

## MEGALOMANIACAL MONUMENT

Genesis 11:1-9

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September 5, 2021**

There wasn't any argument about it before 1998. No controversy whatsoever. Everyone knew that Chicago's Sears Tower was the undisputed, tallest building in the world. But that's before the twin Petronas towers in Malaysia. While they have twenty stories less than the Sears Tower, they stand 33 feet taller because of architectural spires that top the building.

So which one is really the taller building? The taller building or the shorter building with architectural spires?

In fact, there was so much controversy that they formed a regulatory board known as the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat. Multiple categories were established: tallest building with antennae, tallest building without antennae, highest occupied floor, and so on and so forth.

The controversy is over, however, because the tallest building standing today is 2,717 feet tall. Found in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, it opened January 4, 2010. It is taller than any other man-made structure ever built. The building boasts more than 160 stories. And it seems to take all the prizes. Tallest building in the world. Tallest free standing structure in the world. Highest number of stories in the world. Highest occupied floor in the world. Highest observation deck with an outdoor terrace in the world. Elevator with the longest travel distance in the world. And on and on the records go.

Do you think we have a little bit of skyscraper-complex on earth these days? Has no one read the story in Genesis 11 about the Tower of Babel – what happens when men try to build tall buildings, reaching into the sky? Buildings that break records. Buildings that say “Look at me, look at what we have done. Look at this monument to our ingenuity, our intelligence.”

The first skyscraper ever constructed comes to us in Genesis 11. Remember, no elevators, no cranes – just men making the most out of the mud bricks they fire in the furnace.

Chapter 10 lists a Table of Nations. So the question the reader might ask is, “How did we get these varying nations that speak differing languages?” Well, Genesis answers the question in the very next chapter, chapter 11.

### **I. Megalomaniacal monuments focus on the creation rather than Creator.**

Notice humankind has moved to the east, in the land of Shinar, a forename for the place of Babylon (see Genesis 10:10).

Verses 3-4

And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.” They used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. They said, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name; lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”

Let’s count the first person plural references. “Let us” (v. 3). “Let us” (v. 4). “Let us” (again v. 4). “Ourselves” (v. 4). “We” (v. 4).

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has summarized the spiritual selfishness of the tower builders: **“Those who were supposed to be reflecting God’s image in the world– that is, human beings – are instead looking into mirrors of their own...arrogant and insecure, they have become self-important.”** (N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, p. 73)

They weren’t concerned about worshiping God or obeying the commandments of God. God had told them to scatter, to cover the earth, to be fruitful and multiply. God wanted them to fill the whole earth. That’s what He told Adam and Eve all the way back in chapter 1 of Genesis (and later Noah’s family). But instead of scattering to fill the earth, they were gathering to build a monument.

Notice what they said about themselves. “Let’s make for ourselves a name” (v. 4).

Pride is the great sin of every atheist. Those with pride think they are self-made men or self-made women, not God-made men or God-made women. Once again, creation has forgotten Creator, the demands and the commands of the One who has made them. They want to be master of their own ship and captain of their own fate.

We all need to learn two things very quickly in life. Number 1: there is a God. And Number 2: We are not that God.

Pride has a terrible tendency to place ourselves at the center of life, at the center of the universe, when God – and God alone – should occupy the throne. Pride is the only sin so serious it calls forth resistance and opposition from God himself. James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 both warn their readers, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Scripture does not say that God is opposed to the gluttonous, the fornicators, or the covetous, but only to the proud. God resists the proud.

Pride is a sin directed to the face of God. Thus, it is listed not as the last of the Seven Deadly Sins, but as the first – it is the root of all of the sins. It is the first sin, the sin of Adam and Eve, who wanted to be like God and ate from the fruit in the middle of the Garden.

When we’re prideful, we say, “I ought to be, can be, and, by right, am my own God.”

**One counselor told the story of a seventeen-year-old girl who came to see him to untangle her life. She’s already had two children. She’d given up one for adoption. She’d been involved in drinking, promiscuity, and drugs as early as fourteen years of age. She had a**

boyfriend she was planning to marry. The counselor, Dr. William Backus, suggested she might start rebuilding her life by waiting to sleep with her boyfriend until after the wedding. Her response was telling. “I don’t believe in God that much.” You might not like her answer, but at least she was honest. She realized that there was a Being called God, but she had no intention of allowing Him to take away her autonomy. She was saying, “I won’t listen to what God thinks is best for me. I will do what I think is best for me. I will sit on my own throne. And I will be proud. I will live life according to ‘thus sayeth myself.’” (William Backus, *What Your Counselor Never Told You*, p. 56-57)

So it was in the early chapters of Genesis. “Come, let us make a name for ourselves.” Let’s don’t follow the commands of the Creator, but let’s make a monument to man.

Perhaps in this early culture, this precursor to Babylon, they were building something of a semblance of a temple tower which was later known as the Babylonian ziggurat, an imperial embodiment of pride and self-sufficiency. In Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon, in the area of Marduk’s sanctuary, there was a seven-story tower with a temple top that stood tall for all to see. This is the first forerunner to the ziggurat. Genesis implies that nothing similar had ever been built by man before.

## **II. This behemoth building, this tall tower, was an act of disobedience.**

God had told them to fill the earth, to scatter. Humankind is afraid of scattering and has taken action to prevent it. Therefore, against their own will, God – as you will see – scatters them. God wills that earth should be peopled everywhere. Humankind should be attentive to all parts of creation, working in His image to enhance the whole creation. But, instead, humankind is trying to establish a false unity, to establish a human oneness, without any reference to the threats, promises, or mandates of God. This is a self-made unity, which would proceed from a fortress, a tall-tower mentality.

We need to ask ourselves this question today, church. Are we missional in our message? Are we actively spreading the gospel beyond the boundaries of the church? Do we take the attitude of the inhabitants of Shinar? Our tower has been built. Lots of luck to the rest of you. Have we formed redemptive relationships with the lost? Will we hoard the gospel within the walls of this sacred space?

I think there is a New Testament parallel. In Acts 1:8, Jesus tells the church that after Pentecost they will be His witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and the remotest part of the earth. But in Acts 8:1, the church still hasn’t left Jerusalem. So God imposes a missions program by sending a severe persecution against the church in Jerusalem which caused the church to scatter. As they ran from Jewish persecution, they were carrying the good news of the gospel with them even as they went.

## **III. Man’s efforts are laughable in the sight of an almighty God.**

Look at verse 5

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built.

Now there has to be some irony to this. In verse 4, they say this tower they are going to build will reach into heaven.

Reminds me of the little girl who was riding up in the Empire State Building elevator. She was a tourist. You know that elevator goes up, up, up, up. At the 60th floor, her stomach and ears began to show the heights. The girl clung to her father's hand and asked the question, "Daddy, does God know we're coming?"

The reality is, congregation, not this Babylonian behemoth structure, nor even the Empire State Building, will reach the heavens of God. The irony of this is that after they built so high, God couldn't even see their tower from where God dwells. He had to come down to have a look.

God has a long history of following us and finding us out. God descends to the city in order to keep tabs on the inhabitants.

**Author and church development consultant, Kelly Fryer, tells about a time in seminary when she was listening to an uninteresting lecture on a beautiful day when everyone would rather be outside. Apparently the professor sensed that nobody was being attentive because suddenly he closed his notebook and stopped talking. "He wasn't going to waste one more breath on us," she writes. But before leaving the lecture hall, he picked up a piece of chalk and going to the blackboard he drew a huge arrow pointing straight down. He stood back and told the class, "If you understand that, you understand everything you need to know about what it means to be a Christian..." and with that he left the room.**

**Everyone remained for a time staring at the arrow pointing downward. Fryer admits that the most logical thing she could think was, "He thinks we're all going to hell."**

**But the next time the class met, the professor began his lecture by drawing the same arrow on the board. This time he had everyone's complete attention. "Here's what this means," he told them. "God *always* comes down. God always comes down. There is never *anything* that we can do to turn that arrow around and make our way UP to God. God came down in Jesus. And God still comes down, in the bread and in the wine, in the water and in the fellowship of believers. God ALWAYS comes down." (Kelly A. Fryer, *Reclaiming the "L" Word: Renewing the Church from Its Lutheran Core*, [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003], 25-26)**

The seminary professor is right. God comes down.

At that moment, they have a common language, a *lingua franca*. So God spoke as deity to the divine court, and He uses His own "Let us." They had said "Let us go and build up," and God said, "Let us go down and confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech...Therefore its name was called Babel, because the Lord confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth" (vs. 7, 9).

God has His way at the end of the day. The plans for the tall tower have tumbled.

In fact, would you believe that, interestingly enough, building a tall building is still a disaster today? William Pesek says there is a skyscraper curse. And I quote: **“The desire to erect the tallest building seems to have much to do with sudden capital inflows that pump up credit creation and confidence. It’s often periods of over-investment and financial speculation, fueled by excessive monetary expansion, which drive developers and politicians to architectural one-upmanship.” This financial boom is often followed by a bust; hence skyrocketing economies that build lavishly into the stratosphere soon dive dramatically into the doldrums. (“The Skyscraper Curse,” [www.homileticsonline.com](http://www.homileticsonline.com))**

There is an odd New Testament parallel to this Tower of Babel, where men can only babble at each other and not speak. It’s in Acts 2. The Day of Pentecost.

Jews were visiting Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven (v. 5). They had come from the four corners of the earth. But as the apostles began to preach, empowered by the Spirit of God, “each one was hearing them speak in his own language” (v. 6).

Verses 7-8

They were amazed and marveled, saying, “Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?”

To which Peter stood and preached the gospel. And all could hear and all could understand, despite the barrier of language. God, for that one moment, brings them all together to a common communication so they could each hear the gospel in their own language.

Let me ask you some hard questions today.

First, what monuments are you building to satisfy your own pride? What monuments are we building as a church to satisfy our own pride? We build to the glory of God and not to heighten humanity. But in your own life, personally, what monuments are you building? A career? A resume? A portfolio? Accomplishments of your children? What monuments are you building to make a name for yourself?

Second, is God asking you to go? Is His command for you to scatter, and all you do is gather? Maybe He does want you to stay right here, but maybe He calls you to be part of His plan to “fill the whole earth with the gospel.” The Great Commission is about “Go, make disciples.”

Third, where does pride creep in in your life? Remember, every time you’re proud of something, every time you lift up the self, you worship creation rather than Creator.

O God, come down to us, your people, as we realize we can never ever reach up to you.