

A Tale of Two Cities

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[0 : 00] Good morning. The scripture reading today is found in Genesis 11. Please follow along in your bulletin as I read this passage. Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.

As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly. They used brick instead of stone and bitumen for mortar.

Then they said, come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves. Otherwise, we'll be scattered over the face of the whole earth. But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, if as one people speaking the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.

Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. So the Lord scattered them and from there over all the earth and they stopped building the city.

[1 : 12] That is why it was called Babel because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. This is the reading from God's word.

Good morning, my name is Chris. I help oversee the community groups here in Watermark. And I want to start off with some history.

I know you can feel very excited at this moment. The year is 1549. The Chinese emperor is not a happy bunny.

His city of Beijing has just been looted and pillaged by a load of nomadic tribespeople. He is supposed to be the son of heaven, the ruler of the greatest nation in the world.

And his position is under threat. So he comes up with a cunning plan. He thinks to himself, I know what, I'm going to build a wall.

[2 : 18] A big wall. A very big wall. And this wall is going to secure China's future from any future invasion.

So for the next nearly 100 years, thousands of people build what is one of the most incredible achievements that man had known up to that point.

In fact, it's the largest man-made structure in the world. They built a wall which extended for 6,000 kilometers over incredible terrain.

It is incredibly impressive. Many of you who have seen it can say, wow, that is an achievement that is worthy of greatness. 1644.

Some Manchu warriors come up to the wall. And like good, polite, well-brought-up warriors, they knock on the door of one of the gatehouses. And they say, excuse me, would you mind if we could come in and invade, please?

[3 : 27] And the commander on the wall, who was trained to defend that wall to the death, looked at the warriors and said, okay.

And have a cup of tea on the way. And the warriors go in, take over Beijing, destroy the end of the Ming Dynasty, and set up the final dynasty of China, the Qing Dynasty.

Everyone who looks at the wall, even today, would say it is an incredibly impressive achievement. Extraordinary. But actually, in terms of what the wall was there for, its function, it was functionally useless.

It didn't defend China. It didn't defend the emperor as he wanted. It's the same with the Titanic. Titanic was built as a symbol of the greatness of the British Empire, the unsinkable ship.

What happened four days later? It's on the bottom of the ocean. Human greatness. Here in Genesis, we're looking at another building project.

[4 : 38] We're looking at the Tower of Babel, or Babel, if you're confused, if you're American, it's okay. We forgive you, but really it's Babel. Okay. Okay. We're looking at this building project.

And if you look in verse 2, something interesting is happening. If you look in your text, it says, people moved eastward. Now, if you know the story so far, what's been happening?

People were made, in Genesis 1 and 2, in God's image to reflect his glory. They were given gifts, abilities, talents. They were made to create culture, to develop things, all for the glory of God.

What happens? Adam and Eve, they decide, actually, we'd prefer to be God. We'd prefer to get the glory in this. God throws them out eastwards. So he puts angels on the east side of the garden.

And then what happens? Cain and Abel, who are Adam and Eve's sons, Cain kills his brother. What does God do? God throws him out of the garden. Which way? Eastwards.

[5 : 41] What's happening now? You can see the symbolism. People are moving further eastwards. The symbol is people are moving further and further away from God and further about trying to keep their own rebellion against God and growing it.

And actually, Genesis 1 to 11 is all about this. It's all about the climax of man's rebellion against God. And Tower of Babel is that climax. It's a city which comes to be known as Babylon.

And throughout the whole of the Bible, Babylon is the symbol of opposition and rebellion against God. And let's see what happens first.

What happens? The people, in verse 3, they say, come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly. They use brick instead of stone, bitumen for mortar. And you might be thinking, that sounds very dull. But the fact is, in the place where they've gone to, there's no stone.

All they've got is mud. And so building bricks is a revolutionary design. They're using their creativity. They're using their abilities. They're using the gifts that God has made them and has given them.

[6 : 55] And they're using it to create. And it could be a good thing. And you see, I can imagine them there. You know, people are getting together. And when people come together, you know, ideas flourish, creativity flourishes.

And so I can see them. They're there. The vision begins to get bigger. They suddenly think, oh, we've made a brick. Okay, what next? And they think, okay, we could make this really big.

This could be like a city. This could be incredible. In fact, we could tap into a really niche market here. You know, people are feeling insecure. If we build a city, you know, we could brand this thing. This could be a global launch. This could be the next big thing. We start on our business plan for building this incredible city. And they're determined. They say, let us do this. Let us build ourselves a city.

Let us do it. We're determined. They're coming together. Their eyes are getting bigger and bigger. They're thinking, maybe we're going to launch brand Babel.

[7 : 52] Maybe we'll have Babel TED Talks. Maybe we'll have Babel conferences all over the world about how to do a cool city. Okay? This thing is going to go viral.

Babel is going to be the next Gangnam. People will be soon doing things Babel style. And here's the first thing, my first point.

If you're not using your ambition and your talents to glorify God, you're using them to glorify yourself. I'll repeat that.

If you're not using your ambition, your talents, the gifts God's given you to glorify God, you're using them to glorify yourself. In the Bible, there's a tale of two cities.

One is a city where people can do incredible things, amazing, impressive things. But they're doing them for their own glory.

[8 : 54] They're doing them to make themselves look great, to serve themselves. It's revolving life around themselves. That's Babel style. There's another city in the Bible where humans can do incredible things using their gifts and talents, but for God's glory.

And it's not about making yourself look great. It's about making God look great. It's about making Him look impressive. Him being the center. And that's heaven style.

Babel style, heaven style. Now, as Alfie mentioned earlier, I think we all in some way want to be great.

The Babylonians, they wanted to be great. And how do they want to be great? Well, what they do, they build a tower. Okay? Now, this tower is probably what we call now a ziggurat.

A ziggurat is basically like a stepped pyramid. And it had no particular function other than to be a stairway for the gods to come down.

[9 : 58] And you obviously build it as high as possible so the gods don't have so far to come down because obviously they're tired and the lift's broken or something. So it gives them an easy way down. And they come down.

They bless what you're doing. And life's good for you. So they kind of say, yeah, what you're doing is great. We'll just give you a bit of blessing from us. Basically, it's all about you.

But you get the gods to do for you what you want. And just think, in the cities of the world, think in most cities which want to prove themselves and their greatness, what happens? People build big buildings.

Think in Paris, the Eiffel Tower. Think in New York, Empire State Building, the World Trade Center. Think in Dubai, the Burj Khalifa. Think in Hong Kong, the IFC, the ICC.

We're building towers usually to our own gods, the gods of finance, the gods of shopping, the gods of consumerism. And we want them to bless us with rewards, usually money, power, status, those kind of things.

[11 : 01] I saw a T-shirt a while back which said on it, hello, I'm awesome. And I looked at the T-shirt and I thought, actually, I think that too.

But I'm British, I'm not American, so that means I wouldn't say that out loud. Tobey's not here, so I can... But if someone comes up to me and says, you know, that was a great sermon, Chris.

Amazing. And I say, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Praise God, praise God. But tell me a bit more about this sermon. You know, I'm just interested.

You see, I just want to be a little bit great. I want God to get the glory in my life, but I'd like to take a 20% cut.

You know, I'd like to say, God, okay, you and I, we're going into business 80-20. Okay, it's a good deal for you. I just take 20, you take 80. It's all cool. But the thing is, that's not the way the world was made.

[12 : 13] The way the world was made was for God to get 100% of the glory, because he's the only one who deserves it. And how do I know if I'm trying to get greatness?

I think there's a number of ways, but one of the things is, think about what consumes your thoughts. What do you think about when you have free time? What do you daydream about? For me, I daydream about being a fantastic, famous rock guitarist.

I know you can all say, yeah, I can see that, Chris. But you know, I dream of being up there, you know, playing it with my teeth, you know, my big toe, and everyone's thinking, wow, you are just amazing.

And then I come back down to earth. But really, what am I doing in my thoughts as I'm fantasizing about that daydreaming? I'm building a tower to my own greatness.

It's all about my kingdom. What do you think about? What do you spend time thinking about? Because that's a window into your heart. How else do we try and be great?

[13 : 16] I think there's a couple of ways. And there's plenty more. I'm just going to focus on two. One is image. And one is performance and achievement. Image.

The fashion business is a multi-billion dollar business. Cosmetic surgery. In China, in 2011, there were over 1.5 million cosmetic surgery procedures done by 2,000 plastic surgeons.

And that's only the official ones. In Hong Kong, 40,000 people work in the beauty industry. In China, 100 billion RMB is spent every year on cosmetics.

We all want to make ourselves look beautiful, look great, look attractive. I got a friend request from someone on Facebook.

Didn't recognize the name. But I looked at the picture and I saw there was this very glamorous woman looking like a model. And I thought, do I know you? So out of curiosity, I kind of flicked through some of her other photos just to see if this was a real person or not.

[14 : 20] And as I flicked through, I suddenly realized, oh, it's you. And then I compared the kind of normal photos with her profile photo. I thought, there is absolutely no similarity whatsoever.

Because what's she trying to do? With the Facebook profile, she's trying to make herself great through her image. And I've seen some of your Facebook profiles. So don't be laughing too loudly. But what do we try and do? How do we try and do it? We either try and do it by making ourselves look cool, making ourselves look intellectual, making ourselves look beautiful. Think about the

amount you spend on clothes, the amount of time you spend thinking about your image. And maybe that gives you a window on your heart where you try and be great. Not that it's wrong to look good. It's not wrong to look good. But who are you doing it for?

So we can sometimes use image to do these things. I think another way we can do this is with our image. Well, maybe I tend to sometimes exaggerate things.

[15:29] Like, you know, you go to a park. You see a worm, which is about three inches long. You go back, you start telling your friends, but you realize actually it's not very impressive to talk about a three-inch worm. And suddenly, the worm transforms into a 15-foot boa constrictor.

Do any of you ever do that? You just kind of massage it up a little bit because it makes you sound a bit better, a bit more exciting, that your life is not quite as boring as it really is. Yeah? Often, it's all about my image.

Another way we can do this, try and build towers to our own greatness, is through performance and achievement. We do this in many, many different ways. We're impressed by people who seem very intelligent, who have so many letters after their name that you can make words out of it.

You know, but let's think maybe for parents. How could this work out for parents? What's your ambition for your kids? Here's a scenario. There are two sets of parents.

One is middle class, and let's call them Rich and Penny. And the other is very working class. We call them Jim and June. Rich and Penny sent their kids to the best schools, ferried them to piano lessons, extra putain-wha lessons, flying yoga lessons, whatever lessons they could get.

[16:49] And the kids excelled at what they did. They were really good. They passed all their exams with flying colors. But they were so busy with all their activities, and the parents were so busy ferrying them around to all the activities, that they never inputted spiritually into their lives.

They never read the Bible with them. They never really prayed with them, except occasionally. And they left the responsibility for spiritual input to watermark kids. Their kids grow up.

They go to Harvard. They graduate. They get excellent jobs. They have well-educated, fantastically attractive spouses and partners there. They're getting their first flats in Hong Kong, New York, all over the place.

And then there's Jim and June. Jim and June never really encouraged their kids academically. They were happy if they got C's on their report card.

The kids never did very well at school. When they left school, the only job they could get was working at Café de Coral. However, all through their childhood, the parents invested in them.

[17:55] Every night, they would pray, read the Bible together with them. They taught their kids how to forgive the people who hurt them at school. They taught their kids, through the circumstances of life, just how to trust God in all the situations that they faced.

And these two sets of parents happened to go to a party together with all kinds of other parents. And Rich and Penny are happily talking about how successful their kids are, about the flats that they've just bought, and about how amazing their partners are.

And everyone's impressed. Everyone says, wow, you must have been pretty good parents. And then it comes to Jim and June's turn. And people say, oh, so what are your kids doing?

And they kind of rather embarrassingly say, well, they're working in the restaurant business. People say, oh, you mean like the Four Seasons? Like Mandarin Oriental? And they say, no, it's Café de Coral.

And they say, oh, you mean like they're in the managerial position? And they say, no, they're just serving. And at that moment, a disinterested glaze comes over the other parents' faces.

[19:00] And they say, oh, that's nice. And then turn away and carry on talking to everybody else. Because they didn't give Jim and June a chance to say about how their kids were well known in the restaurant where they were working for just being so caring and compassionate and reaching out to the people around them.

In fact, a number of people had become Christians through their witness. They didn't say how proud they were that their kids were making a difference in the lives of others. And people didn't want to know because they weren't impressed.

But which parents do you think God is more impressed with? It's not that we, it's not that ambition is wrong. It's not that wanting successful kids is wrong.

That can be very right. But the issue is, what is my highest ambition for my kids? What is my highest ambition? It's not wrong to want to look good.

It's not wrong to take kids to all kinds of classes. That's fine. God wants us to use our gifts and abilities and talents. But the question is, what is the highest goal? What is the thing I spend time thinking about intentionally for my kids, for myself, for my image?

[20 : 21] What do I pray about if I pray? What's the subject of my prayers? Is it all about give me more things, let them have a good career, let them get this job? Or do I pray that I want God to be glorified?

I want opportunities to share the gospel. Or I want to be able to say to the other parents around, listen, the most important thing for me in my kids' lives is that I desperately want them to know God and to live for him.

That's challenging. That's challenging. Really challenging. So we've looked at if our ambition and our talents and gifts are not for the glory of God, they're for ourselves, our own glory.

The second thing I want to mention, and I've only got three points, so don't worry. The second point is how foolish glorifying ourselves really is.

You see, the Babylonians like to think that Babel meant gate of the gods. But here in verse 9 it says, The Lord confused the language of the whole world.

[21 : 31] And from there they all scattered them over the face of the earth. And actually, later on it says that, sorry, it says that is why it's called Babel.

Sorry. Because what is the author saying here? The author is saying Babel means confusion, and it's also similar to the word for foolishness or folly. What people thought, Babel style, was the gate of the gods, where the gods were blessing, where they were impressive.

Actually, God says, that ain't anything very impressive. It's foolishness. And I love the way the author actually writes this, because I think he uses a bit of humor here.

Because you look in verse 5, and it says, The Lord came down to see the city. Now think for a moment. What are the people trying to do? They're building up this tower so it can reach the heavens, but God can't even see it, so he's got to come down.

And I can imagine kind of the father saying to Jesus, You know, Oh, I can see there's something going on down there, but I can't see it. Can you see it? I said, No. Spirit, fetch the intergalactic telescope, and they're kind of, I can just about make something out.

[22 : 42] I think it's Lego or something down there. Oh, Father, would you just kind of go down and have a look? Because what we think looks impressive, God can't even see.

He says, Is that it? Is that it? And I think sometimes we get confused with then verse 6, because verse 6 says, If as one people speaking the same language they've begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.

And that sounds like God's getting scared, Oh, they're getting closer. Okay. Quick. Got to do something. What should we do? I don't know. Make some of them speak French.

Okay. But that's not what's going on here. God's not scared. Because what is he saying? God comes down and he confuses their language.

Why? Because the people are determined to make themselves great. And if they're allowed to go to any extent, then the scale of the devastation and the destruction will know no bounds.

[23 : 53] And God says, I'm going to have mercy on you through my judgment. I'm going to stop you from going to the full extent of what you're capable of. Because I know how devastating it can be when you make yourself the God of your life.

Think about it. What do we do? What does it look like? Sometimes it looks like you work so excessively that you never see your family and your family relationships break down. When it's all about making yourself great.

You are ruthless towards your employees. And you use them simply to make money. And then you fire them at will. That's Babel style. You trample on anybody. You create monopolies that keep employees with incredibly low wages so that you can make maximum profits.

But they have no way of escaping the poverty trap. That's Babel style. You lie on your CV or your resume to get the job you want. It's Babel style.

Maybe you bad mouth or gossip against those who seem to get in your way or block you from doing what you want to do.

[25 : 05] It's Babel style. We're trying to take a 20%, 50%, 100% cut in God's glory. And it causes relational ruin. It causes society ruin.

It causes breakdown in every aspect of our lives. And God says, that's not what I want. A third point. So we've looked at, if your ambition's for God, for anything other than God, it's for you. We've looked at how foolish it is. God can't even see the achievements that we think are so impressive when they're made for ourselves. The third thing is the hope of an alternative city. The hope of an alternative city. Because what happens here, God comes down in judgment. God also comes down in judgment in Sodom. But he comes down in rescue and deliverance at the cross.

God comes down, not in judgment, but he comes down in humility to take our judgment. As Alfie was saying before, when people looked at the cross and they looked at Jesus, they thought, that is stupid.

[26 : 17] That is foolish. That doesn't look impressive. But actually, it was the greatest thing that has ever happened in the history of the universe. The God of all creation comes down. The God of all creation comes down to take the judgment that we deserve so that he can rescue us from living Babel style to living heaven style.

And he says, I want to create you into a new city. A heavenly city. A city where the throne in this is not you on the throne.

There's no space for you. There's only God is on the throne. And if we look in Acts chapter 2, which is where Pentecost happened.

Pentecost, where after Jesus has risen from the dead, God sends his spirit down. His people there are waiting for him. And then they go out. The spirit comes on them.

And they speak in languages. And people from all around the world hear their language being spoken. The judgment before was confusion in many languages.

[27 : 28] But in Acts chapter 2, after Jesus has risen from the dead, what happens is the communication barrier, which had stopped people going to the full extent of their own sin, is broken.

And people hear their language being spoken. But they don't hear people saying how wonderful people are. They hear people saying how wonderful God is.

Later on in Revelation, you see this picture of people from every tribe, every language, every tongue, praising God. And what they say is this praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength and anything else you can think of.

Be to our God. Not to you. Not to me. Be to him. Because he's the only one who deserves it. He's the only one who deserves it. He is more beautiful than I am, than you are.

He's more impressive than I am, than you are. Imagine the moment of your arrival in heaven. This is a quote. All the angels are lined up to welcome you.

[28 : 42] And all the saints who have gone before you are ready to cheer as you walk through the gates. Those who know you have got front row seats but are more attractive than you've ever known them before.

The noise is deafening and the sense of coming home is almost too much to bear. At first, you think that they are there for you. And in one sense, they are.

But then you realize that no one is patting you on the back. Not one word of congratulation is spoken. All the cheers are for God. All the praise is directed to him for his magnificent work of taking a broken specimen of humanity and transforming her into a stunning and breathtaking example of what grace can do.

Just as no one stands in a gallery and praises the canvas or the painting and says, what a fine work of art you are.

So no one in heaven will look at me and praise me for what a fine job I've made of my life. It's the artist who is applauded. As it is God who is praised.

[30 : 01] It's the artist who is applauded. It's his gifts. It's his abilities. It's his talents that he gives to us. And see, this is what it's like living in the heavenly city.

The heavenly city is all focused on Christ. It's focused on wanting to make him known to the people around us. And we here in Hong Kong, if you're a Christian, here in Watermark, we'd have been an outpost, a glimpse of heaven to the people around us, whether that's in your work, in your school, in your homes, wherever it is.

Now, you could go away and say, thanks, Chris, that was a great sermon. And then you carry on going living on Babel style for the rest of the week. Why? Because Babel is incredibly attractive.

It's very attractive. You don't just hear one sermon every week. You may not realize this. You hear 10,000 sermons preached at you every week.

Every billboard you look at, every movie you watch, every song you hear, when you speak to your colleagues or your family, sermons are being preached at you.

[31 : 21] Telling you to glorify yourself. Telling you to live for yourself. Telling you to make yourself great. Make your own image. Your own reputation.

A friend of mine just on Friday told me that he's a fresh graduate. He told me he'd been offered a \$1 million a year job. Just straight out of college. The only thing is the working hours are 16 hours a day, pretty much seven days a week, with the possibility of overtime.

Go figure. All his friends are telling him, you've got to take the job.

It's at a top bank. It's a fantastic opportunity. Just think of the people you're going to be around. Just think of the career possibilities that you're going to have. Just think what you could become if you just stay there a little while.

You don't have to stay there too long, but just stay there a little while, and you can really make it.

Maybe Babel is talking to him. And he's wrestling because it's so attractive.

[32 : 31] It's so impressive. And Babel talks to us all the time. And what we're saying here is this. God has blessed each one of you with gifts, talents, abilities.

And he wants you to use them. If you're a banker, be the best banker you can be. If you're a teacher, be the best teacher you can be. If you're a parent, if you're a helper, if you're a student, be the best that you can be.

But here's the issue. Why and who? Why are you doing it? And who are you doing it for? Who are you looking to glorify through your work?

Who are you looking to glorify through your study? Who are you looking to glorify through your parenting? are you going to live Babel style or heaven style? And the only way that you can live heaven style is when you see that heaven style is more beautiful, is more impressive than living Babel style.

It's only when your heart is captured more by heaven and by the God who is more beautiful than anything that you can ever achieve.

[33 : 48] Who is the one who comes down and in humility gives up everything. And you can see his greatness shown at the cross. It's only when that captures your heart that you will begin to look at all the other things that surround you and say, actually, it may look impressive, but God can't even see it.

So how do we do this? Just two last things. How do we do this? Because it's all very nice saying, okay, we've got to live heaven style, but then you go out there and you're just bombarded by everyone telling you something different.

Two things. One, preach to yourself. Everyone else is preaching to you, but preach to yourself and preach to each other about the goodness and glory of God.

What does that mean? It means share stories about what God's doing in your life. Ask each other questions. I find so often Christians only ever talk about Jesus in meetings.

You ever notice that? Only when they're doing a Bible study do Christians ever talk about Jesus. Or when they feel that they're supposed to do kind of an evangelistic thing and then it's kind of, oh, I don't know how to do it.

[35 : 07] But what you meditate on in your heart, what you think about in your heart, what you talk about will reveal what really is precious to you.

The more you talk about it, the more precious it will become in your eyes. So what about in your community groups? Make a deal with some others that you will actually ask each other, okay, so what have you been learning about Jesus this week?

Why don't you think, okay, how can I meditate on the cross and what the cross has done in my life this week? What about the songs that you sing? Fill your thoughts with things of God's greatness. Because when you do that, you then just look at the rest of the world and you say, actually, it's not that great, really. If you don't do that, you are in such danger.

In fact, you probably already are living Babel style. The second thing that you can do is this. When you make decisions that you've got to make, how do you know if you're going to make them with heaven as your highest priority, with Jesus and his glory as the thing that captures your heart?

[36 : 22] Often we don't know our own hearts. So actually, ask people, have people in your life, not just your spouse, have other people who will ask you tough questions about to examine your motives.

When you've got jobs, things like taking a new job, moving to a new place, all those kind of decisions. Ask people to ask you the tough questions. I find if someone says, oh, I'm thinking about getting a new job, most people say, oh, great, how's the pay package?

What are the conditions like? How many of you ever ask, how will it affect the time you spend with your family? How will it affect your involvement in Christian community?

How will taking that job help you to glorify God? Where are you looking to share Jesus in that new job opportunity? Because you could take that job and do it for the glory of God and do it well, or you could take that job and do it for yourself.

We need others to ask us the tough questions. If you're not yet a Christian, here's the thing. All that was left of Babel and Babylon is just a few bricks.

[37 : 44] All that's left of the Titanic is a bit of rusty metal. All that's left of the Ming Dynasty is a few vases. If you want to have something that's going to last eternally, if you want to be really significant, if you don't want to have wasted your entire life just living for yourself, but when you get to heaven, you see that actually what you've been living for is what really counted, and it was so much more beautiful than you even ever imagined, then start living heaven style, not Babel style.

Let's pray. Father, I just confess that Babel is so attractive to me, and it fills so many of my thoughts, and so often I don't intentionally think about how to glorify you, but I think very intentionally about how to glorify myself, and forgive me for that.

Forgive us for that. Lord, please give us a vision to show us that you are so much more beautiful, so much more impressive, so much more glorious, that your humility was the greatest greatness, that the cross is more wise, more incredible than anything that we can build.

Help us to live our lives in all the Monday to Friday, the Monday to Saturday, our parenting, all the different things we do, wanting to make you known, wanting to have opportunities to speak of you, and to say how wonderful you are.

Thank you that you are the one who changes our hearts. Please do that in our lives. Amen.
Amen.■iert