

FGBC: Our Stories Begin: The Beginning of the Elect in the City

Genesis 10:1-11:26

October 14, 2018

Dan Hoffman

When I was 18 my dad was building a fence. And that meant I had the opportunity to spend many hours after school and on weekends planting fence posts. Thankfully Dad had a tractor auger the holes, but my job was to put a post in a hole; fill the bottom with rocks, the rest with dirt; and then pound the post down to the right height. If you've never had the privilege to do something this fun you haven't lived.

Anyway, one morning I went out and the very first hole I arrived at had a small mouse and a toad hiding in the bottom. And they were very happy down there, but without thinking much I reached in, pulled the toad from the hole, and planted the post.

...

If you've been with us over the last several weeks you know that we are in the middle of a study through the book of Genesis. Genesis comes from a Hebrew word that means "beginning" or literally "seed" – out of this everything grows. And so Genesis is about telling us Who made everything, and why He did it. This is a worldview.

Now everyone has a worldview. Everyone has a perspective we see the world through. And all of these glasses are biased – there is no such thing as a neutral perspective.

And so what we get in Genesis is a God centered, Christ-exalting worldview. God says if we look at the world from His perspective things are going to go better for us than if we see the world through a different perspective. And there are 7 aspects to the worldview presented in Genesis.

And so far in this series we've seen that a loving, communal God is behind everything. And He created us to join His community. But sin broke this. And yet, with every twist and turn everything still turns out to be part of God's plan A. And that's because God has appointed a seed to fix everything and bring us back to the relationship we were created to enjoy. And God has made a covenant with us to ensure this will happen.

Today we are going to look at the strange biblical fact that some people get chosen. So the world is a full place in all sorts of ways, yet God has always reached down into our craziness to select some ugly, unworthy, wart-covered people that He pulls up from the hole of depravity we've been happily seeking comfort in, to save. God saves some. So turn with me to Genesis chapter 10.

[Read Genesis 10:1]

So Noah and his three sons and their wives exit the ark and begin populating the world. And immediately we notice that the world is divided into three kinds of people – the neutral non-elect, the antagonistic non-elect and the elect.

...

Now election is a word that the Bible uses to describe people that God has chosen for Himself. And the idea is that, whether we like it or not, God chooses to save some and not others. And this idea carries down through the Old Testament and into the New Testament. So in Romans 9 Paul says:

For God said to Moses, “I will show mercy to anyone I choose,
and I will show compassion to anyone I choose.”

So it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it.
(Romans 9:15-16)

And Paul says “Don’t get mad at God for this.” God has the right to do what He wants with His creation. But we do get mad, and that’s because we think election is about God arbitrarily choosing to send some people to destruction. But that isn’t the point.

The reality is all of us have chosen destruction. We have all eaten the fruit in the Garden. We’ve all sought to live life as gods in our own little universes. And yet when God looked down at the cesspool of rebellious wickedness that we were all enjoying He decided to reach in and open some of our eyes to the foolishness of living for ourselves. And He lets us center our lives around Him – the only being in the universe worthy of worship. And when we do this we begin to really live.

And so the focus of election isn’t that some people go to hell, it’s that some of us are undeservedly saved from our hell-bent determination. And this should lead us to worship. Are you thankful you’re not getting what you wanted?

...

And so there are 3 kinds of people in the world. There are people who aren’t Jesus-followers, but aren’t opposed to Him, they just don’t think about Him much. And there are people who are angry at God and have given themselves to the destruction of His church. And there are faithful people living for the increase of God’s glory.

And this division is birthed right here in Genesis 10. So in chapter 10 we get the 70 grandsons of Noah. Now over the last several weeks we’ve noted that numbers are significant in Hebrew. This means the point of Hebrew genealogy is not to give us a scientific method for figuring out how old the earth is – the 21st century scientific community cares about that, but the ancient Jews didn’t. And so their genealogies – surprise, surprise – want to tell us about something that was important to them.

And so almost every genealogy in the Old Testament is full of significant numbers like 3, 7, 10 and combinations of these numbers. And that’s what we get here. Genesis 10 gives us the 70 grandsons on Noah – seven 10’s. And the point is this is everyone’s story. Everyone fits into one of these three categories – either you are the neutral non-elect, the antagonistic non-elect or the elect.

...

Now an important point to note here is that the names in this list are not always racial. Sometimes they are political, geographical, social or linguistic. And so while each of Noah's sons make up one of these different categories, the point is not that certain races are elect while others aren't.

We don't see this so clear here, but throughout the Old Testament non-Jews are constantly being grafted into the elect line. And in the New Testament Paul makes it crystal clear that genetics has nothing to do with being God's chosen people.

...

As an aside, in 1948 Israel became a nation again after almost 2000 years. And a new theology emerged in the Christian tradition that began to make a big deal about the Jews and the idea that they are still God's chosen people. Here's the problem, this doesn't line up with the Bible. Here's what the Bible says:

The real children of Abraham, then, are those who put their faith in God....

Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing He promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:7;14)

The point is you are part of the elect, the chosen people, if you put your faith in Jesus. And that is true whether you are a Jew or a Gentile. Genetics has nothing to do with it. But there are three different kinds of people in the world. And we get this in Genesis 10.

So in verses 2-5 we get the lineage of Japheth. He's the oldest, and so he gets listed first. But everywhere else it is always Shem, Ham and then Japheth because his line is the least important. His lineage is a lineage of the neutral non-elect: people who are largely oblivious to God.

And you probably know people like this. They simply don't care about spiritual things. And there are 14 people groups mentioned in Japheth's line.

...

Next, in verses 6-20 we get the descendants of Ham – these are the bad guys – the non-elect, antagonistic people. And there are 30 people groups here again signifying all the people opposed to God. And the groups grow to become the nations of Egypt and Babylon and Canaan – all the enemies of Israel.

And in the middle of this genealogy we get the story of a guy named Nimrod. Now just to make it absolutely clear that I was a little church geek as a kid, one of the favorite insults among my teenage friend group was calling people Nimrods – “you're such a Nimrod.” It does have a nice ring to it doesn't it?

Anyway, this is a bad dude. Kind of like the Nephilim who we came across earlier, this guy is a powerful warrior who established wicked cities and nation groups including Babylon – the place where Judah ended up in captivity, and Assyria, the place where the rest of Israel was taken and destroyed, and even Nineveh, the wicked city God sent the prophet Jonah to.

And if you were a Jew this would just make it clear that the sons of Ham equal bad.

And that leads us to the final group, the sons of Shem. So look at verse 21

[Read Genesis 10:21]

Now Eber is an early name for Hebrew. And the interesting thing about Eber is that there are ancient non-biblical texts from 2300BC that mention this guy as king of Ebla, the earliest historical empire. So this guy is an archeologically confirmed figure. And Moses, who wrote this, wants us to see that this guy was God's elect.

So there are 14 generations between Seth and Eber. And in chapter 11 verse 14 the story is going to pick up with Eber's line and tell us that there were 7 generations between him and Abraham. Abraham was a Hebrew. He is the next link in God's elect line coming down from Adam through Seth to Shem to Eber. God has chosen this family, He has elected it out of obscurity, to work out His plan of salvation.

Now here's the point: if you are a Jesus-follower you've been grafted into this family. But you are not here because you come from a good blood line, or because you are a moral person, or because you work harder than other people. You are here because even though you are a toad Jesus decided to reach down into your post hole of depravity and pull you out. Thank you, Jesus!

...

Chapter 10 ends with the words "From these the nations spread out over the earth." This was the design.

And then we get the story of the tower of Babel, another one of those stories like Noah that everyone knows but doesn't necessarily understand.

Remember how, two weeks ago we saw that Noah's story wasn't actually about a smiling zoo keeper who was good enough that God selected him to win the human lotter and pass on his genes. Remember that?

Instead the structure of the text, specifically something called a chiasm, made it clear that this was a story about God and His decision to bind Himself to humanity through covenantal relationship. Covenant is the fourth aspect of the worldview that Genesis lays out for us.

Well it turns out that the story Babel is similar. So it too is written as a chiasm. And that means it has parallel ideas at the beginning and the end and one thought in the center which is the point of the story.

So in chapter 11 verse 1 we read Now the whole world had one **language** and a common speech. And in verse 9 we read "That is why it was called Babel – because there the LORD confused the **language** of the whole earth. So language bookends this story. God wants human diversity. He wants nations spread out over all the earth.

But there is another plan afoot to thwart this. So in verses 2-4 it says “As people moved eastward, they found a plain... and settled **there**. They said to each other ‘**Come, let us** build ourselves a **city**... [to] make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” And in verses 7 and 8 God said “**Come, let us** go down and confuse their language’... So the LORD scattered them from **there**... and they stopped building the **city**.”

And right in the middle comes verses 5 and 6:

[Read Genesis 11:5-6]

So God sits at the center of the story of Babel. This is His story. And in this story He enters the city to check things out, and from inside the city He responds to what He finds. Now He responds in a funny way, and we are going to deal with that.

But first we need to see that God shows up in the city. Cities have always played a crucial role in human development. The word “civilization” is literally “cityization.” Humanity happens in the city and this is only increasing.

In 2000 50% of humanity lived in large urban areas, and the UN says that by 2050 almost 70% of humanity will live in cities.¹ And cities drive everything. Technology is such today that kids who live on the outskirts of Vanderhoof are totally influenced by what goes on in New York. So as much as you might like the country, cities are central to defining what it means to be human, and they always have been.

Now often church folk talk about cities in a negative way – like this is where sin comes from. And there is lots of sin in the city. But the reality is there is lots of everything in the city. And because of this, as Genesis is laying out, the city plays a central role in the way God wants us to view the world.

So Genesis 11 gives three things about cities. It tells us why we need them – “Come let us make a city.” It tells us the problem cities have – “that we may make a name for ourselves.” And thirdly it tells us how God is healing cities “The LORD came down.”² So first, why cities? Babel says: “Let’s build a city so that we are not scattered.” So the people of Babel were seeking safety in numbers and to centralize their power. And they were also seeking technological advance. They were building with bricks instead of stone. And this enabled them to build higher and bigger than ever before. Cities have always been about safety and advancement.

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/17/two-thirds-of-global-population-will-live-in-cities-by-2050-un-says.html> (Accessed October 12, 2018)

² Outline adapted from Tim Keller’s Sermon “Lord of the City” <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/lord-of-the-city-5214/> (Accessed October 11, 2018)

And Babel was seeking spiritual connection. They wanted to reach the heavens. They wanted to get to God. This is the human story. This is what every religion is about. And cities play a big role in this.

So the tallest buildings in cities are always religious places of worship. This is why the Middle Ages Cathedrals were huge buildings. They were reaching up to God. And priests were central in society. And it's the same today except the temples have changed. The tallest buildings in our cities are offices buildings dedicated to making money. This is the god of our culture rich kids. And business people rule our cities. And this is why we give our money away at church. Jesus doesn't need it, but we need a constant reminder that we worship Him not our bankbooks. And you can't say this unless you give your money away.

And so some Christians have seen this and said cities are wicked places. Someone once said "God made the country, man made the suburbs, but the devil made the city."

The problem is that when you read the Bible you find that the city wasn't the devil's idea, it was God's. And so in Revelation 21 and 22 where everything is coming to God's perfect conclusion we find the words:

And he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God and sparkled like a precious stone... I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.... Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life (Revelation 21-22)

So back in the Garden God told Adam and Eve to take dominion and develop the world with a God-centered perspective. But they failed. They failed to build a God glorifying city in Eden. But the new Adam – Jesus Christ – didn't fail. And one day His plans are going to come to pass and we are going to arrive in the city He had in mind from the beginning. The tree of life is there, this was His original plan.

So the city is God's invention. Sure it has been corrupted, but it is an inherently good and creative thing that is going to be redeemed. Friends, we aren't going back to the garden, we are moving to God's city.

...

Now cities aren't perfect. They have always been broken because they are full of broken people. And we see this in Babel. The people there wanted to build a city to make a name for themselves. They weren't interested in God, and living God's way, they were interested in elevating themselves. And this leads to brokenness.

And we could talk a lot about this, but I want to get to God because He and His action is what sits and the center of this story. God doesn't abandon us to brokenness, He enters our city. The LORD came down to the city.

In contrast to the world's religions this is what God's way is about. Salvation is never about us building a tower, but always about God bending down to the hole we are hiding in and rescuing us.

Now in verse 6 God seems scared of our potential – “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.” But actually this isn't fear but gracious punishment.

Remember how God kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden thereby guarding them from the tree of life? If they had eaten from it they would have gained eternal life separated from God. Similarly, now God begins guarding us from the danger of humanism – this is the tendency we move towards when we work together as one. And we are seeing this thrive in the global village we live in – the belief that we can save ourselves is on the rise. But at Babel God confuses their speech to keep them from making a name for themselves to their own demise. This is grace. It is always grace when God saves us from the salvation we think we've found in our own little hole.

And this points to another time that God came down to another city in grace. In Hebrews 13 we read:

And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through His own blood. Let us, then, go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. (Hebrews 13:12-14)

Jesus came to the city, and died outside the city, as a symbol of being isolated from human community. And He died so that we could gain the community with God and each other that we were designed for. And He died so we could become citizens of another city. This is the story of salvation.

But there is one more side to this, and that is that when God unfairly elects us He saves us both from something and to something. He saves us from seeking salvation in any other place, and He saves us to save the city. This is why Jesus sent the 70 before Him into cities. This is why Paul planted churches in cities. God loves cities, and He wants to use them to save humanity.

So if you've been saved today don't be content in your salvation. Instead invest yourself in spreading it around. Bend down and reach into the holes you've been placed beside – there are lots of people stuck in holes, just think of all the suicide going on – and with the power of Jesus' Spirit offer salvation to those you find.

When Jesus showed up in Palestine 2000 years ago He made the place better: People got physically healed and relationally healed, and emotionally healed and spiritually healed. And Jesus has put us in this city. And He has filled us with His Spirit. So Prince George should be a better place because we are here. So elect, give yourself to shining the light of Jesus into the city.