

“And the LORD Came Down” Genesis 11:1-9

INTRO

Raise your hand if you’ve heard the story of “The Tower of Babel.” We know it, right? Some passages are so familiar it’s dangerous. This is one of them. [It’s like if you live right by a zoo – you hear the powerful roars, you can see into some of the enclosures, the breathtaking sights and wild sounds of such magnificent creatures give you goosebumps. But before long, you grow used to it all.]

This morning I encourage you to pretend as if you just moved into that house – to be amazed again at the wonder of God’s word. And as you do, I believe you’ll be surprised to see that the main focus is not the people building the tower but what God did to intervene – that **the LORD came down**.

You can follow in your bulletin – the people build upwards, the LORD came down, and the LORD came down again.

I. The People Build Upwards (vv. 1-4)

In vv. 1-4, we see that the people are unified. Unity is good, right? We’ll see.

These people are unified in two ways:

A. Unity of Language (1-2)

(v. 1) *“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.”*

Who are these people? [Need to pause and back up. In chapter 9, after the flood, *“God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.’”*

So these are Noah’s descendants after the flood.

Now jump to 10:25 – *“To Eber were born two sons: the name of the one was Peleg,¹ for in his days the earth was divided...”*

So the list of Noah’s descendants in chapter 10 was what happened after our story today – people divided into different languages and nations.]

¹ Peleg means *division*. (ESV footnote)

Ok, let's get back to where we were.

(v.2) "Shinar" – the site of ancient Babylon² – near Eden. It says they "settled there." Sounds innocent right? Wrong. This is one of the first signs that something's not right. Remember God's blessing on Adam and Eve, and again on Noah and his sons? "*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth*" (9:1). Instead of filling the earth, they're trying to all clump together in one place. This is not what God told them.

Why would they do this?

B. Unity of Ambition (vv. 3-4)

(v. 3) "*Come let us make bricks...*" Bricks were a common building material in early Mesopotamia.³

(v. 4) "*Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower*" Nothing wrong with building a city with a tower. But wait, "*with its top in the heavens.*" Does that just mean a really tall tower?

[This is the site of what would become ancient Babylon – known for their massive step-towers called Ziggurats, which were symbols of their power and culture, some as high as 300ft (steeple = .⁴)]

[When Israel is about to enter the Promised Land (Deut. 1:28), the 10 fearful spies report about the Canaanite cities, which were enemies of God, "*The cities are great and fortified up to heaven.*" – enemies of God.]

Are the people of Babel trying to make a statement?

They continue, "*and let us make a name for ourselves.*" Here we see into their heart: prideful self-interest – open rebellion against God.

² Allen Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, p. 244.

³ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, p. 481.

⁴ Ross, pp. 238-239.

They wanted to make a name for themselves – “name” meaning reputation, recognition, fame, glory. And notice, there is no mention of God in their plans.

This is no mere city/tower, but a monument to self.

Their motto – “We run our own lives. We control our own future.”

[Does this remind you of anyone earlier in Genesis? Remember a certain serpent that told a certain woman – “*You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil*” (3:4). To be *like God* – this was tempting, and Eve made a choice – to control her own destiny, to be independent from God, to rule her own life.]

Simply put: **The people of Babel were depending on self to make life happen.**

But why? The answer is in their second reason for building: “*Let us build...lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.*”

Fear and insecurity. That’s what drove them to depend on themselves to make life work. They were afraid that they would be dispersed over the face of the earth and lose control over their lives and future.⁵

They were building a tower towards heaven, but they didn’t do it to be near God. They did it to keep God at arm’s length – to take control in place of God.

[I did this once. Seminary was very sweet in some ways and very difficult in others (mainly academics). In my second year of seminary, there were elections for student officers (president, treasurer...). I got an email that I had been nominated for the office of President! My heart raced as I read the email. I couldn’t believe it – someone nominated

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, p. 109.

me for president! I was so excited – maybe *too* excited – but I didn't think much of it. Then I got another email: there had been a mistake, I was not nominated for president, but social chair... and I was running against one classmate. Voting day came and...**I lost**. I was crushed – I mean, really crushed. Why was I so affected by this? Looking back, I share a lot in common with the people of Babel –I was depending on myself to make life happen. If I couldn't feel good enough academically, I wanted to make a name for myself socially – be the pastor among pastors – rather than resting in the status given me by my good Creator.]

The problem is that this path doesn't end well. For Babel, the tower they built towards the heavens actually led them towards hell – deeper into self-trust and further from humble dependence on their good Creator.

What does God do? – Climax of the story.

II. **And the LORD Came Down (vv. 5-9)**

We see two things in v. 5:

1. Humor – They're building a tower as tall as “the heavens” and yet the LORD has to “come down” to see it. Shows it for what it is – (prof) “a tiny tower, conceived by a puny plan and attempted by a pint-sized people.”⁶
2. Intentional Intervention – “the LORD came down” – like Eden – God was walking in the cool of the day and “called to [Adam] and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (Genesis 3:9).

Why did God intervene?

(v. 6) [READ] Because he sees their destructive potential, and as a good Creator,⁷ in mercy he stops things before they get worse⁸

[like child who's been told, “Don't run with scissors,” and they've found scissors and are taking off – what would the parent do?]

⁶ Mathews, p. 483.

⁷ Kidner, p. 110.

⁸ Mathews, p.

A good parent would protect their children from themselves.

Does this sound familiar? [Garden of Eden – “Behold the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever –’ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden...” and set a cherubim (Genesis 3:22-24).]

God was protecting them from eating of the tree of life and living forever in the shameful misery of sin.⁹

God often works this way – in the words of one pastor, **he kills the dreams that are killing us.**¹⁰

How does he intervene for Babel?

(v. 7) “Come let us go down and there confuse their language...” – this sounds like what the people said earlier (“Come, let us build...”). In the Hebrew for these two phrases, the letters are reversed.¹¹

Basically, God is reversing their efforts.

(v. 8) And as Result of God’s intervention – two things happen:

1. “*the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth*” – this is ironically what they were afraid of and were trying to avoid. But it’s also what would bring blessing – “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” – and God knows that.

2. “*they left off building the city*” – can you imagine? The once-bustling city a ghost town – **a stark picture of any people group or person who depends on self to make life happen.**

And talk about social distancing! Their language was muddled and the next thing you know everyone is spreading to the ends of the earth.

⁹ Source forgotten.

¹⁰ Pastor Harry Reeder, Briarwood Presbyterian Church.

¹¹ Ross, p. 236.

This was pandemic-scale. Everyone's life totally uprooted. But it was actually God working out his plan to bring great blessing and to save them from themselves. Could God be up to something similar today?

One quick takeaway:

Today there is a lot of division and a lot of talk about unity. Unity is good. But **God is opposed to unity if that unity is opposed to him.**

These people were unified right? On the surface, yes, but they were unified in exalting self and not humbling themselves after God's heart.

"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12).

[That's what happened to me in seminary – I exalted myself, and God graciously humbled me.]

And God humbled Babel, too.

(v. 9) Summary – "Therefore it's name was called Babel" – sounds like the Hebrew verb for "confuse."¹² They wanted to make a name for themselves, but this isn't the name they had in mind.

This sounds all too familiar to me. Often, motivated by fears (God isn't good, loving, strong, wise; people will reject me, I'll be a failure, I won't be able to keep up), we use our God-given abilities/gifts to keep God at arm's length and run our own lives.

"I'm smart enough, hard-working enough, kind enough, a good enough listener,...to run my own life, thank you very much." God will derail that, especially in the lives of his children (Hb. 12:6).

¹² Mathews, p. 486.

There are times when I ask, “Will I ever change? Is there hope for this pastor to ever give up trying to run my own life?” YES! Because...

III. **The LORD Came Down Again (Genesis 11:10 – Revelation 22)**

This story is the turning point in the whole book of Genesis, and in salvation history.

When God dispersed the people, he set the stage for all nations to be blessed.

The rest of Genesis, we see God making a new people – promising Abraham: “*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing*” (Genesis 12:3).

Abraham, you don’t have to make a name for yourself. I will give it to you.

And he did. Abraham’s descendants became a great nation. But they, like Babel, forgot God’s blessing and took their lives into their own hands – and God eventually dispersed them too over the face of the earth in exile.

The LORD saved a faithful remnant, but they also struggled with taking control of their lives.

And then we see it...**The LORD came down again!** This time in human flesh.

He did not seek a name for himself. Instead he became no name – called himself the “Son of Man.”¹³ He gave up his reputation. *He did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death...*” (Phil 2).

¹³ Contrast with “children of man” in 11:5.

And God “*exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.*”

Because of Jesus, we see the Spirit at Pentecost, the reversal of Babel – people of every nation, language, ethnicity unifying as one people – the Church.

And we see the Church facing opposition – Babel/Babylon in the Bible came to mean any nation or people who stands against God in human pride¹⁴ – but the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church.

And the LORD will come down a final time to bring judgment on the proud, blessing on the humble, and a new city, not with a tower, but Mount Zion – the new Jerusalem (Rev 21).

And streaming into it’s gates will be a mighty company of people from every nation that was dispersed at Babel, every language that came out of that day, “*crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’*” (Revelation 7:9-10).

¹⁴ Ross, p. 241.