

What Kind of Legacy?

Genesis 11:1-9; 12:1-3

I was talking with a reporter from the Maryland Independent this week and she asked, “What do you want your legacy to be?” It’s something I apparently started thinking about fairly early in my life. When I was in first grade, our teacher told us to draw a picture and write what we wanted to be when we grew up. I still have that picture. It shows clearly that my legacy would not involve anything to do with art. But underneath the drawing I wrote, “When I grow up, I’m going to be a pastor. I will be a pastor because my dad is a pastor. I will have 624 people in my church.” Not 600. Not 650 – 624.

Well, unless things pick up significantly in the next three weeks, I’m going to fall a little short in that aspect of my legacy. The question remains, “What do I want my legacy to be?” What do you want your legacy to be?

In Genesis 11 and 12, we find two different approaches to building a legacy. One of these passages is much better known than the other – which may be part of the point, come to think of it.

I. At the beginning of Genesis 11, we find the obscure and rather strange story of the Tower of Babel. It’s possible to read this story from a number of different perspectives. One of them is the perspective of legacy building. In verse 4, the people of Babel say, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, *so that we may make a name for ourselves.*” So, one kind of legacy is built on the attempt to make a name for ourselves.

Babel, it turns out, is the Hebrew name for the city of Babylon. One of the features of Babylon and ancient Mesopotamia were structures called “ziggurats.” These were pyramid-like towers that had a shrine at the top for a god. The thinking was that, if these towers were in their cities, the god would always be with them. And because they were so tall – they “reached into the heavens” – the god could get to them relatively easily.

In our more sophisticated age, it may strike us as a little silly and naïve. But before we simply dismiss this story, we need to recognize that there are some aspects of it that may not be as foreign to us as we first thought. Behind the building project there was a desire on the part of the people of Babel to build their own security. One of the commands that God had given to Adam and Eve as part of His original plan was that they were to “be fruitful and increase in number [and] *fill the earth*” (Gen. 1:28). Again, after the flood, God had told Noah and his sons to “be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1). Now, however, the people of Babel have found a comfortable place where they want to settle down. We know that, beyond their religious significance, towers were used as places of refuge in case of enemy attack. If the enemy managed to take the city, they still had to deal with the tower from which the locals could rain down rocks on the heads of their attackers. Floods were also a regular occurrence in that part of the world, and a tower could also be a refuge from a flood.

In themselves, none of these things was bad. But taken together, they paint a picture of a group of people that had decided that embracing the legacy that God had given them was simply too risky. They wanted a life that was comfortable, predictable and safe.

That meant that they did not want to depend on God. They preferred to be self-sufficient. Or so it seems when they say that they want to make a name *for themselves*. The tower was a strategy that they hoped would enable them to control their god. Yes, they built him a nice apartment to live in upstairs – but he would be like an aging grandparent to whose face they would be nice, but whose opinions and ideas they would ignore where it truly mattered. It was the kind of attitude we see even today in those who refer to God as “the old man upstairs.” We’ll acknowledge Him with our lips, but we wouldn’t dream of letting Him control something as important as our legacy. We’ll take care of that on our own. We may employ different strategies. Some want to build a tower of power. Some want to build a tower of fame. Still others want to build

their tower with wealth. But behind the variety of our strategies is an assumption that our legacy is up to us!

We also see that the people of Babel wanted to realize their legacy in their own lifetime. There are some subtle details in this story that indicate that these folks were not concerned about the long term impact of their work. The Israelites knew that if you wanted to build something that would last, you used stone. If you couldn't afford a whole building made of stone, you laid a stone foundation and then built the rest of the house with mudbrick. The people of Babel are building a whole city with a tower that is supposed to impress people. But they don't have any stone, so they have to make do with mudbrick for the entire structure. And they don't have any cement to hold the bricks together, so they have to make do with tar.¹

When I got my driver's license, my dad decided that our family needed a second car. Funds were limited, so he bought a Dodge Dart. It was new – but it was . . . a Dodge Dart. The carburetor was never right on the thing. If you stepped on the gas too hard, it would stall. So, pulling out into a stream of traffic was always an adventure. The body of the car was also inadequate. By its third Ohio winter, the wheel wells were already gone. There's a reason why you almost never see a Dodge Dart from the 70s on the road today. If you're ever in a junkyard and come across a pile of rust, I'd be willing to bet it used to be a Dodge Dart.

The engineers who designed that car apparently had a lot in common with the people of Babel. They wanted to get something impressive up quickly. They wanted the security and recognition in their own lifetime. That's still the approach many people have to the legacy they are trying to build. When we are making a name for ourselves, it seems pointless if we don't get to see the results ourselves. So, we draw from whatever resources or materials we have available to us – even if they are defective and will not last.

In the case of Babel, God didn't like what He sees. The Bible tells us that He came down and scattered the people. In other words, the very thing that they were trying to avoid is exactly what happened to them. Instead of making a name for themselves, there is no trace of them. Their city – and the legacy they were trying to establish with it – is now buried in the sands of time.

II. At the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12, the Bible turns a corner. All of humanity's efforts to go their own way in opposition to God's purpose come to nothing – literally nothing. We are introduced to Abram who is married to a woman named Sarai who, we are told, was childless, because she was not able to conceive. Now what? From the very beginning, God has been telling his human creatures to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth. But now the story comes down to Abram and Sarai who are childless – with little hope of that ever changing.

So it's surprising to hear God say to this man, "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" (Gen. 12:2). This is a very different situation – and a very different approach – from the one that we see in the people of Babel. The legacy that we see here is not something that Abram – or Abraham – can create for himself. This is something that he must trust God to do for him.

The circumstances of Abraham's legacy are the opposite of what was happening in Babel in almost every detail. First, God was calling Abraham *away* from his security. God's first words to him are, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Instead of building a tower in a citadel – instead of building walls behind which he could hide – Abraham is asked to leave the people and the family among whom he had lived his entire life and to go – well – to go "somewhere" – to the land God said He would show him.

As we've seen, it is our nature to resist the insecure situations. And yet, that's where God begins with Abraham in calling him to a future in which God would make Abraham's name great.

¹ John Goldingay, *Genesis for Everyone*, p. 128.

This willingness to accept insecurity was a choice that moved Abraham away from self-sufficiency. To respond to the call of God meant that Abraham would be absolutely dependent on God. Abraham's legacy had nothing to do with his competence or his resources. It had everything to do with his willingness to trust the promise of God. If Abraham's name was to become "great" it was something that God was going to do.

The apostle Paul highlights this aspect of Abraham's experience. In his letter to the Romans, he writes, "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations." A couple of verses later he adds that Abraham was "fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (Romans 4:18, 21).

One of the things that encourages me in this story is that it was out of the situation of "barrenness" – out of the place of greatest disappointment in Abraham's and Sarah's lives – that God established their legacy. The greatness of Abraham was not the result of how much he was able to accomplish but of how deeply he was able to trust God.

It also encourages me in a strange way that Abraham did not have a perfect record in this regard. There were times when fear got the best of him – like when he decided to pawn off poor Sarah as his sister to Pharaoh. There were times when he doubted that God could fulfill the promise. There were times when he thought he had to take matters into his own hands – like when he decided his only shot at building a legacy was to have a son by Sarah's servant, Hagar.

There are times when fear and doubt appear in our lives – times when we find that we are off track. The thing that saved Abraham was, first, that God kept coming back to him and rescued him on several occasions but also that Abraham kept coming back to God until, finally, he came to the place where he could trust God completely – as when he obeyed God's command to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

But even then, the legacy that God intended for Abraham was not realized in his lifetime. God had said that He would make Abraham into a great nation. Later, He took Abraham outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be" (Gen. 15:5). When we do the biblical math, however, we discover that, when Abraham died, he and Sarah had exactly one son, one daughter-in-law and two teenage grandsons.

Doesn't that suggest that what God wants to do through any of us is much bigger than anything that can be contained in the brief span of our lives? I've mentioned before that, when I told my friend Howie Haft about my diagnosis over lunch one day a few years ago, he knew the implications immediately and he said, "You know, I realized a long time ago that whether we're given 40 or 60 or 80 – or even 100 years – it's still a very short time."

That's true. And if we try to build a legacy that will be realized in our lifetimes, I'm afraid that we're going to end up with a lot of Dodge Darts. I'm not saying that we will never catch a glimpse of the impact our lives have had. I'm simply saying that, if our primary goal is to see our name become great, we're going to be drawn to things that have only a temporary impact.

So how did Abraham make choices that led to a lasting influence? He recognized that his legacy wasn't just about him. God says that He will make Abraham's name great – but He immediately adds that Abraham would *be* a blessing. In the next verse, God says that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through Abraham."

Whatever legacy God may have for you and me, we can be sure of one thing. It will not be about us. It won't be something that is measured by our bank accounts or by our titles. If God has given those things to us, our legacy will be determined by how we *use* those things to extend His blessing to the world around us.

If you question this second approach to building a legacy, consider this. Abraham left his security behind in order to embrace the promise of God. As

we've seen, he died before he could see anything but the slightest glimmer of the ultimate greatness of his name. And yet, few people in all of history are better known than Abraham while the tower of Babel and the people who built it are long forgotten.

III. These stories raise a few questions for us to consider. First, what if it's not our place to build a legacy? What if "making a name for ourselves" is actually counter-productive to the ultimate impact of our lives? If, someday, your name goes up on a building or a street is named after you, that's ok. But if those are the goals with which we set out to build our legacy, we may find ourselves making choices that eventually leave our legacies "scattered" rather than continuing to bring blessing to our world.

But if it's not our place to build a legacy, then what are we supposed to do with our lives? Well, what if it's our place to live in dependence on God and in faith? Rather than doing things our own way – instead of building our own security and relying on our own competence and ability – what if the key to our legacy is learning to trust the leading of God and of the Holy Spirit – even when it seems to be taking us in ways that are counter to the world's measures of success?

And then, what if our legacy is not so much about what God does for us as what He does *through* us? I suspect that, when all is said and done, the greatest legacies are not going to belong to people who appeared on Time Magazine's list of "The 100 Most Influential People" or Forbes list of the wealthiest people in the world. I suspect that the greatest legacies will belong to those who learned to say, "Let my life be used by God to bring His blessing to the world."

One day this week, I turned on the television and caught the tail end of an interview with the missionary nurse who had contracted the Ebola virus and had been brought back to the US for treatment. She had recovered fully. She wasn't the kind of person we're accustomed to seeing on the national news. She wasn't politically powerful. She wasn't glamorous. She was an ordinary person – except for the fact that she had answered God's call to go to a distant country

to minister to the physical and spiritual needs of the people there. She had almost lost her life in the process.

As the interview came to a close, the interviewer said, "I think I know the answer to this question but I need to ask it anyway. Has this experience shaken your faith?"

The woman smiled and shook her head. "No," she said. "I just pray that we can develop a vaccine that will be able to help my African brothers and sisters to fight this disease." It wasn't about her. It was about bringing blessing to the world. She may or may not see it in her lifetime – but someday it will happen – and she will have had a part in writing that story.

What kind of legacy will we leave?

I. Approach #1: We can "make a name for _____"

- A. The people of Babel attempted to build their own _____
- B. The people of Babel wanted to be _____
- C. The people of Babel wanted to realize their legacy in their own _____
- D. The outcome: They were "_____"

II. Approach #2: We can trust God to "make our name _____"

- A. Abraham was willing to accept _____
- B. Abraham was _____ on God
- C. Abraham's legacy was not realized in his own _____
- D. Abraham's legacy wasn't just about _____
- E. The outcome: Few people are better _____ than Abraham

III. Questions to consider:

- A. What if it's not our place to _____ a legacy?
- B. What if it's our place to live in _____ on God and in _____?
- C. What if our legacy is not so much about what God does _____ us as what He does _____ us?

