



GRACE CHURCH

The Name of God

Genesis 11:1-31

Grace Waco | 5.17.26

In our congregation we tend to have a lot of children. Just this week two babies were born. I know this can, on one hand, be a difficult reality for those who want children but have not received them from God's hand. But on the other hand, we continue to rejoice with those who rejoice. There is something incredibly mysterious, powerful even, about looking at your children and thinking: once they were nothing, then now they are. And one of the most powerful and mysterious parts about having children is that as parents you are entrusted with a responsibility that will shape them forever and mark them as long as they live, perhaps even into eternity. I'm not talking about raising them—I'm talking about *naming* them.

The art of naming creation is God's gift to man. A name is something we sometimes give and sometimes receive. But what a name does is provide meaning, shape, order, density, to what is named. An unnamed object is a *thing*, but we name things that are more than things, that have life: animals, humans, pieces of art. Sometimes we name boats or cars or other things: but we do so because they remind us of life. Kids, sometimes you name stuffed animals. Maybe you even give your friends or siblings a *nickname*. What are you doing? You are trying to give meaning to your relationship. That can be positive or negative. The Christian novelist and poet Madeline L'Engle says it this way:

God asked Adam to name all the animals, which was asking Adam to help in the creation of their wholeness. When we name each other, we are sharing in the joy and privilege of incarnation, and all great works of art are icons of Naming.¹

This is what we are created for. Adam and Eve were made by God to “fill the earth and subdue it”, that is: to birth and name children and to birth and name the beauty in the world. Pro-creation and sub-creation, family and art, multiplication and order.

This is what you are created for, as well. Fill the earth, and subdue it. To parlay that into New Testament language: go into all the nations, teaching all to command what Jesus has taught, and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit. Fill the earth with disciples and order the

¹ Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water*

disciples around the teaching of Jesus. Spiritually pro-create, and spiritually sub-create. Do your part not just in naming babies, but in naming the nations with a new name: in Christ.

So now I've reminded you of your purpose, the question is: how do we do it? How do we go about *naming* the world for Christ?

Genesis 11 is the counter example. It's how we *don't* do it. It's a negative example of what happens when we are driven not by the desire for the world to bear the name of Christ but the world to bear our own name, when we think that it would be far better if our name was shouted and praised rather than God's holy name. It's what happens when we really follow the worldly advice to "make your mark".

This is a story about a group of people, who, **verse 4**, say: "let us make a name for ourselves". See, **verse 1**, they shared the same language. What a gift! What the text is saying is: "they all had a family name". There was unity, camaraderie. They came from the line of Noah, they bore the name of a righteous man, who feared and worshipped God. But that wasn't enough. They didn't want to be known by someone else's name. They didn't want to be known by God's name. They wanted to make a name for themselves.

So this is a story about what happens when we name ourselves. It's a tragedy in three parts.

Part 1: The Futility of Godless Ambition

What drove the people of Babel to build a tower reaching to the Heavens? They wanted to make a name for themselves. We can call this desire *Godless Ambition*. There is such a thing as *Godly Ambition*, that is, a burning desire to bring about the glory of God's name through dependence on the power of God.

But this is the opposite. Godless ambition is a burning desire to bring about self-glory through self-dependence.

The clues that this is godless are everywhere. They move, **verse 2**, *East*, which in Genesis is always the direction *away* from God (Adam and Eve are banished *east*; Cain wanders *east of Eden*; and Lot heads *East* towards Sodom). They set their city in a plain, which is a Biblical foreshadowing of later idolatry. "It is not coincidental that Nebuchadnezzar will later erect his massive golden statue on a similar 'plain' in Babylon"². Mountains, as we have said before, represent the place where God meets with man. Plains are the place where there is little connection to God. But it's in that plain that they decide to build, **verse 4**, a tower, a ziggurat: a man-made mountain. The name they give their city is Babylon, literally meaning "gate of the gods". They want to get to God, back to Eden, to glory—but they want to do it their way, through the work of their hands.

² Ian Duiguid, *Genesis (ESV Expository Commentary)*.

They make bricks and burn them so that they are hard as stone, and then use bitumen, that is pitch, for mortar. Notice two things: first, they don't use purely natural (God-made) materials like wood and stone, but they use materials that *they* have made. In contrast, the temple that God instructs Israel to build only utilizes natural materials.³ Second, they utilize baked bricks and pitch the newest technology. Why? So that their tower is strong *and* waterproof. They are prepping, just in case God wants to send another flood. This time they will be ready.

The tower being made with "it's top in the heavens" is a personal affront to God. The heavens are the Old Testament word not just for the sky but for the spiritual realm, the place where deities dwell. It is saying: we don't need God. We can reach whatever heights we need without him. We can *become* God. Literally the word "top" means *head*—as if they are building, like Nebuchadnezzar will do in Daniel 3, a great idol, an image of a man with his head in the heavens.

Self-glory through self-dependence. Once we ignore or forget God's glory, the only glory left is our own. As Nietzsche has said, once we remove God from the equation, then "we must ourselves become gods simply to appear worthy of (killing him)."

What drives their Godless ambition? The same thing that drives all godless ambition: insecurity. Look at **verse 4** again. Their primary fear is that they would be "dispersed over the face of the earth". What is interesting is that this is *exactly* what God has made them for: to fill the earth. But their fear is that doing things God's way will lead to their insignificance. They want to achieve unity—a good thing! One of God's great goals. But they want to do it their way, because God's way just doesn't seem to make sense. If they continue growing and expanding and filling the earth, how will they be unified? How will they accomplish anything meaningful? Where is the power and might in dispersion? Who remembers the rural farmer who lives a quiet life? Who remembers the stay at home mom who quietly raises a new generation of Christ-followers? Who remembers the teacher in the small school or the owner of the small business? What we imagine is, like the people of Babel, the only way we can be remembered is if we build towers and monuments and achieve impressive feats. We have forgotten that Godly ambition begins with the plot of ground God has given us, and glories in insignificance before man provided that we please God.

All Godless ambition is driven by insecurity. We would like very much not to be forgotten and insignificant, we do not want our lives to be futile. BUT far too often we seek escape from futility in pursuit of worldly goals. Calvin calls this the "world's perpetual folly: having neglected heaven, to seek immortality on earth, where everything is perishable and passing away."⁴ But the pathway out of futility is not to ignore or out work that feeling of insignificance, but to embrace it. As the author of Ecclesiastes encourages us, we must *embrace* the reality that we will be forgotten and all our accomplishments will turn to dust. That is the way of freedom. Only when we embrace the futility of earthly ways can we long for the significance of God's way.

³ Again from Ian Duiguid

⁴ From RCS, *Genesis 1-11*

We identify godless ambition by examining *motive* (glory) and *method* (dependence). The motive of the Babylonians is to name themselves. Our motives can also be twisted anytime we leave God, his kingdom, and his glory, out of the equation. So we have a plan for how our life should go, or even our day should go. But our motivation for the choices we make is so often a lesser motive: comfort, ease, power, control, success. Until our motivation ends with the increase of God’s glory and not our own, our ambition will always be futile.

But even if we have good motives, we can have bad methods. This is often where we fail in our technological society. We desire to do great things for God, but we are not humble enough to depend on God to do them through us. So we expedite the process: we use bricks to get to heaven, rather than suffering. We outsource devotion and prayer to devices that give us answers. We trade relationships for entertainment. We attempt to multiply and fill the earth not through the slow and patient steadfastness of love, but the frenzied hurry of the next method or fad. Francis Shaeffer nailed it when he said we must do “God’s work, in God’s way.”

And the method of God is dependence, not independence. When we move from dependence on God and others to independence of God and others, we dehumanize ourselves and others. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber calls this shift going from an “I-Thou” relationship to an “I-It” relationship. We are built for “I-Thou” relationships. We are made to work and dream and accomplish both in the sight of God and in the sight of others. But the moment we see the world not primarily as something we receive as a gift from God but something we use to get what we want, we trade “I-Thou” for “I-It”. Other people, and even God himself, become means to an end. The personal God becomes an it—and “its” are easily dismissed and forgotten when we feel we don’t need them anymore.

In our culture, we use words like “find yourself” or “make something of yourself”.⁵ But no one *can* know himself apart from God and others. No one can name himself. No one can reach Heaven from earth. No one can build a legacy that lasts for eternity. What Babel is teaching us is that such an effort is entirely fruitless and futile. And yet, that futility is also a mercy.

Part 2: The Mercy of Ordained Frustration

What does God do with our godless ambition? Well first, he laughs at it. Look at **verse 5**, “The Lord came down”. They are trying to build a tower to reach God, but just in order to see it, God has to condescend. What they think is massively impressive, God calls puny (Is the tower in the room with us now?). Kids, it’s like you building a tower out of a couple of blocks and boasting that it is the size of a skyscraper. What would your parents say to that? They would laugh!

Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,

⁵ Received from Atkinson, *Genesis*

against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying,
3 “Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.”
4 He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.

And this is the first mercy of God, the mercy to not take ourselves too seriously. But more importantly, God actively works against the Babylonians in **verse 6**. Commentator Derek Kidner makes the important note that this is not the tone of a rival who is threatened, but the tone of a father who is concerned.⁶ God knows that if they continue down this path, they will only increase in their deception of their independence from him. When we are children our parents praise us for tying our own shoes, even if they held our fingers while we did it, or pouring our own milk, even if they steadied our hand while we did. But eventually, in order to teach us how much we really depend on them, in order to bring us back to reality, they must cease to help us at all – or even, if needed, frustrate our attempts.

This is God’s strategy. Using the same language in **verse 7** as in **verse 3**, “come, let us”. They had their futile work, now God has his real work. And how God frustrates them is by giving them over to the very insecurity they were seeking to avoid. Desiring not to be scattered, now they are scattered and confused. And now we see the play on words and the confusion they received in **verse 8** and **9**. They leave a half-built tower, a monument to their futility. And even their name is confused: in Babylonian Babel means “gate of the gods” but in Hebrew it just sounds like the word for “confusion”, “or as we might refer to it in English, ‘Blah, blah, blah’”. Their attempts turn to baby talk, their plans to gibberish.⁷

They reached for heaven, but only achieved earth. They received the very thing they feared: so it is with all godless ambition. In desiring to become more than human, we become the thing we fear: less than human. In wanting glory, we only get vanity.

And God’s mercy is that, even if it seems like the wicked get their way now, all of it will eventually lead to dust. Not only that, but God will often confuse *our* plans when they are done with the wrong motive or the wrong method. Which leads us to the final part of the story.

Part 3: The Triumph of Downward Mobility

We end Genesis 11 the same way we ended Genesis 10: with a genealogy. Noah and his family exit the ark speaking the same language and in unity. In Genesis 10, each genealogy ends by recognizing that these three distinct lines of people had different languages and lands. That is, they are divided. Then you have Babel, the story of how they got those languages and division. Then afterwards in chapter 11:10-31, we get the genealogy of Shem, which leads us to Abram. In Genesis 12, Abram is called by God to be the father of all nations: that is, the unifier of the nations.

⁶ Kidner, *Genesis*

⁷ Duguid, *ESV Expository Commentary*, 128

So the goal is not division, but unity. This is, remember, what the people of Babel desired, but for the wrong reason and in the wrong way. But mankind is not made to be frustrated and confused. We are meant to be called by one name. We are meant to share in one family line: but not the name Western or Eastern or American or Asian or African or European. Not a national name or a cultural name or an ethnic name. Not PhD or MD. We are meant to share and bear the name of God, the name of Christ.

So Babel is the negative example. The question is: what is the positive one? How do we go about *naming* the world for Christ? How are the nations unified? How do we all get to God?

The answer comes in God's action in our text. Look again at **verse 7**. The Babylonians wanted to go up—but God's direction is to come down. God's way is the way of downward mobility. He calls us to the same direction he came in Christ: the direction of humility, the direction of deference, the direction of love and service and sacrifice. God never expected us to build up to him: he came *down* from Heaven, from the mountain to the plain, from the city of God to the valley of idolatry.

Jesus is the king who unbuilt the palace of his presence, brick by brick, so he might rebuild here on earth. This is why we pray "let your kingdom come". Jesus came down so that he might be lifted up on another man-made instrument, the Roman cross. And the reason for the cross was, in his words, so that "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:38)., What was attempted at Babel in man's way is fulfilled at Calvary in God's way.

Today is Ascension Sunday: where the risen Christ went up—but so that he came back down to get us. And next Sunday is Pentecost Sunday, where God sent his very Spirit *down*, and what happened? Instead of the confusion of the nations, the apostles spoke and all nations, all tongues, understood them. The way that the earth is unified, the way we receive the name of God, the name of Christ, is never by our own means or our own way. It's never by our godless ambition or our building or our best laid plans. The only way for God's kingdom to come is for him to send it and for us to receive. The only way to learn the language of God, the language of grace and mercy and the language of Heaven, is to learn it as a child does: slowly, by immersion in the love of God and dependent on the speech of God.

The only way to be called by the name of God and to come into the family of God is to lay aside your desire to make a name for yourself. And here, at God's table, we have our opportunity. Laying aside foolish and godless ambition, we embrace the beautiful folly of the gospel: God come down, made like us, dying in our place, offered to us, Christ himself, the only gate back to God.