WEEK 2 | A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF TECHNOLOGY, PT 1

I form light and create darkness;
I make well-being and create calamity;
I am the LORD, who does all these things.
ISAIAH 45:7

Our first task in this course is to develop a Biblical view of technology. When looking at the cultural landscape and the impact technology has, it is easy to identify concerning symptoms and pathologies that a misuse of technology causes. However, without a proper, Biblical worldview, it is almost impossible to properly diagnose what the root causes of those symptoms are and to correctly identify the remedies to those solutions. It is imperative we possess a God-centered view of technology so that we can apply Biblical wisdom appropriately and navigate the technological age in which we live.

OUT OF THE TAR PITS

> **1** Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. **2** And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. **3** And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. **4** 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, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." **5** And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. **6** 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. **7** Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." **8** So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. **9** 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.
> – Genesis 11:1-9

In Genesis 11 we are introduced to a portrait of human rebellion against the Creator. The story opens with great potential. Humanity is united. They speak the same language ("the whole earth had one language and the same words," 11:1) and they have migrated together and have gathered in the land of Shinar (11:2). The possibilities seem endless. Imagine, a united humanity—there's almost nothing they could not accomplish. To prove this, they set out to build a tower "with its top in the heavens" (11:4), a tremendous accomplishment indeed.

It is interesting that the first spoken words recorded by this people united by language is "Come, let us make. . ." (11:3). It speaks to the natural inclination in mankind to create and to build—an inclination that is part of our being made in the image of God. God commanded Adam and Eve to "subdue" and "have dominion" over the earth (Genesis 1:28). Mankind was always meant to discover and create, to cultivate this world in a wise way that would reflect and honor the Creator. Sadly, after the fall in Genesis 3 this impulse, like everything else in mankind's constitution, would be corrupted and used for evil rather than for good.

All is not well in Shinar. The reader is not to understand their congregating there as a blessing but an act of rebellion. The people of earth have gathered and are building a tower to "make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:5). On the sixth day of creation we read that God made man in His own image and commanded man to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). This was man's cultural mandate. Adam and Eve and their offspring were not meant to congregate but to disperse over the whole earth, spreading the image of God everywhere and making His name great. Instead, mankind has rebelled, seeking their own name instead (Genesis 11:4).

How will the people of earth go about building this tower? With technology, according to that innate impulse to discover and create. In Shinar a new technological breakthrough was made. The people had discovered that baked bricks harden, making them stronger and able to bear more weight, opening up a whole host of new possibilities (11:3). As one author wrote, "The citizens did not start out deciding to build a city and tower. . . They start off by discovering a new technology, fired bricks, and having discovered the technology, they decide to build a tower and a city. There is something about technologies that open our imagination to new possibilities, preceding our sense of what can or should be done."[1] The author notes a key insight we should be aware of as we advance in this course: our ability to *make* and to *do* always advances faster than our ability to grapple with what we *should* do.

Fired brick weren't all the inhabitants of Shinar had. They had another, older technology at their disposal: bitumen (11:3), also known as pitch or tar, which could function as a mortar to bind those bricks together. The inhabitants of Shinar did not discover tar. In fact, tar as a technology to bind materials together predates the Tower of Babel by 150 years. It's discovery and first use takes us back to another story, that of Noah and the Ark.

Genesis 6 opens on a world that is as dark as can be. Sin entered the world in Genesis 3, and its corruption has spread everywhere. God looks on this world and sees "that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). The earth is "corrupt in God's sight" and "filled with violence" (6:11). Such is the state of creation that God is "grieved. . . to his heart." He regrets that He has made man on the earth (6:6). This wickedness cannot go unpunished; God commits to "blot out

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[1] Alistair Roberts, quoted in Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life*, 35–36.

man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry I have made them" (6:7).

It seems God's creation is doomed; and yet, verse 8 offers us a glimmer of hope, for "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord." God comes to Noah and tells him what He is about to you. Then, salvation. "Make yourself an ark of gopher wood," God commands Noah. In Noah and his family, the human race will live on, for Noah is a righteous man who found favor in God' s sight. God will save him from the coming destruction—through technology. The ark would have been a mechanical marvel, a ship of size and proportion incomparable in that day when only small boats were used.[2]

A ship of this size would require new methods of building and new technological advancements. All this Noah would have to figure out over the course of his 100 year building project. However, God did give him one piece of advance technology as an aid: pitch as a sealant, to be spread inside and out of the ship so she would be seaworthy (6:14). The same pitch that the inhabitants of Shinar would later use in a similar way, as mortar for their bricks.[3] As Reinke writes, "the ark itself—the most incredible technological achievement in the history of mankind up until that point, a compilation of all the building technologies prior to the flood—carried over and preserved a new age. The ark helped to inspire the technological advances that would lead to the aspirational ziggurat of Babel."[4]

The memory of the ark is present at Babel, and this is what makes the scene so shocking. The people of Babel remembered the ark and it's technology, but they forgot what it represented. Reinke again is insightful:

> Knowledge of the flood meant that the postflood people all knew that God judged sinful humans who spurned Him and rebelled against His will. Everyone knew it. So if you're gong to build a tower to dethrone God and break free from Him, you'd better be ready. Ready for what? Ready for judgment. Ready for God's rage to once again pour down from the skies in catastrophic flooding. So you harden your bricks with fire, and you glue them with tar. You make your tower watertight. And only then do you stand on the top of the roof, look up into the blue heavens, raise your fist, and say "Good luck washing us away now!"[5]

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[2] Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God's Gifts to a Fallen World* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 1:338.

[3] Although in Hebrew two words are used, however in Exodus 2:3 we see the two terms, *bitumen* and *pitch*, linked together: "When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the riverbank." Both terms refer to the same technology.

[4] Toney Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life*, 39.

[5] Ibid., 39.

Babel was a case of human technology being leveraged to thwart God, to enable human rebellion of the highest order. We must recognize that, while technology can be used to further God's purpose in the world—like tar used to seal Noah's ark—the same technology can be used by sinful humanity for nefarious ends.

It is important to see that God gave mankind this technology. God commanded Noah to use pitch to seal the crevices of the ark. God put this technology into human hands and, once unleashed, it was sinful humanity that used it for sinful purposes. This could give the appearance that God unwittingly gave humanity the means to rebel against His purposes in a way He did not anticipate. This, however, would be to ignore how the story of the Tower of Babel ends.

Returning to Genesis 11, we see that God "came down to see the city and the tower" (11:5; apparently the tower was not as tall as the inhabitants of Babel thought). He sees the rebellion of man, and again He judges sin. This time, however, He does not send a flood (He promised He would never do so again, c.f. Genesis 9:11) or any deadly and destructive force. Rather, He confuses their languages "so that they may not understand one another's speech" (11:7).

What is the outcome of this confusion? Dispersal. "So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city" (11:8). The outcome is the exact outcome God desired and intended in Genesis 1, that mankind would spread throughout and fill the earth. Despite mankind's best efforts to rebel against God and go their own way, God's purpose is not thwarted.

There are some principles we can draw from this story as it relates to God's relationship to technology:

- First, God introduced the very technology that would eventually be used against Him. How are we to think about this? Was this a mistake on God's part? A lack of foresight? Not likely. This is God who declares the end from the beginning, "and from ancient times things not yet done" (Isaiah 46:10). This is God who "works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11). When we look at the story of the Tower of Babel we should recognize that this event, too, was according to God's eternal purposes. The people of earth coming together to build a tower to the heavens provided God the circumstances in which to confuse their languages and force their dispersal. He used their own rebellion to thwart their rebellion and further His plan. In other words, "As for you, you meant evil. . . but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20).

- Second, we must not overlook the significance of God confusing the languages of the people of the earth so that they could not "understand one another's speech" (11:7). Languages are a central and significant component of a particular culture. One author writes, "Many anthropologists say that if you truly want to learn about a people group, you need only to learn their language and it will tell you all you need to know. So by confusing their languages, God was essentially reprogramming their sense of self, their

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relational connections, and how they viewed the world."[6] The outcome of this is that, in multiplying their languages, "God keeps man from forming a truth valid for all men. Henceforth, man's truth will only be partial and contested."[7] In other words, God introduced disharmony into the worldviews of men. No longer would they agree on how or what or why to innovate, for they had different values and ways of looking at the world. This disharmony would prove a powerful restraint on mankind's ability to create and develop new technologies. "By multiplying cultures, God coded into the drama of humanity different ways of thinking about and engaging with the world. These differences are so potent that they will help restrain us from adopting any one, single technology."[8] In His grace, God at Babel was constraining mankind's ability to produce destructive technology.

In Babel we see God's exhaustive sovereignty extends even over the technology mankind creates. He sovereignly uses man's technological aspects for His own purposes, and simultaneously extends mercy in the midst of man's rebellion by instituting natural restraints on man's ability to create new technology that sinful tendencies will purpose towards evil ends. How does God relate to technology? "In Noah, he commanded it. In the ark, God took human engineering and technology and wrote it into the grand story of redemption. But in Babel, God squashed it. In the face of human self-glory, he introduced the tensions that utterly thwarted human collaboration."[9]

THE SMITH AND THE RAVAGER

What comes to the fore in the story of the Tower of Babel is that God's exhaustive sovereignty extends even over man's technological insights and advancements. This theme is picked up by the prophet Isaiah in our next passage as we examine God's relationship to technology. In Isaiah 54:16-17 the prophet writes,

> Behold, I have created the smith
> who blows the fire of coals
> and produces a weapon for its purpose.
> I have also created the ravager to destroy;
> no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed,
> and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment.
> This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord
> and their vindication from me, declares the Lord."

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[6] John Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011), 105.

[7] Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 19.

[8] Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life*, 41.

[9] Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life*, 44.

God makes three remarkable claims in this text:

1) He creates the creator of weapons: the ancient blacksmith was on the cutting edge of technological advancement and creation in the Ancient Near East, making the finest weapons and armor of war available. He is the innovator, the technologist of his age. Yet, God creates this creator. All technology is a product of minds and hands that are the product of the Creator God. God is sovereign over who produces and what is produced. Ultimately, all technology finds its origin in the mind of God.

2) He creates the wielders of those weapons: just as God is sovereign over the creators of technology, He is also sovereign over those who wield that technology. The word "ravager" summarizes all that you would expect of someone wielding a weapon of war—the destruction, devastation, ruin, death. The ravager, in some ways, represents all our worst fears about technology. He represents the evil that sinful men can purpose technology towards, the devastation that misusing God's good creation can lead to. Yet the ravager, like the forager, is God's creation, ordained by Divine decree. The word *bara*, translated as "create," is the same word used in Genesis 1 to describe God's creation *ex nihilo*. The ravager finds his origin in God, and nowhere else. In other words, there is no use or outcome of technology that is not from God. He ordains what technologies are created, who uses them, and how they are used.

3) He governs the outcomes of those ravagers: as Tony Reinke writes, "God governs each creature towards good ends directly; and He governs all sin and evil indirectly."[10] Not only does God create the ravager, but He directs the ravager to His intended purpose. God creates the ravager "to destroy." As one commentator writes, "nothing occurs, not even the destroying acts of the enemies of God's people, apart from God Himself."[11] However, the ravager and his ravaging are likewise under God's sovereign control, for "no weapon formed against you shall succeed." The ravager will ravager no further than God allows. This is absolute, exhaustive, comprehensive sovereignty. As God says through Isaiah elsewhere, "I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am Yahweh, who does all these things" (Isaiah 45:7). God's sovereignty over technology is absolute. That which is created is from Him. The ways in which those technologies are used are from Him. All things are "through him and for him" (Colossians 1:16).

What are we to take away from these two portions of Scripture?
- God is in absolute control of the innovators of technology and the tech they produce.
- God has the ability to squelch any technology or action that is not in accordance with His will.
- God is sovereign even over the destructive technologies we see at work in our world.
- God leads and guides technological innovation for His own purposes

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[10] Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life*, 49.

[11] Edward Young, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 372.

- Innovators exist only by divine appointment and work according to His will.
- God controls the future, in part, by creating the innovators of that future.
- God reigns over technologies that wound and technologies that heal.