

14. The Triumph of the City of God (2007)

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn, if you would, to Genesis 11 and 12, as we read there. As I said, for the last couple of weeks we've been looking at the question of why the world is as it is.

The world of paradox and contrast that we know so well. A world of love and of beauty, of fulfillment and of hope. And yet, at the same time, that world of hate and ugliness and frustration and despair. And we've seen that the clear answer from these early chapters of Genesis is that this world, of course, is wonderful. In all these ways that we know.

Because it is a world under God's blessing. It's a world under God's care. God did create a good world. An ordered world. A beautiful world. And he had a great purpose of glory for the world that he has made.

And yet, of course, that's not the whole story. We've seen that. And these early chapters of Genesis also tell us so clearly about the story of man's rebellion. His spoiling of the beautiful world of God in defiance of God.

[1 : 09] In opposition to God. And it tells us very plainly of the resultant curse that that has brought on this world. And that's the darker side of this world that we do know.

That we see. That we can't avoid. It's what the heart of man is capable of when God gives him over to his own devices. When he removes his restraining hand.

It's very, very ugly. It's very frightening, isn't it? Didn't you think that was just the lowest, the nadir of human bestiality? When you read about these terrorists sending handicapped people into a marketplace and then blowing them up?

That the heart of man can be capable of such bestiality. It's abhorrent, isn't it? And yet it's real. And unless we're utterly blind to the world that we live in, we have to accept that.

We have to explain it, don't we? Just look again at the gathering shadows that we're seeing in the land of Kenya. It just shows what can so easily erupt out of the hearts of men and women.

[2 : 14] A clash of tribe and language and nation. Well, that too is the world as we know it, isn't it? And it's we, says the Bible, who are responsible for it.

The world is under God's curse, but it's the sinful corruption of man that has brought that curse down on the world. And that's what these chapters make so plain.

But perhaps in the face of that, the most astonishing thing of all is that God has not utterly abandoned his world. He hasn't let man utterly ruin and utterly destroy the world and so completely destroy ourselves.

No, he has repeatedly intervened. He has judged the world in mercy in order to preserve it, to protect it, to protect us from ourselves. That's what the flood was.

That's what the judgment at Babel was all about. It was to stop man's wickedness running away with itself. Turning into absolutely organized, ultimate apostasy that the world would never recover from.

[3 : 19] God judged the world in order to preserve it. To preserve the world for his ongoing purpose of his promise. A promise and a purpose that he will never allow to be derailed, even by the sheer depravity of the human world of men and women.

And so, we've seen these judgments in history. And yet we saw last time, didn't we, that there will come a time when God will at last judge the world forever.

There will come a time when these merciful judgments in history change. And they give way to an ultimate judgment on this world forever.

To end the world, not to preserve it. There shall be a terminus for the city of man, for this world and its sin and its rebellion. And the time will come when Babel, when Babylon, when the world of humanity that has rejected God and has scorned God, when that at last will be no more.

And that is the end of the world as we know it. And it's a certainty, according to the whole Bible, according to Genesis. And we've got to take that seriously. The Bible is exceptionally clear.

[4 : 35] It's insistent that God is a righteous judge. That he's a perfectly just judge. And therefore, ultimately, he must judge all evil and wickedness.

And he must judge it with an everlasting judgment. Now, we've read that, haven't we? Both in Jesus' own words and in the graphic portrayals of John's vision in the book of Revelation, with all the images of destruction, portrayed as it is, as we saw last time, as the final destruction of Babylon, of Babel, of the city of man, when the Lord Jesus himself comes again to judge the whole earth. And that is the ultimate end of the world as we know it, the terminus of the city of man. In the words of John's vision, it's cast into the lake of fire, a place of torment, day and night, forever and ever. But Jesus' own words are the same, aren't they? The eternal fire, he says, prepared for the devil and his angels. We can't avoid that. That's the end of the world as we know it.

In one sense of that word end, it's a terminus. It's where the tragedy that is the city of man must end, in total and unmitigated disaster.

[5 : 52] But I want today to trace another thread of this story to its end. Its end in a different sense, in the sense of its goal, its purpose, the destiny for which this world as we know it was actually created, and which God has purposed before the foundation of the universe that it shall certainly reach.

Because the end, the destiny of this world as we know it, will be seen one day to be the glorious triumph, not of the city of man, but the triumph of the city of God.

So again, as we come to this milestone in Genesis 12, in the whole of the Bible's storyline, the beginning of a wonderful story of the city of God, with God's call to Abraham.

Before we get into the story of Abraham, I want again to step back, and just to trace the whole story of the triumph of the city of man as it stretches before us.

The city of God, sorry, as it stretches before us in Scripture. Because that is the true end, the true goal of this world as we know it.

[7 : 02] It's the beginning, if you like, also of the world as we have never yet known it to be, but which we long for with every fiber of our being. That's true, I think, isn't it, of all of us.

All of us as human beings, especially when we see what the world is like, when we read the news, when we see these terrible things. Don't we find ourselves imagining something better? Don't we find ourselves imagining what this world could be if only, if only there weren't so many of the disasters and tragedies and evils and wickednesses?

I mean, that's what the romantic poets and the composers are always searching for, isn't it? Using their artistry, their creative arts, to express that inconsolable longing that we all have.

Something that's within every human heart. A longing for a better place, for a different world. A world of the blessings, but not the curses. You see, the reason that we all have those feelings is that God has set eternity in our hearts.

Remember that in Ecclesiastes? And these feelings that all human beings have, they're the distant echoes that that other world is real, that it's coming.

[8 : 19] They're the unconscious memories, if you like, deep in the fibers of our humanity that bear testimony to the reality that this world is not the way it should be and will not always remain this way.

That there's another world that we were really made for. C.S. Lewis puts it so well, doesn't he? He says, If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, then the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

In another place, he says, All your life, an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness.

The day is coming when you'll wake up to find beyond all hope that you have attained it, or else that it was within your reach and you've lost it forever.

Well, the story of the Bible is the story and it's the only story of the way to that place of satisfaction. That's why the university students are calling their mission satisfaction, the biblical theme.

[9 : 27] What we long for, what we're searching for, can be attained. But it can't be attained ever in the city of man. It cannot be found in the endeavor of the human spirit apart from God.

The end of that way is disaster. It's a terminus. But it can be attained by seeking to join in the triumph of the city of God.

And the story of that triumph is what the story of the whole Bible is about. Because with God, mercy triumphs over judgment. Mercy triumphs through judgment.

Mercy triumphs beyond judgment. And that's the story of Scripture between the scattering of the Tower of Babel in Genesis chapter 11 and the final judgment on Babel, on Babylon, that we read last week in Revelation chapter 18.

It's the story of God's wonderful redeeming grace. It's the story of the triumph of his city through the gospel of his Son. And it's a story that takes us beyond even the end of this world with all its shortcomings, with all its downright evil.

[10:40] It's a story that takes us right into eternity, right into the new creation. And what we have to understand is this. For all God's judgments in history and for all the fact that there will be a final judgment on human history, the story of Scripture is not ultimately a story of judgment.

It's not just as though in the midst of God's many judgments there's a little bit of rather grudging mercy. It's quite the reverse.

God's real story is one of judgments within a far greater story of mercy and grace. God's grace and his mercy are the major motifs.

His judgments are only the minor motifs in the great symphony of his gospel purpose. The true end, the true goal for which this world was created is the glory of God's new creation in Christ.

And that's the real wonder of the Bible despite our sin, despite our rebellion, despite all of our rejection of God. As Martin Luther put it once, God may fight against us with his left hand but he fights for us with his right hand.

[11:58] And that's the truth about the story of the gospel. The God who comes down in a merciful judgment at the beginning at Babel to preserve humanity is the same God who in the fullness of time comes down once and for all in an ultimately merciful judgment so that he might save and redeem helpless and hapless human beings like you and me.

And that's the whole point you see of the Genesis account here. It's to light up and focus God's promise of salvation for all the world. And that's what's beginning right here in verse 10 of Genesis chapter 11 straight after the judgment on Babel.

It's the beginning you see of the Bible focusing its story down just like the lens of a microscope focuses down on one man on one family on the one seed that will at last bring triumph for the whole world through the mercy of God.

And you see how the text here makes it clear to us that this is no afterthought. It's not plan B after a disaster at Babel. Not at all. It's not God just reacting to man's initiative.

It's quite the reverse. God's purpose is already in motion. Just turn back a page and you'll see that in chapter 10 verse 21 we begin with the story of Shem don't we? To count the begins there but it breaks off doesn't it in verse 25 with Peleg.

[13:33] We don't get any of Peleg's descendants there. The whole story stops because he wants to emphasize the story of Babel and the division of the world at that time. But now after that aberration he's straight back to the main story.

These are the generations of Shem. And we come down to verse 16 and we meet Peleg again. But instead of Peleg's story just stopping off there now the story goes on verse 18 when Peleg lived and we have all his descendants right down to verse 26 Abram.

Now everybody knows that name don't they? You perhaps don't know about Joktan or Almodabad or any of those guys but you've heard of Abram because this is where the new story begins.

And the whole of the rest of the world's story if you like is laid aside with Genesis chapter 10. It's not forgotten about but it's left aside for a time because the focus is on the beginning of God's unfolding plan for the redemption of the whole universe.

In a very real sense this is the beginning of the end of the goal for the world as we know it. It's the beginning of the story that will end in the final triumph of the city of God.

[14:54] I want you to look at what it is that God calls this man Abram to do. This man who is going to become the hope of all humankind. What does God call him to do?

God calls him to turn his back on the city of man and to seek his future not in man's city or cities but with God alone. You look at chapter 11 verse 31.

He left Ur of the Chaldeans. Ur was a daughter city of Babel. And Abraham left his home and his security. He gave up his city.

In verse 1 of chapter 12 we're told that he left his country and his kindred. In other words, he turned his back on his identity, his posterity. He gives up, if you like, his family name.

We're told there he leaves his father's house and his family at God's call. He leaves behind the cohesion, the belonging of being in one place and with one culture and one language.

[15 : 55] Isn't that very striking? everything that human civilization is seeking for itself in Babel cities, everything that human civilization is still seeking today in our world, Abraham leaves behind and gives up.

To live in tents, to be homeless with no city, to be a wanderer, somebody with no identity in this world's terms, to be an alien, not belonging, with no common culture with the world around about him.

Abraham turns his back on the world, on everything the world is desperately seeking, everything the world thinks that it itself can offer. And yet, God promises Abraham that by turning his back on this world and by seeking God alone, he will actually find all of those things and much, much more.

You see what God promises Abraham in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 12. One of the great foundation stones of the whole gospel. Let's read it. I will make of you a great nation, and 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 will be blessed. God promises him an everlasting name, a true and a secure identity forever.

[17 : 22] And a universal family, true and secure relationships forever. And an eternal home, a true and secure place to belong forever and ever.

Isn't that striking? So, what Abraham discovered, you see, is that God's ambitions for man are actually far greater even than man's ambitions for himself.

infinitely more and greater. But they can only be realized and achieved and found in God, not apart from him.

And that is, isn't it, the extraordinary discovery that's made by everyone who has, at one time in their life, sought to fulfill those ambitions without God. even perhaps consciously in scorn of God.

They've sought to live their life and find all of these things and build them for themselves in this world, in the city of man. And yet, then at last, they have capitulated to the rule of God in Jesus Christ.

[18 : 27] And yet, when they've done that, they discover that God wants far more blessing for them than ever they even could have imagined for themselves. That's what happens, isn't it, when you become a believer in Jesus Christ.

That's the discovery you make. Because you see, man is seeking his own glory in his own city, but at best, at best, it's just fading, it's temporary.

But God, God seeks glory for us in his city. And that alone is the place that's enduring, that's eternal. How did, how did Abraham receive all these things from God?

All this blessing that humankind are so desperately seeking and yet not able to find? Well, Hebrews chapter 11 tells us, 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 them of the same promise.

For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. God. How did he receive all these things? By faith in the promise of God, for a true and an everlasting city.

[19 : 42] He turned away from the city of man and looked to that enduring city, the city of God. We've already seen, haven't we, that our world isn't so different from Abraham's world.

Ever since Babel, the world has really been the same. People desperately seeking identity and security and significance in all kinds of places, all kinds of ways, but tragically unable to find it. Because these things can't be found in the city of man. Even the greatest, even the wealthiest, can't cheat that last enemy of death, can they? I often say we may delay the wrinkles, but we can't deny the worms.

And that's the truth for every living human being. But ever since Abraham, God has revealed the same promise to all who will receive it with faith as Abraham did.

The God who promises a name, a true identity. The God who promises a family, real significance and belonging. The God who promises a home, real and eternal security.

[20 : 54] In God's city, the city where he alone is the designer, the builder, the keeper, with everlasting foundations. Isn't that extraordinary?

Isn't that good news that everything that the human heart is seeking but cannot find, God offers a thousandfold freely by his grace for those who will trust in him.

Listen, this is just the beginning of the gospel. It's the beginning of the story of the city of God. And we, those of us living today, we have something even better than what God gave to Abraham.

You might say to yourself, well, what could possibly be better than what God offered to Abraham? That sounds pretty good. But in one sense, of course, nothing, nothing could be better than what God offered Abraham. And what we have is that same promise.

But what we have is that promise even more certain, even more sure, even more solid than ever Abraham did, because we have lived in the age that has seen that promise of Genesis 12, verses 1 to 3, accomplished and fulfilled in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[22 : 03] Because in Jesus, God has come down in the flesh, in an ultimate merciful judgment, to deal with sin and evil, to do it forever. And he's done it so that through Abraham's seed, all the world may be blessed.

So that all who trust in Abraham's God may also with confidence turn their backs on the city of man and place their future in the city of God, the kingdom of God, through the gracious fulfillment of all of those words to Abraham, accomplished through what our Lord Jesus Christ has done in history. And that's the message of the Bible, that's the Christian gospel, this is the beginning of it here, all the way back in Genesis, in the very first book of the Bible. But its climax came when in Jesus Christ God himself acted once and for all and forever in that decisive merciful judgment on the cross, when the blessing promised to Abraham was poured out to all nations because he took away the curse.

And therefore every tribe and tongue and people and nation can belong to him as a seed of Abraham. That was Paul's message, wasn't it, to the church in Galatia. He said, Christ became a curse for us so that the blessing given to Abraham might come to all the nations in Jesus Christ.

And in Galatians 3.29 he says that if you're in Christ then you are Abraham's seed, heirs of the promise. The same promise but better, more sure because it's been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

[23 : 44] Christ. And it is for us. It's for you. God's promise of a name and of a family and of security of an eternal home forever and ever.

It's a certain promise because it's been accomplished in history through Jesus Christ. It's been declared to the world through his resurrection that justifies forever all who believe in him. the death that rescues you as the New Testament says from this present evil age. That's its language for the city of man. It raises you up with him into a new creation into the kingdom of Christ, the city of God.

And Abraham you see, he saw it all, God revealed it to him from a distance. And yet he reaped the blessings of what Christ was going to come and do. Well we see it, but we see it in all its full glory. We see it from the perspective of its fulfillment in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. That promised blessing has come to this world. And you see what God has done in Christ is the reversal of the curse of Babel.

[24 : 56] It's the regathering into one family of all the tribes and tongues and peoples and nations. That's what the prophet Zephaniah foresaw when he said this, at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to pure speech that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord.

And he says that the dispersed peoples of the world will gather to worship God together on the mountain of the Lord's holiness as we sang. You see that's the true end, the true goal of this world. Everything that man seeks for himself in his own city but can never ever hope to find, God gives us in his city. And he does it through the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's just go to the very end of the Bible again to see the picture of this as we have it in the book of Revelation.

Look at Revelation chapter 7. I think it's a page 1032 in the church Bibles. See what we have here is a window into the new heavens and the new earth, into the new world that Jesus will bring.

And it's a description, isn't it? Not of the city of man because Babel has gone forever. We saw that last time. But it's a city, it's a picture of the triumph of the city of God. Look at Revelation 7 verses 9 and 10.

[26 : 15] You see these verses echo exactly the words that we read in Genesis chapter 10 about God dividing up humanity by every clan and language and people and nation. And you see when

we get to the very end of the Bible we discover the world hasn't been forgotten.

God's promise through Abraham is for the whole world and for all its peoples. It's where God's story reaches its goal. Look at verse 9. After this I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number from every nation and 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 and crying out with a loud voice salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

Salvation belongs to our God God. That's a song of the truly united nations of this world isn't it? You see a truly united world at last but only in the city of God through Jesus Christ.

It's the only place it can be ever. Listen again to the words I began with from Revelation 21. then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more and I saw the holy city new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying behold the dwelling place of God is with man he will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more for the former things have passed away that's the real end that's the glorious goal of this world as we know it the whole Christian gospel is the story of the triumph of the city of God over the city of man the new Jerusalem over the old Babylon by the grace and mercy of God poured out in the Lord Jesus Christ so that rebellious sinners like you and me who share Abraham's faith so that we might inherit Abraham's promises that we might confidently turn our back on the city of man and turn our face instead to the city of God and to be welcomed there and to be given an eternal identity and eternal significance and eternal security all the things that can be found nowhere else that means that the gospel says that people like you and me may share in the triumph of the city of God even though we don't deserve to belong to that city at all that we can share in the end in the goal of the whole purpose of this world's creation that's what the Christian gospel is all about it's what it means it's the story of the triumph of the city of God and it's the offer to share in that triumph through the mercy of the

[29 : 28] Lord Jesus Christ let me just end by summing up with a few implications of all of this for us this morning four things beginning with C just to help you remember first confidence if you're a Christian you can have confidence about the future about your eternal future because the triumph of the city of God is already evident in our Christian experience today of course we're primarily confident about the future because of the resurrection of Jesus and the witness to that in the New Testament because of the truth of the gospel but we already experience in our lives don't we as members of the worldwide church of God we experience the triumph of that city we recognize that picture of Revelation chapter 7 already don't we well for one thing we saw it on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 do you remember when the spirit's coming upon the church is a public manifestation of the reverse of the curse of Babel what do you have in Jerusalem people from every tribe and language and nation speaking in their own languages and hearing the word of

God in their own languages and yet together all understanding and praising the name of God and that's what the city of God is and that's just what we find isn't it as Christians in our experience in the Christian church you go anywhere in this world and anywhere in this world this morning you walk into a church and you share the same language as the people there don't you you might not understand many things if you try and talk to them but together you share the language of praise to the one true God you belong instantly and you understand one another on a far deeper level than just the superficiality of language so we can have confidence the triumph of the city of God is already a reality on earth in the Christian church second though cost we will bear cost in the present you see God's call and the gospel call is to turn our back on the city of man and on all its values and on all its loves and to seek his city alone and to make our defining relationships in this world the relationships and the values of heaven not earth and that's always costly isn't it of course it cost Abraham much to leave his home his family his people his city and Jesus said whoever loves his father or mother or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me whoever finds his life will lose it costly to seek only the triumph of the city of God isn't it you know that if you're a Christian but remember Jesus also said everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life there's cost but there's gain third conflict see whoever turns his back on the city of man can't avoid conflict to the very end because

this world the city of man despises those who reject its values it hates vagrants and foreigners who don't care anything for the culture and for the values and the precious things of this world and so those who have no enduring city in this world will always face conflict and will do so right to the very end of this world remember in Galatians 4

Paul says it was always that way right back then in the days of the patriarchs those born according to the flesh that is citizens of the city of man they persecuted the one born according to the spirit the ones whose hearts have been set by faith on God's eternal city and that alone that's why Paul says in Ephesians 6 that there will be conflict for us right till the end because we wrestle against the dark powers that lie behind an unbelieving world and resist every effort of people of faith to leave the unbelieving world behind there'll be conflict and that's why you struggle as a Christian but we are to have absolutely no doubts whatsoever as to which city in the end has the victory and we're never to think that capitulating and taking refuge in this world to avoid the conflict can ever ever be anything other than total disaster Babel will never triumph over the city of

God there will be conflict till the end but in the end there will always be a terrible terminus for the city of man and there will be a towering triumph for the city of God so fear not don't change sides final C certainty see revelation in the gospel at the true end the true goal of the world as we know it is the triumph of the city of God that means that for everyone who believes there can be certainty right now today about salvation from judgment there can be certainty about eternal security and safety in the city of God it's the only place that we can have certainty and security and we find that security not in something inside of us but in something that we are inside the unassailable city of God the kingdom of our

[35 : 22] Lord Jesus Christ that's our message on Wednesdays this month in Psalm 48 safe in the city of God and our safety comes not from our hold on God but from God's hold on us that's what marks out genuine biblical faith from every other made up religion of the men of this world the gates of hell themselves says Jesus will never prevail against the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and if by grace you are a member of that city Zion city the city of God then you are surrounded by those walls of salvation and nothing but nothing as the hymn says can shake your sure repose not your enemy the devil not those who would hinder you in this life not even your own sin and guilt and shame however damning it is and it is with salvation's walls surrounded you may smile at all your foes because you're safe and certain in the city of

God aren't you glad that by grace you're a member of Zion's city aren't you glad of that certainty that confidence if you're not sure yet that you are a member of that city surely surely you want to be sure that you are don't you Jesus says I am the door if anyone enters by me he will be saved certainty in the triumph of the city of God well let's pray safe in the triumph of the city of God I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing 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 and if you are Christ's says Paul then you are Abraham's offspring heirs according to the promise we thank you heavenly father that you have laid out for us the future the end the goal the purpose for which you made this whole universe the purpose achieved and accomplished through the death on the cross and the rising from the dead of our savior the lord Jesus and we pray that every one of us here this morning would be rejoicing in our membership of Zion's city through your grace alone or if that not now then this very day hearing the words of your invitation and entering through those gates to be certain of our salvation for we ask it in Jesus name amen