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MAN VERSUS GOD: GOD WINS

Genesis 11:1-9

By

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Genesis Lesson 23

Man Versus God: God Wins Genesis 11:1-9

Several years ago, during the nuclear arms race, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops drafted a pastoral letter condemning the U.S. policy. One sentence read: "Today the destructive potential of the nuclear powers threatens the sovereignty of God over the world he has brought into being" (*Newsweek*, 11/8/82).

Imagine! God's sovereignty over His creation threatened by the plans and programs of world leaders, as if God were sitting in heaven, wringing His hands, crying, "What can I do! I never knew they'd build the bomb!" The bottom line is that if God's sovereignty is threatened by what man does, then man, not God, is sovereign.

For centuries, men have deluded themselves by thinking they could determine their destinies apart from God. As William Ernest Henley boasted in his poem, "Invictus," "I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul." Proud men think that they can call the shots. What they forget is that one little virus, one drunk driver, one "freak" accident, is all it takes to end their proud plans.

The Bible declares, "There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord" (Prov. 21:30). Concerning world rulers, a later king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, was humbled by God until he learned that "the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes" (Dan. 4:17, 25). As the psalmist expressed God's response to proud kings who challenge His rule, "He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them" (Ps. 2:4). Concerning the plans of proud man, the Bible declares, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord, it will stand" (Prov. 19:21).

These verses are a commentary on Genesis 11:1-9, where we find proud man planning to thwart the purpose of God. But God effortlessly confuses their language, and their ambitious plans are laid waste. It teaches us that ...

When proud men set themselves against
the Sovereign God, God always wins.

It's like saying, When a deluded man sets himself against a speeding locomotive, the train always wins. Unless you want to spend your life in futility, you must submit to the Sovereign God.

The story is skillfully placed in the middle of two lists tracing the descendants of Shem (10:21-31; 11:10-32). In chapter 10:8-11, we learned that Nimrod, a rebellious, aggressive descendant of Ham, founded Babel. A dominant theme in the Babel story is that these settlers wanted to make a name for themselves; but in line with their rebellious leader, Nimrod, they are doing it in defiance of God. In Hebrew, Shem means "name." Moses is saying that if we proudly seek to make a name for ourselves by our achievements, God will scatter us. If we want His blessing, we must, like Shem, obey Him. From Shem's line will come Abraham and God's covenant of blessing.

The story serves as a sequel to the table of the nations, explaining why the nations were scattered and why they spoke different languages. It also shows that their root problem was their rebellious pride toward God. Thus it serves as a warning to Moses' readers to submit themselves under God's mighty hand and not be deluded into thinking that they will prosper if they rebel against Him.

The story is written with delightful literary skill. The Hebrew text is full of wordplays and poetic devices. The ultimate wordplay is in verse 9, where Babel is played off the Hebrew *balel*, meaning "confusion." Babylonian accounts tell how their city was built in heaven by the gods, proudly referring to it as "Babili" ("the gate of God"). But God says, "So you want to make a name for yourselves, do you? You call your city the gate of God? How about 'confusion' instead?"

The narrative uses antithetic parallelism to contrast and balance the ideas. Verse 1 is set off against verse 9, verse 2 against verse 8, and verse 3 against verse 7, with verse 5 being the hinge of the story. Verse 1 mentions "the whole earth" and emphasizes the unity of the language; verse 9 also mentions "the whole earth" (twice), but contrasts God's confusion of the languages with the

unity of verse 1. Verse 2 shows the people settling in one location; verse 8 contrasts that with the Lord's scattering them abroad. Verses 3 & 4 show the people boasting in their plans to build a city and a tower, with the words, "Come, let us build ..."; verse 7 and part of verse 8 provide the contrast with the Lord stopping their plans, using the same form, "Come, let us confuse" In verse 4, the people plan to build a tower to reach *up* to heaven; but in verses 5 & 7, the Lord has to come *down* in order to view this supposedly great project that man is attempting to build. In verse 4 men fear that they will be scattered over the earth; in verses 8 & 9, what they fear comes upon them through the punishing--and yet protecting--hand of God. (I'm indebted to Allen P. Ross, "The Dispersion of the Nations in Genesis 11:1-9," *Bibliotheca Sacra* [Apr.-June, 1981], pp. 119-138, for most of these insights.)

Some have been bothered by verse 5, which seems to imply that God didn't know what was happening on earth, as if He were feeble or near-sighted. So He comes down for a closer look. While the verse is anthropomorphic (using human language to describe God), its point is satirical. Here proud men build a tower whose top (they think) will reach into heaven; but God, who is high and lifted up, must come down in order to view it. It's just a speck from His vantage point. The satire is heightened by referring to the builders as "the sons of men" (11:5). They are not gods; they were mere, puny men. It is a clever satire on the feebleness of men who vainly think they can penetrate God's realm. Man may plan and build in defiance of God, but God will accomplish His purpose in spite of man's rebellion.

1. Men proudly set themselves against the sovereign God (11:1-4).

Derek Kidner (*Genesis* [IVP], p. 109) observes,

The primeval history reaches its fruitless climax as man, conscious of new abilities, prepares to glorify and fortify himself by collective effort. The elements of the story are timelessly characteristic of the spirit of the world. The project is typically grandiose; men describe it excitedly to one another as if it were the ultimate achievement At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes.

We can see the spirit of Babel in the worldly reaction to the AIDS epidemic. No one outside the church (and few in it) is saying, "This is the judgment of a holy God on our sexual immorality. We must repent." Rather, the attitude is, "Let's not condemn anybody. It's not their fault they've contracted this disease. We'll find a cure and fix this terrible problem. Meanwhile, make sure you have safe sex." It is man seeking to overcome his problems apart from submitting to the Sovereign God.

Babel was Nimrod's project. He wanted to build his empire in defiance of God. But you can tell from verse 4 that he promoted it under the guise of human betterment. "We'll make a better world, a world that is safe for us all. Why be scattered over the face of the earth? Settle in Babel!" It sounded attractive, but there was one major problem: God was not consulted or trusted. When man can do it by himself, he doesn't need a Savior. This was arrogance and open rebellion against the Lord. God had said to fill the earth (9:1), but these people said, "Let's build a city so that we won't be scattered." They wanted the good life, but on their own terms and in their own way, without submitting to God. Babel was the epitome of human effort and achievement to solve the problems of this world, but to solve them without admitting sin and without coming to God, who alone has the remedy for human sin.

Apparently there were no stones in the area to use in building their city and tower. So they developed kiln-dried bricks and used pitch for mortar. Making bricks when there was no stone bolstered their pride and confidence in themselves. "We can do anything, overcome any hardship. The only limit on what we can do is our own imagination. Let's go forward." As in Genesis 4, it was progress; but it was progress without God.

Yet in spite of this bravado, these pioneers had an underlying sense of anxiety. They feared that they would be scattered over the face of the earth and die unknown, without a name for themselves. Isn't that just like proud man? Like a little boy, he puts on a brave front, but deep down inside, he's afraid.

The tower figures in the story here. I believe it had religious significance. Archaeologists have uncovered in this region a number of ziggurats, or religious towers, made of kiln-dried bricks and pitch. These may be modeled after this original tower. We know

that astrology originated in Babylon, so this tower may have been designed so that the top contained a representation of the heavens (the signs of the zodiac) on it. Astrology replaces submission to the Sovereign God with submission to fate as seen in the movements of the sun, moon, and stars. Thus it is a form of idolatry and is satanic in origin.

All false religion is a scheme of making God available to man for man's glory and plans. Sometimes it is very subtle, because it uses the name of the true God, and all the right words, but it's a cover for a man-centered system that dethrones God and robs Him of glory. Many people in Christian churches "received Christ" so that He could help them be happy or solve their problems or succeed in life. But self was never dethroned. Pride was never humbled. They never bowed before the Sovereign God and confessed their sinfulness and yielded to His rightful lordship. Just like the residents of Babel, they're using God and religion for their own benefit, rather than submitting to Him and judging their proud, sinful rebellion. But such people actually are opposed to God. What they need to understand is,

2. The Sovereign God always wins (11:5-9).

The hinge of the passage is, "the Lord came down" (11:5). He sovereignly acts to bring about His own purpose in spite of man's rebellion. The Lord acknowledges man's possibilities: "now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them" (11:6). But note that God did not approve man's possibilities; He thwarted them, in order to establish His own sovereignty. God is not Aladdin's Genie to help us reach *our* goals. We must submit to *His* will.

God is exalted by the manner in which He so easily disposes of proud man's efforts: He confuses their languages. Don't tell me God doesn't have a sense of humor! It must have been hilarious to watch the workers the morning this happened. The boss is trying to tell a crew to do something, and they look at him like he's from outer space. Then they start talking and every one of them is speaking a different language. Each person must have thought the others had flipped out! Whenever you see the people at the United Nations with their headsets on, so that they can understand the translation, remember Babel, and know that God is exalted over proud man.

God's action in scattering the people was both a punishment and a preventative, to keep man's pride from going too far. Man's plans for unity and strength ultimately would have resulted in great evil, because it was done in human wisdom apart from the Lord. It would have resulted in what God will one day permit, the one world government and one world religion under the total domination of the antichrist. And so God met the unity on earth with disunity from heaven.

As I wrote in the recent church newsletter, there is a great push in our day for unity among the churches. Part of the rallying cry is for the churches to come together for prayer. That sounds good on the surface. How can anyone be opposed to prayer? But when it means God's people joining with those who pray the rosary or pray to the virgin Mary, it is not true Christian unity. God wants Christians unified, but not at the cost of fundamental truth. Derek Kidner writes, "... unity and peace are not ultimate goods: better division than collective apostasy" (p. 110). Satan is always trying to counterfeit the work of God. Here he was building a false unity which did not honor the Lord. God one day will unify His people, but it will be under His sovereignty, not under the banner of proud man. In Zephaniah 3:9-12, the Lord says,

For then I will give to the peoples purified lips, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord, to serve Him shoulder to shoulder.... In that day you will feel no shame because of all your deeds by which you have rebelled against Me; for then I will remove from your midst your proud, exulting ones, and you will never again be haughty on My holy mountain. But I will leave among you a humble and lowly people, and they will take refuge in the name of the Lord.

Those who truly belong to the Lord are lowly people who take refuge in the name of the Lord, who bow under His sovereignty.

Let me nail down this passage with three applications:

Conclusion

1. If you're not growing in humility, you're not growing as a Christian. Since pride is the root sin of all sins, humility is the chief virtue of the Christian life. Since the original temptation in the garden, Satan

has been active in trying to get man to exalt himself against God. It has flooded into the church in our day under the banner of building your self-esteem. But the Bible is clear that we all esteem ourselves too highly. Even the person who goes around dumping on himself is self-focused. I used to teach the popular views on self-esteem. But in reading Calvin's *Institutes* I came to realize how far I had drifted from the clear teaching of Scripture, and I had to repent. He writes,

A saying of Chrysostom's has always pleased me very much, that the foundation of our philosophy is humility. But that of Augustine pleases me even more: "When a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule in eloquence, he replied, 'Delivery'; what was the second rule, 'Delivery'; what was the third rule, 'Delivery'; so if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always I would answer, 'Humility.'" (II:II:11).

Calvin not only taught humility, he modeled it. On one occasion, the Roman Catholic Cardinal Sadolet passed incognito through Geneva. He wanted to have a look at the famous reformer. He found the simple house on Canon Street and stood there amazed. Could the great Calvin live in this little place? He knocked. Calvin himself, in a plain black robe, answered the door. Sadolet was dumbfounded. Where were the servants who should have been scurrying about to do their master's bidding? Even the bishops of Rome lived in mansions, surrounded by wealth and servants. Archbishops and cardinals lived in palaces like kings. And here was the most famous man in the whole Protestant church, in a little house, answering his own door! (Thea B. Van Halsema, *This Was John Calvin* [Baker], pp. 164-175.)

If you ask, How do I grow in humility? the biblical answer is: Get a clearer picture of the greatness of God in His holiness; and, get a more accurate view of the depth of your own sinfulness. C. S. Lewis wrote (*Mere Christianity* [Macmillan], p. 111),

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that--and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison--you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking

down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.

In 1715 Louis XIV of France died. He had called himself "Louis the Great," and was famous for his brash statement, "I am the State!" His court was the most lavish in Europe and his funeral the most spectacular. His body lay in a golden coffin. To dramatize his greatness, orders had been given that the cathedral would be dimly lit, with a special candle set above the coffin. Thousands waited in hushed silence. Then Bishop Massillon began to speak. Slowly reaching down, he snuffed out the candle, saying, "Only God is great."

2. *Take care how you build because God will inspect it.* "The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built" (11:5). He inspected their work. He will inspect our work as well. We had better build with that in view. I'm talking about the motive behind your service for the Lord. God looks on our hearts. He's concerned about why you do what you do. Is it to gain the praise of men? Is it to meet your own needs? Or is it to honor and glorify Him? The question is not, What does your work look like from the outside? I'm sure the city and tower were the most impressive thing on the face of the earth in that day. There are many works for God in our day that seem quite impressive. The question is, What does God see? Calvin writes, "We never truly glory in him [God] unless we have utterly put off our own glory. On the other hand, we must hold this as a universal principle: whoever glories in himself, glories against God" (III:XIII:2).

3. *Make sure that your hope for heaven is based only on God's grace through the cross of Christ, not on anything in yourself.* Man's religions always seek to reach God through human effort. Thus man can boast in his standing before God, because he had a part in it. But biblical Christianity says, "May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14). The cross strips us of our pride and puts all our hope in the merits of the Savior.

Dr. Harry Ironside told the story of a new convert who gave his testimony at a church service. With great joy he told how he had been delivered from a life of sin. He gave all the glory to God,

saying nothing about his own merits or anything he had done to deserve his salvation. The man in charge of the service was a legalistic man who did not appreciate the reality of salvation by grace through faith apart from human works. So he responded to the young man's testimony by saying, "You seem to indicate that God did everything when He saved you. Didn't you do your part before God did His?"

The new Christian jumped to his feet and said, "Oh, yes, I did. For more than 30 years I ran away from God as fast as my sins could carry me. That was *my part*. But God took out after me and ran me down. That was *His part*." Ironside observed, "It was well put and tells a story that every redeemed sinner understands" (from "Our Daily Bread").

Scripture is clear: "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5). If you don't want God as your enemy, humble yourself under His mighty hand, confessing your sin. Forsaking all trust in yourself or your efforts, trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. Remember, if you set yourself against the Sovereign God, God always wins!

Discussion Questions

1. How can believers fight pride and grow in humility?
2. How can Christians know when it's right to divide from professing Christians? How much impurity should we tolerate?
3. Should Christians aim for success in their jobs? How does humility fit in with striving for success?
4. Why is the cross central to Christianity?

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