

“Towers of Disappointment” //

Genesis 11:1–9 // *The Whole Story* #6

Since I wasn't here last week, I know some of you have been wanting to hear what I have to say about the Panther's loss in the Super Bowl... Since I made such a bold prediction on it and even wore a jersey... A few of you have said you assumed it indicated some lack of prophetic ability on my part as it relates to sports, but that is just because you are mean-spirited.

- The Lord revealed to me the reason the Panthers lost is that I didn't run out and give my Bible to a little kid after each good point I made in the sermon.
- It was a failure to go all-in. So, let that be a lesson to you.

Now that I have that out of the way... We are back in our series called “The Whole Story” in which we are **working our way through the whole Bible in a year**. Last week our **church-planting residents** took us through the life of Abraham, which is what I'd asked them to do, but the snow week had thrown us off so we had to skip a story, and it's really important, so this week we are going to go backwards just a little bit and pick up the story of the Tower of Babel.

So, GENESIS 11 if you have your Bible.

Let me start by asking: How many of you **know a different language**? Let's say, **speaking proficiency in 2** or more languages? 3 or more?

- When I got my Ph.D. I had to be reading proficient in 4 research languages—Greek, Hebrew, German and Latin. Don't be impressed. If you put sentences in all 4 languages in front of me now, I could probably tell you which language was which, but that's about it.

- The only language I really know besides English is Indonesian, and that has gotten pretty rusty.
 - I lived in Indonesia for 2 years... I knew almost none of language on arrival.
 - They gave me a basic crash survival course so that when I got on the ground in Indo I could say, “Hi, my name is J.D. Where is your bathroom? My house is on fire.”
 - So I learned the language there. The kids taught it to me. Kids are the best teachers. They were so patient, the best teacher... I'd go out every evening and play soccer with them. I'd pick up a rock and say, “batu.” Stone. They'd say, “Yes, Mister. Batu.”
- But that also meant I made a lot of mistakes. Some of you know my life's motto is “often wrong, but never in doubt.”
 - So I spoke their language with the same brash, unwarranted, confidence with which I do everything in life.
 - Berzina/ “your wife looks enak”
 - ~~Sometimes they would try to get me to say words that I couldn't pronounce right and they would laugh...~~
 - “I need to duke.”

All that goes back to Genesis 11. According to the Bible, the **multiplicity of languages was God's response** to one of mankind's most spectacularly sinful displays. It occurs **early in recorded human history**, on the **plains of Shinar**, or modern day Iraq. It was the building of the Tower of Babel.

On the surface, what they did doesn't look like anything **horribly evil**—they **just built a tower**—but it's going to give you a glimpse into the root causes of sin, what makes sin sinful.

Listen... Have you ever wondered **where sin comes from** in your heart, or **why it has such power** over you? Why you **can't just stop sinning even** when you want to?

- That's **what this story will show** you.

I'm going to use my friend **Matt Carter's title** here and call this story, "Towers of Disappointment,"¹ because that's what these things are, towers of disappointment.

If you've ever felt like life was disappointing, in any way—your marriage, your job, retirement—I think you'll find an explanation in this story. What God was doing here at the Tower of Babel he's doing in your life!

[11:1] Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. [2] And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. [3] And they said to one another... "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

Now, a **couple of things** to notice here:

- First, their attempt to stay put, together, was an **act of disobedience**.
- God had commanded them **3 times in Genesis to be fruitful and multiply** all over the earth for his glory.
 - Why would they **not want to obey** that? That sounds to me like "Have sex and travel." What's not to love?
 - **But they want to stay in one place...**
 - Here's a **little throw away lesson** for you: God always pushes his people to look outward, to multiply, toward sending and giving. Sinful man always looks inward, toward building for his security and his glory.
- **Second, more importantly what do they want?** 3 THINGS, SPECIFICALLY: A city, a tower that reached to the heavens, and a great name.
 - A city (think of that as a home, a place to belong), a tower that reached to the heavens (they wanted to do something significant in life, for their lives to matter, for

permanence); and to make a name for themselves (they wanted greatness).

- Now, ironically, God had already given man those things in the Garden!
 - **A city:** God was our home; in fellowship with him is where we got our sense of belonging.
 - **A tower:** We got our significance from doing his will; being sons and daughters and vice-regents of our King.
 - **A name:** The greatness we sought was supposed to be in God.
- But now they have rejected God and so, like we went over a few weeks ago, they feel naked...
 - Stripped
- *Sin is an attempt to find in something or someone else that you lost in God.*
 - That's **why it says their tower reached up** "toward the heavens."
 - They are **trying to get back** something they had once had in God!
 - They are going to **call this tower, "Babel,"** which means literally, "the gate of God" (11:9).²

So here is your 1st point:

1. Sin attempts to build towers to heaven (11:3)

- **Their desires:** for belonging, for security, for greatness, are **not wrong**. It's **where they are looking** for them that is wrong.
- Now, several thousand years later, people haven't changed. We still desire these same things:
 - **We want a city:** a place to really feel safe, a group to feel like we really belong.
 - Isn't that why **family** is so important?

¹ Matt Carter, "Towers of Disappointment," Genesis 11:1–9, ASCC

² "Gate of God" comes from the Babylonian name for their own city. "The Babylonians themselves call their city *bab-ili* or *bab-ilani*, "gate of the god(s)," which is reflected in the Greek *Babylon*."

- Or being accepted by the **right groups** at school? Or having the right people praise you—**coaches, the cool kids, peers** at work, the **academic community**?
- We **want to belong to a city!**
- **We want security**
 - Something that guarantees our safety. Isn't that why **insurance is a trillion dollar** industry in our country?
 - Nothing wrong with it, of course, but sometimes you get the idea that people are looking to insurance to remove **any danger from their lives**.
 - (I saw a while back that for \$118/yr you can get alien insurance—you get abducted by aliens and your family gets 500K, if you get eaten they get 3 million).
- **We want our lives to matter.**
 - Why some people stress over their careers or lack thereof.
 - Guy in mid 40's...
 - Have I done anything that changes the world?
- We want to be **connected to greatness**.
 - That's why people namedrop whenever you're with somebody famous.
 - We all do it... If you meet someone famous, or even get close, you **put that picture up**.
 - I see other Christian leaders tweet out things like, *"Had lunch today with Billy Graham. #humbledbythis*. The irony is you are not humbled by it, you feel exalted by it, which is why you tweeted it out.
 - **I don't tweet out things that humble me. Forgot to do my quiet time again this morning. #humbledbythis. Doctor said I'm still 8 lbs overweight.**

- Here's one from my life: **Photobombing Jeb Bush**. When my friend sent me that, how long do you think it took me to tweet that out? Seconds, #humbledbythis. Why? Because I want to be connected to greatness.

Belonging, security, significance, greatness—none of those things are wrong; it's where we look for them that is wrong.

- LISTEN: One of the **greatest discoveries of my life** was realizing that all my life I'd been reaching out for God, even when I didn't know it!
 - There was this **yearning I experienced** as a kid.... I didn't know how to articulate it, but I yearned for something I **tasted in the security of my parents' home** and the affections of their love. It's why I was terrified that they would die or I'd get taken away.
 - I felt this kind of yearning again in my desire to **meet that special someone** who would consume me romantically...
 - I sometimes **experience it in the adventure of foreign travel**.
 - Foreign travel is never as good as the excitement in the anticipation of it.
 - **Sometimes I feel it when I am here in a church** service. A yearning for something.
 - Or when I see the **sunset over the seemingly endless horizon** of the beach.
 - These experiences are all great, but it's like these things are calling out to me...
 - C.S. Lewis said it best: *"The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came **through** them, and what came through them was longing. These things – the beauty, the memory of our own past – are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the*

thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.” – C. S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory, 29.

▪ Rays!

- (Jonathan Edwards: “Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, friends... These are but shadows; but the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.”³)
- **It will change your life if you realize that every tower you build in your life** is an attempt to regain something God had designed to give you in himself...
 - I even read recently that **pornography is driven** by this desire to take beauty into ourselves.
 - Yes, it is **lust, but it is more**. I want to possess beauty!
 - It’s why **G.K. Chesterton** said that the man who knocks at the door of brothel is in search of God

So, 1: Sin attempts to build towers to heaven...

LET’S KEEP MOVING...

[5] And the LORD *came down* to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.

- That’s a **play on words**. They are trying to build up, and God says, “Let’s go down... way down there and see what the little gerbils are up to.”
- It’s **very condescending** language.

³ Jonathan Edwards, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 17: Sermons and Discourses, 1730-1733

[6] And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

- In other words, **every form of evil is going to spring** from this declaration of their awesomeness.

2. Sin’s root is “by my will, in my strength, for my glory.” (11:3)

- **Again, what they are looking for—security, significance, and greatness—is not wrong.** They were just supposed to get them through **depending on God**.
- Now, they want to do it **for themselves, in their own way**, by their own strength, and so that they get the glory.
 - Let us **build a tower for ourselves** for the *glory of our name*.
- I **often teach my kids that they can understand sin** by looking solely at the middle letter: **S “I” N**
 - What I want, instead of what God wants.
 - In my strength, instead of God’s.
 - So that **I get the glory** and attention, and not him.
- **Sin’s wickedness begins not with the immorality** of the act, but with the heart behind the act.
- That’s **why God says that this tower will become the source** of immeasurable amounts of sin.
 - **Babel, or Babylon, as** it is translated elsewhere in Scripture, is going to become the **symbol for mankind’s opposition** against God, the epitome of wickedness.
 - Babylon is the **name of the capital city** of Israel’s fiercest enemy in the Old Testament, the kingdom that destroys Jerusalem and takes Israel captive.
 - **In Revelation, ‘Babylon’ is the symbol of man’s united front against God** at the last battle:⁴ *After Jesus comes back, the angel says, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons... for all the nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual*

⁴ Revelation 14:8; 16:19; 18:2-3, 21-22

immorality.” (Revelation 18:2–3 ESV) Every kind of sin and demonic influence is there.

- **(I know Revelation can be a confusing book,** you go in there and you get lost in locusts and bowls of blood; I’m a professional and can take you through safely ensuring that no one gets... left behind...)
- **But that’s one of things you really need to know.** Babylon represents the full fruition of our sin, BUT IT BEGINS HERE in **Genesis 11 with a heart** that simply says, “I will,” not “God’s will.” **IT’S CALLED PRIDE AND IT’S AT THE ROOT OF ALL SINS.**
 - When Isaiah described the fall of Satan, he said, **[13] You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; [14] I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’ (Isaiah 14:13-14 ESV)** What made Satan, Satan was not that he **murdered a bunch of angel puppies** and drank their blood, but because he said, “I will,” instead of “God’s will.”
 - Sexual immorality, demonic devices—like violence, hatred, oppression—these are the fruit of sin; the pride of “I will” is the root of sin.
- **What’s in your heart?**
 - For just a minute will you put away “how moral” of a person you are, or “how religious,” and ask whether in the core of your heart there is “God’s will,” or “my will.”
- **Do you walk in pride?** You can do good things in life—like build towers—and still be completely consumed in pride:
 - Like **getting good grades.** according to your will, in your strength, for your glory.
 - Closer to Satan’s heart than visiting a prostitute
 - Or **building a business,** in your strength...
 - Or **being religious.** In your strength... and for your own glory.

- And **here’s how you can know that you live that way.** C. S. Lewis said that there is one, tell-tell sign that you walk in pride: Jealousy of others. How high their towers are.
- **Because pride is, he says, in its very essence, competitive.**
 - **Proud people can never get along.** People of other vices can get along (drunks, immoral people, drug addicts), but proud people always hate each other, because their pride is always in conflict with someone else’s pride.
 - To pride it **does not matter that I am smart,** only that I am smarter than you. It doesn’t matter I’m **good-looking, only that I’m better looking** than you.
 - **C. S. Lewis says that the quickest way to tell that you have pride** is that some other person’s pride bothers you, because pride is always in competition.
 - It irks you when that person gets that **good grade,** or that **new car,** or **their kid gets accepted on scholarship,** because you just know that now they think they’re something and this bothers you because deep down you want to be thought of as something and the fact that people are now thinking this other person is something means they’re not thinking as much about you being something, so you’re mad because said person took your something-ness away from you.

To really get at what is going on in your heart, don’t ask how moral you are. Ask,

- **Whose will** are you living by—yours or God’s?
- **Whose strength** do you attempt to meet each day with—yours or God’s?
- **Whose glory** are you concerned about—yours or God’s?

In SS I learned it as, “In every heart there is a throne and a cross; if Christ is on the throne, you must be on the cross. If you are on the throne, Christ must be on the cross.”

Let's keep going... [7] Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech."

Overnight, God invents new languages.

What **kind of scene** was this like the next day? **Guy asks for a brick** and you are like, **"a turkey leg?"**

- Daniel Simmons... knew missionary in Asia. At supermarket, said, I want to buy some **"boula bong gai."** He was trying to say, "I want to buy some chicken." Because he got the tones wrong, what he said was, "I want to buy some human feces." They sell it over there as a fertilizer, so the guy comes back with a steaming bag of... What's that **like on a humongous scale?**

[8] So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

3. Sin leaves rotting towers of disappointment in your life (11:8)

- It's **interesting to me that God does not tear down the tower.** He leaves it there rotting. As a **message...**
- He could have let them go on...
 - But he doesn't! He **frustrates their attempts** to try and wake them up.
- *Is this judgment or mercy? BOTH.*
 - He is trying to let them taste, early on, the disappointment of their sin, before they go fully down that path.
 - **Any judgment before the ultimate judgment** is mercy,
- **So let me ask: What are the broken towers in your life? Where have you tasted disappointment? A broken relationship? A drug addiction? Humiliation, lost job? Did you get caught cheating and got kicked out of school?**
 - **Revolutionary thought:** What if you learned to think about the **disappointments of your life, the broken towers, as monuments with a message: Return to the love of God!**

- Leader who got caught in the **Ashley Madison** scandal
- **Any judgment before the ultimate judgment** is mercy, because it can wake you up before it is eternally too late!

Tim Keller says that when you face the inevitable disappointment from a broken tower, an idol, you'll have 1 of 4 reactions:

Blame the idol itself: We assume **we chose the wrong thing**, and resolve to make a better choice next time.

- "Well, we **started out well but our marriage** fell apart because she **just wasn't the right person.** I was young and stupid then, but I'm older and wiser now. **"I know there is a soul mate out there for me somewhere that fulfills all my needs and makes my life complete..."**

Yeah. She's right over there next to that unicorn.

Blame ourselves: "I am the problem. I **didn't work hard enough.** I'll do better next time." And you turn over a new leaf. But **that often doesn't work, either.** The cleaned up desk stays straight for about 2 days. Inevitably, the you that failed the first time reappears. And **with every failure,** you feel more like giving up.

Blame the world: You just **give up on being happy.** You become a mean, cynical old person who mocks all those naive young people. Or you just **get numb** to it all and **medicate** through alcohol, drugs, shopping, or some hobby. Or you get angry and depressed and write alternative music. Or you quit the world altogether.

Realize you are created for another world: C. S. Lewis famously said, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience

in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”⁵

You want to be **safe**. You want to **belong**. You want to **have a home**. To have **beauty and significance**. To be connected to **greatness**. These things are all in God!

Listen to one of my fav Psalms... Psalm 139

[1] O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

[2] You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar.

[3] You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

[4] Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.

[5] You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

[6] Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

[7] Where could I go from your Spirit? Or where could I flee from your presence?

[8] If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol (OT word for hell), you are there!

[9] If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

[10] even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

[11] If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,”

[12] even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

[13] For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

[14] I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. [16] Your eyes saw my unformed substance (just as a fetus); in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

[17] How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! [18] If I would count them, they are more than the sand of sea. I awake, and I am still with you! *(It's like a dream, too good to be true... but I wake up and it's still true! I never wake up from it!)* (Psalm 139:1-18 ESV)

Do you know how much and how often God thinks of you? Oh my goodness!

- He **saw me in the womb**... before my mom even knew she was pregnant... he knew me and had plans for me.
- He **chose every one** of my days, and had his angels watch over me in good times and bad. What felt like darkness was to him like the full light of day.
- Not **one hair falls from my head** without his knowing! When our kids were young, I **was always amazed** at how aware my wife Veronica was of the smallest of physical features of our kids. Did you see that Ryah has new freckle on her left shoulder? (And I would say, “How many kids do have now?”) God knows me better and watches me more closely than the most attentive, love-stricken mother.
- **When I made my bed in hell**, he wouldn't leave me there. He came and took hell into him so he could get me out if... When I showed no interest in him; when I outright rejected him and told him to leave me alone, he **kept thinking of me**. He said, “Father, forgive him, he doesn't know what he's doing!” And he willingly endured my shame and the pain of my punishment to buy me back!

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 29.

No wonder David says, “How precious also are your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand! And when I awake, I’m still with you!” It really is like the most incredible dream, which we never wake up from!

You want to be **known, valued and approved of**? You are!

- And it is **richer, and deeper, and lasts longer** than the love of any man!
- He just cannot stop thinking about you!

Are you trying to be **special to someone**? You are to him.

Are you **trying to matter**? You matter to him.

The **arms you search for** in romance are his arms. The **security you work for** in life is found his promise. And the **fullness you yearn for** in all your pursuits is experienced in his presence.

Which leads to the last point...

[9] Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. **Another play on words:** The word Babel in Hebrew sounds really similar to “balal”, which means “confuse.” Just by re-adjusting the accents you can change the word to mean “confusion.”

And then, as soon as this story is over, the next chapter begins this way: [12:1] Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. [2] And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [3] I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

4. God is building a better tower (Gen 12:1–Revelation 22:21)

- Genesis 11 is, in a sense, the **fulcrum of the whole Bible**. Man’s attempts to build a tower back to God, to regain what he lost in God, fails.
- So, in Genesis 12, God starts to **build his own tower**.
- **But he starts in a really odd place**. He chooses a **sterile, frail old man** to begin building it. This is not a demonstration of human strength; it is the **opposite of human strength**, the epitome of human weakness.
- And he **says to Abram**,
 - “I’ll give you a home, Abram. It’ll be better and more permanent than any home man can build.
 - “I’ll give you significance, Abram, greater than any tower; you’ll have a role in blessing the world.
 - “I’ll make your name great, Abram. I’ll tie the greatness of your name to my own.
 - One day, Abram, all these scattered families of the earth with their new languages will be reunited in what I do through you.”
- And so we **fast-forward through the whole Bible** to the very last book: **Revelation 7:9** After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb... [10] and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”
 - *There they are! The scattered nations of the earth. But this time, they are not all speaking one language, gathered around a tower proclaiming the glories of their own strength; they are speaking multiple languages, gathered around a tower God built, proclaiming that wisdom and glory and power and honor and salvation belong to God.*⁶

⁶ **Zephaniah 3:9** prophesies: “At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.”

- We get a **glimpse of this in the middle of the Bible**, in Acts 2.
 - When the Holy Spirit is first poured out, the first sign is they speak with other languages. It's this big **flashing signpost** if you've read the whole Bible: God's promise to reverse Babel is beginning to be fulfilled!
- What man was unable to **accomplish in his strength**, God accomplishes by his Spirit.
 - **Abram couldn't get his wife pregnant** in his own strength; God will do that.
 - We can't **live a perfect life**; so God will do that in our place.
 - We **can't pay** for our sin. God did it for us.
 - And we **certainly can't resurrect ourselves** from the grave, so Jesus will be buried in our place and burst apart the powers of death on our behalf.
 - **Salvation is, from start to finish, the work of God!**
- So no wonder Revelation 22:4 says in heaven God writes his name will be on our foreheads.⁷ We wear nametags in heaven, but the tags have on them Jesus' name, not ours. Not that we are all called by that name, but his is what is important. Because we didn't get ourselves there, he did!
 - **Personally, I'm glad for that.** I have a feeling that when I get to heaven there will be people who walk up to me and say, "**How are you here?**" Maybe they knew me at a weird time of my life. Maybe they just caught me on a bad day.
 - The other day I was traveling in a strange city... I said something rude. Thought later, "What if that guy is a Christian?"... I'll hang my head and point to his name.

Summit Church, this is what God is doing in the Bible! And what he is doing in our day. And it is amazing.

⁷ Revelation 3:12

And he **will accomplish it as surely as Sarah**, Abram's wife got pregnant and **as surely as Jesus walked out** of the grave.

- He's **driven the church by the power of the Spirit** in every age of the church, and he is driving it forward in our day.
- He is building the church!
- Put up the sails, and let him do something amazing through you.

He doesn't **need us to build the church**; he doesn't need you to overcome addiction or be a great parent or do something amazing... just to **yield yourself to him and let him do something amazing** through you.

Invitation

There are one of two towers being built in your life—yours, as a monument to you. That is a tower of inevitable disappointment.

Or God is building a tower through you of eternal significance. It's a strong tower of refuge you can run into and be saved.

You can **only be working on one of the two**. Which tower are you building?

- Are you doing his will, or your own?
- Do you see what you have as belonging to God, or you?
- Are you building your kingdom, or living out his mission?
 - Are you involved in the church? There's no way you are living out God's mission if you are not involved in the church!
- Are you directing all praise back up to God, or concerned with keeping it on you?

IS God trying to get your attention this weekend? Maybe a tower of disappointment has been revealed? Maybe you thought God was punishing you! Do you see that what he has done is mercy?

Mercifully, he's showing you that sin disappoints so that you can learn that only God eternally satisfies.