

THE TOWER OF BABEL
[written in oral form]

Genesis 11:1-9
Sunday School series

October 22, 2017
Gordon Allaby

A few years ago, back in Saskatchewan, a parent shared that her son was constantly playing on the Xbox. They couldn't get him to do anything else, and he even protested joining the family for supper. It seems that he was consumed with the desire to reach for a better score, and put his name on that achievement. Finally, they took away the Xbox, and destroyed it. He was livid,.....no,... that's putting it mildly. She was quite concerned about his reaction.

However, what she did was an act of love.

~~~~~

The Tower of Babel account is a love story.

This is a fascinating story, and it marks a pivotal point in the Genesis narratives. No longer will God react with destruction, such as the great flood. The next chapter introduces Abram, and God's decision to be more personal and intimate with humans. Relationship becomes the emphasis in the Bible--the relationship with God and all of creation.

~~~~~

The Tower of Babel story is fascinating and inspiring, ...yet somewhat awkward if it is taken literally. There are some problems with a literally interpretation.

To begin with, the story states that everyone spoke one language. The obvious quandary is that it is highly unlikely.

We don't even speak the same language as people in Newfoundland or Texas...or....

And besides, in the previous chapter, it states that people were already dispersed after the flood and speaking different languages. Check out chapter 10 when you get a chance.

So, if we take this literally, then we must ignore chapter 10 or conclude that ...amazingly all the people on the earth managed to learn the same language,....between chapter 10 and 11.

~~~~~

If you can't tell already, I do not take the Bible literally.

Some Christians try to read the Bible literally, believing that God chose each word, including the translations,....and that all the accounts in the Bible are factual.

I do not adhere to reading the Bible literally.  
This is my personal understanding.

When a person desires to take holy scriptures literally, then a great degree of faith is the belief that the words in the holy writings were dictated by God, and not simply stories written by wise and inspired people... that stood the test of time.

For a literalist, a great amount of faith must be in the direct link between the words and God. Another perspective is in perceiving much of the Bible to be as story, and that it is not essential for the facts to be historically accurate.

My bias is to put the emphasis on our relationship with God, a relationship that changes, and has tremendous potential for growth.

I understand the Bible to be a tool that helps reveal God's nature and passion, so that we can better relate to God.

Still, this learning process takes faith, and therefore more faith is needed in the struggle to grow in relationship than in the facts presented in the Bible.

I'm not sure how a literalist deals with the some of the contradictions in the Bible, such as everyone spoke one language in chapter 11, but not in chapter 10.

~~~~~

To be sure, there is a sense of comfort in being a literalist. There is comfort in certainty,.....but I see life as complex and mostly in the grey zone with lots of ambiguity. This is my view.

~~~~~

For example: it's comforting to hear wedding vows. The certainty of the vow sounds great,...but in itself, that pledge is meaningless.

The vows are meaningless without the personal investment that includes faith, trust and love. A healthy, lasting marriage requires constant devotion to nurturing the relationship.

A marriage is more about applying faith, trust and love through the messiness of relationship that is full of surprises--good and bad.

Similarly, when I accept that the Biblical writings are NOT literal factual, then.....I must wrestle with uncertainty,... with doubt,.....and with questions.... lots of questions.

I firmly assert that the Bible is trustworthy and full of truth as it reveals God's nature to us.

I think the Biblical stories are intended to lead us to God and to teach us aspects of the nature of God,... so that we can grow in illumination ...and... faith that grows the relationship with God.

I think Life is about relationship, and relationships can be messy with uncertainty. I think it takes faith to live each day.

In my opinion: striving to read the Bible literally is the pursuit of certainty, and certainty is the opposite of faith.

I think we are invited to live by faith.....because life is about relationships.

~~~~~

The stories in the Bible are full of truth, such as the Tower of Babel, and they are stories that invite us in.... to discover more about God, ourselves and about love, yet....we are left with questions and.... the desire to learn more.... and that takes faith.

~~~~~

So, looking at today's story:

Once upon a time, everyone spoke the same language--it's okay...just go with this.

They all came together to build "for themselves" a city, and it would have a great tower that would reach to the heavens.

They decided to do just that....in order to make a name for themselves. Yes, they were a bit egocentric, and ...part of their motivation was to form strength in their unity.

This prompts the question: strength again whom? ?????

~~~~~

We humans have a long history in the fascination of tall and mighty structures.

I learned in a Cultural Geography course that 2,000 and more years ago, the tallest/biggest structure represented the ruler, be it a pharaoh or an emperor.

In Europe, by the middle ages, the tallest/biggest structure was the church. That statement showed that the greatest influence and power was the church. The church spire dominated urban skylines for centuries, even in the settler cities in N. America, until they were shadowed by courthouses and government buildings.

This change revealed the growing prominence of civil law and order.

By the late 19th century, commercial skyscrapers took over declaring capitalism as supreme ruler.

Some egocentric, capitalist barons even put their own name on their tower.....in order to *make a name for themselves*.

I sure hope that sort of person never becomes a political leader.

~~~~~

This arrogant, self-centred passion did not please God, and is counter to what Jesus taught.

This story tells us a little bit about what pleases God.

Moreover, there is no mention in the story that the people petitioned God's help or advice,..... In fact, God is not even mentioned until God decides to intervene.

God looked at the city and the tower, and was impressed.

God even commented that when people work together, on their own together, they will be able to do anything they "propose" / that they desire to do. The key word is "propose".

~~~~~

This is not a declaration that people can do anything / that nothing is impossible. God was not challenged by their potential, not at all.

All we have to do is look around in our world today. We humans produce and consume most anything we propose....
Still,.....our thinking / our proposals are limited.... without God.

Plus, we can get very preoccupied and consumed by our own endeavors, and this includes playing video games.
~~~~~  
So, God took their Xbox away from them.

God made it more difficult for them to communicate / to be focused and infatuated in their urban construction project.  
It's assumed that this means they spoke different languages.  
~~~~~

Verse 7 is a bit weird. It states, "Come let us go down, and confuse their language...".
"Let us"--who's the us? Who is God talking to?

Or,...maybe this is a literary device that invites the reader to join God in this action.
I don't know for sure,.....but the Bible and life render lots of questions.
~~~~~

So,.....the people could no longer dwell in their own obsession, nor could they easily communicate.

Perhaps, they were left with an enhanced need to seek God for help, and at the very least, they would have to work harder on relationships.  
~~~~~

Have you ever tried to communicate with someone who spoke a language you didn't understand?
It's possible, but it sure takes a lot of effort.

Good relationships demand lots of effort.
Perhaps, the confusion given to the people was a means for them to work harder on relationships.....especially with God.
~~~~~

On the other hand, maybe my interpretation is wrong about this, and I'm prepared to retract everything I just said.  
~~~~~

A good story engages the reader, and we may draw different conclusions,.....and I think that's okay.

Even so, this story **is clear** that being consumed with our own fetishes and actions that **do not** enhance our relationship with God, is NOT pleasing to God.

We can take that lesson to heart,..and learn from it...and grow from it.

In this story, God was Not punishing the tower builders. God intervened in order to make it easier for people to look to God / to seek a good relationship with God, instead of being consumed with their own self interests.

It was risky,.....and it was an act of love by God.
I think God wants to be in a loving, growing relationship with us....
because it's in our own best interests,.....in the long run.

~~~~~  
~~~~~

A few months after the first conversation with the parent, I asked her how things were going. She confessed that it was rough at first. He was very angry, and he often went to his friend's house to play Xbox games. She noted that at least he was getting out, and interacting with his peers. She added, that after awhile, he found other forms for outlet, which included doing things with the rest of the family.

This turned out well for them,.....but there was the chance that it could have gotten very ugly, even sad. There are risks in life and with love.

It's not easy being a parent.
I'm not a fan of "tough love", but I think parents need to show ways of healthy living, and that includes trying to remove obstacles to loving relationships. This is what God did in the Babel story.

~~~~~

This morning the passage about the Pentecost experience was also read. This is often understood as the corrective to the tower of Babel. However, it's important to note that the people were given the ability to understand each other.....because of and through God.  
They were together in God's Spirit, and God gave them the ability to understand each other. That difference from Babel is significant.

When our devotion and faith is in God, then we will grow in our understanding of each other, and we will live in peace.

That same Acts 2 passage ended with "What does this mean?"

~~~~~

Life is full of questions, and we may not have all the answers, Yet we can build on what we do know, and trust God to get us through the unknown.

~~~~~

We may not understand things about our Muslim brothers and sisters, and they likely think the same about us. We may have different views and interpretations on many things, too.  
Even so, we worship the same God. We want to do what is right in God's eyes. We seek what is best for our children, and we value peace and justice.

That's a great foundation, and when we trust God to help us, we will grow in understanding and mutual respect.

Perhaps, all us could model that ideal for the world to witness, and with God's help, peace and love will prevail.

That is truly something worth believing in.