

## **“Who alone is Sovereign?” (Genesis 11:1-26)**

There is no more comforting doctrine for the people of God in Scripture than God’s unfettered absolute sovereignty over the affairs of this planet. Living in our fast-paced knowledge-based society, it is all too easy to be intimidated by the powers of governments and corporations if we judge them from the horizontal only. However, everything is still in His control. His will shall ultimately be done. Our God is still in control of human history, for “*He ruleth by His power for ever*” (Psa. 66:7). We can sing in every age, “*Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth*” (Rev. 19:6).

Solomon makes it clear, “*There are many devices in a man’s heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand*” (Prov. 19:21) and “*There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord*” (Prov. 21:30). Man may do what he can but ultimately God will do what He wills. There is a clear demonstration in this chapter of the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God over the plans of man. Heaven rules over the affairs of man. Steve Cole notes, “When a deluded man sets himself against a speeding locomotive, the train always wins. Unless you want to spend your life in futility, you must submit to the Sovereign God.”

The story of the division of the nations by language is placed by the Holy Spirit amidst two genealogies of the family of Shem. It explains *why* and *how* families, tribes, and finally nations emerged from the three sons of Noah. It does not happen from some evolutionary process of linguistics but from a sovereign sudden intervention by God in man’s development. From chapter 12 onwards, the focus of the rest of the OT will be on God’s redemptive work through Israel.

*And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. 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. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. 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. (v1-4)*

This incident took place when there was a common language spoken by all the people on the earth, as “*the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.*” There was no hindrance to effective communication across the planet. It was a time of unprecedented unity of purpose and communication in humanity. There was nothing inherently sinful in having this unity of language. If it had been used for the glory of God, men could have worshipped God together in harmony as we witness in heaven. However, sin always debases the gracious gifts God has given to us. It must also be noted that unity is not always a virtue. Here we have unanimity but in the wrong direction. Unity is not the highest good, but obedience to God’s truth.

If we take Genesis 10:25 as the timing for this event, we know that Peleg was born about 100 years after the Flood. As Peleg lived 239 years, this incident could be between 100-300 years after the Great Flood. Even though Noah lived for 350 years after the Flood, there was clearly a large group of people who refused to listen to his firsthand witness as a living testimony of God’s judgment on sinners. The fact of this illustrates just how quickly and how far sin infected the new world to the point that God had to intervene in divine judgment again. This time He judges by dispersion rather than judgment by destruction in a flood.

Now God had instructed Noah and his descendants to, “*Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*” and “*bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein*” (Gen. 9:1, 7). However,

this rebellious Hamites that came to establish Babel in the land of Shinar (cf. Dan. 1:2) sought to construct a kingdom of centralised power, “*Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name.*” These people refused to venture forth on God’s promises to live by faith. Nimrod, the Napoleon or Hitler of his day, likely led this Eastward migration (Gen. 10:10). We are given the reason for this movement, “*let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.*”

Babel was clearly much more than a great building project. It was meant to make a statement. The emphasis is not only on the need to glorify man in their purpose, but to do it by man’s efforts, “*let us make brick*” and “*let us build us a city and a tower.*” Throughout the centuries, there is an abundance of raw materials in the region of Shinar (modern Iraq) to be used for construction. These people recognised the effort and cost of this mammoth project, but were determined to fulfill their aspirations. They wanted to bring heaven to earth by their own efforts.

There is certainly skill and ingenuity to note here in this action, but it is done without reference to God. They looked to man alone for help. There is no mention of God’s name in their reasoning or planning – “*let us*” is the emphasis. The city and tower were the outward expressions of the inward sins. They were to be a symbol of man’s independence from God. This is the spirit of the proud man, summed up by the poet, William Ernest Henley in the poem *Invictus*,

*It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.*

Fallen man is still created in the image of God. This image was debased in the Fall, but not eradicated. So, fallen man still has tremendous powers of creativity and ingenuity. Technical advancement is not necessarily a good thing. It can be a product of wicked purposes as much as godly ones. Just look at the technological marvel of the pyramids. Cities are a place of concentrated evil because of the close proximity of depraved individuals. Evil minds can work together to invent even more accessible and depraved ways to sin in such an environment. That is why people often retreat to the suburbs and outlying areas, as the depth and influence of evil can become unbearable.

This was, doubtless, the greatest building project of the ancient world. It would have been the envy of all the peoples around them. The chief end of man is the glory of God. However, the chief end of Babel was the glory of man, “*let us make us a name.*” That is still true today. All around us fallen men are living on the plain of Shinar as they seek to erect great projects for their own glory. Some even name buildings after themselves! It reveals their deep insecurity amidst their pride and arrogance that they will not be remembered. Even churches and Christians need to be wary of this tendency in trusting in bricks and mortar over the Lord. Beautiful buildings must only be erected by trusting in God’s power and for God’s glory.

This was to be a totally man-centred city, which would bask in the adoration of man. It was by man and for man. God was not consulted or trusted. The parallel between a later king of Babel or Babylon is striking, “*The king spake, 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?*” (Dan. 4:30) The city would meet their defence and social needs, but the tower would meet their need for their religious worship of man. Even the man who rejects God, needs to worship someone or something (cf. Eccl. 3:11; Rom. 1:21-25), as man is a spiritual creature. Derek Kidner observes,

The primeval history reaches its fruitless climax as man, conscious of new abilities, prepares to glorify and fortify himself by collective effort. The elements of the story are timelessly characteristic of the spirit of the world. The project is typically grandiose; men describe it excitedly to one another as if it were the ultimate achievement .... At the same time they betray their insecurity as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes.

Some even see in this incident an attempt to build a tower so high that never again could man be swept away in a global flood. It is said that these stones were waterproof. Whatever all of the reasons were, it is clear that the people of Babel were doing it in defiance of God's perfect will. The following verses make that clear.

*And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. 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. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. (v5-7)*

The rebellious attitudes and acts of the post-Flood people did not escape the attention of God anymore than the pre-Flood generation. Proud man will not be allowed to thwart the purposes of God. The language "*the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded*" does not indicate that God only discovered at the last moment what was going on. The expressions are anthropomorphic to emphasise that the omniscient God especially takes note of what is going on. As the people wanted to build a tower to reach heaven, the language also pictures God as far above their feeble efforts in having to come "*down.*" The men of Babel were not divine, but merely "*the children of men.*" Bob Deffinbaugh explains,

These verses are a beautifully fashioned satire on the folly of man's activities. Men had commenced to build a city with a high tower that they thought would make a name for them. Moses is suggesting to us that man's thoughts and efforts, no matter how lofty, are insignificant to God. While the top of the tower may, from the vantage point of earth, seem to pierce the clouds, to the infinite, almighty God it was a barely visible dot on the earth. It was as though God would have to stoop to view it. If God should have to 'descend' to scrutinize this city, it was due to the insignificance of it all, not God's inability to keep up with His creation.

The Lord notes that if He does not intervene to disperse humanity from their declared objective, then the whole world will be consumed by sin, "*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.*" They will believe that they can do anything now by their own efforts. It will fuel their pride to a dangerous level. They will refuse to allow God in their thoughts and declare that the "God of the gaps" cannot resolve unknown questions.

However, because God is God He is not only omniscient, but He is also omnipotent. The Lord has innumerable ways to deal with this rebellious group. He has a plan and the power to fully implement the plan, "*Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not*

*understand one another's speech."* This plan of God will be not just a punishment, but also a preventative measure to stop man destroying himself. The dispersion they feared most, "*lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth*" would ironically be the means of man's ultimate salvation.

Man may have their plans "*which they have imagined to do,*" but only God's plans can ultimately prevail. This is a vital truth for us to learn. We live in a world that believes and teaches that there are no limits on human potential. It is the spirit of Babel repackaged for the twenty first century.

*So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. 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. (v8-9)*

The word "*Babel*" is a term meaning confusion. It is even used in this idiomatic way in English. So Babel became "Confusion City." We are not told how this unfolded but we can only imagine the bewilderment at the building site that day. Panic and then frustration must have set in, as each worker was talking to one another in a language that was incomprehensible. Words they did not know before tumbled out of their mouths. This was a divine miracle for them to suddenly speak completely diverse and unrelated languages. That is why today at the UN assembly in New York the members have to sit with headphones on listening to the speaker through hundreds of different translations. That is a graphic picture of the consequences of Babel. These languages and nations are a potent limitation on the global aspirations of arrogant mankind.

Unity that is not based on truth is not a unity that should be the objective. A divinely imposed disunity will prevent an evil unity amongst humanity. Now we should note that the development of nations and languages was not some byproduct of a gradual evolutionary process as the modern anthropologist and linguist argue, but a single, divine act of a sovereign God. That is why tribes can exist adjacent to one another and speak completely different languages, which are incomprehensible to one another.

This simple act of God to touch their tongues mean that it would have been impossible to progress further, "*they left off to build the city.*" God effectively cancels the building project by just touching one of their smallest members – the tongue! Man's plans are reversed. How weak man truly is! The one-world domination ambition is thwarted until God will permit the anti-christ to arise. The final sentence, "*from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth*" reveals that God's will is ultimately done despite man's best efforts to thwart it. All of human history works to His timetable – it is *His Story!*

*These are the generations of Shem: Shem was an hundred years old, and begat Arphaxad two years after the flood: And Shem lived after he begat Arphaxad five hundred years, and begat sons and daughters. And Arphaxad lived five and thirty years, and begat Salah: And Arphaxad lived after he begat Salah four hundred and three years, and begat sons and daughters. And Salah lived thirty years, and begat Eber: And Salah lived after he begat Eber four hundred and three years, and begat sons and daughters. And Eber lived four and thirty years, and begat Peleg: And Eber lived after he begat Peleg four hundred and thirty years, and begat sons and daughters. And Peleg lived thirty years, and begat Reu: And Peleg lived after he begat Reu two hundred and nine years, and begat sons and*

*daughters. And Reu lived two and thirty years, and begat Serug: And Reu lived after he begat Serug two hundred and seven years, and begat sons and daughters. And Serug lived thirty years, and begat Nabor: And Serug lived after he begat Nabor two hundred years, and begat sons and daughters. And Nabor lived nine and twenty years, and begat Terah: And Nabor lived after he begat Terah an hundred and nineteen years, and begat sons and daughters. And Terah lived seventy years, and begat Abram, Nabor, and Haran. (v10-26)*

This may appear to be a “boring” list of names setting forth another genealogy of Shem. However, this family tree is a vital link in God’s redemptive chain. When man was devising his plans for world domination, God was quietly working in the background to effect His ultimate plan of bringing peace to all men through His Son. This would be through Shem’s line in the person of a chosen instrument called Abram or Abraham. Unlike the people at Babel, this man will look “*for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God*” (Heb. 11:10).

Outside of Jesus Christ, it is arguable that Abraham will be the most important figure in Scriptures. His life and descendants dominate not only the bulk of Genesis but also all of the OT Scriptures. They were to be God’s evangelical witness of the Gospel to all the other nations of the world. The people at Babel wanted a great name for themselves. They got it but not the one they had hoped. However, this man Abraham will submit himself to the will of God and the Lord promised, “*I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing*” (Gen. 12:2).

Then, and today, the message is the same. There will be no lasting satisfaction in the things of this life if they are not done by God and for God. Trying to erect a monument to your glory will fail. You will just be like the people of Babel in erecting a tower that ultimately leads to nowhere! We are not to devote our lives making a name for ourselves but to exalt His great Name. The mistakes of history are valuable only if we learn from them.

The basic philosophy of mankind is “Glory to man in the highest.” Yet although man seeks to position in himself in the centre of the universe, he is a God-dependant creature and always will be. For the very laws of nature that man seeks to manipulate for his glory are independent of him and control him. Self-glorification is always self-defeating. Yet, man still tries to usurp God’s position! However, we are commanded, “*In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths*” (Prov. 3:6). There is an alternative tower to Babel, “*The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe*” (Prov. 18:10). Build your life on that foundation and you will never be confused or disappointed.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Is unity a good thing or a bad thing?
2. What do we learn about the origin of languages in this passage?
3. What do we learn about God's sovereignty in this passage?
4. How have you been challenged by this passage?