

Genesis & A Biblical Worldview

Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, October 21, 2012

Introduction

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God

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Creation

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Man

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Sin

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Grace

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Culture

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Purpose

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The Confusion of The Languages

This morning's study continues to deal with the development of a biblical/theistic worldview with regard to human culture. Our last study looked at chapter 10 and 'The Table of The Nations'; and this morning's study has its roots in that 'table'--particularly from 10:8-12; and the kingdom founded by Nimrod.

The Jewish Targums were ancient paraphrases and explanations of Scripture. The Targum of Jonathan says: "From the foundation of the world none was ever found like Nimrod, powerful in hunting, and in rebellions against the Lord." The Jerusalem Targum says: "He was powerful in hunting and in wickedness before the Lord, for he was a hunter of the sons of men, and he said to them, 'Depart from the judgment of the Lord, and adhere to the judgment of Nimrod!' Therefore is it said: 'As Nimrod the strong one, strong in hunting, and in wickedness before the Lord.'" One ancient translation of 1-Chronicles 1:10 says: "Cush begat Nimrod, who began to prevail in wickedness, for he shed innocent blood, and rebelled against Jehovah." Nimrod was the first recorded tyrant over men after the flood; and the kingdom he founded--Babel--became symbolic throughout the Bible of worldly idolatry, human arrogance, and sinful rebellion against the rule of God.

Humanity, though of one race, has become divided and scattered across the face of the earth in confusion and ungodly rebellion; and Genesis 11:1-9 tells us how it happened.

I. THE CONDITION: UNITED BY ONE LANGUAGE (v. 1).

- A. We're told, "Now the whole earth had one language and one speech"¹--or literally "one lip". It was the language of Noah and his sons. It was presumably the language of the world before the flood; and possibly even the language of Adam and Eve. Since the proper names that the Bible gives of men and places in the pre-division period are all given in Hebrew, it has been assumed that this universal language was Hebrew--or at least a semitic language of some form. But this can't be known for certain.
- B. Language powerfully unites a people and a culture. Whenever someone wishes to become assimilated to a new people group, he or she must learn the language of that people. The ability to have and share language is a great gift from God. But that gift is greatly abused when it is used--as apparently Nimrod used it--to traffic in rebellion against God.

II. THE SIN: REBELLION AGAINST GOD'S COMMISSION (vv. 2-4).

- A. We're told that the post-flood population of humanity migrated "from the east." They settled in "a plain in the land of Shinar" [which is where the beginning of Nimrod's kingdom was; see 10:10], and they dwelt there. The Tigris-Euphrates plain would place them in the region of modern Iraq and Iran. Then, being settled--and perhaps free from the struggles for survival--they began to build. To say, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly", suggests something stronger and more durable than mere sun-dried building material. To use brick rather than stone meant greater quantities; and to use asphalt for mortar meant stronger adherence. With these innovations, man began to build large, strong, long-lasting cities.
- B. It was not a sin for man to build cities. It wasn't even a sin for man to build towers. But what *was* sinful was man's rebellion against God's command in Genesis 8:17 to Noah and his sons to colonize and spread out

upon the earth; and to build a city for rebellious unity and a tower for arrogant pride. Mankind--perhaps through the ambitions of Nimrod--became sinfully 'collectivistic'. "And they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth'" (v. 4). There may even be the formations of a rebellious, worldly religious system implied in the desire to "make a name" for themselves rather than to give reverence toward God, and in a tower built to reach to heaven rather than in trusting in God to communicate heaven to earth.

III. THE INTERVENTION: CONFUSION OF THE LANGUAGES (v. 5-7).

- A. The sinful ambitions of human culture are not ignored by God. We're told that "the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built"--suggesting that the tower had been completed. In the Bible, when God comes to "look" at something, it's because He intends to do something about it (see also Genesis 18:20-21). God *did* see; and we're given His assessment of what He saw: "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them" (v. 6). This may be a divine recognition that mankind, united in this way, will be free to follow any destructive ambition it desires. But to see this as anything but an 'anthropomorphism' (that is, God speaking of Himself in a manishly limited way) would be to see mankind's course of action as out of God's sovereign control. Perhaps it's better to see God's intention as that of pronouncing a judgment--much as if to say that He was giving them up to their intention (see Romans 1:24-25). After all, according to Revelation 17-18, the human culture of wicked rebellion will eventually go on later to build the rebellious city Babylon all the way unto its own destruction. (It's interesting to note that, in verse 8, what God stops is the building of a city--not the building of a tower.)
- B. God rules over the times of man as well as over man's affairs. Speaking in triune council, God says, "Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (v. 7). Thus, God graciously forestalls the destruction humanity would bring upon itself--until His appointed time--by breaking up the unifying power of language, and forcing a dispersion of the people rebelliously collected at Babel.

IV. THE SCATTERING: DIVIDED ACROSS THE EARTH (vv. 8-9).

- A. We're told, "So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city." This was the doing of the sovereign Lord; and it resulted in two things: (1) the forced spread of humanity upon the face of the earth--just as He had commanded, and (2) the cessation of the building of the rebellious city. God remains sovereign over even the rebelliousness of man.
- B. We're also given, by this story, the reason for the name of the city. The word "Babel" means "Confusion"; and that, ironically, became the name of this rebellious city--the City of Confusion! "Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth." The long term result of God's intervention was to bring about the thing that was said at the end of The Table of The Nations in chapter 10--"These were the families of the sons of Noah, according to their generations, in their nations; and from these the nations were divided on the earth after the flood" (10:32).

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We learn from this that wicked human culture is *not* outside of God's sovereign control. It shows us, indeed, "that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will, and sets over it the lowest of men" (Daniel 4:17b). As Psalm 2:1-6 puts it;

*Why do the nations rage,
And the people plot a vain thing?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
And the rulers take counsel together,
Against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying,
"Let us break Their bonds in pieces
And cast away Their cords from us."
He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;
The Lord shall hold them in derision.
Then He shall speak to them in His wrath,
And distress them in His deep displeasure:
"Yet I have set My King
On My holy hill of Zion" (Psalm 2:1-6).*

¹All Scripture readings are taken from *the Holy Bible, New King James Version*; copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.