

Stairway to Heaven

GENESIS 11:1-9

**Baxter T. Exum (#1268)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
June 8, 2014**



For many, many years, the human race has had a fascination with tall buildings. I am guessing that most of us here this morning have probably had a chance to make it down to Chicago to visit what is now known as the Willis Tower. Of course, for most of us, that name just sounds wrong. Most of us grew up referring to the Sears Tower. Having grown up in the Chicago area, we would often take field trips downtown. We would go down to visit the Shedd Aquarium, the Field Museum, the Art Institute, the Museum of Science and Industry, and so on, but the highlight always involved going to the top of the Sears Tower and to look out over the city. I remember taking the train downtown when I was in high school, and one time I went up in the Sears Tower at night – absolutely beautiful – to be able to see for miles in all directions, to see the planes landing at O’Hare Airport, to be able to look out over the darkness of Lake Michigan, to be able to see the city lights – just an awesome experience. One time we took some friends down there, and it was a cloudy day. They warned us that there was no visibility, but we had traveled so far, so they gave us half price admission that day. And sure enough, we stepped off the elevator on the 103rd floor, we could see out the windows, but it was like looking at the wall up here. We could see absolutely nothing, but our guests from out of town still enjoyed the experience, knowing that they were 1353 feet above street level, and to be able to feel the building just kind of gently sway back and forth in the breeze – it was quite the experience! Of course, just a few years ago, they added the experience now known as “The Ledge.” They have created these bump-outs made of glass where you can step out and look directly down. In fact, you can turn around and look back at the outside of the building! Just to put this in perspective, the NBC15 tower along the beltline on the SW side of Madison is almost exactly the same height as the Skydeck (1361’ vs. 1353’). I sometimes think about that when I drive that section of the beltline. For those of you, then, who have not gone up in the Willis Tower, maybe you can try to imagine standing at the top of that tower along the beltline. You can look straight down, and there is nothing but glass under your feet. Of course, as you might have heard in the news about two weeks ago, a family was out on the ledge at night when they heard the glass shatter under their feet! They quickly came back in, officials shut the whole thing down, it was later determined that only the top layer of three layers shattered, but still – we can imagine that that was a unique experience.

The point of this is: For many, many years, human beings have had a strong fascination with tall buildings. This morning, I want us to study a request from one of our members for a lesson on the Tower of Babel, the record being found in Genesis 11 (p. 15). This account is significant, of course, not just because of the tall building, but also because this account describes the origin of various languages. So, if you have ever been frustrated

sitting in school trying to learn Latin, or French, or Spanish, or whatever, or if you have ever struggled to communicate with someone who speaks a language other than your own, this account will give us the background for some of that frustration.

Those who study language tell us that there are more than 6,000 languages in the world today. And what I find interesting in studying this is that scientists really have no way of adequately explaining the origin of various languages from a purely evolutionary point of view. We don't have time to discuss this in detail, so I have put an interesting handout in the cubbyholes this morning. I will read one of those quotes, though, a quote from Richard Dawkins, one of the world's most prominent evolutionary biologists. He once said, "...all the thousands of languages in the world are very complex (some say they are all exactly equally complex, but that sounds too ideologically perfect to be wholly plausible). I am biased towards thinking it was gradual, but it is not quite obvious that it had to be. Some people think it began suddenly, more or less invented by a single genius in a particular place at a particular time." Very interesting! I would agree: Yes, the various languages were invented in a particular place at a particular time! Again, though, time does not allow a more thorough discussion, so I would direct your attention to the handout for more information.

This morning, though, I want us to study the text itself – a text describing the world's first skyscraper, a text describing the origin of language – but as we read, we will discover that the main point is not about buildings and the main point is not even really about language. If you will, then, please look with me at Genesis 11:1-9, as we discover why this passage was included in the Bible – Genesis 11:1-9,

¹ Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words. ² It came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ They said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly." And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. ⁴ They said, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." ⁵ The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. ⁶ The Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech." ⁸ So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. ⁹ Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth.

As we keep our attention focused on this one chunk of scripture, I want us to notice the main point here, and then I want us to ask the "So what?" question: What does this passage really mean for us?

- I. **First of all, though, let us notice the main point, and the main thought here seems to be a warning, a warning concerning the danger of arrogantly conspiring against God, a warning about the DANGER of PRIDE.**

Notice what happens: In verse 2, as they travel east, they decide to settle in the plain of Shinar, in what is now the nation of Iraq. And as they settle, they decide to make bricks. But unlike the sun-dried bricks they had perhaps used in the past, these bricks are baked in some kind of ovens, they are "**burned bricks**," we have some kind of technological advance. And we can say the same thing for the mortar. Instead of using mud, they

are now using some kind of **“tar.”** And so they are advancing with their building materials. Certain structures are now possible that were not possible in the past. And I would point out here: The issue is not with technology. Just like today, advances can be used for either good or evil. The problem, then, is not with the actual building. Instead, we find that the problem is with their motivation. Notice what they said in verse 4, **“Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”** I would ask: Why were they so worried about being scattered? Well, it seems that that was God’s intention. God wanted them to scatter. You might remember, right after the flood, how God commanded Noah and his descendants (in Genesis (9:1) to, **“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.”** In other words, God did not want the entire human race all bunched up right there around the mountains of Ararat; instead, God wanted people to move out. He wanted people to explore. He wanted people to **“fill the earth.”** Imagine the problems if people had just stayed together in one huge city. One disease could have wiped out the entire human race. There would be overcrowding. A powerful military leader or dictator could have taken control of the entire human race. God, then, told them to **“fill the earth.”** So here we are in Genesis 11, just a few generations later, and we find that the people are now stopping. They seem to be traveling together, and as they travel, they find nice place, and they decide to settle down. And their concern (according to verse 4) is that they do not want to be **“scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”** We might say that perhaps they are tired of always moving, and so to avoid getting spread out, they decide to build a huge city so they can just stay put, right there. And with these technological advances, the pride sneaks in, and they decide to build this huge tower **“whose top will reach into heaven.”**

There has obviously been much speculation as to the purpose of the tower. We have remains of many ziggurats in that part of the world, and many of them seem to feature the various signs of the Zodiac. Many of them seem to culminate with some kind of temple or altar up on top. Some, then, have assumed that this is the problem God has with this tower. However, we are not really told. Here is another possibility: Think back to what happened with the great flood. Water covered the entire earth – not just a local flood, but the Bible tells us that even the tops of the mountains were covered (Genesis 7:19). Some have suggested, then, that these people were building some kind of escape route. In other words, as their behavior got worse and worse, they started worrying about another great flood, and so they needed a way out. They needed a way to escape God’s judgment if a great flood ever happened again. And so you can see, there are many possibilities.

All we have, though, is the text itself. And in the text itself, they tell us their motivation. Right there in the middle of verse 4, the people straight out tell us exactly why they are doing this, and their reasoning is, **“...let us make for ourselves a name.”** Don’t we see a sense of pride here? Whether they were starting to worship some pagan deity or whether they were trying to escape the possibility of future judgment, we may never know. But we do know, they were trying to make a name for themselves. They were doing something that had never been done, and they wanted everybody else to know about it. They were basically making a monument to themselves. They were celebrating their own pride, **“Look what we can do!”** Pride had entered into their hearts, and their pride was starting to squeeze God out of their plans. Their pride caused them to settle down, when God really wanted them to keep on moving out in all directions. The tower, then, was not for defense. It was not so they could see a forest fire on the horizon. It wasn’t for condos. It wasn’t for office space. It wasn’t so they would have a glass-bottomed tourist trap at nearly 1400’ above the city. Instead, they built the tower to make a name for themselves. They were motivated by pride, and that is the problem.

This brings us to verse 5, where we find that, **“The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built.”** Some have asked: Why did God have to come down? In my opinion, it seems that there might be some sarcasm here. Yes, God knew exactly what was going on, but what an interesting picture:

Here we have the human race getting together to build the tallest and most magnificent structure ever built up to that point in history, and what does God have to do to see it? He has to come down! Oh, that is a nice little tower you have down there! In my own mind, I picture God kneeling down with a huge magnifying glass, just like we might stoop down to examine an ant hill.

God, then, examines the tower, and notice what happens next: God speaks to himself. And as he speaks, he uses a plural pronoun. Again, very interesting! Notice the beginning of verse 7, ***“Come, let Us go down....”*** God, then, was speaking to himself – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, were having a discussion with one another. And the decision was: They would go down and would confuse the language of the people. And the “punishment” here is absolutely genius! God does not kill the people, he does not destroy the tower, he does not send an earthquake, there are no huge lightning bolts here; instead, the Lord God simply confuses them! To me, this is rather hilarious! And to me, this serves as a reminder that the tower itself was not the problem. God never destroyed the tower; instead, he simply confused those who were working on it. So here we have a group of people thinking they are so smart, they go out there to make a name for themselves, and now they can’t even talk to each other! We imagine a huge construction site. I think of the massive roadwork going on near our house on the far southwest side of Madison at the beltline and Verona Road. Imagine having hundreds of people all working together, and then in a single instant, every single one of them is speaking a different language! With that one little tweak, God made all of these geniuses look absolutely foolish! The problem, then, is that these people were arrogant, and in their pride, they left God completely out of their plans. Truly, as King Solomon would go on to say later (in Psalm 127:1), ***“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.”***

II. Now that we have discovered exactly why God had a problem with what happened here, we now need to ask ourselves what this passage means for us – WHY IS ACCOUNT IN THE BIBLE? Why does this passage really matter?

Well, if these people were condemned for selfishly and arrogantly leaving God out of their plans, then obviously, the lesson for us is: With humility, let us do what God wants us to do! In humility, let us include God in our plans. We think about the parable Carl read for us earlier from Luke 12. Here is a rich man with so many crops he doesn’t even know what to do with them all. And so instead of including God in his plans, instead of asking God for advice, the rich man selfishly and arrogantly decided that he was going to build much larger barns. Of course, the problem was not in building a barn (God does not have a problem with barns) – instead, the problem was that he failed to check in with God. He failed to include God in his plans.

Today, do we ever take on a project without praying about it? Do we ever start something without consulting God? Do we ever do something to make a name for ourselves, without really including God in the process? Over and over again, the Bible warns about the danger of arrogance. Pride has a way of pulling us away from God. We think of James 4:6-7, where James says, ***“...God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God...”*** We think of what Solomon said in Proverbs 16:18, ***“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling.”*** Pride has a way of bringing us down in the end. We might start off building some kind of a tower to make a name for ourselves, but in the end, we stumble into confusion.

As we summarize this passage and what it means for us, the real question is: What are doing? What are we building our lives toward? Do we live for our own good, or are we living for God? Are our lives monuments to ourselves, or are our lives built to honor God? We think of the comparison Jesus made in Luke 6:46-49,

⁴⁶ “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say? ⁴⁷ Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: ⁴⁸ he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. ⁴⁹ But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great.

Why did God tell us about the Tower of Babel? God put this account in the Bible as a warning against the danger of pride. When God tells us to go, we are to go – we are not to slow down, and we are certainly not to build a huge monument in our own honor. Instead, we are to build our lives on the rock-solid foundation of God’s word.

Conclusion:

As we close, we invite all who are here this morning to do just that. If you are already a Christian but have fallen into sin and need the prayers and support of this congregation, we invite you let us know how we can help. On the other hand, maybe you have never obeyed the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus came to this earth and died for our sins, he was buried, and then he came back from the dead on the third day. We respond to that message in faith. We turn away from sin, we allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and we are raised up out of the water as the Christian life begins. If you have any questions, let us know – give us a call, send us a message – we would love to study with you. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com