

THE TOWER OF BABEL (1)

A Meditation on Genesis 11:1-9

I like to refer to the Lord's Prayer as a daily, eschatological prayer. First, it's an appropriate pattern to use in prayer every day. "Give us this *day* our *daily* bread." Second, it's an *eschatological* prayer, which means "last things," or "end times." It's eschatological, since the petitions in the prayer reveal what God is doing in the world, and where He is taking the world. In praying according to the Lord's Prayer, we join with God in asking that His agenda for the world comes to fruition—His agenda to see His name hallowed, to see His kingdom come, and have His will done on earth as it is in heaven. And we can be confident that God will answer our prayers, for Jesus wouldn't have told us to pray for these things if God didn't intend to answer them.

How does this relate to the tower of Babel? These builders of Babel weren't hallowing God's name, building His kingdom nor doing His will.

What name were these rebels preoccupied with? God's name or their own? "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'" (Gen. 11:4). In essence, the prayer of the Babelites is, "Hallowed be our name." God's people shutter at such a thought. "Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness" (Ps. 115:1).

Who are these people at Babel? Remember that the original Hebrew didn't have chapter divisions, so the story in chapter 10 continues non-stop right through chapter 11. In Genesis 10:26-30, Joktan's descendants are mentioned and they travel east. Genesis 11:2 picks up on this move to the east: "men moved eastward" (NIV) in "the land of Shinar and settled there." "The land of Shinar" is where Nimrod began his kingdom (10:10). These are the sons of Joktan, and they intermarry with the ungodly descendants of Nimrod. This is a recapitulation of the "fall" of the sons of God, who married the ungodly, although attractive daughters of man (6:2).

The people of Babel stand toe to toe with God. The description of "a tower with its top in the *heavens*," (11:4) probably isn't so much a physical reference as it is a spiritual reference. This tower was designed to connect heaven and earth. It would be "the gate of God." In fact, in the language of ancient Akkadian, Babel means "the gate of God." Therefore, this tower represents a false religion, a false mediator, and a false savior. And all that these idolaters do is for their own name and fame.

The people of Babel also pray, "Our kingdom come." The first mention of *kingdom* in the Bible is found in Genesis 10:10, where we're told that "the beginning of [Nimrod's] kingdom is Babel...in the land of Shinar." But this is not God kingdom; rather it's a rival kingdom, which will always be opposed to God's kingdom. The two cannot harmoniously co-exist. While it's common place to refer to this passage as "The *Tower of Babel*," they are building much more than a tower or monument or pyramid. They are building a city, an empire, a kingdom (11:4, 5, 8).

These arrogant builders think their kingdom will tower above all kingdoms and reach heaven itself. In verse five we have a humorous response: "And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built." First, notice that the builders are the "children of man," and not the "children of God." But then observe that their grand, exalted kingdom is so puny in God's sight that He had to descend from His throne in heaven just to see it. "Oh, yeah," God says, "now I see it." However, this verse isn't meant to be humorous, it is intended to sober us. When God comes down to see what man is doing, the end result will be one of blessing or cursing. Later in Genesis 18, when the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah reaches the LORD, He says, "I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know" (vs. 21). The consequence of that descent was judgment; this coming down will also lead to judgment.

At the same time, God acknowledges their work in glowing (hyperbolic?) terms. "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. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them'" (11:6). At the very least this tells us about the power of unity—for good or evil. But the unity that they enjoy will be short-lived, for God will divide and conquer, thus bringing an abrupt end to their consolidated kingdom.

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Furthermore, the builders of Babel pray, “Our will be done on earth, regardless of what is done in heaven.” They deliberately concentrated their work in one place “lest [they] be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (vs. 4), as God had commanded them (Gen. 1:28; 9:1). God’s clear command is held in contempt, which is always the case when one is preoccupied with their name and kingdom.

Ted Turner provides us with a good modern day example. A few years ago Turner stated that the Ten Commandments were obsolete. He said, “We’re living with outmoded rules. The rules we’re living under are the Ten Commandments, and I bet nobody here even pays much attention to ’em, because they are too old. When Moses went up on the mountain, there were no nuclear weapons, there was no poverty. Today, the Ten Commandments wouldn’t go over. Nobody around likes to be commanded. Commandments are out.”

Politely asking the Almighty to step aside, Turner modestly offers his Ten Voluntary Initiatives to replace the antiquated Ten Commandments. As you read Turner’s initiatives realize that while most people aren’t as audacious as Turner, they too are nevertheless replacing God’s will with their own when they don’t submit to His will.

1. I promise to have love and respect for the planet earth and living things thereon, especially my fellow species—humankind (It’s a good thing he clarified who his fellow species were).
2. I promise to treat all persons everywhere with dignity, respect, and friendliness (This is an intriguing initiative, since it was violated just minutes after he gave it, when he referred to Christians as losers and bozos. He apologized later for the comments).
3. I promise to have no more than two children, or no more than my nation suggests.
4. I promise to use my best efforts to save what is left of our natural world in its untouched state and to restore damaged or destroyed areas where practical.
5. I pledge to use as little nonrenewable resources as possible.
6. I pledge to use as little toxic chemicals, pesticides, and other poisons as possible and to work for their reduction by others.
7. I promise to contribute to those less fortunate than myself, to help them become self-sufficient and enjoy the benefits of a decent life, including clean air and water, adequate food and health care, housing, education, and individual rights.
8. I reject the use of force, in particular military force, and back United Nations arbitration of international disputes.
9. I support the total elimination of all nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons of mass destruction.
10. I support the United Nations and its efforts to collectively improve the conditions of the planet.

As Christians, we should love *God’s will* and live to do it. Jesus said, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me” (Jn. 6:38). On another occasion Jesus told His disciples, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (Jn. 4:34).

How did God respond to the rebels at Babel? “Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech. So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth” (vv. 7-9). They wanted to make a name for themselves, but God gave them their real name—confusion, which in Hebrew is also folly.

How is the gospel to go forth today, now that we have this confusion of speech among the foolish outside of Christ? The answer is found at Pentecost, which reversed the judgment at Babel. Peter Leithart notes, “Acts 2, which is the story of the outpouring of the Spirit on the apostles, is like Genesis 10-11. Like Genesis 10, Acts 2 contains a ‘table of nations’ (vv. 9-11), and like Genesis 11, Acts 2 tells about a miracle of language. But the language miracle is exactly the opposite of the judgment at Babel. At Babel, people were unable to understand each other because of their different languages; at Pentecost, they are able to understand each other, in spite of their different languages” (Peter J. Leithart, *A House for My Name*, p. 68).

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