

THE AWFUL TOWER

GENESIS 11:1-26 NOVEMBER 3, 2021

In the year 2155, the Universal Translator will be invented. At least, that's what *Star Trek* predicts. First used as a spying device, the ultimate goal is to bring differing peoples together in peace.¹ In reality, we're way ahead of schedule. Have you opened Google Translate recently? With it, you can point your phone's camera at any text and have it *immediately* translate to over 100 languages. In 2015 the *BBC* wrote an article saying Google Translate is "*bringing us closer to 'a world where language is no longer a barrier'...It offers a glimpse of a future in which there are no linguistic misunderstandings - especially ones that change the course of history.*"² By the way, when that article was written, Google offered interpretation in just *six* languages.

Linguistic barriers can be funny or frustrating. Every now and then, they're downright dangerous. Just ask President Jimmy Carter, who had to endure *multiple* serious linguistic misunderstandings during a 1977 visit to Poland. At one point, his interpreter changed "I left the United States this morning" into "I left the United States, *never to return.*"³

It's been estimated that there have been "something like 31,000 languages" in human history.⁴ But, for the first 2,000 years, there was only *one*. We saw in our last study that the descendants of Noah spread out in different directions, according to their clans and *languages*. How did that change from *one* language to *many* happen? It happened in Babylon.

But this is more than a story about words, it's a story about hearts - man's heart and God's heart. Sadly, despite God's revelation, despite the *judgment* of the flood, we find our forefathers once again setting their sails away from God, rebelling against Him, refusing to acknowledge Him. And, true to His character, God will *respond* to man's sin decisively and mercifully.

Genesis 11:1 - The whole earth had the same language and vocabulary.

The text gives us the impression that a vast number of people are involved in what follows. The opening phrase "the whole earth" wants us to think big. In the end, the judgment of Babel impacts *everyone*, or very nearly everyone. Some believe that those who were righteous were not judged and so, the suggestion is that the *original* human language is one we might identify as Hebrew and that it was retained *through* the Babel incident. We're not explicitly told that, but Moses wants us to know that this was not an isolated situation involving only a few people.

Genesis 11:2 - ²As people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there.

¹ https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Universal_translator

² <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150202-the-greatest-mistranslations-ever>

³ *ibid.*

⁴ <https://www.uh.edu/engines/epi2723.htm>

In Genesis, movements to the east coincide with separation from God.⁵ Adam and Eve went out of the Garden to the east. Cain moved to the east after he murdered his brother. At the end of his life, Abraham will send Isaac's half-brothers far to the east. And so we already have a clue as to the *spiritual* mentality of this group. On top of that, in chapter 10 we were told that this region and this city was founded and dominated by that notorious character, Nimrod.

The people settled in the valley of Shinar. This covers parts of Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Kuwait today.⁶ This group decided they were *not* going to go and fill the earth, as God had commanded. Instead, they stop and settle, relatively close to the land of Ararat where the Ark had landed.

Genesis 11:3 - ³They said to each other, "Come, let's make oven-fired bricks." (They used brick for stone and asphalt for mortar.)

We see here a unified, cooperative effort. They spoke *with* each other. They join *together* in the work. And we learn some things about what they were doing. First of all, they had a certain level of technological sophistication. They weren't just making *sun*-dried bricks, but *kiln*-dried bricks. Charles Ellicott points out that, being covered and joined with this slimy bitumen tar,⁷ these buildings would be "virtually indestructible."⁸ In that area, there were no stones suitable for building cities and temples. The people show impressive ingenuity and effort in this project. One commentator writes: "[These people] were content to face great and arduous difficulties."⁹ This style of Babylonian construction has been verified by archaeology, by the way.¹⁰

Think for a moment about the incredible *unity* of these people. They were united in heart, united in focus, united in effort. Of course, most of us know what's coming, and it's not a good thing. So we have an opportunity to *learn* something here about unity.

Derek Kidner writes: "[The tower of Babel] makes it clear that unity and peace are not ultimate goods: better division than collective apostasy."¹¹

This is important because it always *sounds* good to call everyone to unity as a goal unto itself. All the people of the world. All the churches of a city. The idea is if we were simply *unified* all would be well. But that isn't true. *Who* are we unifying with? And *what* are we unifying about? Sometimes unity is a terrible mistake. In 1 Samuel 8, *all* the elders of Israel come together to demand a king. That was a mistake that, *ultimately*, led to exile. In the future, all mankind *is* going to rally together in powerful unity one day...*the Day of the Lord*. When Jesus returns all the nations of the world will unite to fight against them and will be destroyed by the King of kings.

⁵ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

⁶ <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-middle-east/mesopotamia>

⁷ NET Study Bible Notes

⁸ Charles John Ellicott *Ellicott's Commentary For English Readers*

⁹ John Calvin *Genesis*

¹⁰ CSB Study Bible Notes

¹¹ Derek Kidner *Genesis*

Today, when we hear calls for church unity, it can seem prickly or hard-hearted to not *immediately* agree and sign on. But the *particulars* matter. The *goals* matter. The *members* matter. Are we the Jews under Nehemiah building a city wall or are we like the Babylonians here? If you have three churches wanting to “unify” together at some event and one church says all roads lead to heaven, another says you can only be saved if you speak in tongues and the third says you’re saved by grace through faith plus nothing, it’s a problem. How can two walk together unless they agree?

In verse 4 we see *what* exactly they were trying to make and *why*.

Genesis 11:4 - “And they said, “Come, let’s build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let’s make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered throughout the earth.”

Their plan had 3 parts: First, a city. Second, a tower, which we would call a ziggurat today, which was kind of like a pyramid, but multiple levels stacked up, each being smaller than the one below it, with a pagan temple on top. Third, the city would be *fortified*, probably by a strong wall, to keep them safe. Safe from what? From *scattering*. From the very thing God had asked them to *willingly* do. This is open rebellion against God.

Your translation may say the tower’s top would be “in the heavens.” These builders weren’t trying to get to the moon, though undoubtedly the structure was quite high. No, they wanted to make a heavenly dwelling place for themselves. Lucifer had said, “I will ascend to the heavens, I will set up my throne above the stars of God.”¹² They were putting themselves in the place of God.

Their motivation had two parts: First, they wanted to make an immortal name for themselves and, second, we see that they wanted to keep themselves secure.

In this rebellion we see the foolishness of the human heart and how sick it is with selfishness. First of all, they convince themselves that they will achieve some sort of immortality, making a *name* for themselves by piling up a bunch of mud bricks. “If we do this, our legacy will live forever!” There’s an incredible amount of pride here. They are given over to what the Bible calls selfish-ambition. A desire to put self first, to elevate self over others. Ultimately, it’s a *worship* of self.

The question is: Does *any* of this mentality live in us? Our culture is *infected* with the idea that *fame* is a virtue and that it should be the pursuit of your life. In 2017, one poll showed that 75% of children ages 6 to 17 want to be YouTubers when they grow up.¹³ Why? I don’t mean to generalize and say that every content creator is absorbed with pride. But the Bible consistently warns us that pride, selfish-ambition, is a deadly sin that separates us from God and leads to ruin.

That *doesn’t* mean that Christians can never *build* anything (or post on Youtube). Sometimes God asks His people to build *great* things! Think of the hospitals and universities built by Christians or

¹² Isaiah 14:13

¹³ <https://mediakix.com/blog/percent-children-becoming-a-youtuber/>

Gutenberg's printing press. The Wright Brothers were committed Christians.¹⁴ Think of Solomon's temple.

The question is one of *motivation*. We can see the contrast clearly right here in Genesis. Narratively speaking, we've had two major building projects presented to us. This tower and Noah's ark. The tower is being made in challenge to God, in an effort to bring fame to humans who want nothing to do with righteousness. The ark was something God *asked* His servant to do. It was a huge undertaking - Noah would be *inventing* a new technology, but one that would change the world.

So, the Bible does not tell you that you can not be well-known or create something that has far-reaching, long-lasting impact. But what is the *goal* of your pursuit? Is it *self*? Then you are going the way of Lucifer. The only legacy you'll build is one of folly, like these Babblers. The *other* way is to be led by God - to be directed by Him into your endeavors.

Before we move on, notice this: They feel the need to build a fortified city so that they "won't be scattered." By who? By God? Maybe. What's more likely is that we're seeing their supposed unity is just a facade. They're working together *now*, but they can foresee a time when they will crumble into warring factions. That's what *always* happens when people live selfishly. It's true of nations, it's true of churches, it's true of marriages.

So, what did they want? They wanted lasting unity and they wanted a measure of immortality. The tragic irony is this: They *would've* gotten those things if they would've gone God's way. You see, they settled for a *surface level*, short-lived unity, as long as their selfish pursuits were aligned. But, even they knew it wasn't going to last. And they settled for a cheap substitute for real immortality. "Well, our *name* will live forever." All the while, God wanted to give them *true* unity and *true* immortality based on *Him*. That's still His offer to mankind today.

Genesis 11:5 - ⁵Then the Lord came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building.

Obviously God already knew everything that was going on. But God loves to come and be among us. It's always an interesting political gamble when our leaders come and tour a disaster area. George W. Bush was savaged for merely *flying* over New Orleans. Many felt he hadn't come *soon* enough and he didn't come *near* enough. Here we have God Almighty coming down to tour the disastrous enterprise at Babylon. Some suggest that the Lord didn't *actually* come down in a Pre-Incarnate form, but that He just "looked" from heaven, but that's not what the text says. We're given the image of Yahweh, the great Builder, the Master Craftsman, visiting the construction site. Did they *know* He was there? I think it's very possible. He had face-to-face talks with Adam and Eve and Cain. He had shut Noah into the ark. He will share meals with Abraham. Imagine the Lord walking the grounds, seeing the progress of their blasphemous sedition. Looking not only at the columns and beams, but into their hearts. Here is His assessment:

¹⁴ <https://answersingenesis.org/creation-scientists/the-wright-brothers/>

Genesis 11:6 - ⁶The Lord said, “If they have begun to do this as one people all having the same language, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.

From the beginning we’ve seen that human beings are a *special* creation. We have been equipped to accomplish what no other creature can. At the time of Genesis, top speed was maybe 30mph on a horse for a short distance.¹⁵ Today, humans routinely travel faster than the speed of sound. The Apollo 10 crew traveled at a speed of over 24,000mph.¹⁶ At Babylon, the weapons were spears and arrows. Today man can split atoms and engineer biochemical armaments which can wipe out whole populations. Consider the leaps humanity has made inventing things like the photograph, batteries that harness energy, the International Space Station. Now, mankind is working on things like time distortion¹⁷ and teleportation. It seems impossible, but did you know researchers have successfully teleported photons between two Canary Islands, 88 miles apart?¹⁸

Of course, there *are* things that are impossible for mankind. The Bible says as much. But Genesis is a testament to just how unique we are in God’s creation. Sadly, our potential is not only found in technological discovery, but in our capacity to *retreat from God*. That is the context surrounding the Lord’s assessment here. And, having seen it, God reacts.

Genesis 11:7 - ⁷Come, let’s go down there and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”

Why did God do this? Was it because He felt threatened in some way? Was it because He was jealous that they were building a tower for themselves instead of for Him? No. His action here is, in fact, one of mercy. In response to their unbridled rebellion He did not kill them as He did in the flood. He did not blind them, as He will at Sodom. No, instead He simply gave them a new language to speak. But He *also* gave them *other people* with whom they could communicate. He left them with a community. This was a significant judgment, but a merciful one.

Genesis 11:8 - ⁸So from there the Lord scattered them throughout the earth, and they stopped building the city.

We see that God had a will (that people scatter throughout the earth), man tried to *stop* that will, but that God’s will was *still* done. They had wanted so badly to *not* be scattered, but God accomplished it anyway. Why? To spite the people of earth? No! God has done this *for our good!*

Acts 17:26-27 - ²⁶From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. ²⁷He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

¹⁵ <https://www.deephollowranch.com/horse-speed/>

¹⁶ <https://www.space.com/11337-human-spaceflight-records-50th-anniversary.html>

¹⁷ <https://blog.scienceborealis.ca/time-travel-is-possible-but-its-a-one-way-ticket/>

¹⁸ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexknapp/2012/09/06/physicists-quantum-teleport-photons-over-88-miles>

God does not command us because He needs an ego boost. All His ways are good and are for *our own* good. When we resist, the result is ruin and waste and destruction and confusion.

Genesis 11:9 - ⁹Therefore it is called Babylon, for there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth, and from there the Lord scattered them throughout the earth.

You may be thinking: "Wait, I thought God is *not* the Author of confusion..." That phrase comes from 1 Corinthians 14 where God is talking about the way Christians conduct themselves in church services. The phrase there might also be translated "God is not a God of disorder but of peace."

God *does* employ confusion at times in order that people might turn to Him in faith and seek *His* wisdom. Jesus spoke in parables *in order that* the clear understanding would only be discovered by those who came to Him in humility and sought His wisdom. God says that He purposely works to "confound the wise" of this world in order to reveal salvation through the cross of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

There's a sad contrast here. In Hebrew the word *Babylon* means "confusion." That's what pride led to. But in Babylonian literature, the word means, "The gate of God."²⁰ What a wide gulf there is between God's truth and man's opinion - between how we see ourselves and how things really are.

There's a big question: Is God *determining* every event on earth or is He only *reacting* to what humans do? Some theologians see God as being meticulously deterministic. That He, essentially, *forces*, every single thing to happen that has happened. After all, there are no rogue molecules in the universe (they say).²¹ Others in the camp called "open theism" suggest that though God is all-powerful, "His knowledge of, and plans for, the future *conditional* upon our actions." That, "though [He is] omniscient, God does not know what we will freely do in the future."²²

What do we see in this text? We see, clearly, that God *responds* to human behavior, changing the course of their trajectory so that they *won't* end up in a particular place, but that, *simultaneously*, that which He has willed from the beginning is *still* done despite the freewill rebellion of humanity. Neither determinism nor open theism adequately *listens* to what the Bible actually says. The Bible distinctly demonstrates that human beings have been given a genuine free will *and* that God is not only all-powerful *and* all-knowing, but that He will have His way.

That idea is driven home to us in the next set of verses, we'll just read them quickly, which come as a sort of post-credits scene after the drama of Babel.

Genesis 11:10-26 - ¹⁰These are the family records of Shem. Shem lived 100 years and fathered Arpachshad two years after the flood. ¹¹After he fathered Arpachshad, Shem lived

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

²⁰ NET Study Bible Notes

²¹ R.C. Sproul <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/series/chosen-by-god/gods-sovereignty>

²² <https://iep.utm.edu/o-theism/>

500 years and fathered other sons and daughters. ¹² Arpachshad lived 35 years and fathered Shelah. ¹³ After he fathered Shelah, Arpachshad lived 403 years and fathered other sons and daughters. ¹⁴ Shelah lived 30 years and fathered Eber. ¹⁵ After he fathered Eber, Shelah lived 403 years and fathered other sons and daughters. ¹⁶ Eber lived 34 years and fathered Peleg. ¹⁷ After he fathered Peleg, Eber lived 430 years and fathered other sons and daughters. ¹⁸ Peleg lived 30 years and fathered Reu. ¹⁹ After he fathered Reu, Peleg lived 209 years and fathered other sons and daughters. ²⁰ Reu lived 32 years and fathered Serug. ²¹ After he fathered Serug, Reu lived 207 years and fathered other sons and daughters. ²² Serug lived 30 years and fathered Nahor. ²³ After he fathered Nahor, Serug lived 200 years and fathered other sons and daughters. ²⁴ Nahor lived 29 years and fathered Terah. ²⁵ After he fathered Terah, Nahor lived 119 years and fathered other sons and daughters. ²⁶ Terah lived 70 years and fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

This is more than just names and ages. We saw Man's Rebellion, then God's Reaction, and here we have The Perpetuation of God's Plan to save all those rebels. Once again, we see that He does not primarily do so through fortifications, but through *families*. His fundamental work is not in high towers, but in humble hearts. And that will be the continuing theme for the rest of the book as we look at the family of Abraham.

We close having seen this scandalous rebellion and God's necessary but merciful response. In this example we're reminded of our Christian calling to unity *in Christ*, toward *His* goals and that God leads us on a path of humility, not selfish-ambition. Paul lays it out in Philippians 2:

Philippians 2:2-5 - ² make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. ⁴ Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others. ⁵ Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus