The City of Man

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Preacher: Cory Brock

[0:00] I'm going to ask one of our members, Douglas Carter, to come up. He's going to read scripture for us. Douglas is going to read Genesis chapter 11 verses 1 to 9. If you've got a church Bible, they're on the table at the back. It's on page number 8.

The words will also be on the screen and I think they're in the bulletin as well. Thanks, Douglas.
Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.
And they said to one another, come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. 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. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of man had built.
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.
[1:24] Come, let us go down and there confuse their language so that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth. And they left off the building and they left off building the city.

Therefore, 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.
Let us pray. God, as we read the Bible together and think about your word now, would you please help each of us to understand what it says and to meet Jesus in its pages and to feel the conviction that leads to faith.
Lord, give us the gift of faith. We pray in Christ's name. Amen. Douglas just read for us the Tower of Babel story. Douglas said Babel. I'll say Babel. Douglas said Shinar. I'll say Shinar. This is my American-ness. I can't get over it.
It would be weird for me to say anything different. But this is such an ancient story, such an ancient text, and yet so modern. So this takes place in the land of Shinar, ancient Mesopotamia, what is today in Iraq.
[2:40] And though it is thousands of years old, it still very much speaks to us today. And we're walking through a section of the book of Genesis. The book of Genesis means beginnings, origins.

And in it, you've got the fundamentals, work and rest and marriage and family and culture and cities. And in Genesis 4 to 11, as we've been focusing on that the past semester, we've seen that all of the good things God made are corrupted.
So this series, Grace Amid the Ruins, we've asked one main question, and that is, what is wrong with us? And the answer has been sin. And that sin has gotten into the crevices of all the parts of human existence and corrupted us.
And I've tried to suggest throughout the series that all the way from Genesis 3 to 11 is one fall story. Genesis 3 is the fall, but there's really a cumulative fall story across that whole pattern.
And we saw Adam and Eve go east of Eden because of their sin, but then Cain murders his brother. And then Lamech, one of Cain's sons, murders a boy and creates a city of violence.
[3:52] And even after the flood, Noah gets drunk and allows Ham to effectively abuse his own family in what we thought was almost like a world recreated, a second Adam.

And so that leads to the second question we've been asking, is there anyone who could save the world from the plight of sin and corruption? And Genesis 3 to 11 has been tracing, is there one, is there anybody who can deal with the beast, as Genesis 4 puts it, that is within us?

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There is a beast inside every one of us. That's how Genesis 4, that's how God puts it. And He says that it is sin and we must rule over it lest it rule over us.
And every single week at the same time we've seen that God's grace outruns the ruin that we create in this world. That His grace goes further than our sin could ever go.
And gives us hints and shadows of that reality that God is still for us. Now when you open this moment, you realize that the cycle of Genesis 4 to 11 started with the building of a city, the city of Cain, based on murder and violence and evil.
[5:14] And then the prologue of the whole Bible, Genesis 4 to 11, 1 to 11, ends with the building of a city. This is the last narrative of the prologue of the book of Genesis.

And it's bookended by these evil cities that get built. And there's even more than that. If you look down at chapter 11, verse 2, it says, As people migrated from the east.
As soon as you read that language, if you've been with us for this series, the Hebrew text is ambiguous. You can read as people migrated from the east or as people moved to the east. You should hear sort of that ominous music in a film, you know, dun-dun-dun, sort of a vibe.
Because the east has been mentioned again. And any time we've seen in Genesis 4 to 11 people move eastward, it's not a statement about east being bad and west being good or anything like that. The world is a sphere, in fact. It's all relative. No, it's the sense, the symbol, the sign that people are moving further and further away from what they were made to be.
[6:17] Further and further away from the presence of God. And so the text, before you ever know anything else, tells you we are moving east. And that's a dangerous sign. And so this text also has a really clear shape and structure.

We've talked here before about chiasms in the Bible. And this is a chiasm. A chiasm is just a fancy literary term from a Greek letter chi or chi.
And if you were to write it, it's an X. It looks like an X. And so in an X, you have the top, it looks like a funnel at the top, and then a center point and a funnel going back down.
And so in a chiastic structure, you have things that are being poured in and then a dead center to the text, and then things being poured out again in the same fashion. And if you look at the text, I'll just give you one example to save us time going through it all.
But verse one, the whole earth had one language and the same words. And if you have a Bible, look down at verse nine. Therefore, its name was called Babel because the Lord confused the language of all the earth.
[7:18] So in verse one, there was one language. In verse nine, there are many languages. And you could go and look at verse two, verse eight, verse three, verse seven, verse four, verse six, and find that they all correspond to one another.

And in the first half, you're seeing what the people did to build the city. And in the second half, how God responded. And that means, naturally, that there is a center point to that X, that chiasm, and it's verse five.
And in verse five, it says, and the Lord came down. The Lord came down to see all that the people were doing. That gives us a nice three point structure.
We try to go up, but God comes down. And then thirdly, we'll see God comes down to stay. So human beings, we want to go up, but God has to come down.
And in the rest of the Bible, we learn that God comes down to stay. So first, verses one to four, the people cry out, let us go up. And you ask the question first, if you were here last week, where are we?
[8:25] Well, chapter 11, verse one, the whole earth has one language. The Hebrew word is one lip. Like we would say one tongue, the old way of saying, they all had one lip, one way of speaking.

And you say, well, we were here last week for chapter 10. And in chapter 10, there are 70 nations and they all have so many languages. And so we see immediately, this is not chronological.
Instead, Moses, the writer has stuck this in as a theological explanation for what happened in chapter 10. So how did we get all these languages and these people groups spread across the earth?
And you'll remember this one guy named Nimrod in the middle of that genealogy. And his name literally means we will rebel. And it says that Nimrod called we will rebel was the beginning of the kingdom of Babel.

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And so this text is focused on the story that we read about in Genesis chapter 10, verse eight. And it's the theological explanation of what we read in the previous chapter. And to understand it, you've got to think just for a moment about what a city is in an ancient person's mind.
[9:27] So in verse four, they say, let us build a city. What's a city? We live in a city, a small city relative to places like London and Tokyo and Paris and Mexico City.

A city in the ancient world is not measured by population size. And so the smallest village on the Isle of Lewis is a city in the ancient person's mind.
It's anywhere where you gather families to create a society. And oftentimes cities exist in the old world by being marked off by walls. So if you have a wall and you have somebody that guards that wall, you've got a city, no matter how many people might live there.
And that means in this text, city building is something that we all do, no matter where we live. And even in verse one, it says the whole earth had one language, one lip, and also the same words. The word for words, Debar, doesn't just mean words like vocabulary. It means customs. It means practices. And so it's saying that a city exists anytime you have people who are gathered together in a society and they have the same customs, same practices, a shared language.
[10:34] And that means you can have a city like Edinburgh, but you can have a city, quote unquote, in the ancient mind in your workplace. When you have a group of friends that gather together and have a shared vision, shared custom, shared way of speaking corporate talk.

This is all what the ancient mind thinks of as a city. And that's so important because here we learn what's wrong with cities, what's wrong with society, what's wrong with our gatherings into groups and societies.
And you could answer that question by going all the way back to Genesis 1 and 2. I'll just give you the tiniest snippet of that.
Back in Genesis 2, city building begins with who? Well, it actually begins with God. Making society begins with God. And what happens in Genesis 2 is that God creates Adam and then he creates Eve, the pinnacle creature of creation.
And in Genesis 2, 22, it actually uses the same word that shows up in Genesis 11, 4. And it says in Genesis 2, 22, that God built Eve. He fashioned her just like we build cities.
[11:43] And that architectural word that's used, it's often translated rib. God took her from Adam's rib. It really means architectural side, like half of a building.

And God constructs her. Why? Because God, the divine artist, makes the pinnacle creature woman. And then he says the only way a society can happen is if man and woman go together. And they do go together. And it's from families that societies come forth. And so what is the commands that we saw reissued in Genesis 9 that come from Genesis 1? Be fruitful.
Multiply. Fill the earth. And then spread out into all the earth. So fill the earth with families, Adam and Eve. And that's because humans are made in the image of God. And we are made to carry the image of God into the whole world and to shine forth God's glory all over the territory of this globe. The whole point was to spread Eden out everywhere. When you come to the Tower of Babel story, there is city building, but it's completely different than that. Whereas God had told us, make society, build cities, make families, go out into all the world and be the image of God, declaring my glory, making God's name famous.
[12:52] Instead, they huddled together in one place in this plain, this land of Shinar, and they refused to spread out. And they even say that we're doing this to make a name for ourselves lest we be dispersed.

Meaning, lest God disperse us like we were originally commanded to do. And so they're building walls in a security system in order to actually not do the very thing God made them to do.
And so you see here exactly what is wrong with human city making, with society. And it comes very clearly in verse 4, most particularly. And it's when they all gather together in one huddle and say, let us make a name for ourselves.
Now this is pride. This is more technically what the old writers will call vain glory. And vain glory is a type of pride.
It's a display of pride. It is when we want to make public the emptiness of our prideful ambitions. Vain glory is whenever we desire to make other people aware of how much better we are than other people and other things.

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[14:03] That's vain glory. That's vain glory. And it also comes with a flip side, an insecurity. And you see that so much in verse 4. In verse 4 it says, let us make a name for ourselves. I desire so much from the bottom of my soul to help other people to know how great I am.

Vain glory. And on the other side it says, lest we be dispersed in all the earth. And so on the flip side there's an insecurity that drives vain glory. In other words, humanity feels so insecure, lest we be scattered.
We huddle up and use our pride to make things, make cities that stand against God and ultimately even attempt in our city making, our society building to displace God.
And so we'll make a name for ourselves. We don't need to be named by God to be told who we're going to be, what we're going to be. In the year 410, the great eternal city, as it was called, Rome, was sacked by Alaric of the Visigoths.
And nobody thought that Rome could be sacked. And yet this pagan polytheistic tribe comes and they sack Rome. And they didn't even stay.
[15:15] They, for three days, attacked Rome and then left and didn't even hardly take anything with them. And in that moment, there was one of the great crises of the time of the early church.

Because the Greco-Roman believers in that time, the people who still worshiped the polytheistic gods of Greece and Rome, in the city of Rome said, our city was so great, our society was so wonderful until the Christians came.
And the reason that we have just fallen is because of the Christians and our gods are punishing us.
The Christians on the other side said, we thought that God was going to build the eternal city, the city of God, heaven itself, right here in the eternal city that they called Rome.
And instead, it all fell apart. And so, St. Augustine entered and he wrote this massive book called The City of God. And he said, the issue, there's an issue on both sides.
The Christians are getting it wrong. And, of course, the Greco-Roman religious society is also getting it wrong. And he said, there are two cities. There is the city of God and the city of man, as he called it.
[16:24] And each of those cities is built on two different types of love. Where is the city of man? Where is the Tower of Babel? Where is a corrupted society and city? It's anywhere where we try to build life, culture, and cities, societies, with self-interest and pride at the very center.

And St. Augustine said, look, Rome was never going to be the city of God. It was full of human hearts. It was full of pride. The problem is that we cannot build the city of God.
And Augustine said, the only way you can have the city of God is if God were to come down and regenerate, change the heart from the inside out, and give you a fresh heart, a love for all the things God made you to be.
To be a little outpost in this world of a city that he's ultimately building one day. And here we find, and this is my little definition of the city of man, of what's happening at the Tower of Babel. And it's this.
We build cities of men, towers of Babel, whenever we share, even if we don't intend to, opposition to God because of a life built on self-interest.
[17:32] A life built tower building with all sorts of blocks and bricks to build our name, our fame, our hopes and dreams with no thought about the God who made us.

No desire to be named by God and be in God's image. And so let me just quickly show you three idols that come up here in the text that really flesh this out for us.
The first is the idol of security that shows up in building the Tower of Babel. And it's in verse 3. And in verse 3 they say, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.
It says very literally, let us break bricks and fire them with fire. And they had bricks for stone and tar for tar. And the text is very poetic throughout.
And when they say that, we saw back in Genesis chapter 9 when the flood came upon the earth that God said, I'm keeping this place around. I'm not going to let the world go.
[18:33] Seed time and harvest. No matter what people believe in, I will bless cities and peoples and villages with gifts. Cain built his city on music and tools of all kinds, technology.

We call that common grace gifts that God's given the world. What's happening here is that self-interest and pride, the city of man, what does it do? It takes the gifts that God has given us and it uses them to fight against God.

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So here they take bricks, they brick bricks, and they make tar from tar. And they figure out for the first time in human history how to build buildings with brick and mortar.
And it's hard to underestimate, I think, the power of that innovation. Our whole city, I was walking through this morning through the meadows and up through Old Town to St. C's. And just noticing that we build a lot here with stone.
And this is the first moment that people figured out how to do that. And it changed the world. And they could do that because God had blessed them with a gift of common grace.
[19:34] And yet, what do they do with it? They turn around and say, lest we be dispersed and actually have to do what God commanded us to do, we're going to actually build and use common grace gifts to stand opposed to God and build a city in the way we want to build it.

So one of the great idols of the human heart is self-security. That we will take the Legos of creation and build all sorts of things in order to actually stand against the God who made us.
And not conform to what he's actually called us to conform to in this life. There was a guy named, a theologian in the States named Van Til who once saw a train.
He was on a train going from New York to Philadelphia. And he saw a little girl sitting on her father's lap. And the little girl reached up and slapped her father right across the face. And Van Til said, that's the Tower of Babel.
The little girl had to sit on dad's lap in order to slap him in the face. And in the same way, we have to use all the gifts God's given us like bricks in order to build towers of idolatry to slap him in the face.
[20:43] The second idol we see here is an idol of identity. So verse 4, they say, let us make a name for ourselves. This is really the core of the story of the problem.

I've already said something about this, but let me add a bit. What is a name? When they say, let us make a name for ourselves, what does that really mean? Name has been such an important motif all throughout this section of the Bible and will be all the way to the book of Revelation.
But this is a contest that's going on that goes on in the human heart. Who gets to name you? And I'm not talking about the audible name that you get called day by day.
But who gets to name you? What is a name? In the ancient mind, a name is an identity. It's an essence. So Abram is renamed Abraham. Why? Because God is saying your essence, your identity now is to be the father of the nations.
And here, what are they saying when they say, let us make a name? They're not just saying, you know, I want to get to name myself. I'm going to change my birth certificate. No, they're saying, I will define my essence.
[21:45] I will not be named by God. It's existentialism of the most modern variety. My identity comes from my inside, not the outside. I will not be named and told who I am by God.

I'm going to name myself. I'm going to create my own path and my own identity and my own life.
And I want to ask you this morning, where are you taking the gifts of God to build walls of security in your life that actually keep you from realizing your dependence on God?
Your wealth, your bank account, your educational status, your achievements, your children, your relationships. And where, secondly, are you building a name for yourself?
And a name in a way that's actually opposed to the name that God has given you. My image, my beloved crown of creation. Christian, baptized in the name of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And then the third idol that shows up here is a religious idol. Notice in this passage, it says that they, again, they built a tower where?
[22:53] To the heavens, it says, verse 3. And look, there is no atheism in this story. Nobody's an atheist here. Nobody's struggling with atheism or agnosticism.

They all believe in God. They know God exists. They are building a tower to the heavens, I think, in order to displace God. Why? Because we all want to go to the heavens.
We all want to reach the heavens. We all are worshipers looking for spiritual and religious significance. And here they're saying, we will make our own way into the heavenly domain. We will chart our own path to glory.
We don't need God. We can be our own gods. And so, in 2022 in Scotland, we had the census, the first census in history, where more people than not on the census said, I have no religion.
But you've got to understand that saying that you have no religion is religion. Saying I have no religion is just saying that my self-interest and personal desires are the king of my own

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consciousness.
[23:59] And that is building a tower to the heavens. We're all seeking the heavens. We're all worshipers. And here we see that there is no such thing as unbelief in the sense of not believing in God.

Really what there is, is just saying, are you charting your own path into the heavens, building a tower to the heavens? Are you doing it the only way there is to do it? And that's the way that God has actually given us into this world.
Herman Boving puts it this way, every other religion emphasizes human action, self-salvation. Every religion besides Christianity builds a ladder to the heavens and makes their own religious meaning and inevitably ends up just worshiping themselves.
Humanism is religion. And the question of the Tower of Babel is, are you a humanist? Are you a theist? Are you a God worshiper? Are you building a tower around your own achievements, your self-security, your self-definition, your self-naming?
We, friends, are all worshipers with Babylonian hearts. And the city of man is deep inside of us.
Now, just very briefly, we learn, secondly, that the Lord also came down.
[25:14] And in verse 5, that's what happens. We have the first joke, I think, in all the Bible here listed in verse 5. And you'll see that God, after they say, let's build a tower into the heavens.

In verse 5, we read, the Lord came down to see the city and the tower. So this is meant to be comedic that they said, we're going to build a tower to the heavens and displace God.
But the Lord had to come down. It's like the images of a dad getting on his knee to look at his children's little Lego construction. This is the Lord saying to humanity, to the builders of the Tower of Babel, aren't you cute?
You know, you tried so hard. You gave it your best shot. This tower is very small. It's an anthill. It's not even close to the heavenly domain. And yet, there are just two main thoughts to see in that.
One, God is telling us, we cannot ascend to the heavens on our own terms. The only hope of humanity is that God would come down.
[26:18] And that God would come down even to tower of Babel builders that do a fairly bad job of it. But the second thing to see here is, what does God do with these people?

He says in verse 6, nothing that they proposed to do will now be impossible. And so he confuses their language and he scatters them. But do you see what he's doing in that judgment and that punishment?
They received a multiplicity of languages as a punishment. Can you imagine, you know, laying bricks next to your fellow worker and then all of a sudden you can't understand a word that he's saying? That would be utter confusion and chaos.
And they spread out. And it's how we get people groups and languages that all come from this moment. But what is he saying? He's saying, nothing they do will be impossible for them. Meaning, humanity is so valuable and so like God, being made in God's image with gifts of reason and consciousness and ability to craft and discover that he's saying, if we put all these sinners together all in the same place and just let them carry on, their skill of innovation will carry them to heights of idolatry that we can't yet imagine.
It's already happened in the flood story. And we know from the 20th century how true that is. When you take a whole society and gather them around one idol, how dark it can really get. And that's exactly what he's saying.
[27:42] He's saying, look, I'm going to scatter you and make you fill the earth because that was always my intention. And so what God does here is he punishes them with confusion of language in order to give them mercy.

Just like Adam and Eve at the tree of life, at the end of Genesis 3, they sinned. And God said, lest you eat of the tree of life and eternalize your condition and sin, I'm getting you out of here.
I'm judging you in order to save you. I'm punishing you in order to give you mercy. And so God saves them from their selves and saves us from ourselves.
It could be the case today that you are coming here and there is something that you have been building for a long time that you desperately want in your life. And it has never seemed to work out. And it really seems like God almost has pulled the bricks out from the tower that you've longed to build in your life. And let me say, according to this story, that may be one of the greatest mercies.

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[28:43] It may be that God taking away from you the thing you want most in life is him showing you a mercy that you cannot see at this moment.

That he's protecting you and trying to lead you to the thing that you actually need most. And so, thirdly and finally, we see that the only hope we have is for God to come down.
And we learn, if you read this in the light of the rest of the Bible, that God comes down to stay. And that's the great point of the passage. Genesis 1-11 has been telling us over and ever again, we cannot ascend into the heavens.
We must wait for God to come down. Self-made security in this life will not hold us up. Self-made identity in this life will not last.
We will find that we are building that tower forever and ever and never getting to the end of it. Never finding satisfaction. Self-made religion, the Bible teaches over and over again, will not work.
[29:43] And if you think instead about the logic of Scripture already, how did Adam and Eve meet with God in Eden? God came down into the Garden of Eden. How is Moses and the people of God going to meet with God after Egypt and Sinai?

God's going to come down onto the mountain. God loves to come down to meet with people on tops of mountains. And this ancient work of building a tower of Babel, this ancient temple, was an attempt to go up to the top of the mountain, to build a mountain.
To reach into the heavens. And I don't know if you remember that, or know maybe that, the word Babylon, this is proto-Babylonian. And we'll see Babylon stretch all the way to the book of Revelation.
But the word Babylon in its most ancient form, what does it mean? It means literally gate of God. And Babylon has always been, what is Babylon? What is the city of man? It is the human heart trying to build the gate of God on their own terms.
And so what God does at the end of this story is he turns what they thought would be the gate of God, and not into Babylon itself, the gate of God, but into Babel, Balal, which is the place of confusion.
[30:54] And he's saying any time you try to build into the heavens on your own terms, on your own good works, your own identity, that's what the Bible calls idolatry, and it is Babel.

It's not the gate of God. It's not Babylon. And so think about what comes after this as we close. If you have a Bible, chapter 11, verse 10, and we'll be right back there next week, says, these are the generations of Shem.
Now, I'm not making this up. The word Shem in Hebrew is the word name. You see, in the Tower of Babel, we learn that it is my heart and it is your heart, it is the Babylonian hearts in all of us to make a name for ourselves, and to be named and identified and create an essence that stands apart and against God.
It is self-interest, it is pride, it is vainglory. And the very next story says, but let me tell you about a genealogy named name. Shem, the name.
And that is God saying that the whole movement of redemptive history is that I am going to give you a name, a name that is far better than the name Babel or Babylon.
[32:10] I'm going to give you a better city. Hebrews 11, 10, a city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God. Later on in Genesis, Jacob has this dream of a stairway into heaven and angels are ascending and descending on it.

And then you come to the Gospels, in Jesus Christ it is said of him, angels of God ascending and descending where? What was the vision? On the Son of Man. And when you come to the New Testament, you realize Jesus Christ is the stairway.
He is the tower. He is the gate of God. He is everything that the people of the Tower of Babel had been looking for. We at Babel tried, we today with our Babylonian hearts, we tried to climb up to God to take God's place.
And in the middle of history, in the incarnation and at the cross, God came down and took our place. At Babel, we wanted, we want to displace God and say, God, you're not my king.
I'm the king of my own life. At the Tower of Babel, I believe that they wanted to kill God, to slay God. And you've got to know that at the cross, Jesus Christ gave himself up to be slayed by humanity in order to reverse our Babylonian hearts and give us everything that God was leading us to in mercy from the point of the story of the Tower of Babel.

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[33:33] There's a beautiful moment in Acts chapter 2 where all the early Christians are huddled together in one place with one language and then the Holy Spirit comes down in tongues of fire, just like the fire that came down on Mount Sinai.

And all the people are speaking different languages. And all of a sudden, everybody can understand the gospel in their own language. The Tower of Babel story finds its ultimate fulfillment at Pentecost when God brings together all the nations through the truth of the gospel by giving the ability to speak other languages in this moment.
What was he saying? He's saying, listen, to all the nations, all 70 nations representing all the world, the gate of God is open, but it's only open in Jesus Christ. You cannot ascend to the heavens. You have to look at the one who came down, the one who came down for you, and it's Jesus Christ. And when you do that, Christian today, the gate of God is open to you. And when you see that, when you come to see that Christ has condescended to you, and that is the whole point of Christian and real life history, you know that you can go out into the city today being a little tiny outpost of the city of God that is to come in the midst of the city of men.
Let us pray and ask for that. Lord, we pray. We pray now that you would teach us to be little glimpses, little glimpses, little outposts of the city of God in the midst of the city of men.
[35:05] Lord, we confess before you our Babylonian hearts that we are full of vainglory. We want people to think we're better than we are at everything. But even bigger than that, Lord, we confess before you now in our hearts that we have been building towers of identity and security, towers of being self-made our whole lives in some instances.

And today you call us and invite us to see that the gate of God, the real tower into the heavens, is only the ladder himself, Jesus Christ, who has condescended to be near us and for us.
So I pray today now that you would, Lord, teach hearts here to turn to you, to turn to Christ by faith, even for the first time. And that we would be helped to go out into the city and be outposts of the city of God with the love that you've given us shown to the love, shown to the city.
And we pray for these hearts in Christ's name. Amen.

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