

A Name For Ourselves (Genesis 11)

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[0 : 00] Well done. Thank you, Venus, for helping us to remember. Such an important passage as well, and we will be in that passage next week. But for now, if you'd like to open your Bibles, if you have them, to Genesis chapter 11.

And yeah, feel free to come down and join us as well. We can read God's Word together. So Genesis chapter 11.

So I'll be reading from verse 1 through to verse 26. This is the Word of the Lord. Let's listen together.

Now, the whole world had one language and a common speech. And as people moved eastwards, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.

They used brick instead of stone and tar for mortar. Then 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.

[1 : 14] But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the people were building. And the Lord said, If there's 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 that we will not understand each other. So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth.

And they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel. Because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

This is the account of Shem. Two years after the flood, when Shem was a hundred years old, he became the father of Afaxad. And after he had become the father of Afaxad, Shem lived 500 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Afaxad had lived 35 years, he became the father of Shelah. And after he became the father of Shelah, Afaxad lived 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

[2 : 21] When Shelah had lived 30 years, he became the father of Eber. And after he became the father of Eber, Shelah lived 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Eber had lived 34 years, he became the father of Peleg. And after he had become the father of Peleg, Eber lived 430 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Peleg had lived 30 years, he became the father of Reu. And after he became the father of Reu, Peleg lived 209 years and had other sons and daughters. When Reu lived 32 years, he became the father of Serug.

And after he became the father of Serug, Reward lived 207 years and had other sons and daughters. And when Serug had lived 30 years, he became the father of Nahor.

And after he became the father of Nahor, Serug lived 200 years and had other sons and daughters. When Nahor had lived 29 years, he became the father of Terá.

[3 : 19] And after he became the father of Terá, Nahor lived 119 years and had other sons and daughters. After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

This is the word of the Lord. Shall we pray and ask God to speak to us today? Father, these are curious stories, but they're important stories for us.

Remind us how firm a foundation we have in you, our Creator. Convict us that we cannot reach heaven by building a name for ourselves. And Father, remind us again how you have come down to make a name for us.

Father, we ask all these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. So we are coming to the end of our series through Genesis, which all three services have gone through.

So again, next week it's your last chance. If you do have any burning questions, please, if you can put it up there or you can text it to me. I'll try and make a shortened sermon next week and then we'll leave some time.

[4 : 24] And I'd love to invite you to share or even ask some of your final questions before we kind of say goodbye to Genesis for a season. So, all right.

We dream of fame and fortune. We dream of fame and fortune. Fame and fortune, these are two things that more and more apparently millennials and Gen Z feel are very important.

There was a recent study of a thousand adults who were born between 1998 to 2002. That makes you Gen Z, by the way, if you didn't know. And in this study, making money, having a successful career, and being famous actually were listed right up there as very important to them.

And actually, more so than people born in the 90s, the 80s, or earlier. In other words, more and more of us are wanting to make a name for ourselves.

And now, when we talk about making a name for ourselves, being famous and so on, different cultures do this in different ways, right? So, I was remembering watching, I can't remember which show it was, but there was a scene where the Korean baby turns one.

[5 : 41] And what happens? You know, there's a tradition. You put a bunch of random toys right in front of them. And you just hope that the Korean baby, one-year-old, doesn't know what they're doing, will pick the one that is a stethoscope or the one that has wads of cash.

I don't know. And whatever they reach for will be their future ambition. I don't know if you've seen that in real life or on TV. Maybe in your family, you don't do that.

But maybe the ambition in your family is a successful career. And so, you will gather everyone, not for family dinners, but for the graduation photo, right?

No one should miss that, okay? When there's a graduation, everyone in the family, all the relatives need to come along, and you're going to hang out together. This is what we live for. Maybe in another family, you've got sports trophies or sports achievements.

That's what your family are trying to come together for. And even in my old high school, recently, has been sending me emails, right? Hey, William, how are you? Hey, do you want to know what your former classmates have been up to?

[6 : 39] And how have you made a name for yourself? Let us know. Reply to us. We live in a world, right, that is caught up with chasing greatness, dancing with the stars, and being remembered.

And to be honest, if you're like me, sometimes a part of us wants to join in. Whether it's what we add on our Instagram profiles. Whether it's what we buy or what decisions we make with our lives. It is far too easy for all of us to get caught up in wanting to build something for ourselves. And so we are not alone, actually. Because from Genesis 11, we read something that sounds eerily familiar, right?

A whole bunch of people, our earliest ancestors, they're building a city, wanting to make a name for themselves. And I know when I read Genesis 11, it sounded pretty odd, two different sections. But actually, both have the idea of a name, right? A name that runs through the chapter, right? Whether it's a name that the tower builders are trying to make, or names that run down Shem's family tree.

[7 : 48] For those of you who weren't here last week, you'll remember. We looked at this table of nations last week. Okay, three suns after the flood. And we were going, what on earth could we get out of this?

How is all this geography going to be helpful? But we remembered, right? That each sun helped us to remember something different that we needed to think about. Right? We were called to remember God's heart for distant nations, right?

With your faith. When we thought about Ham and all these neighboring peoples that we had to be watchful about, we remembered, stay loyal to God as we live among our neighbors.

And as we follow Shem's line today, we're going to be reminded again, right, as we said last week, that we need to trust God's plan to rescue a divided world. But how did it get divided in the first place?

Well, this is where Genesis 11 helps us out. We continue from Genesis 11, and here we get kind of two different accounts, don't we? Right? Two different stories.

[8 : 47] Two different paths. So I want to submit to you that, you know, on first glance, they don't look the same, these two stories. They don't look related. And yet, both stories flow from Genesis 10.

And both repeat the idea of a name, right? And actually, even the word Shem in Hebrew sounds like the word name. So I think the author's trying to say, I'm here to tell you about how to make a name.

And if you remember, vaguely, right, this looks very complicated, doesn't it, right? Sons of Shem, all kinds of names, right? The key name to focus in on is the name Eber, right?

Because two sons were born to Eber. He makes that point clear. Right? And these two sons were born during a divided time. We go, one side, there's a guy called Peleg.

Another side is a guy called Yoktan. But notice how then, at the end of chapter 10 last week, the verses just follow Yoktan's line. Okay? We kind of put pause on Peleg until what we heard today.

[9 : 48] And so actually, I think, firstly, Yoktan is going to set the scene for the Babel story. Okay? This is what we heard at the start. And then later on, the other line of Eber's sons comes down to Peleg.

And then that's where we'll resume that path. So today, almost, we get two ways for humans to go. There are two ways to live in God's will.

And there are two kinds of consequences. And so we're going to look at the Babel story. And that's our first path. Okay? Genesis 11, I think, shows us two ways to live. The first way is this. Building a name for ourselves, which will bring judgment.

The first path tells us this. Building a name for ourselves brings judgment. That's what we see from the Tower of Babel story. Let me read verse 1 and 2 again. Now, the whole world had one language and a common speech.

And as people moved eastwards, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. Here we are told literally, right, that all the earth spoke one language. And actually, this phrase, all the earth, happens, I mean, in just a couple of verses, a lot.

[10 : 55] You know? All the earth. In verse 4. Verse 8. Twice in verse 9. This is reminding us. This is a timeless, global tale for all of us. Other ancient Near Eastern cultures, they had their own kind of modified creation stories and flood stories that we've talked about in previous weeks.

But this Tower of Babel story, we can only find in Scripture. It is unique to God's Word. And uniquely, it tells us that once there was a united people who settled in a place called Shinar. And from last week, remember, Shinar is not a happy place. Okay? Shinar is actually part of the kingdom of Nimrod, that mighty warrior that was kind of boasting and putting his, kind of marking his territory all over the place.

And actually, significantly, who's he descended from? Which son? Anyone remember? It was Ham. Yeah, that's right. My kids know, so. Already, our warning bells should be ringing.

Okay? Why are they going to live in Ham's land? Okay? Remember, right? God's people should be on neighborhood watch, not sleeping with the neighbors. Okay?

[12 : 06] Will Shem's kin stay loyal to the Lord? Or are they going to get drawn into the godless ways of their surrounding peoples? Already, I think the answer's not looking hopeful, because they are settling in Shinar.

Verse 3. What did they do? They said to each other, Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly. They used brick instead of stone and tar for mortar. Then they said, Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens.

Okay? Anyone remember what God's first command to humans were? Way back in Genesis 1, it was to be fruitful.

That's right, and multiply. Okay? And the way to do that, God's plan was this. It was for them to spread over the whole earth and to do that. And so what is happening here is actually a rejection of God's plan for humans in those times.

Right? Instead of filling the earth, here with one language, as one people, they make one plan to build a city. Or the tower that reaches to the heavens. They make a plan to stay put.

[13 : 16] These should have been a people that just moved on. Okay? Moving to where there's water. Moving their animals to the next place of the food. Just spreading and going across the earth. You do not bring bricks and mortar when you're kind of in a camper van.

And yet, here they deliberately stay put. They build a stairway to heaven. They think they can reach God this way. And actually, verse 4, as we read it, okay, tells us two reasons.

There's two aspects to why. Right? You can see the first part. So that we may make a name for ourselves. And then, the verse ends there.

Friends, here we see two extremely important insights into every single human heart.

Yours and mine. One is this. Okay? We'll go back to the first one. Underneath many of our life goals, our good works, we're often trying to make a name for ourselves.

[14:22] Right? So that we may make a name for ourselves. If you show me what you're building your life towards, I could find out where you find your identity and purpose.

If you share with me that you pour all your time and effort into building up your gaming profile, then I could probably tell you that's probably where you find your purpose and identity in life.

If you are always trying to please your family's expectations for you, maybe that's where you're trying to make a name for yourself. If you're always trying to tweak your social media profiles, always trying to make everyone see you as a certain way, maybe that's where you find your identity and are trying to make a name for yourself.

Can you see what they're doing is not so different to what we do time and time again? But I think the other important insight comes straight after this, right? Okay. How does the verse end?

It says this. Why do we pour our efforts into trying to look good, trying to make a name for ourselves?

[15:35] Behind it often, there is a fear. They had a fear of the future. A future where they were scattered across the whole earth. Right? Behind the tower builders' efforts, there was that fear.

They didn't want to be split up. God's command, right, was not good news for them. They were afraid of what kind of future that would look like if they were split up. So behind all our kingdom building, tower building, there's also fears.

Show me what you spend your time on, what you love most. And underneath that, there might be a fear that you need to diagnose. If you can't stop shopping online, I don't know.

Maybe you're afraid of a future where you look poor or unimpressive to your friends. I don't know.

For me, recently, I obsessed over a conversation I had with someone where someone criticized me or criticized something that I'd done.

And then I realized, why was I so upset about it? Actually, maybe I fear being disliked. I don't know if you've had that same experience.

[16:44] What do you cast your mind to? Or what's underneath that that you're afraid of? Genesis 11 verse 4 gives us two insights into our hearts, doesn't it?

So look, what humanity was doing here in Genesis 11 is far more to us than just a story about tower builders. These are people like us who often cling to each other and not to the Lord for their fears and their futures.

These are people who are seeking a way to connect with heaven or the divine without going to the Lord. These are people wanting to make a name for themselves rather than to spread God's name over the earth.

And this is a kind of self-focused attitude that the Bible calls sin. And look, any time you and I live, work, study, just focus on our life goals without anything else, just focus on my name, my ambition, rather than looking to God for our purpose in life, we will become as self-centered as these tower builders.

We will also commit the same sins as we see at Babel. So what happens next? Verse 5 tells us, But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building.

[18:11] I find this quite ironic, right? You have, you know, all this tower building effort. And then here's the high point of the story, right? No matter how far the humans built or how far they got, the Lord has to come down, as it were, to kind of see what's going on.

You see that? For all the heaven chasing that the humans are doing, right? God was still so far off. They had not even bridged that gap at all. He had to stoop down to see what was going on.

And then in the next few verses, verses 6 to 9, God judges them. He judges them by reversing the efforts of these tower builders.

There's a bit of symmetry here, right? Just like the humans were kind of working with each other, collaborating, verse 3 and 4, to make the tower, in verse 6 to 7, we kind of get this we language, right?

Perhaps the triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit. Perhaps he's consulting and he decides to break up the party. Now imagine showing up to work one day.

[19 : 13] Let's say you're a builder. And suddenly one of your co-workers is speaking Swahili. And the other one's speaking Swedish. Or maybe, I don't know, you've got a uni assignment. It's a group one. And then all of a sudden, all the emails from your friends come in Thai or Tagalog.

Or next in Tereo. It's going to be pretty hard to finish your work. And so, you know, there's no Google Translator either to help them out. I think this is the Lord's judgment.

He mixes their languages so that they have no choice but to stop. And eventually they scatter over the earth. At Babel, that prideful building is baffled.

It has stopped. What's the message to the surrounding people? Remember, Israelites, first readers of this Bible. The nations surrounding them, they love to build tall things and big things.

You know, I've seen someone's, a friend of ours, he's in Egypt, right, looking at big pyramids right now. Okay. And the Babylonians, they got up to that kind of tower building lots too.

[20 : 17] But to them, the message is clear. Your tall towers are nothing. You cannot reach God this way. And for us, as God's people today, the message is clear too.

Whatever our tall towers are, they cannot reach God. None of our human ambitions and careers can achieve the status and significance that we are chasing for in life.

It will just crumble down sooner or later. We cannot reach the heavens this way. Look, don't get me wrong. My point is not saying that God is better than skyscrapers or you can't be an investment banker and glorify God.

Rather, what the story of Yoktan's descendants warns us is that we cannot get closer to God by our works, by what we build. He must come down to us.

Do you see the difference? Maybe we don't, though. Maybe in church we are just full of people wanting to build stuff to draw a crowd.

[21 : 23] We are in an age where worship that has great production values becomes something that people think will connect us close to God, right? But we must not forget it is not what we do that draws us to God.

Friends, there is no magic worship set, no secret cord, no type of building or style of worship that gets us close to God. He must come down to us through His Word, by His Spirit, whatever it takes from Him.

Look, put aside issues of buildings and worship, the Babel story builds on the previous chapters of Genesis, doesn't it, right? And we have been learning all this time, what does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be human, for you and I to be human? When men and women reflect God's image, it is paradise. When we rebel, when we go our own way, when we sin or murder, when we get wasted, or we just waste our lives trying to make a name for ourselves, Genesis tells us we become not even human.

We become enslaved to whatever we are addicted to. Whether it's our screens or our bank balances, we become broken mirrors that cannot reflect God's image clearly.

[22 : 40] So the Tao story points us to a sad reality. A sad way to try to be human and yet be less than human.

To try and make a name for ourselves and yet, we have no name left after it's scattered and judged. And if the Tao story points to one way, we're going to switch gears and look at the other story, right?

Verses 10 to 26. This is where Shem's other family line gives us a different path. And now you're looking at me and going, really?

From this list of names, what can we learn? Well, I want to say this. I think the other way to live comes through here. Instead of building a name for ourselves, 10 to 26 tells us, actually, instead of doing that, we can let God make His name for us.

And that will bring blessing, not judgment. I'll say it again. Letting God make His name for us brings blessing. Okay. Have a look again at verse 10. I'll just have that in front of you.

[23 : 45] I won't read it again. I get tripped up when there's too many numbers and names. But one thing I want you to notice is this, right? Notice the pattern of the genealogy.

Okay. Notice how, actually, if we started at verse 10, we could actually join it to another genealogy way back. Do you remember when Pastor Sam preached from Genesis 5, right?

There was a bit of a genealogy there. And actually, maybe Shem's family tree could just follow straight from there. Okay. And there's a very similar pattern. You notice that, right? So I put Genesis 5, a snippet of that, at the top.

And you notice how similar it is to how Genesis 11, verse 10 starts, right? There's this pattern of so-and-so lived a number of years, became the father of so-and-so. And after that, he lived so-and-so years and had other sons and daughters.

Sounds like a cut-and-paste job, doesn't it? And yet one sentence is different. I wonder if you can see it. If we look at the next slide, you'll see.

[24 : 48] All right. Where Genesis 5, right, that genealogy kept repeating the phrase, and then he died, right? And then he died. And then he died.

This is missing in Genesis 11, verse 10 onwards. What can we learn from this? We learn this, right? In Genesis 5, every name ends in death.

That was the focus, remember, right? That was the curse of sin. It brought death. But when we follow Shem's line here, it sounds like the focus shouldn't be on their death, but their future destiny, some kind of living hope.

Do you see? Whereas Aba's youngest son, right, youngest son, Yoktan, it descends into the confusion of Babel, right? And then they're not even remembered anymore. They're all scattered, anonymous.

From verse 16, we see the other line keep going. Generation after generation, being fruitful and multiplying, following the Lord, until Terah becomes the father of Abraham, Nahor, and Haran, sets it up for the rest of the Bible, right?

[25 : 56] So you see, there's actually two ways to live here. Either you can make a name for yourself, right, and then be scattered, forgotten, or you can make, let God make his name through you and your family.

That was the message to the Israelites, and I think a message to us too. I can either chase my own greatness in this life, and just be enslaved to it, and then die forgotten anyways.

Or I can live under God's plan, under what he wants for me and my family, and perhaps be free. A name for myself, or a name through God's plan.

Those are the two choices we have before us. Those are two ways to live that chapter 11 tells us. And you know what? Throughout the rest of the Bible, actually, this kind of two ways to live idea continues.

And funny enough, the Bible uses the language of cities to describe it. Some of you have lived in both of these cities, if you can recognize them. Whether you lived in Hong Kong and now in Auckland, or the other way around and come back, maybe you've lived in other cities before.

[27 : 05] Whenever you've grown up in different cities, you have personally experienced two different lifestyles, haven't you? Two different paces of life, or two different ways of going to the shops, or getting around.

Two different ways to live. And in the rest of the Bible, what the Bible does, basically, is gives God's people two different cities throughout the Bible to describe two ways to live in God's world.

So time and time again, actually, the Bible talks about Babel, which later becomes the city Babylon, or Jerusalem, or Zion.

These become kind of metaphors for two ways to live, right? One way is just to go through and live in a way that's self-centered, self-interested, doomed to judgment, okay?

You think of the story of Daniel, right? There's a king, King Nebuchadnezzar. He's proud, and he looks around, and he says, look at my kingdom, it's great. And then he has to be humbled like a beast.

[28 : 12] Or we think of, actually, the exiles in Psalm 137. In Psalm 137, the psalmists actually sing, and they grieve that they're in Babylon, and they long for Jerusalem instead.

This is the kind of language that the Bible keeps using. Two cities, two ways to live. Let's go for that city instead. Even the Apostle Peter, I was reading 1 Peter recently, he describes, actually, the Roman Empire they're living in, right?

Where he's saying, you know, you need to live as holy people within this place that you're scattered in. And then he calls the Roman Empire Babylon.

Is it actually Babylon? No. It's standing for everything, any city, any ideology, or world that is built, that is opposed to God.

And the Bible, time and time again, says, don't go to Babel. Go to Zion. Go to the city of Jerusalem. The way of life that is focused on God, that is fixed on His purposes.

[29 : 17] You see, Zion is a place called to center on the Lord and His purposes, and His people, us, are called to do the same. When this happens, it's glorious.

When we move and head towards Babylon, it's disastrous. And so from this tale of two cities, the challenge is the same, not just for Israel, but for us too, right?

Which city do you belong to? Which way of life will give you real security? You can either try to make a name for yourself, that will only lead to futility and judgment from God.

Or rather, would you let God make a name for you so that you will have fullness and joy? I wonder how God could transform us here at PCBC if we took this message to heart, that there are two ways to live, and only one way is what God wants us to live.

You know, what if we were not so fixed on making our name for ourselves, even in church and ministry? What if we were not so fixed on building church structures, but rather focusing on God's people?

[30 : 38] What if you and I weren't focused and fixed on being a famous church among your peers, but rather just being in a faithful church? Imagine if we weren't always worried about promotions or pay rises or politics as we lived our lives on earth, but rather we were pursuing the other city, opportunities to make God's name great, whether in our workplaces, in our families.

Imagine if as parents or couples or friends, we were less inward-looking and comfort-driven as if we lived here, but willing to take risks to reach our friends and family, to invest in future leaders, to plant new churches for His name's sake.

Imagine that. PCBC, if we were willing to give up just making a name for ourselves, imagine what God could do through you and me. He could offer a far better name for all of us.

Look, from the bricks of Babel is only confusion and disappointment. There's nothing good there. But from within the walls of Zion, God promises to give an everlasting name that will never be cut off.

Where even foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord, as Isaiah 56 says, they will love the name of the Lord and worship Him there. What about that? Wouldn't that be something worth living for, building towards?

[32 : 06] And finally, do you know what the best part of all this is? Thousands of years later, actually from the city of Jerusalem, God builds a new people, does He not?

A new city. A new Jerusalem, as it were. He calls it the church. How does He found it? He founds a church on the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

And Jesus Christ is our Lord who came down. Was He not? Who humbled Himself. When we were building our own faulty towers, He humbled Himself to die on a cross for us.

And now He's exalted and lifted high. He is the name above all names that we need. You know? And in that upper room, on the day of Pentecost, full of men and women who are united in this Jesus, God comes down again.

And He sets hearts on fire. His Holy Spirit is at work. He is making a name for Himself. He kick-starts the church. At Babel, God judges sinful unity, does He not?

[33 : 24] He builds barriers by putting people into different languages. And at Pentecost, God builds the church. He reverses the judgment of Babel.

The Holy Spirit rains down on the first Christians, and they are able to speak in different languages. Do you see the reversal? Do you see how much unity and joy there is now in the Lord Jesus, as people make Jesus' name known among the nations?

So if you're still trying to make a name for yourself, if you're still looking for security and stability right now, even today, can I plead with you? Go to Jesus.

He can give you a name for yourself. He can offer you an identity and a purpose that no one in this world can take away or tear down.

Because His name is beautiful, right? His name is wonderful. His name is powerful as have sung. And one day, when He comes again to rule and reign over every city on this earth, we will get to see God's finest building project together.

[34 : 39] And Revelation 7 verse 9 describes it as, a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.

And they all cry out, united and diverse, they will cry out the name of Jesus. Yeshua. Jesus.

Ihu Isa. Yesu. The name who loved us, freed us, bled, and died for us. Amen for that. Let's pray now, in the beautiful name of Jesus.

Lord Jesus, you have no rival. You have no equal. So we forgive, forgive us for trying to make a name for ourselves, even in this past week.

And yet we thank you. We thank you for your great building project, the one that we want to be a part of. Please, Lord, help us see how we can, how we can build for a far better kingdom, the kingdom of God in Christ.

[35 : 47] We thank you that in the Lord Jesus, we are building for something far better, that will last forever. We pray all these things in his beautiful name. Amen.

Amen. very good. Amen. Amen. Thank you.