Living The Good Life
Genesis 11:1-9

Let's pray – Lord God, Creator of heaven and earth, you are the One who knows our name. Would you open the eyes of our hearts today and shine the light of your truth into our minds, illuminating the darkness with your very presence, so that we might understand ourselves better and surrender more fully to your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.

INTRODUCTION – What does Living the Good Life Mean to You?

What comes to mind when you think about "Living the Good Life"?

Is it sitting out on your deck sharing a favorite beverage or a delicious meal with friends and family? Is it driving up the coast and enjoying the beauty of God's creation? Is it taking a nap without the pressures of school or work? Is it the freedom to pursue an interest or a passion you have? For each of us it might look a little different. But it is probably safe to say that everyone is searching for a path to "the good life', however they define it.

Often people think they will find "the good life" if they can have a successful career that brings a certain level financial stability, and social status. If you have ever raised children, perhaps at some point along the way you have found yourself telling them that they had to work hard in school in order to get good grades so they could get into a good college and then get a good job, so that they could have a good life.

It is not uncommon, especially here in the Bay Area, for families hire college consultants to help their kids map out this pathway to a good school with the goal that it will lead their children to "the good life." Many people want for themselves and their children, the safety and security and independence they think that "the good life" offers.

This desire to be "living the dream," is not new. We see evidence of it going back thousands of years. In a few minutes we'll read a story about how some of our earliest ancestors banded together in an effort to build what they thought was the ultimate good life for themselves. As we unpacked the story, we'll see why they failed in their efforts and what lessons we can learn from them to inform our own understanding and pursuit of the good life.

The context for this story is that after the great flood, God commanded Noah and his family to be fruitful and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1, 7). It was a re-iteration of the blessing and command God had given to Adam and Eve when he first created them back in Genesis 1. There, God said, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28).

But as Noah's descendants began to multiply on the earth again, after the flood, they only partially obeyed God's command. They obeyed the part about multiplying, and so there was a population explosion as loads of children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren were born. We read the representative list a couple of weeks ago in Genesis 10. That is often called the Table of Nations since it shows us the complete representation of where all the nations of the earth originated.

But as our story today reveals, the people in Genesis 10 did not want to obey the part about separating from each other to fill the earth. Let's read Genesis 11:1-9 now to discover why.

Genesis 11:1-9

11 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. **2** As people moved eastward,[a] they found a plain in Shinar[b] and settled there.

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; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." **5** But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people 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."

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[c]—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

There are a few things I want to note for you at the start of this passage –

First, in the Table of Nations we read about in Genesis 10 we are told that the peoples spread out into their territories by their clans within their nations, each with its own language. The tidbit saying that the whole world had one language here tells us that this story happened chronologically before the spreading out of the nations into the world that we read about in Genesis 10. There is a good reason our author inserted this story where he did, when he laid out the book of Genesis. But I'll talk about that reason next week. So, make sure you come back in person or tune in online next Sunday to find out the answer to that question. Why did our author write this story **after** he recorded the spreading out of the nations, even though it happened **before** the nations spread out? Today, I'm just going to note that what happened in this story was the instigating factor that caused our ancestors to spread throughout the world as we talked about when we discussed Genesis 10.

The second thing we need to understand at the start is that when we read about people moving "eastward" in the book of Genesis, it is a cue that we are supposed to feel a little nervous. In Genesis, "eastward" is not just a geographic location. Moving "eastward" frequently signifies a moving away from God's presence and God's will. It often a symbol of separation, rebellion, and alienation from God.

For example, in Genesis 3:24 – after Adam and Eve at the forbidden fruit and were evicted from the Garden of Eden, they were sent out in an eastward direction, symbolizing their separation from God.

In Genesis 4:16 after Cain killed Abel, we're told he went out from the presence of the Lord and lived in Nod, east of Eden. Going east therefore indicated a separation and alienation from God.

So when we get to Genesis 11:1 and read that the people were moving "eastward", that is a cue for us to know we are supposed to feel a little nervous about what is happening. We are to understand that it is not just a geographical direction they are heading in, but this is also a theological statement regarding what is about unfold. As one people with one language and common speech, the humans were choosing to move away from God and distance themselves from God's presence.

Why were they choosing to do this? The answer comes in the form of a clue. They found a plane in Shinar and settled there. We've come across that name Shinar once before. It was in Genesis 10:8 where we read about a mighty warrior named Nimrod.

Let me read Genesis 10:8-12 to refresh our memories.

8 Cush was the father[c] of Nimrod, who became a mighty warrior on the earth. 9 He was
a mighty hunter before the Lord; that is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter
before the Lord." 10 The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Uruk, Akkad and
Kalneh, in[d] Shinar.[e] 11 From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh,
Rehoboth Ir,[f] Calah 12 and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah—which is the
great city.

To recap what we talked about in our discussion of Genesis 10 – Saying Nimrod was a mighty hunter before the Lord is not to be understood as a compliment.

He was clearly a powerful man – a warrior, a conqueror, a tyrant. The phrase, "before the Lord" suggests Nimrod was aware of God's presence and God's commands, but he acted in bold defiance of God's authority. He used his strength and skill to defy God and set up kingdoms and cities in direct opposition to God. The name Nimrod is often interpreted to mean "rebel" or "rebellious one".

Although the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 does not mention Nimrod by name, the reference to the plain of Shinar is the clue that links what happened at Babel back to Nimrod in Genesis 10:8

It would therefore appear that the people's moving eastward, away from God, happened because they allowed themselves to be influenced by a mighty man named Nimrod.

Linking this back to our theme today about how all of us are in search of the good life, however we define it, Noah's descendants thought they could find the good life apart from God.

They thought they could find the good life, by following the voice of a powerful and impressive man, instead of the voice of God.

This was a similar mistake Adam and Eve had made in the garden of Eden – they thought they could find the good life apart from God as well. They listened to the voice of a strange talking snake instead of following the voice of God.

Their son Cain made a similar mistake when he killed his brother Abel. He thought he could find the good life apart from God as well. He trusted the voice of the powerful negative emotions of jealousy and rage rising inside of himself instead of trusting the voice of God to guide him.

All of these things still cry for our attention today. Powerful urges and emotions within, strange pressures from without, the voice and influence of people who look impressive and wield great power.

Who and what are you allowing to influence you today? Who are your heroes and why? What are their values? What do they stand for?

There are many people who would love to tell you what to believe and how to live your life. Many people today set themselves up as influencers on social media. There are many political voices that are vying for your vote in November. Not every voice and not every path out there will lead you closer to God and to the good life he intends for you. In fact, many voices in our world openly deny the existence of God or question the relevance of his word for us still today. Whose voice are you listening to as you pursue your version of "the good life"?

In the midst of it all, can you hear the still small voice of God? He often speaks in a gentle whisper. Sometimes with a quite thought that goes through our mind. Sometimes in a dream. Sometimes through another person. Sometimes through nature. Sometimes through circumstances. Always through his word, the Bible. Are you making time and space to listen for his voice as you pursue the good life?

Our ancestors, Noah's descendants, listened to the voices of early influencers like Nimrod and moved eastward, away from God, until they found a plain in Shinar, where they settled, in direct opposition and defiance of God's command to fill the earth.

The rest of the story of the tower of Babel divides nicely into 3 parts, structured around the phrase, "Come let us…" Twice the humans say, "Come let us…" and once God says, "Come let us…"

Let's look at each of these "Come Let Us" phrases to see what they each show us about finding the path to the good life.

We find the first expression of this phrase, "Come let us," in Genesis 11:3

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.

Stones would be what people might naturally find on the ground. If they gathered the stones together and piled them up, they might be able to make simple houses for themselves.

Years ago, I visited Ireland and was very impressed by the engineering skills of the early monastic communities there. They constructed the beehive houses found along the southwestern coast of County Kerry. They are simple dome shaped buildings made from flat stones, stacked together without mortar. They have stood strong for over 1,000 years. Though very simple in design they are quite impressive.

This isn't what Noah's descendants wanted to build when they settled on a plain in Shinar. They didn't want to just pile up a bunch of stones. They wanted to make bricks and bake them thoroughly and use tar for mortar. They were engineers and had made some impressive technological advancements.

Is there anything wrong with technological advancements in and of themselves? No. But as Genesis shows, our motive in engineering the advancement and our choices in how we use the technology we have created determine whether they help us or hinder us in our search for "the truly good life."

Noah's building of the ark to preserve him and his family through the great flood was a massive technological advancement for his time. The difference was that Noah's built his ark in obedience to the voice of God and in co-operation with God's plans, whereas Noah's descendants settling on the plain of Shinar and engineering bricks and tar was done in direct rebellion against God's commands as we see when we read our second, "Come let us," phrase. Listen as I read the second, "Come let us," phrase now.

Genesis 11:4

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; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

And so, in this second, “Come let us,” phrase we discover three motives the people had for engineering the brick and mortar.

Three motives stand out clearly:

- **To reach heaven on their own terms**
- **To make a name for themselves**
- **To resist God’s plan that they scatter over the face of the earth.**

Let’s take these one by one.

a. Although they were moving eastward away from God, and in defiance of God, a part of them still wanted to reach heaven. But they wanted to do that on their own terms.

So they said, “Come let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens.” What great pride they had, to think they could build something that would let them make it up to the heavens when they wanted nothing to do with God on earth.

In Isaiah 66:1 God tells us, “Heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool.”

No matter how hard humans try, we can not climb from God’s footstool and take over his throne. He will always be enthroned in heaven. And if we want to join him there, we must do it on his terms, not ours.

Yet many of us live this way still today. Like our early ancestors, we want control of our own destiny. We want to determine our future. We think we can find the good life and even heaven apart from God.

Perhaps you’ve heard the saying, “All roads lead to the same path, no religion has the whole story.” There is a movement in the world today that asserts all religions though different in their approach, are equally valid and that no one religion can claim to have the complete truth.

But from beginning to end, the God of the Bible says that He is one and the He is the Way, the Truth and the Life and that no-one comes to the Father except through Jesus. His arms opened wide on the cross so that any who will may come, but not all wish to do so. The Bible makes it clear that life lived in relationship to God through Jesus and in submission and obedience to his word is the path to the good life and to eternal life in heaven.

Psalm 24 says -

1 The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;
2 for he founded it on the seas
and established it on the waters.
3 Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?
Who may stand in his holy place?
4 The one who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not trust in an idol
or swear by a false god.[a]
5 They will receive blessing from the Lord
and vindication from God their Savior.
6 Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek your face, God of Jacob.[b][c]

It is seeking God's face that we find God's holy hill opened to us. It is on God's terms and God's terms alone that we find the path to heaven and true blessing in this life, as Jacob came to understand.

We'll come to this story later in the book of Genesis, but at one point as Jacob lays down to sleep, he has a powerful dream. In his dream, he sees heaven opened and a ladder with angels ascending and descending. Thousands of years after God gave Jacob that dream, Jesus would come and call Nathaniel to be his disciple. And Nathaniel was a little reluctant until Jesus said to him, I saw you sitting under the tree. All of a sudden Nathaniel believed because Jesus knew what he had been doing and had seen him even though he was not physically right next to him under the tree.

Nathaniel was impressed. And Jesus said to him, "You're impressed by that? I tell you the truth, you will see heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Nathaniel with his Jewish heritage would have understood the reference Jesus was making to the ladder in Jacob's dream. The ladder to heaven with the angels ascending and descending on it… Jesus was saying, "I am that ladder." The only way to heaven is through me. That's why Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." He is the ladder that links the footstool of God to the throne of God. The path to heaven is only through Jesus.

The second motive Noah's descendants had for making bricks was that

b. They wanted to make a name for themselves. They thought living the good life meant they would be known, admired, and celebrated. They wanted to be famous, to be celebrities. In other words, they were looking for significance.

Who among us cannot relate? Don't was all want to feel important? To feel special? To believe we matter to others?

Still today, many people spend a lot of time trying to make a name for themselves, by trying to establish a reputation in their particular field of work, whether that is publishing scientific papers, winning court cases, selling the most houses, going IPO, getting into a top college, winning the most Oscars, being the best athlete, breaking a record. The desire to be respected by others or to become well-known for one's accomplishments goes way back in time.

Is there anything wrong with wanting to be significant? No.

The problem comes when we care more about being significant to other people than we do about being significant to God.

Often when people seek to make a name for themselves, it puts them in conflict with God's desires for them. Our own efforts to gain recognition often lead us into pride and self-centeredness and sometimes lead us to compromise on what God has asked us to do- which is to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with Him.

As we'll see when we get to Genesis 12 and the story of Abram, the Bible makes clear that it is God who gives us our names and our identities. In Genesis 12:1-4 we'll see God calls Abram to leave his home and his country and go to the land the Lord would show him. And as part of this calling, God promised to make Abram's name great.

Can you trust that if you are not focused on making your name great, that God can make your name great if he so chooses?

How would your life be different if you were more concerned about how God sees you than how other people see you?

Would you be more authentic and real with others, letting people see the whole you, with your flaws as well as your beautiful parts? Would you have less anxiety because you didn't have to worry about impressing others, or managing control over everything? Would you feel more secure? Because certainly if the God of the universe thought you were all that, what difference would it make what anyone else thought of you?

Worrying less about making a name for ourselves and worrying more about how God sees us and our relationship with God, and letting God build our reputation and make a name for us if he so chooses, helps bring us into alignment with God's purposes and plans for our lives. It can take the pressure off as we trust God more and find more joy and fulfillment in our lives.

So, the first reason Noah's descendants engineered bricks with mortar was to try and make it to heaven on their own terms, the second reason was to make a name for themselves and the third reason was

c. They did not want to be scattered over the face of the whole earth.

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; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

Why might they have resisted God's plan for them to fill the earth?

Most likely they were looking for comfort and security.

If you have ever been on a long trip where you had to keep moving from one place to the next, you'll know that a nomadic lifestyle can be quite challenging. It usually feels more comfortable and safer to stay in one place than it does to keep moving day in and day out.

Think about all the challenges people have faced and the lives that have been lost as they have migrated around the world even in more recent centuries and decades.

In US history, 45 of the 102 people that came over from England on the Mayflower died in the first winter due to the harsh conditions, lack of shelter, diseases like scurvy. (1620)

As a child growing up in Hong Kong, I saw many Vietnamese refugees that came through on their way to other parts of the world. The reason being that after the Vietnam War, between 1975 – 1992 it is estimated that almost 2 million people fled from Vietnam in what has been called the Vietnam Boat People Crisis. Of those 2 million who fled Vietnam, it has been estimated that between 200 and 400 thousand died on those boats as they fled to seek refuge and safety around the world. It was a tragedy. It was awful.

So we understand that even in the more recent historical events of the world, where people have moved to a new country and a new land, there are inherent risks with scattering over the face of the earth.

Who knows what the dangers and discomforts were for the people back in Genesis 11 as they spread throughout the earth.

Whatever they were, under Nimrod's influence, the people said "No, we'd rather not keep moving. This plane here is nice and fertile. It will make a nice home for us. We're going to stay put."

Whether out of a desire for comfort or a fear of the unknown, they settled in direct disobedience to God's commands to fill the earth.

We too can experience fear when we go through transitions and changing seasons in our lives, when we have to leave what is familiar and comfortable. But we mustn't let fear stop us from responding in obedience to the voice of God as he leads us into the next chapter or season of our life.

See the people in Nimrod's day didn't know all the good things the Lord had scattered around the world, but God did. He knew all the plants and minerals and resources that he had spread through the whole earth when he created it.

He knew where he put the gold and the oil. He knew where the precious spices would be found for example cinnamon from Sri Lanka and Ginger from Southeast Asia. He knew where all the various foods we needed were located around the world. God wanted everyone to discover and share these resources so they could have the good life he intended. They would miss out on so much if they just stayed put where it was comfortable.

Again, as a child growing up in Hong Kong we were so blessed to have things come in from other countries. We got the most delicious mangos coming in from the Philippines and Apples from China and Pears from Japan and Oreos from the US.

By spreading out and filling the whole earth, people were able to discover things that were necessary. I understand that potatoes originated in Andes of South America. I'm sure the Irish were very happy that the Spanish found them and brought them to Europe because they became a staple to the Irish after they were introduced in the late 16th Century. Their high yield per acre compared to the grain crops meant even small plots of land could produce a substantial crop and so this allowed for the population to grow in Ireland until the Potato Famine around 1845, which was devastating in Irish history.

Potato Blight aside, the point is this - if Noah's descendants had all stayed put on the plains of Shinar, we would have all missed out on so many good and wonderful blessings God had planned for us to experience in the world.

The same is true in our lives. When God calls us to step out of our comfort zones into something new it is because he has a good plan for us. It is to bless us and not to harm us. But it takes trust that God is good and that he will be faithful. And that is often our problem isn't it. We don't trust God to lead us to the good life he intends. We want to keep control and try to build it ourselves. But we often miss out in the process.

That leads us to the 3rd "Come Let us," phrase in this story. For now we see God's response.

5 But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people 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.”

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[c]—because there the Lord confused the language
of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Here we see the irony of the situation, and we might attribute a sense of humor to God in this story.
The people thought they were building a tower so big and impressive that it would reach the heavens so they could make a name for themselves. But God had to bend down and take a closer look in order just to see it.

The Bible makes it clear that God, knows everything, and sees everything from where he sits on his throne in heaven.

So I can only image what God must have said as the people were building this tower. “Oh I know you’re building a great tower down there in the hopes that you can come up and visit my throne. But, where is this tower? I’m in heaven and I don’t see it. I’m looking. I’m straining my eyes. It must be tiny because I’m still not seeing it. Sigh. I guess I’ll just have to come down and take a look at this minuscule tower you are making.

I’m being a bit silly here, but the point is, God is immense. God is massive. In power, in wisdom, in stature, in all ways.

And in a very real way, God coming down to look at the tower is much like what Jesus would eventually do for us when he came down to earth, to give his life for us, to reach us so that through belief in Him we could the true path to heaven and the good life.

This story is a comforting reminder that even the most complex problems in our world, and all the private and personal anxieties that get us wrapped around the axel, these all look small from God’s perspective where he sits up in heaven. I don’t mean to minimize our problems and anxieties but to maximize our view of God. He has the whole world in his hands. There is nothing beyond his ability to heal, to restore, to comfort, to guide us through and to provide for.

What about this sentence where God says, , “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.

Does this mean God felt threatened by them? No, it means he could see they would stop at nothing to self-destruct. Nothing in their path to pull away from him and do damage to themselves would be impossible for them. He wasn't worried for himself, he was worried for their well-being.

Our God is a wise and merciful God. And in his wisdom and mercy, God interrupted the building project by confusing the languages of the people so that they would scatter over the face of the earth.

Sometimes when circumstances beyond our control happen, when we realize our health is failing, or when life doesn't go the way we planned, it might feel like a setback. We might wonder if God is punishing us for something.

Often these "divine interruptions" are God's way of protecting us, sometimes from ourselves. Instead of God punishing us, He might actually be saving us from putting false hope in something that cannot truly support us. God's faithfulness and the truth of God's word are really the only foundations that will last.

CONCLUSION

As the years tick on by, our understanding of what constitutes, "the good life" often changes. In our younger years we might focus more on climbing the ladder and building a career. Reaching financial security. As we mature, we might come to realize that the good life is really about drawing closer to God, finding peace, deepening relationships and leaving a lasting legacy.

Our desire for security and comfort and control may never go away completely, but it might look different. We might come to worry less about our careers and more about our health, or about the generations that follow and whether our lives have made a difference. But hopefully we learn that God is with us through it all.

The truly good life isn't built by making a name for ourselves. It is built by finding our identity in God and in God's name.

The truly good life isn't built on the security of what we can accumulate or control, or amass or hoard for ourselves, but on the enduring foundation of God's faithfulness to us and the truth of his word.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you that your word lays out for us that path to the good life. Thank you that as part of that path, you invite us into relationship with you through Jesus' Christ. We pray that wherever we are at, whether our problems seem big of small, whether they are health related or job related or conflict related or anything else, that you would speak into our lives in a way that we could hear. Open our ears to hear

your still small voice and help us to trust you enough to step out into whatever you call us to do. We pray this for your glory and not our own, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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