

2. Because Mankind has made it what it is

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 September 2006

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Well, if you turn in your Bibles to the book of Genesis, to page 6 and 7, we're going to be looking again at Genesis 9 and 10 and 11, particularly today, chapter 11.

But if you just look first at Genesis 9, verse 1, it picks up the story of God's creation after the flood and reminds us that God's purpose goes on.

God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Look down to verse 18. The sons of Noah went forth from the ark, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan.

These three were the sons of Noah and from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed. Remember last week we read chapter 10, which speaks of that dispersing, that filling, that populating of the whole earth by their clans and languages and lands and nations.

You see the very last verse of chapter 10. These are the clans of the sons of Noah according to their genealogies in their nations. And from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood.

[1 : 16] God's blessing, his purpose, not forgotten, being carried out. But there is another side to things.

And that's what we read of here in Genesis chapter 11. Having laid out the big picture of God filling the earth as he promised in chapter 10, we now read an account which doesn't come afterwards but is in fact parallel.

You'll see that from verse 1. Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. So this is another side of the explanation of how the nations, the tribes, the different languages came to be all over the earth.

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a place, a plain in the land of Shinar. And they settled there.

And they said to one another, come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens.

[2 : 26] And let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of man had built.

And the Lord said, behold, they are one people and they have all one language. And this is only the beginning of what they will do and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

Come, let us go down. And they are confused their language so that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of the earth.

And they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel. For there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

Well, keep your Bibles open there. We're asking the question this month, why is the world as it is?

[3 : 37] The world that we see, the world that we know. Of course, that's a question that people do ask, even in our so-called post-modern world. Where many people would want to say, well, there's no answer.

There can be no answer. In fact, there's not even any coherence in the question. But nevertheless, people do ask the question, why is the world the way we see it to be?

Why is this world a world of paradox, on the one hand, of beauty, of joy, of love, of creativity? It is. But at the same time, on the other hand, a world of ugliness.

A world of sorrow, of hatred, of destructiveness. Why is the world like that? Well, the Bible offers its own explanation. And especially, it offers it in the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis.

Actually, we saw last time that the book of Genesis is really a prologue, and ten books of beginnings that come afterwards. Last time, we romped through the early chapters of Genesis, just jumping here and there.

[4 : 41] But we come to chapter 10 and 11. Actually, chapter 10, verse 1, begins the fourth book. Do you remember? The fourth book of the generations, of the Genesis, of the sons of Noah. If you look at chapter 11, verse 10, you'll see the beginning of the fifth book.

These are the generations of Shem. And then at verse 27, the sixth book of Genesis. Now, these are the generations of Terah. Terah, who is the father of Abraham.

And we've seen so far that according to the Bible, the reason that the world is the way it is, is because, first of all, God is sovereign.

And God has purposed that the world should be the way that it is today. The creator God, the God who made this world, is still in charge of the world. He hasn't abandoned the world, despite mankind's rebellion against him.

He cares for all the world. He cares for every people, for every place. Chapter 10 shows us God's gracious, sovereign hand, apportioning out the world to every land, to every language, to every clan, to every nation.

[5 : 51] Each has its place. Yes, God has not abandoned the world. His hand of blessing is on the whole world. But also, do you remember, we saw hints in the story of chapter 10, that that's not the whole story.

God's hand of blessing is on his whole world and its people. But there's more to it than that. Do you remember, we saw the hints in the genealogies that point to another side, another factor at work.

Remember chapter 10, verse 8, Nimrod? Nimrod was the first mighty man, the first tyrant, really, is what it means. And Nimrod, we read there, was a builder of cities.

A builder of cities, as we'll discover, in defiance of God. Do you remember the other name that stood out in verse 25? Peleg, who was born to Eber.

Why was he called Peleg? Well, another nickname, like Nimrod. It means divided. The world was divided in his day. In other words, it speaks of a judicial act of God to divide the world.

[6 : 59] It didn't just happen. God divided the world. God scattered, dispersed the peoples. So there's more than just God's blessing at work in the world.

There are also God's judgments at work in the world. Because of the wickedness of humanity. And that's what we have to think about today.

The world is as it is because God has made it so. God is sovereign. But it's also as it is because man has made it as it is.

Human beings are unequivocally responsible for the state of this world, according to the Bible. Now, responsible because of our habitual sin and rebellion against God, whose will and whose desire it was to bless all the nations.

And when you say it like that, it sounds perverse, doesn't it? We've rebelled against God who desires to bless the world. But it's true. And the truth is, friends, as you know and as I know, and as the Bible clearly tells us, rejection and rebellion against God inevitably leads to disaster.

[8 : 19] It leads to the natural consequences of what we see in society without God, because sin carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. But also, there is a judicial aspect as well.

Romans chapter 1 is very clear. It tells us God has given us over to our own sinful desires, to our shameful lusts, to our depraved minds.

God, according to the Bible, is judging this world, but we are responsible for that judgment. And that's what Genesis chapter 11, and in particular this story of Babel, or Babylon, is all about.

It's the darker side of chapter 10. The darker side of chapter 10 that speaks of God's gracious plan and purpose for the world, of people being fruitful and multiplying over the world.

It's not just a bountiful filling of the earth, although it is that. It can't be, because humanity throws up nimrods, tyrants, people like him.

[9 : 30] Because humanity throws up the evil empires of Babel, of Babylon. And so the sovereign God who desires to bless the whole earth can't just stand by and do nothing in the face of wickedness, of tyrants, of evil.

He's got to act. And therefore, in the days of this man called Peleg, nicknamed Divide, the earth was divided.

It was judicially scattered by God. Verse 9 of chapter 11 says, God dispersed them over all the face of the earth.

What we have here in Genesis chapter 11 is really just a particular example of what is a perennial reality through history. Albeit this is a foundational one, of course.

History is explained by God's intervention in the affairs of men, in blessing and in judgment. And the story of Babel simply crystallizes, it epitomizes, a state of affairs which at a real time and in real history resulted in a decisive act of God that shaped all subsequent history that changed the world ever after.

[10 : 46] It explains how the world came to be as we know it today. And it explains why. And that's why it's full of very important lessons for us.

Because in biblical terms, Babel or Babylon is a recurring phenomenon. It's something that throws itself up in every single age of human history.

And it will do so right to the end. All the way through the Bible, Babel or Babylon stands for the city of man. Man. The city of man, arrayed against and in opposition to the city of God.

And that's what this story is about. The city of man against the city of God. Let's look at verses 1 to 9 and see what the crux of the matter really is.

Why is such a great judgment unleashed? Some of us might think that's totally disproportionate. They build a tower and God scatters them over the whole earth. What is all this about the Tower of Babel?

[11 : 49] Well, first of all, the title in our Bible there, The Tower of Babel, probably isn't the best one that we could have had. In fact, the tower is a little bit of a red herring. The really important thing in this story is the city.

The kind of city it is. And the purpose of the city. It's really the story of the city of Babel or the city of Babylon.

And by the way, that name Babel or Babylon crops up well over 300 times all the way through the Bible from Genesis right to the very last chapters of the Bible, Revelation. It's the city of man opposed to God.

And this is its beginning. See, what was hinted at in chapter 10, verses 8 to 12, with the story of Nimrod, is just opened up and expanded here in chapter 11.

This is Nimrod's territory. This is the plain of Shinar. This is the first of his great cities. The cities where mighty men were tyrants, led by somebody called Nimrod, whose name means we shall rebel, remember, where tyrants show their rebellion against God and their disregard for God.

[13 : 00] And so the city of Babel and the story of Babel is just a microcosm of that whole story of mankind's rebellion against God. And that's the way it's presented before us in this little dramatic summary of Babel.

What do we see in verses 1 to 4? Well, these verses lay out the nature of the activity that was going on in the city of man. And what it is, is the deliberate foundation of a society without need for God and without regard for God and in fact in total opposition to God.

It's a total self-assertion of the whole of society against God's command to go and fill the earth and cover the earth. That's what they're saying in verses 1 and 2, do you see?

We don't want to fill the earth, is what they're saying. We shall rebel. We're not going to go over all the earth. We're going to stop right here in the plain of Shinar. You see, they're rejecting God's command.

And when you reject God's command, that always begins to lead to an illusion of self-sufficiency. Do you see verse 3? Let us make bricks. See, we don't need God.

[14 : 19] We can progress quite nicely on our own. We have technology. We have development. We've got engineering. We've got science. Who needs God? So in verse 4 they say, come on, let's build.

Let's build for ourselves, do you see? And what will we build for ourselves according to verse 4? Well, we'll build a society that will immortalize ourselves by our own achievements.

Do you see? We can reach the heavens ourselves. We don't need God, they say. We can make a name for ourselves and achieve posterity for ourselves.

We don't need God. We can find security ourselves. We shall not be scattered over the earth. In other words, we don't need God and we don't want God in our society.

Thank you very much. That's what they're saying in verse 4. Well, you might think that sounds very familiar. I think it does, doesn't it? I think we've been reading the newspapers of Babel this week.

[15 : 28] A society with no regard for God, with no need for God, and in fact totally opposed to God. A society where they feel that their own technology must inevitably be put to uses is that defy God, that challenges heaven itself.

Well, isn't that the story of the history of our world? Just think about medical science. Think about all the potential good and the uses that it can be put to. And just think of all the uses that it is being put to.

The genetics, and cloning, and stem cell research, and dabbling with the very essence of life itself. Think of some of the outlandish and bizarre things that it's put to.

Cryotherapy, people trying to preserve themselves for the future, freeze themselves so they can be brought back to life again. A quest for immortality. Think of the physical sciences that we've developed through our human history.

Think of the great scope for good, but what is the most productive area so often? Well, it's fashioning the highest tech weapons of war, isn't it?

[16 : 39] The highest tech methods of self-aggrandizement and power-broking. A society marked by extreme hubris of arrogance. In every area of life, you see, Babel is transgressing the divine limits.

The limits between heaven and earth. The limits between creator and creature. Well, what kind of society does that lead to? Well, it doesn't lead to a society of peace and stability, does it?

John Lennon used to sing that silly song, Imagine what life would be like without no God in heaven. Everyone will be living life in peace, he said. Well, that's not what happened in Babel.

In fact, it's quite the opposite. And we know that, don't we? We know that in our world. And it's just what Genesis chapter 11 tells us. Verse 4 tells us that Babel was marked by megalomania on the one hand.

Let us make a name for ourselves, they said. Let's find significance, fame, let's be self-made men. Megalomania, but on the other hand, fear and insecurity.

[17 : 50] We don't want to be scattered. We don't want to be dispersed. We must shelter in our city. We'll make ourselves big, but we're very, very scared of being scattered.

Not cities, by the way, that God is against, just on their own. God's not against cities. Revelation tells us we're all going to a heavenly city. But what God is against is a society seeking pride and security for themselves, without God, banishing God.

And that's the problem. Well, doesn't that ring bells with us about our society? Think about the insecurity and the fear of the rich and the famous.

How much they spend on their own personal security. How much they spend on their image. Isn't that the driving force of our world institutions? Think of the United Nations, the European Union.

On the one hand, megalomania, desire for significance, status, but at the same time, driven by fear. Fear of attack, fear of war, fear of losing control, fear of being scattered.

[19 : 06] It's a very bad combination that leads to terribly unstable societies. And you see, when we disregard the boundaries between God and man vertically, inevitably, we'll start to disregard the boundaries between men and women horizontally.

Instead of having all the people living life in peace, that really is imaginary. Now, we'll have a society desperately seeking significance in that unity, in that collective society, but at the same time, with a desperate, desperate desire to consume one another and get one up on one another.

And that's what Genesis 11 tells us, is Nimrod's kingdom in Babel, a world of tyranny, a world of oppression, of exploitation, of brutality.

And it's because, you see, you can't separate arrogance on the vertical level, you can't say, we shall rebel against you, God. You can't separate that from arrogance and brutality and wrongdoing on the horizontal level.

can't separate godlessness from immorality. People deny that, but it's just not true. True morality does depend upon true religion.

[20 : 32] Now, you might be saying to yourself, well, I don't believe that. How can there be a God and the world be as it is? But listen, the question really ought to be, how could we expect the world to be any other way when we've so systematically and totally abandoned God and his ways and his laws and shaken our fists at him?

How could it be any different? When we've said, let's build our own city, our own society, without God, we don't want God. It's bound to be chaos.

So God says, for example, no adultery. And we say, we shall rebel. Let's have sexual freedom. And so we have a society with consequences all around us from that.

Family breakdown, unwanted children, abortions, sexually transmitted diseases. Couldn't be anything else, could it? God says, life is sacred. And we say, we will rebel.

We don't care about life. Life is cheap. We want stem cell research. We want cloning. We want euthanasia. Well, it shouldn't surprise us that at the same time we also have a society which is full of murder, abuse of children, abuse of the elderly and so on.

[21 : 47] Should it? God says, no coveting. We say, we shall rebel. Money makes the world go round. We shouldn't be surprised that we reap a harvest of inequality and oppression and slavery.

Of course. There can't be any harmony, any morality and ethics apart from an acknowledgement of the true God who made us all.

The Bible's very clear. Godlessness leads to wickedness. John Lennon's view is totally imaginary. That is the view of all humanists. It's imaginary. The Bible's view tells it as it is.

It's real. Our world is Nimrod's world. Nimrod is our patron saint. We shall rebel. That's our motto, isn't it? God is still sovereign.

God sees. God sees. God sees. And God acts. Look at verse 5. He comes down. The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that men had built.

[22 : 53] God judges. He judged them then decisively in a way that's shaped the world ever since. And God has judged throughout history many, many times when regimes and empires have reached for the sky and sought to usurp God.

And that should be a warning to our world. Remember Babel. Remember the Babylonian and the Assyrian empires, one's great monuments for culture and learning and power raised to the dust.

Remember the Greek and the Roman empires. Remember the Nazi Reich. Remember the Soviet Empire. Remember the British Empire that once was. All gone. Beware a society that's bent on usurping the throne of God, a society that's bent on self-idolizing by space exploration, genetic engineering, cloning.

Remember Babel. God is not dead. God sees and God will judge. There's also a great hope and a comfort, isn't it, to know that evil won't go on unstopped forever.

Isn't that a comfort to you? God is sovereign even over Nimrod's domain. That's what this passage is telling us. And God sees and God will act in severe and in just judgments.

[24 : 27] Notice verse 6. Do you see? Do you notice that God's judgment is a merciful judgment? He tells us that He judges in order to stop man's limitless capacity for destroying himself and the whole world.

Nothing they purpose to do will be impossible for them, says God, unless we scatter them and frustrate their language. Just imagine if all the wicked and evil elements in the world could unite.

All the despots, all the criminals, all the terrorists, all the tyrants. Just imagine what would happen. It would be the end of the world, wouldn't it? But God must judge and frustrate humanity so that His purpose of grace for the earth might stand.

So God totally reverses. Verse 2. Man says, we'll be scattered. Verse 8. Sorry, we'll not be scattered. And God says, you will be scattered.

Verse 1. There's one language. By the end, God has confused it all. And that's the world we know, isn't it? We inhabit a world just like Babel, full of people desperately seeking identity and posterity, seeking a name and meaning, a sense of transcendence, a gateway to the gods, but just finding no name, finding confusion, lack of identity.

[26 : 00] We live in a world where people are desperately seeking family and belonging. We want one language. We want to be together. We want cohesion and relationship. But actually, we just find scattering, loneliness, isolation.

We live in a world where people are desperately seeking security, a city for us, a real home, but only finding frustration and insecurity and anxiety.

Isn't that our world? Babel's world is our world. God has done it. He is sovereign. But we're responsible.

We've made it as it is. But Genesis is a book of beginnings, the beginning of a story.

And we need to see the bigger story. The world isn't just a chance happening. It's not just as it's always been. No, God does have a plan and purpose for this world, still. And this world will not remain as it is, scattered and Babel-like forever.

[27 : 07] No, God has a plan. Even in these early chapters of Genesis, there are hints of the promise of a future. This isn't the end of the story. It's the beginning.

There's more to come. God's plan will not be thwarted for this world. Though he's had to judge so that his purpose may go on. Will God, will God, if he really is sovereign, will God always put up with a world like this, so far short of his ideal in creation?

Will he? We'll have to come back next week and see. Let's pray. Gracious Father, we see ourselves as we look in the mirror of Scripture.

We see our society and our world shaking its fist and rebelling against you, thinking that we can achieve all that we need by ourselves. how foolish we are.

Forgive us, we pray, and teach us to seek our name, our identity, our security, our hope, our belonging, our family, in the one place where it can truly be found, in you, as made known to us through your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[28 : 36] for in his name we pray. Amen.