

What Would You Do With a Fresh Start?

New Beginnings—Part 4

Genesis 11:1-9

April 19, 2015

A. While my favorite character in the Wizard of Oz is certainly the Cowardly Lion (in fact, let's just say that I have a strong affinity for the character) my second favorite character is the Scarecrow.

1. Soon after he and Dorothy meet, the Scarecrow tells Dorothy, "I haven't got a brain... just straw."
2. Dorothy replies, "How can you talk if you haven't got a brain?"
3. And the Scarecrow says, "I don't know... But some people without brains do an awful lot of talking... don't they?"
4. Of course, Dorothy agrees, "Yes, I guess you're right."
5. Finally, she poses the question, "What would you do with a brain if you had one?"
6. There've been a few times I've wanted to ask someone that question too.

B. But my question for you this morning is a little different.

1. My question is: What would you do with a fresh start if you had one?
2. If you could begin again today, if you had a clean slate, what would you do with it?

C. The last several weeks, we've been talking about new beginnings.

1. In Genesis 1, we saw the beginning of everything.
2. And in creation we see the power, planning and product of God.
3. Then, in Genesis 3, we saw the deceptive character of sin, the destructive consequences of sin, and the divine covering for sin.
4. Even though Adam and Eve blew it, God covered them with his grace and gave them a fresh start.
5. But not long after, in Genesis 6-9, we find the story of the flood.
6. Human wickedness had reached a crescendo.
7. Every inclination of their hearts was only evil all the time.
8. But even then God wouldn't give up on us completely.

9. He kept Noah and his family safe on the ark and then he placed his rainbow in the sky as a symbol for God's patience, promises, and peace.

10. All of humanity had a clean slate—a second chance to get things right.

D. But what did they do with their clean slate?

1. What would you do with a fresh start if you had one?
2. Let me invite you to Genesis 11; just a turn of the page after God gave Noah and his family a fresh start, we see how the next generation used it.

E. Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. 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; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people 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. (Genesis 11:1-9 NIV)

F. This construction project has gone down in history as one of humanity's most epic failures.

1. It's been told and re-told in dozens of cultures all around the world.
2. The Babylonians, the Chinese, the Hawaiians, the Toltec Indians, and many more all tell their own versions of this great failure.
3. So what can we learn from their mistakes?

G. First, let's look at their motive.

1. The Bible doesn't give us a very deep look into the motivations of the people here, but a lot of ancient commentaries have chimed in on the subject.
2. While these sources are not biblical or apocryphal, there are ancient writings by Jewish writers like the book of Jubilees, for instance, that says that the people built the tower in order to "ascend on it into heaven" (Jub 10:19).
3. 3 Baruch 3:7–8, another of these Jewish texts, goes further, saying that the people not only wanted to ascend into heaven but wanted to pierce it—that is wage war against heaven and God, an explanation also found in the Babylonian Talmud, Philo of Alexandria and others.

4. Whatever their goal, I think their motive is summed up in one word: Pride.

H. 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” (Genesis 11:4 NIV).

1. They had bought into the lie Satan whispered to Eve back in the Garden:

2. “You will be like God!” (Genesis 3:4).

3. That’s what they wanted to achieve.

I. Psychotherapist Naomi H. Rosenblatt writes, “Every generation builds its own towers.”

1. And she’s right.

2. Whether these are actual skyscrapers (like the Sear Tower in Chicago, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Empire State Building in N.Y.), or mega-corporations that circle the globe, the idea is the same: “We will make for ourselves a name.”

3. The Bible warns us against that kind of attitude.

4. It says, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18).

J. In a certain pond, there were two ducks and a frog who were neighbors and the best of friends.

1. They played together all day long during the summer time.

2. But as the cold drew near and the water dried up, the ducks realized they would have to move.

3. This would be easy for them, but what about their friend the frog?

4. Finally it was decided that they would put a stick in the bill of each duck, and then the frog would hang onto the stick with his mouth and they would fly him to another pond.

5. And so they did.

6. Just then, a farmer looked up and said to his wife, “What a great idea! I wonder who thought of that?”

7. Proudly, the frog said, “I did!”

8. Thus illustrating: “Pride goes before a fall!”

K. We shouldn’t take the opportunities God gives us and use them to glorify ourselves.

1. Instead, we should glorify God.

2. He’s the only one that can truly make your name great anyway.

3. He promised to do that very thing for Abraham saying,

4. "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:2 NIV).

L. Today, no one knows the name of a single person who helped construct the Tower of Babel.

1. Yet the name of Abraham is instantly recognized all around the world.

2. There is a vast difference between mankind's, "We will make our name great!" and God's, "I will make your name great."

3. Let's use the opportunities we have to glorify God; rather than ourselves.

4. Now, let's take a look at, number two: their materials.

M. The tower they build at Babel was probably what is known as a ziggurat.

1. Archeologists have excavated several of these large structures which were primarily used for religious purposes.

2. A ziggurat was like a pyramid except that the successive levels were recessed so that you could walk to the top on steps. (Image)

3. At the top was usually a special shrine dedicated to some god or goddess.

N. Of course, before they could build this tall tower, they needed the proper material.

1. The Bible tells us: "They said to each other, 'Come, let us make oven-fired bricks.'

2. They used brick for stone and asphalt for mortar" (Genesis 11:3 HCSB).

3. And with these oven-fired bricks and mortar they planned to build "a tower that reaches to the heavens."

4. They just kept stacking brick upon brick, but no matter how high their tower reached, it would never be enough.

O. Sadly, some people live their lives like that. Christopher Winans, in his book, *Malcolm Forbes: The Man Who Had Everything*, tells of a motorcycle tour that Forbes took through Egypt in 1984 with his Capitalist Tool motorcycle team.

1. After viewing the staggering burial tomb of King Tut, Forbes seemed to be in a reflective mood.

2. As they were returning to the hotel in a shuttle bus, Forbes turned to one of his associates and asked with all sincerity: "Do you think I'll be remembered after I die?"

3. Forbes is remembered.
4. He is remembered as the man who coined the phrase, "He who dies with the most toys wins."
5. That was the wisdom of Malcolm Forbes.
6. In fact, that was his ambition.
7. That's why he collected scores of motorcycles.
8. That's why he owned castles, hot air balloons and countless other toys that he can no longer access; because you can't take it with you when you die.

P. Pastor Bob Russell tells a story about a rich man who was determined to take his wealth with him.

1. He told his wife to get all his money together, put it in a sack, and then hang the sack from the rafters in the attic.
2. He said, "When my spirit is caught up to heaven, I'll grab the sack on my way."
3. Well he eventually died, and the woman raced to the attic, only to find the money still there.
4. She snapped her fingers and said, "I knew I should've put the sack in the basement."

Q. Jesus warned us not to put our hopes in material things.

1. He said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21 NIV).

R. Jesus made it clear that having the wrong treasures leads to our hearts being in the wrong place.

1. Rather than stacking brick upon brick in material possessions, we need to be investing in heaven by doing God's work and building his kingdom with spiritual bricks.
2. Martin Luther once said, "I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess."

S. So when God gives us a clean slate, let's use it to store up treasures in heaven; rather than building castles in the sand.

1. Finally, let's look at their mess.

T. Babel's conceited, "Let's go up!" was answered with heaven's calm, "Let's go down!"

1. God says, "Come, let's go down and confuse the people with different languages. Then they won't be able to understand each other" (Genesis 11:7 NLT).

2. In so doing, everything fell apart.
3. Construction came to halt.
4. Their plans for a one world government and the conquest of heaven were foiled.
5. In the end, they were forced to fan out into smaller groups that could actually understand each other.

U. They begrudgingly surrendered to God’s plans, and thus, the world was populated with diverse new cultures and civilizations.

1. Even though God made a mess of things, he also showed great mercy.
2. By confusing their language and scattering them over all the earth, God graciously spared their lives and gave them another new beginning.

V. This story goes to show us that sometimes God has to destroy something in order to build something better.

1. London businessman Lindsay Clegg told the story of a warehouse property he was selling.
2. The building had been empty for months and needed repairs.
3. Vandals had damaged the doors, smashed the windows, and strewn trash around the interior.
4. As he showed a prospective buyer the property, Clegg took pains to say that he would replace the broken windows, bring in a crew to correct any structural damage, and clean out the garbage.
5. “Forget about the repairs,” the buyer said. “When I buy this place, I’m going to build something completely different. I don’t want the building; I want the site.”
6. Compared with the renovation God has in mind, our efforts to improve our own lives are as trivial as sweeping a warehouse slated for the wrecking ball.
7. When we become God’s, the old life is over.
8. He makes all things new.
9. All he wants is the site and the permission to build.

W. This type of “new beginning” is common in the construction world—it’s called “controlled demolition.”

1. When a building becomes structurally unsound and dangerous, a team of experts use strategically places explosives to implode the build.

2. About 37 years ago I was working night stock at a grocery store in Toledo.
3. We were just about done with the shift, around 7:00 in the morning, when all of a sudden we heard an explosion that rattled the windows of the grocery store.
4. We ran to the front of the store and as we looked out the window a huge cloud of dust began to rise in the distance.
5. At first thought was that we were hit with a bomb.
6. And then we remember of a demolition project that was taking place.
7. About 5 miles away, the office building at the Jeep plant was imploded but for some reason the whole thing didn't collapse as they had planned.
8. As I drove home from work I noticed that one of the corners was still standing, failing to fall when they detonated the explosives.
9. By the time I went back to work the next evening, the rest of the building came down.
10. The same explosives were used, but a corner of the building stubbornly clung to life for eight more hours before finally giving way.

X. I think some of us have buildings like that in our lives—structures that we stubbornly hold onto.

1. God wants to clear those buildings out of the way so that he can build something better in their place.
2. If you are living in rebellion to God—maybe you've been resisting his leadership in your life or clinging to some secret sin—he'll give you second chance.
3. But if you keep on rebelling, don't be surprised when God starts blowing stuff up.
4. He will mess with your life and frustrate your plans until you finally surrender your will and accept his Leadership.
5. Then and only then will you really be able to experience a new beginning.

Conclusion:

Y. So, back to my original question: What would you do with a fresh start if you had one?

1. Whatever your answer may be, let's try to learn from the people of Babel's mistakes.
2. Let's build our towers from the right motivation—seeking God's glory instead of our own.
3. Let's work with the right materials—storing up treasures in heaven, rather than on earth.

4. Let's try to avoid the mess they got themselves into by surrendering our will to him and doing things God's way.

Invitation:

Z. Maybe you're in the middle of your own mess right now and maybe you could use a fresh start.

1. God is ready to give you one—all you have to do, is ask.
2. Ask for his forgiveness, his grace and his mercy and you can begin again today.