

\* The Heights Baptist Church \* Series: Genesis—The Book of Beginnings \*  
\* Topic: The Tower of Babel \* Scripture: Genesis 10 and 11 \* 7/30/2023 \*

## MAIN POINT

God is sovereign, working out His purposes through the people who obey him and in spite of the people who resist him. He even works through the people who resist Him.

## INTRODUCTION

**Why do we sometimes ignore or resist doing what authority figures in our life tell us to do? What kinds of consequences may occur when we ignore the rules or advice of these authorities?**

It's not hard to come up with a list of ways we think we are above the law. Nor is it difficult to make a list of consequences that come when we break it. In this study, we will see the consequences that a generation of people faced because they ignored God's purposes for their lives.

**Have you ever been in a country where you had a difficult time communicating with people due to a language barrier?**

Communication is something that we easily take for granted. If you are shopping, you can ask a worker where the item you are looking for is located. You can ask where the bathroom is. Even our money is a form of communication. When you are in a foreign country with a different currency, it is difficult to figure out what something costs or even if you are receiving the correct change!

At the Tower of Babel, God confused the languages of the people so that they could not communicate with one another. If not speaking a language means it is difficult to find a bathroom, buy milk, or make change, imagine how difficult it would be to try to engineer a building together!

## UNDERSTANDING

### SUMMARY OF GENESIS CHAPTER 10

Genesis 10 is known as "The Table of Nations". It lists the sons and grandsons of Noah's sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. This chapter contains more information on world history than is provided in the entire Koran.

**A remarkable book has been written based on Genesis Chapter 10 titled *After the Flood*, by Bill Cooper.** In his book he researches the names of the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth listed in Genesis 10, looking for traces of their names in the nations around the world, since all nations' origins trace back to those men.

One example is Shem's son Ashur (Gen. 10:22), from whom the Assyrians are descended. Their first king was named Puzer Asshur I. Examples from Ham include his sons Egypt and Canaan, from whom the Egyptians and the Canaanites came. Finding the names of Shem and Ham's descendants was very easy.

The bulk of Bill Cooper's research dealt with the children of Japheth, who migrated to Europe after Babel. He writes, "The test I devised was a simple one. If the names of the individuals... listed in the table of nations was genuine... those same names should appear in the records of the other nations..." He went on to write, "I wanted to see firstly whether the same patriarchs mentioned in Genesis were evident in the most ancient genealogies and chronicles of the peoples of Europe." An example of this is Riphath (Gen. 10:3). His descendants gave his name to the Riphæan mountains. Early records of the Paphlagonians record their race as the Riphæi. Their identification was confirmed by the Jewish historian Josephus.

He states the results of his research (which took about 25 years to complete) this way. "Today I can say that the names so far vindicated in the Table of Nations make up over 99% of the list... **No other ancient historical document of purely human authorship could be expected to yield such a level of corroboration as that!"**

## REVIEW OF GENESIS CHAPTER 9 (RELEVANT POINTS INTRODUCING GENESIS 11)

ASK A VOLUNTEER READ GENESIS 9:1 and 7

### **What did God tell Noah and his sons to do after they exited the ark as part of the Noahic Covenant?**

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. This is repeated from the Edenic Covenant, where similar directions were given to Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:28).

ASK A VOLUNTEER READ GENESIS 9:6

We talked last week about one of the effects of Adam and Eve's sin was they now were "knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:22). Rather than the innocent, child-like relationship with God that they had in the garden, they now had a conscience, and they also had a sinful nature. This dispensation has been labeled "The Age of Conscience".

The end result of living with each person allowing "their conscience to be their guide" was God having to destroy the entire human race (other than Noah and his family) by the global flood due to the level of wickedness that mankind had attained.

Part of the Noahic Covenant described in Genesis 9:6 appears to be an additional responsibility placed on mankind to police each other, specifically in the area of capital punishment for murder due to the high value of human life. This new dispensation has been labeled "The Age of Government."

If this system had been in place before Noah's flood, it appears it would have been the responsibility of Adam and Eve and any other of their offspring to execute Cain for murdering Abel.

In Genesis 11, we will see the end result of this new "Age of Government".

ASK A VOLUNTEER READ GENESIS 11:1-4

*Note to study leader: Verse 2 tells us the people moved eastward. This likely includes a spiritual picture. The entrance to Eden was to the east. And the entrance to the Tabernacle and the Temple were to the east. So, to enter these areas where God was present, people had to move from the east to the west. The fact these people moved in the opposite direction likely pictures the fact they were spiritually moving away from God.*

### **What two motives are given for the people at Shinar for building the city with a tower that "reaches to the heavens"?**

#### **What is wrong with the goals that they set for themselves?**

Shinar is an area in Mesopotamia—around the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. This area is in modern-day Iraq. There appears to be two problems with the people at Shinar: pride and disobedience.

The people mentioned in the beginning verses of Genesis 11 intended to make a name for themselves. They apparently believed their completed city and tower would form an impressive, lasting monument to their power and ability. In seeking to ensure their fame and prestige lasted, they tried to claim the place that belongs only to God. Our purpose on earth is to magnify the name of the Lord, not make a name for ourselves. This passage demonstrates the pride that the builders had in themselves and in their position.

Another problem is that the people were building in order to keep from being "scattered over the face of the whole earth." After the flood, "God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'" (Genesis 9:1). God's stated will was for the people to fill the earth; but their plan was to stay in one place to make a name for themselves rather than obey the command of God.

Rebellion against God is the opposite of organizing our life around God's purposes. Believing we know what is best for us means we do not seek God's guidance and in the case at Babel, it meant intentionally resisting His will. When we substitute our purposes for God's, we miss out on the blessing of serving Him, and we go in directions harmful to ourselves and others.

**How would you compare the motives of the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden with the people at Babel?**

Adam and Eve gave in to temptation, while these people were deliberately scheming and planning to rebel against God. Numerous other comparisons could be given.

**How would you compare the motives of the sin of Cain with Abel and the sin of the people at Babel?**

Cain was angry with Abel since Abel's righteousness helped exposed Cain's efforts to come to God in his own way with less than his full heart, while these people were deliberately scheming and planning to outright rebel against God. Numerous other comparisons could be given.

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ MARK 10:42-45 AND 1 PETER 5:5-6

**How does pride lead people away from God?**

Pride prevents us from organizing our life around God's purposes, which includes the command to humble ourselves. Pride directly violates God's command to be humble, and pride results in God opposing us. To find true fulfillment, we as Christians need to crucify ourselves and place Jesus on the throne of our life.

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ JOHN 14:23-24, 2 CORINTHIANS 10:5, AND 2 JOHN 1:6

**What does rebellion against God's commands reveal about us?**

Our motive for obeying God should be because we love God. As Jesus said, anyone who does not love him will not obey his teaching.

**MORE BACKGROUND ON BABEL**

Genesis 10:8-10 tells us the founder of Babylon (The nation which grew out of Babel) was Nimrod, who was a mighty hunter. Jewish writings say this about Nimrod; "He was powerful in hunting and in wickedness before the Lord.... He said (to the sons of men), 'Depart from the judgment of the Lord, and adhere to the judgement of Nimrod.'" (Jewish Targums). The Jewish historian Josephus wrote, "Now it was Nimrod who excited them to such an affront against God (building the Tower of Babel)... He also said he would be revenged on God, if he (God) should have a mind to drown the world again; for that he would build a tower too high for the waters to be able to reach! And that he would avenge himself on God for destroying their forefathers" (Ant. I.iv.2)

The Targums and the works of Josephus were written thousands of years after the event at Babel occurred. We can't be sure how much is based on legend, and how much is based on historical truth passed on through Jewish tradition. But at the very least, we see that Israel recognized the wickedness of the leadership at Babel.

ASK A VOLUNTEER READ GENESIS 11:5-9

**What irony do you see between the statements in verses 4 and 5, which are separated by the word "But"?**

The people built the tower to make a name for themselves, that would reach up to the heavens. **But God** had to come "down" to see it.

**Why do you think God was concerned with “nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them”?**

The very government concept designed to keep us walking with God was now corporately leading an organized rebellion against God. This would open up new possibilities for ways people could collectively rebel against God.

**Why do you think God confused the people’s languages rather than just destroy the tower and city?**

The buildings were only a symptom of the greater problem of pride. Forcing the people to scatter shows God’s purposes will be accomplished against the stubborn sinful will of the people.

*Note to study leader: Archaeologists have excavated the foundation of a tower near the ruins of ancient Babylon that well could be the base of the tower of Babel. It is a large foundation, with an inscription on it reading, “the temple of the foundation of heaven and earth”.*

*Note to study leader: This miracle of God is amazing. To confuse the languages would require reprogramming people’s brains to instantly speak and understand entirely new types of languages. Language studies provide strong external evidence to support this miracle at Babel. There are numerous families of languages in the world today. An example of this is English and Spanish, which are viewed as “cousins”, since they come from a common ancestor language known as Indo-European. But all of the families of languages in the world are traced back to independent dead ends a few thousand years ago.*

**SUMMARY OF GENESIS 11:10-26**

The genealogy provided in these verses provide the link from Noah’s son Shem to Abraham, which shows the origins of the nation of Israel, and a continuation of the genealogy leading from Eve to the Messiah.

**APPLICATION**

**To a God who created the entire universe just by speaking, how big do you think that tower really appeared?**

**Have group members silently consider: Is there any area in my life where I need to choose to humbly submit to God?**

**PRAYER**

Pray that we would choose to humbly submit to God out of love for him, choosing to follow his plan for every area of our lives out of love for him. Ask God for wisdom and strength from the Holy Spirit to walk in his will.

## COMMENTARY

### GENESIS 11

The story of the tower of Babel separates the genealogy of the descent from Noah to Eber and Peleg and the genealogy that connects Noah to Abraham. In the days of Peleg, son of Eber, the earth was “divided” (10:25). Through Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant it someday would be reunited. The Babel narrative thus illustrates the false and defiant sense of humanistic solidarity that sought to evade the creation mandate to fill the earth under God’s dominion. The scattering of the nations accomplished that purpose but did not effect compliance to the will of God that made true servant-hood a reality. That is why a new covenant, one with redemptive aspects, had to be implemented.

The account of Adam and Eve’s sin in the garden of Eden (chap. 3) and the Tower of Babylon share many similarities in plot, vocabulary, and theme. Both show people acting with sinful pride to try to make themselves godlike, and both show God expelling sinners from their homes as punishment for their sin.

The event at the Tower of Babel occurs chronologically earlier than some of the material in chapter 10 about the descendants of Ham, Shem, and Japheth. This section on the Tower of Babel provides the reason for the scattering of the people and the necessity for the confusion of human language.

The structure of Genesis 11:1-9 is often referred to as an hourglass or chiasm. The narrative portions are found in verses 1-2 and 8-9, while the discourse material is in verses 3-4 and 6-7. Verse 5 acts as the transition between the first and second parts.

11:1. The Tower of Babylon incident occurred earlier than at least some of the events of chapter 10 since the whole earth still had the same language and vocabulary (10:5,20,31).

11:2. The land of Shinar corresponds to ancient Babylonia and includes the region of the cities of Babylon, Erech, Accad, and Calneh (10:10).

11:3. Unlike the original readers’ homeland of Israel, with its extensive quantity of limestone building material, the people of Babylonia used oven-fired bricks. Archaeological excavations have confirmed that ancient inhabitants of the land used asphalt for mortar.

11:4. The people’s pride and ambition is expressed in three different ways: (1) the fivefold use of the first-person pronouns—us (twice), ourselves (twice), and we; (2) their desire to build a tower into the sky, thus giving them access to “the heavens,” the domain of God; and (3) their attempt at self-glorification—let us make a name for ourselves. Because they did it to avoid being scattered over the face of the whole earth, all their efforts amounted to a rebellion against God and His command to fill the earth (9:1).

11:5. In spite of their best efforts to elevate themselves to God’s domain, the Lord still had to come down to look over the city and the tower. Human attempts to achieve glory, which belongs to God alone, always fall pitifully short.

11:6. God’s concern that nothing the people might plan to do would be impossible for them does not express a divine fear that humans might someday become as powerful as God. Rather, it conveys dismay that people, unchecked, would undertake extraordinary deeds of evil and defiance.

11:7. Perhaps the most dramatic Hebrew wordplay in the Tower of Babylon episode involves the deliberate reversal of sounds between verses 3 and 7. Human beings created brick—a word which contains the sound sequence l-b-n in Hebrew—to rebel against God. In response God created confusion—a Hebrew word containing n-b-l—to reverse the evil human plot.

11:9. Most English versions refer to “Babel” here, but this is the same Hebrew word translated “Babylon” throughout the Old Testament. The connection between the words “Babylon” and “confused” constitute another of the many instances of wordplay in this chapter. The Lord’s action had two positive outcomes:

first, because it confused the language of the whole earth, it ended the possibility of large-scale evil ventures; second, it caused humanity to scatter over the face of the whole earth, thus bringing people into compliance with God's command to fill the earth (9:1).

11:10-17. This genealogy follows the same line up to Peleg as the earlier one in Genesis 10:21-25, except that in addition to names it also gives ages similar to the genealogy of Genesis 5:3-32. Unlike Genesis 5, this genealogy omits the age at a man's death and the phrase "and then he died" and therefore emphasizes life and expansion rather than death. The age of man became progressively shorter in the postflood era up to the time of Abraham.

11:18-26. These verses list ten generations from Noah, through Shem, through Peleg to Lot, Abraham's nephew. The total time, if no gaps are permitted, is about 352 years from the flood to Abraham. Abraham's birth year is usually considered to be 2166 B.C., based on the coordination of biblical and extrabiblical events that can be backdated from a known time.

The phrase "Terah... became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran" may not give the three sons in chronological order by age (cp. Noah's sons in Gen 9:24; 10:1, 21). Haran died while their father Terah was still alive (Gen. 11:28). Again, the first-listed son, not necessarily the firstborn son, would become the most significant in the following narratives.