



# New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

## INTERRUPTION

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February 17th, 2008*

Does anybody know what is the most visited landmark in the world?

It's the Eiffel Tower. The Eiffel Tower was in the news this week because it set a new record in 2007. Last year, 6,893,000 people took a trip to see it. And that's just counting the paying customers. That's pretty remarkable, because when it was built for the World's Fair in 1899, the people of Paris thought it was a huge eyesore. The city planned to tear it down when its 20 year permit expired. Now here it is, over 100 years later, and the Eiffel Tower is recognized everywhere as being synonymous with Paris.

That may be the most visited landmark, but the most famous tower of all time is actually one nobody alive today has ever seen. The Tower of Babel in the Bible has fascinated people for centuries. It's been the subject of all kinds of speculation – where it was, how tall it was, what it looked like. All kinds of legends have sprung up, like that it was a mile tall or that God destroyed it with fire from heaven. Back during the Renaissance, there was a trend among Italian artists to paint the Tower of Babel. Apparently they assumed that it had been designed by Italians, because all the paintings looked like variations on the leaning tower of Pisa and the Coliseum.

The reality is that we have just 9 short verses in the Bible telling us about the tower, the people who built it and what happened to them. This morning I'd like to sort fact from fiction and see just what we know from Scripture. And more importantly, explore what it means for us.

When I was in college, I got into a fight with one of my roommates. It wasn't an interesting fist fight or anything like that (it was a CHRISTIAN college, after all). It was just an argument, and I don't even remember what it was about. But at the end, to get in a really good dig at me, he said, "If you ever have a reflective thought in your life, let me know."

Well, his words came back to me as I looked at the Tower of Babel story again for this morning. Because I've known the story since I was a kid, but I've never really had a reflective thought on it in my life! Okay that's an exaggeration. I had given it a little thought. But the longer I looked at the story, the more I realized how little attention I had

ever paid to what it was actually saying. And it's saying a lot. So I'm grateful for the opportunity to dig into it a little more and do some reflection. I guess I'll have to call my old roommate and let him know it finally happened.

I'm calling this message "Interruption" for obvious reasons, but I would almost give it the subtitle of "3 pursuits". Because as we go through this story, we find it's not so much about the tower as it is about three kinds of chases. The first one I would call "The Abandoned Pursuit."

Last week we left Noah and his family, having survived the flood, now ready to start life over again. After they disembarked from the ark, God blessed them. I want to just read the first line of his blessing for you, because it will relate to our story this morning:

**Genesis 9:1-7**

*Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."*

People began to repopulate the earth after the flood. The Bible doesn't say exactly how much time elapsed between God's blessing and the Tower of Babel, but it had been long enough that the population of the planet had grown probably into the tens of thousands. And here's where we jump into our text for today:

**Genesis 11:1-9**

*Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.*

Shinar was the name given to a large territory that would be present day Iraq. When people had migrated that far, they decided that was home. There was no need to keep up the endless journeying when they found everything they needed right there.

The Bible doesn't say anything about post traumatic stress syndrome, but you have to wonder what kind of psychological scars the flood left on humanity. That collective memory would be passed down from one generation to the next, shaping all of culture. It makes sense to me that people would choose to live in the plains – some place where they didn't have to look at water. And it was flat. After being stuck up on Mt. Ararat, maybe hilly country had left a bad taste in their mouths. For whatever reason, Shinar was appealing to them and they decided to settle there. That word for settling is the same word for sitting. They found a comfortable spot, dropped their bags and said, "This is it."

Already, we get a hint of trouble. In the blessing we just read, hadn't God told them to spread out and "fill the earth?" That was more of a blessing than a command, but it seems that God had a desire to see humanity disperse throughout creation. Everyone had started out in that spirit, but they only got so far. Now, as they settle down, the people of Babel stopped short of God's intentions, and they're just staying in one place. They abandoned the pursuit.

Have you ever felt like God was asking you to do something, but you held back because it would take you outside your comfort zone? We forget that his intention for us is linked to his blessing, and that we're missing out on the best when we stop short of full obedience.

Can I share a failure from my own life? A few weeks ago, a friend of mine from out of state called. In the course of the conversation, he mentioned that his mother was not doing well in her fight against cancer. My friend's family is Jewish by background, but not really by faith at all. And he mentioned that his mom was feeling scared.

I've never met his mom, but when I hung up the phone I thought, "I should offer to talk with her about Jesus and heaven and her fears." My friend and I have talked about my faith before and he knows what I do for a living, so I knew it wouldn't offend him if I offered that. But I didn't know quite what to say and I wasn't sure she'd even take me up on it. And the idea of talking to a complete stranger feels so intimidating that I conveniently let the idea fade from my mind.

This week I got an email from him that his mom is now unconscious and probably won't wake up again. And I felt this enormous sense of loss, because I hadn't acted when I felt prompted, and now the chance is gone. Not that her relationship with God depended on me – God can reach someone else however he wants. But whatever he might have wanted to do in me or with me through that opportunity was now gone, because I was too lazy or too comfortable to follow through.

That's not a very flattering story to tell, but I share it because we're about transparency here at New Day, and I can't in good conscience stand up here and tell you that it's easy to be obedient. Even when it's my profession to talk to people about God, I can still ignore when God prompts me.

Watchman Nee talked about those little urges we feel, and he said, "Do you stay and examine yourself whether this urge is from you or from God? While you are asking your questions, the opportunity will be gone! Act and be liberated!"

You know the verse, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"? We often use that verse to support the idea that everybody is sinful. But equally important in that verse is what we lose because of it. We miss out on God's glory. We stop short of his brilliant, shining ideal for us. God wants us to act and be liberated, to follow him all the way and not settle for comfortable.

Beth Moore gives a great example of this. She was in the airport one time on the way to a speaking engagement. She was sitting and waiting to board when a flight attendant wheeled a man in a wheelchair to the end of her row of chairs. Beth says he was the oldest looking man she had ever seen. His head was down and he had long, matted hair that was hanging down all around his face.

And Beth says she could feel God urging her to talk to this man, and she was panicking. In her mind, she was saying, “God don’t make me talk to him about Jesus! Don’t make me witness to that man!”

And she says as clear as a day, God spoke to her and said, “I don’t want you to witness to him. I want you to brush his hair.”

And immediately she’s going, “Can’t I please just talk to him about Jesus? That would be way easier than brushing a stranger’s hair.” She didn’t even have a hairbrush with her.

Finally, she gets up the courage to go over to him, and she said, “Sir, may I have the honor of brushing your hair?”

He said, “What? You’ll have to speak up.”

So she practically yells, “SIR, MAY I HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF BRUSHING YOUR HAIR?” At this point everyone in the airport is staring at her.

He looked at her and said, “Okay.”

She said, “I don’t have a brush.”

He had one in his bag, and as she got it out, she says the love of Christ just filled her up for this man, and she started to brush his tangled hair. And as she did, she thought, “I can do this. I’m good at this. I raised two daughters. This is nothing.” By the time she was done his hair was soft and smooth.

He was crying by the time she was done. It turned out he had been in the hospital for a long time and nobody had cut or combed his hair. Now he was headed home to see his wife, and he had just been thinking, “I must be a terrible sight for her to see.”

Now feeling all bold, Beth knelt down by the man and said, “Sir, do you know Jesus?” He said, “I do.” It turns out God really hadn’t needed her to witness to him – he just needed her to brush his hair.

We miss out on God’s glory when we don’t listen to what he’s encouraging us to do. The people in Genesis had no idea what they were missing by stopping there on the plains. All they could see were the advantages of staying in one place.

*They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar 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 and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."*

This was their plan, and it's what we could call "A Misguided Pursuit". They wanted a city with a tall tower. A city is what you build when you want to live close together. You create some common space where you can share resources and conduct the public business of the community.

As for the tower itself, we know from archaeology that the people in Babel were probably talking about building a ziggurat. Ziggurats were like pyramids, with a staircase going all the way up to the top. The staircase wasn't for people to use – it was for different Gods to use when they came down to earth from heaven. Ziggurats were seen as being connection points between heaven and earth.

So when the people of Babel said they wanted to build a tower to the heavens, they weren't literally trying to build it tall enough so it actually poked into heaven – they just meant it would be tall and that it would be a way of accessing the divine. It would be the gateway to heaven.

It's amazing how quickly people had forgotten the true God and his character, and how easy it was for them to miscalculate the relationship between God and humanity. Whether it was through arrogance or ignorance, they wanted a tower that would give them a measure of influence over God.

Their stated purpose for this massive construction project was two-fold. First, **they wanted to matter in the long run**. It says they wanted to make a name for themselves. They had missed out on God's glory – now they were going to create some of their own. They wanted to do something significant enough that they would be remembered.

That makes a lot of sense, given that everything was wiped away in the flood. All human achievement had been lost. So now, there was a huge desire for permanence, for making a mark that would last.

That's a deep need in all humanity. We want our lives to matter in the long run. Why is the Eiffel Tower called the Eiffel Tower? Because that's the last name of the architect who designed it. We like to attach our name to our work in the hopes that it will help us achieve a degree of immortality.

Kennon Callahan once wrote, "In the end, people do not want to go to the grave feeling that their life has been utterly useless – they want to have the sense that they have made some contribution."

It's ironic that the people of Babel wanted to make a name for themselves with this great project and yet it's the first story in the Bible where we're not given ANY names. Not one person is credited with this achievement. All their hard work was for nothing. It's as if God made sure that wish didn't come true.

Secondly, the people of Babel **wanted to have a center**. They feared the possibility of being scattered – out there to fend for themselves all alone. By what or by whom it

doesn't say, but again -- I think their fear goes right back to the flood and the mass of humanity that was uprooted and swept away. They didn't want to see that repeated in any form. So their answer was to huddle up and bar the door. They clung to each other. They wanted stability, connection and groundedness. In the face of their own insecurity, they wanted something solid.

They looked for that center in three different directions. They looked for it in people – staying close as a group. If we stick together we'll be okay They looked for it in the land itself, feeling tied to that spot of geography. And they looked for it in their work. They identified themselves with the structures they were building. That gave them a sense of who they were. They wanted something that could be seen for miles around and would become their main reference point.

Who doesn't want to feel centered? We all have this need for stability and grounding. And we look for that in the same places those people did – in relationships, in where we call home, in our work. Something to help us feel like we are secure in a very uncertain world.

It was at this point that the Lord stepped in and intervened.

*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."*

*So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 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 a heavenly pursuit – God coming down and pursuing them. Why would God choose to do something so drastic that would alter all the rest of history? What was so profoundly wrong at Babel that brought such a profound response from him?

I think it's important to recognize the basic wants the people had were not wrong. It's not wrong to want significance. God is the one who has given us the ability to wish for more than this life.

### **Ecclesiastes 3:11**

*He has planted eternity in the human heart...*

We know deep down that we are meant to last and have an impact. And there's nothing wrong with wanting to feel centered and grounded. It's like we're spokes on a bike wheel. We need a hub to stay connected. So what is it that was wrong?

Imagine for a minute that we have a church potluck after the service. Somebody who shall remain nameless for this illustration decided to bring some potato salad they'd had

in their fridge for a few weeks past the expiration date. It looked a little green, but they brought it anyway.

Let's say the preacher got long winded that morning so everybody was starving by lunch time. Even so, most everyone takes one look at the potato salad and knows better than to eat it. They find other things to fill up on.

But let's say I ate some and then got completely sick afterwards. And nobody else did. Do I blame the fact that I was so hungry, or do I blame the fact that the potato salad was bad? There was nothing wrong with my need – just how I filled it.

God created us with a need for significance and a need for being centered. That's not what was wrong with the people of Babel. What was wrong was how they chose to fill that need.

Let's think about their desire to make a name for themselves. They took that on as their own responsibility, and God says, "That's my job."

In the very next chapter, when God called Abraham, he says this:

**Genesis 12:2**

*I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.*

What a contrast – these people who wanted so desperately to make a name for themselves and who worked so hard at it, and Abraham – who didn't do anything to earn God's blessing.

We search for significance in so many things. Sometimes even in the stuff we do at church. We want to make a name for ourselves, and God says, "That's my job. You don't have to work at that. Your value doesn't come from those things. You won't find permanence in a job or a legacy in what you leave behind. You're not even going to make a name for yourself in that ministry you're trying so hard at. I'm the only one who can make your name great and make you a blessing."

In the book of Revelation, Jesus talks about us spending eternity with him. Out of all the things he could choose to give his followers, the one object he says he's going to give each of us is a stone, and on that stone is going to be a new name. He gives us a new name. And it will be permanent. He understands our need to be known and remembered. And he makes it last.

**Revelation 3:5-6**

*He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.*

Your name. My name. Etched in heaven permanently. We can be remembered before God forever and ever by Jesus. You can't get more significant than having God know you by name. And only Christ can offer that to us.

The people of Babel were trying to create their own self worth, and God says, "That's my job." Secondly, the people had chosen the wrong center. They were physically building their lives around that tower, looking to it to ground them and give them their sense of security.

God says, you want a tower? I'm your tower.

**Proverbs 18:10**

*The name of the LORD is a strong tower;  
the righteous run to it and are safe.*

He's the one who protects us.

**Psalm 61:3**

*For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe.*

He's the one who defends us against everything the devil schemes up.

**Psalm 90:1**

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.*

God is the source of strength and safety and stability and security. When we look for it anywhere else, it's idolatry, because we're putting something else where only God deserves to be.

The sin of Babel was very simple: The tower had replaced God as the center. The people were putting their faith in their own accomplishments, their own relationships and the place they had chosen for themselves. That was what they pinned their hopes on and God had become irrelevant.

Got any towers in your life? I sure do. I am quick to replace God with many other centers. They can be all good things. The question is what role I'm looking for them to fill in my life. If I find my identity in my work, if my sense of security comes from my relationships, they've replaced God in my life. They've become idols.

In the case of Babel, God pursued them and interrupted. He frustrated their efforts. He brought confusion. And the work came to a halt.

When God saw the tower, he made that comment, "This is just the beginning. If this keeps up, these people will carry out every thought they get in their head." And we saw last week that every thought they were getting in their head was evil. Violence and sin would once again run rampant if God didn't act.

This is what I think is so essential to recognize here. God's interruptions aren't punishment – they're grace. He was preventing evil from getting the upper hand. He used division to keep the darkness in check. He turned confusion into a tool for good. For as much wickedness as we see caused by the fact that people are divided, apparently it can be much worse sometimes when they're united. We start to think we're unstoppable. We start to think we're always right. God's method of dealing with Babel was a gift, because it helped slow the effects of sin, which were escalating out of control.

We view frustration and confusion as being negative, but God's interruptions are often a gift, and a sign that we're headed down a wrong path. When we find ourselves beating our head against a wall trying to make our plans happen, maybe it's time to take stock and see if there's an angel in our path that's keeping us from hurting ourselves further.

On the northern island of Japan, there's a mountain pass called Shiokari Pass. On February 28, 1909, a train was going up to the pass on the snowy mountain. Suddenly, the train stopped and the cars started moving backwards, down the slope. The passengers were all wondering what had happened when they discovered that their car had become unhitched from the train. Total panic and chaos erupted.

One of the passengers, Masao Nagano got up and tried to pull the hand brake lever to stop the car but it was rusted. This whole time, the car is hurtling downhill faster and faster. Mr. Nagano walked to the rear deck of the car and threw himself onto the tracks. The car hit his body and stopped, saving everyone on board.

God's biggest interruption came in the form of Jesus, throwing his life across the tracks of sin to save us. He interferes with our lives out of love. We ignore him at our own peril. Jesus saw our crisis of sin and made himself the interruption. And he continues to interrupt our lives. But the frustration of our way is our salvation. He offers us a new name. He offers to make us a blessing. It's in Jesus that we find our true center. All because God chose to pursue us, to interrupt the pattern.

Babel isn't just an ancient city – it's a heart condition. As you think about the story in relationship to your own life, it begs the question:

**Is there a hairbrush I need to pick up?** What is God prompting you to do? Maybe you've been stuck in a comfort zone like me. Maybe you've stopped short of following through. God invites us to act and be liberated. Ask God to redeem those lost opportunities and keep giving you new ones.

Secondly **what's my tower?** Is there something I'm looking to for strength or significance? Am I trying to make a name for myself through my job or what I do? How can I see my identity and worth as being in Christ instead of my accomplishments?

Finally, **am I paying attention to God's interruptions?** Am I responding to what Jesus has done and continues to do in my life to prevent me from hurtling down the wrong track?