

DESCENT

A STUDY OF GENESIS 4-11

*A Tiny Tower and
Ten Generations
Genesis 11:1-26
July 12, 2020*

MAIN POINT: The nations rage and the peoples plot in vain, but the LORD rules over all from his throne in heaven- *Psalms 2:1*

I. THE TOWER OF BABEL (vv. 1-9)

- **One Language of the Whole Earth** (v. 1)
 - The events of Gen. 11:1-9 precede Gen. 10 temporally, but follow in the literary flow to reinforce that the Table of Nations ultimately was a result not of obedience to the creation mandate (cf. Gen. 1:28; 9:1) but, disobedience to God's good command.
- **What Mankind Strives to Do** (vv. 2-4)
 - Those migrating eastward settle in the plains of Shinar in v. 2, which is contrary to God's command to fill the earth.
 - We should probably understand the tower in v. 4 to be an Ancient Near Eastern ziggurat... think a massive stack of rectangles that get smaller and smaller the higher you go with staircases ascending and descending from bottom to top (cf. Gen. 28:10-17; John 1:51).
- **What the LORD Determines to Do** (vv. 5-8)
 - There is a lot of anthropomorphic language in these verses. Anthropomorphic language describes God in physical human terms or doing things in human ways.
 - The LORD "comes down" to "see" the city and the tower in v. 5, but this should not lead us to reject God's omnipresence and omniscience.
 - It's helpful to keep in mind when you're reading Scripture the interpretive axiom or principle that being (what God is) precedes action (what God does).
 - As a result of the judgment of the LORD in v. 7, v. 8 tells us that the people were dispersed and "left off building the city."
 - The very thing the people were afraid of back in v. 4, being dispersed, has come to pass; and the very thing they sought to do in v. 4, building a city, tower, and a great name, was thwarted by the sovereign LORD.
- **Confused Languages of the Whole Earth** (v. 9)
 - Confused languages are typically a sign of God's judgment throughout Scripture (cf. Deut. 28:49; Isa. 28:11-13; Jer. 5:15).
 - From Babel we get Babylon and the Babylonians. The Babylonians understood their great city Babylon to mean "gate of the gods" (from Akkadian *babīlu*). Instead, though, Babel is the place of confusion, *balal* in Hebrew. It would have been a constant reminder to the people of Israel that great nations cannot defy God and long survive, and if they followed in similar rebellious ways they too would be dispersed.

II. THE TOLEDOT OF SHEM (vv. 10-26)

- Ten Generations from Shem, the Son of Noah, to Abram, the Son of Terah
 - Noah was the father of three sons – Shem, Ham, and Japheth – while Terah also fathered three sons – Abram, Nahor, and Haran. This brackets the genealogy of Shem to Abram, and accounts for ten generations.
 - The seed of the woman, through the line of Shem, will continue on through Abram and his offspring.
 - The seed of the serpent, will continue through the line of Ham, and will consistently be a thorn in the side of the LORD’s people.
 - From Adam to Noah and From Shem to Abram
 - In Gen. 5, we have the *toledot* of Adam, where the refrain is “... and he died.” This refrain culminates in the birth of Noah, a note of hope, but also leads to the Flood catastrophe of Gen. 6-9.
 - In Gen. 11:10-26, we have the *toledot* of Shem, the son of Noah, and although death still comes to all, the refrain is “... and [he] lived.” This refrain culminates in the birth of Abram and the promises of the LORD to Abram in Gen. 12:1-3.
 - The *toledot* of Shem in Gen. 11:10-26, climaxing in the birth of Abram, follow the Babel event as a reminder that God’s purpose in grace cannot be thwarted by the evil of mankind.

III. THE SEED OF ABRAM AND THE UNITY OF THE REDEEMED

- Although the narrative ends with the birth of Abram, who is indeed in the line of the woman, he is not the hero of the story.
- The true and better offspring of Abram, Christ Jesus, accomplished in his person and work what Abram himself was unable to (Gal. 3:16).
 - Christ Jesus conquered sin and death in his death and resurrection, and overcomes dispersed nations with confused languages through his ascension, the sending of his Spirit at Pentecost, and the continued proclamation of the gospel by his church (cf. Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:1-41; Gal. 3:16; Eph. 2:11-22).
 - Pentecost foreshadows what our sin-bearing, curse-defeating, blessings-giving King will ultimately accomplish when he returns. When Jesus returns a confused speech will be made pure so that all may call upon the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord, a dispersed people will be reunited as one perfectly unified humanity in the true Man, the proud will be brought low and into judgment, the humble will be raised up and given blessings, and the redeemed from every tribe, nation, people, and language will worship together on the mount of the LORD, singing, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:10; cf. Zeph. 3:9-13; Acts 2:1-41)

RECOMMENDED READING:

- *What is Biblical Theology?: A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* by James Hamilton

Questions/Discovery Points for Life Groups/Families

Read Genesis 11:1-26

1. How do Gen. 10 and 11 fit together chronologically? How do Gen. 10 and 11 fit together literarily? How does understanding both the chronological flow and literary flow give us a grasp of the narrative of Genesis?
2. In what ways have you been tempted, even recently, to trust in secular systems and organizations? What promises are they making that seek to replace the promises of God? Take some time and remind yourself of the promises of God in Christ.
3. The interpretive principle of “being precedes action” was mentioned briefly. Take some time and discuss together how this interpretive principle helps us better understand passages of Scripture that use anthropomorphic language.
4. Gen. 11:1-26 moves from judgment to the hope of redemption by way of a genealogy. Does seeing how genealogies work in Scripture give you a better appreciation for them, or are you still tempted to rush through them? Can you think of some other biblical genealogies that offer hope if we were to dig into them?
5. Christ is the true and better seed of Abram. Take some time to discuss how his person and work overcome the judgment of Babel, both in this age and in the age to come.
6. What other thoughts or questions does Gen. 11:1-26 leave you with? Take some time to talk through them as a group.