

The Triumph of the City of God

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[0 : 01] Well, we come now to our Bible reading, so please do pick up a Bible and turn to Genesis chapter 11. We continue our series in this key foundational book of God's Word.

And you remember that the book of Genesis itself is really made up of these ten separate books.

And in our passage this evening, we've got the fifth and the sixth book.

Every book begins with this little same phrase, these are the generations of... And tonight we begin with the generations of Shem. And just keep your eye, we were left hanging as we looked at previous generations in chapter 10 about the family line of Peleg.

And we're going to hear about that in this passage tonight, so keep your ears out for this. But let's read the Word of God together, beginning at verse 10. Hear the Word of the Lord. These are the generations of Shem.

When Shem was 100 years old, he fathered Achpachshad, two years after the flood. And Shem lived after he fathered Achpachshad 500 years and had other sons and daughters.

[1 : 19] When Achpachshad had lived 35 years, he fathered Shelah. And Achpachshad lived after he fathered Shelah 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Shelah had lived 30 years, he fathered Eber. Shelah lived after he fathered Eber 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Eber had lived 34 years, he fathered Peleg. And Eber lived after he fathered Peleg 430 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Peleg had lived 30 years, he fathered Reu. And Peleg lived after he fathered Reu 209 years and had other sons and daughters.

And when Reu had lived 32 years, he fathered Serug. And Reu lived after he fathered Serug 207 years and had other sons and daughters.

[2 : 24] And when Serug had lived 30 years, he fathered Nahor. And Serug lived after he fathered Nahor 200 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Nahor had lived 29 years, he fathered Terah. And Nahor lived after he fathered Terah 119 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Terah had lived 70 years, he fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Now these are the generations of Terah.

Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran. And Haran fathered Lot. Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred in Ur of the Chaldeans.

And Abram and Nahor took wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. Terah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah.

[3 : 35] Now Sarai was barren. She had no children. Terah took Abram, his son, and Lot, the son of Haran, his grandson.

And Sarai, his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife. And they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.

The days of Terah were 205 years. And Terah died in Haran. Now the Lord said, or you'll see from the footnote, that could be translated, the Lord had 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. And I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. And 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, amen.

[4 : 47] And may God bless to us his words. Well, do turn with me to Genesis 11. And it's a passage that Phil read there for us.

Our world is a world full of paradox, full of contradictions. There's love, there's beauty, there's much hope in our world, because God created an ordered and a beautiful and a good world.

And so much of that goodness is evident, isn't it? Everywhere we look, abundantly so. But of course, there's another side that we know only too well.

There's ugliness. There's disorder. There's horror. There's sheer evil in our world.

And we can't deny that, can we? And the Bible, you see, tells us why that is so. It tells us that human sin, that is rebellion and rejection, of our Creator's gracious rule, that is the root cause of all of that other side.

[6 : 13] And so this world lies under judgment. It lies under God's curse. And yet even God's curse, his judgment, manifests his overriding care for the world that he's made.

God's judgments in history have repeatedly, so often been merciful judgments. Judgments to preserve humankind from our own self-destructive evil, which if it was left unchecked, would in fact destroy the world entirely, destroy our civilizations.

But as we saw last time, God will not let this world in rebellion go on like that forever. There will come a time when his merciful judgments come to an end.

And at last, he will judge this world ultimately. There will be an end to Babel's world, to Babylon's world, to the world of mankind arrayed against God and his rule.

And we saw that a couple of weeks ago. There is decreed a terminus for the city of man, where the tragedy that is that human rebellion will end, in a judgment of sheer and unmitigated eternal disaster for the city of man.

[7 : 39] But although this end of the world as we know it is certain, the ultimate end, in the sense of the ultimate goal of God's purpose, is not merely the terminus of the city of man.

It's something far, far greater, something far more wonderful. The purpose, the destiny for which God created the whole cosmos, which he purposed before even the first fiat of creation, that first word of creation was ever uttered, and which purpose can never, ever be spoiled or thwarted in any way.

The true end, the true purpose for this world, is nothing less than glorious triumph. Glorious triumph, not, of course, of the city of man, but of the city of God.

So once again, before we get into the detail of the story of Abraham, which is the first movement towards this ultimate triumph, through the seed of promise, through the seed who will bring ultimate salvation.

Before we dig into that, I want to step back once more and see this whole story again, as it stretches out right through the Bible, right to that greater end, in the triumph of the city of God.

[9 : 03] And that is the true end of the world as we know it. And it's the beginning of a world as we have never yet known it to be.

But a world that deep within us, we long for with every fiber of our being. And I think that's true of all of us, of every human being. Especially when we see what this world of our own is actually like, and as we experience it to be.

We find ourselves imagining, don't we? Longing for something better. We find ourselves saying that if only, if only the world could be like this.

That's what the romantic poets, that's what the romantic composers are searching for in their creativity. But they're just articulating with all their creative arts, that inconsolable longing which is within all of our hearts, for a better place, for a different world, for the world full of all those blessings and wonderful goodnesses, but not containing the curse, and the evil and the horror.

And of course, the reason that we do have those feelings and those longings is because God has set eternity in our human hearts. And these feelings, you see, are the distant echoes of another world, a world that is real, and a world that is coming.

[10 : 36] They're the unconscious memories written in the very fiber of our being. That bear testimony to the reality that this world as we know it to be is not the world that we were really made for in the beginning.

C.S. Lewis so often puts these things so well. He says, If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, then the most probable explanation is I was made for another world.

Another place he says this, all your life, an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness. And the day is coming when you awake to find beyond all hope that you

have attained it.

Or else, that it was within your reach, but you've lost it forever. Well, you see, the story of the Bible is the story, and it is, friends, it is the only story of the way to that place of deep satisfaction.

To what we long for. To what we're searching for as human beings. And it can be attained. It can't be attained, not ever, in the city of man.

[11 : 59] In the endeavor of the human spirit against God and apart from God. The end of that way we've seen already is disaster, eternal disaster.

But it can be attained by joining in the triumph of the city of God. And the story of that triumph is what the story of the whole Bible is all about.

Because with God, mercy triumphs even over judgment. It triumphs through judgment. And it triumphs beyond judgment.

And that's the story of scripture between the scattering, Genesis chapter 11, the scattering at Babel, and the final judgment on Babel, on Babylon, that we saw before in Revelation chapter 18, the city of man.

And it's a story of God's wonderful redeeming grace, of his triumphant, glorious gospel of salvation. And it's a story that takes you beyond even the final end of this world with all its shortcomings, with all its failures, and downright evil.

[13 : 11] And it takes us into eternity, into a new creation altogether. And what we have to understand is this, you see, for all the reality of God's judgments in history, and his final judgment on history, the story of scripture is not just that there's a little bit of grudging mercy from God in the midst of all of that judgment.

Now, the story of scripture is quite, quite the reverse of that. God's real story is one of judgments within far greater mercy. God's grace, God's mercy, is the major motif of this story.

His judgments are just a minor motif in the great symphony of scripture. And God's judgments serve his greater purpose. They serve the true end of this world in the grace and in the glory of his new creation.

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

The God who came down in merciful judgment at the beginning in Babel to preserve humanity by judging it so as to preserve the earth from man's evil.

[14 : 47] He is the same God who in the fullness of time again came down once and for all in the flesh in an ultimate merciful judgment to save, to redeem a world of hopeless humanity.

And that's the whole point of the Genesis account here. It lights up, it focuses God's promise of salvation for all his world. And that's what's beginning right here in verse 10 of Genesis chapter 11 straight after the story of judgment at Babel.

It's the beginning, you see, of the Bible beginning to focus right down like the lens of a microscope going narrower and narrower. It focuses right down on this one man, this one family, this one seed that would at last bring the triumph of God for his people into this world.

And you see the way that the writer here makes it so clear that this is no afterthought. This is not plan B after the disaster of Babel, not at all.

It's not God reacting to man's initiative. No, God's purpose is already in motion. Look at verse 10, it already takes up, doesn't it, the story of Shem, the account of Shem.

[16 : 12] And that account began, if you look back to chapter 10 and verse 21, the account of Shem, the father of the children of Eber. And the account there broke off in verse 25 with Peleg.

You see there, we don't get Peleg's sons and his grandsons there. Why? Well, it's interrupted to emphasize the story of Babel and the division that took place in the world at that time.

But now, having got that out of the way, we go back to the main story. And verse 10 of chapter 11 picks up again God's main concern, which is the future of this line, the promised seed, the line of Shem.

And at verse 16 there, you'll see we reach Peleg. And then in verses 18 to 26, we do at last have his line until we reach who in verse 26?

Abram. Abram. Now, everybody knows that name. Maybe not Joktan, Peleg's brother, or his son, Al-Madad, and all those lot.

[17 : 22] Probably don't know those names. Don't recall them. But Abram, you certainly know. Because, of course, from this point, a whole new story begins.

The whole of the rest of the world, if you like, is laid aside. It's not forgotten, but it's laid aside for a time. And the focus, the whole of the rest of the story until the very end almost of the Bible, is upon the unfolding plan for God's redemption through this single family.

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

Now look at what it is that God calls this man Abram to. This man who's going to be the hope of all mankind. Beginning of chapter 12, God calls him to turn his back on the city of man and to seek his future not in man's city, but with God alone.

Chapter 11, verse 31, he leaves Ur of the Chaldees, that was a daughter city of Babel, at God's call. And in chapter 12, verse 1, we're told he leaves his country, his kindred.

[18 : 48] That is, he leaves his identity, his posterity, gives up his name. He leaves his father's house and his family. He leaves all the cohesion and all the belonging of being in one place, of having one culture, of having one language with his people.

Isn't that striking? Everything that human civilization was seeking for itself in Babel cities and still today, all of those things Abraham gives up at God's call.

To live in tents, to be homeless with no city. To be a wanderer, to have no fixed identity in this world's term. And to be an alien, not belonging, having no common culture with the world around him at all.

Abraham turns his back on this world and everything that this world is so desperately seeking. Everything that this world thinks it can offer to human beings.

And yet, having done that, God promises Abraham that by turning his back on the world and by seeking God alone, he will in fact find all of these things and much, much more.

[20 : 04] Look what God promises Abraham there in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 12. This is one of the great foundation stones of the whole gospel. Let me read it again.

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 them who dishonors you I will curse.

and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Do you see, God promises him an everlasting name, a true and a secure identity forever.

And he promises him a universal family, a true and secure relationship with others forever. And he promises him an eternal home, a true and a secure place of belonging forever.

Isn't that striking? All the things the world is seeking, God promises to Abraham by turning his back on the world. And you see, what Abraham discovered is that God's ambitions for man, in fact, are far, far greater even than man's ambition is for himself.

[21 : 17] In fact, infinitely so. But these things can only be realized in God and with God, never apart from him.

That's the discovery, isn't it, that's made by everybody. Everyone who's sought to fulfill their own ambitions in life without God and perhaps even consciously scorning God.

But then, they have capitulated to the Lord. And at last, they've become a follower of Jesus and they've discovered, haven't they, that God wants more blessing for you than you ever thought was possible even before.

See, man seeks glory in his own city, but that glory at its very best is fading, it's fleeting. But God seeks glory for man in God's city, which alone is enduring, it's eternal.

How does Abraham receive all of this? All this blessing? That all mankind is so desperately seeking for, but it's so elusive? Well, let me read to you from Hebrews chapter 11, verse 9, which summarizes it so neatly.

[22 : 35] How did Abraham receive this? 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 was looking forward to a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. How did Abraham receive this?

By faith in the promise of God. He turned away from the city of man and he was looking for that city that was enduring with foundations, the city of God.

See, our world is not so very different at all from Abraham's world. Ever since Babel, the world of humanity has essentially been the same. People are still desperately seeking identity, desperately

seeking security and significance in all kinds of places in all kinds of ways and so often, tragically, being unable to find it because these things can't be found in the city of man. Even the greatest, even the wealthiest, the most powerful people on this earth cannot cheat the last enemy, can they? They can't cheat death. You can delay the wrinkles if you're rich enough, perhaps.

[23 : 59] You cannot deny the worms. And that's the truth. But you see, ever since Abraham, mankind has also had the same promise for the same God.

The God who promises a name, a true identity. Who promises a family, real significance. man who promises a home, real security that we so crave in God's own city where He is the designer, where He is the builder and therefore where the foundations are everlasting and unmovable. isn't that extraordinary good news that everything that the human heart longs for and seeks for and craves after, God is offering in His own city freely to those who will obey Him and follow Him to that place.

But listen, this is just the very beginning here of the story of the city of God. We who live all these years later, we have something even better than Abraham had.

You might think, what on earth could be better than all these things God promised to Abraham? Well, in one sense, of course, nothing could be better. Nothing is better. But what we have is the same promise, only we have it more certain, we have it more solid, we have it more sure.

[25 : 22] because we have seen that promise of Genesis 12, verses 1 to 3, we've seen it come to its fulfillment. God has revealed to us not just the beginning of the goal of this world, but He has shown us the climax of it in the coming of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because in Jesus, God has come down in the flesh, in an ultimate merciful judgment. to deal with sin, to deal with wickedness and rebellion forever.

So that through Abraham's seed, all the nations of the earth have indeed been blessed with the way of salvation. So that everyone who will trust in Abraham's God as He did, they also, with confidence, can turn their backs on the city of man and can find in the city of God, in the kingdom of God, the glorious fulfillment of everything here that God promised to Abraham.

as accomplished through the Lord Jesus Christ in history. That's the message of the whole Bible. That's the message of the Christian gospel.

This is just 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 Christ God Himself acted once and for all forever in that merciful judgment where He bore in Himself on the cross the curse of our sin so that this mercy promised to Abraham, the blessing promised to Abraham might come as God said to all nations, to people from every tribe, every language, every nation who like Abraham will trust the word of this God.

[27 : 10] God. That's Paul's message to the New Testament church. In Galatians, Christ became a curse for us, he said, so that the blessing given to Abraham might come to all nations through Christ.

And he says, if you're in Christ then you are Abraham's seed. You're heirs of this promise. The same promise but better, more sure because it's now fulfilled in history in Jesus Christ.

And so it's a promise for us. It's a promise for every one of you here tonight. God's promise of a name, of a family, of security, of an eternal home.

And it's a certain promise because it has been accomplished in history forever in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins and in his resurrection which justifies all who will believe in him.

It's a death, Paul says, to the Galatians that rescues us from this evil age, from the city of man. And raises us up with him into a new creation, the kingdom of Christ, the city of God.

[28 : 29] And Abraham, you see, he saw it all. God revealed it all to him but he saw it from a distance looking forward. Yet he reaped the blessings of that decisive work of Jesus Christ that was still to come.

But we see it in all its final glory from the perspective of the resurrection of Jesus in the gospel of our Lord and Savior.

The promised blessing has come to all the world. And what God has done, you see, through Jesus Christ is the reversal of the curse of Babel.

It's the regathering into one family of all the scattered tribes and languages and peoples and nations of the world in Jesus Christ. Prophet Zephaniah foresaw all of that in chapter 3 of his prophecy.

He says, at that time, God says, I will change the speech of the peoples, the nations, to a pure speech that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord.

[29 : 34] And he says to the dispersed peoples of the world that they will come and gather and worship God together in truth. You see, that's the end. That's the goal of this whole world.

Everything that humans seek for themselves, that man seeks in his city, but can never, ever hope to find, God gives us freely in his city through the Lord Jesus Christ and what he's done.

Let's go to the very end of the Bible then again to see the picture that we have of this glorious triumph of the city of God. I'm going to read from Revelation chapter 7.

What we have here in Revelation 7 in John's vision is a window into heaven, into the new world that is coming when Jesus returns. And it's a description here not of the city of man, not of Babel, which has gone forever.

We saw that last time. But here is a picture in Revelation 7 of the triumph of the city of God. 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.

[31 : 07] Salvation belongs to our God. That is a song from the truly united nations of this world. There will be, one day, a truly united nations, but only ever in the city of God through Jesus Christ.

Never one constructed by the city of man. Listen to how Revelation 21 describes it right at the very end.

The beginning of 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, God's city, the 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 anymore for the former things have passed away.

[32 : 32] The city of man is gone and all the terrible things that filled her. And here is the real end, the goal, the glorious goal of the world as we long for.

The whole Christian gospel, you see, is the story of the triumph of the city of God over the city of man. It's the triumph of the new Jerusalem over the old Babylon by the grace and the mercy of God that is poured out for us as the Son of God himself poured himself out for our sins so that rebellious sinners who share Abraham's faith may like him turn their backs, turn our backs on the city of man and instead enter the city of God and find eternal identity who we truly are and eternal significance what we're made for and eternal security kept by his powerful hand.

All that we can find nowhere else in this world of humanity there ours in his city. And our Lord Jesus Christ came and did what he did so that people like you and me can share in the triumph of the city of God to share in the goal the purpose of this whole world's creation.

That's what the Christian gospel is about nothing less than that glorious truth. Well let me end by summing up four implications of this for our thinking this evening.

First we have confidence if you're a Christian believer one reason we can have confidence about the future about our eternal future is because that triumph of the city of God is already evident in our experience as Christians today.

[34 : 34] Of course our primary confidence in the future rests in the resurrection of Jesus and the witness to that by the apostles the truth of the gospel but we already experience that reality in part as members of a worldwide city of God the church of Jesus Christ.

We recognize that picture already in Revelation 7 don't we? You see it for one thing in Acts chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit's coming is a public manifestation of the reversal of Babel.

Do you remember everybody was proclaiming the gospel in their own language and yet everybody was hearing it and they understood it and there was no confusion understanding together as one people from so many different nations the grace and the mercy of God and praising him together. And that's what we find isn't it in our experience in the Christian church. Go anywhere in the world and you find immediately true Christian family. As you know I've been far away this week and I find

Christian brothers and sisters my family whom I felt at home and together we were praising God. And we can't always understand one another's languages and we need translators still and everything isn't completely reversed yet as it will be one day but we can still all praise God together we can say Amen together we can sing Hallelujah together and we know that we belong together and we have the same God and Father the same Savior we're one family in Christ and we have confidence because the triumph of God's city is already in our experience on earth in the Christian church.

[36 : 15] We see it we feel it we understand it and that gives us great confidence about the future. Of course secondly there is cost isn't there in belonging to his city.

We will bear that cost also in the present because God calls us to turn our back like Abraham on the city of man and its values and its loves he calls us to seek his city alone to make our defining relationships those of heaven and not of this earth and that will be costly always it cost Abraham to leave his home his family his people his city and the Lord Jesus says 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 costly and follow me is not worthy of me whoever finds his life holds on to it in this world will lose it it is costly to seek only the triumph of the city of God 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 a worldwide family and will inherit eternal life this cost and often that cost will take the form of conflict because 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 anyone who rejects its values the city of man hates vagrants and foreigners hates those who don't care anything for its culture and for its values and so for everybody who has no enduring city here it will face conflict in this city right till the end

Paul says in Galatians 4 doesn't he that it's always been like this those born according to the flesh those who are citizens of the city of man persecuted those born according to the spirit those whose hearts are set by faith only in God's eternal city in Ephesians chapter 6 Paul says it will be so to the end he says we wrestle against the dark powers that lie behind our unbelieving world and resist every effort to leave it behind we know that's true we feel that in our experience don't we but we're to be in absolutely no doubt whatsoever about which city has the victory we're never to think that that capitulation to this world taking refuge back somehow in the city of man will ever be anything other than total disaster never Babel will ever triumph over the city of

God it'll be conflict right to the end but the end will be a terrible terminus of judgment for the city of man and a towering triumph for the city of God don't ever ever forget that and don't fear and don't change sides friends don't go back because finally we have certainty the revelation in the gospel that the true end the goal of this world as we knew it is the triumph of the city of God and that means for everyone who believes there can be absolute certainty right now about salvation from judgment about eternal security safe in the city of God the only place to find eternal security is not it's not in something inside us but it's in something that we are inside the unassailable city of God the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ our certainty about the future comes not from our hold on God but on from God's hold on us and that's what marks out genuine biblical faith from every other religion of man the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church of our Lord Jesus Christ and if by grace you and I are members of that city the city of God Zion city then we are surrounded by those walls of salvation we're inside impregnable walls forever absolutely nothing can ever shake our sure repose not our enemy the devil not even our own sins however real however damning they are and real and damning they are with salvation's walls surrounded you can smile at all your foes all your foes because we have certainty in the triumph of the city of

[41 : 45] God aren't you glad that you're a member of Zion city surrounded by those walls of impregnable salvation if you're not sure that you are surely you want to be Jesus says I am the door the door into that impregnable fortress he says if anyone enters by me he will be saved in Zion city in the triumph of the city of God this is the story of the Bible this is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ this is the certain future of this whole wide world amen let's pray together go 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 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 them who dishonors you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed and the apostle tells us if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring heirs according to promise Lord we thank you for your promise which is sure and

unshakable and we pray that like Abraham you would grant us the faith to turn our back on all this world's joys and promises that we might find true joy in your promise which is ours in Jesus Christ your son amen