

Going it Alone

The following text is Jonathan Green's speaking notes from the gathering held at The Sanctuary Westminster on 15th February 2007

Introduction

Tonight, we are going to take another step on this journey together through scripture as we continue our series called 'The Story we find Ourselves In'. Last time we thought about Noah... and how God called him to do something absolutely ridiculous... build a floating structure nowhere near water... we saw how obeying God ended up saving his life! We thought about God's challenge to do 'that thing' he is telling you to do, *that command* or *invitation* that he has given, because you never know, it too, might end up saving your life!

You may have noticed on the flyers that we are in Act 2 of this drama. Act 1 was the work of 'creation' and as we studied the story we saw how creation is something, which in its very essence is ongoing. We saw how God connected humankind in a series of relationships and that when that web is functioning as it should we find stability... We then moved on to Act 2 and last time we gave it the title 'crisis'. I think you will agree without a hesitation, that this 'crisis' is also ongoing, and we do not have to look very far to see that this is also very true!

This week we are moving to the end of Act 2 as we think about this incredible story of independence and the endless pursuit of progress. If you think about it, this quality of 'going it alone' is often praised in society as a virtue... 'a remarkable quality'... but we know, if we have tried that route, that the alternative, which is being committed to God and to a community that is also committed to pursuing God's way of being is ultimately in keeping with God's design, and therefore works better! A few weeks back we thought about Cain and Abel and saw how part of God's displeasure at Cain was that he was becoming independent as a farmer and landowner... he was becoming increasingly able to 'go it alone', whereas, Abel depended upon the Lord and the Lord was pleased with him for that dependency. And so we move on in time, through many generations and to a time after the Great Flood!

Nations emerging...

Genesis 10 tells us about how the world's nations emerged from the sons of Noah and how this is a positive outworking of God's command to Adam, which he then repeated to Noah: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.' However, at this stage in the story we are not surprised to learn that the positive development of a great expansion in population and cultural progress has a negative side to it as well. Genesis 11 tells the story of a tower being built, the tower of Babel. The story marks the high tide of sin up to this point in the biblical drama (and sin as we have seen is thinking that we know best.)

So let us think about this incredible city and tower as we look together at Genesis 11

In **verse 1** we read that the whole world had one language and a common speech... This unified language helped men and women work together to progress at an impressive rate.

We are told in **verse 2** that people moved eastward and found a plain and they settled there. In other words, they found a flat region fit to build upon. Archaeologists and Biblical scholars tell us that this is the region of Babylonia and you will note that Babel actually refers to the city of Babylon, which was built, by the Euphrates River. So it was a good place to build - flat ground and near a great water source...

Genesis 10; tells us about Nimrod whose father was Cush. Nimrod grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth. 9 He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; that is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD." 10 The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad and Calneh, in [e] Shinar. So Nimrod founded Babylon, which in Hebrew means 'gate of God'.

Verse 3 tells us that they plotted together - let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly... they used brick not stone and tar for mortar... It's interesting because the ancient text says that Babel became possible because of technological advancement. The high tech innovation back then was the *brick*. If you can make bricks, you are no longer dependent on God-given stones, which are hard to shape and stack. Now you can mass-produce uniformly sized bricks, so your buildings can be really tall and impressive. So technology is advancing... now what?

Verse 4, let us make *ourselves* a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens... **Why?** So they won't be scattered but together and able to control and accomplish anything they put their minds too.

Babel is a monumental, community attempt by Adam's race to wrest human autonomy from God once more. The impulse to build a city is part of normal cultural development within God's world. But this impulse can be misdirected on a massive scale. Building Babylon was the way of asserting their own will against God's desire that humans should be spread and scattered throughout the world.

Of course this activity couldn't be hidden from God and in **Verse 5** we read that the Lord came down to see what was going on...

Verse 6, nothing will be impossible for them...

Verse 7 - So God confuses their language!!!

Archaeologists found an ancient tablet when excavating around Babylon which read 'the building of this illustrious tower offended the gods. In a night they threw down what they had built. They scattered them abroad, and made strange their speech.'

The condition

The people of the nations became restless with the status as subjects of God and recipients of God's gifts. They craved independence (v4). With cities, people begin to feel even more independent... cities are little self-contained social worlds for people. If you live in a city, you don't feel much need for God at all. You can do whatever you want. God's judgment was to scatter the people over the face of the earth - to displace them.

Ongoing!

We see today, how technology is moving at an incredible pace... I think that we are striving for total control of our environment so that no thing can hurt us. We try to control the molecular structure and cure diseases and even enhance bodily functions. We try to control our environment. I don't know about you but I love science fiction... especially the Iain M Banks novels about the Culture. This is the human race in another time in the future where computers have rights and stuff like that and everything is just perfect. People rarely die and you can be backed up on a mainframe and be awoken at a more interesting time in civilization if you so desire... It is hedonism at an extreme... In many ways, that is where we are trying to get - total control and total pleasure.

Recently I read that we will be able to back up our entire brain by 2050!

So Babylon lives on and continues to evolve. Technologies are evolving at an *exponential* rate - you see technological development is not linear it is exponential. They reckon that right now a computer is about as smart as a chicken, by 2014 they will be as smart as a human being... when it gets to that stage, the feedback loop built into the development of technology will get shorter and shorter and the advancement of computing power will increase.

There is something in science called The Singularity... The dictionary definition: a point in the future (often set around 2030AD) beyond which overwhelming technical changes (especially the development of superhuman artificial intelligence) make reliable predictions impossible. That is within our lifetime! How are we going to adapt and build communities centered on Jesus Christ that can embrace and adapt to these changes? We really need to think creatively...

Intel

A chip with 80 processing cores and capable of more than a trillion calculations per second (teraflops) has been unveiled by Intel... it consumes 62 watts, and the cores can power on and off independently, making it more energy efficient.

Intel says that commercial spin-offs of the chip could see it being used in high-definition entertainment PCs, servers and handheld devices.

Possible uses include artificial intelligence, instant video communications, photo-realistic games and real-time speech recognition, said the firm.

Apart

Babel stands as a monument to the permanent human desire to build our own kingdom apart from God, to 'make a name for ourselves'. Babylon throughout its history became a symbol of the pride of man and his inevitable fall as he tries to 'go it alone'. In the story we find ourselves in, this city came to symbolize the godless society, with its pretensions, pleasures, sins, superstitions, riches and eventual doom.

You see there is judgment, and we do not talk about it much in churches these days, but the consequence of doing things our own way is a lack of life in its fullness... it is death... life without God is no life... and so Jesus says, I am the way, the truth and the life... follow me and my way of being and you will experience the fullness of life – don't go it alone!!! That is the message of God to humankind.

The elements of this story are timelessly characteristic of the spirit of the world. The project is typically grandiose; people describe it excitedly to one another as if it were the ultimate achievement - very much as modern people glory in their space projects or technology or molecular biology or whatever... we think we are so clever... so powerful

Psalm 2 says;

Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth take their stand
and the rulers gather together
against the LORD
and against his Anointed One.
"Let us break their chains," they say,
"and throw off their fetters."
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
Then he rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath,

The power of story

Act 2 of the story is all about crisis, how things get worse. Human beings leave their identity, their life, and their story as creatures in God's creation. Their intelligence has developed beyond their moral wisdom and self-restraint.

We were never meant to come out from the covering of the story of creation. We were never meant to go *it alone*. We were never meant to style for ourselves a way of being that is apart from God as his subjects.

We have displaced ourselves... we don't know our place in creation anymore and that's the problem! That's why we are telling this story, so we can find our rightful place once again and help others to find their place too.

Tonight – give yourselves to God; be content with resting in him, not trying to prove that you can get along on your own. It's not the right way to live... surrender your life to God and choose to live with a simple dependency upon God. It is not easy, we have to let go of something so that we can receive something else, something far better. So let go and receive. Stop building towers and let God build something far more significant.

Pray

Next time

We will move into Act 3 and see that God once again tempers his judgment with mercy, for Act 3 will show yet another new beginning for humankind, as God steadfastly works out his purpose for his creation.