

Easter 7
May 23, 2010

See what happens when we speak the same language!

Pastor Michael Ewart
Genesis 11:1-9

[*The following said in Russian...*]

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I so far have said hardly anything, but you already understand how important it is that we speak in the same language. [*resume English*]

How did it feel to sit there for a few moments and not understand a word of what I was saying? I received the call to Russia in May of 1995. We arrived in Russia a few months later in September. In the 3 ½ or so months between receiving the call and arriving on the field, Jenny and I (who were just married) thought it might be a good idea to learn some Russian before we went over there. Now God had seen to it that I had a wife who already knew some Russian. Jenny had taken a year of Russian at a renowned college before we ever met. But I literally knew NO Russian when I received the call to be a missionary in Russia. So we did some checking around and found a summer two month intensive Russian course called the Russian School, held at Norwich University in Vermont. We stayed in the dorm there and did nothing but study Russian for 10 or 12 hours per day.

I still remember how clueless I felt. It was a total immersion program. During the day on campus, English was prohibited and you could only speak Russian. Problem was, I was a beginner, so I didn't know any Russian. Jenny was in the second year course, so she had an easier time of it. But I distinctly remember how I could not make out a single word of what was being said for the first 3 weeks of the Russian School. Announcements would be made in the cafeteria and I would listen intently, and I would hear exactly what you heard at the beginning of the sermon... nothing. It all flowed together and was completely unintelligible. After about three weeks, though, my ear was finally starting to get it. I could start to pick out words and phrases. I finally felt like I was making some progress. I can tell you, those first three weeks were unsettling. To be a missionary in Russia, I had to speak the same language as the people I would be serving! I wondered if I would be able to do it.

Also at the Russian School, were some employees from NASA. They themselves were not astronauts, but they worked with the Russians on the MIR space station project. They too needed to speak the same language as the Russians they would be working with.

I know this is somewhat self-evident, but with English so widely spoken in North America and throughout the world, I think we sometimes take for granted just how essential it is to speak the same language. I imagine we'd understand this better if we were in Europe where countries with different languages are much closer geographically. It is extremely difficult to work together with anyone on anything when you don't speak the same language. *If only the whole world spoke the same language, think about what we could do! Think about what would happen.*

Well, truth is, the picture isn't as rosey as we might think. You see, the Bible does tell us about a time when there was one language on earth. And isn't it interesting that it answers that vital question for us? If Adam and Eve our one parents... and if after the

Flood, clearly there was only Noah and his family, then why isn't there one language today? And why are there clearly identifiable families of languages today? The answer is in the Old Testament reading for today, Genesis 11:1-9. But more importantly, it answers the question of what would happen if there was one language today. We can envision a utopian world where everyone gets along because everyone understands each other. But that's not how it worked when there really was one language:

“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men 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 and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

When God created Adam and Eve, he wanted to be fruitful and multiply and to subdue the earth. After the Flood, God's will was that Noah's family multiply and spread out over the earth and rule over it. Imagine human beings all speaking the same language spreading out and living on the whole planet... managing and running it cooperatively to the glory of God and for the benefit of all people! That was God's will and command. But that's not how things played out.

Sinful man speaking a common language had other plans. Rather than using the common language inhabit the whole planet and rule it to the glory of God and for helping all people, they decided to clump together in a huge city and do something that would bring glory to THEM instead of to God. In the middle of their city they wanted to build a skyscraper... not as a temple of praise to God, but as a monument to *their* ingenuity and power. They wanted to build a huge city state and keep the world's population gathered in this one location. They looked for security apart from God and independent of him. They directly disobeyed God's command to scatter over the earth and inhabit it. They wanted to make their name great instead of God's name great. They were practicing open idolatry. A clear worship of self instead of God.

Friends, we struggle with the same sins today. Whether it's our country, our State, our football team, our city, our family, or JUST ME... we want glory and recognition. We want to be known and admired and glorified. We want others to look up to us, and if possible bow before us. It's in our sinful nature to say, **“Worthy AM I (or my country or my city or family) to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.”** This is nothing more than sinful human pride wanting what God has. Like those at the tower of Babel, we want to make a name for ourselves. We are idolaters that want to be sitting on the throne receiving praise instead of God.

The title of today's sermon is: **“See what happens when we speak the same language!”** Many people, whether philosophers, or science fiction authors, or leaders of world religions, have looked to the future optimistically. They are hopeful of an era where man works together and cooperates. They would certainly enthusiastically agree that a single language would only help usher in an era of peace, security and sharing.

Well, when such conditions did prevail on earth, that's not what happened. Man united and cooperated... to be sure... but they did so in disobedience and opposition to God. What happens when sinful man communicates well and works together is not a

blessing, but increased and accelerated resistance to God and alienation from him. And if we're honest, this is what we'd have to expect, right? Look at your own heart and life. How many times have you acted selfishly? Sought personal glory? How many times have you not been kind to others or put their needs before your own? Are you always generous? You know your heart. It's flawed, imperfect and selfish. Now join together a bunch of hearts like that, and what will the result be? The same thing, just multiplied.

And this arrogance is not ignored by God!

“But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men 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.”

We might think we're getting away with something when we sin and there aren't immediate consequences... but God knows. He sees all. He knew what these people were doing as they built their city. And he wasn't happy. Who are these human beings who think they can disobey God and draw glory and praise to themselves which only God deserves? God saw that this was the beginning of a pattern. With all men on earth working together under one language, the result would be a widespread evil and unbelief.

God could have gone down and caused an earthquake to destroy their tower. But the tower wasn't the main problem. It was the corrupt hearts that worked together to build it. God came down then and did something that would slow the wicked cooperation of sinful hearts. He confused languages and scattered people across the earth.

Can you imagine working on a building project and suddenly everyone on the project is speaking a different language? The work would halt immediately. Now it's not clear if God then physically transported the people to various parts of the planet, or if the confused languages caused those who spoke the same to join together and find a new home. I tend toward the latter, but I could have been either.

In summary, God stops man's arrogance and sinful cooperation to oppose him. God stepped in a supernatural way and put a quick stop to their sin. And his is no more tolerant of sin today.

But this isn't the end of the language story. God confused languages to build barriers that would slow sinful human pride and arrogance. In our second lesson today, we heard how God intervened again in human languages... this time not to confuse them but clearly communicate something: namely, his salvation accomplished through the Lord Jesus Christ.

God so loved the world he wasn't content to slow down sins progress and man's arrogance. It was all a part of God's plan to allow more time for his perfect plan of salvation to unfold. When the time was right, God sent his Son Jesus to fix things for good.

Arrogance, sinful pride, glory seeking... none of this could be found in God's perfect son. How incredible that God's Son and ruler of the universe could live a humble, servant life that we cannot live. And he credits it to us! How incredible that God's Son, ruler of the universe, would humble himself even to take our guilt, our arrogance, our

pride upon himself and go to a cross to face the Father's wrath. The Father's wrath was poured out on him completely... right down to the last drop. Our sins fully paid for. Forgiveness is completely ours. And God raised this Jesus to life and he is exalted at the right hand of God. The work is complete! We are God's children. Eternal life is ours!

But what good is this gift of God if nobody knows it or believes it? The news needs to be spread. To get the news out, God enabled the disciples to speak the life-giving Word in multiple languages. People from all over the world heard the good news of Jesus and in a single day, 3,000 of them became believers. They went home and shared that good news with their families and friends. That message has continued to be shared with people for the last 2,000 years... such that now the Gospel is preached through out the world.

The Bible or parts of it are available in every language. Churches are established in every part of the world across languages and cultures. There is a single language understood throughout the world – the language of God's love. Not that this language has been spoken to every person on the planet. There are lots in your own families, neighborhoods and workplaces who haven't yet heard this language of God's love. Will you speak it to them?

See what happens when we speak the same language!

Mir bozhe katorie privishet vsakova uma, sobludaet serdtsa vashi I pomishlenia vashi vo Krista Iisusa. Amin.

And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.