

Session 9: Stalled (Genesis 11:1-9)

Genesis 11:1-9

1 The whole earth had the **same language** ^A and vocabulary. 2 As people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of **Shinar** ^B and settled there. 3 They said to each other, “**Come, let’s** ^C make **oven-fired bricks.**” ^D (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.**” ^E 5 Then the Lord **came down to look** ^F 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** ^G for them. 7 **Come, let’s** ^H go down there and **confuse** ^I their language so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” 8 So from there **the Lord scattered** ^J them throughout the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9 Therefore it is called **Babylon**, ^K for there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth, and from there the Lord scattered them throughout the earth.

Exploring Key Words

A Chronologically, this episode likely took place before the events in Genesis 10, which specifically mentions nations and languages.

B Also called “Babylonia,” this is present day Iraq. Compare Genesis 10:10.

C This is the first of three times this phrase is used. The first two (vv. 3,4) involve humans speaking about what they wanted to do. The third time (v. 7), God was saying what He will do.

D This was a great leap forward in technology. Baked bricks were as durable as stone, and were easier to shape to uniform dimensions.

E God had explicitly commanded Noah and his descendants to fill the earth (Gen. 9:1).

F While God is omniscient, this description emphasizes that His judgment is always according to truth—in this case, observable facts.

G God isn't threatened by human effort (see Luke 1:37). However, it is dangerous for people to try to reach their potential apart from His sovereignty.

H As mentioned in Key Word C, God was speaking here. The plural structure could refer to the divine council (see Job 1–2; Ps. 82:1) or be an implicit reference to the Trinity (see Gen. 1).

I Hebrew *balal*. Often in the Old Testament, this word refers to mixing grain and oil for an offering. Here, the mixing of languages results in chaos rather than worship.

J God will fulfill His purposes, whether we obey or not. The people refused to disperse themselves, so God did it for them.

K “Babel” (KJV; NIV; ESV). It is a wordplay on *balal*, which means scattered or confused. See Key Note I.

TALKING POINTS

United (Gen. 11:1-4)

- Having a single language, expansion toward the east stalled in the land of Shinar.
- The people began building a brick city with a tower that would reach toward the heavens. They wanted to make a name for themselves so that they would not be scattered.

Reviewed (Gen. 11:5-7)

- The work on the city was reviewed by God. He observed the people's failure to obediently cover the earth and understood the potential of them taking on other impossible (and sinful) tasks.
- In response, God decided to scatter the people by causing them to speak in different languages.

Dispersed (Gen. 11:8-9)

- Having confused them with different languages, God scattered the people abroad and they stopped building the brick city.

- The city took on the name of Babylon since God confused them and scattered them from there.

Summary Statements

God expects His will and desires to be carried out.

- 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.

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.)

1. UNITED (GEN. 11:1-4)

- Genesis 11:1 paints a picture of the comprehensive unity of humanity at that time. Moses highlighted the fact that the whole earth shared "the same language and vocabulary." These terms underscore the unity, even though it violated God's plan for humanity.
- This unified people "migrated from the east" (or "eastward"). In Genesis, "east" often marks occurrences of separation. In this case, the people settled in Shinar, a region in ancient Mesopotamia (or Babylonia).
- The people made bricks to build a "tower with its top in the sky." They also used a form of asphalt for mortar. Their goal was to "make a name for themselves." This was their attempt to reach God, become famous, and avoid dispersion.

2. REVIEWED (GEN. 11:5-7)

- As the people worked hard to reach God, the Lord "came down" to examine what they were doing. The language emphasizes the awesome vastness of God and the smallness of humanity. Even our best creations pale in comparison to His power, authority, and creativity.

- God was not threatened by these people. However, if speaking one language encouraged them to conspire against His will, they would continue to spiral down a path of rebellion. Left unchecked, they would have pursued every imagination of their depraved hearts.
- In verse 5, the Lord came down to inspect their work. In verse 7, He came down to thwart it. God reversed their organized rebellion by confounding them. Confusing their ability to communicate shut down their pretentious project.
- Again, Moses emphasized God's power and authority. The people might have thought they were united and their tower was impressive, but God ended the project with ease.

3. DISPERSED (GEN. 11:8-9)

- The confusion created by God ended the construction project. Finally, the people did what God originally commanded by spreading out across the earth.
- Ironically, the residents of Shinar did make a name for themselves, and their tower has gone down in history. But they are famous for their foolishness and arrogance, not their achievements or unity.
- Their work became the city of Babylon. The Hebrew wording is related to *balal*, which means "confusion." It serves as a reminder of the confused languages and the confused thinking of people who thought they could bring glory to themselves by disobeying God.

DIG DEEPER

COMING DOWN

The tower of Babel was probably a ziggurat, a common structure in ancient Mesopotamian cities. Archaeologists have unearthed dozens of ziggurats in the region, with texts mentioning several others. The most famous example is the Great Ziggurat of Ur in Iraq, a huge, 4,100-year-old structure made up of more than 700,000 baked bricks.

Unlike the pyramids in Egypt, ziggurats were not tombs for pharaohs. They were stairways for the gods. The defining feature for the ziggurat was a long staircase leading to the top, where a room with a bed and a table was prepared for the

deity. A temple usually built into the structure so people could go to worship. Contrary to common assumptions, the stairway was not for people to climb up, but for the god to come down.

The Bible includes many references to God coming down to earth. God met with Abraham in Genesis 18. Moses met with the Lord when he received the law on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:11,18,20). Joshua (Josh. 5:13–6:5) and Samson’s parents (Judg. 13:1-24) each encountered individuals who they equated with deity.

There is a huge difference, however, between Babylonian mythology and Christian theology. The purpose of a ziggurat was to entice a god to come to earth to do the bidding of man. But when the one true God visits the earth, it is always at His initiation, not man’s invocation. The best examples of this are Jesus’s incarnation and His second coming, where He will “descend from heaven with a shout” (1 Thess. 4:16).

It may seem ironic, then, that at the tower of Babel, the Lord did indeed come down and visit the people (Gen. 11:5,7). However, He did not come at the people’s request. If anything, they were blatantly rebelling against His plans. Rather, He came down to accomplish His will. We can know without a doubt that God’s plans never fail, and He will always take the steps necessary to see His purposes accomplished.