

**In the Tongues of Men:
The Birth of Languages (Genesis 11:1-9)**

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 8, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're starting a new sermon series on Bible translation that's timed with the *Adopt-a-Verse* campaign that we've been previewing the last few weeks. Starting today and for the next two Sundays, you'll have a chance to help get the book of Colossians and Jude translated into the heart language of three connected people groups – together known as the Patip Cluster – who are living on a large island nation in Southeast Asia.
 - We're working with *The Seed Company*, which partners with a number of existing translation companies, and has an ambitious goal of getting a Bible translation project started by 2025 for all the remaining untranslated languages of the world. Their larger vision is to complete all these translations within our generation. *The Seed Company* wants you to *imagine zero* languages that don't have a full Bible. They say, that by the grace of God, that's an achievable goal within our lifetime.

- ❖ This is a great opportunity for us to get behind, and it's a campaign that really hits home for a Chinese church like ours. That's because at the heart of Bible translation is a deep appreciation for heart languages. **A heart language is the language that you use to most effectively express your thoughts and feelings and to process them.** If you're only proficient in one language, then that's obviously your heart language.
 - Now if you're bilingual or multilingual, your heart language may not even be the one you use the most. English might be the language you use the most in a given day, but you might be constantly processing what you take in through another language. You likely think and dream in that language, and if you're religious, you probably pray in that language. *That* would be your heart language.

- ❖ **Now, as a Chinese church, we were established because of this deep appreciation for one's heart language.** Chinese immigrants can become proficient in English and function just fine in the workplace. But when it comes to worshipping God in song, listening to his Word preached, reading his Word in study and devotion – we gravitate towards our heart language. **There's a difference when communicating with God or about God in a mother tongue versus an adopted tongue.**

- ❖ I remember last year during our Missions Conference we had a missionary from Vietnam as a guest preacher, and he shared a story about this conversation he had with a woman from an unreached people group in Vietnam called the *Tai Dam*. He shared the gospel with her in her dialect, and she was fairly receptive. But it was after he prayed for her in the *Tai Dam* language – that he looked up afterwards and she was crying. She was moved to tears – and not because of the eloquence of his prayer.
 - He asked why was she crying, and she said, “*I didn't know God spoke Tai Dam.*” **Until that day, she assumed the Christian God was a foreign god, a Western god.** But when she realized this God spoke her language, it drew him so much closer. **To discover that she can communicate with this God in her heart language opened up a new paradigm for her.** This could be *her* God and she could be loved by him.

- ❖ That's the power of a heart language. And that's why Bible translation is such an important task for the Church. **We have a stewardship to translate the Word of God into every heart language, so that every people group on the face of the earth can hear Jesus and speak to Jesus in their own native tongue.**
 - But there are those who question the efficiency of this task. Since we live in a globalized society dominated by a handful of primary languages – English, Mandarin, Spanish, French, etc. – **wouldn't it be easier to teach them one of these languages than to translate the Bible into theirs?** You're going to invest all that time, money, and energy to translate a Bible for a small, primitive, illiterate people group of a few hundred? Is that good stewardship of our limited resources?

- ❖ It's not hard to sympathize with this argument. That's why this effort comes down to a conviction regarding heart language. Bible translation requires hard work and perseverance. **The effort to get the Bible into every language will be sustained – not by sheer determination – but by a deep theology.** What's needed is a biblical theology of language.
 - Where did the diversity of languages on this planet come from? Why is there not one universal common language? And is that the goal? Is that what we'll experience in heaven? Will we all be speaking one common heavenly language? **How does the future of human language impact our present efforts in Bible translation?**
 - To answer these questions, we'll turn to Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel, and we'll consider three things: (1) the power of a common language, (2) the judgment by multiplying languages, and (3) the redemption of all languages.

The Power of a Common Language

- ❖ Let's begin by considering the unifying power of a common language. When we turn to the book of Genesis, we're introduced to the primitive history of all people groups on earth. **The biblical story of origins insists that we are all of one race – the human race.** Everyone – no matter where you're born, no matter what language you grew up speaking, no matter the color of your skin – everyone shares in the *imago dei* (the image of God).
 - **I would contend that, without this biblical understanding of our common origin, there would be no sustainable argument for human rights.** There would be no way to resist the toxicity of racism or any theory of racial superiority. It's the biblical doctrine of creation that is necessary to combat these lies.

- ❖ Now in the beginning, not only was everyone made in the same image of God – everyone spoke the same language. **It was a universal common language that brought humanity together and enabled great collaboration and innovation.** They were able to build a new city and a magnificent tower in a location where stone and mortar (the typical building blocks) were not available.
 - Listen to vv1-3 again, *“¹Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.”*

- ❖ **Because of a common language, the people were able to collaborate and innovate and make new discoveries.** They figured out how to construct tall towers using baked bricks instead of stone and bitumen in place of mortar. That's the power of a shared heart language.
 - **Let's be honest, it's just so much easier to work with people and get things done when you speak each other's language.** We've all experienced it. You can love being in diverse environments and love being with people of different backgrounds, but there is something unique to be experienced when you gather with people who speak your own language. There's an ease to communication. Even if they're strangers you're meeting for the first time, the fact that they speak your heart language endears you to them much faster than normal.

- ❖ **So you would think that possessing one universal common language would've contributed to greater unity and oneness of faith.** But don't forget how human sinfulness was introduced to the world back in Genesis 3. And that sinfulness corrupted human collaboration. **A common language certainly united humanity – but sadly in rebellion.**
 - Let me read v4 and listen carefully to their reasoning for building this city and its mighty tower. *"Then they said, "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 whole earth."*

- ❖ They want four things: (1) They want to build a city. (2) They want to build a tower with its top in the heavens. (3) They want to make a name for themselves. And (4) they don't want to be dispersed over the face of the earth.
 - Well in order to accomplish the last thing, they do the first. They don't want to be dispersed so they build themselves a city. And in order to make a name for themselves, they build a tower that stretches up to heaven.

- ❖ **Now on one hand, you can understand why they don't want to disperse.** If a large number of you speak the same language; you easily understand each other; and you work well as a group – why would you want to disperse? Besides, isn't there security in numbers?
 - It all seems innocent enough – until you read Genesis 11 in the context of Genesis 9:1 where God commands humanity to, *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."* Their mandate is to disperse and populate the planet. To fill the earth with the praise and knowledge of the Lord. **So their decision to stay put and resist dispersion is nothing short of treason.** It's a sinful act of rebellion.

- ❖ And building this tower only makes things worse. **Most commentators think what they built was a ziggurat – a stair-stepped, pyramid-shaped tower.** They were considered a meeting point between heaven and earth. That's why this ziggurat stretched to the sky with its top in the heavens. It was basically a stairway to heaven. That's how inflated their pride had grown. They were trying to approach God by their own efforts.

- ❖ Here's another way to look at it. When they wanted to build a city because they didn't want to disperse – what were they ultimately after? **Security**. And when they wanted to build a tower up to heaven because they wanted to make a name for themselves – what were they ultimately after? **Recognition**. That's what they wanted – security and recognition.
 - Now those aren't bad things. **But they refused to depend on God for them.** And that was the problem. It's really no different than what occurred in Genesis 3. **Once again humanity refused to trust in God's provision and tried to obtain his blessings by our own efforts.** That's how sin expressed itself in Eden. That's what sin is doing in Babel. The flood back in Genesis 7 was unable to wash away sin from the world – because it was buried too deep in every human heart.
- ❖ Here we have a people blessed with a common language. They have the power and potential to do so much for God's glory – for God's name. But because of sin and its corruption, they are too busy trying to preserve their own glory and establish their own name.

The Judgement by Multiplying Languages

- ❖ So in the next scene, God responds to this sinful rebellion. This leads to our second point. Let's consider the judgment by multiplying languages. **What we discover is that the multiplicity of human languages today is a result of sinful disobedience.** So while we have a deep appreciation for heart languages, we're going to have to wrestle with the Bible's teaching that they were birthed out of rebellion. That's a tension we'll have to address.
- ❖ But first let's see how God responds. Look back at v5, "*And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.*" Now there's a bit of humorous irony when it says the Lord had to come down to see this thing. That ought to humble these builders who thought they made the tower so high and mighty with its top in the heavens.
 - Now listen to v6, "*And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."*
- ❖ So God comes down to stop them – not because he's worried they might be unstoppable – but because he knows they'll never stop in their rebellion. **He's not concerned with the heights of accomplishment that they might achieve – but the depths of sin that they might dive into.** He's essentially saying, “If I don't act to restrain their sinfulness, there's no telling how bad it'll get. They'll end up destroying themselves and all of creation.”
 - So he comes down and confuses their speech. Look at v7, "*7Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech. 8So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.*"

- ❖ **So because they no longer possess a universal common language, they can no longer collaborate and coordinate their efforts.** So they leave off building the city and are dispersed over the face of all the earth. They wanted to make a name for themselves, but now they can't even pronounce each other's names. They wanted to avoid dispersion, but now they're scattered all over the earth. This is judgment. This is God's way of punishing.
 - **But notice how even God's judgment is filled with mercy.** By confusing their speech, God dispersed the people all over the face of the earth. Like what he asked for in Genesis 9. He was getting them back on track with his redemptive plan.

- ❖ This is another example of the doctrine of confluence. **Confluence means "to flow together", and this doctrine teaches that God's will is sovereign and comprehensive.** And within his overall will flow multiple decisions and intentions coming from multiple free-willing actors. So imagine a mighty river flowing in one overall general direction. But within that river, smaller tributaries are fed into it, and at those junctions, you'll find a confluence of currents. They're different and may even appear to run against each other, but in the end, they all flow together within the same mighty river.
 - So in our story, you've got **the current of God's will to bless his people with one common language** for the sake of collaboration. But then you've also got **the current of the people's sinful rebellion** that flow against God's intentions for them. And then there's **the current of God's judgment** – removing the blessing of a common language, multiplying their tongues, and dividing them into different tribes.
 - These currents appear to run against each other, but in the end, because of confluence, all these currents flow together within the same mighty will of God – the sovereign and comprehensive will of God.

- ❖ **So does this mean that all languages are birthed in sin and disobedience? Part of the answer would be "yes".** That's what the story of Babel is describing – where all the different languages come from. But "yes" is only a partial answer.
 - **Yes, all of our unique heart languages are birthed in sin, but are these languages inherently bad?** Is it bad – and counter to God's will – for there to be a multiplicity of languages in the world? Is it God's preference and plan for us to reunite around one common language – to be restored as one tribe with one tongue? I would argue that the answer is "no".

- ❖ **This is not a contradiction. This is a confluence.** Yes, God created humanity with one common language. Yes, it was because of human sin that God multiplied languages. But no, it does not imply that a multiplicity of languages is inherently bad. No, it's not God's plan to go back to one common language. **This is not an example of God changing his plans. This an example of God sovereignly using even our sin and rebellion to accomplish his greater plans.**

The Redemption of all Languages

- ❖ To see how this confluence of divine desires flow together, we need to read this story of the Tower of Babel within the larger biblical narrative that unfolds from Old to New Testament. So let's do that as we consider our third point: The redemption of all languages.
- ❖ Now, by Genesis 11, understandably things look bleak. **Yes, they are finally filling the earth, but humanity is fractured. Their unity is gone. They're divided among a multiplicity of tribes and tongues.** Will things ever be restored?
 - Well immediately in the next chapter, in Genesis 12, we're introduced to a man named Abraham – to whom God promises to make into one of the nations among the larger Table of Nations. And notice how in chapter 12:2, God promises to make a great name for Abraham.
 - **That's the thing – we try our hardest to make a name for ourselves – but the only name that matters is the one that God makes for us.** And God says he does it – he gives us power, influence, recognition, a great name – *so that* we will be a blessing to others (vv2-3).
- ❖ **Well the rest of the Bible is about how God keeps this promise to make a great name and a great nation out of Abraham.** The overall storyline of Scripture follows the line of Abraham and how, through the people and story of Israel, God will deal with the problem of human sin and rebellion – which was manifested at Babel.
- ❖ **Because there are a thousand tongues, there are a thousand ways to worship falsely – to praise false gods in our own heart language.** And that's what we see play out in rest of the Old Testament. Idolatry and false worship covers the face of all the earth.
 - But then we read hints in the prophets that this will not always be so. Listen to **Zephaniah 3:9**. This is the Lord, speaking through the prophet, foretelling a time when the speech of the nations will be changed. *“For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.”*
- ❖ Now you might assume that means everyone's speech will be changed to the same language. But that's reading too much into it. The emphasis is on the purity of their speech – in contrast to the false worship that the nations are entertaining now.
 - **God is saying he's going to do something significant, so that all the different peoples on the face of the earth will call upon the name of the LORD in pure speech – pure worship.** And we'll be united again to serve him with one accord.
- ❖ Well as the storyline of Scripture continues into the New Testament, we're immediately introduced to a son of Abraham (Mt 1:1). His name is Jesus, and we quickly come to see that he is God Incarnate. **In Jesus, God once again came down to visit a city – to see what they built.** The city is Jerusalem, and the temple they built had become a shameful den of thieves (Mt 21:13).

- ❖ **So once again there's judgment and punishment, and once again it's full of grace and mercy.** We're told that Jesus came down to Jerusalem, and five days later, he was led out of the city gates with a cross on his back. **Hebrews 13** says, "*Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. . . . For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.*" (13:12;14)
 - So once again there's punishment for sin. But this time, it's Jesus who takes the punishment for us. He gets dispersed instead of us. He gets thrown out of the city and we get to stay. **Jesus is exiled and killed, so that sinners like us can be restored to God and given new life.**

- ❖ **It's only through the gospel of Jesus that we can be brought back on track with God's plan of redemption.** At Babel, things went off track. We started by speaking one language but ended in confusion, with multiple languages, unable to understand each other. But now, with Jesus's death and resurrection, God's bringing us back on track.
 - **And as the story unfolds, God comes down again. This time in the person of the Holy Spirit.** In Acts 2, we're told that his followers were gathered on **the day of Pentecost**. "*2And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. 4And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. 5Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. 7And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?"*" (Acts 2:2-8)

- ❖ Notice what's happening. It's not as if all these foreigners suddenly understood Aramaic, which is what the disciples would've spoken. It's not as if everyone began communicating in one language. **No, somehow the Spirit of the Risen Christ enabled everyone to suddenly hear the gospel being proclaim in their own native language.**
 - That phrase "*native language*" is literally "*the language of your birth*". Your heart language! **Everyone was hearing about the Risen Christ in their heart language!** And then Peter stands up and explains that Pentecost is a sign of those last days that the prophets spoke of. The days have come when all the nations will be saved by calling on the name of the Lord with pure speech – *but in their own native tongue!*

- ❖ **This, my friends, is how the story of Babel finds its resolution in the events of Pentecost.** Unity was lost at Babel. It was restored at Pentecost. Confusion was sowed at Babel. Understanding was recovered at Pentecost. Now I've heard some describe Pentecost as reversing the effects of Babel. I think I know what they mean, but it's not exactly true. Pentecost doesn't reverse Babel since we're not restored back to only one common language. Our unique heart languages are preserved even in eternity!

- ❖ **That means when we get to heaven, we won't be speaking a common language.** We know this because the Apostle John was given a glimpse of heaven, and he saw, “*a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne of the Lamb.*” (Rev 7:9) And they were singing praises to the Lamb in their own native tongue, in their heart language.

- ❖ **So I think it's better to say that Pentecost redeemed the effects of Babel.** Humanity doesn't go back to sharing a universal common language. But that's because God has given us an even greater source of unity than a shared language.
 - No doubt, language is a powerful unifying force. **But according to God's unfolding plan, from Pentecost onward, the redeemed people of God will be unified – not by a common language or culture – but by a common faith and common Spirit.** There is *one gospel* in which we all trust and *one Holy Spirit* in whom we all share. That means our Christian unity and our Christian mission does not depend on us choosing and using only one language.

- ❖ **That's why a church like ours can contain a multiplicity of languages and yet still be unified in the Spirit.** We can experience and express Christian unity. Sure, there are language barriers (and cultural barriers) to be faced, but they can be overcome by our shared faith and our shared life together in the Spirit.
 - And this is why our Christian mission of disciple-making among the nations is not dependent on one language. **Every heart language is valued by God and will be represented around the throne of the Lamb – when Jesus receives the global praise he deserves from every language on earth.**

- ❖ And this is why we're getting behind the *Adopt-a-Verse* campaign. **Because every language on earth will be represented in heaven, we want to see God's Word translated into every language.** We want to make sure every people group on earth knows how to sing praises to the Lamb in their own heart language. Let's work together to make that possible – starting with those three people groups in the Patip Cluster.