



The Essentials Series

Week 3 – The Tower of Babel Gen 9-11

St. George's Episcopal Church

Spring 2015

The Post-Flood World

- God – makes a new covenant with Noah and the creation (9:11ff). Is this a conditional or unconditional covenant?
 - The flood was pronounced as a judgment upon and means to purge human evil. After the flood sin still remained, but rather than being a 'failure', the flood foreshadows the final and ultimate divine Judgment on the Last Day.
 - In the meantime, the Creation Mandate continues. God ratifies the mandate in 9:1 with Noah and his family, a virtual quote of Genesis 1:28f.
- Noah – becomes a farmer, plants a vineyard, got drunk and passed out in his tent.
 - Noah's son Ham, embarrasses Noah by seeing 'the nakedness of his father' (9:22) and instead of doing something helpful, goes and tells his brothers! Shem and Japheth then appropriately cover their father.
 - The result is a blessing for Shem and Japheth, and a curse for Ham (9:26-27), who is identified as the father of the Canaanites, who are the enemies of Israel. Thus chapter 10 (Book 4) becomes the origins story of the enemies of Israel.
 - Note, the blessing for Shem is that God (the LORD) will be his God, indicating that the preservation of the lineage of the Seed and God's favor will go through Shem. The blessing for Japheth is that he will dwell in the tents of Shem, which foreshadows the inclusion of Gentiles into the Body of Christ (see Romans 11:16-24)
- Humanity & the World
 - Humanity continues to spread around the world, each with their own language and tribes (10:1). So while God's original purposes for humans to be fruitful and multiply is still working itself out, it is being done so under the curse.
 - Chapter 10 is often called The Table of Nations, because it provides a genealogy of all the ancestors of the people groups who are around at the time of national Israel.

Table of Nations

- Three primary divisions of humanity, each descending from one of the three sons of Noah
 - The sons of Japheth essentially constitute Gentile nations in Anatolia (modern Turkey) and Greece/Mediterranean. When unbelieving Israel reject Jesus Christ, God through primarily the ministry of St. Paul, brings Gentiles from both Anatolia and Greece into the 'tents of Shem', "we are all Japhethites dwelling in the tents of Shem."
 - The sons of Ham (Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan) are all the historic enemies of Israel/Shem.
 - Noah's curse indicates that Canaan will be subjugated to Shem/Israel, which did happen after the Exodus in the days of Joshua and the Judges.
 - But the gospel clearly indicates that one day the descendent of Shem, the seed of the woman, will bring peace and reconciliation to Ham's descendants as well: Jesus and the Canaanite woman (Mat 15:21-28); the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), Jesus' death makes ethnicity and descent obsolete (Eph 2:11-22; Gal 3:26-29).
 - The sons of Shem – the blessed lineage of Shem is preserved through to his grandson Eber, and here the elect lineage is split. Eber has two sons, Peleg and Joktan. Peleg, whose name means "division" is singled out and later is listed as the ancestor of Abram (in Book 5, Gen 11:10-32); for it is in Peleg's time that the earth was divided.
 - This somewhat cryptic reference (Gen 10:25) is most likely referring the forthcoming account of Babel, when the earth's people were divided (scattered) by God.
 - Thus the story of the Tower of Babel is a flashback to unpack what was referred to in Shem's genealogy in Peleg's lifetime.

The Tower of Babel

- This well-known story of Genesis constitutes the second half of toledot/Book 4
 - It illustrates the sinful pride of humanity, particularly in their rejection of the creation mandate (see below). It illustrates the just judgment of God and also his mercy
 - The builders of the Tower are the spiritual heirs of Cain: both move eastward, both build a city to establish a secure and significant place apart from God, both are proud manufacturers, both are judged and forced to migrate, and yet both continue to propagate under God's blessing.
- Opening setting illustrates three sins:
 - Settled – they decided to stop spreading and stay in one place
 - Their tower would reach to heaven, which is God's realm
 - Strove to make a name for themselves – acquiring glory instead of giving it to God
- The passage has some irony in it. "Babel" in the Tower-builders vocabulary meant 'gateway of the gods' but Genesis parodies the term with the Hebrew word which means 'confused'
 - Also, despite the arrogant claim that the tower would reach into heaven, the Lord has to 'come down' just to see it.
 - Compare the Tower builders and their usurping, defiant, autonomy, with Abraham who was content to be a wandering Aramean who, in faith, looked (waited) for a city with foundations "whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10).
- The cursing of Babel is specifically undone at Pentecost.
 - While God, in his grace, does not condemn language diversification, the way he undoes the Babel curse is not by removing diverse language, but rather through the Spirit allowing the regenerate to understand other languages, and ultimately, understand other people/image bearers. Thus in Christ there is no Jew or Greek (ethnically or linguistically) because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).
 - The descendants of Cush (Ethiopian eunuch, Acts 8:26-40) are found alongside the descendants of Abraham (Peter and Paul).
- Cities & Civilization
 - Are not bad, but as humanity spreads and builds its cities, cultures, and civilizations, they become substitutes for God and idols, and the means for human glory.
 - Thus cities in Genesis are often portrayed negatively; however God redeems this key aspect of human life, because the new heaven and earth will feature a city! See Revelation 21-22.
- It is important to note that there is a tension in Book 4: chapter Act 1 portrays the natural diversification of humanity, occurring as a part of the creation mandate.
 - Act 2 shows humanity's division as the result of a curse for their pride (which is itself a compounding of the Curse). Toledot 4 is holding before us the parallel tracks of God's Law and his Grace: that while God's judgment of sin and pride must be given if he is to be just, God's grace is still at work in making, remembering, and fulfilling his promises.
 - In this case his judgment of Babel's arrogance is countered by his ongoing blessing of the fructification of humanity, his (fallen) image bearers.
 - God's blessing specifically is traced through Shem to Peleg to Abram, as the Story of Salvation progresses ultimately towards Jesus Christ.

Next Week: The Calling of Abraham, Gen 12:1-12:20; 15:1-15:21

Additional Resources

Goldsworthy, Graeme. *According to Plan: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*. Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1991.