

**Genesis 10-11**  
**Faulty Towers**  
**Notes from a sermon preached at**  
**Christ Church Liverpool**

What does it take to bring people together?  
What does it take to keep people together?

At the level of individual relationships we know that it's difficult for human beings to form lasting partnerships – as our experiences of broken friendships and marriages testify so clearly.

Often we just don't understand how our relationships get to the points of stress and struggle that they do. It's just somehow that, as the Black Eyed Peas put it in their current single, *something got out of hand*.

It's difficult to keep individuals together.

As we've studied Genesis over the last few weeks we've discovered why that is.

The spoiled and fractured nature of our relationships, of all human relationships and especially on those which should be the most perfect partnerships – between men and women in marriage – is a result of our rebellion against the God who made us.

Part of God's just judgment on humanity's sinful desire to reverse the created order and become like God – those who define good and evil, is fractured and messed up relationships.

But of course, while that might explain our difficulty in what you might call "personal" relationships, it doesn't explain the difficulties in global relationships.

- Why do different races find it so hard to get on?
- Why do different nations squabble and fight and war?
- Why do we split into tribes and factions and parties?
- In fact, come to that, why are there different races, nations and clans at all?

Well those are questions that God has given us Genesis 10 and 11 to answer.

Our temptation, of course, is to skip straight over the arcane list of names that have, for the most part, faded into the depths of history, and head for the better known and exciting story of the tower of Babel in chapter 11.

But that's really a mistake. Because Genesis 11 is part of a unit – these two chapters belong together and, together, they present parallel pictures of why we have a world full of joyous

and wonderful human diversity – and full of painful human rivalry.

**1 Spreading humanity rightly fills God's earth (10:1-32)**

10:1 repeats a phrase that will by now be familiar to those of you who have been reading along in Genesis.

*This is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons, who themselves had sons after the flood.*

Literally: *these are the generations of the sons of Noah.*

And each time we've seen this in Genesis – *these are the generations of the heavens and the earth* or *these are the generations of Adam* – it introduces a major new section.

The flood is over. And God has covenanted, solemnly promised, to all humanity that he will never again destroy the earth by water. And so we have, uniquely in world literature, a table of the nations.

Not every nation on the earth of course – the writer of Genesis is only interested in those nations that were known to Israel. But a symbolically complete list of the nations – a list of 70 names in all. A complete number.

And as you read through there are a number of key words in this chapter. Words that the writer of Genesis emphasises again and again.

10:5  
10:20  
10:31-32

In Genesis 10 the effect of people having clans and tribes and languages is that it means that the **spread** over the face of the earth.

If you wanted to use the language of Genesis 1 they fill the earth and begin, through agriculture and technology, to subdue it.

Why are there different races, nations, tribes and languages? Well the answer we are given by Genesis 10 is profoundly positive.

The nations exist under God's sovereign rule to fulfil God's purposes for the world.

Here is mankind fulfilling his creation mandate. Humanity doing exactly what God had asked of them.

The nations, Genesis 10 teaches us, are brothers and sisters.

All descended from one human family. All united in our common humanity. All to be respected as bearers of God's image.

As chapter 9 has put it – whoever sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed. That's not bloodthirsty vengeance. That is a profound respect for the individual dignity and value of human life.

We are united in our humanity. And the nations are God's plan to enable humanity to fill the earth and harness all its bounty for the glory of God.

After the flood, after God's terrible judgment, there is still blessing. God brings about his creation plan for the earth through human beings, even though every inclination of the hearts is evil from childhood.

But even here in chapter 10 there are hints that this is not all good news. Because this is not an uninterrupted list of nations. Two people are singled out for special mention. Two people who are not simply named but described. Nimrod and Peleg.

*Nimrod, v8, the son of Cush was a mighty warrior.* Not a shepherd king, but a hunter king.

And any Israelite reading the list of cities which Nimrod either conquered or founded would have picked up straight away that this man is not a symbol of godly living. Babylon and Nineveh were proverbially wicked and immoral. These cities were later to be capitals and fortresses to the Babylonians and Assyrians – the cruellest and most fearsome ravagers of nations in the ancient world. It seems they had some of their ancestors' blood in them still.

And Peleg. Unlike Nimrod he was not despised Canaanite. Peleg is a Semite – a descendent of the blessed line of Noah. But, we are told, in his time, the earth was divided. What's that all about?

After all though Genesis 10 has explained to us that the nations are all united in their humanity and that they bring about God's purposes for the world as they spread and fill it hasn't explained why there is so much war and hatred between peoples.

Why so much confusion and misunderstanding?

What is it that Nimrod and Peleg hint at? What has happened to bring a curse to the nations disrupting their relationships just as personal relationships are cursed by God's judgment at the fall?

Well the answer, in chapter 11 is that:

## **2 Gathered humanity sinfully challenges God's authority (11:1-9)**

Right from the beginning of chapter 11 we know that something is wrong.

Because, as we've seen several times in Genesis already, moving eastwards is not a good sign. To move east is to move away from Eden, away from God's blessing and rule.

And if a key word in chapter 10 is **spread** the key word in chapter 11 is **scattered**.

They build their tower, v4, so that they may not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.

Rather than spreading out to fulfil God's plan that humanity should fill the earth these people are determined to gather together in defiance of God.

The author of Genesis writes to show us that everything about their project was godless. Let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly – they choose man made materials rather than the stone of the earth that God created.

*Let us build ourselves a city...so that we may make a name for ourselves.*

This place, this city, with its tower, is about godlessness. This is human cooperation with the express purpose of toppling the creator.

They think the tower they build will reach into heaven itself – as if they can invade God's kingdom from underneath and catch God unawares.

We don't know exactly why it was that they did it. Perhaps they wanted an enormous tower so that the rich and elite could escape a future flood. If so it shows that they simply did not trust God's word – for he had promised there would be no future flood.

Perhaps they recognised that a growing population meant that they soon would be forced to spread across the earth and wanted this city with its magnificent tower, this Babylon, to remain as an eternal reminder of their greatness when they were dead and buried.

Whatever their motivation this city, and especially its tower, was symbolic of humanity united against the God who made us.

And God will not stand for that. I wonder if you noticed the irony of v5?

These people think to storm heaven itself with their massive and impressive tower.

But the LORD has to stoop even to see the city and its tower.

These people may think they are impressive and terribly clever. But they are no more than children messing about with lego bricks.

They thought it was terribly clever to, v3, literally, mix up bricks...

...But the Lord, v7, comes down and mixes up their languages.

He confuses and prevents, he mixes up and scatters.

The scattering of languages and nations is not only humanity fulfilling God's purpose to fill the earth.

For the nations, with their warring and misunderstanding, are scattered under God's judgment to reduce their collective rebellion against the creator.

And the symbol of the rejection of God by human beings is the city and its tower.

You might think that that's not how people think any more. But you'd be wrong.

For, despite all their many blessings. Despite the cultural creativity and the blessings of the gathering of people from many nations that happens in cities across the world, cities and their towers are still very often centres of godlessness.

Take these words from one developer's web site in Liverpool:

*For nearly a century the Three Graces - The Royal Liver Building, The Cunard Building and the Port of Liverpool Building - have defined one of the world's most recognised skylines.*

*These majestic buildings were conceived and constructed as visible symbols of Liverpool's international prestige, proud emblems of its commercial prowess.*

*The City of Liverpool is once again looking to the future with renewed confidence and optimism. Its waterfront and City Centre are being transformed by record levels of investment, and a new spirit of partnership between private and public sectors.*

*Located at the southern end of the Pier Head, the Fourth Grace is one of the world's most*

*inspiring development opportunities. In January 2003, Liverpool Vision and its development partners selected a proposal by a consortium of Neptune Developments and Countryside Properties, designed by Alsop Architects, as the preferred scheme for the site.*

*On completion the innovative and iconic Fourth Grace will be an architectural signature that will be read by the world, and an important focus for regeneration of the city and the region.*

I can imagine that's probably word for word the kind of application for planning permission the builders of the tower of Babel would have written!

That was exactly what they thought. That their signature tower would be read by the whole world. That they would make a name for themselves.

And God comes in judgment on their pride and arrogance, scatters the people and divides their communications, tribe from tribe, nation from nation.

The people of Babylon, one of the great cities of the ancient world, would, if you had asked them, told you that the name of their city meant "the gate of God."

That is not, Moses says, what it really means.

Far from being the gate of God their city is so puny and pathetic that God has to peer down even to see it.

And its name really means confusion. Babel.

If we were naming it today in English we might call it blah-blah-blah.

No meaning - just noise and confusion.

And the cities and nations of the world have not changed in the thousands of years that have elapsed since Babel.

In many ways the life of this city, or any city, is a fulfilment of the responsibilities God has given us - to reproduce, fill the earth, be creative, understand the world that God has placed us to live in.

Liverpool, with its universities, theatres, galleries, businesses, airport, museums, libraries, warehouses, shops and factories. With its people drawn from many nations, of different colours, languages and tribes shows God's glorious diversity and creativity.

But the city, this city, is also, very often, a symbol of godlessness.

- Its university science departments are determined to reject any explanation for the existence of the universe apart from God.
- Its artists depict human beings as little more than interesting machines.
- Its shops celebrate consumerism – greed is good.
- The arts faculties carry Babel to new extremes by trying to empty language of any meaning at all.
- It is riven by racism, tabloid style fear of the outsider.
- Even the airport is known by an explicitly godless slogan – above us only sky.

That is the city. Our city. Any city.

Godless humanity sinfully challenges God's authority.

And so God ensures that human cooperation, without exception, ends in failure and the breakdown of communications.

All the worlds great unifying projects are doomed to failure.

And that is not simply a judgment of God – but also a sign of his astonishing mercy.

Because it means that, though great unifying empires may come and go, humanity will never cooperate long enough and thoroughly enough to utterly eradicate God from their thinking and living.

Empires may flourish for a long time. The Roman empire lasted over 400 years. Compared to that the century of the British empire and the 70 years of the Soviet empire seem like just a breath. We, of course, think that the rule of Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Disney, Nike and all our global brands is unchallengeable. But if we think that we are fools. For the Bible and the record of history show us that God will not allow human towers of arrogance to stand. He brings empires crashing down to limit human pride.

The United Nations is in many ways a noble project. But Genesis 11 tells us that, ultimately, it is a project doomed to failure.

Because society without God is fundamentally unstable. People may seek meaning in unity but they also, as one of the commentators on this

passage puts it, "have an insatiable appetite to consume what others possess."

There will be no lasting peace in our world, without the Prince of Peace.

So then, what should those of us here this morning who call ourselves Christians, what should God's people do?

### **3 Godly humanity leaves Babylon looking for a different city (11:10-32)**

Oh no, I hear you cry, not another genealogy! This time we're back to a genealogy very similar to chapter 5. Not this time an exhaustive account of relationships. But a straight line – swerving not at all from v10 to 23. Lots of sons and daughters but traced simply through one line.

The godly line. The line of people from whom God will bring his blessing, as we'll see next week, the line of Abraham.

Normally, you'll remember, after each episode of judgment on sinful humanity in Genesis there is some sign of hope. Some sign of blessing.

But not so in chapter 11. In fact God doesn't speak again. The heavens are silent.

Generations come and go and the passage ends with yet another death – Terah, Abraham's father, dies in Haran.

But there is just the hint of hope. Because Terah has left Babylon. Did you notice that?

All the previous generations were in Ur of the Chaldeans – that's a place near the ancient city of Babylon. And God does not speak until his people leave.

We might not even pick up on that if the book of Hebrews didn't explain it to us.

For Abraham, in the next chapter will move again.

He will move on from Haran to Bethel, the house of God.

Why?

Hebrews 11:10 – *he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

Now that is a city to want to live in. Abraham knew the godlessness of the city. And that enabled him to leave the city. Because he was looking for a better city.

You see if you a Christian here this morning living in the city, amongst godless humanity, the secret of successful living is to see the city for what it is.

To love the creativity and energy of the city as part of God's plan for filling and subduing the earth.

And to despise the godless arrogance of the city.

And the reason Christians can do that is that we are looking for a better city. A place where humanity will not be scattered but gathered. A place where the nations, people of every tribe and tongue and language will be gathered together. A place where languages will be many and varied – but where there will be no confusion or misunderstanding.

That city, that gathered community, is possible only under the rule and reign of Jesus Christ.

That's what Acts 2 is all about. When the people speak in tongues in Acts 2 it's not some private religious experience – a me and God moment. It's the reversal of the curse of Babel. Not the destruction of the variety of language, which is a wonderful gift of God, but the removal of confusion.

Each of the nations hears the wonders of God in their own language. No confusion. Many languages – one message, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The existence of the church – a global community, with many languages but one message – the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ – is a taste of a better city.

In the book of Revelation the elders in heaven, representing the whole of redeemed humanity, sing to Jesus.

With your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Christian people can rejoice in the diversity of the city – a diversity that, we hope, as our church grows, will be reflected in our own local church.

But we need not be taken in by the arrogance and pride of the city – because we know a better city. A city which recognises the God who made us and redeems all who trust in Jesus.

So what might any of this mean for us this week?

Well in your office it could give you a powerful tool in conversation. As problems and news stories are discussed from around the world you know what most people don't. That humanities problems cannot be solved by us.

That only in Jesus will there be true unity of peoples and nations.

As you work in your company or hospital or school this passage teaches us that we cannot heal the worlds problems, educate sinfulness out of people or create meaning and purpose through prosperity and trade.

As good as hospitals, schools and businesses are – and all are to be valued by Christian people – it is sheer folly and arrogance to think that our towers can solve our problems.

Only in God's community and, ultimately, in God's city, will we be liberated for true unity.

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