

New Grace for the City - Thanksgiving 2021

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Nov. 21, 2021

Read Genesis 11:1-9; 12:1-3 NIV

Genesis 1 tells us we were made in such a way that human existence and human security only work if the Creator is at the center. No other center is big enough or strong enough to hold us all together. This explains the strange words the Tower of Babel builders say at the end of their speech, **"Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth"** (v. 4). **"Otherwise we will be scattered."** They are in some way feeling the consequences of the shift in center. Even in their one common language and one common effort to build the tower and make a name, they feel insecure; they sense it is not really working.

Helmut Thielicke in his 1949 book *How the World Began* (1961 edition, pg. 280-281, 284) writes about the tactics used to hold people together when they've lost the Creator as their center. I'll summarize parts of what he writes.

Having banished God from their midst they no longer have anything that binds them to each other. Always the trend is the same: wherever God has been deposed, some substitute point has to be created to bind people together in some fashion or other. You start a war, perhaps, to create a new solidarity against a common threat. Or you

build a tower. Or you whip together by terror those who will not stay together voluntarily. Or you utilize the powers of suggestion, "propaganda," and "ideology," in order to generate the feeling of community by means of psychological tricks and thus make people want precisely what you want them to want.

These are substitute ties, conclusive attempts to replace the lost center with a synthetic center. But this attempt is doomed to failure. The centrifugal forces go on pulling and rending and a hidden time-fuse is ticking in the piers of all the bridges.

In a society which has lost its center and consists of not much more than interest groups, employers' associations and labor unions, tenants' and home-owners' association – we call it a "pluralistic society," without realizing the fateful Babylonian curse that lies behind this pluralism! – in such a society fear and distrust prevail, precisely the centrifugal forces which exploded with a vengeance at the tower of Babel.

Do we understand now that this story is something like a compendium of what we experience every day in ourselves and all around us? For a moment [through this Babel story,] God opens the armored strongbox and lets us see the secret survey map of the course of the world.

At all events it no longer requires a thunderbolt from heaven to drive men apart. Since they have become

godless the ferments of decay and disintegration are at work everywhere even without a blast from heaven.

Though written in 1949, this is true of every era. Without God at the center, the centrifugal forces of fear and distrust go on pulling people apart. Again, we see this judgment is always God simply giving us the full implications of the path we have chosen for ourselves.

The story of the Tower of Babel tells us that the centrifugal forces set in motion by the shift in center pull us apart. It turns out that if we live without God as the center, we will have no center at all. And so at Babel, God lets the centrifugal forces have their way. God confuses the one language at Babel. Babel, the so-called “gate to the gods,” becomes Babel, “confusion.” God does it to keep us from ruining our lives. We cannot live on the path of life lived in independence from God.

The end.

Is that it? It cannot end there, *can it, Lord?* Has God’s grace ended at Babel? The grace we’ve seen following every human turn away from God in Genesis 1-11, is it exhausted? Not at all. God’s new grace is evident in the beginning of the second half of the Bible: Genesis 12. But how and where does God begin to clean up the mess humanity has made?

Have you ever been responsible for cleaning up a mess that's so big you don't know where to begin? You have to just pick a place and start. Otherwise, it's just too overwhelming.

One day when my twin brother Reed and I were young, one of us threw up and my Dad started cleaning it up. Probably because Reed was grossed out at the thought of cleaning up the mess, he asked our Dad if he liked cleaning up throw up. My Dad had started cleaning without complaining. In response my Dad said emphatically, *"No, but as a parent, you don't clean up your kids throw up because you want to, you clean it up, because you want it cleaned up!"* You want it done.

Most people know that when they become a parent they're going to have to clean up a lot of messes. I think God our Father knew this too. One day God created humanity to live in a harmonious relationship with Him through faith. Then sin happened. And because of God's love and grace, God has been cleaning up our messes ever since. He wants the disease of sin and death cleaned up and gone.

Now as we have made our way through the first half of the Bible, Genesis 1-11, you may have detected a pattern to the stories. The stories repeat the same cycle: grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. God comes in grace. Humanity rebels in some way. They receive the judgment about which humanity was warned. And then,

unexpectedly, God offers new grace to the rebelling and underserving humanity. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace.

In the story of Adam and Eve, God acts in grace when he calls humans into being and give them everything they need to be “fully human and fully alive.” But they begin to believe the serpent’s twisting of God’s word, and they become suspicious that God is withholding something they need. So they rebel, deciding to take life into their own hands, living independently of God. Then comes judgment, just as God said it would. Life begins to unravel, paradise is lost, and the Garden becomes a cemetery. And then God offers new grace. Adam and Eve remain alive in spite of the threat of death. And God makes a promise that one day a seed of the woman will come and crush the head of the serpent. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace.

In the story of Cain and Abel, God, in an act of grace, gives Cain a brother. Cain rebels and murders Abel, and then he runs off to make a city where he thinks he will not have to deal with God. And then there is new grace: God graciously establishes a protective relationship between God and Cain, and God enables the rebel to build a city to provide for his family. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace.

In the flood story, even though God graciously gives humanity all that is needed as the avalanche of sin

continues, humanity again rebels at even deeper levels. Angels rebel too. Society grows more and more self-indulgent. God responds by cleansing creation with a huge flood, caused by the removal of a protective barrier. Then there is new grace. God spares the life of Noah and his family, and through Noah he begins to re-people the earth. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. **“Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more”** (Rom 5:20)!

Then there is the Tower of Babel. Due to the grace of God, humans are given the capacity to create. Humanity rebels. God responds in judgment, scattering the builders and frustrating their attempt to build a human-centered civilization. And then the story ends. Grace, rebellion, judgment. Period. No new grace. The nations are scattered over the face of the globe, alienated from each other, arguing over boundary lines, wrestling for access to natural resources, always preparing for war. Grace, rebellion, judgment. The end. No new grace.

Is that it? It cannot end there. Is God’s gracious provision exhausted? No. Thank God for the “promised seed” whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

In Genesis 12, the camera turns from its panorama of the nations and narrows its focus to one couple in one of the nations. It is stunning. All the nations are scattered over the globe, still rebelling, still under judgment, still suffering the inherent consequences of moving God out of the center of life. Their “no center” way of living. What is God

to do? **God chose to wade in and clean up the mess sin had created.**

The solution was a Savior, the promised seed of Eve - a Savior whose redeeming work would create a way for God to cure the disease of sin without destroying His people. But where could He begin the process of redemption in a world where sin had affected everything? He really only had one choice. You pick a place and start.

The camera slowly zooms in on an elderly couple living in Ur of the Chaldeans, in what is now Iraq. The two people are named Abram and Sarai, later to be renamed Abraham and Sarah.

God said to Abram, **“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you”** (Gen. 12:1). And God made Abram a promise.

I will make you into a nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:2-3).

What is going on here? Simply and profoundly this: God is providing new grace for the city. God’s call on Abram and Sarai of Iraq is God’s new grace for all the cities of all the nations scattered over the face of the earth. He picked a place to start cleaning up the mess. To Abram, **“I will make your name great”** (v. 2). All that the Babelites wanted

to achieve by making a name for themselves on their own, God will do. God will rebuild the fallen world. God will build the city we seek.

The first half of the Bible ends with judgment. The second half of the Bible begins with new grace. The cycle is not broken. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. **“In you all the families of the earth will be blessed”** (v. 3).

It takes some time for the new grace to unfold - around two thousand years! - but finally the camera zooms in on another couple of the line of Abraham and Sarah, this time in Bethlehem of Judea. The camera shows us Joseph and Mary and finally just Mary, who is a virgin, unable to conceive on her own. This is the same note on which Genesis 11 ends. **“Sarai was barren; she had no child”** (v. 30). God’s work of new grace for the city begins through a barren line, a humanly helpless line. Abraham and Sarah try to get pregnant for twenty-five years without success. And then, well past Sarai’s age childbearing, God gives grace to conceive. So are we surprised that when the long promise finally comes to its fulfillment, God graces another woman with a child? A miracle of conception and birth.

That is the way it is with grace. God comes to do his new work when we finally realize that we are not able to do it. **“Let us make for ourselves a name”** (11:4). No! **“I will make your name great”** (12:2).

The descent of Abraham and Sarah conceives. A virgin conceives! And she gives birth to a Son, to the seed of the woman promised in the Garden, the one in whom all the peoples, all the nations of the world will be blessed.

But who is this seed? Who is this Son? Who is this Jesus? Consider the answer in the closing story of the first half of the Bible. It is written to focus our attention on “**the LORD came down**” (11:5). The Lord did come down, much further down than the Babelites realized, much further down than the author of Genesis realized. The Lord came all the way down. The divine response to human hubris is divine humanity. The Lord came all the way down. Jesus is the Lord-come-down!

In Jesus every civilization, every city, any city finds its center, its true center. In him we find our significance and security. In him we find our unity. In Jesus we find all we are longing for when we’re building our cities and towers. We need not construct towers to take us into heaven. Heaven has come to us in Jesus. Heaven came down, all the way down.

And because we can now live around the true center, the judgment of Babel can be lifted. Confusion can be removed. Fifty days after Jesus rose from the grave, Jesus poured out his Holy Spirit on the newly formed community that gathered in His Name, centered on him (Acts 2), and people from all over the world hear the good news spoken simultaneously in their own languages.

Pentecost is the reversal of the judgment of Babel. **“The LORD came down,”** all the way down, bringing new grace to the city.

One day there will be another “came down.” He who came down will come again. The end of the second half of the Bible tells us about it, **“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband”** (Rev 21:2). **“Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life.... There will no longer be any curse.... They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads”** (Rev 22:1-4).

It is for that city that we were created. It is that city that Jesus-the-center calls us to seek, as did Abraham, **“for he was looking for the city which has foundations [not bricks!], whose architect and builder is God”** (Heb 11:10).

The cycle did not break. Grace, rebellion, judgment, new grace. Jesus of Nazareth. **“The LORD came down.”** He is the new grace for the city. On this Thanksgiving and always, let us give thanks for the center of our lives: Jesus!

(Drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson’s book *The Story of All Stories* and Andy Stanley’s *The Grace of God*.)