

See How the Building Inspector Intervenes

Genesis 11:1-9 • June 9, 2019 • Pentecost Sunday



It wasn't too long after moving into a log home we were renting that I saw an odd-looking pile of what appeared to be almost like sawdust along a wall. I wasn't familiar with this problem, but the log home was. It was termite frass. As termites dig through the wood, they create piles of little pellets which they then push out the wall through a tiny opening. The pellets themselves are harmless. But those pellets are an indication of a termite infestation. And if you aren't careful to watch it or deal with it, the termites could end up destroying the very foundations of your home. An extreme intervention may be required. Otherwise they'll destroy your home. That's how we deal with that type of problem. How does God deal with a world that is prone to work against him? This Pentecost Sunday we see the answer as we turn to Genesis 11. Like a building inspector, God sees signs of a problem in his world and decides he must intervene. We see how the building inspector intervenes. The world gathers in defiance, but the Lord scatters to spare his world and gathers it to save it.

An extreme intervention had recently occurred on the earth. The whole world had been covered with a flood sent by God. The springs of the deep opened up and the sky poured down rain until the last dry land was gone. God deemed extreme intervention necessary to save his world. It wasn't God's fault, but mankind's fault. God saw the problem and had to act to save his creation. The world was full of those who opposed and ignored their Creator. God saw that "every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." (Genesis 6:5) So he wiped mankind off the face of the earth.

After that extreme intervention the world had a fresh new start. Picture those surviving families through whom God displayed his mercy. He did not annihilate human life and all life. Noah and his sons and their families were all spared. These were the only remaining people on earth. Now Noah and his family could give the earth a fresh start. These people moved eastward, descending down from Mount Ararat and down into the newly washed lands. They had one God and one common language. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

Seems innocent enough right? Shinar is the location of Babylonia, near modern-day Iraq. The land they settled in had a fertile plain and was located right between two major rivers. It was a perfect place for people who worked the ground. And they were intelligent planners and good builders. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar.

Why would Moses record this detail for us? For one it shows that they had a plan. And it was a plan they all agreed upon and encouraged others to join in. They didn't just want to settle there for a short while. They now saw no reason to go further. They had a grand vision. "A city with a tower reaching to the heavens." They would make solid bricks baked in a kiln, resistant to water, a lasting dwelling. They wanted to make a place to live. The iconic center of that place that would be a glorious sight seen all across the Shinar plain. "Where do those great people live?" Of course, see the great tower!

Their purpose is clear. "So that we may make a name for ourselves." How quickly the attitude and mindset of Noah and his sons' was lost! Noah called on the name of the Lord. Noah worked hard and long to carry out and build the Lord's plans. But within only a few generations the attitude of Noah was gone. Is there in any mention of serving the creator and giving him the priority in life? Just the opposite! The priority is honoring self and working for self-recognition.

This section of Scripture doesn't stand as a testimony to mankind's ability to work together to build a utopia. It testifies to mankind's deep propensity to work together to ignore the Lord. Just as God told Adam and Eve to fill the earth, so he also repeated to Noah's family as they stepped onto a new and refreshed earth: "Fill the earth." Noah's sons and their families were told to spread across all of God's creation. In defiance they say, "Let's not be scattered. Fill the earth? Shouldn't we know what is best for us?" The people that left Mount Ararat went down onto a fertile plain. What did it matter if God wanted them to continue to spread over the earth? They had what they wanted. Would the creator know or care?

The flood destroyed many sinners, but the world was still full of sinful people. As it populated and grew, it grew full of people prone to sin, prone to serving self in life, and people quick to ignore God and think he doesn't really know or care about what they do. Our God sees more than just what we are building, he sees the heart behind it all.

What is your priority in life? Is it working hard and doing quality work? Is it planning great projects or goals? That's not bad in and of itself. But who are you working for? Sometimes one can get so caught up in this world which wants primarily to build a self-honoring, self-serving utopia that you can lose sight who one is serving in life. It's easy to join in working to serve self and our own desires our own priorities. And if we are honest with ourselves, ---regardless of what kind of working or planning we do-- is all that we plan and carry out always worked or planned for the honor of our creator? Or do we sometimes wish his will didn't have to get in the way of our plans and pleasures? Consider everything you have spent your life planning and building. Would it pass a building inspection if God examines the plans of the heart?

When we plan to advance ourselves and our own lives our priority begins to be like that of the people who began to build that great city and tower. Working for self can end up causes us to ignore and turn aside from our God and his will. "God won't notice or care if I cut back on honoring him so that I can get the things I've really always wanted." Or we might just say, "I'm just trying to provide for my family!" Someone might argue. "I want them to have this grand house, car, yard, computer.

They should have the very best.” But who should have the very best? The people at Babel on the surface were simply providing a nice dwelling in a nice fertile location. But behind the surface they were ignoring and defying God’s plans.

But God saw it all. Here is the real problem of self-centered goals and priorities! God sees the rebellion of a heart against him! God is not unaware of when our hearts and goals in life are ignoring him and glorifying ourselves. Imagine you are doing a building project and the building inspector is about to come for a visit. Then when he arrives, he doesn’t start critiquing the building itself, its structural integrity or checking if it is up to code. Instead he begins to ask deeper questions. “What were you thinking when you first planned this building?” You might say, “Look everything is great looking isn’t it?” And he just says, “I don’t care how great the building is. Why did you build it?” So it is with our lives and our hearts before our God. He doesn’t care how much we have or how nice our yard and wallet are. He inspects our very hearts to see what is behind all our plans.

And he is a God who intervenes. First of all, see that God is just. Notice that he doesn’t simply act against the people on a whim. He doesn’t arbitrarily interfere and pronounce judgment on people. He acts on the basis of his knowledge. He acts for a reason. He saw what was going on with the people. He saw their purpose in self-glorification. He saw that they did not want to carry out his will. And this was only the beginning, God knew it. With one single mind and purpose in sin they would continue to grow more and more in their endeavors to rebel against their creator and glorify the human race. In a sad irony the only way the world is good at uniting is against God! And so, God stopped them.

But the careful reader will see here more than simply God halting a workforce. Here we see God display his mercy. See how the building inspector intervenes. The world gathers to build in defiance. The Lord scatters to spare in mercy. God displays mercy here. God noted, “This is only the beginning! This is only what they have begun to do!” Yet he did not destroy them. He didn’t send a flood and say, “Let’s see if your tower is tall enough to save you now!” No. He spared them from destruction. He put a halt to their working together against him and forced them to disperse. His actions at Babel displayed his mercy.

Why doesn’t he destroy all mankind once again? Though we have not always made him a priority, he has made us a priority. And we are included in his plan to build an even greater building: his church. It’s a plan to give us a name, to build his kingdom, and to gather us together so that we might not be scattered.

God’s building plan centers on Jesus. It is a world-wide building. He still has his promise to carry out for us all. His promise would be not that he would destroy sinful mankind, but that he would destroy what we built between us and our creator. He spared the people and put an end to their working against him. He forced them to separate and spread across the earth. No longer were the people of this world able to unite in unbelief. No longer would they unite so that God could not fulfill his promise of a Savior. But God would set aside a man from whom an entire nation would come. Abraham would be called out of a land that had turned to worship of false gods to be the start of a new and separate nation. Because God still had a promise to carry out. A promise given long before the tower of Babel, long before the flood. He would send someone to bring sinful and rebellious people of this world back to himself. A promise fulfilled in the one man who never sought to do anything but glorify God. A promise fulfilled in the one man who perfectly sought to carry out God’s will and plan for mankind. Who? Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the reason why God spared and has spared the destruction of countless people of this world – people who have sought to honor themselves and seek their own plans in opposition to God. He faced the destruction that all the world deserved. The power of sin and its curse was destroyed. Jesus is the reason God does not destroy us when our plans turn aside from his own. All our self-serving attitudes are forgiven. All the times we set ourselves as priority and set aside God’s plans and his will for our lives are forgiven.

And because of that promise for all peoples and nations, God said he would once again gather those scattered around this world to himself. This gathering by his Spirit what we celebrate this day. God, who has in mercy spared us from destruction now also gathers those who have been scattered in sin. By his Holy Spirit the curse of Babel is undone. We see the good news of Jesus spoken in the languages of all those gathered in Jerusalem fifty days after Jesus rose to life.

No, we don’t all speak in tongues, but by the blessing of our God we speak his word and share that word to all the world. Even in this small synod of ours we work in many cultures and languages around the world. The Holy Spirit undoes the scattering of sin. We publish materials in over 50 different languages. So that while you may not speak another tongue, you support ministry which shares the gospel in many other tongues. If as one people we have begun to do this united and working together with our God’s help, then nothing we set to do in serving our Lord will be impossible for us. His word is shared by missionaries and most importantly by his Spirit. We by God’s mercy are now working for him, to serve him, to give him the honor.

For the building now has been built to God’s glory on this one man: Jesus our Lord. “Unless the LORD builds a house its builders build in vain” (Ps 127) The Lord himself has built for us his church. He has gathered us into his church by his Holy Spirit. The Lord who scattered to spare the world from destruction now gathers by his Spirit to save.

See how the building inspector, our creator and judge, intervenes. He is also our savior. He builds a new heart. Now we live to honor his name. Now we live to serve him. Though we have not made him a priority –he has made us a priority: it included giving his own Son. In included giving us membership in the city of him who has a name greater than any: Jesus our Lord.