

Tower Play

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a seven-part series

June 23, 2019

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Genesis 3:1–7 (CEB)

The snake was the most intelligent of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say that you shouldn’t eat from any tree in the garden?”

²The woman said to the snake, “We may eat the fruit of the garden’s trees ³but not the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. God said, ‘Don’t eat from it, and don’t touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴The snake said to the woman, “You won’t die! ⁵God knows that on the day you eat from it, you will see clearly and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶The woman saw that the tree was beautiful with delicious food and that the tree would provide wisdom, so she took some of its fruit and ate it, and also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷Then they both saw clearly and knew that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made garments for themselves.

Genesis 11:1–9 (NRSV)

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then 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; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” ⁵The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And the LORD said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

How will we use our ever-increasing technological power?

In the 1950s and ‘60s, Americans were consumed with the possibilities and fears of the atomic age and intercontinental ballistic missiles. We hid under our desks at school and watched movies about giant mutant ants. For, you see, it was all true (ok . . . not the giant ants). For the first time in human history, we had the power to destroy ourselves and the planet many times over. Movies such as *Fail-Safe* and *Colossus* reminded us what we had accomplished and of our new fragility. And here we sit in 2019, having yet to blow ourselves up or unleash an incurable virus or introduce a fatal defect into our DNA. Technology has brought us unimaginable power, testing our collective wisdom every single day.

The ancient story of a tower that reached to the stars is about this problem and God’s response. To see this, we have to put the Tower of Babel story into context.

Creation

Our story begins simply enough. God creates everything there is—yes, everything. If it exists, God created it. And God pronounces it all good. All of it. Every corner, every last bit and particle—good.

Of all the creatures that God creates, one is made in God’s image: the humans. And God gives the humans the responsibility for God’s good creation (Gen 1:26). That’s what we mean by “stewardship” or “dominion.”

We learn further that this good God creates a beautiful place for the humans, where they can live and work and love. In beautifully evocative imagery, we're told that God comes to walk with them in the evenings. There is even a tree in the garden from which the humans will eat so they will live in eternity with God. The humans are free to enjoy God, one another, and this garden—with one exception. There is one tree from which they are not to eat. If they do, God tells them, they will die, not live.

That's the big picture. God creates the cosmos and everything in it, and it is all good. There is nothing but hope and anticipation of the glories to come. But soon, a dark shadow falls.

Rebellion

One thing. There is just one thing they should not do, one fruit they must leave uneaten. But they won't. A serpent approaches Eve and tells her that by eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she can know what God knows, i.e., she can be like God herself. Who among us could resist such a tantalizing promise? So Eve eats the fruit and then Adam does the same . . . and it all begins to plunge into ruin.

This act of rebellion, doing the one thing God asked them not to do, tears everything apart. Instead of walking with God in the evening, they hide from God, for shame has been planted in the garden. They point the finger at each other when God asks them what they have done. The relationships have been ripped apart; they are estranged from God and from each other.

And so God sends them out of the garden. They will not be able to eat from the tree of life and live forever; instead, they will now die. Death comes as a consequence of their sin, their act of separating themselves from God. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "For the wages of sin is death. . . ." (6:23).

The story of the fall, as it is often called, is a sad story of human pride, imagining that we could be like God, that we could know what God knows. Indeed, the next major story in Genesis is Cain's murder of his brother, Abel. It is a short walk from rebellion against God to envy and murder. And it goes downhill from there.

The story of Noah and the flood in Genesis 6-9 is the story of a rescue attempt. Basically, God "uncreates," by means of the flood, and starts over with a new first family, that of Noah. Of course, pretty much as soon as they step off the ark, things go downhill; sin and shame are still with them. Soon, the humans build a tower to the heavens, the Tower of Babel. But God knocks the tower down, scattering the people and their languages.

One often-overlooked aspect of the creation story is that the humans are to be part of God's creative activity. They are to have dominion over the earth. They to tame and master it. They are to be fruitful and multiply. They are an integral part of the creative work that spans the globe. The OT scholar, Terence Fretheim, helps to see that the story of the tower is the humans' attempt to thwart God's work, thereby endangering themselves and the future of humanity. I found Fretheim's insights so helpful on this little discussed story, that I'm including them at some length. You might open your Bible and follow along as Fretheim proceeds from verse to verse. This is an excellent example of reading even a short biblical text slowly and carefully.

The key is in the motivation, "otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." This central human failure inheres in the straightforward moral-order talk (the punishment fits the crime); it corresponds precisely to God's judgment (vv. 8-9). Most basically, humans fear what the future might bring, evincing deep anxiety and insecurity about what lies ahead. We do not discover fear of other human beings, but fear of not being able to keep their community intact in the face of a perceived peril of dispersion into a threatening world. Only because of this motivation do their objectives of building a city/tower and making a name for

themselves become problematic. The building projects constitute a bid to secure their own future as a unified community, isolated from the rest of the world.

Hence, their action constitutes a challenge to the divine command to fill the earth, . . . but *not* simply in a spatial sense. Their resistance to being scattered (this word occurs positively in 10:18; cf. 9:19; 10:5, 32) occasions a divine concern for the very created order of things, for only by spreading abroad can human beings fulfill their charge to be caretakers of the earth. According to 1:28 and 2:5 (cf. 2:15), the proper development of the creation depends on human activity. For the builders to concentrate their efforts narrowly on the future of the (only) human community places the future of the rest of creation in jeopardy. An isolationist view of their place in the world, centered on self-preservation, puts the rest of the creation at risk. The building project thus understeps rather than oversteps human limits, for it prevents scattering and taking up the creational command that put the creation at risk.

In v. 5 God “comes down” to conduct a judicial inquiry (see 18:21; their project was *not* so meager that God, ironically, had to descend to see it). God’s descent (see Exod 3:8) demonstrates God’s deep engagement on behalf of the creation. Heaven is that place *within* the created world where God’s presence remains uncontested. The relation between this descent and that of v. 7 represents the difference between inquiry and action. As in 18:21, the inquiry appears genuine, preliminary to a final decision (the NIV’s “were building” recognizes that the project was incomplete, v. 8).

Verse 6 constitutes a summary of the results of the inquiry; v. 7 calls on the council to assist in taking the necessary actions. Verse 7 indicates that in v. 6 God speaks to the divine council (see 1:26; 2:18; 3:22), with whom God consults about the matter. . . . v. 7 indicates that this punishment stems from the divine council.

God’s response focuses, not on their present project, but on other possibilities of united human endeavor (v. 6). The *unity* of peoples with isolationist concerns for self-preservation could promote any number of projects that would place the creation in jeopardy. Their sin concentrates their energies on a creation-threatening task; even the finest creative efforts can subvert God’s creational intentions. . . .

In response, God judges, but in the interests of the future of the creation, “the face of all the earth” (vv. 8–9). God’s judgment, though creating difficulties, has a fundamentally gracious purpose. The garbling of languages and consequent scattering prevents any comparable projects that could be carried out by a self-serving, self-preserving united front; humans might engage in feats that could be even more destructive of themselves and God’s creation (Job 42:2 uses similar language of God). God’s gracious action places limits on human possibilities for the sake of creation (see 3:22; 6:3).

God thus counters their efforts to remain an isolated community by acting in such a way that they have no choice but to obey the command. God does this by making their languages so diffuse that they can no longer communicate, having to leave off what they are doing, move apart from one another, and establish separate linguistic communities. The confusing that leads to their scattering (confusion is the only means cited by which God does this) thus becomes a means to another end: the filling of and caring for the earth in fulfillment of the creational command. God thereby promotes diversity at the expense of any form of unity that seeks to preserve itself in isolation from the rest of the creation.

The divine action of scattering corresponds exactly to what the people sought to prevent (v. 4). The verb *bālal* (“confuse”; vv. 7, 9, see footnotes) plays on the word *Babel* (in English it would approximate “babble”). The very name they sought to make for themselves becomes a name for confusion, making them famous for their failure.¹

What will we do?

The ancient people of Genesis 11 thought they could use their construction to defy God, and insulate themselves from their responsibility to spread across the earth and exercise godly stewardship over creation. Just as God had banished Adam and Eve from the garden, God frustrates the ambitions of the tower builders, even going so far

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, “The Book of Genesis,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 412–413.

as to divide their languages. The humans have little choice but to go on and play their role in God's purposes.

Technology has given humanity such profound good. Until the middle of the nineteenth century life expectancy was little more than it was in the ancient world; but clean water and antibiotics have driven life expectancies skyward. But the technological advances also bring the possibility of great harm, even ruin. In this, the question for us is the same as it was for the ancient tower-builders. Will we seek after God's way in the development and use of existing and new technologies? Will we heed God's warnings about pride and greed and lust and envy? Let us pray that we do, before God has to smash our towers.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Ruth.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

This class will not meet June 24

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2). Next up is a journey through Jesus' parables.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Video of each week's class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy

We will have some guest teachers in June:

June 23 – Rev. Allison Jean

Beginning June 30: A new series: *Amazing Stories*