

AM Genesis 11:1-9 The Tower of Babel

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[0 : 00] verses 1 to 9, and that's found on page 9. Now the whole earth had one language and the same words, and as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

And they said to one another, Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. And they said, Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of man had built. And the Lord said, Behold, they are one people, and they all have one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do, and nothing that they purpose to do will now be impossible for them.

Come, let us go down and confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

[1 : 34] Amen. Our second psalm for singing this evening is Psalm 2 on Acts chapter 2 and verses 1 to 41.

That can be found on page 1096 of the Church Bibles. Acts chapter 2, reading at verse 1.

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting, and divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven.

And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?

[2 : 56] And how is it that we hear each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and the residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and Proselythites, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.

And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, What does this mean? But others, mocking, said, They are filled with new wine. But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, Men of Judea, and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words, for these people are not drunk as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day.

But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel. And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams, even on my male servants and female servants.

In those days I will pour out my spirit, and they shall prophesy, and I will show wonders in the heavens above, and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and vapour of smoke.

The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

[5 : 00] And it shall come to pass, that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. Men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God, with mighty works and wonders, and signs that God did through him in your midst.

As you yourselves know, this Jesus delivered up, according to the definite plan, and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him, I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken.

Therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced. My flesh also will dwell in hope, for you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.

You have made known to me the paths of life. You will make me full of gladness with your presence. Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David, that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.

[6 : 24] Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses, being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit.

He has poured out this, that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain, that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brothers, what shall we do? And Peter said to them, Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[7 : 53] For the promise is for you, and for your children, and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. And with many other words, he bore witness, and continued to exhort them, saying, Save yourselves from this crooked generation.

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about 3,000 souls. Amen. Let's come together in prayer once more.

Verses 1 to 9. So this evening, we're going to be looking together at this rather unusual event at the beginning of Genesis, in those early chapters, the Tower of Babel.

So this event occurs between the flood account, and then the call of Abraham. So this is somewhere in the middle, sandwiched with two genealogies on each side. So after the worldwide flood, that amazing judgment, where the Lord killed everybody, and everything, apart from Noah and his sons, we see the world becoming more populated once more.

But sadly, again we see it becoming rebellious, and sinful once more. And here we are given one last look at the world in Scripture, before everything seems to focus tightly upon one man and his family, upon Abraham and the chosen line.

[9 : 22] So this is one last look at the world that we have, and it is another judgment by the Lord. But this time, it's not a judgment of destruction as such, but it's a very monumental time in history, when the world changed forever.

We see tonight, in just these nine short verses, how we see the origins of all the nations, and all the languages that we see. And perhaps this is something you take for granted, it's something I take for granted, because it's all we've ever known, the fact that the world is organized into different languages, different nations, different cultures and customs.

And it's amazing to think that there are over 7,100 languages to date that they've actually discovered up to this point. When at one time, every single person in the world spoke the same language and were of the same nation.

So we'll look at these verses together in four points. So the first point is verses 1 and 2, which is the post-flood people. And then verses 3 and 4, the people sin.

And then verses 5 to 9, the Lord's response. And then finally from Acts 2, which we read earlier, we see this gracious reversal, which happens for a time. So let's come to our first point, verses 1 and 2, the post-flood people.

[10 : 44] And this will give us some background to the passage and help us to know exactly where we are in the biblical timeline and in history. And to do that, we only need to go back one chapter to chapter 10.

Because in chapter 10, we have this genealogy, one of these long lists of men, which are, many of them I find, very difficult to pronounce. But it's a very narrow family tree.

And it starts with Noah and his three sons and their wives, Shem, Ham and Japheth and their wives. Because they're the only people left on the planet after the flood. And then, if you look from verse 2, you have the sons of Japheth.

From verse 6, you have the sons of Ham. And then from verse 21, you have the sons of Shem. And at the end of all these lists, when you get to the end of the list, in verses 5, 20 and 31, you read something like, by their clans, their languages, their lands and their nations.

So they're already neatly divided up into their languages and their nations. And if you were coming to this chapter for the first time, you might be wondering, well, how on earth did this come to be?

[11 : 57] How on earth did they begin to get separated from one another after they all came out of the ark? Well, to put simply, these chapters don't follow each other chronologically.

So chapter 11 is actually an event which happens within chapter 10. And specifically, it happens at verse 25. Because 25, you have this man called Peleg.

Now, Peleg's quite a strange name. And quite often, men are given names in the Bible for specific reasons. And the reason this fellow was called Peleg is because it says, in his days, the earth was divided.

So Peleg means division. So we can know that the Tower of Babel and the city that they were building was probably around the time of his birth. And he is Noah's great, great, great grandson.

So this is at least 100 years after the flood. And historians give this an approximate date of around 2200 BC. So that's just a bit of background as to where we are.

[13 : 05] So now we come to our text, verse 11. I'm sorry, chapter 11. And here we read, Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.

So from this we know communication was very easy. There was a great unity. And we see all this one nation, this one people, moving around as one group. And in verse 2 we read that the great multitude of people are travelling east.

And they come across a plain which is a flat piece of land and in an area called Shinar. And it's also known as Mesopotamia, which today is modern day Iraq, to give it a bit of modern context.

Now Mesopotamia is a Greek word which means between the rivers. Because some of you may know that Iraq has two rivers that kind of flow diagonally parallel to each other down it.

You have the Euphrates and the Tigris. So this is a very fertile corridor of land where people would choose to settle.

[14 : 09] And you might find it quite strange because whenever I've seen Iraq on the news it just looks like a barren desert, a bit of a wasteland. But if you actually look on satellite imagery and look at the terrain of the place, there is this area, this fertile strip of Mesopotamia where the twin rivers provide irrigation and there is a lot of good farmland there.

So it would be a very pleasant place to live and a great place to make home. Which brings us to our second point. And that is the people's sin. Because in verse 3 we read that they all settle down but then they start on this building project.

They say, Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly. So on a plane there was probably not many rocks around so they decide to make their own. So they would dig down, get some clay and fire it in a kiln.

And you can build structures very quickly when you have bricks. And so it wouldn't take them long to start building this massive city and to build this tower. And they do make quick progress.

And the whole plan of these people is to stay huddled together so they can feel protected and safe. And they build this huge city and then the crowning jewel in the centre would be this large tower.

[15 : 27] And you see there's real unity here. They say, and they say this a number of times, Come, let us. Come, let us. Let's go in this together. And you may wonder, well, whatever's wrong with this?

Unity is good. Working for a common cause is seen as a noble thing. Why does this warrant God's judgement? Well, as we'll see, these people are far from God.

In just a few generations after the flood, all the offspring of a righteous man, Noah, we have this stark reminder of the total and absolute depravity of man.

And Robert was preaching about this morning, the depravity of man and the doctrines of grace. And when we see how quickly they turned away from the Lord.

And it can be the same for us. We often think, especially in Scotland, we have a rich Christian history. And yes, that was many decades back. But it doesn't necessarily pass down.

[16 : 29] Every single man is born in sin. Every single man is dead in sin and trespasses. And we should be reminded that every individual, each of us, have each gone our own way.

Have all like sheep gone astray, each his own way. And every man must be born again. Otherwise, they are under the judgment of God. And the same is true of these men and women here.

They are all wayward. And as we come to verse 4, it's really interesting. Because in verse 4, we have three reasons why the building of this tower and this city is a bad idea. Three sins, all compactly found in this verse 4.

So the first reason that this is an evil project is the purpose of the tower. And it is for idolatry. We read that it's a tower with its top in the heavens.

Now, you may think initially that this is just going to be a landmark, a bit like the Shard or the Empire State Building or something like that. But when we read a tower with its top in the heavens, it doesn't necessarily have the meaning to try and build something that will go up into space or into the atmosphere.

[17 : 38] Apparently, in the original Hebrew, it's more like a tower whose top is heaven. And so it's commonly held that this tower is a tower with a pagan temple right at the top of it.

And where you would meet with a false god. And that is why it is seen as heaven. And these types of towers have been found all over Mesopotamia.

There's been archaeological digs. And they have a name for them. They're actually called ziggurats. They look a bit like, if you know what an Incan pyramid looks like, they have like stepped sides with ramps running up them for the temple on the top.

And there you could go and worship a god of your own making, rejecting the true and living god. For one of your own imagination. A god who you're comfortable with. And verse, Psalm 115, in verses 4 to 8 especially, teaches us about the folly of idolatry.

It's actually quite humorous in a way when we read Psalm 115. We'll read from verse 2. Why do the heathen nations say, Where is their God?

[18 : 47] Our God is in the heavens. He does all that pleases Him. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak. They have eyes, but do not see.

They have ears, but do not hear. They have noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel. Feet, but do not walk. They do not make a sound in their throat.

Those who make them become like them. So do all who trust in them. Particularly verse 8 there. Those who make them become like them. They reject their creator for a lie, so they can live however they want.

So that's the first reason, idolatry. The second reason we have is pride. They say, and let us make a name for ourselves. These are a people who want to be remembered for generations to come for their skillful building, for their cleverness, for their strength.

They made the plans. They cut the bricks. They did all the work to make this temple. And they worked hard and they worked as a team. And obviously, there is nothing sinful about working hard or being clever or being strong.

[19 : 59] All these are good attributes, but where the sin comes in is the pride and who gets the glory for all these things. And it doesn't seem to matter which area of life we're talking about here.

Pride just seems to stick to everything. It's a bit like, I don't know, children, if you've been to the sea or been to a harbour and you see the boats there, and when the tide's low, you see these barnacles stuck to the bottom of the boats.

We were actually in Bangor last year and we saw them cleaning all the barnacles off the bottom of these boats. And the barnacles stick to the boats, they stick to the pier, they stick to the harbour wall.

But that's just the same with pride. It doesn't matter whatever good things we have in life, all the blessings, pride has a tendency to stick to everything, whether it's your job or your hobbies, your sport or your family, your appearance, your intellect, your house, even your car.

Anything which is a blessing from God is an opportunity for pride. And even for the Christian, church attendance and Bible reading and prayer, if not done humbly out of love and devotion to Christ, they are only done out of pride.

[21 : 12] The Puritan Henry Smith says, When the devil cannot stay us from a good work, then he laboureth by all means to make us proud of it. And we read of that in Matthew 23 when Jesus is pronouncing the woes upon the Pharisees and the scribes because they do all their religious acts just to be seen.

He says in verse 12 of Matthew 23, Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, whoever humbles himself will be exalted. So unlike these people here, the goal of the Christian, the goal for you and me, should always be to give God the glory in every area of life.

The psalm we were reading earlier, Psalm 115, actually starts in verse 1, Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory. And then in 1 Corinthians 10.31, we read, So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God.

And so may it be for us in all aspects of our lives. And if not, let us recognize them and repent of them. And then the third and the final reason why this is a sinful plan.

They say, Let us be, lest we be dispersed over the face of the earth. Now this is them consciously and actively disobeying God's command.

[22 : 32] You may remember in the garden, Adam and Noah later on, the Lord commanded them to be fruitful, to fill the earth and to subdue it. And instead, they're all just staying together in one place.

Instead of trusting in the Lord for their security, they want this building to make them secure. And this is a reminder to us also that every command given from the Lord that is applicable to today, it doesn't matter the generations that go by, centuries that go by, with God it still stands and it should be obeyed.

Time does not erode God's eternal word. We should not think that because we live in the 21st century that we know better than God. These people in Genesis were the most modern people at their time.

And they thought God's word was outdated. And particularly today when, in terms of views on morality, particularly abortion and sexuality and gender at this time, and even the command, the strange thing, even the command to be fruitful and multiply, you hear many people saying, particularly in the media, that because of global warming we have to stop having children.

And we have to limit the number of children families have or, you know, if you have more than one child you're being selfish and you're not doing your bit for global warming. Already just disobeying that direct command in Genesis.

[24 : 01] And so Jesus says, let us remember, so let us remember what Jesus says. If you love me, you will obey my commandments. So here we have these three sins.

Idolatry, pride, and disobedience. So now let's move on thirdly to God's response. And that's found in verses five to nine. We read here that the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the children of man had built.

So here we have the Lord's response to all this. And it's interesting how it's put. It's put that he came down to see. Now, we know how great God is, that he is high above the earth, he is omniscient, he is omnipresent, he knows all things, he sees all things.

But yet we read here that he comes down to see. Well, we know from chapters in the Bible like Psalm 139 that the Lord knows us and he sees us and he knits us together in the womb.

And he knows our rising up and our lying down. So how do we understand this God coming down? Well, first we need to understand that he isn't just making a trip.

[25 : 16] We need to understand that it's simply a way of telling us that he is showing special interest in this situation. He shows us that he really does know what's going on here and that his divine judgment is always in accordance with the truth.

And he sees the people building this city and this tower and it's only the beginning of what they will do because they will become more and more rebellious and sin always breeds more and more sin.

So he says, come let us. It's quite interesting here, come let us. Here we have the Trinity, God, one God, three persons to bring an end to this evil.

And he does this in a miraculous way by confusing the language. And you can just imagine the two men working side by side, bricklaying. And the next minute they turn to each other and don't have a clue what they're saying to each other.

It's like one man says, oh pass me the trowel but it comes out in French or it comes out when another man is speaking to him in Chinese or some historical language like that.

[26 : 20] It would be such a strange and unnerving feeling and different groups would form because you would find people who speak the same as you and groups would form here and there as the great language barrier is put up.

And some of you may have experienced this in part if you've been to a foreign country and sat down at the dinner table and you've been the only person who's an English speaker and everyone else is in the native tongue.

And you can, even though you're surrounded by people laughing and having a great time and talking to each other, you can feel so alone at that table. Well it will be the same here. And so they're just down tools because now the architect can't tell the foreman his plans, the foreman can't tell the labourers what to do.

And now we read in verse 8 the Lord dispersed them over the face of the earth. So these people become nations and that's now what we call them and the city and the tower are abandoned.

And then finally in verse 9 it tells us that the city was given the name Babel because in Hebrew it means to confuse. And that word still lives on today. We would say children are babbling or even adults babble sometimes if we can't understand what they're saying.

[27 : 34] So now just to close let's consider our final point the part in the Bible where for a short period of time there was this reversal of this judgement and that takes us to Acts 2 the day of Pentecost.

So you have Christ ascending to heaven believing men were filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak in tongues or different languages that they had never learnt.

And so in Jerusalem at that time you had people travelling in from all different countries to hear for this festival but they go back hearing the gospel in their own tongue.

God took down the language barrier for that short time as he set it up because there was a good reason for him to let it down and that's so the good news could be spread. And so men and women and children from all nations could hear the good news of the gospel and they could understand and take it back to their homelands.

They could understand that their sins could be forgiven once and for all. They could learn about the cross where all their sins were paid for by Christ. They could learn about the resurrection and eternal life to come.

[28 : 48] And now we sit here and this gospel has been spread all over the world to many parts and in a very special way every believer has become part of one nation under Christ.

Though we are many earthly nations and languages the church is a spiritual nation. Here we see in a couple of passages in the New Testament in Galatians 3.28 we read there is neither Jew nor Greek there is neither slave nor free there is no male or female for you are all one in Christ.

And then in 1 Peter 2 9 and 10 but you are a chosen race a royal priesthood a holy nation a people for his own possession that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvellous light.

So spiritually there are two nations today. One is made up of believers and the other one of unbelievers. There is no halfway house there is no neutral ground. And the only way you can become a citizen of Christ's kingdom is through him coming to him repenting of your sins and trusting in his finished work.

And you either belong to him or belong to the prince of this present age Satan. Staying in that world you will find your end in eternal judgment. So let's read of Christ's kingdom and its wonderful future in Revelation 7 verses 9 to 12 in closing.

[30 : 22] After this I looked and behold a great multitude that no one could number from every nation from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands and crying out with a loud voice salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.

and all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God saying Amen blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever.

Amen. Amen. Amen. So let us close with the singing of Psalm 61.