

## **Genesis 11:8**

**So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel.**

What is the tallest building in the world?

- Before you start thinking this is another quiz – let me give you the answer
- The answer is: there is no easy answer to that question
- It depends what you mean by a building – does a radio mast count?
- If radio masts don't count – what about radio antennae on the top of a building
- My initial enthusiasm for sharing this information with you blunted
- Including the radio antenna, the Sears Tower, Chicago, USA is the tallest
- Including the spires, the Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia are taller
- But without the antenna or spires, it is the Taipei Financial Centre, Taipei, Taiwan
- One thing is for certain, the desire to build to the sky, as a gesture of achievement
- Is by no means a new idea
- In the years when many of us were growing up (1931-1967 to be precise)
- New York's Empire State building held the record
- Before that record holders include cathedrals at Cologne, Paris, Strasbourg, Lincoln
- Before these the Great Pyramid and Red Pyramid in Egypt
- And before these it was likely that the temple towers (called ziggurats)
- Of the Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians were the world's highest buildings

Similar in some ways to the pyramids, ziggurats were a form of temple tower

- Made from sun-baked bricks, built up to as many as seven levels
- Each ascending level was a bit smaller than the one below
- The top level of the tower was flat and often had a shrine or temple
- Such temples were believed to be dwelling places for the gods
- The theory being that through the ziggurat gods and humans could be closer
- Most of the remaining ziggurats are in Iran and Iraq
- The ziggurats gave priests a place of refuge from any flood waters
- And a place of security as access to the top by stairs or ramps could be defended
- There is an ancient ruin of a ziggurat at Etemenanki near Babylon
- So perhaps this was the kind of construction that we learn about in Genesis 11

Following the account of the great flood (a Bible story often referred to as Noah's Ark)

- The Bible records that God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them
- Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1, 7)
- Chapter 10 deals with the genealogy of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth
- Although we often succumb to the temptation to skip over such chapters
- It is important to notice that the account of the building of Babylon and the tower
- Comes right in the middle of the lists that form chapters 10 and 11
- In the family trees there are two lines of descent
- One that starts with Shem and goes through Eber and Joktan
- Which is followed by the story of Babylon and the Tower of Babel
- And the other that starts with Shem and goes through Eber and Peleg
- Which is followed by the story of the call of Abraham
- So the Tower of Babel is one half of a story of contrasts
- The Babel half describes what happens when a community goes away from God

## I IT RESULTS IN SELFISH AMBITION

There is a sense in which the story of the tower of Babel and the confusion of language

- Is an origin story, answering the question, ‘why do people speak different languages?’
- There are as many as 6,800 languages in the world
- Even primitive societies have the most complex languages
- Somewhat oddly, the older a language is the more complicated it is
- And though there are language families – where languages are clearly related
- There are at least 50 and perhaps as many as 100 or more language families
- Where the languages of different families bear no relationship to each other
- Causing many linguists to conclude that there never was a common language
- But the story of the Tower of Babel gives a different explanation

In Genesis 11 the people have move eastward and settled in the plain of Shinar (modern Iraq)

- An eastward movement in the Bible nearly always represents moving away from God
- The Bible clearly states that the world had one language and a common speech
- And had discovered a new technology – the ability to make bricks and mortar
- Believing they had the means of guaranteeing their own unity and security
- They set about building a city and a great tower

The clues to why God’s judgment was against the builders of the city and tower

- Are found in the words that are repeated within the story
- They want to make a name for themselves
- They want to stay together in one place and not spread out as God commanded
- But when God saw their plan, he initiated a counter-plan
- That resulted in the very thing that the builders were trying to prevent
- They were scattered over the face of the whole earth
- And, incidentally, the names of all the builders are long forgotten

All of this shows the results of human ambition

- From the beginning men and women have failed to trust God and enjoy his provision
- Only when God calls Abraham will people be led to a good land
- Only through obedience to God’s word will Abraham’s name be made great

As for the selfish ambition seen so clearly in this passage

- Even the very best of human schemes – things in which we so easily take pride
- Are, like the tower of Babel – made of perishable materials
- It shows the foolishness of giving pride of place to human achievements

On a recent internet poll sampling 3,000 people as to what was most important to them

- More than half the respondents said that health was the most important
- One in five said love was the most important
- One in twelve said money was the most important
- Only one in a hundred said beauty was the most important
- But the Bible teaches that being in a right relationship with God is the most important
- And what this passage shows us is the result of selfish ambition
- Is further estrangement from God and the further breakdown of community

## II IT RESULTS IN FAILED RELIGION

Whether or not the temple tower to which the story refers was a Mesopotamian ziggurat

- The idea seems to be to make a name for yourself
- And build your way to heaven – maybe even to have a high place to escape a flood
- It seems nothing less than do-it-yourself religion
- In an attempt to become the means of our own salvation

The grandiose plan of the tower of Babel is typical of human pride

- But while the builders thought that their work was very splendid
- Even their newly discovered materials, bricks, were prone to decay
- From their perspective their city and their tower were huge
- But from God's perspective they were really rather small
- So that the Bible narrative says, he had to 'come down' to have a look

When a community goes away from God

- It results in failed religion – the people still had an ambition to reach the heavens
- But coupled with that ambition was the goal of disobedience, not to be scattered
- This insistence on trying to reach the heavens and keeping selfish ambition
- Was the opposite to walking with God and obeying him (as Enoch and Noah had)

According to the archaeologists, the tops of these ancient towers were places of worship

- Later in the Old Testament we discover high places being used for the same purpose
- And yet both venues were places of opposition to God and competition with God
- The great failure of all religion is to try to make our own way to heaven
- But the great claim of the Christian faith is that God in Christ comes down to us

In the Old Testament the promises of God are unfolded

- From Abraham onwards, a land, a people and a blessing to the world are promised
- But the backdrop against which a man who believes God is people who do not believe
- These are the people who did not believe
- They make bricks, they build a city, they build a tower
- All in the cause of selfish ambition – to make a name for themselves
- Maybe, despite their disobedience, they are trying to build their way to heaven
- But it is all so small that God must come down to take a closer look

But when God comes down he comes not as a spectator but as a judge

- 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
- At first this is a rather confusing statement – but its meaning is clear enough
- Building the city and the tower are exhibitions of humanity's disobedience
- In other words there is no limit to the human capacity for evil
- Therefore it takes the wisdom of God to baffle and defeat their projects
- We all know the immense capacity there is for human evil in the name of religion
- The human capacity for disobeying God is divided by the division of language
- And so God's intervention to divide human language is an example
- Of judgment mixed with mercy – to divide our capacity for evil

### III IT RESULTS IN TOTAL CONFUSION

Babylon was the heart of the ancient world and the centre of its power

- To Babylonians, 'Babel' meant the gate of the gods
- But in the judgment of God their language was confounded
- And their building stopped

In Genesis 1:27 we learned that each human being is made in the image of God

- One of the clues we gained to what that meant is the capacity for rational speech
- My experiences in other countries have taught me the importance of rational speech

The first time Janet and I planned to go to Germany we telephoned our friend Gabi's house

- The difficulty was that Gabi's mother spoke no English and I could not speak German
- The only thing she could do was to give me Gabi's new telephone number
- And I knew the numbers up to ten in order to be able to write them down

The disruption of language results in the breakdown of communication

- The fracture of community and the scattering of people
- The result of selfish ambition and failed religion at Babel was total confusion
- The building stopped and the very thing which they had feared came upon them
- The builders were scattered over the whole earth
- And they departed in companies, after their families and languages (Gen. 10:5, 30-31)

And so, with the scattering of the disobedient people, the scene is set

- Here is a picture of selfish ambition, failed religion, total confusion
- And ultimately the scattering of people – who can no longer communicate
- For their languages are different
- This was a chaotic situation, so different from God's original creation
- But this is just one side of a two-sided story

For following this there is a great contrast – in the calling of Abraham

- Unlike the people who did not believe God and did not obey him
- Comes one who believed God and obeyed him
- And it was by believing that Abraham was counted as righteous
- Here was a man who was not intent on staying where he was
- But one who would go where God commanded – even to a country he had not seen
- This was the beginning of God's work of gathering together a people for himself
- People who would not be caught up in selfish ambition or failed religion
- But people who would be committed not to their work but God's work
- Not to making a name for themselves but to honouring the name of God
- Not to religion (trying to build their way to God) but to relationship (trusting him)
- This would not result in total confusion but a new creation

The one who will ultimately gather people to himself and to his name is Jesus

- It is to Christ that everyone will have to come
- And to Christ that every knee will have to bow and every tongue confess
- And people who are scattered will be brought together at that great day