The Gospel and Technology

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[0:00] Thanks very much, Stuart. And it's such an encouragement to us and an answer to prayer to see you standing in front and reading to us this morning. And as we think about the gospel and technology, what could be more appropriate, Stuart, our resident technological expert, to read our passage for us this morning.

As I said, this is our final Sunday in this short series we've been doing, thinking about how the gospel, about how all that Jesus has done, about how trusting in him shapes our approach to the very day-to-day parts of life.

So we've talked about friendship, how the gospel affects our interactions with other people. We've spoken about work last week, how what we do, what we commit our efforts to, how the gospel shapes that.

This morning, we are talking about technology and all that goes with that and all that kind of surrounds us with that. And I'm gonna start with the caveat that we've started with the last couple of weeks as well, which is that in these titles, we've kind of deliberately really given ourselves far too much to cover, far too much than we could ever speak about and do everything in one week.

We are not gonna cover kind of every aspect of technology this morning and how we're supposed to deal with that. But I hope again, through this whole series, the goal is, the idea is that we get kind of a big picture.

[1:20] I hope that we can bring to the front of our minds some of the questions that we might want to ask, some of the dangers that we might want to avoid, some of the joys that we might want to celebrate as we think about technology, the technology that surrounds us in our day-to-day lives.

And as we think about how actually, hopefully we see we can do that best when we see that through the lens of the gospel that we've been talking about. And more and more, every aspect of our lives, even the seemingly mundane, would be shaped by the most incredible aspect of our life, which is what Jesus has done for us.

And so that's the plan. We're gonna start a bit more general. We're gonna look through that passage that Stuart read for us, trying to put together what we might call a kind of a bit of a theology of technology, that is a foundation.

And then we're gonna look a little bit more specifically. I think it's probably fair to say that the technologies that are surrounding us and shaping us most of all at the moment are that kind of powerful cocktail of mobile phones, social media, the internet.

And so perhaps we'll particularly have those in view as we get a bit more specific later on. But first let's dig into that passage which we read, Genesis chapter 11. It'd be good to have your Bibles open there, page eight, if you've got one of the blue Bibles.

[2:43] I don't know if while we were reading that, if you kind of wondered, what has this got to do with technology? It doesn't mention Twitter. There's no artificial intelligence involved. They don't even use a phone in this passage.

Why are we looking at Genesis chapter 11? Or maybe you kind of would say that about the whole Bible. Why are we looking at the Bible at all if we wanna think about technology?

What could it possibly have to say about that? And you've actually chosen this passage because this is one of the kind of early stages in the Bible, really kind of laying out human technological progress.

Verse three, come let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. Verse four, then they said, come let us build a city and a tower. Here is humanity thinking technologically.

Here is humanity taking the raw materials around them and using them to make something new with a purpose in mind. Ultimately, that is what technology is, isn't it?

[3:47] You know, I take a stick, I use a kind of a stone to sharpen one end and I've got a spear. That would be a very ancient form of technology. Or I make something circular, I kind of stick an axle through it and I've created a wheel.

It's technology. Right up to the present day, I take this combination of microchips and a circuit board, I put them together in the right way and I create a laptop or a phone or whatever else.

It's technology. I say I do that. Obviously, I don't do that. I've not got a clue. But humanity, people do that and technology progresses.

We put lines of computer code together and technology moves on. And so this really is this kind of technology here in Genesis chapter 11.

Let's make bricks. Let's burn them to make them strong. Let's fix them together. Let's build a city. Let's make this tower. And the really important thing to start with, I think, as we're thinking about technology, is to say, well, that's good.

[4:46] That actually humanity is made to be creative. We're told we're made in the image of God, a God who creates. We have a God-given ingenuity.

Technology is part of that. And as the rest of the Bible unfolds, God will speak really positively about building. He'll instruct his people, for example, to build a temple.

He'll give them the plans, the detailed plans on how to do that. In the book of the Psalms, we read about the beauty of the city of Jerusalem, where this temple was. Its structures, its architecture.

And so as we look at Genesis chapter 11, thinking about technology, it's really important to lay down, first of all, that the problem here isn't the fact that humanity is building, that technology in and of itself is not a bad thing.

It can be tempting to think, you know, if only we could go back as if there was some kind of perfect year, somewhere in the 1800s or something like that, where technology hadn't taken hold, where the world was so idyllic, where everything was just as it should be.

[5:58] But that is not the Christian view of history. That is not the Christian view of technology. The Bible says God makes us as creative, technological people, that actually technology can be a good thing used for good.

And yet what we're shown so clearly in this passage is that technology can also be used in negative ways as well. The technology itself, I suppose we could say, is neutral, but it reflects both the positive and the negative aspects of humanity who operates it.

We just said there's nothing wrong with making bricks, building a city. God will call his people to do that. But here in Genesis 11, we see the problem is the particular use of this technology or the motivation behind it.

Now let me read verse four. It says this, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.

There is loads we could say packed into that verse, but really the headline is this, that the motivation behind this building, behind this use of technology in Genesis 11 is to get rid of God.

[7:22] The motivation is to replace God. That's emphasized three ways in just this one verse. First, the idea that we don't need God up in the heavens.

We can build a tower into the heavens. We can be like God, the people are saying. Secondly, we don't need God to name us and naming something in the Bible in particular has a sense of holding authority over them.

We'll make a name for ourselves, the people say. We'll be in charge. Thirdly, we don't need God to tell us what to do. God in the earliest, the very opening chapters of Genesis had given this command to humanity to multiply, to go forth, to fill the earth.

And yet this project has the complete opposite intention. Look what it says there. They'll build this lest we be dispersed over the face of the earth.

And this city, this tower, is supposed to prevent the very thing that God had called humanity to do. Now, so as we said, the Bible isn't anti-technology.

[8:32] Christians aren't supposed to be kind of Luddites living in the past. But we see here, and again, this is a pattern repeated throughout history and still into the present day, that we can misuse that technology.

Here it is being used to assert independence against God. Ultimately, technology seeking to replace God. And we'll think later on, perhaps about some of the ways we try and do the same today.

But sticking in this chapter, the next thing we see is that that is just a futile effort, isn't it? This passage is not written to wow us about this tower as a technological marvel.

It's actually written to make us laugh at it. Have a look at verse 5. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of man had built.

The author of Genesis is kind of making a joke here. He might say he's kind of trolling these builders. The people think they're building a tower into heaven. Actually, God is described as having to go down to look at it.

[9:39] Humanity think they've managed this incredible feat that is going to replace God. And yet it's as if God is having to get down on his hands and knees to see what it is that they've put together.

So insignificant is it compared to his greatness and his glory. This pursuit of technology in the place of God is the problem and it is doomed to failure.

And that's ultimately what we see as God goes on to scatter the people. They are dispersed over the face of the earth. God's plan does come about even if he's had to give them a bit of a boot to make it happen.

Ultimately, this technology can't displace, can't replace God. And this passage is showing us that the futility of that thinking. This passage is bringing us face to face with the limitation of our human effort and technology as well.

And then the final piece, I suppose, in the big picture is that this chapter is also here to be pointing us forward. To see that while humanity can't reach up to God, the incredible thing is that God has come down.

[10:52] The Jesus Storybook Bible, which we sometimes read with our kids and is often very insightful, I find. It finishes this chapter by saying, people could never reach up to heaven, so heaven would have to reach down to them.

And one day it would. In the Tower of Babel, we have the very opposite of the incarnation. The only way that God and man can be together again is not by humanity in its pride and its own effort reaching up, but by God, by Christ in his humility and through his work coming down.

That is what brings man and God together again. It's only through Christ's work. It's only through the gospel that this can happen. And interestingly, in the Bible, that is when this technology of building is something that is able to bear fruit and be such a positive thing.

We said earlier, the Bible isn't anti-technology. The problem in Babel wasn't that they were building because later on, God will instruct his people to build, among other things, this temple, which at the time would have been the most impressive building in all the world.

And so what is the difference here? Well, the difference is this, that the temple is built in light of the gospel, we might say. And the temple is built with God having come to his people, with God having made a way to be with them, with God dwelling among them because he has made that possible.

[12:32] It's not building to reach God. It's building because God has come. It's not building to replace or reject God. It's building in obedience to welcome him in and to celebrate and worship him for what he has done.

And so there's, in one way, I think, the very quick, big picture of the Bible's view of technology, that we are made to be creative, technological, that's a good thing.

But as fallen people, we can use technology in fallen ways, for bad as well as good, often repeating this pattern of trying to replace God through our technology.

And yet that great hope that actually through the gospel, as we recognize that the lordship of Jesus in every aspect of our life, that we can only get to God, we can only get to know God through Jesus and the forgiveness that he offers, that actually, as we've been saying in this series, that affects every part of our life and that can help us get technology in its right place as well, that we can act with wisdom to use technology well, ultimately with us in control over it, rather than it in control over us.

That so often seems to be the case. So there's the big picture, as I said this morning. In the second half of our time, what I'd like to do is run through three ways that this might play out then in our day-to-day lives with the technology around us to try and kind of ground this big picture a little bit in our day-to-day lives.

[14:13] As I said, I think in the front of my mind is that kind of almost mundane, but also incredibly potent mix of technology, of phones, of the internet, of social media, these things that kind of surround us and shape us day by day.

So apologies if you're wanting some kind of deep dive into the complexities of artificial intelligence or the new Apple Vision Pro or whatever it is. We're not going to get quite that high tech.

And yet I would say that actually as technology moves forward, we'll find actually, I think it is these same attitudes. It is these same motivations that are being worked out in different, ever more advanced forms of technology.

And yet the gospel solutions that I hope we'll see remain the same. So three temptations in our use of technology as we see in Genesis 11 to replace or reject God, the futility of that, and then how the gospel changes that.

And the first one, number one, is connection. Connection. One of the huge impacts of technology is that we are more connected than humanity has ever been at any point in history.

[15:30] Being connected remotely to others is now our default state, really. Most of us here could right now pull out a phone and could instantly speak to, could instantly probably see face-to-face people at the other end of the country or maybe even on the other side of the world.

There's just kind of no limit to that. And of course, we wouldn't actually have to speak to people to find things out. We could just check their online profiles, the kind of information that is put out there.

We can find out how things are going in people's lives and they can know what's happening with us without us even having to interact with them personally at all.

We're more connected than we have ever been. And as we said, there can be incredible benefits to that. And there's a real kind of wonder in that technology.

My parents are a couple of hundred miles away, but they get to see regular photos of our kids growing up. They love that. I get to see regular photos of my sister's new dog.

[16:33] I love that. I loved it for the first 25, 30 pictures or so. But there is that joy in being connected as we're designed to be relational people.

Or think of the Pattersons who we support as missionaries in Vietnam. It is so much easier for us to hear and see more quickly what they're up to, to get their latest news, their needs, to be praying in real time almost about the things that are happening in their lives, to interact with them in a way that would have been impossible for missionaries even a generation ago.

And so there is lots that is good about that connection and the use of technology that way. And yet there's also that well-known danger that we become almost dependent on.

or addicted to that connection that we can't disconnect. We begin to measure our worth by the number of friends or followers we have online.

The number of likes that a post might get or how swiftly, if at all, the people respond to our message. We use that as a kind of a gauge of our importance.

[17:47] Ultimately, like Genesis 11, we're using technology to try and replace God as we look to find our identity, our self-worth, our value in our connection with others.

And the danger there that through that our relationships become kind of a mile wide and an inch deep. that we are so desperate to be connected with everyone but that we don't really know anyone.

We receive and we present carefully curated versions of ourself rather than the real thing. And it's certainly not only Christians that have recognized that danger.

But then the question comes, I suppose, how does the gospel change that? What difference does the gospel make? Well, the gospel says that the primary connection we need is actually not with other people.

That our identity is not found in spreading our net wider and wider, in connecting with more and more people, in kind of presenting the right image far and wide.

[18:57] Our identity, our very worth, is found in a genuine connection and a personal connection with God himself. As we saw in Genesis 11, that doesn't work by us reaching up to him but by God coming down to us and that he has done that.

That Jesus has come, Emmanuel, God with us. That we can have true connection with God. True relationship with him through trusting in Jesus.

And that is not connection on a surface level. That's not a connection where we have to portray an image or put on a filter or make ourselves look good in order to get Jesus to like us or to respond to us.

No, it is the deepest connection we can imagine because Jesus knows every single thing about us. Every single dark secret. Every single thing we are ashamed of.

Every single thing we would never dream of posting about. That we would never share with others. And yet despite all of that, that he still loves us.

[20:08] Loves us so much that he came to suffer and die in our place. So that all that stuff that we are ashamed of, all that stuff that we want to kind of hide away can be dealt with, can be forgiven because the penalty has been paid.

The connection we need most is that connection with God that Jesus has made possible. A connection where we can be completely open. A connection with a God who is always there for us and a God who is always with us through his spirit.

And it's with that in place then I think then we can connect well with others including that use of technology to connect well. It means we don't need to put up an act.

We don't need to present a false image because we're secure in what God thinks of us rather than searching after the approval of others or matching up to other standards.

We're free actually not to be feel like we have to be connected with everyone that we've ever met as if the quality of the, sorry, as if the quantity of our connections is what matters most.

[21:18] And we're actually free to be genuinely connected with those that God has put in our lives in this place at this time to invest in others, to love our neighbours well as we thought about a couple of weeks ago and that absolutely can involve the gift of technology, dropping a text, having a FaceTime, keeping in touch, whatever else.

But it also I think has to include that physical presence as well which is so often becomes lacking in our relationships. And that is how God came to us in Christ physically to be among his people.

And so as we look to have that connection with people surely that involves going for a walk or meeting for a coffee. These things which are harder, which are more time consuming, which you couldn't possibly do with your 500 Facebook friends.

These things that involve the effort of getting out and going to where people are. These things which if we're honest as we see people face to face are more revealing of how we're really doing rather than how we can present what we're doing in a text or an online profile but which we can do secure in the perfect connection we have with God in Christ.

The God who knows everything about us and yet loves us so much he would come and die for us. So technology for connection that can be a good thing or that can be something we misuse.

[22:46] It is the gospel I think that we need to keep us right with that. And that was number one. The second and third will be much shorter with these last two but I think worth saying as well.

Number two what are we seeking from technology is satisfaction as well. Technology claims it will tell us the things that we need or perhaps more likely sell us the things that we need that will finally make us happy that will finally fully satisfy.

A good example to think about think of the amount of technology that you can use for free. Facebook, Amazon, Google, TikTok, you don't pay on the whole to use those services and yet they are vastly valuable companies.

Billions of pounds among the most valuable in the world. How do they make so much money? I'm sorry to kind of burst your bubble here. It's not through doing you a favour or because they're your mates and they just like doing nice things for people.

It's because ultimately they or advertisers through them are looking to sell you something. Technology is incredibly well designed to kind of hook us in and to present us with its vision and its version of the good life.

[23:59] This is what a happy, a full, a successful life looks like. This is how to be satisfied. Whether that is the technology itself, you know, the latest iPhone, the latest smart watch, whatever it might be, all the things that are advertised on those platforms, those kind of adverts that follow you around because you search for something once and then you see it and every page you ever go to, you need this, don't forget about this.

We need to be aware that we are constantly being fed ideas, attempting to shape us and convince us of what we need to be fulfilled.

Ultimately, feeding us idols of the things we need, the way we have to look, the experiences that we need to live out. And yet those things cannot fulfill what they promise.

In that parallel with the Tower of Babel, technology tries to fill God's place and yet again it falls woefully short. And we know that actually, don't we, by the fact that we never get to the end of the stuff that we need.

We are never fully satisfied with our appearance or perhaps even our life as a whole. and yet the gospel offers us God himself, God who made us and who we were made for and who alone can satisfy.

[25:25] God who says, Jesus Christ who says, come to me and I will give you rest. The gospel gives us what we truly need in forgiveness and right standing before God, our creator.

And that is where a true satisfaction is found. And that is where, as we sometimes sing, where the things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.

Technology, however advanced it gets, will never offer us that true satisfaction because it will always pale into insignificance compared to the glory of the God who we were made for and who has come in Christ so we can know him.

So connection, satisfaction, finally, distraction. I think if we're honest, not that these things don't all kind of mix together and will be different temptations for different people, but if we're honest, certainly if I'm honest with myself, a lot of interaction with technology is simply frittering the time away.

This era has been called an age of distraction. Limitless entertainment or information almost never out of arm's reach. Back in the 80s, an author called Neil Postman wrote a book called Amusing Ourselves to Death about the increase in people just kind of passively watching TV and just spending hours sat on their couch in that way and I think that that concept, amusing ourselves to death, has kind of exponentially increased with the screens and with the amount of content coming into our homes today.

[27:01] And that can take different forms. That can be kind of good things, something that's good but hugely inflated out of all proportion. For example, there's nothing wrong with leisure. There's nothing wrong with an interest in football would be my thing, but actually if I spend so much of my time, far more than I ever spend kicking a ball, perhaps more importantly, far more than I ever spend looking at God's Word, the Bible, or things that point me toward Jesus, if that time is taken up with checking the latest scores, checking the transfer news, watching the games, checking back to the transfer news in case there's been any big developments in the last five minutes, whatever it is, then clearly that is something that is distracting me from what is better in life.

Things that are fine, things that are good can be blown out of all proportion and that is something that again, technology kind of amplifies that tendency. Or perhaps this distraction can take the form of places we shouldn't be at all.

The astronomic rise in the use of pornography across every different age demographic is a huge reality of technology. Again, ultimately coming back to this idea I think of distraction as people look to distract themselves from the mundane realities of real life, of real people, of real relationships, and look instead to escape into that kind of fantasy where they can be whoever they want to be.

Again, ultimately that searching for satisfaction in places that can never offer it, that desire for distraction from the real world around us.

And yet in all these cases, whatever form it takes, I think ultimately, again, we know that it is futile. You know, so why not just indulge these distractions? Why not just endlessly entertain ourselves, scroll our lives away?

[28:54] There's something inherent within us, isn't it, that says that that's not right. You know, we don't want our kids to spend just all their time just off somewhere digitally distracted. When we get sucked down that kind of social media rabbit hole or watching one YouTube video after another, we don't tend to come out the end of that thinking, oh, that was good, that was time well spent, that was a useful evening.

We know there's more, the world knows there's more, that's why kind of screen limiting programs or programs to try and control our use of our phones are so popular in the world. And yet that's where actually the gospel fits and has an even better message because the gospel affirms to us that there is something more.

The gospel says that we're not simply loved by God, but through the rescue of Jesus Christ, through his death on the cross, we are redeemed, we are purchased by him to be his people.

And that comes with a genuine purpose, to live for him. The apostle Paul famously writes, so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, and we could fill in a whole list of things and a whole load of technological things in that whatever there, whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

We've not much this morning kind of dug into practical tips and tricks. Apologies if you're wanting some of those. I will share in the email or on Facebook some extra resources that I think are really worth looking at and really helpful.

[30:31] But actually, for those things to be effective and really to take root, we have to have this gospel foundation first. And I think this is a great place to start. Is what I'm doing, is how I am engaging with this technology that surrounds me day to day?

Is it for the glory of God? Can I genuinely say, yes, God is glorified by my actions in this area? Or is it trying to replace God?

Is it actually just distracting me from the primary purpose for which I was created? I'm redeemed by the blood of Jesus to live as his people and for his glory that he might receive the praise he deserves.

Okay, let's close there. Just to kind of recap, I suppose, that the goodness of technology that we're made as creative people but that danger that it's fallen people, we use that technology in fallen ways, looking to replace God, looking to find our meaning, our identity, in connection, in satisfaction, or simply distraction without God, doing away with him.

And yet our prayer is that we would remember that ultimately that will never fulfil us. That technology and nothing else in this world can give us what only God can.

[31:55] And God has given us all we need through Jesus, that through trusting in him, through accepting the forgiveness he offers, we can have that relationship that we need, find that satisfaction that we crave, and live out that purpose that he gives us.

As we seek to live for his glory in all things. Let's pray together. Amen.