

The Scattering of the Nations

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Jill. I did warn Jill before I asked that this was not the easiest passage. I was very grateful when she texted back and said yes.

I'm not sure if she'd read it by that point or not, but thanks very much. It's our penultimate week, as we said, in this opening section of Genesis. James will finish that off for us next week as we run through the rest of Genesis chapter 11.

But for this morning, if you're sitting there right now and you're thinking, what on earth are all these verses we've just read about? Please don't worry. We're going to try and make sense of these together.

And particularly what I hope we'll see is how the two seemingly very different sections there that you might have noticed, that list of names in Genesis chapter 10 that Jill heroically and very accurately, I thought, made her way through.

And then the start of Genesis chapter 11, that Tower of Babel story, these two things that seem so different how actually they hold together to explain one another and also to explain the world that we live in.

[1 : 0 7] And that has been one of the big themes, hasn't it, of these opening chapters of Genesis, I hope. These are chapters that help us, that enable us to see why the world is as it is.

These are chapters that have shown us God's goodness in creation, God's mercy and care, while also highlighting the human condition, the state of the human heart because of sin coming into the world and how it's these two things together that explain our experience of life and the world that we live in.

For me personally, one of the things that gives me the greatest confidence in the message of the Bible, my faith in Jesus and the gospel, is that it explains the world better than anything else.

It makes sense of what we see, what we feel, what we experience, and perhaps no more so is that more clearly laid out than these opening chapters we've been looking at.

Again, if you're a Christian, I hope that as we see that in these chapters of Genesis, it's been building and strengthening your faith. And if you're not yet a Christian, if you're still perhaps asking questions, still a little bit unsure, as always, we're so glad that you're here with us this morning and every Sunday morning.

[2 : 2 7] I hope that seeing the Bible make sense of life, the kind of explanatory power that the Bible has, would make you want to investigate that more and more. And again, seeing time and time again how it's always pointing us to Jesus as the reason that we can have hope in this world we live in and that is laid out for us in the Bible.

So let's think then of our verses this morning. What is it that they're particularly explaining, making sense of to us? Well, it's really how we got to this world we live in as it is filled with people of different cultures and nations and languages spread across the face of the globe.

It's explaining our international world. You might remember, if you're here, we left last week with just Noah and his family after the flood.

By Genesis chapter 12, God is going to send out Abraham as a blessing to the nations, plural, lots of different people groups, much kind of closer to the world we have today.

How do we get from one family to the nations? And perhaps even more significantly than that, what is the relationship between the different nations, the different peoples that make up our world?

[3 : 49] How should we think of others? How does God think of others? What is the future for the countless people groups scattered across our world?

That's the kind of thing we want to see. Two main sections, as we said, in the verses we're looking at. We'll look at them in turn and see what answers we can find to some of those big questions. And thirdly, we'll also see how the rest of the Bible ties this all together with where we're heading.

So the first section there is really the whole of chapter 10. This is what's generally called the table of nations. We've come across a few family trees in Genesis already, and it's quite tempting, if we're honest, isn't it, just to kind of skip over them.

We don't find them that thrilling. But the author of Genesis obviously thinks that they're important, significant, gives a lot of time to them. And so it's good for us to stop and see why that is.

What is the point that he is trying to get across? And this list is slightly different from some of the previous lists we've seen. We're not really focusing on individuals here.

[4 : 56] We don't get that kind of formula, they lived this many years and then they died, which has been repeated and repeated so many times. No, the focus here is on peoples rather than people.

The different nations, the different people groups that developed and grew and spread. And really the point of this section is to show that all these different groups all have this common origin and that all of them are ultimately under God.

This is humanity as a whole under God's rule. The American Pledge of Allegiance describes the United States as one nation under God.

The emphasis of this chapter, Genesis chapter 10, is that all nations are under God. There are 70, you can check that for yourself when you get home if you like, but 70 different nations listed here.

70 in Hebrew literature is a number of real significance, it's a number of completeness, of wholeness. And so this table of nations is representing humanity as a whole, making the point that all people are ultimately under God and dependent on God's mercy.

[6 : 12] do just have a look at verse 1. It says, these are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Remember when we come across that line, these are the generations in Genesis.

That's how we know we're in a new section. That's like a kind of a title heading. That's how we know all of these verses fit together this morning because we don't have another of those until chapter 11, verse 10.

So this is one block held together. But verse 1 then says, sons were born to them after the flood. And if you were to flip over the page and have a look at the end of chapter 10, how is this table of nations concluded?

Chapter 10, verse 32, the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood. That reminder of the flood beginning and end at both ends, bracketing, holding together all of these nations.

nations. And it is there as a reminder that all these peoples, all humanity lives in light of God's judgment and mercy that the flood has demonstrated that we've thought about over the previous three weeks as we've looked through those chapters.

[7 : 27] That all humanity exists under a God who will not ignore wickedness, but also a God who shows incredible mercy. humanity. This is all after the flood.

And so the fact that any of these nations are here, exist at all, are able to develop, is only because God in his great mercy offered that rescue for humanity through the flood.

The salvation that God granted to Noah and his family in the ark, that display of preserving grace, is the only thing that has made all these nations possible.

And so really what we have here is this sign of the unity of humanity. It's a sign to all people, God's people especially, that he is God over everything and everyone.

And so their horizons, our horizons today, if we're Christians, should be broader than simply just being concerned about ourselves because God is concerned about all people. That we, as Genesis 12, will make clear as God makes his covenant with Abraham or to be a blessing to the nations, not just to one another or people just like us.

[8 : 42] Here's a reminder as well, I suppose, that Christianity isn't, as it's often presented as today, often in a critical way, Christianity is not a white Western religion.

The people who wrote the Bible did not look like me. Actually, we are part of the nations. Christians. And yet, because God is the God of the nations, we're brought into his family.

We live in light of God's mercy. And recognizing that that is how God sees and that is how God has dealt with all the people in our world should have real kind of big picture consequences for us as we think about our world.

It means we should be praying for our world and things that are going on far beyond our borders. It means that we should be supporting the work of the gospel in other nations as we do with the Patersons, but wanting to actively engage in that more and more, feel a real burden for that.

In our increasingly fractured world, it means things that should be as obvious and simple to say as the fact that there is no place for racism or any kind of racial superiority among God's people.

[9 : 59] Again, a reminder here that actually the teaching of the Bible is the foundation for that fact that so often we perhaps take for granted. But it is true because all people are God's people made in his image, living in light of his judgment and mercy.

And so we see this kind of universal message in this chapter, but I think we could also kind of apply that. We can zoom in here a little bit as well. This chapter means that we should have a concern for people even on our doorstep but who aren't like us.

You know, we're often pretty quick, aren't we, to judge people's decisions, choices, way of life. This passage absolutely is not saying, well, yeah, anything goes.

We'll see that really clearly in a moment. But it does mean that our first response, our overwhelming response, is to be a love and a respect for others, a care and a listening to others, as a mercy toward others, as God has shown to all people.

And most importantly, that reminder that the best way we can serve others is an eagerness that they would come to know the greatness of God and all that he has done.

[11 : 11] That he is their creator and their king, that their life is dependent on his mercy. God is not our God to keep to ourselves. God, as we see here, is the God of the nations.

And so we long that all people would come to recognize him as we see here. Humanity as a whole under God's rule.

Genesis chapter 10. Okay, well, before we move on, it's good to note that while Genesis 10 then carries this kind of open and this uniting message, it's good to see that actually this isn't a passage that as it says that, which is naive or unrealistic about the world, which we might perhaps be tempted to think.

It's not simply saying, you know, aren't we just one big happy family here? Because again, the world we live in is not like that. And actually, this chapter recognizes that, especially the middle, verses 6 through to 20, includes plenty of places, plenty of nations, which are kind of infamous, biblically speaking.

It speaks there about Egypt, Canaan, Assyria. These are places who, for the first readers of Genesis, had already or would in the near future become real opponents, really setting themselves against God's people.

[12 : 33] And so this chapter here is causing us to be realistic that all people are under God's rule, but that many will reject that.

It's a reminder that there is still, as we saw, beginning right back in Genesis chapter 3 and kind of renewed almost at the end of Genesis chapter 9, there is still this opposition.

There is still the descendants of Eve versus the descendants of the serpent, those two lines. And that is still a reality, a reality that people would experience throughout the Bible, a reality still experienced today.

And so this passage is again making sense of our world as we seek to live in harmony with others, that the Bible gives us the best possible ground to live that way, showing respect and love and grace to those made in God's image who has received his mercy, but also being prepared for and through that equipped for the fact that we might not receive that back in return.

And really that leads us to see then how the second section of our passage fits in here. Genesis chapter 11 verses 1 through to 9 and what's often called the Tower of Babel.

[13 : 50] If the emphasis or if the kind of subtitle for that first section was humanity as a whole under God's rule, then in this second section we see humanity scattered for rejecting God's rule.

Where chapter 10 emphasizes the unity, the brotherhood, the sisterhood of humanity. In chapter 11, which kind of chronologically fits somewhere into the middle of chapter 10, we come to see and understand actually the growing distance between humanity, between the nations.

As together they reject God and as a consequence are scattered. Really verse 4 I suppose sums up perhaps best what's going on. Then they said, this is all the peoples together, come let us build 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 earth.

We read that and we recognize again in some ways lots of things don't change, do they? Humans love a building project to make their names great. There's plenty of examples we could think about.

Perhaps the most famous or it comes to mind the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world in Dubai. Dubai very much built to literally put Dubai on the map.

[15 : 13] Look at us. We are serious players on the world stage. Here's a very tall building to prove it. We're looking to make a name for ourselves. Well that's not a new concept is it?

We see it here right back in Genesis chapter 11. But here in Genesis it's not actually making a name over and above the other nations.

No, here it's humanity at this point united seeking to make a name for themselves over and above God himself. It's against God that this building is built.

Some kind of Hebrew scholars and linguists have suggested actually that the idea of a tower with its top in the heavens is actually drawing on kind of military language. The idea of a siege tower or a beachhead from which humanity intends to storm the heavens and replace God that it's that kind of idea.

Maybe, maybe not but whatever that is this is humanity together again following that pattern that we've seen time and time again in Genesis which we'll continue to see throughout the Bible which we see in the world around us which we see in our own lives.

[16 : 30] Humanity looking to do away with God get along just fine without God and ultimately take God's place. And we see in this chapter then how foolish this is as God has described twice in fact as having to come down to see this supposedly great tower that humanity has built.

It's obviously not quite as impressive as the people had thought or expected. We see the foolishness of that but at the same time we see the seriousness of this as God scatters the people as a result of their rebellion against him.

Verse 6 And the Lord said Behold they are one people and they have one language and this is only the beginning of what they will do and nothing that they propose to do now will be impossible for them.

Come let us go down and there confuse their language so they may not understand one another's speech and that's what God does the result being that the building stops the place is called Babel which means confused the people are spread across the face of the earth and perhaps as we think about that or perhaps as you heard that read you might think well hang on a minute why is God doing that?

You know it says that the people here are together they're united that nothing will be impossible for them doesn't that sound great? Why is God limiting this human progress and dividing people?

[18 : 06] Well the point is that actually no that wouldn't be great that actually this scattering this kind of judgment is actually a mercy as we've seen that what humanity left to its own devices proposes to do is not good that does not lead to flourishing that there isn't joy or satisfaction or peace or hope when we try and push God out the picture as they were seeking to do this is perhaps a mundane example but what's happening here is kind of like the teacher who separates out the naughty students so they don't conspire to cause trouble but they can get on with their work for their sake and everyone else's humanity scattered for rejecting God's rule and while this Tower of Babel story perhaps seems so distant so strange to us what we see here is actually something that each one of us does or has this tendency towards we have this tendency to try and replace

God we have this tendency rather than being content as his people rather than being defined by his relationship with us rather than finding our identity in him rather than submitting to his rule which is actually the greatest the most secure the most loving place we can be which is actually what we were designed for each one of us has this tendency to try and make a name for ourselves as the great line in the final song of the musical Hamilton where Alexander Hamilton lists many of his great achievements and he kind of asks the question in this song when my time is up have I done enough will they tell my story he's saying will I have made a name for myself will I be worth talking about again that's something we're all guilty of even if we don't expect to go down in the history books or have musicals written about us we still think I want to be the guy that people think is the cleverest

I want to be the girl who is the most successful or who looks the best effortlessly I want to be the parent with the highest achieving children or even just simply I want to be the person who people say is the nicest the kindest we seek to make a name for ourselves in all of these different ways and in just the same way as God has to come down to see this tower the Bible shows us the foolishness of trying to build these monuments to ourselves because all of these things are so fragile all of these things are ultimately outside of our control and what people think of us is not ultimately something that we can depend on or be in control of and none of these things which we try to define ourselves by can even come close to the heights that we were created for of finding ourselves our hope and our name through

God knowing us through being known as his children his people and again just like this passage these things end up causing division as it sets us up against others when we're not defined by God when we don't allow his name to be what defines us we define ourselves in comparison ultimately in opposition with others and that causes us to divide and more than that it sets us against God as we live for our glory and not his and so we see humanity is scattered for rejecting God's rule we see the consequences of refusing to live for God's glory and instead seeking our own we see around us in our world today just how clearly there is this division between those of different nations different languages different cultures as well as division between individuals as we seek to build ourselves up the passage here telling us ultimately this all comes down to finds its root in a rejection of God and his rule and as we see time and time again as we grow apart from God we grow apart from one another humanity scattered for rejecting

God's rule so this passage is showing us these links between humanity the oneness of all the nations but that tragically that oneness is also used in opposition to God and as a result of that we have this fractured world that we now live in and that would be a really sad place to finish wouldn't it if that was it if this was just the end just as it would have been a really sad place to finish if back in Genesis chapter 3 as Adam and Eve had to leave the garden because of their sin if that was just the end and it could have been but we see again here as we saw there how God reveals his mercy in bringing restoration and that God will not just leave his people he is not finished with us and really this is the kind of unfolding piece by piece of the rest of the Bible we've seen humanity as a whole under God's rule we see humanity scattered for rejecting God's rule but in the big picture of the

[23 : 44] Bible we can look forward to humanity restored in celebrating God's rule because Genesis chapter 11 is not the end of the story chapter 11 in some ways is setting the scene for chapter 12 where God chooses Abraham to go and bless all the nations and the ultimate outcome the focus of that blessing as we said earlier is Jesus the descendant of Abraham Jesus comes and suffers and dies for the sins of the people which people the people who spoke his language the people who looked just like him no the Bible says he died for the sins of the world all the different peoples and that's why Jesus then sent his disciples and that includes us in those famous words of the great commission to make disciples of all nations and we perhaps see the most brilliant picture of this in

Pentecost a few weeks after Jesus' ascension back into heaven the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts chapter 2 we're told there in Jerusalem there were people from every nation under heaven but now rather than their different languages being a barrier something that keeps them away from hearing about Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit each one was able to hear the apostles share the good news about Jesus in their own language it says God overcomes that language barrier which divides and finally this kind of thread of language its ability to divide God's work in bringing restoration it finds its fulfillment in the very final book of the Bible and I think it's telling how many things we've seen in Genesis have been kind of pushing us forward to look to the end in Revelation chapter 7 verses 9 and 10 it says this after this I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number from every nation from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands and crying out in a loud voice salvation belongs to our

God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb this picture of heaven's worship of where history is heading and what is it it's all the nations all the tribes people from all the languages gathered together worshipping God on the throne where we see that what God has scattered in judgment he has restored in his mercy and he does that through Jesus Jesus who is front and center in this passage in Revelation the Lamb who is there on the throne the one who dies in our place who dies for the nations so that we can know in the most real way the most clear way that his rule is not something to fight against to rebel against to seek to overthrow but it's actually this incredible loving rule to be embraced and celebrated and we see so much division in our world

I don't need to prove that to anyone we see it on a big scale nation against nation we see it on an individual scale person against person again Genesis here is explaining to us why that is it boils down to our humanity's collective rejection of God and yet the Bible also shows us what the solution is it offers us hope that the gospel and recognizing the love of God is the only way that people from every tribe and tongue and nation people from every background and culture and class can come together again united in their worship of him and in their love for him showing that love for one another different distinct but made in his image these verses explain that world to us but also surely show us and motivate us and move us to be sharing that gospel of Jesus which is the hope the

Bible offers to be sharing that near and far to hold that out to people just like us but also people radically different from us because it is that good news of Jesus it is having Jesus as our king the king who cares the king who made forgiveness possible the king who gave himself as that ultimate sacrifice the king who rules with perfect justice that and that alone is the hope for a broken and divided world to find restoration in him and as we think about that task of sharing the gospel far and wide a daunting task and yet we can do that with confidence because the Bible has promised that time will come when people from every tribe and tongue and nation will come together united in Christ to worship him let's pray together in Christ to worship in Christ in Christ peace and so as we said to invoke on earth as we ask on earth to accept in Christ to worship as we and in Christ one and to worship and just in Christ the and and in Christ