

PROMISE: WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

GENESIS 10-11

When we get to Genesis 10, we come across that intentional phrase that we have already discussed a few times before where we read, "These are the generations of the sons of Noah." And again, this phrase is being used to make a connection from the story of Noah in the previous chapters to the story of Babylon that's coming up in Genesis 11.

Genesis 10 is often referred to as the *Table of Nations*, but it was not necessarily structured to give an exhaustive historical account of all the people on the earth at this time in history. Instead, it very strategically lists seventy different nations which was more of a symbolic way to represent all the people groups of the world.¹

As John Walton describes it:

"The text only seeks to account for the groups the Israelites were aware of and does not hint at a world beyond the ancient Near East. In other words, the author has not attempted to provide a comprehensive list of all people(s) descended from the sons of Noah. Instead, he has addressed how all the known peoples and nations of his day are related to the sons of Noah."²

This means that the names in Genesis 10 were listed primarily for the theological significance that can be drawn from this genealogy. The author of Genesis is primarily focused on linking the one chosen line of Shem with all the other lines of human descent. The author is trying to make the point that despite its diversity, all of humanity is one under the one Sovereign God over all creation. Genesis is declaring that all human beings "are of the same origin, have the same dignity, and belong in the same world."³

¹ The number 70 is often used throughout Scripture as a symbolic representation of totality, completion and fullness.

² C.S. Keener & John Walton, *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, (Zondervan: 2016), 24

³ David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11: The Dawn of Creation*, (Inter-Varsity Press: 1990), 174

As David Atkinson points out:

“This undercuts all human divisiveness based on nationality, culture and race. However good, however rich national and cultural diversity can be, it should never be allowed to cloud the more fundamental fact that all human people share the same nature, breathe the same air, live on the same earth, and owe their life to the same God.”

And so the genealogy of Genesis 10 is meant to remind all of God’s people back then and even now that we belong within a world of nations and people groups that are a part of God’s purpose in this world, and so we should feel eager, obligated and unashamed to extend God’s blessing to all the families of the earth.

And from here, we move into Genesis 11 where the action picks back up, and the downward spiral of humanity reaches its climax in the building of the city known as Babylon. And while other Ancient Near Eastern accounts⁴ referred to this story and viewed Babylon as the heart of civilization and the height of human progress, Genesis once again paints a different picture and offers a theological critique of the ancient beliefs concerning this city. In other ancient accounts, the Babylonian civilization was esteemed as the most advanced and enlightened on earth, but Genesis declares that it was the most destructive and corrupt. Genesis 11 introduces us to a city that throughout the rest of the Bible becomes the standard symbol and representation of a godless society on earth.

The story of Babylon in Genesis 11 is the tragic conclusion to the Genesis’ account about the origins of the world and humanity. And as we see, it leads to yet another judgement from God that brings disorder and chaos as it ends with humanity scattered, separated and left unable to speak to one another.

This downward spiral that now ends with the scattering and confusion of humanity has made it clear that human beings are the ones to blame for what’s wrong with the world today. And so now the only question that remains is, “Is there a solution to the problem that we have created, and if there is what is that solution?”

⁴ Most notably the Babylonians own account in the *Enuma Elish*

Fortunately, there is hope for humanity and a solution to the problem, and it is actually the two genealogies at the end of Genesis 11 that reveal it. It is there that we learn that:

Despite human imperfections and failures, God has promised to rescue and bless his rebellious world through one particular family that he blesses from Babylon.

At the end of Genesis 11, we are introduced to the family of Terah and more specifically to his son named Abraham. The bridge between the story of Babylon and the family of Abraham is the genealogy of Shem. It is in this genealogy that we learn that Abraham is a descendent of Shem who just so happened to be the blessed firstborn son of Noah who just so happened to be a descendent of Seth who just so happened to be the special son given to Adam and Eve as a substitute for their lost son Abel. Genesis is showing us that God has a plan to rescue his rebellious world through one particular family from Babylon, but Genesis is also showing us that it is a plan that he has been brilliantly orchestrating since the very beginning.

And so, as we examine this final section in our study, we will look at the problem with Babylon, the promise given to Abraham and the promise fulfilled in Jesus.

The Problem with Babylon

In our study of Genesis 1-11, we have come to see how human beings were created to work like God by bringing order and meaningful life to areas of life that are formless and void. We need to understand that this implies that humans were created to develop culture and civilization and to build cities as they fulfilled their commission to multiply and fill the earth.

And so, when we read this story about the building of Babylon, we need to make sure we avoid the common error of assuming too much from the story and taking on the view that in some way cities and advances in technology are somehow bad things in this world. We need to realize that human beings build the city of Babylon because of a desire that was already ingrained in our created DNA to multiply, build, order, create and cultivate the earth.

The problem with Babylon was not that human beings built a city or that they invented a new technology (the brick); the problem with Babylon was that human beings were building a city and using their technology to “make a name for themselves” (11:4).

How many people today are still moving into big cities and trying to harness new technology with the primary motivation to make a name for themselves?

You see, the problem with Babylon was that human beings were collectively trying to create their own identity and their own sense of security with the belief that they could earn the blessing of the gods through their own accomplishments and advancements.

The tower that they built “with its top in the heavens” would have been a well-known temple structure in ancient Mesopotamian cities known as the ziggurat. Essentially, it was a structure that was built in order to provide a convenient stairway for the gods to come down from heaven in order to bless the people who built it. And so, here again we can see how Genesis is confronting and critiquing the beliefs of the ancient world around them.

G.J. Wenham puts it this way:

“Babylon was famed for its temple tower or ziggurat, whose foundations were in the underworld and whose top was in the heavens. No, says Genesis, so far from reaching heaven, Babel’s tower could hardly be seen from there – the Lord had to come down to see it (5). Babel means ‘gate of god’, and Babylon considered itself closer to god than anywhere else on earth. It regarded itself as the religious, intellectual and cultural capital of the ancient world, the showpiece of human civilization. ‘Rubbish’ says v 9, Babel does not mean ‘gate of god’ but ‘confusion’ or ‘folly’, and far from human wisdom, Babylon’s ruined ziggurat, shows human impotence before the judgment of God.”⁵

Human beings were created as God’s special partners who were to fill the earth with the image and glory of God, but in building the city of Babylon humans have reached the point of settling in one place to make a name for themselves. Here in Genesis 11, we see that human beings are increasingly beginning to feel a false sense of self-sufficiency and self-

⁵ G.J. Wenham, *Genesis, New Bible Commentary*, (Inter-Varsity Press: 1994), 69

security that if left unchecked would inevitably lead them to forget their true identity and their need for God altogether. And so God graciously intervenes to stop the downward spiral that is leading to humanity's own self-destruction even though they're unaware of it. And so, the city is left unfinished for now, and the people are left dispersed and isolated.

So now what? How is God ever going to get his creation and humanity out of this mess that we have made?

The Promise Given to Abraham

The story of Babylon ends and there is no hero, and there seems to be no hope. But then we keep reading, and we are introduced to the genealogy of Noah's son Shem that leads to a man named Terah. From there, we move into a short genealogy of Terah's family where we are introduced to a man named Abraham from Babylon.⁶ And it's from here that the rest of the Biblical story begins to unfold and reveal the remarkable solution to the problem that humanity has created.

David Atkinson writes:

"Now the primeval story has ended. The account of the people of God in history – a salvation history ultimately centered in Christ – can begin. For now God begins to reverse the judgment of Babel. A new community is being built as the family of Abraham. Through Abraham, we are told, all the families of the earth will again receive blessing (12:3). Through Abraham the covenant story of sacred history begins."⁷

The solution for what's wrong with the world today and the hope for all of humanity is found in God's promise to this descendent of Shem named Abraham.

⁶ Ur of the Chaldeans was located in ancient Babylonian territory.

⁷ Atkinson, 185

In Genesis 12:1-3, we read:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God promises to make Abraham's name great and to bless Abraham. In the story of Babylon, we saw humanity trying to make a name for themselves, but here in the story of Abraham, we see God as the one who is going to make a great name for Abraham. And just as the man and the woman in the garden were blessed by God, here Abraham is also promised God's blessing despite his place in this corrupted world.

And so the big question is, "Why is God going to bless Abraham and his family?"

And the answer becomes clear in the last line of God's promise:

"So that all the families of the earth will find God's blessing in you."

Despite human imperfections and failures, God makes a promise to rescue and bless his rebellious world through this one particular family from Babylon. And with this begins the remarkable story of God's unfolding plan to redeem and restore his creation, but as we said before it is plan that he has been brilliantly orchestrating since the very beginning.

In Genesis 3, we read about God's promise to bring justice and salvation through the promised offspring of the woman. In Genesis 8, we read about God's willingness to suffer for his creation and his commitment to protect and preserve his creation. And now in Genesis 12, we read about God's promise to bless the whole world through the family of Abraham. It is a promise that initiates a story that has many twists and turns and triumphs and tragedies, but one that eventually finds its fulfillment in the promised descendent of Abraham who was unlike any other man in human history.

The Promise Fulfilled in Jesus

Two thousand years ago and many, many, many years after God's promise was given to Abraham, we are introduced to another genealogy. It is the genealogy of Jesus Christ who just so happened to be a direct descendent of this particular family from Babylon. And the descriptions of his life and teaching make it abundantly clear that Jesus was in fact the intended solution to the problem with the world and the incredible hope for all of humanity.

Unlike every other man in human history, Jesus was not made in the image of God; he is the image of the invisible God. He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of his nature. All things were created by him and through him and for him. In the beginning, God created the world through his word, and then two thousand years ago his word became flesh and dwelt among us. God is reconciling all things back to himself through the life and work of Jesus. And just as death came into this world through Adam so also eternal life is now once again possible through Jesus.

Jesus declared himself to be the solution when he said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Jesus declares that he is the way. He is the way back to what was lost in the beginning. In our rebellion, humanity was stripped of the Eden experience and the sword of judgement was placed in between us and access to the tree of life that gave eternal life. But Jesus took the sword of judgment upon himself and in doing so once again opened up the gate to the garden experience. It is now only through the life and work of Jesus that we can once again experience the life that we were created to experience and have access to eternal life.

And not only is Jesus the way back to what was lost in the beginning, he is the way forward to what God has had in store for creation ever since the beginning. Jesus is the New Adam of a new creation that will one day fill the earth with the image and glory of God and enter into the eternal rest of God.

Jesus also declares that he is the truth. Humanity has made the decision to define good and evil for ourselves because we have believed the lie that God doesn't really have our best interest in mind. But the life and work of Jesus tells us the truth about God. The Sovereign God over all of creation loves his creation so much that he is willing to suffer death himself – the penalty of human rebellion – in order to rescue and bless his creation with eternal life. Because of Jesus, we can once again live in a relationship of trusting obedience towards God knowing without a doubt that he is a good God who certainly has our best interest in mind and who is always working for the good of those who love him too.

And Jesus declares that he is the life. Jesus has shown us and taught us what it truly means to be a human being, and what the life we were created to live actually looks like. He lived the kind of life that we were meant to live, but then he also gave his life by dying a death that he didn't deserve so that we might now experience the life that we don't deserve but were in fact meant to live. Jesus has shown us, taught us and promised to empower us to once again live in loving fellowship with one another and in trusting obedience towards God and to once again live working like God and working with God to restore his creation and to fill the earth with his image and his glory.

Jesus is the solution and the Son of Abraham in whom all the families of the earth can once again experience God's blessing. He is the fulfillment of that wonderful promise to Abraham and he is the reason that we should sing with the apostle Paul:

"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Romans 11:33, 36)

Conclusion

Genesis 1-11 has introduced us to the awesome Creator of this world who cares about humanity and who has a special plan for us in spite of our rebellion. We ought to be filled with wonder as we read through these ancient words, but we should also be filled with worship as these words set the stage for the rest of Scripture and they provide the answers to our most basic questions.

Who is God?

He is the Sovereign Creator over all of creation who has brought order and meaningful life to this world in which we live.

Who are we?

We are God's special representatives in creation and the resident caretakers of creation who were made for loving fellowship with one another and trusting obedience towards God.

Why are we here?

We are here to work like God and to work for God in order to cultivate a world that glorifies the goodness, beauty and wisdom of our Creator.

What's wrong with the world?

We were created to live in a relationship with God and to rule the world on behalf of God, but we chose to rebel against God and began to ruin everything. And even though God patiently and graciously keeps giving human beings a chance to do the right thing with his world, human beings continue to ruin it by choosing to define good and evil for themselves.

And so what's the solution?

In spite of all of humanity's imperfections and failures, God has promised to rescue and bless his rebellious world through the promised offspring of the woman and the descendent of Abraham known to us today as Jesus Christ.

Genesis 1-11 has taught us a great deal about ourselves and the meaning of life itself. And so, may these ancient lessons reshape our modern minds and give us a humble view of ourselves and an exalted view of our Creator and our Christ without which there would only be chaos.