

## The Tower of Babel and the Confusion of Languages

### Genesis 11:1-9

Genesis 11:1-9 - *“Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. <sup>2</sup> And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. <sup>3</sup> Then they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. <sup>4</sup> And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”*

*<sup>5</sup> But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, “Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” <sup>8</sup> So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.”*

### Background Notes

How do you visualize the Tower of Babel? Like the Empire State building, or the Sears Tower? Like the Eiffel Tower, or the Leaning Tower of Pisa? The Tower of Babel was probably an ancient ziggurat, or at least a prototype of a ziggurat. A ziggurat was a wide-based temple tower of the ancient world. It resembled a step pyramid, with a staircase or ramp running from top to bottom. This staircase was for man to ascend the tower in order to reach the shrine at the top of the ziggurat, and also for the “gods” to (supposedly) descend from heaven to the earth. A number of ziggurats have been found in the ruins of ancient Babylon and other locations in the Mesopotamian valley, and some of them would have reached as high as three hundred feet. Polytheism, astrology and the zodiac find their roots in the ancient pagan religions associated with the ziggurats and the worship of the heavenly bodies, and this idolatry started as early as the Tower of Babel.

Notice that the emphasis in verse 4 was on reaching the **heavens**: *“Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens...”* They didn’t say let us reach to **God** – they said let’s reach into the heavens. I think you can see what was going on there.

Genesis 10 covers the time from Noah to Abraham, including the time of the Tower of Babel. Chapter 11 goes back chronologically to show how the seventy nations of Genesis 10 developed in such a short time. The answer is: the Tower

of Babel. If the reference in Genesis 10: 25 to the division of the earth in Peleg's time refers to the Tower of Babel, then the Tower of Babel was only a few generations after the Flood. In fact, Peleg is the fifth generation after Noah. So it's likely that the Tower of Babel occurred about five generations after the Flood.

Is five generations enough time to provide for enough people for the Tower of Babel event? Yes! A few simple calculations can show that, starting with the eight people who came out of the ark, there could be enough people in five generations to form seventy subgroups of about a dozen or more extended family members. These subgroups would become the basis of the seventy nations of Genesis 10. In fact, God probably divided the people up by family groups at the Tower of Babel. He likely didn't split up husbands and wives or parents and children. No, He gave a different language to the various extended family units, and these groupings then became the beginnings of the seventy nations listed in Genesis 10.

What about the different languages? The study of languages indicates that all languages are related. This fact certainly supports the biblical account of the Tower of Babel. Before the dispersion, the whole earth had one language and one speech (v1), but then the Lord confused the language of all the earth (v9).

Notice in verse 7 that God said, "Let Us" (not "Let Me") go down there and confuse their language. The "Let Us" here doesn't prove the Trinity, but it certainly opens the door. It paves the way for the doctrine of the Trinity that will be revealed as we go on in Scripture. It is very similar to Genesis 1:26, at the creation of man, when God said, "Let Us make man in Our own image, in Our own likeness." It is not proof of the Trinity, but it certainly lays the basis for the doctrine.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Man, in his pride, tries to reach Heaven by his own efforts.

Verse 4: *"And they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.'*" After the Flood, God's command to man was to fill the earth (Genesis 9:1). In Genesis 11 we see man's rebellion and disobedience. Man was doing everything possible not to obey that command or submit to God. Notice that the idea in building the Tower of Babel was not only to stay in one place, in direct disobedience to the command of the Lord to "fill the earth," but men wanted to make a name for themselves by building a tower reaching into the heavens (v4). Their desire was not to reach God, but to reach the heavens for their own proud advancement.

A definition of human religion is "man, in his pride, trying to reach heaven by his own efforts." As it was at the time of the Tower of Babel, so it is today. Man, in his pride, tries to reach Heaven by his own efforts. Think of the "New Age" movement today. The bottom line in the New Age movement is one world government and one world religion. Sounds a lot like the Tower of Babel, doesn't it?

The New Age movement is not such a “new” movement after all, is it? In fact, it is an old satanic movement, going all the way back to the Tower of Babel. In his pride, man tries every conceivable way to reach beyond himself and into the heavens - by his own efforts. He tries every way but the right way. He tries every way but God’s way.

The Bible teaches that people must renounce their pride, confess their sin, and call out to God for mercy. When people reach out to God in that way they will find that God, in his grace, has already reached out to them. What a contrast to human religion! Man, in his pride, tries to reach Heaven by his own efforts.

## **2. God, in His wisdom, thwarts man’s proud religious efforts.**

*Verses 5-8: “But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, “Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city.”*

Did you catch the irony of verse 5? The people thought that they were reaching into the heavens, but the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the sons of men had built. You know, God does have a sense of humor! Here puny man thought he was building a great big tower to reach up into heaven – but God said, “What’s that little building down there? It’s so small I can hardly see it!”

As God thwarted man’s proud religious efforts at the Tower of Babel, so God opposes and thwarts man’s proud religious efforts today. Listen to the words of Isaiah 2:12, *“For the day of the LORD of hosts shall come upon everything proud and lofty, upon everything lifted up— and it shall be brought low. “And Isaiah 2:17: “The loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be brought low. The LORD alone will be exalted in that day.”*

In His wisdom, God thwarts man’s proud religious efforts. Scattering the people and dividing them into nations was far better than unified apostasy against God. Verse 6 indicates that man can be quite successful in a united effort against God: *“And the LORD said, “Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them.”* Do you see God’s wisdom here?

So God divided people into nations. At the present time, nationalism, even though it involves nations warring against each other, is better than a one world government that is united against God. Also, nationalism often does more to preserve personal liberty than one world government united against God. God in His wisdom thwarts man’s proud religious efforts.

## **Practical Application**

### **Whose name are we trying to magnify?**

At the Tower of Babel the people said, "Let us make a name for ourselves." They were trying to magnify *themselves* - not God! This lesson is for non-Christians and Christians: Whose name are **we** trying to magnify?

As a Christian, your bottom line can either be to magnify your own name or the name of the Lord. Do you love to see your own name in print for your own accomplishments? Do you love to hear your own name announced for your own outstanding achievements - even in church or in ministry?

This lesson can be applied to individuals, churches and organized ministries. We need to be aware of our true motives. Why are we seeking to build bigger and bigger ministries, organizations, headquarters – and even churches? Whose name are we **really** trying to magnify? Remember what the apostle Paul said in Philippians 1:20 - whether by his life or by his death, Paul wanted **Jesus Christ** to be magnified!

What about us? Do we want the name of Christ to be magnified, or are we trying to make a name for ourselves? Whose name are **we** trying to magnify?