

There is something exciting about an auction- the auctioneer rattling on with his incessant talking, the seller standing by his side with muted anticipation wondering what he will receive for his merchandise, and the crowds of people examining the goods, each thinking that he might be able to come away with a great bargain. Perhaps these are some of the reasons why auctions have been with us for so many years.

I believe that one of the greatest auctions in human history might have taken place on a beautiful spring day almost 1,800 years ago. It was late in March, 193 A.D. when Marcus heard about an auction- an auction being promoted by some of the Roman praetorian guards.

Now Marcus Didius Julianus loved auctions. Marcus was an extremely wealthy man. The son of a prominent family of what is now Milan, Italy, Marcus had grown up into a vast fortune. And he had caused that fortune to grow and grow. Perhaps that was why Marcus loved auctions- it was the challenge of a good bargain that excited him. So Marcus attended this auction with a sense of anticipation- and he was not disappointed.

The major item that the praetorians were auctioning was an old relic that had seen better days- but it was still very valuable. The bidding began at 10,000 sesterces. What a bargain that would be, Marcus thought, as he raised his hand to bid. Do I hear 11,000? the auctioneer asked. Another bidder, a man named Flavius, raised his hand. It soon became apparent that the bidding was between Marcus and Flavius, but Marcus was not to be underbid. Up and up he went until he finally won the bid at 25,000 sesterces. Marcus had come away with a bargain indeed.

But there is an old Roman saying- caveat emptor- let the buyer beware. That item purchased at the auction would lead to Marcus' death 2 months later. And the sad thing is that Marcus really didn't need the item- it was the prestige that accompanied the highest bid that he couldn't refuse. For those roman praetorian guards were the ones commissioned to oversee the entire Roman Empire. And that empire was in such bankrupt shape financially that they had decided to raise money with an auction. Yes, what Marcus Didius Julianus had purchased at that auction was the Roman Empire itself. And for a whole 2 months, he was the emperor, until he was assassinated.

History is filled with examples of civilizations that have risen and fallen. When we see the strength and power of the Roman Empire during its peak when Jesus Christ was walking the face of the earth, it is hard for us to believe that within 200 years the entire empire would be sold at an auction- but history records that it happened. So it has also happened to all other civilizations that have been based solely upon human ingenuity and power.

We come this morning to the passage of Scripture that briefly describes the rise and fall of the first great

civilization that we know of after the flood. It is found in Gen. 11. And this passage helps to answer some major questions that we have as we look at the human race today. It is for this reason that this event must be seriously considered as one of the top ten greatest events in all of human history.

*If everyone in the human race came from 2 people- Adam and Eve- why are there so many different national identities? Shouldn't we all have a common cultural heritage?

*Why do these different nations speak different languages? If we all came from a common source shouldn't we all speak the same language?

*Why do these different national identities look and act so distinctly from one another? If every human being ultimately has the same set of parents, shouldn't we all have the same color skin?

Let's look together at the world event that helps to answer some of these questions.

READ Gen. 11:1-9

GE 11:1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

GE 11:3 They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ 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."

GE 11:5 But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

GE 11:8 So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ 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.

1. Now first of all, let's look at this sin that was committed. Was it wrong for these people to start this building project? Is God against buildings? Of course not. It was the type of building that God opposed. For this decision to build a great tower that reached into the heavens was made with a 2 fold purpose: in pride to make a name for ourselves and for security that we might not be scattered.

Now we must discuss this project briefly in order to understand what is happening here.

We can't be too dogmatic about the temple itself for the Hebrew language leaves us 2 options. Literally the Hebrew says that they wanted to build a tower as or like the heavens. Now this can mean one of 2 things, or perhaps, as I feel, elements of both of them which is perhaps the reason for the apparent ambiguity.

a. It could well mean as most translators render it that the tower was to be an extremely tall one- one that would reach up into the heavens because of its height.

b. But it could also mean that the tower was to resemble the heavens- a tower looking like the heavens. If this were the case, the tower would be some kind of temple promoting the worship of the heavens, perhaps a planetarium type of structure where different star formations could be seen.

Let me take you for just a moment to ancient Babylon- to the ruins of Birs Nimrud located about 6 miles SW of ancient Babylon.

Birs Nimrud is a ziggurat facing NE having 7 stages with the remains of a large tower at the top. The platform is made of burnt brick. The height is 155 feet above the plain below with a circumference of more than 2,000 feet. Many feel that this might just be the ruins of the ancient tower of Babel. It does have an ancient date. If not, this ziggurat does give us an idea of temple construction back in ancient times.

1. The 1st stage is black in honor of Saturn- 272 feet square and 26 feet high.
2. The 2nd stage is orange representing Jupiter- 230 feet square; 26 ft high
3. The 3rd stage is red representing Mars- 186 feet square; 26 feet high
4. The 4th stage is golden representing the sun- 146 ft. square; 15 feet high
5. The 5th stage is pale yellow representing Venus- 104 ft. square; 15 ft. high
6. The 6th stage is dark blue representing Mercury- 62 ft. square; 15 ft. high
7. The 7th and final stage is silver representing the moon- 26 ft. square; 15 ft. high

The inscriptions and pictures at this ziggurat make it very clear that this was a temple formed to worship the planets, sun, moon and stars. It is likely that the tower of Babel might have been similar structure (if not this very one), both reaching up into the heavens (for this would have been a very tall skyscraper back in ancient times) and also representing the heavens for worship.

*Why was it made out of bricks? There is indication that people already were anticipating another world-wide judgment from God and they expected that judgment to be with fire.

-God had promised no more floods

-So they would make a fire proof building.

You see, the building this tower was an act of arrogance and rebellion against God. Just try to destroy us again. You caught us off guard once, but we will be prepared next time. We will have our shelter against your judgment.

It was not that God was displeased with a building project. No, he was pleased with what they were able to accomplish and he commends them on that- nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. What a tremendous statement of human potential from God himself. If people can imagine it, they can accomplish it given enough time to develop the technology.

But their motive and their attitude were displeasing to God. They were building this tower to worship false

gods and to bolster their own pride- to make a name for themselves- and in an act of arrogance against God, in a puny attempt to defend themselves against any upcoming judgment. It is interesting that the Hebrew word for name is shem. Some feel that when it is recorded that they wanted to make a name or a shem for themselves, there is a reference to Shem the son of Noah thru whom God had prophesied all of his blessings to come. They claim that these people were trying to forcefully take over the place of Shem's descendents, promoting their own program over God's. We can't be dogmatic about this connection between name and Shem the son of Noah, but the point certainly is valid. For in the beginning, Lucifer fell into sin trying to ascend to the place of the Almighty, and Adam and Eve fell into sin trying to be like god- certainly these builders of this tower in pride were likewise usurping God's position in their lives.

So God decided to thwart their plans- and he showed how easily that could be done. Here they were preparing to stand against a great world-wide judgment and God simply foiled their plans internally, by changing some languages so that they couldn't communicate with each other anymore.

2. This brings us to the consequences of their sin. God simply confused their languages, making them speak in different tongues, so that they could no longer communicate and work on this project together. As a consequence of this act of God, a very natural phenomenon began to occur that has continued to this very day. And it is not difficult for us to envision this sequence even though we are given only the first stages of it in Gen. 11- the scattering over the face of the earth.

*Not being able to understand each other, the building project stopped due to the lack of communication.

*Then it would have been natural for people of like language to gather together for they would be able to communicate with each other. So undoubtedly sub groups developed, each speaking a common language.

*Not being able to communicate with other groups, it would then have been natural for these common language groups to develop suspicions of other groups, and move away from them further isolating themselves. Indeed, the bible says that thru this phenomena people were scattered over the entire face of the earth.

*Now isolated from other language groups, it would have naturally occurred over longer periods of time that certain physical characteristics would have become dominant in certain races of people as they better adapted to their climate and environment. Just as all different types of domestic dogs- from the smallest Chihuahuas to the giant Great Danes - are bred over periods of time until the once recessive genetic patterns become dominant in certain pedigrees, so the same thing would have happened in the human race when the people became isolated from each other due to language differences. In some groups, darker skin and hair would have become more dominant, while in others, lighter skin and hair would have prevailed. And in time, nationally distinctive characteristics would have emerged. We must remember that all genetic possibilities must have been originally created in Adam. So if you

want to know what Adam looked like- he very likely was the consummate human, containing characteristics of every race on the earth. But in time with the isolation, distinctive characteristics came to be among the races. And , of course, we see in interracial marriages that occur today, a reversing of that trend. As 2 people marry from differing races, their children lose the most distinctive characteristics and become a mixture of both races. If interracial marriages were to continue to happen with all of the races in the world, those distinctive characteristics of different races would eventually be lost again, and the world would have a common race as it did before the tower of Babel.

Now, you might be thinking- this is certainly very interesting. And this does answer some of the questions of how the world has come to be as it is today. But what are some practical lessons that can be learned from this greatest of events in human history. I would like to bring 2 practical applications to your attention as we conclude this morning:

1. In this passage we find some very necessary keys to group success as well as some guarantees for failure in God's eyes. It is important for us to note these, for a church is a group of people called out by God to accomplish a task that he has given to them. The Greek word translated church is Ecclesia- literally called out ones.

It is incredible what these people were able to accomplish in building this tower with the industry and technology that they had. They were able to accomplish so much that God said that without his intervention nothing they planned to do would be impossible for them. What were the keys to their successful progress on this monumental project:

*they had commitment to work together towards a common goal vs. 3-4

*they had unity vs. 6

*they had an effective communication system vs. 1 and 6

Now they didn't fail because of lack of commitment or effort. They failed because they overlooked one more effective key- that was the will of God. Their motivation was wrong. They were trying to build this monument for themselves. Pride was not a sufficient foundation for such a task as this. If they would have committed this amount of energy to a task for the glory of God, they would have undoubtedly been successful.

These are key ingredients in the success of any group activity- especially for a church.

*there must be commitment

*there must be a common goal, and a unity of pursuit towards that goal

*there must be effective communication

*there must be a confidence that the project is in the will of God for the glory of God.

2. But also in this scene we see an interesting cycle to human history that I just want to mention in closing this morning.

*God created the world in unity. His goal was that the human race would be unified to worship him.

*But the human race abused that power in unity. People worshiped other gods and used the power of human unity to exalt us rather than God.

*God brought about different languages and different races- separating people into groups in every corner of the earth. And the human race has existed in this state for most of its history.

*But in more recent years, an interesting phenomenon has begun to occur. Once again the world appears to be coming together in unity. World leaders are speaking of a new emerging world order. And this unity is being facilitated thru communication. English is very quickly becoming the world language. It is difficult to find many places in the world now where somebody doesn't know English. And when different languages are found, there are interpreters who are helping people communicate with each other.

*What is going to be the outcome of this cycle returning to world unity? It will be the same as before for human nature has not changed in time. A man of sin, one called the antichrist in the Bible, will use this new world unity to exalt himself and bring about a false worship system. Iniquity will abound and humans will be exalted once more. And this trend will result in God's upcoming judgment coming upon this earth.

*But God is ultimately going to use this newfound unity for his own good ends. For following a period of worldwide judgment (called the Tribulation Period in the Bible), Jesus Christ himself is going to establish a kingdom here upon this earth. The Bible says that everyone will speak a common language in this kingdom. The Bible says that there will be a perfect unity of purpose and direction. Finally, the world will realize that which has been its goal all the time- a perfect, unified world government.

What a blessed day that will be! How we look forward to God bringing about the culmination of his program!