

AMBITION GONE WILD

Genesis 11:1-9

After the flood subsided God divided the earth among the sons of Noah, and commanded them to "go forth and replenish it." In obedience to that command they journeyed toward the west. As they journeyed they came to the plains of Shinar, or Babylonia, and settled there. Over a long period they multiplied greatly. Since they were prosperous and contented, they did not see any need of leaving the fertile plain. They reasoned something like this, "If we spread all over the face of the earth, we won't accomplish anything. Let's stay here, where we can have pleasant associations and wonderful protection."

I. A Purpose.

God's purpose was to scatter the people, in order that the whole earth might be replenished. It was a case of scattering people for enlargement. God's purpose was not acceptable to the people. It was their purpose to stay together, thereby thwarting the will of God. What a pity that they rebelled against the will of God! Instead of obeyed the command of God to be "fruitful, and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein" (Genesis 9:7), the people preferred to remain in the plain of Shinar and to live as they pleased. They entertained the very foolish idea that they could get along very well by themselves or on their own. They had one purpose and that was to oppose the will of God. Before the flood there was widespread corruption and extreme violence, but in the days of the construction of the tower of Babel the people exalted their wills above the will of God.

II. A Program.

Their program, which called for a united effort, was as follows: "And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:3-4).

A little knowledge had caused them to become conceited. A small accession of power had made them arrogant. They encouraged one another to help build a city and a tower for their habitation and protection.

Hitherto these people had been dwelling in tents, but at last their inventive genius asserted itself. They cried, "Let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven." Their desire had its origin in their deliberate, determined, and enthusiastic hostility to the divine purpose. One of their objects in building the city was that they should be self-contained and self-sufficient. They did not want to be scattered. It was God's purpose that they should disperse and possess the earth, so they were guilty of insubordination in wanting to abide in the vale of Shinar. They made the tragic mistake of leaving God out of their reckoning. They wanted to build something in their own honor, and that would be a shrine unto themselves. They never mentioned God. In proposing to build a tower high enough to reach to heaven they were attempting the impossible. With them ambition had gone wild.

Since the plain of Shinar did not afford any stones, they decided to dig clay and make bricks for the job. Believing in doing a thorough job, they supplemented their inventiveness with thoroughness.

The building of the tower of Babel was an outstanding example of the sin of pride. People are always trying to make themselves bigger than they are, even if they have to declare their independence of God. Creative genius existed among them and they were capable of building a magnificent tower. With their ambition had gone wild and they thought that they could build a tower that would reach to heaven, but that was an utter impossibility. Man can do amazing things, but there is a limit to his ability. With all of his genius, he remains a finite creature.

The crux of the whole matter was that they left God out of their plans. Since they were so sure of their own ability, they did not feel any need of God's help. If by their own hands they could build a tower that would reach to heaven, what could God do for them that they could not do for themselves? Modern man does not so much deny God as he ignores Him. To him God does not matter especially. Man will tip his hat to God occasionally by attending church or by making a contribution to finance the church program, but those things are not enough. God wants to control every aspect of our lives. God will not allow man to forget Him. Man may rule God out of his calculations but inevitably there comes that moment when God makes His presence known. These people intended to become so strong, powerful, and self-sufficient that they would not have any need of God, and He would be ruled out of their plans completely.

III. A Principle.

The principle, which was underlying the purpose of unity and the program of unification, was that of the glorification of man. They said, "Let us make us a name." They had an inordinate desire for fame. They believed that the building of the city and the construction of the tower would immortalize them. It was wrong to build the tower of Babel in disobedience to God, and it was even worse for them to make it the symbol of self-glorification. When any system glorifies humanity and makes man everything, it is not long before it minimizes God and makes Him nothing. God did not approve of their attempt to build in order to glorify man. Those early city planners said, "Let us make us a name;" and they did, but it was not the sort of name that anyone would care to have preserved. Name-making is a common and popular business, but it never pays well in the end.

God was highly displeased with their work which was done independent of and in disobedience to Him. When God is left out of the thinking, planning, and working, the result is always worthless. Nobody can afford to attempt anything without God. Anybody is foolish who tries to do as he pleases and to make his own way in defiance of God.

Vitally concerned with the divine glory, God said: "Let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." This expression, "Let us go down," intimates the mysterious doctrine of the Trinity. Thus God declared His determination to frustrate the design of the disobedient people, and to accomplish His own purposes, by confounding their language. The confusion of tongues at Babel came as a curse upon men for

trying to be independent of God. Up to this time everybody spoke the same language. That day there was an effectual stay of proceedings. Determined to defeat their plans, God came down and confounded their language. When the place was filled with confused voices, the perplexed workmen "left off to build." Thus, the most prosperous looking undertakings often terminate in miserable failure. The tower was proud civilization's attempt to reach heaven by its own efforts. Instead of permitting that, God confused their language.

One should never expect any work to escape the eye of God. Every work of man shall be judged at the bar of God. As a judgment on the persons of the builders, it was unexpected and deserved by its subjects. It was also appropriate in its character and effectual in its design. Man's designs often fail, but God's purposes never fail. God saw the pride that impelled their design, the ambition to exalt themselves to the level of God and take His place, and the act of defiance of God's will for their lives. These people intended to become so strong, powerful, and self-sufficient that they would not have any need of God. For their good God intervened. God brought to naught their ambitious attempt at self-glorification. He confounded their language so that the workmen could not understand one another. People who cannot talk with one another cannot work together.

What a pity that they had allowed their ambition to run wild! It had far outdistanced the will of God. They had a plan of their own, and they much preferred it to God's plan. If they had conformed to the will of God, they would have brought glory to Him, but they wanted the glory for themselves. Again and again unholy ambition has raised its head among nations. The Pharaohs of ancient Egypt had a case craving for power and fame, and they did make a name for themselves. About a generation ago Hitler's Germany was flourishing. With the slogan "Germany over all" he was building the mighty Third Reich, which he said would stand for a thousand years. God dealt with such sinful pride by punishing those who asked for it by their evil deeds.

Our own nation, which has as its motto, "In God We Trust," is merely uttering a proud boast unless its citizens trust in God. A nation can easily have a false pride in its strength, its natural resources, its wealth, its inventive genius, or its high material standards of living. But sinful pride and simple dependence on God cannot dwell simultaneously in the same heart. Only as man humbles himself before God and is united with Him will he truly be united with his fellows. Those who are united with Christ as Lord are united with one another.

When we regard our great scientific achievements as evidence that we do not need God, and conclude that science can do anything or everything, are we not also building a tower of Babel? Science can do some wonderful things, but it cannot produce the forgiveness of sins, mend a broken heart, answer prayer, or give us life after death. God alone can meet our deepest needs.

Quite frequently people formulate plans for their own glory or advantage only to have their purposes thwarted. Think of how Saul of Tarsus planned to arrest and imprison Christians at Damascus, but God intervened and completely thwarted his plans, to the good of countless millions. Anybody who sets out to have his own way always creates a gap in communication. It will be the

greatest irony if, after landing men and materials on the moon, we are paralyzed on earth by loss of communication between our philosophers and our technologists, between the rich and the poor, between the educated and the uneducated, between the adults and the youngsters, and between those who are engaged in the same tasks.

After these ancient people had allowed ambition to run wild, and in spite of their purposeful plans and dynamic energy, they failed ingloriously. But why did their fail?

1. They left God out of their plans.

It is impossible for anybody to succeed if God is left out of his or her life plans. Ambition, clever plans, and human effort are splendid aids to noble achievements, but, if people ignore God, they are doomed to miserable defeat and shameful failure. It is folly to plan and hope for success in the highest and truest sense if we leave God out of our plans, because He has all forces at His command, He has set a limit to every man's life and activities, and He has positioned Himself against those who ignore Him or dishonor His name.

2. They were actuated by selfish motives.

(1) To live for self is to sin against self.

He who lives for self does not have much for which to live. One who lives for little self cannot live the larger life. The selfish life is foredoomed to defeat. A selfish soul ekes out a miserable existence, and then is gone and soon forgotten.

(2) To live for self is to sin against others.

This is all the more tragic. It is not possible for one to live without influencing others. The prayer of Charles D. Meigs should be ours also. He prayed:

"Lord, help me to live from day to day
In such a self-forgetful way
That even when I kneel to pray
My prayer shall be for Others.

Let "Self" be crucified and slain
And buried deep: and all in vain
May efforts be to rise again,
Unless to live for Others.

Others, Lord, Yes, Others,
Let this my motto be,
Help me to live for Others,
That I may live like Thee."

(3) To live for self is to sin against God.

No self-centered soul has ever won the approval of Christ. If we would succeed, we must be willing to conform to the will of Christ for us.

3. They defied the will of God for their lives.

God commanded them to scatter abroad, to multiply and to replenish the earth, but they deliberately refused to do so. No soul has ever succeeded that refused to do the will of God. The one and only way to avoid failure and to insure success in life is to discover the will of God and to do that will. Do you love Him enough to conform to His will?