

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL



SURVIVING BABYLON

This writer has just completed an eighteen-month, Sunday morning study of the *First Things*—the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Our study concluded with the first nine verses of Genesis 11.

And 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 over the face of the whole earth.”

Genesis 11:4



HERE IS NOTHING WRONG with a people seeking out a new home and building a community. But verse four of Chapter Eleven is ripe with a picture of a self-centered people, a people who—remember, still within human memory of their being saved by Yahweh from the devastating Inundation—a people who are thinking more about “ourselves” than they are nurturing a humble relationship with God.

There is nothing in this verse to indicate that the tower had as its purpose to “reach up to God” or even replace Him. It clearly is meant to exalt themselves (“let us make for ourselves a name”), and the text just says that the top of this “tower” would be lofty—no doubt higher than anything ever made—certainly post-Flood. There is nothing in this verse that even suggests that it is the size or height of the tower that Yahweh finds objectionable. *Shamayim* (“heavens”) is a common word; it can mean God’s heaven, outer space, or just the sky overhead. Its root just means to be lofty.



The people of this new city—just a few generations after the Flood and the explicit call from God to populate the earth—were saying, *No, we’re not going to do that. We want to stay right here in one place and make ourselves famous as we worship ourselves. Our tall tower will stand as a monument to ourselves and our fame.*

We may imagine that once Yahweh confused their language they had no other recourse than to go their separate ways, migrating eventually as individual language groups to regions far and wide. And it may be that that was the earthly, human sequence; but the emphasis in the text is that “Yahweh scattered them.” In any case, the result is an unfinished city and tower, and most if not all its citizens scattered to the four winds. This is the moment that the various groups spread out to inhabit the locations itemized in the previous chapter.

Therefore its name was called Babel, because there Yahweh confused the language of the whole earth; and from there Yahweh scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Genesis 11:9

These people built the city and its tower for the expressed purpose of “mak[ing] a name for [them]selves” to the ultimate purpose of avoiding being “scattered over the face of the whole earth.” How did God express His displeasure with their intent? He made the “name” of their city—Babel/Babylon—a byword in the annals of history as well as future prophecy, to stand

for all eternity as the name given to corruption and evil, and a rejection of God’s blessings. Later, to Abram, Yahweh will say, in effect, *I will be the one to make you a name:*

**And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;**

Genesis 12:2

Then, to top it off, Yahweh did precisely what the people of Babel were trying to avoid: He scattered them across the earth.

If we are correct in the narrative order of chapters ten and eleven—setting the migration from Ararat to Shinar first, followed by their dispersal throughout the Middle East, Africa, today’s Turkey, and even into Europe—then this makes Babel/Babylon, as it were, the “navel” of this world. And how apt: It would be hard to imagine or contemplate a world more culturally, morally confused than ours is today.



THE STORY OF BABEL IN CHAPTER ELEVEN serves as a concise summary and conclusion for this first narrative of the Bible: the First Things. For what was their offense that drew Yahweh's judgment? They wanted to go their own way; they wanted to make a name for themselves; they wanted to set themselves on a pinnacle, rather than God—who just a short time before had saved their family alone from a world-wide Inundation.

This has been the intent of man from the very beginning. Yahweh Elohim offered His creation sublime paradise, only to have the first couple fling it back in his face by believing the lie of Satan over the promise of God. He punishes Adam and Eve, but graciously withholds immediate death. Their firstborn son Cain makes a mockery of the Lord's sacrifice and out of jealousy and anger murders his own brother. Again Yahweh graciously exiles Cain instead of killing him outright. And in spite of that grace, Cain and his descendants turn away from Yahweh.

So God gives Adam and Eve another son—Seth—a new and righteous line from which

will later spring Noah, “a righteous man, blameless among those in his generations,” and a fresh start for mankind—another chance for man to be obedient and accept the blessings of God. But by the time of Noah, humanity has become so corrupt that there is no recourse but to wash it all away and begin again.

Now the earth was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. Then God said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth.”

Genesis 6:11–13

After the Flood, even as Yahweh accepts the burnt offering from Noah's altar and promises to never again wipe out “every living thing as I have done,” He also admits to Himself that “the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth.”

Then Noah built an altar to Yahweh and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And Yahweh smelled the soothing aroma; and Yahweh said to Himself, “I will never again

curse the ground because of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth; and I will never again strike down every living thing as I have done.

Genesis 8:20–21

If God were one of us, this would be a turning point in the story—the sudden realization that no matter what good things are offered him, man will always gravitate toward evil. But of course, God is not one of us, and He is not just learning something He had never realized before. No, all this nauseating insistence of man to go his own way—to make a “name” for himself, rather than honor the name of Yahweh—was baked into the cake, as it were, from the beginning.

Man will stick to this pattern of behavior

- through Noah, his sons, the founding of cities of rebellion against God, Ninevah and Babel/Babylon;
- through Israel refusing to obey Yahweh's laws of blessings and good;
- through Israel's rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah; and
- through our own times, and man's determination that his way is better than God's, that he has no need for a Savior; and yes,
- through even our own sin and small rebellions against the blessings of God in a righteous life.



IN THESE OPENING CHAPTERS OF GOD'S WORD the pattern is set: His repeated offering of blessings by living in accord with His will being repeatedly rejected in favor of rebellion, sin, depravity, evil. This is the pattern set by our corporate parents; this is what is now bred into every human being born after them.



In God's most dramatic and precious gift to man—His own Son—man finally has the means by which he can have a relationship with his Maker. But until the day man loses the fallen flesh in which he was born, we still struggle against that flesh that calls us to go our own way, to set ourselves—just like the people of Babel—as the pinnacle of fame and importance.

We take away from these chapters the wonder and glory of God's creative genius, His longsuffering, His grace demonstrated from the very beginning. We also take away the disappointing behavior of His human creations. These are included in the narrative for our benefit—just as the repeated betrayals of Israel are included—to stand as negative examples for us today, as to what happens to a life that is disobedient, even antagonistic, toward his Maker.

For no apparent reason other than divine influence, I awoke recently one morning to the strains of that old classic, *Trust and Obey*, ringing through my head. And it would not go away—which is often a sign that God is telling me something. Here, I believe, is what we should put in our pocket and take home with us from the First Things.

*When we walk with the Lord
in the light of his word,
what a glory he sheds on our way!*

*While we do his good will,
he abides with us still,
and with all who will trust and obey.*

*But we never can prove
the delights of his love
until all on the altar we lay;
for the favor he shows,
for the joy he bestows,
are for them who will trust and obey.*

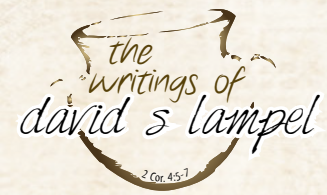
*Then in fellowship sweet
we will sit at his feet,
or we'll walk by his side in the way;
what he says we will do,
where he sends we will go;
never fear, only trust and obey.*

John H. Sammis; 1887

We Christians frequently use the word “faith”; the concept of faith is almost always synonymous with “trust,” and an integral part of trust is “obedience” to the One in whom we are placing our trust. All of this speaks to God's sovereign rule over our lives, and “the glory He sheds on our way” in turn. We have a share in His glory by obeying Him.

The reward is not just glory, but joy—as the familiar refrain says:

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus,
but to trust and obey.*



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