

The Greatest Story Ever Told

A Back-to-Basics Catechesis

The Tower of Babel

In the story of the great flood, we saw how evil and sin had grown so fast and become so serious that God saw it necessary to cleanse the whole world and dramatically prune the human family. While the flood was a severe measure, that tells us how bad the problem had become! The flood was like a giant “bath” that cleansed the world, making an end of sin and new beginning for goodness to grow.

But the world after the flood was far from sin-free. Even in Noah’s family there are struggles with drinking too much and the indiscretion and divisions that often follow such matters.

In the decades and centuries that followed, humanity grew once again and began to spread toward the lands east of where Eden had once been. The land was called “Shinar”, but it would be called “Babylon” later in the Scriptures. It is a region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (aka Mesopotamia). Today the region encompasses Iran and Iraq.

At this moment we encounter a story about the sin of pride wherein we forget the glory of God and esteem ourselves too highly. Let’s consider this story and seek to learn from it.

The Story of the Tower of Babel

Now the whole world had one language and a common form of speech. And as people journeyed eastward, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” So, they used brick instead of stone, and tar instead of

mortar. “Come,” they said, “let us build for ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens, that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of all the earth.” Then the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the sons of men were building. And the LORD said, “If they have begun to do this as one people speaking the same language, then nothing they



devise will be beyond them. Come, let Us go down and confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them from there over the face of all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it is called Babel, for there the LORD confused the language of the whole world, and from that place the LORD scattered them over the face of all the earth. (Gen 11:1-9)

What Do We Learn?

Fundamentally this story is about the sinful drive of pride. Pride is the most serious of sins we commit. It is a very

deep drive, so deep we often aren’t even aware that we are doing it. It is also at the root of every other sin we commit. Pride is the sinful tendency of esteeming oneself more than is proper and at the same time denigrating the goodness of others. Pride also stirs us to reject the lawful authority of others, including God, and through it we often refuse appropriate submission. The proud man is under pressure since he seeks to live the lie that he is more than he really is. St. Gregory lists four kinds of pride:

- Thinking that my gifts are from myself, rather than from God or others who taught me.
- Thinking that, even if my gifts are from God or others, it is because I deserve them.
- Claiming an excellence I do not have.
- Despising others and their gifts or thinking that I am the only one who can do things.

Pride makes us think we know better than God and that we can disregard what he teaches in his Scriptures and the Church. Pride is extremely dangerous because it distances us from God and makes him seem irrelevant to us. It even makes him seem to be a competitor or rival to our control or power.

As we saw earlier, the sin of Adam and Eve was, at its heart, a sin of pride. Satan told them that if they ate the forbidden fruit they would become like gods, deciding for themselves what is good or evil (see Gen 3:5). They distrusted and disregarded what God had told them,

insisted on eating the fruit and knowing evil personally.

In this story of the Tower of Babel, pride is evident in their intentions to build a massive city and a tower *that reaches to the heavens, that we may make a name for ourselves*. Reaching to heaven is not possible for man. Even getting back to the earthly Garden of Eden is beyond our powers (see Gen 3:24). Only by the wonderful grace and mercy of God can we ever hope to see heaven.

Large cities were a sign of collective human power. Like today, they were considered the economic and political powerhouses of their day. They were surrounded also by high walls and military embattlements. All of this exuded power, security, hubris, and self-reliance.

Further, “making a name for ourselves” is prideful. To God alone be the glory! And, if there is any human achievement it is only on account of our God-given intellects and gifts working with what God has made that make human endeavors successful. Scripture says, *Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain*. (Ps 127:1)

Note however, God is not opposed to human development or ingenuity. In fact, he placed us here and gave us a mission. He told us to be fruitful, multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it (see Gen 1:28; 2:15) In effect, we are to take the raw materials of this universe and build beautiful and useful things, help creation reach its potential, and unlock its secret powers, all by the grace of God. But thinking we can soar to heaven or make a name for ourselves apart from God is laughable and prideful.

What a Joke!

The laughable quality of the pride inherent in the builders of Babel is made clear when their mighty city and

tower are so puny that God must come down to earth to see it! The text says of the completed tower and metropolis: *Then the LORD came down to see the city and the tower*. Yes, it is implied that the Lord must stoop and squint to even see what this mighty city and tower is! Our greatest works are barely visible from heaven.

We do well to recall that we are tiny specks, standing on a slightly larger speck (the earth) which circles a slightly larger and fiery speck (the sun), circling the center of a slightly larger dust cloud of specks called the



Milky Way galaxy. It has tens of billions of similar stars, and the Milky Way is just one of billions of other galaxies in the vastness of space. So, you might say that the mighty city and Tower of Babel, and our own larger and modern versions of these aren't so big and mighty after all. Humility everyone! Let's have some humility.

God must Act

Because pride is so dangerous, God once again acted to prune our pride and limit our stupidity. He did this by confusing our speech and confounding our grandiose notions of one-world government and collectivist power. He spread forth the human family throughout the world and thereby decentralized our prideful power. Both language and distance are used to assist humanity to live in families, God's preferred social

network, rather than in large collectivist systems or city-states that are depersonalizing and often dehumanizing. God also brings diversity by introducing new languages and giving wider experiences by locating us everywhere in the world.

In the modern world there has been a tendency to return to large cities with tall buildings. This has once again contributed to a lot of pride and depersonalization. There are globalist notions of one-world government and centralized control that seek to create progress and a kind of utopia that replaces God and undermines families. These modern attempts have usually ended in dystopian disasters and wars, leading to grave human suffering and a loss of freedom. The Catechism of the Catholic Church warns especially of godless schemes that seek to build a “city of man” without God:

The Church has rejected the totalitarian and atheistic ideologies associated in modern times with "communism" or "socialism." [and the] individualism and the absolute primacy of the law of the marketplace over human labor in capitalism. Regulating the economy solely by centralized planning perverts the basis of social bonds; and regulating it solely by the law of the marketplace fails social justice, for "there are many human needs which cannot be satisfied by the market." Reasonable regulation of the marketplace and economic initiatives, in keeping with a just hierarchy of values and a view to the common good, is to be commended. (CCC #2425)

The story of Babel warns us to curb our tendency to think too highly of ourselves or over-estimate our knowledge and abilities apart from God, who gave them to us. We must humble ourselves before God, listen carefully to what he says, and heed what we hear. Anything else is colossal and towering pride.