

STORY

The Tower of Babel - *Genesis 11:1-9*

TEACHER PRAYER

Lord Jesus, I am an earthen vessel to whom You have entrusted the responsibility of teaching Your lambs. Keep me from ever becoming self-reliant in my teaching or in any part of my life. By Your Gospel, preserve in me a humility that understands my need and a confidence that trusts my Savior. The world promotes and in many ways encourages a self-pride. This is a temptation for us all. Equip me to bring Your Word to the children concerning this temptation and lead them to boast only in You and Your salvation. Lord Jesus, bless us today! Amen.

VOCABULARY

Asphalt (v.3) - bitumen; children may think of the asphalt on our streets which, on a hot summer day turns somewhat soft. The bitumen used for building Babel was an oil/pitch that bubbled out of the ground and would become very hard when baked by the hot sun. For this reason it would serve as the perfect mortar for long lasting construction. The region in which Babel was built (present-day Iran/Iraq) was/is rich in bitumen so the building materials were readily at hand.

OUTER AIM

God confused the languages and dispersed the people.

INNER AIM

Human pride opposes God and will be brought to nothing.

BACKGROUND

Bible History Commentary, Franzmann - pp. 89ff

Bible History References, Rupprecht - volume 1 pp. 35ff

God destroyed the world in the Flood because of its sin. However, the eight souls whom God kept alive in the ark were also sinners. Therefore, even though the sinful, unbelieving world was destroyed, sin lived. Following the Flood, the very next account in Genesis relates the sins of Noah and of his son Ham (Genesis 9:18ff). The motives that lay behind the building of Babel also reveal the same root of sin. As we see the events unfold at Babel, there is no doubt about the accuracy of God's declaration: "*The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth*" (Genesis 8:21).

Sin would not be conquered until Jesus, the Son of God, came and fulfilled His work of redemption. Even now, after Christ has come and redeemed us, sin still thrives in the world, but through faith we know that sin's guilt is washed away in the blood of Christ.

This lesson is the last account in Genesis which traces the "general" history of mankind. From this point forward, the Scriptures follow the history of the Messiah's family line through Seth to Abram, Isaac, etc.

v. 1

Based on Genesis 10:25, we can conclude that the events at Babel took place very shortly before Peleg's birth and for that reason Eber named his son as he did (Peleg = "division"). The genealogy recorded in 11:10ff shows that Peleg was born 101 years after the Flood. So, the events at Babel occurred about 100 years after the Flood.



Noah and Seth were both still living at this time.

- The world's population would not have yet been extremely large, but within a hundred years the population could quite easily have been 20-30,000 (any suggestion of an exact population would be speculation).
- **Literally:** "one (set of) words" and "one lip" Not only were the people speaking the same language/vocabulary, but there was also one unified dialect.

v. 2

- KJV and NKJV both translate this verse, "...as they journeyed **from** the east..." It is translated more correctly as, "...journeyed **eastward**..." The people's migration was actually southeast, but the Hebrew language makes use of only the four directions, unlike English which makes use of combinations.
- The people migrated from the region of Mt. Ararat where the ark came to rest and settled in the land of Shinar - an area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.
- "Dwelt" implies settling down and establishing a permanent residence. The people found the Plain of Shinar inviting and decided to cease migrating. A city and a tower also implies permanency (especially the tower).

v. 3

- Come! - this is the first of three imperatives to "Come!" used in this account. Someone came up with the idea of making these building materials and as the idea spread everyone "jumped on board" saying, "Come on! Let's make bricks..." You can sense the excitement.
- Moses, by inspiration, is led to record the detail of how the people planned to build their city and tower. It would not be built with stones. Nor would it be built with the typical sun-dried bricks. Rather, this city and tower would be made with "well-burned" (literally), kiln-baked bricks. Their mortar would not be simply mud or clay, but asphalt (see vocabulary). Luther believed that this was the first time this type of construction was used and had been unknown to previous generations.
- The type of construction which the people chose would normally be very long lasting and would coincide with their purpose. There are ruins of ancient buildings of this type still in existence today.

v. 4

- Come! - this is the second of three imperatives to "Come!" used in this account. Again the sense is one of excited purpose and plans. "We've decided on the building materials, now come on! Let's build!"
- **"..whose top is in the heavens..."** The text does not indicate that the people believed they would build the tower so high as to reach heaven-God's dwelling place. They intended to build a tower reaching to the heavens, i.e., a very tall tower reaching far into the sky with "heavens" being the opposite of "earth." (cf: Deuteronomy 1:28, 9:1)

THE PEOPLE'S SIN REVEALED

-- The sin of the people was not simply in the construction of a city and tower. Neither of these would have been sinful in themselves. The sin lay in the motive behind the building of the city and tower.

-- **Motive #1: MAKE A NAME FOR OURSELVES...** The people wanted to make a name for themselves. They were seeking to satisfy their own prideful longings for fame. They were seeking the things of themselves rather than the things of God. They wanted people to hear about THEM and to come and see the magnificent city and tower THEY had built. Solomon's wisdom and wealth, his name, and city became famous. The Queen of Shea heard of Solomon's fame and had to come and see if all that she had heard were really true. This is undoubtedly the kind of name and fame the people of Babel wished to achieve by building their city and tower. However, there is a large difference. Before returning home, the Queen told Solomon, "*Blessed be the LORD your God,*

who delighted in you, setting you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD has loved Israel forever, therefore He made you king, to do justice and righteousness” (1 Kings 10:9). The people of Babel wanted their name and fame for themselves. In his prayer at the temple dedication, King Solomon noted that heathen people would hear about the Israelites and their God and be brought to faith (1 Kings 8:41-42). Isaiah prophesied that many would come to “Zion” and be blessed by her (Isaiah 60:1ff). In both of these cases the name that was made and glorified was that of the Lord and of His salvation. The people at Babel wanted to make a name for themselves-to glorify themselves rather than God and that is SIN.

-- **Motive #2: “Lest we be scattered abroad...”** In these words the people’s sin is bold and clear. After Noah and his family left the ark, God spoke clearly what His will was for them when He blessed them and said: “*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth*”(Genesis 9:1). God had blessed them with fruitfulness in offspring so that they could fill the earth. The people were building a city and tower “LEST we be scattered abroad” - the exact opposite of God’s desire. The people’s pride and self-interest led them down a path completely contradictory to God’s will, and that is SIN.

v. 5

- **BUT...**man’s plans are one thing, but God would not allow their plans to be fulfilled. “*Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it...*” (Psalm 127:1).
- God describes Himself as the “**LORD**” - Jehovah/the Covenant God/the God of Promise to remind and impress the people that as God “came down” to bring their plan to an end, it was in their souls’ best interest that He was doing so.
- “**...came down to see...**” God was certainly well aware of what the people were doing and why they were doing it. God is described as “coming down to see” as a way of conveying to human readers that now God was going to do something. Compare this to parents sitting in the downstairs of their home where they can hear their children upstairs jumping on the beds and then onto the floor. The parents know full well what is going on, but there comes a point when they will go “upstairs to see” what their children are doing and to take appropriate action. God had allowed the people of Babel to go this far, but then no further.
- “**Nothing they propose to do will be withheld from them**” God does not suggest that unless He would stop this project, man could do anything. Regardless of what the people would plan and/or do, they would ever remain sinful human beings—creatures of the Creator—and thereby limited in what they could accomplish. Rather, God is noting that if the people were allowed to continue in one unified language pursuing their own plans, they would continue to follow after sin. The people had arrogantly and smugly despised God's command and had set their minds so firmly on their own thoughts that they would not turn from them, “*now nothing they do will be withheld from them.*” Left to their own devices, the people would bring swift destruction upon themselves-in time and eternity. So, the LORD/Jehovah, intervened for the salvation of souls.

v. 7--9

- “Come!” This is the third and final “Come” of the account. The previous two were calls to action for the people. Now comes God’s call to action. The results of the action clearly demonstrate who is God. “Us” is an allusion to the triune nature of God. God’s confusion of language led to confusion (and probably anger and hostility) among the people. No work could be done because no one could understand one another. Living together in one place no longer held appeal because they now had much less in common and what they did have in common, they couldn’t share with each other! There are now more than 5,000 thousand languages in existence (*Genesis, The People’s Bible, Jeske, p.107*). God’s one act of confusing the languages accomplished what the people had planned would never happen (lest we be scattered...) Scattered is literally, “to break or dash into pieces.” What the people did not want to do (“lest we be scattered, v. 4) and the thing against which they worked, was now done by God and they

were scattered. The location of the city and tower became known as “Babel” by the time Moses was inspired to write Genesis. It was named “Babel” because “Babel” means “Confusion.” It is also the word from which we derive “Babylon” - a kingdom which was located in the same region. Martin Luther viewed God’s action at Babel a much more horrible judgment than even the Flood. Luther said that the Flood wiped out only a single generation of humanity; but confusing the languages at Babel, however, has bred confusion, suspicion, and hatred ever since, right down to the present day (Luther’s day and our own).

Additional Scripture:

Daniel 4:28-33; Psalm 2; Proverbs 3:5; Proverbs 16:9; Jeremiah 9:23-26; Jeremiah 17:5-8; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Galatians 6:14; Philippians 3:8-10; 1 John 2:15-17.

STUDENT PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You for all the gifts You give to me. Remind me day by day that all that I am, all that I can do, all that I will receive comes from You, without any worthiness in me and without any contribution from me. Forgive the times when I am self-reliant and proud and all the other sins my pride may produce. Remove all pride from me and deepen my trust in You so that my boast will always be in the God of my salvation. Amen.

PRESENTATION (1)

The previous story (The Flood) provides excellent background and a bridge to this lesson. After the Flood, the world’s population consisted of 8 people...now what? God’s plan was that they be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. To accomplish His plan, God blessed Noah and his family. Man’s plan was different from God’s and opposed God’s plan.

Students should be led to see the human pride involved with the building of Babel and how that opposed God’s will. From a recognition of the pride and sin involved at Babel, lead your students to see how the same self-will and sinful pride infect each of us in what we choose and what we do. Lead the students to see that human pride is sinful and at odds with God. We can’t follow God and our sinful selves at the same time. Lead them to see that pridefully following one’s own way does not lead to salvation. We cannot be proud of ourselves and still be trusting Jesus as our Savior. Faith recognizes our failure and relies completely upon Him for salvation and ability to do what pleases God.

Throughout the story and application, a resounding truth should become clear: **GOD IS GREATER THAN MAN**. All the planning in the world can’t succeed unless God blesses it or at least allows it. All the best building materials used together in the best possible manner will wash away like a sand castle, if God so desires. The greatest marvel of all is in God’s use of language. Consider how the various languages became a barrier for the people to accomplish their plans. Then consider how God has used human language to convey to us the glorious Truth concerning Himself and the Salvation He has provided for us. Consider how God made use of many different languages at Pentecost so that His Word would spread far and wide to the people using many varying tongues. The confusion of languages at Babel stopped the sinfully motivated building project but it **did not and can not** stop God’s plan of bringing salvation to the world! The Gospel news of salvation is the same in any language. The people wanted to remain one unified whole for their own honor and glory. God wanted them to scatter and caused them to do so. The different peoples of the world would be unified again but not in the sense that the people on the plains of Shinar had originally imagined. Years later, God sent His Son Jesus to die for the sins of all people. Those who believe in Him are united in Him through faith no matter what nationality they are or what language they speak.

PRESENTATION (2)

If the teacher can converse in a foreign language, perhaps the lesson can begin in that foreign language. The students will not be able to understand the lesson and that will become an illustration in the story presentation when God confused the languages. Ship captains, airline pilots, etc. are **REQUIRED** to have at least a working knowledge of English because that has become the universal language of commerce. Have students consider what might happen if there was no such universal language. Use that as an illustration of what probably happened at Babel. (Also consider how Greek was the language of commerce in the early New Testament period. This is surely one reason why God had the New Testament Scriptures recorded in Greek-it facilitated the spread of the Gospel.) Use the story of Pentecost as a New Testament link. The many different languages spoken by the disciples were begun at Babel. Of what did the disciples speak when they had the ability to speak in foreign tongues? Were the disciples acting like the people of Babel? Why or why not?

“Were people given their different colors of skin and racial appearances at the tower of Babel?” In Scripture, there is no mention that God did anything further than confuse the peoples’ languages. Therefore, to suggest that there were also changes in appearances is pure speculation. The various racial characteristics are, however, quite easily explained in connection with this account. Genesis chapter 10 describes the divisions and the various peoples that came from Noah’s three sons. Within the three “branches” of Noah’s family tree there would already be some differences. When the languages were confused and small pockets of people spread across the earth and grew into their own societies, further division was made. Over time, each of these societies would have easily developed characteristics different from other societies. It is not difficult at all to see God’s use of the “natural means” of genetics and reproduction within the separated peoples after Babel to Accomplish what we now recognize as differences in appearance among cultures/peoples.

“Where did the people go?” The various civilizations of the world and their locations are the result of God’s dispersion at Babel. People have wondered how the American Indians could have come to the Americas when all of “known civilization” was in Europe, Asia, and Africa. There are many evolutionary explanations. Scripture’s plain truth is the simplest and best. As groups of people migrated from Babel, over time they reached what we now know as the Americas and developed as a civilization.

“What language did the people speak before Babel?” There is no mention of a particular language and we have no way to know. Since God’s design was to totally confuse the people’s languages so that they were forced to divide and spread, it would *seem* likely that the pre-Babel language didn’t even continue to exist after Babel.

APPLICATIONS

The people of Babel defined their lives in terms of themselves rather than of God. Discuss the many ways in which people today (ourselves included) define their lives in terms of themselves and then consider the better outlook through Christ. God today intervenes at times as He did at Babel. God intervened at Babel because without the intervention, the people would only have grown in their sin and continued their sinful ways. God intervened to accomplish His will which is always the salvation of souls. Likewise, today, God may at times bring hardship and/or catastrophe to direct people away from the things of the earth and to seek Him through the Scriptures. Loss of man-made possessions because of storms, earthquakes, etc. reminds one that our treasure is not in earthly things but with our Savior. Sin is rebellion against God. Discuss the various sins into which we may fall and how this is rebellion. (Students may not be willing to concede, at first that every sin is rebellion against God. However, an examination of what sin is and how each sin breaks God’s will lead to that conclusion.) David showed sinful pride when he ordered a census (1 Chronicles 21:1ff). Peter proudly said he would never deny the Lord and then stood in the High Priest’s courtyard where temptation would be strong (Matthew 26:33,69). We show the same kind of pride every time we rely on ourselves, give glory and honor to ourselves, or when we boldly enter tempting situations thinking we won’t be affected, when we strike out to do

things “our way” and fail to consider “God’s way.” Discuss with the students the ways in which pride affects their lives. Discuss how every aspect of life is an opportunity to give glory to God and not to ourselves. Explain/consider how we do or do not give glory to God in the many things we do and say in day-to-day living. Discuss the Gospel and how Christ did not show pride but humbled Himself...how there can be no room for human pride in the heart of a child of God’s heart both because of what he is (a sinner) and because of what Jesus has done (everything for our salvation without our help). Reassure the student that the sins of pride are also forgiven in the blood of Christ by emphasizing God’s gracious plan even in His confusing of the languages at Babel.

The world’s concept of “self-esteem” continues to be promoted widely. A lack of the world’s concept of “self-esteem” is often touted as the cause for problems. The Tower of Babel shows that the world’s concept of self-esteem is actually sin because it gives man a higher position than is rightfully his. Children in the public schools will almost certainly face a false concept of self-esteem in a variety of ways. ALL children need to know and understand from where their true worth is found, namely, in their Savior.

Agree or disagree: The skyscrapers and big cities of the present world are in many ways modern towers of Babel. Discuss.

Project: Have the students spend a week or two reading newspapers/magazines and looking for articles that demonstrate or report upon the same kind of attitude/motivation as the people of Babel and discuss what they find.

PASSAGES

These passages can be assigned as memory work or simply discussed in class as to how they fit the lesson.
Lower

Proverbs 3:5 - Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

1 Corinthians 10:17 - He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.

Middle any of the above and...

Proverbs 16:9 - A man’s heart plans his way, but the LORD directs His steps.

Galatians 6:14 - God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Upper any of the above and...

1 John 2:15-17 - Do not love the world or the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world-the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life-is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

HYMN CHOICES

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (TLH #175)

“Just as I Am Without One Plea” (TLH #388)

“Savior I Follow On, Guided by Thee” (TLH #422)

“What is the World to Me” (TLH #430)

“Thy Way Not Mine O Lord” (TLH #532)