

United We Fall

Genesis 11: 1 – 9

May 23, 2010

I. Introduction

- A. We have within us a self that has its poison from Satan, writes Andrew Murray
 - 1. That self is expressed chiefly in three ways, he says -
 - a. Self-will, self-trust, and self-exaltation.
- A. The people in our story today demonstrated all three of these character traits
 - 1. Self-will, when they said – Come, let us build for ourselves...
 - a. Self-trust – let us build a great city, in which we will find security
 - 2. And self-exultation – let’s build a tower up to the heavens
 - a. Let’s make a name for ourselves, and not be scattered all over the earth
- A. Was it wrong for them to make plans for themselves and for the future
 - 1. Not if they had been taking their cues from God’s plan for their lives
- A. Were they wrong to desire a place in which to live safely and securely
 - 1. Only if it made them feel that they didn’t need to depend on God anymore
- A. Was it wrong to build a great, high tower that might serve as a place of worship
 - 1. Rising up to the heavens, the very dwelling place of God
 - a. A monument to their human strength and skill and ingenuity
 - 2. Well, that contradiction seems more apparent as we look back at it now
- A. Yet it’s so much a part of our human nature that we continue to do it today
 - 1. Come, let us build **for ourselves** a city, a nation, a monument that will last forever
 - a. If we all just stick together, **we** can do it – sounds good doesn’t it
 - (1) But God says – no you can’t. Not without my blessing.
- A. God has allowed tremendous accomplishments in human civilizations since that time
 - 1. But I believe the principle still stands –
 - a. If our achievements lead us away from a sense of dependence on God
 - (1) We are walking on dangerous ground
 - 2. “Pride goes before destruction” says the proverb of the wise King Solomon
 - a. To which the Apostle Paul would later add, “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall”
- A. There’s no doubt that much good can be accomplished by united hands and hearts

1. And I in no way wish to downplay what God can do in and through his people
 - A. But if the motivation is pride and self-exultation, as it seems to have been
 1. In the building of the Tower of Babel
 - a. The popular motto “United, we stand” can quickly be turned to “United, we fall!”
- II. We pick up again this Sunday, on one of what are sometimes called the “creation stories”
- A. Several relatively short vignettes found at the very beginning of scripture
 1. That come to us from the first several centuries of recorded history in the Bible
 - a. From the days of Adam and Eve, through the story of Cain and Abel
 - (1) That we looked at last Sunday
 - A. The familiar story of Noah and the flood – we’re going to skip over that one
 1. And then we come to this passage regarding the dispersal of the human race throughout the world
 2. A spreading out that was mandated by God from the very beginning of time
 - a. Expedited here by the confusion of languages that brought to an end
 - (1) A very imaginative and ambitious building project – the Tower of Babel
 - A. If you are interested in the details, Bible scholars seem to be pretty much in agreement
 1. That the location of this city and the world’s first skyscraper
 - a. Was probably in the area of the world we now know as Iraq
 2. We think that partly because of the ancient ruins of great high towers – called ziggurats, that still exist in the area today
 3. And also because of the connection between the names Babel and Babylon
 - a. A city that has stood in one form or another throughout most of human history
 - A. The fertile plains, called the land of Shinar, along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers
 1. Must have seemed like an inviting place to settle down
 - a. For these generations of the descendants of Noah and his three sons
 - A. Cities would usually have been built with stone walls around the outside
 1. But, in this area, the rich soil was so deep that stones were hard to come by
 - A. So we read that the leaders of the people propose making bricks, for the city wall
 1. And for the tower they envisioned, holding the bricks together
 - a. With a sticky, black tarry substance that occurs naturally along the rivers
 - A. Scholars are not totally in agreement about the purpose for this high tower
 1. With it’s top reaching up into the heavens, as it is described for us here
 - a. Some say it might have been a response to the great flood

- (1) A place of refuge if the water should rise again
- 2. Others suggest that it was meant to serve as a sort of landmark that could be seen
 - a. From a far distance, guiding hunters or explorers back home from their journeys
 - (1) Perhaps with a fire burning from the top during the night
- A. History tells us that such high structures often were built as places of worship
 - 1. Perhaps in a similar way as we think of tall church buildings/steeple lifting our eyes
 - a. And hopefully our thoughts, heavenward
- A. One popular understanding, though not supported very strongly by the facts
 - 1. Is that these people believed that if they could build the tower high enough
 - a. They might actually reach the boundary of heaven – that dome
 - 2. That appeared to cover the earth and provide a pathway for the sun, moon and stars
- A. I'm not sure what they thought they would find up there
 - 1. But if, as they may have believed, heaven was the dwelling place of the gods
 - a. Then surely it would be a good place to attain to
- A. I've heard that understanding preached in sermons ever since I was a kid
 - 1. The writer of our drama this morning seems to have been thinking along those lines as well
 - 2. But it doesn't really explain why God was displeased by their actions
- A. Anyway, all we really have to go on is what we find in our verses -
 - 1. Come on, the people said, let's build a great, high tower
 - a. Let's make a name for ourselves, a monument to civilization, as it were
 - (1) So that we won't be scattered all over the face of the earth
 - 2. You may recall, back in Genesis Ch. 1, when God was creating humankind
 - a. That the directions these first humans were given, was to be fruitful and multiply
 - (1) To **fill the earth, and subdue it**
 - 3. That happened to some extent after Adam and Eve were driven out
 - a. Of the Garden of Eden, where they first lived
 - 4. Then, after the flood, the process would have started all over again
- A. I don't suppose that God was opposed to the idea of building cities in which to live
 - 1. But it may be that the phrase in our text about not being scattered over the earth
 - a. Gives us a clue about God's displeasure with this particular building project
 - 2. Whether or not the intention of the people was to circumvent God's plan for the human race, it doesn't appear that they even considered God's wishes/desire

- a. Before they started putting their building plan into action
- 3. That should certainly serve as a warning to us today, as well
- A. From our understanding of God's abilities, we might wonder about the phrase –
 - 1. "The Lord came down" to see the city and the tower that was being built
- A. Surely God could see what was taking place all along
 - 1. But the writer seems to indicate an intentional movement on God's part
 - a. In human terms, God came "down" to inspect the work of these human beings
- A. I can't help but think of the great difference in perspective
 - 1. Between the people, who must have viewed this as a tremendously large project
 - a. On which they would have labored mightily for a long time
 - 2. And the God who created everything in the world/in the universe
 - a. Simply by speaking it all into being
- A. That's a reminder to me, whenever I think of worthwhile projects or tasks
 - 1. That we believe would be helpful to the church or to the community
 - a. But they seem too big for us to handle
 - 2. The work of building God's kingdom in our community, and in the world
 - a. May look hopelessly overwhelming at times
- A. However, if it truly is God's work, and God is calling us to take part in it
 - 1. Then it's God's ability and strength and resources that are on the line
- A. And yes, God does use the resources we provide
 - 1. But our numbers, or resources are not the ultimate yardstick to measure by
 - a. The key is our discernment of what God's work is really all about
 - (1) And making sure that our work is a part of God's plan
- A. The city and tower of Babel apparently did not measure up to that yardstick
 - 1. Again, we hear the words of God as they are recorded here –
 - a. Look, they are all one people, with one language
 - 2. This project is only the first step, if it continues, what will they think of next
- A. I find it fascinating that God seems to concede that the project is indeed feasible
 - 1. Not only is this tower a real possibility, but its success would lead
 - a. To even larger, or higher, or more complex projects
 - 2. And so, God says, let's go down and confuse their language
 - a. If they can't communicate with each other, these self-serving projects
 - (1) Will come to a halt – and so it was done

- A. We are not told how, or over what length of time this action took place
 - 1. But the end result was that people began to drift apart
- A. And our scripture records – So **the Lord** confused the language of all the people
 - 1. And they were scattered abroad over the face of all the earth
- A. The question that comes to us today is – So what?
- III. Is this nothing more than a historical account? As some scholars suggest
 - A. Was it only written/recorded as a way to explain differences in race and culture
 - 1. As they have developed down through the centuries until now
 - A. Is there anything more that we can learn – about ourselves, or about God
 - 1. That would help us know better how to live as the people of God today
 - A. We've mentioned a couple of things already that speak to me from this passage
 - 1. One – a warning against self-will
 - a. That is, the perception that we human beings are quite capable of ruling ourselves
 - (1) And even the world to a large extent – we really don't need God anymore
 - A. I doubt that anyone here this morning would actually say those words
 - 1. But a good attitude check would be to ask ourselves –
 - a. How much do we see ourselves, our families, our church family, even our nation –
 - (1) As truly dependent upon God
 - A. Are we trusting in God's providential care, God's wisdom and power
 - 1. To maintain control over the forces that threaten to tear our world apart
 - a. Whether it's the forces of nature, or the forces of evil that surround us
 - (1) Or even the natural tendency for self-destruction that we humans exhibit
 - A. Do we believe that God has a plan for creation, and that plan is being worked out
 - 1. Or do we think that God has put everything in place – and left us to work out
 - a. Our own final destiny for good or for evil
 - 2. Yes, we have been given free will/choice about many things in this life
 - a. And we are responsible for the choices that we make, for good or for evil
 - 3. But at the point where we begin to think that we are able to solve every problem
 - a. On our own, or with the combined resources of human strength and wisdom
 - (1) We are dangerously close to the kind of prideful, self- will
 - (a) That caused God to take action against the people of Babel
 - A. Someone has even suggested that living in a democratic society
 - 1. Tends to influence our thinking about our relationship with God

- A. So that if we don't like how God is running our world
 - 1. We may decide that God isn't any better qualified for the job than we are
 - a. So we can simply vote him out and run for the office ourselves.
 - 2. I'm sure nobody here this morning has ever thought of doing that. Amen?
- A. Closely related to that is the warning against self-trust – here's an example
 - 1. We Mennonites have a long history of feeling a certain tension between
 - a. Purchasing insurance to protect our families and our belongings
 - (1) And trusting in God to be our source of protection and security
 - 2. For most of us, the balance has moved toward viewing insurance in all its forms
 - a. As one of many tools in the wise stewardship of resources
 - (1) But the tension remains, whether we are aware of it or not
 - 3. Our nation's money still carries the motto; In God we trust
 - a. But the evidence would indicate that for many, if not most of us
 - (1) Those words have very little practical meaning
 - (a) When it comes to the choices we make about handling our money
- A. Again, I don't believe God was necessarily opposed to the idea
 - 1. Of building the city of Babel to provide protection for its inhabitants
- A. The challenge is how to take those practical measures that provide safety/security
 - 1. Without losing sight of our position before God and our dependence upon God
- A. And finally, it seems to me, the clearest warning in our scripture text has to do with pride
 - 1. Come, let us do this thing, and so make a name for ourselves
- A. Thomas Merton, in his book *No Man Is an Island*, writes –
 - 1. To consider persons and events and situations only in the light of their effect upon myself, is to live on the doorstep of hell.
- A. Even when we are aware of the dangers of “thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think” as the Apostle Paul put it
 - 1. It can be difficult not to see ourselves as being the center of the universe
- A. Kids can grow up thinking that the whole world revolves around their schedule
 - 1. Adults compete for positions, titles, do almost anything to gain public attention
 - a. We can have an unhealthy pride in our nation, our accomplishments
 - (1) Even our church
- A. The opposite of pride is humility, and the true test of humility is our willingness
 - 1. To put the needs of others ahead of our own wants or desires

- A. Jesus is our perfect example in this – while people have since built edifices
 - 1. Or monuments in his name – when Jesus was living here on earth
 - a. His goal was to serve the needs of humanity, not to make a name for himself
- A. If we want our lives to count for something, if we want our church to reflect God’s nature
 - 1. If we don’t want God coming down to look at what we are doing with displeasure
 - a. We’d better learn what it means to be a servant like Jesus
 - 2. And then of course, we need to be on guard against feeling proud of ourselves
 - a. For being such good servants
- IV. So, rather than going away from our scripture text this morning thinking that those people
 - A. Who thought they could build a tower up to heaven were really foolish
 - 1. And looking down on their prideful attitude with a feeling of smug superiority
 - A. Perhaps we should be challenged to take a good look around us
 - 1. And especially inside of us, to see what towers we may be trying to build
 - A. And let’s not wait for God to take the drastic action he did with the tower of Babel
 - 1. Let’s volunteer to be servants in the work of God’s kingdom today
 - a. Comprende, mi amigo?