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Genesis 11: 1-9

LANGUAGE – MAN’S BRILLIANCE OR GOD’S JUDGMENT?

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Over the past few years I’ve had the opportunity to visit some countries I’ve always wanted to visit. I’ve been to Germany, Israel, Egypt, and even had a cup of coffee in Turkey. It was nice to have a guide who spoke English and the language of the country we were visiting. My German was very rusty, but by the end I was picking it up pretty well. Hebrew isn’t really a language for speaking and I did not know Egyptian at all. I still could find the bathroom and a place to eat and that was enough. One of the questions that people have is “Where did all the world’s languages come from?” There are those who believe that all the different languages came from man’s ingenuity and resourcefulness. The Bible tells us a different story. The different languages came from man’s rebellious attitude toward God. God would do something about it. We answer the question LANGUAGE – MAN’S BRILLIANCE OR GOD’S JUDGMENT?

Think of how important language is in our everyday life. We need to communicate with others. Husbands and wives need to understand each other. Parents and children need to understand each other. Employers and employees need to understand each other. As I’ve often said, we need to use words that not only are easy to understand, but impossible to misunderstand. You know the problems that arise if you can’t understand the other person. We’ve all gotten phone calls from people in Pakistan or Indonesia. I can’t understand what these people are saying. After the third time or so, I usually hang up. I’m sure that you have stood in line in a store while people are speaking a foreign language that you don’t know. Perhaps you feel very uncomfortable and nervous. What are they saying? Are they planning and plotting something bad? Are they talking about you?

Communication is important. When God created Adam, he created him with the ability to communicate. God gave us a mouth for speaking and he gave us ears for hearing. It’s been said that we have two ears and one mouth so we should do twice as much listening as speaking. There is a lot of truth to that. God especially wanted his creatures to listen to him and to speak to him. God made it as simple as possible.

But man’s rebellion against God would try to thwart God’s good purpose. There are those who say that we are good by nature. God says differently. At the time of the Flood we hear, “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.” God sent Noah to preach to an ungodly world. God gave the world 120 years of his grace and love, yet the people wanted nothing to do with it. God would destroy the world with a flood. Noah and his family would be saved and the world’s population would start over.

Our text takes place about 100 years after the Flood. Noah and his family were still alive. They could personally tell the story of man’s rebellion and God’s love. They could warn the people of what sin and rebellion can do to our relationship to God and to one another. Everyone in the world spoke a common language. They were able to communicate. There was a great unity. It was a godless unity, but a unity nevertheless. We see that the people would have the same attitude toward God and his Word as their godless predecessors had. They were going to do what they wanted to do. They were not going to do what God wanted them to do. They were going to fight God. They were going to thwart God. They were going to show God who’s boss. It wasn’t the wisest choice then and it isn’t the wisest choice today.

God had told the people to go out and fill the earth. God had given them the entire earth as his gift. We hear that the people moved eastward. There is an interesting play on words in the Hebrew language. It means that they were moving away from the Source. God is the Source of all life, truth, love and salvation. They were saying that they didn't want anything to do with God. They were just fine on their own.

The people found a place in the plains of Shinar, located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. It was a very fertile piece of ground that would be good for farming. That sounds good and innocent. They were going to build a permanent settlement. These people were intelligent. They weren't country bumpkins. God had blessed them with knowledge, skill, and ingenuity. These were gifts that God had given them that could be used to God's glory. But they would have other ideas. They were going to manufacture bricks and build a structure that would last. That didn't sound so terrible either. Wanting to build a city or using bricks are certainly not sins. The sin came in the reason for wanting to do so. "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."

They were going to make a name for themselves. They didn't care about God's name and calling upon it. God did not fit into their plans at all. They had no need for God. They didn't need God for their crops. They didn't need God for their building. They had their own ideas and they were going to carry them out. One might imagine that they might want a little pleasure. They were going to invest their time and energy in the things of this world: money, sex, alcohol, you name it. They didn't want some God telling them what to do. Remember that this was before God had given the Ten Commandments. They weren't written on two tablets of stone, but they were written in man's heart. Man's conscience knew the two tables: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind," and "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Humanism does not accept these things. I am the master of my own destiny. The only thing that is important is that I get my way all the time. I am going to do what I want when I want to do it and nobody, especially God is going to tell me any differently. Does this sound familiar at all? It should. It describes our culture to a "T." But then again it describes any culture because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It doesn't matter if you are on the plains of Shinar or out in the wilderness with Moses or on Mt. Carmel with the prophet Elijah or in Jerusalem with our Lord Jesus. It doesn't matter whether you are in America or Germany or Australia or Africa. Man will try to defy God. And man will lose every time.

Our natural inclination will always be an enemy of God. That is because that is the only thing that we are capable of being on our own. We need God to change things. We need God to step in for our own good. We need God to break our hearts of stone and help us to love. We just saw God's plan of salvation. We spent six weeks in the Lenten season seeing our Lord Jesus show his love for selfish people by being totally selfless. He would lay down his life for sheep that loved to wander and get lost. He would suffer the punishment of hell itself so that we might have the joys of heaven. And then we spent the next seven weeks celebrating the victory that we have as our Lord Jesus rose from the dead and destroyed the power of death.

God is not the enemy, no matter what our sinful flesh wants to believe. If we oppose God, we will be destroyed. We are always the creatures. God is always the Creator. He is the one who brought the universe into being simply by speaking the words, "Let there be!" It seems almost unbelievable that man really thinks that he can bring down an almighty God. Yet we see it every day.

God could certainly destroy the human race, but he continues to deal with us in love. His patience and love are far beyond our comprehension. "The LORD came down to see the city and the tower that they were building." God did not have to travel to the plains of Shinar to know what was happening. God knows all things. We can't hide our intentions from him. What these words mean is that when God acts, he has carefully evaluated all the facts. The people

saw this as merely the beginning. They felt that they could accomplish anything they wanted. And they could do it all without God!

It is also interesting as we see the choice of words used here. These people saw their project as a huge, monumental structure. To God it was so tiny that God would have to come down in order to see it. God would intervene in judgment, but he would also intervene in mercy and grace. When people don't see a need for God in their lives, they also don't see a need to love their fellow human beings. Unbelief would continue to grow and show itself in people's words and actions.

God would simply make some changes inside the minds of the builders. They could no longer understand one another's language. The different tribes could no longer work together. Was that person asking for a hammer or a screwdriver or saying that it is time for lunch? Or is he threatening me and my family? People no longer trusted one another because they no longer spoke a common language. Friendliness and cooperation was replaced by ugly suspicion. Their plans were thwarted and they would move away from their dream home.

We talk big. We think that we can actually challenge God. Man proposes, but God disposes. The place was called Babel because there the Lord made a babble of all the languages. Man has often tried to thwart the will of God. He might build a golden calf in the wilderness or worship the Canaanite god of fertility. He might even try to kill the very Son of God by throwing him off a cliff or stoning him or nailing him to a cross. But God is still in charge. This is the threefold truth: Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

God keeps all of his promises. Jesus promised his disciples that he would send the Holy Spirit, the Comforter who would lead us into all truth. This is the reversal of Babel. The apostles would be filled with the Spirit and would tell of the saving acts of God in people's own languages, languages that they had never learned. Sin divides, Christ unites! There were many different languages as people assembled in Jerusalem, but there would be one message: God has reconciled us to himself through his Son Jesus Christ. That was the message then and that is the message that we must continue to preach today.

We do speak a common language. It is the Gospel that is the unifying factor. It brings together people of all nations, races and social status as God had originally intended. We are strengthened in our family ties through the hearing of the word and the reception of Christ's own body and blood given to us in Holy Communion. May we always speak in a common language, listening and responding in love! AMEN.