

Move Along, Folks! Nothing to See Here!

Genesis 11:1-9

Sunday, June 28, 2020

It's essential that families take part in Scripture together. These are words of life. These are words that give us wisdom and perspective and strength. These are words that make us disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But too often we keep Scripture at a family safe level. We keep thoughts about Scripture to the place where we first learned these Scriptures as children. Here's a time when this became apparent to me.

I was still in college when the animated movie *The Prince of Egypt* was released to theatres. When Hollywood makes Bible movies, they often take a lot of liberties. Important details are left out, and odd details are added in. But this movie, for the most part, was really good! It was putting stunning visuals to the story I had always known. It was enriching the Scripture I was very familiar with.

Like most church kids, I grew up with Moses delivering the Israelites from Egypt as THE central story of the Old Testament. The burning bush, the plagues, the Passover, the parting of the Red Sea: all were massive smaller stories within a gigantic larger story that we consider the Exodus from Egypt. All were illustrated well within this movie.

Even though *Prince of Egypt* was animated, it treated the story I had known since childhood with significant weight. This was especially true when the plagues against Pharaoh and Egypt were portrayed. These are horrific scenes. As I watched the movie, I began to realize that I was still processing the story I learned as a child from a child's perspective. There were heavier things at work in this story than I realized.

Then the death of the firstborn is portrayed – it was chilling. I had to take a pause: Is this a movie appropriate for children? Is the biblical telling of this appropriate to tell to children?

Of course, I am richer for having learned about Moses and the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt as a child. However, what we read in Scripture are no mere "stories for children". There is a severity to these stories that we miss when we keep Scripture at a child's perspective.

Consider other biblical stories, like Noah's ark. We see the marvellous imagery of the animals on the ark. It's adorable! Images grace our nurseries at church and at home. We can find Noah's Ark toys in our toy boxes. Yet an adult reading lets us know this story is just as much about God's judgement as it is about God's deliverance. Very few people and animals are delivered. Everything else is consumed by water and destroyed. What we use as cute novelty knickknacks for toddlers, Scripture uses as a warning that God is holy and not to be messed with. Many of us learn these stories in childhood, but we do not advance into an adult understanding of these stories as we grow up.

Our Scripture passage this morning is also one that deserves more of a grown up reading. I head the story of the Tower of Babel over and over and over again growing up. Here's how a Children's Bible in our house tells the tale from Genesis 11:

The Tall Tower

After the flood, everyone spoke the same language. One word meant "hello". One word meant "Mom," and one word meant "Dad".

The people said, "If we work together, we can do anything. Let's build a tower that goes all the way up to heaven. Then everyone will see how great we are!"

The people worked on their tower. They built it taller and taller. They began to brag. God did not like the way they were acting. It was if they no longer needed him.

So God mixed up their language. When they tried to talk to each other, it sounded like "babble". Everyone was confused!

Then God scattered the people over the whole earth. They had to stop building their tower. From then on, the tower was called "Babel".

This is an entirely appropriate reading of the story for younger children. It's to the point. It's engaging. It communicates most of the high parts of the story.

But when it comes to stories like the Tower of Babel, this children's version of the story is often where we stop. Some of us just take the stories at face value and don't consider the deeper things at play. Others of us dismiss stories like this as primitive stories written by primitive people. Again, great for kids, but what does this really have to say to me?

A return to stories like this reveals that there is much more here than we teach to children. We will find things that were never taught to us. We will find things that may irk or bother us. Let's read through Genesis 11:1-9 again and pay close attention to what is going on here. **[Read Genesis 11:1-9]**

There is much more going on here than a memorable story for children.

Here are a few things from this passage that I will not be covering today, but would be worth your own study or reading or consideration.

- Locations are extremely important in Genesis. Is it a big deal that people are moving eastward? Why is their location at the plain of Shinar a big deal? Is the fact that this is Babalonia a big deal?
- Ever notice that the places "Babel" and "Babylon" are very similar? Babylon is a major player (and major enemy) all throughout the Old Testament. I wonder if a nod to Babylon is significant here at all. . . . hmmm. It makes you ponder!
- The phrasing is very particular in the story.
 - The people say "COME LET US make bricks and bake them thoroughly"
 - The people say "COME LET US build ourselves a city"

- The Lord says “COME LET US go down and confuse their language”
- Why the very specific phrasing?
- It seems like everyone speaking one language here is a bad thing, and that the punishment is diversity. But Scripture also tells us that diversity in the Church and world is an incredible thing! How do we reconcile an apparent punishment of multiple languages with a future blessing? Worth looking into!
- Hey, and what is with the Lord saying “us” in referring to the Lord, or coming down to see what’s going on? I thought God was everywhere!

All of these things are worth further consideration. I am not saying you have to look up and research and know all of these things. You don’t need to be an inside-out expert on this story to learn from it. I do want you to see that something bigger is going on here. The writers of Genesis are very intentional and smart. Biblical stories familiar to us as children deserve a deeper look when we are teenagers and adults. The Tower of Babel is no exception.

As I come to the story of the Tower of Babel as an adult, a few things bother me immediately.

- Although the people are making a name for themselves, it does not seem like they are necessarily defying God in all of this. The understanding taught to me was always that God was being neglected and people were saying, “We don’t need God.” But that does not seem entirely true. They want to make a name for themselves, BUT they also don’t want to be split apart. Is the desire to stay connected so bad?
- People are working together here. They are one in purpose and focus. Do you know how rare that is? We are taught the word “Cooperation” over and over again on Sesame Street simply because humans are that bad at it. So why is God messing with a situation where people are actually working together?
- In the story does the Lord seem to be kind of . . . petty? This is what bothers me most in my reading of the Tower of Babel as an adult. The Lord seems threatened. The Lord seems small-minded. It’s not a great look. God says “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.” God sounds . . . nervous? God’s solution sounds meddlesome: “Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

When I come to passages like this I have choices. I can be briefly uncomfortable and then plug my ears and skip to something else. This helps me keep intact a shallow and fragile faith.

OR I can just assume that the Bible is not that great, and continue the erosion of my faith.

OR I can really lean into the story – I can look for answers. I can ask the questions that I am afraid to ask.

When I lean into the difficult passages of Scripture, in my experience, the outcome is extremely rewarding.

Let's start where we ought to start – at God! Why is it that God seems so threatened by these people?

In looking at commentaries on this passage, I learned that God is indeed NOT threatened here. This is not the response of a fragile God. God is a parent looking out for the best for people.

Have you ever had big plans, only to have those plans ended because of the choices of someone else? It's disappointing, isn't it? Multiple times I have lined up "ideal" job opportunities. Yet due to some grand conspiracy by between God and hiring committees those jobs never worked out! I was often very disappointed.

However, I have NEVER looked back at any of those jobs in the years following and mourned those lost opportunities. I have seen how those opportunities could have gone very, very badly. Things that I thought were best for me, God refused. And God was right!

This is God's role here in this passage – a caring parent that is redirecting the people away from plans that are not in their best interest.

What about cooperation? It seems like a real tender moment, them all working together. Why would God interrupt people working together?

Just because people are unanimous on something does not make it right. When we look back on things that the vast majority of society agreed on, we are often horrified. Agreement and solidarity and cooperation are not good things when they have the incorrect focus.

This even applies to people who follow Christ together. I can't be the only one who thinks this way, but some of the most terrifying groups I encounter are Christians in total agreement with one another. We can be in total agreement. We can feel completely justified in our plans and actions – God is on our side, after all!! And yet we can be completely wrong and engaging in destructive things.

It may look like unity. But unity is only good when it has a proper focus. When we all agree on something is Jesus in agreement? That is the most important question to ask.

When you look at the people of Genesis to date, what do you see? Lots of dysfunction. So the idea of these dysfunctional people working on the same plan – maybe not the best!

Finally, let's look at what motivates people to build the tower.

I have ALWAYS understood the main reason the people built the tower of Babel was that so they could make a name for themselves. That is only a FRACTION of the story. There may be arrogance to their plan, but it is arrogance deeply embedded with fear.

When Noah and his family emerge from the ark, they are told: Be Fruitful and multiply and cover the whole earth. They have a mission. They are being sent out.

Being sent out is scary. Staying with what is familiar feels cozy. It feels safe.

But safety is not what God was asking of his people!

Genesis chapters 1-12 is one section of the book. A major transition happens after this Tower of Babel story. This is the last part of Genesis before we go from a global focus to focus on one nation, and from all people to most specifically on one family. That family is constantly sent and constantly on the move. It begins with Abraham and goes from one generation to the next.

This isn't true only of Genesis – this seems to happen throughout the entire Bible. God is constantly sending people out. God is sending people away from safety and into risk.

When the early church begins in Jerusalem it is amazing! People share with one another and live in remarkable unity. Then persecution comes to the church and the church is scattered from Jerusalem. The church grows throughout the world remarkably as a result of this.

There is a scared safety to “Let’s build this tower so we cannot be separated.”

But there is the constant presence of God in the constant sending out by God.

We have this caring God that is sending out. All of us are sent out. All of us are sent away from the foundations that we have built, from the walls of safety we have constructed around us. All of us are sent beyond the walls that confine and protect us. For some people that means a change in location. For some that means a change in vocation. For some that means the halting of a habit or a priority. And for some that means addressing a problem that has always bothered us but we have never done anything about.

Where is God sending you to? Where have you built a foundation and put up walls in an attempt to declare, “I ain’t moving”?

We can trust God as a parent that actually cares for our good.

We must always examine whether our actions and motives are on the side of Jesus.

And we must always be willing to move away from places of safety to where God is leading us.