

## Be a Person (Genesis 11:1-9)

For the Travelling Light Series

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By Pastor Ricky Stephen

### Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. <sup>2</sup> As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

<sup>3</sup> They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. <sup>4</sup> 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.”

<sup>5</sup> But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

<sup>8</sup> So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup> That is why it was called Babel<sup>[a]</sup>—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

### Losing Our Heads

Whether it is the tower of Babel, A-bomb, the iPhone, or something like Jurassic Park, we’re prone as humans to build things we don’t understand and watch them turn and bite our heads off.

The best biblical word for this proclivity is probably *magic*. Our attempt to get power without effort, ease, and control. The desire to be gods and not human. Sorcerers and not servants.

God stopping the people at Babel is a parental move. He is saving them from themselves. Because our works done apart from God eventually end up dehumanizing and damaging us.

### A Tale of Two Kingdoms

In Genesis 1, humans are told to be ‘fruitful and multiply’. This is called the ‘cultural mandate’. Making things, including technology, is what we are called to do. But those things are supposed to be made to encourage shalom—whole earth flourishing.

At Babel, they wanted to make a name for themselves with their achievements. They were building the ‘earthly city’ Augustine talked about, not the ‘heavenly city’ Jesus is ushering in.

Many of the devices and technologies we use today were made with other goals in mind—most of them financial. They are products of the ‘earthly city’ so to speak. So, the problem is not technology *per se*, but the need to learn how to use that tech in a humane and thoughtfully Christian way.

### Magic: Ease

A comedian that fell from grace, Louis C.K., had a riff on technology he delivered on a talk show. He noticed that ‘everything’s amazing and nobody’s happy.’

Like, the iPhone comes out. Within fifteen minutes, people complained about the loading times. Give it a minute! He says, “That’s going to space”.

Or high-speed internet gets put in airplanes. He's sitting beside a guy; the internet goes down and the guy curses out loud in frustration.

"Oh, I'm sorry that you can't browse the internet on *your throne in the sky!* You are in the place that only birds have been for almost all of history!"

One of the promises of magic, and a trap we fall into as modern people with our use of technologies, is the promise of ease. Our lives were supposed to get better because of technology. Devices were supposed to ease our suffering and ease our toil.

An energy specialist and engineer named Vaclav Smil recently wrote a book called *How the World Really Works*, on the energy crisis. He's the type of guy that does the math on what the energy costs of things are. Like how much diesel fuel a tomato 'costs'.

According to his calculations, the average human has at their disposal the power of 60 human beings working full time around the clock. In affluent places that number rises to 240 people working full time around the clock.<sup>1</sup>

Right now, we live the equivalent lifestyle of the kings and queens of small medieval nations. Only they would have that type of person power available at their disposal.

Do you feel like you live better than royalty?

I'm going to guess not.

Why not? If it's so amazing, why does it still feel so tough?

Christian thinker Andy Crouch uses a technical term for our approach to technology, calling them 'devices'. He says that a device is anything that allows you to make a difference in the world without becoming different in any way.<sup>2</sup> Catch that? Anything that allows you to make a difference in the world without becoming different in any way.

This is why, he says, the promises of device are false. They promise reduced burdens, but they also come with restricted capabilities.<sup>3</sup> We lose abilities by relying on technology.

We were promised ease, and we got it. But it's killing us.

### **Magic: Control**

How many of you have seen iRobot? How about Battlestar Galactica? Ex Machina? A.I Artificial Intelligence? Terminator?

There's a list longer than I am tall, and that's long, of films and books and shows about robots turning against their masters. I believe this is an allegory about the lives we currently live. Why?

Because technology promised us control—over nature, our bodies, and ourselves—but it is often controlling us.

I've had friends who have had to work for stints at Amazon. Every single moment of their time is analyzed and scrutinized to make them as efficient as robots. Their coffee breaks scheduled down to the minute. Or other friends in call centers. 8 hours a day, on the phone, every moment scrutinized and analyzed, penalized if they let up or stop.

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<sup>1</sup> See Vaclav Smil, *How the World Really Works*.

<sup>2</sup> See Andy Crouch and John Mark Comer interview on the 'Rule of Life Podcast', also available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqoY8T208pi> from 28:15 and following.

<sup>3</sup> See Crouch, *The Life We're Looking For*, 136ff.

The more we inhabit a world of machines the more we can be led to live like machines.

Andy Crouch puts it this way. Technology promised us that 'now you'll be able to', now you'll be able to fly across the world.

But, along with that, comes the 'now you'll have to.'. Now you'll feel ripped off if you don't get an overseas vacation. Or now you have to save money to fly.<sup>4</sup>

The more machines and devices take over our world, the more impersonal it becomes.

### **What it Means to 'Be A Person'**

One of Jesus' great gifts is that he does not lie to us. Unlike Silicon Valley snake oil salesmen, Jesus promises us neither ease nor control.

"In this world, you will have *trouble*." (John 16:33)

The root burden we place upon ourselves when we inhabit our techno-magical society is the burden of being *more than human*. It is, in some sense, to be gods.

The Scriptures speak of humanity in a way that you could almost diagram. God is at the top, animals are nearer the bottom, humans are somewhere in-between.

King Nebuchadnezzar illustrates this point perfectly. In Daniel 4, he praises himself for his great kingdom. So, God makes him act like an animal for a period of seven weeks to seven years. Then, when he comes to his senses, he praises God.

The moral is, if you try to be more than human you end up becoming less than human.

Andy Crouch puts it this way:

"... you cannot take advantage of a superpower and fully remain a person, in the sense of a heart-soul-mind-strength complex designed for love. This is not an unfortunate side effect of superpowers or a flaw that could be overcome with future improvements."<sup>5</sup>

God said in Genesis that being a human is very good. Even without modern technology. Even without superpowers.

So how do we embrace real humanity in a world promising us more than we can handle? How do we guard our hearts, souls, minds and strength?

A few quick suggestions.

### **Re-Engage the Heart: Everything is Amazing**

The speed of the modern world teaches us to want more, and this 'more-sickness' is a sickness of a heart.

The cure?

Gratitude.

We have been given an incredible gift to occupy this space and time in history. We can see it that way, marvel at the beauty.

As Paul tells the Philippians "8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or

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<sup>4</sup> See Crouch, *The Life We're Looking For*, 136ff.

<sup>5</sup> Andy Crouch, *The Life We're Looking For*, 45.

praiseworthy—think about such things. <sup>9</sup> Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.” (Phil. 4:8-9)

Just before that, he tells anxious people to pray *with thanksgiving* and promises the peace of God to them.

### **Re-Engage the Soul: Screen Time Limits**

One author I respect has a rule for his devices. One hour a day, one day a week, and one week a year, they're off.<sup>6</sup> That's right. The phone is off for one hour a day, one day a week, and one week a year.

If life doesn't allow turning it off, one other option is to literally make your smart phone a dumb phone.<sup>7</sup> Delete social media apps and any unnecessary apps that steal your attention. Use it to call and text.

### **Re-Engage the Mind: Don't Google It**

I've been experimenting over the past few weeks with not having a web browser on my phone. If I want to look something up, I have to go to my computer in the office.

We were made with minds for thinking, and having unlimited knowledge at our fingertips diminishes our capacity for thinking. But when you distance yourself from that search bar, you must remember things. Memorize them. Write them down. *Think about them.*

### **Re-Engage the Strength: Choose Difficulty**

God gave us strength. Muchness. Power. But He gave it to us, like the parable of the talents says, with a 'use it or lose it' contract. In our modern world to re-engage our personhood we will often have to *voluntarily make things more difficult* if we want to grow.

Choose the slow way to cook something. Walk to work. Garden. Do something hard for the sake of it.

### **Being An Ordinary Horse**

As we close not just today but this series, let's go back to Jesus' words we've been centering on.

<sup>28</sup> “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Whether it was pride, fear, anger, shame, or the way we use technology, our modern lives have us placing many unnecessary burdens upon ourselves. To use Jesus' metaphor, many of us are yoked to loads too heavy for us to carry.

One way of saying this is we all expect something other than what Jesus expects for us.

I went to Trinity Western University, which was great. But Trinity is full of like, super-Christians. I knew people who started multinational non-profits to stop sex trafficking at twenty-two. I went to school with people who are writing books and leading massive churches. I look out at that all, and with the unprecedented ease and control of technology, I think I should be able to get there too. That I need to get there too.

One night, early in our marriage, this had me so stressed out I was literally weeping. I wanted so bad to be special and important. Michelle turned to me and told me a story from the Chronicles of Narnia. In *The Horse and His Boy*, a former war horse witnesses a lion attack one of his friends and he can't help. Later, the horse complains to a hermit of his incompetence. The hermit responds telling the horse to relax. He's just an ordinary horse.

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<sup>6</sup> Jefferson Beffke in the “Fight Hustle, End Hurry” podcast.

<sup>7</sup> See the above podcast.

She looked at me and said, Ricky, you're an ordinary horse.

I think the lie of our techno-magical world is that we will somehow be exempt from all the things humans have had to deal with at all times. We'll all be superstars who never have to do the dishes.

But Jesus' invitation is to be an ordinary horse. An ordinary horse tethered to and led by an extraordinary Lord.

Another short sentence that changed my life from Jacques Philippe:

"...the greatest obstacle on the path to holiness may be to cling too closely to the image we have of our own perfection."<sup>8</sup>

Jesus' invitation is to learn from Him, walk beside Him, be led by Him. To lay down the burden of our own vision for what life should be and take His vision upon us. We will only find rest, real rest, when we walk in the knowledge of His love and are led by that love.

That's why we work on where we give our attention. That's why we grow in humility. That's why we try to deal with our fears, anger, and shame. To hear the voice of that Lord more clearly and follow Him more nearly and love Him more dearly.

Travelling light means **being an ordinary horse yoked to an extraordinary Lord.**

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<sup>8</sup> Philippe, *In the School of the Holy Spirit*, 18.