

“Stubborn Love”

Genesis 11:1-9

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Several years ago, I saw a brief human-interest piece on the CBS morning news. It was about a 17 year-old boy from a small town in Arkansas. What captured my attention was the mother of that boy. Almost the entire piece focused on the boy’s resistance to his single mom. He complained about his mother’s age – she was 58 and he was embarrassed because of how much older she was than other parents. He complained about his mother’s rules – she had an 11:30 curfew for him. He complained about his mother’s interest in him as prying. Even on camera he would give those rolling- eyes-looks of disdain when he spoke of his mother. But the mom was shown as one worried about her athletic son who wasn’t as good at academics. It showed a mother careful to not give her son so much slack in the rope of free time that he hung himself. And it showed a mother sitting in the stands at his basketball games cheering him on, hoping the best, and genuinely anxious when she suspected he might be hurt.

I thought to myself, that young man has been giving her nothing but grief about her age, her appearance, her actions, and even her concerns AND YET she loves him, holds him accountable and keeps cheering him on. WHY? Why doesn’t she just quit, give up – let him go?

While I studied the text for today’s sermon, I found myself asking the same question of God. Why don’t you just quit, give up – let humanity go? Let me show you why I asked that?

Genesis 11:1-9 “Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. ³ They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” ⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. ⁶ The LORD said, “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. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”
⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

In the colorful language of Yogi Bera “This is déjà vu all over again!” Resistance to God seems to mark nearly every incident in these early chapters of Genesis.

Look at it:

Genesis:

1-2 Beginning (Creation)

3 Sin (Eve and Adam)

3 Judgment – Out of Eden

But God doesn't Quit – he starts again:

4 New Beginning (Children)

4 Sin (individual – Cain)

5-6 Sin (Corporate – whole world)

7-8 Judgment – Flood

But God still save humanity – he starts again:

9 New Beginning (Covenant w/ Noah)

9 Sin (individual – Noah and Ham) and that sin affects the entire human race as we see in our text for today:

11 Sin (corporate – whole world)

11 Judgment – Scattering

Over those first, thousands of years of human existence we see resistance to God over and over again. Why doesn't God just quit, be done, put an end to it? Some have called it “stubborn love”. I think that is very appropriate. Or said another way – It is “the perseverance of God.”

To Adam and Eve, the first humans, God have given this command, this privilege, this opportunity: Genesis 1:28 “God blessed them (male and female) and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.’” After the flood, God restated this command, this privilege for humanity: Genesis 9:1 Noah and

sons were commanded to “increase in number and fill the earth.” In Genesis 9:7 God reiterated his command to “be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it.”

God’s intention had been that people spread out around the earth and act as stewards of God’s creation – fill the earth and subdue it. But instead of obeying the people did something else: “Now the whole world had one language and common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and **SETTLED** there.” *Genesis 11:1-2* Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” *Genesis 11:4* Instead of obeying God and filling the earth, they stopped in Shinar (present day Iraq) and built a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens.

Hundreds of years later when Moses wrote this, his readers, the Israelite people, would have easily pictured what this city/tower would have looked like. For hundreds, if not thousands, of years people had been building cities with high towers called ziggurats. These four-sided towers, large at the base and then getting smaller toward the top were designed for both defensive and religious reasons. Toward the top of the tower they would often build a shrine where the gods could come to visit. So people would climb to the top and hopefully the gods would descend to meet them.

Please note why the people in Genesis 11 say they are building their city and tower: “so that we may make a name for ourselves and **not be scattered** over the face of the whole earth.” There were two things they wanted and they set out to get those two things by themselves: significance and security. They said “we want to make a name for ourselves”. And they said they did not want to be scattered over the face of the whole earth – they wanted to remain together to better protect their plans and name.

First of all what is this “name” they wanted to make for themselves? God had plans for mankind to multiply and subdue the earth. He said, “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” *Genesis 1:28* In other words, fulfill

*God's plan for the earth. Live in unity and peace. Work and be stewards of all the earth and all its creatures. Spread over all the earth. Create, discover, pursue the sciences, create literature, mimic the creative power of God in art and music. And as you do you will be what you were created for - bearing the image of God and reflecting the glory of God. God had called them to be his vice-regents in the world. He had offered them lordship over creation. Talk about a "name" - they were to be the sons of God! But that was where these people rebelled. They wanted to make a name **for themselves**. Refusing God's method for making their names great they set out to make their own names great.*

Alan Richardson (In Ross 245) speaks of "the hatred of anonymity." Concerned for significance, demanding to be recognized, craving to be honored as someone important, they determined to build a city and a tower that everyone would have to notice. God had given them a path to greatness, greatness in his estimation but instead they chose a path of their own making to make themselves great in their own eyes.

It is amazing the lengths to which we will go, regardless of our age, to convince ourselves we are something. We see it in the way we dress, the things we buy or wish we could, the promotions we covet, the recognition we seek for the most insignificant things. Like Hollywood's Academy awards we have invented a thousand ways to pat ourselves on the back desperately seeking significance. When you stop finding your significance simply in being an obedient child of God you will do most anything to find significance elsewhere.

John Calvin (p327) wrote, "This is the perpetual infatuation of the world; to neglect heaven, and to seek immortality on earth, where everything is fading and transient." And for most it is too late before they realize the bitter truth. As one man wrote it, "Death alone acknowledges how insignificant are the bodies of men." (Juvenal in Calvin 327)

Where does this country of ours seek its significance? Where does the church seek its significance? Where do you seek it? What makes us great? Do our cities, our towers, our wealth, our name recognition among others make us great? Do our jobs, our mental or physical

proWess make us great? Or is it in simply being an obedient child and people of the most high God?

These people of Shinar sought significance but NOT where it could be found – and they wound up separated from God. It is not as if these people woke up one day and decided to shake their fists in God’s face and say they wanted nothing to do with him anymore. These clearly were religious people. Separation from God often takes place slowly, by degrees. That is the way it is when people begin to separate from God. Like the prodigal son, they don’t create a scandal or denounce their father – they just drift away using their father’s assets but mismanaging them –using them for purposes altogether different from what the father intended. Helmut Thielicke wrote “There is never a moment of open and rude rebellion. But every time the prodigal son took a dollar from his (pocket) he slipped another imperceptible millimeter away from the will of the father.

(Thielicke How the World Began 275)

Seeking significance in the wrong places will result in a handful of sand when life is over. They wanted significance but they wanted it on their terms – willing to disobey God because they were more concerned with what others thought of them than what God thought.

*But they not only wanted significance – a false significance – but they wanted security. And again they sought it in themselves. They said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves **AND not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.**” They believed erroneously that if they stayed together they would be more secure. Their security would be in their numbers, in their superiority, in themselves. I wonder if they already suspected that if they separated they would attack each other. I wonder if they knew that, given their self-centeredness, they couldn’t trust each other if they drifted apart.*

These people had lost a common center. When they turned away from God as the center of their lives together they had only one alternative – themselves. When they banished God from the throne of their individual and collective lives they no longer had anything to truly bind them together. They could try a project – let’s build a city

*with a tower – to show how much we belong to each other. They could envision a common enemy to show how much they need each other. They could even generate a lot of propaganda about being one people **but when the center of their existence moved from God to themselves they lost what could actually bind them together.***

This loss of center drives people apart because they can no longer trust each other. If a man or woman has no guiding principle except his or her own imagination or desires then we cannot know how they will act in any given situation. We can only assume they will act in self-interest. On the contrary if I know that a man or a woman is bound to God and his word then I can predict how they will act in given situations. I know he or she will feel compelled to be generous, to be fair, to keep his or her word. I can predict what they will do because I know they are guided by God's principles.

When Joseph's brothers got to Egypt and learned that the Prime Minister was none other than Joseph himself – the very same Joseph they had sold as a slave – they were very afraid. And rightly so because if Joseph was the kind of man they were, they were in trouble. If he made his decisions centered in himself then those brothers were dead. But when they heard Joseph say that he was in Egypt by God's appointment, that he, Joseph, lived with God as the center of his life – they were no longer afraid. Likewise, when each person in a family, a church, or a society is living as if the only center is the one in them, such a family, church or society is in trouble.

One man said it this way, "When I know that a person has lost the center of his life I must reckon with the fact that he will be aimlessly and arbitrarily carried away by his instinct and his egoism. For a time I may get along fine with him, that is, as long as common economic interests or political expediencies bind us together. But the moment this specific interest ceases to bind us together he loses interest in me. Then he doesn't give a hang for me, it is as if he never knew me. Or it may even be worse: he regards me as his mortal enemy because I am his competitor..." (Thielicke 283-4)

The sin of the people in Shinar was *not in their desire for significance or even in their desire for security but in **their self-sufficiency** – the center that governed life moved from God to*

themselves, individually. And their self-sufficiency was the seed of their own disintegration as a people.

Self-sufficiency is the bane of our own culture. Several years ago Susan Bauer did an analysis of the books that Oprah Winfrey selects for her book club. It seemed that every book she selected became a best seller. What did these books have in common? Apparently in every one of them (or nearly everyone of them) 19 in two years – the theme was suffering - illness, loss of love or a dead or dying child in each novel created emotionally charged reading. These sentimental novels all attempted to find meaning in suffering. But they all rejected the God of the Bible as any help in their pain. Time and time again in these novels the very idea of a sovereign God who cares and loves was ridiculed. As one character says it: “There was no God...Life didn’t have to make sense, I’d concluded – that was the big joke. Get it? You could have a brother who stuck metal clips in his hair to deflect enemy signals from Cuba, and a biological father who, in 33 years, had never shown his face, and a baby dead in a bassinet...and none of it meant a think. Life was a whoopee cushion, a chair yanked away just as you were having a seat.” “God and the tooth fairy and Jiminy Cricket.” (in CT Dec 7 1998–74) But Oprah’s book selections don’t end with just this despair. Instead in each case the sufferer, knowing no God out there who will hear or help, reaches down inside herself and creates her own happiness, her own meaning, and her own destiny – self-sufficiency.

Self-sufficiency has become the diseased soul of modern man and woman in America. One man calls it “liberation psychotherapy.” (Rice in Wells p126) Abraham Maslow called it “self actualization.” Self-satisfaction (personal happiness) becomes the highest goal and self-sufficiency becomes the greatest means of achieving it. And what it means is that a person’s commitments to a spouse, to children, to friends, to God, and especially to institutions like the church or job are all negotiable if they in any way hinder self-satisfaction. But the problem is that the streams of our inner selves are polluted. And such confidence in ourselves eventually shatters; such self-sufficiency is a false sufficiency – for we all know that we are truly helpless in the face of life and death. If we are all we have, we are hopeless.

This is where the stubborn love of God, the perseverance of God, comes into play. God came down. What the people thought was so impressive that it would give them significance and security and reach to the heavens, God couldn't even see without coming down. God came down and said, "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. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." God is not some puny monarch that was afraid of them. He is not suggesting they might take over the throne from Him. He is suggesting that unless he mercifully scatters them, they will persist in their inflated sense of their own importance and abilities. They will continue to believe they can save themselves.

So God scatters them. He didn't obliterate them with a flood or consume them with fire. He scattered them to demonstrate clearly how helpless they truly are. He shattered their self-sufficient plans to leave them no place to go but to him.

How many times did God do that with the people of Israel? In their self-sufficiency they would turn away from God only to have their own plans end in ruin and then (and only then) see that in God alone was all they wanted. How many times has God brought down entire pretentious civilizations? Hitler's Germany and Lenin's Soviet Union are only the two most recent examples. What will happen to our own God-resistant, self-sufficient country?

But in the Genesis story God proves he is not done with humanity. Because after God scatters them we come to chapter 12 where God begins a new thing – God will come to one man (Abraham) and then man by man, woman by woman, God will bring people back to himself.

Why doesn't God just let them go? Why doesn't God just quit? Because he wills to create a people who will receive his blessing and be a blessing to the world around them – to be and do what he created humanity to be and do. God cares enough to shatter our myths about self-sufficiency, to cut down our pretentious efforts at making it on our own. He drives us into the desert to see that only he can truly satisfy. I only wonder if as a country, a church, and as

individuals we will respond. Will we lay down our self-sufficient attempts at significance and security and come to him?

Sources:

Losing our Virtue by David Wells

When the World Began by Helmut Thielicke

Creation and Blessing by Ross

Genesis by Wenham

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