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Sermon Notes

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Babel and Shem: A Tale of Two Cities

Genesis 11

I. Blessings Gone Bad: The Gifts of Language and Ingenuity

A. Language: communication in the image of God

1. 6858 languages in the world
2. Marvel of God's creation in humanity
3. Part of what separates us from beasts
4. Marvel of the human mind BUT ALSO a tool of evil

B. Human ingenuity

1. 20th century advances

Illus. 100 years ago, 1890's, one government official petitioned the government to shut down the United States Patent Office, saying that surely everything that could be invented had been invented!!

Since then, the US Patent Office has issued millions and millions of patents:

1900: Photocopy machine; 1903: airplane; 1907: electric vacuum cleaner & electric washing machine; 1911: air conditioning & automobile self-starter; 1913: refrigerator; 1913: talking motion pictures; 1923: television; 1926: liquid fuel rocket; 1930: jet propulsion engine; 1938: automatic clothes dryer; 1942: nuclear reactor; 1943: artificial kidney machine; 1953: heart-lung machine

NOW: US Patent Office issues close to 75,000 patents yearly

2. Tremendous spread of evil: WWII, terrorism, Internet abuses

C. God's holy power interferes for the good of His plan & our salvation

II. Human Pride: Reaching for Heaven (11:1-4)

A. The power of human cooperation

Illus. Safari ants... how much more, human beings

1. Other than the power of God, no power on earth greater than human cooperation
2. Roman empire, Nazi Germany... cooperation for world domination
3. Modern Internet... information superhighway; greater power of computers communicating
4. Positively: the “Body of Christ”
 - a. individual Christians, gifted in various ways, working together for a common goal
 - b. individual congregations, given various fields of ministry, working together for mission
 - c. BUT: under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit, building an eternal building for the glory of God
5. Negatively: the Tower of Babel
 - a. individual people, gifted in various ways, working together for a common goal
 - b. BUT: motivated by pride, for their own glory, building something that will not last

The power of human cooperation

B. The pride of human technology

1. Created in the image of God
 - a. Powerful in mind, imagination, ambition
 - b. All meant to be used in service to God
 - c. Image defaced through sin... capabilities now used to serve sin
2. Steady advance of technology makes new expressions of sin possible
 - a. previous materials & techniques limited height of buildings
 - b. new technologies
 - i) baked bricks: stronger, more capable of being stacked without crushing

- ii) pitch: used for sealing and adhesion
- c. history of technology & sinful applications
 - i) printing press = proliferation of false doctrines
 - ii) atomic power = atomic weapons
 - iii) television = constant pushing of the moral envelope
 - iv) Internet = just as bad as television
- 3. Human invention immediately leads to human pride

C. The pollution of human rebellion

1. The plan: making a city with a tower that reaches to heaven
2. The two-fold motive
 - a. positively: to glorify themselves

vs. 4 *“Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves...”*

- i) building a city
- ii) tower that reaches to heaven
- iii) make a name for themselves
- b. negatively: to disobey God

vs. 4 *“...and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”*

God had commanded them to fill the earth and subdue it, both at the time of Adam, and again at the time of Noah

Genesis 9:1 *“Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.’”*

Habakkuk 2:14 *“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”*

WHEN??? Genesis 10:25 tells us earth was divided in Peleg's day... could be referring to scattering of all nations... therefore Tower of Babel occurred about 300 years after flood

3. Theological issues

a. the city: like Cain

i) builder of first city

ii) murderer who didn't want to be a restless wanderer on the earth

iii) symbol of human rebellion against God: the city of man

b. the tower: human pride, self-effort, glorification

Illus. Which city has the tallest tower? USA Today reports that Chicago wants the honor back from Toronto

Tower a symbol of human self-worship; human efforts to reach heaven

like Eve

She wanted to be "like God, knowing good from evil..."

Like the evil tyrant rulers in Genesis 6

Genesis 6:4 "heroes of old, men of the name"

like their father the Devil

Isaiah 14:12-15 "How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit."

D. The products of human imagination

vs. 6 "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them."

1. One of God's greatest gifts to us... the ability to imagine things that aren't as if they were

2. Word means imagine, plan, or purpose to do
3. Linked also to ambition... what they were living for
4. Imagination the origin of all human achievement... used for God it is a powerful force
5. BUT God's power is far greater...
 - a. not just to imagine, but to accomplish EVERYTHING He imagines

Romans 4:17 "God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as if they were."

Isaiah 46:11 "What I have said, that will I bring about, what I have planned, that will I do."

- b. ALSO to rule over OUR plans for His own purposes

Proverbs 19:21 "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails."

Our God is a sovereign God, who rules over the minutest details of human history, channeling the flow of the river whatever direction He chooses. The sinner may therefore say, "God is an **interfering** God."

III. God's Sovereign Interference: Restraining Evil (11:5-9)

A. The Lord Descends (vs. 5)

1. Human language... God already knew absolutely everything that was happening
2. Implies patient inquiry... God does nothing in haste
3. ALSO shows human impotence
 - a. they thought to ascend to heaven by their own hands & ingenuity
 - b. Solomon knew how impossible this was

1 Kings 8:27 "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heavens cannot contain you! How much less this temple I have built!"

- c. tallest building in Toronto... XXXXXXXX feet high... still puny compared to the mountains, and a long way from heaven

d. Modern space program put a man on the moon... still far from God

Illus. Pioneer 10, launched March 3, 1972 & exited the Solar System June 14, 1983... 80,000 years to Alpha Centauri... modern technology NTR (nuclear thermal rocket) can propel a spacecraft 7mi/sec... 7 minutes across America; 11,500 years to Alpha Centauri

4. God consistently uses elevation to teach us His power

Isaiah 6:1 “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, HIGH AND EXALTED...”

Isaiah 40:22 “He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers.”

Acts 1:10 “After he said this, He was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They were looking intently into the sky as He was going...”

5. By His grace, He will exalt us Himself

1 Thessalonians 4:17 “After that, we who are alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

Luke 18:14 “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

So, here God comes down to humble these arrogant people

vs. 5 “But the Lord came down...”

vs. 7 “Come, let us go down...”

They had an awfully long way to go to reach heaven, so God had to come down to see them!! How humbling!! Furthermore, they were actually getting further and further away from heaven with every prideful brick they laid down.

B. The Lord Assesses (vs. 6)

1. Human cooperation must be thwarted

2. Human sin must be restrained

3. Human imagination must be held in check

vs. 6 *“The Lord said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.’”*

- a. Hebrew actually says “Nothing they imagine for the purpose of accomplishing it will be restrained for them...”
- b. In the days before the flood, human evil spread like a viral infection
- c. Every imagination was only evil all the time... they accelerated each other
- d. God wanted to **restrain** the spread of evil

Very much like “salt” when Jesus called us to be “salt of the earth”... it slows down the advance of corruption

4. God’s constant striving against human evil

Genesis 6:3 *“My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal...”*

Here God seeks to restrain the spread of evil... his assessment shows Him directly the need to act

C. The Lord Acts (vs.7-9)

1. Speaking within Himself

vs. 7 *“Come, let us go down and confuse their language, so they will not understand each other.”*

- a. some commentators... “heavenly council”
- b. some commentators... Trinity

2. God’s decision

Here God restrains the spread of evil by hindering relationships and communication; they will no longer be “one people” nor will they have “one language”

- a. Confusing the Language
 - i) miraculous changing of the brains of all people
 - ii) same logical structures, different means of communication

- iii) God actually affects the human mind
- b. Scattering the Peoples
 - i) Shem, Ham, Japheth's descendents all in one place
 - ii) Afterwards: peoples divided and scattered to the four corners
 - iii) not wild scattering, but carefully controlled by God's purposes

Acts 17:26 “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”

- 3. Powerful effect on human history
 - a. Language shapes culture, culture shapes language
 - b. Communication hindered, Sin restrained,
- 4. Even more powerful: God constantly shapes human history
 - a. Deism is FALSE

Deism: God manufactured universe like a well-designed clock, wound it up and lets it run

- b. Controlling the movers and the shakers

Revelation 19:11, 16 “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice He judges and makes war. . . . On His robe and on His thigh He has this name written: King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

Daniel 4:34-35 “At that time I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified Him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back His hand or say to Him, ‘What have you done?’”

Proverbs 21:1 “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases.”

It may seem that evil people are controlling history; but God constantly interferes with human events to accomplish His ends... even if it seems to hinder His purposes

5. Gospel proclamation made more difficult
 - a. faith comes from hearing
 - b. Gospel the message of salvation to the ends of the earth
 - c. BUT Babel makes Great Commission more difficult
 - d. YET God overcomes this self-imposed obstacle
 - i) miraculously at Pentecost

Acts 2:6-11 “When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in their own language.... Parthians, Medes, Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Capadocia, Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome, Cretans, and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

- ii) laboriously through faithful people

Ron & Mary Halbrooks, laboring for four hours every day to master a new language; Wycliffe Bible translators working to translate the Scriptures into 5000 dialects

- e. little by little the effects of Babel are reversed, and the Gospel continues to spread

Original language: Hebrew... God’s elect through Shem kept speaking the original language

IV. The Building of the City of God: Shem’s Lineage (10-32)

- A. God’s elect line: The Christ would come from them
- B. Noteworthy elements

1. Shem had five sons, but here we just follow the elect line leading to Abram

Genesis 10:22 “The sons of Shem: Elem, Asshur, Arphaxad, Lud, Aram”

Here we follow Arphaxad, ancestor of Jesus Christ

2. Same style as genealogy of Genesis 5, but no “AND THEN HE DIED”

3. YET lifespans dwindled rapidly after the flood

Probably the effect of increased radiation from sun & of spread of disease

Noah: 950 years old at death; Shem 600; Arphaxad, 438; Shelah, 433; Eber, 464; Peleg, 239; Reu, 239; Serug, 230; Nahor, 148; Terah, 205; Abraham, 175

4. THEREFORE:

Genesis 12:1 “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.’”

- a. 27 years after the Tower of Babel & right near it
 - b. 17 years after Noah died
 - c. All of Abram’s ancestors still live but Noah, Peleg, & Nahor... even great great great great great grandfather Shem still alive
5. The stage is now set for the open unfolding of God’s redemptive plan through Israel... the call of Abram next week

V. Application

1. The dangers of human pride: Human arrogance makes salvation necessary
2. The sovereign interference of God: God shapes history
3. The spread of the nations: God scatters
4. The calling out of God’s elect line, the Semites: God works redemption
5. The advance of the gospel: God reverses the scattering