

# *Mandate Fulfilled*

Genesis 11:1-9

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ May 31, 2020 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



<sup>1</sup>Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. <sup>2</sup>And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup>And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. <sup>4</sup>Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” <sup>5</sup>The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. <sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup>Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” <sup>8</sup>So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. <sup>9</sup>Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (Genesis 11:1-9, NRSV)



God’s directions were quite clear. God creates human beings in his image, blesses them, and then immediately gives them this mandate in Genesis 1:28: **“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”**<sup>1</sup> Ever wonder what your job description is as a human being? This is it. Two things really that God has been giving us to do since the very beginning of time.

First, we are to reflect God’s glory. That’s part of what it means to be made in his image. If an artist does a portrait of me and it ends up looking like Brad Pitt, I’m flattered that he sees the resemblance, but I can’t honestly say that he has accurately reflected my image. In this life we are to reflect God to the world, especially

to one another. We are his representatives. That means we are to go through life as God would go through life if God were in our shoes. That’s why Jesus teaches us that mostly we are to love because God, at his heart, is love. When we love we accurately reflect God’s image.

Second, we are also to make babies, fill the earth, and subdue it. To have dominion over a thing means to dominate that thing. But remember, we can’t do this second task while neglecting the first. We have to dominate the world in the way God would dominate the world because, after all, it’s his world. We’re only caretakers. A better word might be ‘cultivate’. We are to cultivate creation according to God’s wishes. And that’s a huge job, even frightening. God never just wants us to sit put in safe passivity, but to venture out, multiply, prosper, reproduce. But since it’s all God’s world, we have nothing to fear. Everywhere we go and everything we see belongs to him.

Think about a backyard that has been left untended. Weeds everywhere. Mud. No flowers or fruit trees. It’s God’s creation, yes, but nobody but mosquitoes wants to spend much time there. But then one day the owner of the property hires some people to go out back and begin to cultivate the space. These workers don’t just do one little corner of the yard, but the whole yard. Each section is different – it’s not just one big lawn – but each different section also ties into the other sections to form an overall unity that is in line with the wishes of the homeowner. It is unity in diversity, a phrase I want you to remember because we’ll come back to it later.

This is still our calling by the way. We’ve done the making babies part well, though we have to keep it up. We have certainly spread out all over the world. But you and I are still called to go out to our various corners of the world and represent God in those corners, helping to cultivate creation in ways that please the creator. There is great diversity in our cultivation, of course, because God is a God of great diversity and creativity, but there is a unity in the diversity because all cultivation is done under the direction of the one divine Homeowner. So raising children, working the land, managing finances and economies, taking care of our bodies, designing and

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<sup>1</sup> This and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

building cities, promoting healing, creating art and music – whether you are a police officer or a protestor – in all these corners of the world we are to subdue the world in ways that reflect God’s glory.

Stop for a moment and see if you can imagine what the world would look like today if every last one of us, from the very beginning of time, had followed this original mandate. How different our world would be!

Tragically, we have not. And that is the story of the Tower of Babel. Is it historical? Did these events really happen as they are recorded here in Genesis 11? Thoughtful, faithful Christians disagree on that point. But however you would answer that question, I hope you can at least agree with me that whether or not this story is historical, it is true. This story has been played out over and over and over again, right up to today. We know what God has told people to do from the beginning. This is what people have done instead.

The key verse is verse 4: **“Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”** The people want to do two things. First, they want to build a secure city, a refuge from the rest of the world. Second, they want to build an impressive tower, so impressive that they will make a name for themselves. The city and the tower are the outward expressions of their inward and direct disobedience towards God and God’s principal mandate.

First, we don’t want to go out and subdue the world, scattering ourselves all over the place. That would be difficult work, quite inconvenient, even dangerous. No, let the world fend for itself; we are going to build a city for ourselves. A secure city, with a secure wall. We will make things as comfortable for ourselves as possible. Everything we need and desire will be within reach. It’s a fortress mentality.

Second, we don’t really want to make a name for God. We would much rather make a name for ourselves. Let God make a name for himself. We want to make sure people look at us with admiration, even envy. We love human praise and we are terribly bothered by human criticism, even when it is unfounded. Thanks again God, but we would prefer to represent ourselves.

You tell me, is the Tower of Babel story true? Do you see any hint of these rebellious pursuits in our world today? Anybody you know looking out for his or her own security over and above the security of others? Anybody you know trying to make a name for himself or herself? How about in your own life? Is there a part

of you that wants to make things in your own life secure rather than take the risk of venturing out into the unfamiliar parts of our world to cultivate things in the lives of others according to God’s interests? I know there is a part of me that is very interested in making a name for myself. Truth be told, I care far too much about what other people think about me. Maybe you’re not that different from me? This is our story.

So what happens next in our story? Don’t miss the irony. The people try to build this tower that stretches to the heavens, but the Lord still had to “come down” to see what they had made. Have you ever stood at the base of a giant skyscraper and looked up? It’s dizzyingly impressive. But then fly over that same skyscraper in a jet airplane and suddenly it looks like a toy. The things we humans consider to be so impressive, do you ever wonder how they appear to God? It’s a joke.

But it’s not funny. At least not to God. Notice that God takes the efforts of these city and tower builders very seriously. When Adam and Eve took matters into their own hands, God immediately stepped in and removed them from paradise. Later, when the whole world went corrupt, God didn’t hesitate to send a flood to keep things from getting completely out of control. Here in the same way, God immediately frustrates the plans of the people of Shinar by confusing their language and scattering them across the land.

This is always the end result when people focus inward rather than outward, when people seek to look out for themselves first and to make a name for themselves rather than for God. And it makes sense. If I want to make a name for myself then I have to do it at your expense. If everybody else’s tower is just as big as my tower, then what’s the point? My tower has to be bigger than your tower, which may mean I have to knock your tower down. Also, when we wall ourselves off for security, the wall keeps us in but it also keeps others, especially others who are not like us, out. When this happened at Babel, the immediate result was that the people were no longer able to understand one another and their misunderstanding led to division and isolation as they were scattered from one another.

*Tribalism* is a trigger word today, but it’s an accurate description here. Webster’s dictionary defines ‘tribalism’ as a consciousness of, and loyalty to, the in-group to which I belong, a group made up of people who are similar to me in one or more ways. Unless you have been living in a cave this last week, you know that we live in time of intense tribalism. People on different sides of the political aisle, continuously informed by their respective news sources, don’t even seem to be

speaking the same language. Once again this week we have seen tragic, heartbreaking examples of racial tribalism in our own nation and the results have been sadly predictable, so many people retreating to their own camps where they talk over one another, fight one another, even kill one another while nothing changes. Even in the midst of this global pandemic nations have had a very difficult time trusting one another, working with one another, understanding one another. We now even have the mask tribe and the no-mask tribe!

This is the human story. God sends us out to care for his world in ways that honor him and we, instead, focus our concern on ourselves and those like us as we look to bring ourselves honor. Read the Old Testament. Is there a single place in the Old Testament when you stop and say, "At last! Finally God's people got their act together!" No. There are flashes of promise along the way, but things always deteriorate quickly. Sin...judgment...mercy. Sin...judgment...mercy. The pattern is stuck on repeat. God keeps sending people out for his glory; the people keep staying home for their own glory. It's the sin of Adam and Eve, the sin of trying to take things into their own hands and make a name for themselves, repeated over and over and over again. And for all our efforts of city and tower building nothing of eternal value is ever constructed.

Just think of how this one pandemic has exposed the fragility of all the seemingly impressive towers we have built in this world. Economics, education, politics, medicine, travel, entertainment, sports, all these towers have been threatened. And by some standards this crisis might be considered minor. The Black Plague of the 14<sup>th</sup> century killed nearly half the people in Europe in a five year period. Some regions lost up to 80% of their population. Imagine if something similar happened in our day. It could. And for all the progress we boast about in our day – and there has been some wonderful ways people have cultivated our world for God's purposes – there is still whole swaths of the planet that are weed-infested. By some estimates there are 40 million people in slavery around the world *today*. 30,000 children die every day in our world from treatable water-borne illnesses. 2.3 million people are in prison in our country alone, a disproportionate number of them people of color. Think of the groups of people around our world who, because of differences in nationality, ethnicity or religion, literally want to kill each other. Think of the turmoil in our own cities today.

And to make sure you realize I'm not pointing fingers, I look at my own life. All my efforts to create my own security and make a name for myself, what have they profited? It's a vain pursuit. I can take every

precaution, plan ahead, be as prudent as can be, and the walls around the self-made city of my life can come crumbling down with one diagnosis or one disregarded traffic light. A whole crowd of people can think well of me and it's that one stinging criticism, even from somebody who doesn't really know what he's talking about, that can level my self-made tower of reputation and image. Every solo effort on my part to lift myself up, make myself a better person, has fallen short. In the end I'm left with the same old habits and patterns, same old addictions, same old insecurities and resentments. Self-sufficiency and autonomy have never worked out well for me. How about for you?

Now, if you've hung with me this far I'm glad. You'll be glad too. Because as you may know, Genesis 11 is just the beginning of the story. Yes, it does show a pattern that has been endlessly replayed by human beings right up to today. But we must not overlook the fact that in the very next chapter God comes one day to introduce himself to a man named Abram. Abram's an old, childless, pagan idol-worshiper from an out-of-the-way place, a tower-builder in his own right. Nevertheless, God chooses him as a person through whom, he and his wife Sarah, God will do something extraordinary.

Do you remember what God says to Abram when he meets him that day? We looked at this story a few weeks ago. God tells Abram to "Go!", to leave the security of his own land and his own tribe and to go to another land filled with people who were quite unlike him. And then God gave him a name. He changed his name to Abraham, which means 'Father of many.' God called this childless old man, 'Father of many.' You may have noticed, by the way, that God is always giving names to people in the Bible, instead of allowing them to make a name for themselves. And in each case the name God gives a person speaks to what God has done or will do through or for that person. God creates and gives us our identity, and our identity is always tied back to him, to his purposes, his goodness, his glory.

We are then told in Genesis 12 that God blessed Abraham, 'Father of Many', and promised him that even though he and his wife were infertile senior citizens that they would eventually have as many grandchildren and great-grandchildren as the stars in the sky. And that one day – pay attention here – all families on earth, all those families now scattered and divided across the earth, all of them would be blessed through his family. Because one day there would be one of those great-great grandchildren who would finally succeed in carrying out the mandate that God had given to humanity at the beginning.

The New Testament begins with a list of names, a genealogy.<sup>2</sup> The first name on the list is Abraham, 'Father of many.' The last name on the long list is the name of Jesus, a carpenter's son from Nazareth. God gave Jesus his name. It means simply, "God saves." Matthew, who records the genealogy, is being as intentional as possible. Jesus is the descendant from Abraham's family who will bring blessing to all nations, the one who will finally carry out God's mandate from Genesis. Instead of staying in the safe confines of heaven, his eternal home, the very Son of God went forth to the very ends of creation, even taking on human flesh with all its pleasures and pain, for the purpose of cultivating creation, to dominate it with love and conform it, heal it, redeem it. He did not do this by building himself *up*, by making a name for himself. God did make a name for him in the end, but Jesus not before took to himself on the cross obscurity rather than glory, shame rather than honor, weakness rather than power, defeat rather than victory. As commentator John Stott puts it, "At Babel earth proudly tries to ascend to heaven, whereas in Jerusalem heaven humbly descended to earth."<sup>3</sup>

Flash forward to Pentecost, the event we are celebrating today. Christ has gone to the lowest depths, taking sin and death to himself on the cross, into the tomb, to hell itself. But now he has been raised to life! He didn't raise himself; God raised him! All this leaves his small band of followers bewildered. Much of what he taught them is beginning to make sense, but much of it is still vague. Raised to life, he has by this point ascended to heaven again and left them to themselves. But before he left he gave them with a mandate. See if this mandate regarding the new creation sounds anything like the one God gave at the outset of the old creation. **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."**<sup>4</sup>

All authority is his. This world belongs to him. So his followers are now to go out into the world with him (always with him!), to go out and scatter themselves across all the earth, to fill it and to subdue it. Not with force but with love. And with a message of good news, a message that there now is a way to find true and lasting security *and* a beautiful, permanent name for yourself. You could never have achieved these things yourself, but there is one who has achieved them for

you. In him you have eternal and certain security. In him you will be given a name, the name of beloved child, beloved daughter or son of God himself. Not because you've earned it, but as a gift which can freely be received in faith.

You may remember from the book of Acts that after they were given this mandate, Jesus' followers did not immediately take matters into their own hands, venturing forth into the world with banners unfurled.<sup>5</sup> No, they stay put in Jerusalem, and they pray, and wait for God to act. They cannot build this tower on their own. And then in time, on that appointed day at the feast day of Pentecost when Jews from every nation would have been gathered in Jerusalem, God came down again. Not to inspect an earthly kingdom people had tried in vain to build up to heaven, but to build a heavenly kingdom he was about to bring down to earth.

Listen to Luke's account of that day:

**When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.**<sup>6</sup>

The connection, I hope, is obvious. Everybody is speaking their different languages<sup>7</sup>, all those languages that divided them from one another for so long, but now they are all speaking the same message and understanding what is spoken. What unites them? Not the languages; those are all still distinct. Now it is the message that unites them, the message that is being declared through these disciples from the very Spirit of Christ. It is a message that will proceed from that spot in Jerusalem out to every corner of the world and which will cut across all divisions to create a beautiful unity in diversity.

As Paul later put it, **"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."**<sup>8</sup> God's kingdom is to be multi-racial, multi-national, multi-lingual. We, the church, are meant to reflect this unity in diversity to a world so badly lacking it.

<sup>5</sup> William H. Willimon, *Interpretation Commentary: Acts* (John Knox Press, 1988), 27.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:1-4

<sup>7</sup> In Acts 2:9-11 no known nationality of dispersed Jews of that time are excluded from the roll call. Everybody is present.

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 3:28

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew 1.

<sup>3</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 68.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 28:18-20

In John's Revelation he pictures this scene at the end of time: **“There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.”**<sup>9</sup>

Mark Sayers is the pastor of Red Church in Melbourne, Australia, and his writings and teachings have been influential and prophetic around the world. I recently heard him make the point that the story of Babel is still playing out in our world as contemporary society seeks to move forward through perfectibility, human energy, striving, education technology, conquest. But it's a myth, a tower with a fragile foundation, because, in his words, you cannot have progress without presence, a kingdom without the King.<sup>10</sup>

We live at another Tower of Babel moment. This pandemic, and the events in our nation this week, have revealed both the fragility of our human-made towers and the increasing tribalism in our world. Even people who speak the same language don't understand one another these days. So much fear. So much division. So much anger. So much fortress mentality – my nation first, my race first, my agenda first, my rights first, my needs first.

The question – and it's always the question! – is how will the people of God respond. How will the church respond? How will *we* respond? We have failed to fulfill God's original mandate. I suspect God knew that we would. But now Christ has fulfilled it. The perfect image of God has taken dominion over all creation – all authority is his! – and he is now moving towards cultivating our pain-infested world to the point where every square inch will one day reflect God's glory. In response, may we, as his followers, refuse to hide behind the flimsy walls of our self-made fortresses and go instead out after Christ into the world in the love and boldness that comes from knowing that it is his world. And may we, as his followers, also give up seeking to make a name for ourselves but seek instead, in every moment of every day, to bring glory to God's name above all because of what he has done for us, and for every person you will ever meet, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 7:9

<sup>10</sup> From the podcast *This Cultural Moment: Portland Sessions, Session 2*. Listen at <https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly90aGlzY3VsdHVyYXx0b21lbnQucG9kYmVhbi5jb20vZmVlZC54bWwvepisode/dGhpc2N1bHR1cmFsbW9tZW50LnByZGJJYW4uY29tL2I5NWU0OWM4LWNmNTktNWFKOC1iZDQ3LTlhYjA4MDYwYyYU1ZA?hl=en&e=6>



## The Next Step

*A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Genesis 11:1-9 again, the story of the Tower of Babel. What do you notice from this story? What stands out to you?
2. Why would God so quickly shut down this building project? What was the danger or problem?
3. Is your life focused on making a name for yourself or on living in such a way that God is honored or glorified? Maybe it's mixed. Be specific.
4. Do you see tribalism alive and well in our day? How has tribalism sown seeds in the church? How about in our congregation here at Faith? How about in your own life or family?
5. Read the beginning of the story of Pentecost in Acts 2:1-4. What connections do you see between the Tower of Babel and Pentecost?
6. In considering this question, commentator John Stott writes, “At Babel earth proudly tries to ascend to heaven, whereas in Jerusalem heaven humbly descended to earth.”
7. How do you see the Tower of Babel story repeating itself in our day? How are you/we in danger of repeating it yourself/ourselves?
8. How is Jesus calling you to respond to this message today? What is one step you sense you are being called to take?

**Suggested Scriptures for the Week**, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday: Mark 1/Psalm 60

Tuesday: Mark 2/Psalm 61

Wednesday: Mark 3/Psalm 62

Thursday: Mark 4/Psalm 63

Friday: Mark 5/Psalm 64

Saturday: Mark 6/Psalm 65

Sunday: Mark 7/Psalm 66