

## Sermon Transcript 25<sup>th</sup> July 2021

### Rebuilding Babel? Genesis 11:1-9

#### Introduction

Over the past few weeks, we have been looking at the early stories of Genesis. If nothing else, it has been fun to return to these stories. Often it seems, we do not know what to do with the opening chapters of the Bible. We are happy to teach them to children in Sunday school, but because they seem so bizarre in character or unscientific in content, we don't know how to handle these texts as adults. If we are honest, we are at times a little embarrassed by them.

I have been delighted to hear from the feedback this term, how you have enjoyed not just the opportunity to return to these stories, but the opportunity to return to the questions that never got answered in Sunday School. Time and again we have seen that the earnest child-like questions are the best tool for getting to the heart of the narrative.

Today we draw this series to a close by looking at the Tower of Babel, which in many respects is a story of human potential, achievement, and failure. It is a story which examines that primal desire not only to survive, but to push the frontier, to transcend the limits of what is considered possible. As we begin, I want to offer up two images of human potential and achievement.

#### Excellence and Suspicion

On Friday I watched the opening ceremony of the 2020 Olympic games. As controversial as these games have already proved to be, set against the wider concerns of the pandemic, there is, in my view, no greater sporting event on the planet. The Olympics is about the absolute pinnacle of human potential and achievement. We ask ourselves, "will anyone be able to come close to Adam Peaty in the swimming pool?" "Will we ever see a gymnast like Simone Biles again?" "How long will we have to wait to see Usain Bolt's records tumble?"

Now here's a funny observation. In the last two Olympic games, Great Britain has ranked highly in the overall medals table. And when the athletes return home, the media talk of these great feats of strength and endurance as a shared achievement. "We have done well" they say, "We have had an exceptional Olympics," they boast. "Our athletes have done us proud" - as if we have part ownership of their success. But I will openly confess that I actually had very little to do with Helen Glover's rowing gold. Likewise, I am not sure how pivotal I was to Mo Farah's training or success. The point is, we want to associate ourselves with excellence. **We want to associate ourselves with excellence.**

It was the same back in 2009, when Usain Bolt ran the 200m in 19.19, and the 100m in 9.58. Even though it had nothing to do with team GB, or if like me you have never set foot on Jamaican soil, there was still a collective sense of achievement. Everyone knew that

something momentous had happened. The boundaries of human achievement had been moved, humanity was now faster as a species because of Bolt's staggering achievement.

We want to associate ourselves with excellence.

The second image of human potential and achievement I want to offer up this morning, concerns the accomplishments of two billionaires in the last couple of weeks. Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos have flown to the edge of space, experienced weightlessness, and have launched us all into a new era of commercial space travel. What may be one small step (or rather one short flight) for Richard Branson, is not necessarily a giant leap for humankind. We have mixed feelings about this. Yes, it's very exciting, but more than ever we are beginning to question the wisdom of such advancements. We recognise that what is commercially viable is not necessarily ecologically viable. So we are divided. We view these things with a degree of suspicion. And that's key. Sometimes, we are unsure as to what progress looks like. The direction of progress is far from clear.

Now, let's siphon off those feelings:

**The Olympics:** We want to associate ourselves with excellence.

**Commercial Space Travel:** The direction of progress is unclear, and we are suspicious.

Those two feelings describe our approach to the story of the Tower of Babel. We read this, and we want to associate ourselves with excellence, but as objective observers we can't help but watch this and be suspicious.

### Childlike Questions

Let us continue by asking the childlike questions?

Let us turn to the difficult verses (verse 6, 7 and 8):

*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. Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come let us go down and confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord dispersed them over the face of the whole earth, and they left off building the city.*

What are the questions you want to ask of the text?

- What's wrong with human progress?
- What's wrong with the desire to come together, and flourish?
- Why does God seem to oppose human achievement and ingenuity?

There are so many questions about purpose and progress; and what about the questions about language?

In our mid-week thought for the day series, we have been celebrating the diverse range of languages represented in our fellowship: in light of the Tower of Babel, have we been right to do that? – What on earth is going on in this story?

Questions of this nature always lead us deeper into the text, and I want to start with a single word in verse 2.

*And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.* The word I want to focus on, is the direction “East.” Now where have we heard reference to the East in the preceding chapters of Genesis? Let’s remind ourselves:

- God first of all planted a garden in the East, called Eden.
- After the Great Disorder, the Fall, Adam and Eve were banished from the garden to the East.
- An angel was placed at the Eastern entrance to the garden.
- After Cain rose up and killed his brother, he was scattered from the Lord’s presence to the East of Eden.

So what we have here is a storyteller’s device. The reference to the “East” is a way of reminding us as readers that humanity has been scattered from the presence of God. In each generation, people are moving further and further away from God. What is unique about the story of the tower of Babel, is that it is the first species-wide attempt to correct that sense of lostness. Here is humanity’s first joint attempt to confront the scatteredness we feel in our hearts.

Let’s read verse 4.

*Then they said “come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered over the face of the whole earth.*

For the first time, humanity rallies together to confront the lostness of the human soul, the scattered nature of the human heart, to confront being East of Eden. But here’s the problem. The Bible describes this sense of scatteredness as a theological issue, it concerns God, and it is the result of being distant from Him. And yet here, the residents of Shinar seek to address this problem without God. *Let us build a name for ourselves.* As readers, we want to associate ourselves with excellence, but here we have reason to be suspicious. Is this really the route to progress?

The people of Shinar correctly identified the problem, *we don’t want to be scattered*, but they missed the solution, they excluded God. The diagnosis was good, but the prescribed course of action was bad. This is where the story reaches into our own situation here and now. *We are East of Eden; we are scattered before God*, and so often we try to bridge that chasm in our own strength, without God. We seek to make a name for *ourselves*. We seek

the fully human experience, to live the fullest life possible, the best life. But what does it mean to be fully human without the one who defines humanity?

The tower of Babel is the human attempt to confront the lostness of the human heart in our own strength. It is in that sense, that we build a new Babel every day. Each time we sense the lostness of the human heart, the calling to return to Eden, and try to fix that in our own strength, be that with money, influence, addiction, we build another Babel. Every time we try to suppress the homeward call of the human heart, we build another Babel.

Are you building a tower of Babel in your heart? In each of us is an irrepressible yearning to return to Eden.

This is where we must think about languages. I am not convinced that this part is to be taken literally, as if there was *only* one language in existence. Not least, because the chapter before tells us three times that different languages existed. Rather, the single language in the story of Babel is a *shared* language, like Greek or Latin in the ancient world. It is a *lingua franca*; and it is the unifying tool by which the people tried to fix the problem of the human heart without God. The point about languages here, is that this is how humanity first tried to bridge the chasm of the human heart. That is why this story is riddled with irony.

- The people who don't want to be scattered, become scattered.
- The people build upward towards the heavens, but God has to come down.
- The people who speak a shared language, now speak many languages.

The punishment fits the nature of the crime. There is a deliberate correspondence, and proportionality. But this leads us to ask, "is God the opponent of human progress here? Or is there a better way to interpret the text?"

This is where I want to tell you about my friend Ollie. As a young child, Ollie dreamed of being in the Parachute Regiment. One day, to test his abilities in the skies, he sellotaped a plastic bag to his back, climbed the rickety ladder to the attic hatch and jumped off. He was convinced the plastic bag would make the perfect parachute. It did not. He came crashing down and picked up a few nasty cuts and scrapes on the way. Shortly thereafter, his parents removed the ladder to the attic. Now, did his parents remove the ladder because they wanted to ruin Ollie's path to progress, or because they could see the futility and danger of his efforts? They removed the tool of Ollie's error. So it is at Babel. In Babel, God takes away the tool of human pride and error. So we may now expand on our question:

What is the Babel we construct?

What are the tools we use to build it?

This makes for an uncomfortable prayer. So often, our prayers form spiritual shopping lists, where we ask God for the things we need. But do you ever ask God to take away the things that are harmful or destructive? What is the Babel you construct in your life? What are the tools used to build it, which must be taken away?