

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: Genesis 11:1-9

Lesson Title: Scattering the Nations

Introduction

The first eleven chapters of Genesis centers around four key historical events. First, the creation account is recorded in Genesis 1-2. This simple but profound account involves God's creative activity as seen upon the earth. God is presented as Creator and Sustainer of all things. Beginning at the end of Genesis 1, the focus turns toward the creation of man and his relationship to creation. Second, the fall of man and the consequences of sin is the focus of Genesis 3:1-6:10. Man's fall into sin is the most significant event in man's personal history prior to the birth of Jesus Christ to bring salvation. This section includes the first murder and blood sacrifice to atone for sin. Third, God's judgment upon the earth by a worldwide flood is the subject of Genesis 6:11-8:19. In the days of Noah, wickedness reached an all-time high. Man misused God's grace and goodness for his own pleasure. God commanded Noah to build an ark that would provide salvation for him, his family and for two of each of the unclean animals and for seven of the clean. God's purpose in sending the flood was accomplished and afterward God established His covenant with Noah and his family. Fourth, Genesis 8:20-11:32 is a time of new beginnings for man. Noah and his family found a new opportunity in a renovated world. Part of that new opportunity began in Genesis 11:1-9 in the event we are studying today when God scattered the nations at the tower of Babel.

The events of the tower of Babel actually begin in Genesis 10:1-32 with the record of the genealogy of Noah. The chapter opens with a list of the descendants of Noah's three sons, "*Shem, Ham, and Japeth*" (Genesis 10:1) from which come all the ethnic groups on the earth. Genesis 10 concludes by telling us, "These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations, in their nations: and by these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood" (Genesis 10:32). What we have in Genesis 10 and 11 is the origin of nations. Nations and languages did not evolve. They were established by God in a single act. The Bible is the only accurate record of how everything began including nations and languages.

Man's Action (Genesis 11:1-4)

When Noah and his family emerged from the ark after the flood they were together and all spoke the same language. According to Genesis 10:5, 20, and 31, there was

more than one language spoken by the descendants of Noah's sons. That difference of language and dispersion of people is described for us in Genesis 11. What we have in our text in Genesis 11 is how humanity was scattered and how language differences occurred. So, the events described in Genesis 11 occurred prior to those in Genesis 10.

Verse 1

"And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech."

Moses words about man's situation are a brief but definitive statement of how things were on the earth prior to the building of the tower of Babel. "One language" literally means "one lip" or "one speech." The fact that everyone used the same words and spoke the same language should have promoted a positive environment and growth of faith. It is interesting that this story of the tower of Babel and the scattering of people begins with the word "one language" and "one speech." It doesn't take long for the sinfulness of man to rear its ugly head. The best estimation of time here is about 100 years after the flood.

Verse 2

"And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there."

After the flood was over the ark landed on the mountains of Ararat. The people left the area of Ararat and went toward the Euphrates valley and they found a "plain" in the land of "Shinar" and they settled there. The "land of Shinar" is mentioned seven times in the Bible (Genesis 10:10; 11:2; 14:1, 9; Isaiah 11:11; Daniel 1:2; Zechariah 5:11). The name "Shinar" means "country of two rivers" and most likely refers to an area near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

As Noah's descendants literally moved and "journeyed from the east" they were also spiritually moving away from God. Several times in Scripture "eastward" movements signify a move away from God. When Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, cherubim guarded the entry at the *"east of the garden of Eden"* (Genesis 3:24). When Lot left Abraham, he traveled "east," where he met disaster in Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 13:10–12). Abraham's sons by his concubine Keturah were sent *"away from Isaac his son, while he yet lived, eastward, unto the east country"* (Genesis 25:6). Jacob fled his homeland to "the land of the people of the east" (Genesis 29:1). Here in the tower story the people's eastern migration depicts universal rebellion. They have moved outside the place

of blessing. *Hughes, R. K. (2004). Genesis: Beginning and blessing. Preaching the Word (170). Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.*

Verse 3

"And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar."

"And they said one to another" indicates that the people were speaking as neighbor to neighbor or traveler to traveler. Their plans were openly discussed among each other and their families as they migrated from the east.

"Go to, let us..." recorded here and in verse 4 is a verbal declaration of the intention of the people. These four words, "Go to, let us" means the people have no regard for God. They aren't interested in anything God has to say. His will, His directions and His plan are not in their thoughts. "Go to" means "come on." Their plans were to "make brick" and "burn them thoroughly." They were planning to make "brick" out of the chalky clay and make them hard and durable by placing them in a furnace. These would be used for "stone" to build the tower. The words "brick...stone...slime...and mortar" indicate that the people were acquainted with the art of brick-making. The "slime" mentioned here could have possibly been asphalt like substance that would be used to cement or hold the bricks together.

Verse 4

"And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

Once again the people say, "Go to, let us..." which indicates they are about to launch their act of rebellion against God. They decided to "build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven..." What is happening here is that man desires to build something and achieve something to fulfill himself and glorify himself. They want to live independently of God and basically do their own thing.

Four basic things stand out in this verse that reveals what these people wanted. First, they wanted a city. Second, they wanted a "tower, whose top may reach unto heaven." Third, they wanted to make "a name" or reputation for themselves. Fourth, they wanted to avoid being "scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

What's wrong with wanting "a city?" The important point is that it was not God's city, as Jerusalem was. It was man's city, a city of man's own making. As such it was constructed by man for man's glory. This is the first "city" of man built after the flood and is a "city" built by man, of man, and for man. It reminds us of the pride of Nebuchadnezzar when he looked over Babylon and said, *"Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty"* (Daniel 4:30).

What's wrong with building a "tower?" This "tower whose top reached unto heaven" was a supposed connection to God, but in the case of these people it was a connection to the false gods they had already started to worship.

What's wrong with wanting "a name?" The desire to have "a name" was a desire for a reputation and a desire for independence from God. This reputation was to be earned by man apart from God. It was to be his alone and therefore sinful.

What's wrong with wanting to settle down in one place and not be scattered? If this happened the people would have been in defiance of God's command to *"be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth"* (Genesis 1:28; 9:1).

The attitude of the people at this time in history is very similar to the attitude of Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden. It is the attitude of independence. Personal ambition and pride were standing between them and their Creator. And the same is true today (Psalm 10:4; Proverbs 16:18).

God's Action (Genesis 11:5-8)

Verse 5

"And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded."

"And the LORD came down..." are interesting words. The people intended to build a tower that would reach heaven and yet when God intervened He had to "come down." No matter how high their tower was God was still higher! Just like religion, the tower these people built never came close to God!

"To see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded" isn't suggesting that God hadn't already seen it because He sees all things (Psalm 139). The words "to see the city and the tower" suggest God is responding to man's rebellious actions. Once again we are reminded that no one escapes the consequences of

disobeying God. Adam did not escape. The people of Noah's day did not escape. The people here at the tower of Babel did not escape. And people today and in the future will not escape.

Verse 6

"And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do."

God took one look at the tower and what the people had accomplished and said, "They are all of one language and working together, and it's no telling what they'll come up with next." God was not threatened by their unity or ability to do what they wanted to do. Instead, God is speaking from the reality that if they are left unchecked humanity would plunge headlong into destruction. They would soon be a people with their own religion and dependent upon themselves. The results would be they would totally forget God and their hearts would be so hardened they would never serve or worship Him.

The problem with humanity today is the same as it was at the tower of Babel. Unrestrained human freedom always ends in eternally devastating consequences. Unity of purpose may seem like a virtue and a good thing on the surface, but if God is not obeyed the results are disastrous. Most of what we label today as achievement, progress and success is little more than sinful rebellion against God. If God was disturbed by what He saw at the tower of Babel, just imagine what He must think when He looks at sinful man today.

Verse 7

"Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

The language of this verse to describe God's actions is similar to the language of the people and their actions in verses 3 and 4. It's as if God is mocking the people or sarcastic when He says, "Go to, let us go down." "Us" in this verse is the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Trinity will "confound" the "language" of the people so they will no longer be able to "understand one another's speech." This confusion of language is very effective. If the people can't understand one another it creates a host of problems in their plans to build their own city and a tower to heaven.

Verse 8

"So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city."

No one knows how the Lord "scattered" the people but the Bible says He did. Any guess would be just that, a guess. It is possible that when they could no longer communicate with each other that the scattering just naturally took place. It is hard to imagine how the people reacted as they were talking to each other one minute and the next minute they are hearing languages and speech they have never heard. Can you imagine the fear and frustration that must have overtaken them? Panic would have been everywhere. Speech is a wonderful tool. But when speech is misunderstood, it can be frustrating and devastating.

Today there is close to 7,000 known languages in the world. That is not a testimony to the educational advancement or brilliance of man. It is a testimony to the sinfulness of man who for the most part lives in rebellion against God.

Verse 9

"Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth."

God gave the tower of Babel the name, "Babel," which means "confusion." What the people thought was their gateway to Heaven was in fact the exact opposite. At this point, "did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth." When you go away from the Lord and try to build your life away from the Lord the only thing you can ever get is confusion.

Conclusion

If you read the story of the tower of Babel carefully you ask yourself, "What were these people thinking?" Honestly, did they really think they would be able to build a tower that reach heaven? If you look at all the man-made towers being built by man today you can also ask, "What are people thinking?" Do they really believe their religion or works of righteousness will ever get them to God? Obviously the pride of man and desire to approach God in his own way is still a very powerful reality.

The tower of Babel is a reminder that when you try to organize your life or society without God, the result is always failure. The Bible says in Proverbs 14:12, *"There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."* The tower of Babel was a failure. What about your life?

Amen.