

Stalled

SESSION 9

Genesis 11:1-9

Memory Verse: Genesis 11:4

God expects His will and desires to be carried out.

Learning to drive a car with a manual transmission can be quite frustrating with its many starts and stalls, jerks and squeals. As we read through the pages of Scripture, it feels like the relationship between people and their Creator often resembles learning to drive “stick shift.” In Genesis 8:21 God, had noted that human hearts are drawn to evil from an early age. From the time people are old enough to choose right from wrong, they naturally choose wrong! Yet, over and over again, we see God extending grace to human beings when our devotion to Him stalls out. Not many generations after its fresh start with Noah and his descendants, humanity had once again disobeyed God’s directive. And, once again, God brought corrective action.

As you prepare to teach this session on the tower of Babel, evaluate your own walk with the Lord. Think about areas where you are dealing with spiritual starts and stalls. Ask God to help you smooth out those issues and to have the wisdom you need to point the adults in your class toward Him.



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Advertising has a tremendous influence not only on the purchasing decisions of individuals but also on an entire culture. The most successful advertising slogans in our culture bring the company to mind when we hear them. “Just Do It” and “Where’s the Beef?” are slogans many of us are familiar with. For years, one fast food chain’s slogan was “Have it Your Way.” Recently, they modernized it with “You Rule.” Their marketing people understand human nature—we want to be in control. The only problem is that we are not in control. God is, and He expects us to obey Him. (PSG, p. 82)

Why do people find it difficult to give up control of their lives?



Understand the Context (Genesis 10:1–11:26)

Genesis 10 begins another installment of the “family records of” Noah’s sons. These family records follow a pattern found throughout Genesis. The pattern involved giving a brief discussion of a family line before moving away from that line to emphasize a more significant line.

For example, in Genesis 4, Moses briefly traced the lineage of Cain before shifting to Seth’s line in chapter 5. Later, in Genesis 25, the text discusses the family tree of Ishmael before moving to the more significant line of Isaac. Again, Genesis 36 offers a brief look at Esau’s family before focusing the weight of the narrative of the lineage of Jacob.

Here in chapter 10, the first two lineages are those of Japheth and Ham. While their descendants made up a huge portion of the world’s nations when Moses wrote the book of Genesis, their family trees weren’t the ones he wanted to emphasize.

That distinction falls to Shem. In fact, Shem’s line is listed last (a position of prominence in this case) even though he was the oldest of Noah’s sons. This order allows the line of Shem to flow readily through his descendants to Abraham, to David, and to the coming Messiah.

Most likely the tower of Babel narrative in chapter 11 took place within the timespan of these generations of Japheth, Ham, and Shem. Statements made in 10:5, 20, and 31 indicate that each clan had its own language. In addition, 10:25 refers to the earth being divided, which speaks of the separation of languages described in chapter 11.

Genesis 10 chronicles the beginning of great cities, clans, and nations. Seventy different nations are identified. Genesis 10:32 states plainly that all the world’s nations sprung out of these three family trees following the flood.

In the second half of Genesis 11 the lineage of Shem is taken up again. Readers might notice how the ages of each person mentioned decrease over time. This is a stark contrast to the length of people’s lives before the flood. Finally in verses 23-24, we arrive at Abram’s immediate ancestors, his grandfather and father. Abram, Sarai, and Lot are introduced in verses 25-30.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis have covered around 2,000 years. The remaining thirty-nine chapters will cover a period of only about 350 years. The stage is now set for God’s great redemptive work through the line of Shem.

As you read Genesis 11:1-9, consider what it reveals about God and humanity. (PSG, p. 83)



PREPARE: On the board, write: *What are some of your all-time favorite advertisements?*

INTRODUCE: As the group arrives, direct attention to the question on the board. If the group is stuck, instruct them to read the opening paragraph on page 82 in the PSG for ideas.

ASK: **What is the goal of most advertisers?**

EXPLAIN: *As humans living with a sinful nature, we will always struggle between the desire to do what we want and the desire to do what God wants.*

ASK: **Why do people find it difficult to give up control of their lives?**
(PSG, p. 82)

TRANSITION: *This session will emphasize that God expects His will and desires to be carried out.*

NOTES

Group Activity Option

Music

To supplement the Engage activities, pass out copies of *Baptist Hymnal* (2008) and lead the group to sing “Trust and Obey” (Hymn 500). Ask: ***What is the opposite of trusting and obeying? Why is it better to trust and obey God? What are some specific ways that a believer can practice trust and obedience?***

United (Genesis 11:1-4)

1 The whole earth had the same language and vocabulary. **2** As people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. **3** They said to each other, “Come, let’s make oven-fired bricks.” (They used brick for stone and asphalt for mortar.) **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.”

(v. 1) *The whole earth:* This phrase refers to the list of nations from Genesis 10. In 10:32, Moses stated the nations “spread out” following the flood. Chapter 11 explains how that dispersion occurred. The descendants of Noah’s sons apparently were living together in disobedience to God’s directive to populate the earth and settle in different parts of the world (Gen. 9:7).

(v. 1) *Same language and vocabulary:* The emphasis is on the unity of the earth’s population. Everyone literally spoke one **language**. In this incident, God worked to reverse that unity and scatter clans over the earth (see v. 9). This attempt at unity was in direct violation of God’s will.

(v. 2) *From the east:* The term means “eastward.” The movement from the region of Ararat, where Noah and his sons got off the ark, to **Shinar** (Babylonia) would have been southeast.

Throughout Genesis, moving eastward illustrates separation. Adam and Eve went east out of the garden (3:24). Cain settled in the east (4:16). Lot departed from Abraham by moving east (13:11). In many ways, such a move represented a move away from the will of God.

(v. 2) *Shinar:* Outposts in **Shinar** were built by Nimrod (Gen. 10:10). This would have been the region of Babylonia typically known as the “fertile crescent,” near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

(v. 2) *Settled there:* The people took up permanent residence, rather than adopting the nomadic lifestyle of their descendants, such as Abraham. This picture of putting down roots in Shinar stands in sharp contrast to God’s command to spread out over the earth.

(v. 4) *Make a name for ourselves:* The text emphasizes the self-centeredness of the people. **Let’s** is used three times in verses 3-4, while **ourselves** appears twice. The pronoun **we** appears in the last part of verse 4. This was an attempt to elevate the human race to supremacy over God. The root sin of pride had twisted their thinking.



The tower of Babel was likely a ziggurat, a stepped building usually capped by a temple. This is a photo of the Ziggurat of Ur in Iraq, which dates to the Sumerian period. Photo credit: rasool ali

Key Background

Bricks . . . asphalt:

In Shinar, there were no stones for building, so the people made their own **oven-fired bricks**. Normal mud bricks were not usually heated since it was a long process and required a great deal of fuel (wood). However, if they were fired, they became as hard as modern ceramic brick and were very good for building.

The **asphalt** used to hold the bricks together evidently was a petroleum-based substance that occurred naturally in Babylonia. The regular use of asphalt in construction did not occur until Roman times.

(v. 4) *Tower:* Most likely a ziggurat. These tall, stepped pyramid-like structures were common in Babylonia and several have been excavated in recent years. Usually, ziggurats had altars at their pinnacles where various gods were worshiped. The hope was that such a tall structure would give worshipers greater access to the divine.

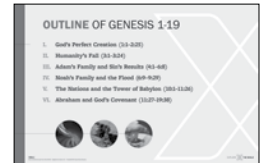
(v. 4) *Scattered:* While God commanded them to multiply and spread out, the people were stubbornly determined to stick together in Shinar. Spreading out was the last thing on their minds.

EXPLORE Genesis 11:1-4



APPLICATION POINT: Believers must safeguard against selfish motives.

OVERVIEW: Display **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Outline of Genesis 1–19) on a focal wall. Note that Genesis 9 ends with Noah dying 350 years after the flood (9:28). Explain that the events in Genesis 10 happened well after that time.



READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 11:1-4**, as the group listens for what the people desired as their goal. Highlight the opening paragraph under “United” (PSG, p. 84) to help the group understand the problem in chapter 11.

RESEARCH: Divide the group into three smaller teams. Assign each team one of the verse sections from the PSG: verse 1, verse 2, and verses 3-4. (Note: For larger groups, create more teams and allow multiple teams to examine the same content. For smaller groups, an individual can be a team.) Instruct each team to review its verse(s) and the information in the PSG. Also, give each adult a copy of **Pack Item 13** (Handout: Towers in the Ancient World). Invite volunteers to share about the significance of ancient towers and what this tower might have looked like.



ASK: How are selfishness and creating a name for oneself a display of distrust in God? (PSG, p. 86)

TRANSITION: Believers must safeguard against selfish motives. God acted to create confusion among the people and disrupt their plan.

Group Activity Option

Object Lesson: Building Blocks

Put two stacks of kids building blocks (wood, plastic, or cardboard) on a table. Enlist two volunteers to use the building blocks to build a tower as high as they can without it falling over—without any communication or help from anyone else. Once one of the towers falls, instruct the volunteers to work together, combining their materials, to build a tower as tall as they can. Discuss the results. Explain that the residents of Babel worked with each other, but they did not seek God’s plan. As a result, their project ran into problems. Emphasize that God expects His directions to be obeyed and will make sure His purposes are fulfilled.

Reviewed (Genesis 11:5-7)

5 Then the LORD came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building. **6** The 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. **7** Come, let’s go down there and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”

(v. 5) Came down: God performed a critical assessment of humanity’s building project and recognized it for what it was—an attempt to exalt themselves to the place of God. What He saw displeased Him. Psalm 2:4 gives a remarkable summary of God’s response to the efforts of humanity. He laughs and ridicules our efforts when we attempt to make something of ourselves without His help and guidance.

(v. 5) The city and the tower: As any great building looks quite small from an airplane, so **the city and the tower** built by humanity appeared insignificant from the perspective of God’s throne. The Hebrew text indicates that the building was in process and not fully completed at this point.

Key Doctrine

The Kingdom

Christians ought to pray and to labor that the Kingdom may come and God’s will be done on earth. (See Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 22:42.)

(v. 5) Humans: The text literally calls them “sons of men” or sons of Adam. The wording points back to the frailty of humanity and the temporary nature of what they might build. Regardless of what these **humans** might have thought, every attempt to equal the sovereign God is futile.

(v. 6) One people: This unity among all people in terms of purpose and language would only serve illegitimate means. In this verse, the Hebrew word translated **people** is used for the first time. Prior to this point, “nations” had been used in reference to a collective group of humans. “People” speaks of family connections, as opposed to the geographical and geopolitical connections. These were **one people**.

One thing is certain: God loves diversity; and, in this context, He wanted humans to pursue diversity rather than a dangerous and disobedient form of

oneness. The record in verse 6 speaks of something that was outside of God’s will, making this an unholy unity that sought to supplant God.

(v. 6) Nothing . . . will be impossible: United humanity was no threat to God or His sovereignty. However, He was expressing a deep foreboding about the extent of the wickedness they might create in their collective sinfulness. Pride always leads to a fall and to destruction (Prov. 16:18).

(v. 7) Let’s go down: Readers can note the parallel to verse 4: “Let’s build” is contrasted with **let’s go down**. God is always proactive toward His created ones. Here, He anticipated the great harm of this unified effort by humans to exalt themselves. In response, He took the initiative to rectify the situation. In so many ways, this is an act of mercy on God’s part. Instead of destroying them as He had done in the flood, He rendered their plans impossible by confusing their languages.

The wording also calls to mind God’s statement in Genesis 1:26. The plural wording suggests two options. One theory holds that God may have been speaking to the members of His heavenly court. More likely, though, He was speaking as the Triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

(v. 7) Confuse their language: Literally the phrase means “confuse their lip.” By confusing humanity’s languages, God put an end to the immediate rebellion. Readers should consider what this confusion of languages would involve. In addition to altering the people’s dialect—the sounds from the mouth—God also would need to alter their thinking patterns. All of this would have prevented any further cooperation toward building this stairway to the gods.

EXPLORE Genesis 11:5-7



APPLICATION POINT: The unity of believers should be rooted in their obedience to God's plans.

READ: Call for a volunteer to read aloud **Genesis 11:5-7**, directing the group to listen for how God responded to the people.

ASK: What do you find significant about verse 5? (*God came down to them. Their tower was not quite as impressive as they hoped.*)

REFLECT: On the board, write the following terms: *Omnipotence, Omniscience, Sovereignty*. Allow volunteers to share how each term is revealed through today's Bible passage. Discuss what each term has to do with the narrative in Genesis 11.

EXPLAIN: Emphasize that God was not worried about humanity's innovation or potential. *God was concerned about the trouble and suffering that disobedience could cause. Confusing their language was an act of grace—though it didn't seem like it at the time.* Remind adults that the unity of believers should be rooted in their obedience to God's plans.

ASK: How can unity of purpose get in the way of fulfilling God's purposes? (PSG, p. 88)

TRANSITION: *After God confused the people's languages, He dispersed them—which is what was supposed to happen in the first place.*

NOTES

Group Activity Option

Reflective

Explain that the sin of the people started with their own pride and desire to make a name for themselves. Emphasize that they had become self-dependent rather than God-dependent. Lead the group to scatter around the room. Direct them to silently reflect on their own lives and to identify where they may be self-dependent rather than God-dependent. If appropriate, play some instrumental music. After a few minutes, call the adults back to their seats. Pray, asking God to help each person learn to trust Him, rather than themselves, in all things.

Dispersed (Genesis 11:8-9)

8 So from there the LORD scattered them throughout the earth, and they stopped building the city. **9** Therefore 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.

(vv. 8-9) Scattered: The word means “dispersed.” What humanity would not do in response to God’s command, He did for them. Instead of destroying those who tried to usurp His place, God simply **scattered** them throughout the earth. This is another example of God’s mercy.

Instead of destroying humanity as He did in the flood, God used separation as His method of punishment. God had separated Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, and He had separated Cain from society. This represents a separation of family groups from one another, as God continued to pursue a relationship of love and grace with His created ones.

(v. 8) Stopped: The tower and city were to be humanity’s crowning achievement and a lasting symbol of the unity between the families of the earth. This would be how humans would make a great name for themselves. After God’s intervention, though, construction stopped because they couldn’t communicate with each other anymore. We talk of language barriers in our world, and this incident serves as a clear indication of how the inability to communicate serves as an impenetrable barrier to cooperation on any project.

(v. 9) •Babylon: This name comes from the Akkadian language of ancient Mesopotamia. It meant “gateway to a god” or “gate of the gods.” This certainly alludes to the purpose of the tower, along with the numerous other ziggurats built in that region. In verse 9, the Hebrew word translated **Babylon** (*bavel*) sounds similar to the Hebrew word translated confused (*balal*), which suggests jumbling or mixing something.

This wordplay suggests the tower of Babel could also be known as the tower of confusion. It is ironic that the people set out to make a name for themselves, yet they ended up being famous only for their confusion.

(v. 9) Language: The single universal language disappeared with this incident. In its place new languages distinguished the clans, tribes, and nations listed in the family trees highlighted in chapter 10 and later in chapter 11. Scholars have no clue as to what that original language was and trying to identify it would

certainly be an exercise in futility. What is significant is the fact that this biblical record is the only source of explanation for the existence of languages. While there are a multitude of theories as to how languages began, they are just that—theories! Yet, in the Bible we have the definitive answer.

Languages arose as an act of God’s grace, delivering humanity from the consequences of their own destructive pride. We know that languages evolve over time. For example, we can compare old English to modern English. That is not what occurred here at the tower. This was a sudden phenomenon from the hand of God.

Key Cross Reference

Ancient Languages

Many in antiquity did learn other languages. For example one Mesopotamian king named Shulgi bragged about his skill in reading and writing in five languages. Abraham conversed with many differing people of differing languages and dialects (likely Semitic Akkadian, West Semitic Canaanite, Aramean, Philistine, Egyptian, and so forth). Moses also had likely been trained to read and write in multiple languages. So ancient people groups and individuals could and did learn to speak to their neighbors or trading partners.

From a spiritual perspective, the confusion of languages was partially reversed at Pentecost for the purposes of sharing the gospel. Spend some time reading and reflecting on Acts 2 to see how God used languages in a powerful way. Some Scriptures also suggest that God will again unite His people with one purified language in heaven. For more on this, study Zephaniah 3:9 and Revelation 7:9.



APPLICATION POINT: Believers can trust God to help them fulfill His purposes.

READ: Call for the group to read silently **Genesis 11:8-9**, focusing on why God gave the place the name He did.

IDENTIFY: Call for volunteers to share any experiences they may have had with international travel. (*Examples: mission trips, vacations, study abroad, business, and so forth*) Allow a few volunteers to share situations when they struggled to communicate with someone because of a language barrier. Affirm that such situations can create a variety of emotions, everything from frustration to helplessness.

ASK: **Why and how did the people scatter after God confused their language?**

IDENTIFY: Using the information for verse 9 and the Bible Skill (PSG, p. 89), discuss the significance of the name “Tower of Babel.”

ASK: **What do we learn about God’s sovereignty over His creation?** (PSG, p. 89)

TRANSITION: *God expects His will and desires to be carried out by His people. Believers can trust God to help them fulfill His purposes.*

NOTES

Group Activity Option

Bible Skill

Babylon plays an important role in biblical history and thought. Lead the group to look up the name “Babylon” or “Babylonia” in a Bible dictionary and discover how the term is used in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Realize that the sinful condition of this city began in the first century or so after the flood in Noah’s day.

CHALLENGE

- SUMMARIZE:** Review these points from Apply the Text on page 90 of the Personal Study Guide:
- *Believers must safeguard against selfish motives.*
 - *The unity of believers should be rooted in their obedience to God's plans.*
 - *Believers can trust God to help them fulfill His purposes.*
- REVIEW:** Discuss how the story of the Tower of Babel relates to each of these statements. Encourage adults to list ways believers can apply this story to their day-to-day lives.
- DISCUSS:** Guide the group to discuss the second question set on page 90 of the PSG: **Where do you see selfishness in your life? What are ways you can safeguard against having selfish motives?**
- PRAY:** Close in prayer, leading the group to thank God for the example in Genesis 11, for His sovereignty over all, and for the fact that believers can trust in God and in His purposes.

After the Session

Reinforce the session by texting the group a Tower of Babel image with these words: *Are you practicing self-dependence or God-dependence this week?* Challenge them to spend some time this week examining their lives for areas where they might be more focused on making a name for themselves than on following God's directions for their lives.

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