

13. The Terminus of the City of Man (2007)

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[0 : 0 0] I'll do turn, if you would, first of all to Genesis chapter 11. We began last Sunday morning by asking the question, why is the world as it is?

That is a question that people constantly do ask themselves, even though perhaps they think there is no answer. They still ask it, don't they? Why the paradox of a world so full of beauty and joy and love, and yet at the same time full of ugliness and hate and sorrow?

Why all the prowess and the progress and the achievement of the human spirit, and yet at the same time the shame and the regression and the frank bestiality that's all too evident in our world of humanity?

I just happened to look at the front page of the BBC News on the internet when I was writing this, and the first three headlines were this, rogue trader defrauds a French bank of seven billion dollars.

Amazing, isn't it? Next one, seven teenagers commit suicide in a Welsh town. And the next one, new terror laws that are being debated in our parliament at the moment.

[1 : 1 5] Well, that's the real world, isn't it? That's the BBC News today. And the Bible gives us an explanation of that reality, and it gives us the only explanation, I would say, that really does make sense of the world as we know it.

We saw last time in these watershed chapters of Genesis chapter 10 and 11 that bring us to the end of the first five books of what we call Genesis. We saw that these are watershed chapters that tell us about the beginning of the world as we know it today.

Now remember, this is a great turning point in the storyline of the whole Bible. Because, as we said, from this point on, the story right to the end of the Old Testament focuses right down from the whole world that we've been dealing with right down to just the story of one family, Abraham and his descendants.

And, of course, from him comes the people of Israel and the nation of Israel. And it's that one nation from one family that takes up the whole of the story of the rest of the Old Testament.

But remember that the whole point of these early chapters of Genesis is to show us that the Bible story is not just the exclusive concern of one family and one race.

[2 : 3 3] Not at all. From the very beginning, God's interest has so clearly been on the whole world. The whole world is God's concern. And if I can put it this way, the whole world is God's problem.

Or I guess it would be better to say, though, that the whole world has a problem. A problem with God. And that is why the world is as we know it to be today. We know that we live in a world both of extraordinary wonder and yet also of tragic disaster.

And the Bible says, and these very chapters tell us, that that is because the world is both under God's blessing and his curse, his judgment. This world is unquestionably under the sole sovereign control of God.

But that control includes both his care, his blessings, his creativity, his grace, and also his curse. His necessary judgments because of our human rebellion.

And if the ultimate explanation of this world is that it's all under God's sovereign control, then as we saw last time, the responsibility for the curse and the judgments of God, well, that lies squarely with man's sinful corruption.

[3 : 52] And that's what the story of Babel is all about. It's man's sinful heart that has moved the sovereign hand of God in judgment against this world. And that's what the story of Babel made so clear to us.

It explains the beginning of the world as we know it. A world that is desperately seeking a name and identity by rejecting God and yet finding in its place only confusion.

A world that's desperately seeking belonging and cohesion and relationship but doing so apart from God and therefore only reaping loneliness and isolation.

A world desperately seeking a city for us and yet in reality finding only frustration and insecurity and anxiety, not the security that it looks for.

Babel's world is our world. It is the tragedy of the city of man. It's a world, a society, a humanity adrift from God and independent of God and resolutely, in fact, against God and his gracious rule.

[5 : 02] And that's the world as we know it. And it's because we live in a world that is under God's merciful judgment. God judges man's city.

We saw it last time. He judges the world of humanity in order to preserve it. In order to preserve it from its innate flight into self-destruction. God's judgments are to preserve this world.

If you look in verse 6 of Genesis chapter 11, he says, unless man's sinful propensity is curbed by God's evil, God says, there's nothing that will be impossible for him.

That is, if man were really able to unite in concentrated, sustained evil, then this world would be far, far worse than it is. A far more dreadful place.

Just think about it. It's God's restraining hand of grace on this world that stops this world utterly destroying itself. And only that. But here's the question that we ended with last week.

[6 : 05] Will God, if he really is a sovereign God, will he always put up with a world that is like this? A world so far short of his created ideal.

A world that needs constant restraint. Otherwise it would erupt into a self-destructive conflagration of mutinous wickedness against him.

Well, the clear answer to that question is no. Says the Bible. This world will not remain this way forever because God will not withhold ultimate judgment from this world forever.

God's merciful judgments in this world to preserve the world of mankind will one day come to an end. And then, there will be a final judgment on the world to end the world.

And that's the clear teaching of the whole Bible. There is a terminus for the city of man. And so, you see, chapters 10 and 11 of the book of Genesis tell us not only about the beginning of the world as we know it, they also launch us into the story of the whole of the rest of the Bible, which clearly, therefore, points us towards the end of the world as we know it.

[7 : 27] The city of man with its unbridled defiance against God. It won't last forever. That's the message of the Bible. Now, in the end, every pretension, every Babel, every Babylon, the whole world of rebellious humanity, it will come to an end.

It will come to a terminus. And in its place, says the Bible, will be another city, indeed another world, a city that is lasting, no longer full of paradoxes and ambiguities, no, a city full of eternal righteousness, the city of God himself.

And so, since with these chapters that we're looking at here, we are at a real watershed, a real turning point in that whole overarching story of Scripture, I want to step back a little bit and make sure that we all see the big picture of this story before we go on any further, before we get right into the detail of the story of Abraham that now unfolds, the story that narrows the focus right down onto these three generations, the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

They take up the whole of the rest of the book of Genesis. But we want to step back and get a sense of the full story. You know, when you look at a map and you're trying to work out where you're going, maybe it's on the internet, on Google Maps, and I still do that when I'm trying to find somewhere in Glasgow.

When I put in where I'm starting from and where I'm finishing, I need to step back and look and see the beginning and the end before I begin to narrow right down and begin to ask the question, well, do you turn left here or right there or so on?

[9 : 00] You need to see where you're going don't you? And we need to see the big picture of where this whole story is going. It's helpful for us to stand back and to trace out the journey right to the end.

And that's what I want to do this week and next week before we dive into Genesis 12 and start looking at these chapters in detail. So having thought about the beginning of the world as we know it, we're going to spend these two Sunday mornings thinking about the end of the world as we know it.

In both senses of that word, end. First today, the end in the sense of where it stops forever, the terminus of the city of man. And then next week, the end in terms of what its true goal is, in terms of the triumph of the city of God.

So in other words, we're going to trace through the Bible both God's curse and his care for this world. Where his judgment leads to in the end and also where his blessing leads to in its glorious fulfillment.

So then let's think about where God's judgment on man's city reaches its fulfillment as the Bible's story is told. What is the terminus of the city of man?

[10 : 16] Where does the story of Babel actually come to its end? And since, as we've said, Babel's world is our world, then that's a pretty important question for all of us, isn't it? Where does the world as we know it come to an end?

Well, to understand where this world really is going to end and how it's going to end and why, we need to be very clear. We need to be not at all confused about two things concerning God's judgment.

First of all, we need to understand his many merciful judgments to preserve human history. But we also need to understand clearly his ultimate judgment to end human history.

So let's think about the first of these in some of the things that we've already seen in these early chapters of Genesis because it has been, hasn't it, a story of God's merciful judgments to preserve human history.

Just think back to the beginning in Genesis 1. God makes a perfect world and his purpose for all humanity is laid out in chapter 1, verse 28.

[11 : 21] Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and have dominion. But then, of course, almost immediately comes man's rebellion. No, man says, we'll do it our way.

And having rebelled, he is able to usurp God or wants to usurp God and God has to judge man and banish him from Eden. And in the chapters that followed, we saw, didn't we, the multiplying of evil in the world.

Cain killing his brother Abel was just one example of that. And yet, amazingly, God has not totally abandoned his world. Remember the end of chapter 4? People began to call on the name of the Lord.

And yet, still, man's evil becomes so prolific that in chapter 6, do you remember, we saw that God saw every intention of man's heart was only evil all of the time. And so, God must judge again, destroying that society in the disaster of the flood.

But still, God hasn't abandoned man altogether. Again, it's a merciful judgment, isn't it? He starts again after the flood with Noah and his family.

[12 : 31] And once again, God commands his blessing on the world. Chapter 9, verse 1, be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth. But still, man will rebel.

He will not submit to God. And so, on the plains of Shinar, we have tyrants like Nimrod, whose very name means we shall rebel, building cities like Babel, the city of man, societies without God and against God.

Come, they say, in chapter 11, verse 4, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. We'll make ourselves divine. We don't need God. We'll make a name for ourselves, they say.

We won't be dispersed over the earth as God wants. We'll be secure here where we want to be. And again, it's just exactly the same phenomenon, isn't it? Man asserting himself against God, transgressing the boundaries between God, our creator, and ourselves as creatures.

And so, once again, as we've seen, God must judge. As he says in verse 6, because otherwise their united opposition against God might become unstoppable and they'll utterly destroy God's good world.

[13 : 46] So, as we saw last time, verses 7 to 9 of Genesis 11 tell us about the scattering of humanity, putting human races and cultures at odds with one another.

They're confused in language, don't understand one another anymore. Clashing in cultures, they're rivaling one another. That's the way the world's been ever since, isn't it? That is our world today.

Open your newspaper, look at the TV. And it is so, according to the Bible, because this world still is under God's sovereign blessing. He hasn't utterly abandoned it, but he has many, many times in history, he has had to judge it in order to preserve this world from destruction, from self-destruction.

and he's done that for the sake of his ongoing purpose in the world, that it might come to fruition. But, and this is just as clearly the message of the whole Bible, things will not stay this way forever.

Contrary, you see, to the way secularists and humanists and atheists view this world, they think it's always been the same from the beginning, it'll always be the same forever. No, the Bible says that's not true.

[15 : 01] There is a terminus for the city of man, for this world against God. Nor is there a kind of samsaric round of the world just going round and round and repeated cycles of reincarnation and rebirth as some of the eastern philosophies would dictate.

No, says the Bible. There will come a time when God's merciful judgments in history to preserve the world will give way to something else, to God's ultimate judgment in history to end this world.

The city of man will not be triumphant forever. There will be an end, there will be a decisive end to Babel, to Babylon, to the world of mankind at odds with our Creator.

So the rest of the time this morning I want to help you see the thread of that big story as it unfolds through the Bible because Genesis 11 as well as telling us about the beginning is also prophetic of the end of this world as we know it too.

What you need to understand is that in the Bible from Genesis 11 onwards Babel or Babylon as it tends to normally become known as it comes it comes to epitomize to typify the whole world of man at war with God and that's the recurring story of our human history isn't it when you think about it.

[16 : 27] Of course if you read the Bible the literal history of Babylon is one of great opposition against God's people Israel. Right through the Bible's story Babylon is a real and present physical enemy.

And you notice by the way that those verses we read in Genesis 10 just at the beginning there they contain don't they they speak of the three great enemies of God's people Babylon and Assyria and Egypt did you notice that?

The two great crises in the history of God's people the time of the exodus and the time of the exile these are the enemies Egypt in the one hand and then Assyria who took the northern kingdom of Israel into exile and Babylon who took the southern kingdom Judah into exile.

So right back here with Moses' words we have a foreshadowing don't we? We have a continual opposition to God and his people from these historic enemies these tyrannical and oppressive earthly regimes and yet you see as you read on in your Bible you'll find that Babylon Babel Babylon in particular is taken up and used to typify everything in the world of humanity that is against God it typifies it stands for the city of man against God and his city and his people and that's what we saw when we read as we did earlier on from Isaiah chapter 13 and 14 you might like to turn back to there for a moment page 577 you see here Isaiah is prophesying in the 8th century BC when the Babylonian empire was the mighty power of the world but surely you could see as we read this that when he talks about Babylon he's talking about something that represents something much greater than just an earthly empire

Isaiah's words are also of course about the the current history of God's people but they're about much more than that aren't they it's clear he's talking about something ultimate an intervention of God right into history in salvation but also in judgment look again at chapter 14 verse 12 how you are fallen from heaven O day star son of the dawn how are you cut down to the ground you who laid the nations low you said in your heart I will ascend to heaven above the stars of God I will set my throne on high I will sit on the mount of the assembly but verse 15 you are brought down to Sheol you see how Babylon and its king are spoken of here as the personification of everything that is anti-God and his people it's the very spirit of Babel isn't it arrogance and defiance trying to rise up above God himself but isn't that the same arrogant defiance of God that we've seen all through human history in every place in every culture in every time and think when you read these words of the rebellious defiance of the devil himself and his angels who abandoned their proper place and sought to usurp God and his throne it's the very spirit isn't it of everything that is anti-God but look at what's promised here for that look at this judgment look at verse 22

[19 : 51] I will rise up against them declares the Lord of hosts and I will cut off from Babylon name and remnant descendants and posterity that's not just a scattering is it like Genesis chapter 11 that's total destruction isn't it and do you see again the tragic irony of it all everything that man has sought apart from God and without God and against God everything that the builders of Babel were trying to achieve for themselves the name and descendants and posterity do you see verse 22 name remnant descendants posterity will be swept away with the broom of destruction declares the Lord of hosts just in case you're in any doubt about the finality of it look down to verse 26 these oracles about these great cities of God's enemies

Babylon and Syria it's very very clear they are representative of the whole world opposed to God this verse 26 is the purpose that is purposed concerning the whole earth this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations you see the prophet here is speaking about an ultimate judgment on the whole earth this is the terminus of the city of man that's in view and if you read through the Old Testament prophets you will find that that is the constant message a day is coming they say when Babylon when the world of man humanity in rebellion against God when it will be destroyed forever no longer a scattering of merciful judgment but a shattering of ultimate judgment now it may be that you would like to think that that's merely something you find in the railing of Old Testament prophets but I need to show you that the New Testament scriptures not only confirm all of this they emphasize it with absolute and extraordinary clarity

Babylon is still the name that epitomizes the world of God's enemies wherever in history wherever in a particular place that might be manifested that's why for example in 1st Peter 5 verse 13 Peter uses the word Babylon as a code for Rome because Rome in that day was the empire arrayed against God and his people but when you come to the very last book of the New Testament the book of Revelation you find that it's constantly in almost every page referring to Babylon the city of man because it represents there the united mass of evil humanity arrayed against God and John's revelation of course in that book is a colorful one it's full of visionary representations but it's just telling the same story for all the apocalyptic imagery it's just the same tale of two cities the city of God and the city of man the city that has been at war all the way through human history with God and his city with his kingdom and his people so in Revelation 14 for example it speaks of Babylon who made all nations drink the maddening wine of her sexual immorality and John's vision describes for us in vivid and flowery ways something just that the whole

New Testament speaks about very clearly elsewhere in very plain words it speaks about a final climax of evil in this world when for a time God will lift his restraining hand upon this world and there will be a last and the greatest I suppose revolt of mankind against God now it's easy when we get into this territory to get into the realm of foolish speculations about the end times and in fact that's something that the Bible specifically warns us against Jesus tells us not to many Christians are far too taken up with these things that's why you have millions of these books in that crazy series left behind and things like that they're not only foolish they're wrong because Jesus tells us no one knows or can know the day or the hour of Christ's coming but some things the New Testament does tell us much more plainly if you go home later on and read 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 you'll see that

Paul does speak of a climax of evil of a great rebellion when God's hand of restraint is lifted from this world before Jesus Christ comes to destroy at last the man of lawlessness whatever that means the manifestation of evil in this world and elsewhere in the New Testament the apostles all of them speak about a rising tide of terrible times they call it in the last days and that's what we see in the book of Revelation with all its apocalyptic imagery it speaks of the last great attempt to unify the city of man against God and his people the last stand of the world in rebellion against God I think it would be helpful for us to turn to some of those verses let's turn to Revelation chapter 20 just briefly so you can see what I'm speaking about and what we read here in verses 7 to 9 it's just like Babel revisited in reverse look at verse 7 and when the thousand years are ended

[25 : 38] Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth Gog and Magog to gather them for battle their number is like the sand of the sea and they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp the city if you like of the saints and of the beloved city you see Babel in reverse isn't it all the nations from the four corners of the earth coming together again to march against God's people and his holy city the resurrection of Babel the great global unity of deception seeking to challenge God but look at the end of verse 9 do you see what happens then but fire came down from heaven and consumed them not a scattering not a merciful preserving judgment to maintain the world it's the end isn't it it's the terminus of the rebellious city of man and at last it is a just and a right retribution it is an eternal judgment don't be in any doubt about that look at verse 9 and 10 fire came down from heaven and consumed them and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever you see all the united evil and opposition of man and the author of it all the devil himself who in Revelation 12 he gets called by his older name that ancient serpent we've seen him haven't we in Genesis they're judged forever forever and ever in the lake of fire it's the terminus it's the eternal end of Babylon of Babel of the city of man and that really is the end of the world as we know it just turn back a couple of pages to Revelation chapter 18 because this just gives us another graphic picture of exactly that same happening the fall of Babylon it's called look at it after this I saw another angel coming down from heaven having great authority and the earth was made bright with his glory and he called out with a mighty voice fallen fallen is Babylon the great she is becoming a dwelling place for demons a haunt for every unclean spirit a haunt for every unclean bird a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast for all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living then I heard another voice from heaven saying come out of her my people lest you take part in her sins lest you share in her plagues for her sins are heaped high as heaven and God has remembered her iniquities pay her back as she herself has paid back to others and repay her double for her deeds mix a portion for her in the cup she mixed as she glorified herself and lived in luxury so give her a like measure of torment and mourning since in her heart she says

I sit as a queen I am no widow and mourning I shall never see for this reason her plagues will come down in a single day death and mourning and famine and she will be burned up with fire for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her pretty unmistakable that isn't it do you see even then here is the extraordinary thing friends even then there is not a hint of repentance from a world at odds with God in fact it is quite the opposite all there is in these verses is sorrow for the loss of this terrible world of rebellion look at verse 15 the merchants of these wares who gained wealth from her will stand off in fear of her torment weeping and mourning aloud alas alas for the great city that was clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet adorned with gold with jewels and with pearls for in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste that makes

Black Monday look like not very much doesn't it and all the ship masters and seafaring men sailors and all whose trade is on the sea stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning what city was like the great city and they threw dust on their heads and they wept and mourned crying out alas alas for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth for in a single hour she has been laid waste it is a shocking thing isn't it that even in the very day of judgment when God is destroying all the rebellion that has been against them the rebellious don't even offer a shred of repentance only sorrow at losing the city of man but the heavens and the citizens of God's city will rejoice look at verse 20 rejoice over her oh heaven and you saints and apostles and prophets for God has given judgment for you against her will the God of heaven and earth let this world go on as it is forever in rebellion against him in scorn against him in hatred of him in hatred of his son the Lord Jesus

Christ no Babel's world can't possibly go on forever can it look at verse 21 then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea saying so will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence and will be found no more and the sounds of harpists and musicians of flute players and trumpeters will be heard and you know more and a craftsman of any craft will be found in you no more and the sound of the mill will be heard in you no more and the light of a lamp will shine on you no more and the voice of a bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more for your merchants were the great ones of the earth and all nations were deceived by your sorcery and in her were found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on earth you see the world that hated and mocked and murdered the Christ of God and the people of God well at last it will be judged forever says the word of God

Nimrod's world a world full of tyrants and exploiters and enslavers this world of murderers and rapists and thieves this world of hard hearted men who abuse women for their own ends and even young girls and children this world of injustice and suffering and exploitation and squalor and envy and pride and selfish humanity the world that we know it will be no more it will end in almighty judgment there is a terminus for the city of man and friends of that dreadful thought we have the assurance of the words of the Lord Jesus Christ himself it will be his voice his voice on that day that says depart from me you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and all his angels read his words in Matthew chapter 25 and yet on that day the heavens and the earth will shout hallelujah because all heaven and earth will know that at last justice has been done that evil has been totally avenged and that God has been shown at last to be truly righteous and just and powerful to judge evil and to put his world to right no longer will anybody say if there is a God why doesn't he put the world to right because every hour will see it you know Handel's hallelujah chorus don't you from the Messiah well this is it right here look at the beginning of chapter 19 it's hallelujah for the end of the city of man after this I heard what seemed to be a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven crying out hallelujah salvation and glory and power belong to our God for his judgments are true and just for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality and has avenged on her the blood of his saints once more they cried out hallelujah the smoke from her goes up forever and ever do you long for a world where there is an end to all evil and injustice and wickedness well the Bible says that day is coming from the start it's absolutely plain that God will not withhold ultimate judgment forever his whole plan and purpose is to reverse the curse and to destroy his enemy the serpent and all the seed of the serpent and Jesus Christ resurrection friends declares that fact of future judgment to be an absolute certainty he is the one appointed to judge the living and the dead that was Peter's gospel in Acts chapter 10 wasn't it and Paul's in Athens and everywhere else he has fixed a day on which to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead the terminus of the city of man the end of this world as we know it it's been fixed in God's timetable it's a very solemn thought isn't it a very solemn thought for this whole world it's a very solemn thought for every one of us too isn't it because Hebrews 9 verse 27 tells us that for every single human being it is appointed to die once and then comes judgment it's a solemn

[36 : 44] message but it is the consistent message of the apostolic gospel it's the message of the whole Bible the big story from Genesis right to Revelation of course it's not the whole story there is more because with God his judgment is never the last word it's never the dominant word you'll have to come back next week to hear about that but for today I want you all to think about this what side do you want to be found on on the day when God's merciful judgments in this world to preserve it and restrain man's evil on the day when these give way to his ultimate judgment to end this world what side do you want to be on and are you sure today what side you will be on there's no more important question in all the world than that let's pray

Mark tells us at the beginning of his gospel that Jesus came proclaiming the gospel of God saying the time is fulfilled and the kingdom the city of God is at hand repent and believe the gospel Lord your kingdom the final triumph of your city is nearer now than ever before so grant that we who could never bear your wrath but for our sins would crumple and collapse in your presence grant that we may turn to the shelter of your cross and so find salvation there in your presence in your city of salvation forever we ask it in Jesus name Amen