

“The Mercy of Frustration”
Genesis 10:32-11:9

August 30, 2015

SI: We’re concluding our study of Genesis 1-11 this morning.
I’m going to cheat a bit, and not cover Genesis 10 as thoroughly as I should.
But a couple of the points I make partially come from Genesis 10.
I wanted to finish up so I could start a new sermon series to coincide with
the start of our Covenant Groups.

I hope our study of these chapters has been as helpful to you as it has been to me.
I’ve been reminded over and over of what an amazing thing it is to be a Christian.
And how good God is not to leave us in the dark about our lives in this world,
but to reveal to us, through his word, why things are the way they are.
That’s a good introduction to this last reading.

INTRO: After Allison's dad passed away, Paulette gave us a box full of DVDs that John had purchased from a company called The Great Courses.

Maybe you've gotten their catalogue before.

They sell college level lectures on every subject by expert teachers in the field. One of the Great Courses series we got was on structural engineering.

It's taught by Dr. Stephen Ressler who is an engineering professor at West Point.

In a couple of his lectures, he examines several famous engineering failures.

He specifically looks at some bridges that collapsed shortly after being built or during construction.

Of course, one of the bridges he highlights is the Tacoma Narrows Bridge.

We've all seen the famous video of that bridge collapse.

When the Tacoma Bridge opened, it was hailed as a triumph of human ingenuity.

The chief engineer, Leon Moisseiff called his creation,

"the most beautiful bridge in the world."

But in his drive to achieve a particular look, he ignored older, accumulated knowledge about suspension bridge building.

Specifically, he did not use stiffening trusses for the bridge deck.

That did make the bridge more graceful looking, but susceptible to wind.

Just four months after the bridge opened, in a steady 42 mph wind, it collapsed.

Another example, not as well known, but also interesting,

was the building of the Quebec Bridge over the St. Lawrence River.

The chief engineer was Theodore Cooper.

He was proud man with a lot of successes under his belt.

He had been very critical of the Firth of Forth Bridge in Scotland.

It was the longest cantilever bridge in the world but Cooper called it

"the clumsiest structure ever designed by man."

So when he got the plans for the Quebec Bridge from the engineering firm,

he increased the length of the bridge to make it longer than the Forth Bridge.

But he failed to make some fundamental adjustments and that resulted

in the collapse of a cantilever arm under construction, that killed 75 men.

Dr. Ressler pointed out how these disasters helped advance

the science of structural engineering, bridge-building in particular.

But then he ended his lecture with these sobering words:

Engineering is an inherently human endeavor, profoundly influenced by human aspirations and creativity, but also by human frailty and hubris.

Hubris. Pride: I'm going to make a name for myself.

I'm going to make the most slender, graceful, suspension bridge in the world without those ugly stiffening trusses. No need for that. I have a new theory.

I'm going to make the longest cantilever bridge in the world.

Going to show those cautious, over-engineering Scots how we Americans do it. And in the end, those plans came to nothing.

What does that sound like? It sounds like the Tower of Babel.

Let's build a tower up to heaven to make a name for ourselves.

That great project fell to pieces when Lord came down and confused languages. The story of the Tower of Babel closes the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

These first eleven chapters lay a foundation for a biblical world view.

This famous story reveals that when the plans and projects of men are frustrated, when they break down, when they fall into ruin, when they give no satisfaction, when they become outdated and stale and sad—God is behind that.

He's the one doing the frustrating.

And when he does so, it's not because he's mean, or because he doesn't like plans and projects and grand things.

It's because he's merciful. He wants people to come to him.

He wants people to trust him and serve him and be saved.

So one of the big ways he gets people's attention is to frustrate them and bring their plans to ruin and dash all their hopes.

Sometimes it's the only thing that works when a person is sunk in unbelief and pride.

But it's not just unbelievers who get this mercy—believers do too, sometimes.

Maybe the Lord is doing this very thing in your life now.

We need to understand the mercy of frustration.

Let's look at this under two points

1. Our tendency to make plans and projects a substitute for God.
2. God's mercy in frustrating those plans and projects to draw us to himself.

MP#1 Our tendency to make plans and projects a substitute for God.

God had made it clear to Noah's descendants that he wanted them to spread throughout the whole earth, but they said:

Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.

This tower was called a ziggurat.

It was the Mesopotamian version of the pyramid. Instead of being built out of great blocks of stone, like the pyramids, it was built out of bricks.

The ruins of ancient ziggurats can still be seen today in Iraq.

They were intended to represent a sacred mountain reaching to heaven.

And on the top of the ziggurat was a temple and an altar.

The worshipper would go to the top, make a sacrifice to the gods,

whoever they were, and the gods would come down and meet you half way.

So these people said, we need a tower reaching to heaven.

We'll be able to appease our gods and they will smile on us

and bless us with the thing we want most—to make a name for ourselves.

Now I want you to think for a moment, about how this same pattern has been repeated throughout history in all the great cities of the world.

The highest towers, the greatest structures are a tribute to the gods of that city.

And people go into those high buildings to make sacrifices so that their gods will smile on them and give them what they want.

What are the tallest buildings in New York and Chicago?

Buildings that pay tribute to commerce, trade, banking, and money.

What about Washington DC? There are no great commercial skyscrapers there.

It's against the law. The great buildings on the mall all government buildings.

Power and influence are the gods of that city.

What are the great buildings of Las Vegas?

Casinos and hotels where gods and goddesses of pleasure are served.

I'm obviously not saying that going into those buildings makes you an idolater..

But just like the tower of Babel, those buildings are potent symbols of this tendency rooted in the human heart to worship and serve created things rather than Creator.

And the way we usually approach those created things and seek their blessing is through the plans and projects and things that we build.

John Calvin famously said that the human heart is an idol-making factory.

We can build idols out of anything.

And we turn to those idols to give us things we most desperately want out of life. One of the most helpful things I learned from Tim Keller that I've shared with you many times in sermons over the years is the distinction he makes between what he calls "far idols" and "near idols."

Far idols are deeply rooted idols.

They are far in the sense that you can't see them on the surface of your life.

They are the idols that have the most power over you.

They motivate you and move you at the deepest levels.

Tim Keller says that there are basically four far idols:

Control, Comfort, Power, and Approval

Depending on your personality, your experiences, maybe even biology, going to be drawn to one or two of these more than others.

1. The control idol promises certainty, security, standards, order

The greatest nightmare for a person who worships control is uncertainty.

Worry is the problem emotion for people who worship control.

Worried that things aren't right, things are out of usual order, that discipline is breaking down.

All idols demand sacrifices. Have to go to top of tower with sacrifice.

The sacrifice that control demands is loneliness and lack of spontaneity.

Because when you worship control, other people often feel condemned by you, and you are fearful of doing anything unplanned or unknown.

2. Another idol is comfort. What does it promise?

Ease, pleasure, for some people that means privacy, freedom, entertainment.

The person who worships comfort wants to avoid stress and demands at all cost.

Boredom and discontent are often problem emotions.

And the comfort idol opens people up to temptations—especially temptations of the flesh.

3. Power is another far idol.

Power promises winning, influence, moving up the ladder, being top dog.

The greatest fear for a person who worships power is failure and humiliation

and anger is often their problem emotion.
This idol drives you to take on burdens and responsibilities that crush you.

4. Approval is the last idol in Keller's list.

It promises affirmation, praise, love, and a sense of worth.

Approval worshippers dread rejection.

They pay the price of lack of freedom around people,
because always concerned about what people think of them.

They sometimes are overwhelmed by a sense of rejection or worthlessness.

There are many variations and combinations of these far idols.

But do you see how these things operate beneath the surface of our lives?

These are the deep idolatries that sometimes don't even see in ourselves.

So what are near idols?

Near idols are the created things we use to get the far idols to bless us.

These are the plans and projects. These are the towers we build.

Let me give you the clearest example. Money. Money is a near idol.

It's a created thing we worship for different reasons, depending on our far idols.
Some people want money in order to have control.

If I have enough money, my future can be planned and secure.

If I have enough money, I can control my life and destiny.

Other people want money because their idol is approval.

If I have enough money, I can buy the things that make me acceptable
to the people who matter. I can make myself more beautiful and attractive.

Other people worship money for comfort and pleasure.

Other people worship money because it gives them power over people.

Do you see how idolatry works? Money is just one example.

You can use any created thing as a near idol—

marriage, children, career, sex, religion, politics, food, drink, exercise—

Anything can be a near idol to get what we really want deep down—

control, comfort, power, or approval.

What do you worry about the most? What do you dream of in quiet moments?

What could you not bear to live without if you lost it?

What do you rely on or comfort yourself with when things go bad or get difficult?

What makes you feel the most self-worth? What are you proudest of?

Answer those questions honestly and you'll be getting close to your idols.

We all have a tendency to make plans and projects a substitute for God.

But God is merciful, and that brings us to the second point . . .

MP#2 God's mercy in frustrating our plans and projects to draw us to himself

Verses 6 and 7 sound odd when you first read them.

The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

It sounds like God is saying, if I don't intervene now, they'll get too strong for me.

I won't be able to stop them if I don't stop them now.

But that's not at all what it means.

This comment is similar to the one in chapter three where the Lord said that he had to keep Adam out of the Garden after he sinned to keep him from eating from the tree of life and living forever.

That doesn't mean that he was worried Adam might sneak in and foil God.

God said that Adam would die, but he sneaks in and eats some fruit from the tree of life right under God's nose and lives forever.

Not at all. What's being communicated in these similar passages is that the Lord is being merciful. He knows that if sinful people continue unopposed in their sin.

If they are successful in it. If they achieve all their hopes and goals.

Then they will become entrenched in their rebellion and disobedience.

Their hearts will become impossibly hardened against God, and there will be no possibility of repentance and grace.

So the Lord says: I'm not going to let that happen.

I'm not going to let the people of Babel succeed in their plans of building a tower to heaven and making a name for themselves, because if they do, they will be so confident and sure of themselves and so satisfied with their idols, that they will never consider turning to me.

So you see, it's not out of vindictiveness that the Lord frustrated their plans—it was his mercy. He didn't come down in judgment, but in grace.

God doesn't derail every building project or cause every bridge to fall.

Not at all. He gives remarkable successes to the human race.

Even though mankind is fallen, sinful, and prideful God still generously gives

talents and abilities. And he doesn't by any means limit to believers. All sorts of people, even people who hate him get amazing talents. In Babel, this ability to build a tower was possible because of a new technology. They had discovered burned bricks, fired bricks, which were stronger and more durable than sun-dried bricks and enabled higher structure. Those sorts of advances are good, even if it was done for a self-serving motive. Advances by the human race are possible because we are made in his image. But the Lord never allows them progress to the point of building heaven on earth.

Listen to the way Dr. Robert Rayburn puts it in his sermon on passage.

There never has been in the history of the world a time in which so many people live as prosperously as they do today, never a time when so many people live to a ripe old age, never a time when ease of travel has shrunk the world so small, but still we are no closer to having saved ourselves than any generation of human beings that lived before us. Think of the UN building in New York City, another tower, as it were reaching to the heavens. The whole idea was that by collective effort we would bring peace and prosperity to the earth. We would end war and pestilence and create a new and abiding kingdom of man. But the goal remains as elusive, if not more elusive today than at the founding of the United Nations. War and pestilence are still with us; disunity and competition among men have been stimulated by the advance of technology rather than curbed by it. Modern technology has been trumpeted as a development that will unify the race and make possible man's final victory over the forces that still control him. But for the first time in history man has grown used to youngsters shooting up a school, or religious and political activists blowing up a market, killing themselves and hundreds of others instantaneously. For all the marvels of their technology, the ancients couldn't do that! It is as true today as it was those millennia ago that there will be no peace on earth without the Prince of Peace. That is a realization that ought sooner or later suddenly to dawn on the minds of all human beings: the futility of human life.

Last week during Sunday school, Ryan LaGanke gave his testimony.

If you missed it, you missed something special.

Ryan is a son of this church,

but as he told us so honestly last week, he rebelled, he wandered.

He tried building his own towers to heaven and the Lord kept frustrating his plans.

At one point, Ryan said something like this, I'm paraphrasing.

I tried selling drugs, but that didn't fill me.

I tried chasing a woman, but that didn't fill me.

I tried running, but that didn't fill me.

Everyone understands the first thing on Ryan's list.

Of course drugs won't fill you. Buying, selling, taking drugs.

It might give you what you want for a while, but you'll be sure to crash.
But what about the last thing on Ryan's list.

Running. Ryan's a talented cross country runner.

What could be more healthy and positive than that?

Exercise, teamwork, the great outdoors.

How could that be wrong?

But Ryan got it.

As the source of my meaning and purpose and happiness and contentment—
even cross country running doesn't fill you.

It might not be as it might not be as dysfunctional or socially unacceptable as drugs,
but it's still an idol and a crummy substitute for the living and true God.

And making it your tower to heaven will end in frustration.

Speaking of running.

Also in that stack of DVDs I got from my father-in-law were a bunch of movies.

And one of them was Chariots of Fire, which we watched.

I had forgotten what a good movie it is.

It's the true story about two British runners in the 1924 Paris Olympics—

Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell—both sprinters.

Abrahams was an agnostic Jew. He was from the upper class, but because of he
was Jewish, he was never fully accepted by his upper class peers—
and it consumed him. That's way he was in the Olympics.

There's haunting line in the movie.

Abrahams is waiting for an important race, and in a moment of honesty he says:
"I have ten lonely seconds to justify my existence. But will I?"

He wins the 100 meters and the gold medal. But as he crosses the finish line,
the expression on his face betrays an emptiness in his soul.

He's won, but still frustrated. His longing for acceptance not fulfilled.

And then there's Eric Liddell, the Scottish Presbyterian.

His sister is a missionary in China. She challenges him.

She says, you said you are going to come to China. We need you there.

Why are you wasting your time with this Olympic running?

Eric Liddell says: "I believe God made me for a purpose (he meant China),
but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure."

That's why the Lord, in his mercy frustrates our plans and projects

to build our own towers to heaven.

Because he wants more for us than 10 lonely seconds of life,
chasing the idols of control, comfort, power, and approval.

Because he doesn't want us to experience a lifetime of gold-medal finishes
that become a substitute for the living God and lead us straight to hell.

He want us to know that he mad us for a purpose. And through Jesus Christ,
to feel the smile of his pleasure upon us in all that we do.