

SERMON TITLE- "Living In Babel's Shadow"

TEXT- Romans 8:18-28

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Last week we came across one of the most spectacular building projects in human history. Some time after the Great Flood the people came together to build a giant tower- a tower whose purpose was to reach heaven.

"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." Genesis 11:1-4

I'm sure it was impressive- but God took a look- and was not impressed.

But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men 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." Genesis 11:5-7

We don't know more about the nature of that tower than what you see here. We don't specifically know why God didn't want this tower built but we do know that within the building project or concept something rebellious was happening- something that needed limiting.

From the Babel story in Genesis 11 we have a Biblical confirmation and elaboration of a principle we see around ourselves day in and day out. The problem of communication is deep and profound. I suggested that nearly every conflict we observe is either caused or exasperated by bad communication.

We also talked about how complex the problem of communication is. At its simplest level it has 2 dimensions-

1. the ability of the speaker to articulate their thoughts
2. the ability of the hearer to understand anyone else

This is a very simple looking analysis but each of these 2 dimensions is extremely complex.

1. getting our thoughts and desires articulated is a huge hurdle

2. actually listening to and understanding each other rarely really happens.

The obvious first step to solving this problem is to actually sit down and begin to talk to each other but if you have ever tried to do that you will know how difficult untangling communication is. You will understand why James came to the conclusion-

The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell . . . It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. James 3:6-8

The situation appears hopeless.

BUT the Bible doesn't tell its stories for the purpose of glorying in nihilism. The Bible is the Book of Redemption. The story of Genesis 11 is tragic and we must never underestimate how tragic it is because the depths of the tragedy are supposed to drive us to find a better way.

So today we want to focus our attention on the story of redemption from the deep problem of frustrated communication. To do that we must go beyond Genesis 11 and look at Romans 8.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it . . . Romans 8:18-20

As with the story of the problem the picture of redemption has many parts and we will have go quickly.

4 Notes-

1. God Subjected Creation To Frustration

This is one of the "strange" concepts in the Bible. Paul confirms here what Gen 11 mentions- it was God who created the communication barrier.

Why? Admittedly it is a little speculative but it seems to me that the reason is that it was done to limit the destructive power of humanity. We are subjected to frustration and there is no escaping it.

The problem is very big.

2. The Problem Is Big But The Solution Is Bigger

Again we see how the Bible is not a book about the hopeless description of the state of affairs. Over and over again we are told that God has a plan of redemption and that plan leads to spectacularly beautiful scenes of God's future. Since the beginning of God's promise of a New Future these images have filled the songs and poems of His people.

But what does that mean?

. . . in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Romans 8:21-22

3. We Are God's Plan

This is a remarkable statement. We are part of God's solution to the communication problem that the world faces. All of creation looks forward to something that we have been given.

This may be THE foundation to understand all that follows. When God created people He intended something profound- but then that went wrong. Then God started over with Noah- but that ended in the Tower of Babel. The rest of the OT describes time and time again when God starts over.

With Jesus however, He does start over in a new way with a New Creation- with people who are being rebuilt- not from the outside in- but rather from the inside out. We are the new thing God is doing.

So what is it?

Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. Romans 8:23-25

4. We Don't Have It All Yet

Again a disclaimer is needed. We are covering huge ground- Paul makes sure we aren't confused about the fact that everything is wonderful among God's people as we speak. We have some patient hope required.

Even as this New Creation- we are stuck in a communication disaster.

But what is the way out of this communication disaster? That is what we are looking at today. Just as the problem is set in motion by God- for reasons we don't fully understand- the solution also has it beginning and end in Him. There are 3 parts described in Romans 8.

The Solution

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Romans 8:26

#1. The Interpreter

The first thing that Paul talks about here is that God tackles the problem at its source. We know we have a problem- but we don't even know how to articulate it.

With such a fundamental problem where do you begin? In fact it is quite obvious- you have begin with someone who knows what is going on in our heart.

When children go to the doctor- they need a parent with them. Why? One reason is that the parent has to help the child explain to the doctor what is going on in the body of the child.

When children are very young- they have no words at all to explain themselves.

So how does that work? Does it mean that God just automatically knows what we want and takes care of it without anything needed on our part?

That is the cynical view of God. If God already knows everything why doesn't He just take care of things?

The Bible is clear that something is needed from us- we are supposed to respond to God.

In the NT that response is giving Jesus the place of Master in our hearts. When we do this He promises to begin a work of regeneration in our hearts.

When we give God access to our hearts, according to the Gospel, is that God places the Holy Spirit within us. This is what is known as the New Birth, or being Born Again. This, of course, is an entirely invisible event taking place within our inner being.

But though it is invisible it is a profound reality. This is something that Paul has been explaining in the previous verses and chapters of Romans. It is something that the OT prophets had talked

about 100s of years before Jesus came and declared that this era had begun.

With the New Birth we have been given an Interpreter.

Part, and a big part, is the work of spelling out what is actually going on inside of ourselves.

Very often people feel very inadequate around the idea of responding to God. They want to make sure things are fixed up before they come to Him. According to Genesis 11- the part of the fix-up that involves communication is fatally broken. What is required of us is simply to both recognize the brokenness and then have a desire to see repairs take place.

For those who take that step of acknowledging that they want God to help- the Bible is very clear- God offers to begin a work that only He can do- the work of sorting out the human heart.

What are we supposed to do? Give God permission and frankly, as Paul puts it that permission probably boils down to groans without words.

But when that permission is given a sorting out of our hearts takes place.

As an aside- it is why the Psalms are so powerful. There is hardly a cry of the heart that is not put down in a Psalm. When we read through them we see anger, despair, frustration, exasperation along with joy, excitement, relief and celebration.

The words are there and when we read them or sometimes sing them they harmonize or even follow the same melody line that our hearts are trying to express.

Two things are asked of us- first, giving permission to God to look into our heart. And second, being willing to let ourselves groan out our heart's cry.

Neither one of these 2 things is automatic. Both require acts of the will- acts that God waits for us to give Him.

So Paul has tackled the core of the communication problem- now he tackles a 2nd piece.

And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. Romans 8:27

#2. We Need A Mediator

It is rare that broken communication can be sorted out without a 3rd party's help. Once 2 people have a real communications break down all kinds of other issues flood into the conversation.

Bad communication has ripple effects and the most obvious is annoyance. Soon we look over at the other person and simply feel frustrated by their very presence.

Specifically in the damaged relationship between people and God there is a track of frustration that goes back to the beginning of time. As people approaching God there are problems that usually go back to our earliest memories. I don't know anyone who doesn't have some memory of disappointment that God did not rescue them from some pain.

Conversely we also know that we have made promises to God that we didn't keep.

At a human level we know that when frustration goes back a long ways that both parties benefit from having an outside and presumably neutral person come in- sit down with both sides and begin the conversation from a clean slate.

And that is the role that Jesus came to play between God and humanity.

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. 1 Timothy 2:5

Not only does the New Birth give us access to an Interpreter- we also have been given a Mediator to help us clear the slate of all that history of painful communication that has gone on before this.

It is an incredible package of blessing that we have been given. Living in the shadow of Babel, living in a world of fundamentally broken communication God is offering a restoration that begins on the inside and works its way out.

But before we move on to another aspect of this gift we need to go back to the verses that introduced this theme today-

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed . . . in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. Romans 8:19-21

#3. It's Not Just About Us

As humans we have an inclination to see all of the cosmos swirling around our personal issues and identities. It is probably a reflection of God's incredible love for us as a special creation. But

this inclination can “go to seed”. We are not the centre of the cosmos- we are a part of it and God’s plan for us is not simply to fix our little worlds- it is a plan for His whole creation.

Those who have willingly accepted Jesus as Master are the place where God’s restoration begins and from there it is to spread out into everything that surrounds us. As New Creation we have been given a vital role to play in what follows. In another place Paul explains it like this-

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation . . . 2 Corinthians 5:18

We have been given the job of being “reconcilers” in the world around us.

There are many aspects of this task of reconciliation but in today’s context it is specifically with the gift of communication that we have granted.

What does this assignment mean? Obviously it looks massive- and it is. But like almost everything in Scripture it has a way of applying to the very ordinary things of life. In fact I suspect that if what you take from the Scriptures does not somehow translate positively back into how you respond to your friends, families and co-workers- you should study that insight again.

We have been given a role to play in the liberation from decay of all creation but it seems to me that a Kingdom principle is that if this doesn’t translate into you being a nicer, parent, child, friend or worker- a point has been missed.

This is a real challenge for all of us who live in a messed up world but we are to be people who model and act with this gift- even while we live in the shadow of Babel.

And this leads to the last point for today-

#4. The Community Of Speakers And Listeners

We have covered an enormous stretch of ground today- from Babel and it’s calamity- right through to the image of the New Creation, restored by God.

But where do we end up? We end up back in our own skins sitting here in the church. As you look around you will see real people just like yourself. And just like yourself, you can be assured that they have communications challenges that look a whole lot more

like the construction site in Babel than they do the New Creation of God.

But this is no accident. This is where God wants us to be- because it is here in the church that we are to look around ourselves, and agree among ourselves that we will engage the challenge that the Scriptures have given us.

And that challenge- simplified is to actually live

- #1. The Problem Is Big But Not Hopeless
- #2. We Have Been Given New Communications Tools
- #3. Put These Tools Into Action
 1. Start talking to God and each other
 2. Actually listen to God and each other

And when we do that we can claim the promise of one of the most quoted verses in the Bible-

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. Romans 8:28