be crazy not to want that.

Jesus says, I am the door. If anyone enters by me, you will be saved.

You'll be safe in the city of God. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have built a city that will last forever, the glorious kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And you have set your Son upon the throne to be the judge and the ruler of that world forever. But that you have made him the door, the gateway, the Savior, who alone can draw us out of the city of man and bring us into that place.

We thank you for the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ that tells us that all that you promised to Abraham is there as a sure and a certain hope for all who will trust in Jesus.

[28 : 22] So help us, we pray, to have our minds and our hearts full of the glories of the city of God and not to allow anything to keep us from being citizens of that place forever.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.