

# HUMANITY REBELS

CORE PASSAGE: GENESIS 11:1-9

**Context:** After living in the ark for just over a year, Noah and his family stepped out on dry ground. Then God made a covenant with Noah that He would never again flood the whole earth to destroy sin. Like He had commanded Adam, God commanded Noah and his sons to fill the earth by spreading out and multiplying. Creation had a fresh start. One would think obedience and a desire to walk with God would be foremost on the minds of every human being after the flood, but sin still corrupted the hearts and minds of each new generation. And once again, God would not tolerate their rebellion.

**Key Concept:** Humanity rebels against God's commands and needs to be restrained.

## DAILY READINGS

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|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Day 1:</b> Genesis 10:1-20  | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Day 4:</b> Genesis 11:5-9   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Day 2:</b> Genesis 10:21-32 | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Day 5:</b> Genesis 11:10-26 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Day 3:</b> Genesis 11:1-4   | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Day 6:</b> Psalm 96         |

**Sin causes us to rebel against God's commands** (Genesis 11:1-4).

<sup>1</sup> The whole earth had the same language and vocabulary. <sup>2</sup> As people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> They said to each other, “Come, let’s make oven-fired bricks.” (They used brick for stone and asphalt for mortar.) <sup>4</sup> 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.”

**The Sin of Disobedience Leads to Rebellion**

Just prior to this passage, Genesis 10 goes through the next *toledot*, a literary structuring of the family history. This one recounts Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, describing the people, tribes, and towns associated with them, sometimes referred to as the Table of Nations. This chapter is an overview of the nations after the flood. It is thematic in nature, not chronological, as throughout chapter 10 we find the varying families and tribes described as “each with their own language” (v. 5), “scattered” (v. 18), and “according to their languages” (vv. 20,31). This summation is in line with biblical patterns. Sometimes the authors first summarize an event and then go into more detail, just like in the creation accounts from Genesis 1–2.

Genesis 11, then, occurred before the people had scattered and developed their own languages. Throughout verses 1-9, we see a literary structure of parallel, paired lines as well as a chiasmus with its center point—“The LORD came down” (v. 5). We see humanity’s efforts, the climax of God coming down, and the ending scene of God’s actions.

Verses 1 and 2 in Hebrew start out the same way with the same word, *wayhi*, literally “And it was,” which you don’t see in some translations. Not normally significant but when it’s repeated, it sets up the narrative that is about to happen. In effect, “[and it was that] the whole earth had the same language” (Gen. 11:1).

The Hebrew word *kalha’ares*, meaning “the whole earth,” is mentioned five times in this short narrative. Once in verse 1, once in verse 4, once in verse 8, and twice in verse 9. This word marks off an *inclusio*, a literary bracket like sandwich bread that starts the passage and ends the passage. It’s repetition throughout provides the subject of the narrative—the history of the whole earth. In verse 1, we see the whole earth “had the same language,” literally of “one lip and one word.” The repetition of “one” emphasizes the unity that the people had. This unity in and of itself wasn’t bad, but what was wrong was that it was a unity without the Lord and against the Lord. By the end of the narrative, the end of the *inclusio*, we find the opposite has happened—the Lord scattered the people throughout the whole earth. What started with “the whole earth” being of one language will end up with “the whole earth” being scattered.

Verse 2 then continues, “[And it was that] as people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there,” again setting up the scene. Moses described the people as having “migrated from the east,” which alludes back to the fact that Adam and Eve were banished from the garden. The cherubim was placed at the east of the garden (3:24) and Cain lived in the land of Nod, “east” of Eden (4:16). Going east tends to have the idea of going away from

God in these early narratives. So as people migrated from the east, east of Eden, they settled in Shinar, the land that Nimrod would rule, which included Babylon (10:9-10) in southern Mesopotamia. Note that Nimrod was a son of Cush, the son of Ham, who sinned against his father, Noah (see 9:20-25). Nimrod also means “we shall rebel.”<sup>1</sup> With these hints, we know something bad is going to happen. People are about to rebel against God. The word “settled” contrasts with what God told Noah and his descendants to do after the flood, to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (9:1). This fact indicates that the people of the times had decided to ignore God’s commands and instructions, and instead of filling the earth, they “settled” where they were.

***Why do you think it is so easy to disobey God?***

### **The Sin of Pride Leads to Rebellion**

Verses 3 and 4 also pair up, both starting out the same way with *wayyo'mru*, “And they said.” Moses continued to recount the events of the people as they spoke to each other and not to God as they should have. They rallied each other with the word “Come” in both verses, inviting themselves to do this thing that would make them look great. First, they said to each other, “Come, let’s make oven-fired bricks.” They were ready to build something. Moses then made fun of the people of Babel at the time when he mentioned, “They used brick for stone and asphalt for mortar” (v. 3). The Israelites reading or listening to Moses’s words would have been used to working with stone and mortar, knowing they were better materials for building than brick and asphalt. Their skill and knowledge of building were much better than those at Babel. Verse 4 then repeats

**Voices from  
CHURCH HISTORY**

*“Any religion that makes salvation dependent upon something man does, rather than what Christ has done, is the religion of Babylon.”<sup>3</sup>*

–Don Fortner  
(1950–2020)

verse 3 with “And they said, come,” for they wanted to build themselves “a city and a tower.” Some of us who are familiar with this narrative may only remember the idea of a tower, not a city. But the use of the phrase “a city and a tower” most likely insinuates a city around its centerpiece, which would be a large and tall tower. They wanted to build the tower as tall as they could, reaching to the sky, hoping it would “make a name” for themselves and keep them from being “scattered throughout the earth” (v. 4). In other words, their pride and desire for fame and power was the motive behind their building. But they would soon realize, however, that pride will always lead to our fall.

Archaeology supports the idea that this tower they were building was similar to a ziggurat, a high, step-formed building, similar to a pyramid but without an interior space. Dedicated to the gods of the region, it had steps leading up to the top where a bed or table was placed for the gods. “This stairway was a visual representation of that which was believed to be used by the gods to travel from one realm to another. . . . In summary, the Tower of Babel project is a temple complex featuring a ziggurat, which was designed to make it convenient for the god to come down to his temple, receive worship from the people, and bless them.”<sup>2</sup> The people of Babel, then, were trying to reach God, but a god that they formed in their minds, one like them, who could be reached.

The people’s desire to build a tower to reach God had faulty theology. Not only was it prideful, but it assumed that God was in a specific, particular place and could be reached by man-made efforts. Like many other religions of that time (and of our time), people forget that God is omnipresent and transcendent. He

is everywhere yet at the same time beyond our reach by our own efforts because of His holiness and righteousness. He cannot be found in one place alone and cannot be reached simply by building a tower to Him. Religions in the past and present have always tried to give humanity a way to God or gods or a place of tranquility or peace through a person's own efforts. Yet Christianity reminds us that it is God who reaches out to us, and we ourselves in no way can find God on our own.

*What are some ways we try to come to God on our own terms?*

### **The Lord restrains sin and accomplishes His will** (Genesis 11:5-9).

<sup>5</sup> Then the LORD came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building. <sup>6</sup> 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 for them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let's go down there and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another's speech." <sup>8</sup> So from there the LORD scattered them throughout the earth, and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore it is called Babylon, for there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth, and from there the LORD scattered them throughout the earth.

### **The Lord Restrains Sin for the Benefit of His People**

Here the narrative shifts from the people being the subject to God being so. The Lord "came down" to

observe what the humans were doing. The supreme God is everywhere and all-powerful, but describing Him as coming down was to show how small humanity and our works are. As one commentator states, “Their tower was so microscopic that the all-seeing omnipotent God had to come down to see. It was as if God stooped down like a man on his hands and knees and lowered his face to the earth to see the great tower.”<sup>4</sup>

God then surmised that as one people, being unified, the things they planned to do would be accomplished. The unvoiced assumption is that what they planned to do wouldn’t be anything good. God wasn’t threatened by what humanity could do. He’s all-powerful. God’s concern for a single-language humanity was not for His sovereign position but humanity’s unfathomable descent into depravity should they remain united in their rebellion. They would continue trying to do things on their own efforts, believing their self-sufficiency was enough, but in reality, they would fail and fall to sin and evil. God knew that He had to rescue them from themselves and restrain sin. God is in the work of rescuing His people, even from themselves.

In a somewhat mocking rebuttal to humanity’s efforts in saying to each other, “Come, let’s make oven-fired bricks” (v. 3), and, “Come, let’s build ourselves a city and a tower” (v. 4), the triune God said, “Come, let’s go down and confuse their language” (v. 7). With one fell swoop, God destroyed their plans. Moses’s word selection in Hebrew is interesting here. With the use of similar sounds, he mocks the people at Babel. The human beings say, *nilbenah*, “let us make (bricks)” (v. 3), but God says, *naḇelah*, “let us mix up” (v. 7). “The Lord literally mixes up *nilbenah* through his judgment.

Indeed, *nabelah* sounds very like *nebalah*, meaning ‘the folly of the impious.’ The name ‘Babel’ thus stands forever as a reminder of the failure of godless folly (cf Ps 14:1).”<sup>5</sup>

### **The Lord Always Accomplishes His Will**

God knew that if the language of human beings was different, the people would “scatter throughout the earth” (v. 8), what the people were trying to prevent in the first place. Their own idea of building a city and a tower not to “scatter” (v. 4) was the very thing that made God “scatter” them (v. 8). Being scattered, they stopped building the tower and city. Human beings can make plans, but we can never be sure we can accomplish them. God, however, will always accomplish His. Proverbs 16 has a few words of wisdom for this occasion:

- “All a person’s ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs motives” (Prov. 16:2).
- “Everyone with a proud heart is detestable to the LORD; be assured, he will not go unpunished” (v. 5).
- “A person’s heart plans his way, but the LORD determines his steps” (v. 9).
- “Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall” (v. 18).

Humanity in their pride wanted to make a name for themselves, being disobedient to God, but God will always have the last word. Now they were vulnerable to the world around them and humbled before an almighty God.

***How does God restrain sin today?***

Notes

#### **Voices from CHURCH HISTORY**

*“God’s judgments on sinners in this life, compared with those which are reserved, are little more than restraints.”<sup>6</sup>*

—Matthew Henry  
(1662–1714)

**THEOLOGY**  
**Connection**

**GOD:** God as Father reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history according to the purposes of His grace. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, and all-wise. God is Father in truth to those who become children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. He is fatherly in His attitude toward all men.

God's judgment at Babylon was severe, dividing a family into peoples who would be at odds with each other, and yet, God's judgment was also full of grace. The people were prideful and wanting to reach the skies to make a name for themselves. They settled when God told them to fill the earth. They disobeyed and tried to do things apart from God. Yet God in His graciousness didn't destroy them as He could have done and as they deserved. Like in the narrative of Adam and Eve, He didn't want them to continue in their foolishness, pride, and sin. So similar to expelling Adam and Eve from the garden so they wouldn't eat of the tree of life and thus live forever in sin and shame, the Lord God confused the people's language and scattered them. In one way, this was to limit, decrease, or reverse their rebellious ways, making it difficult for the people at that time to continue in their pride and sin that would lead to further evil and judgment.

God is sovereign and we are not, but when we try to do things our own way, He will orchestrate events to try to conform us back to His will. Being all-knowing, God knows what is better for us than we do. And sometimes what we think is judgment could also be His grace as He accomplishes His will. We should be reminded that God "is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us—to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations" (Eph. 3:20-21). In this instance, the people were thinking wrongly, but God still was able to do more. In confusing the language and scattering the people, God not only prevented them from further foolishness, He was also creating beautiful new cultures, people groups, and nations that He would one day redeem.

Moses ends this section by commenting that the place was “called Babylon.” In Hebrew, the name meant “confusion,” as opposed to the Akkadian meaning of “gate of the gods.” God “confused the language of the whole earth” and “scattered” them, forcing them to do what He commanded in the first place in filling the earth, thereby humbling them in their confusion. For the Israelites who were hearing Moses’s account as they were wandering in the wilderness toward the promise land of Canaan, they understood that Israel, like Abram, must take up the role “as the appointed vehicle of God’s salvation among the Gentiles. Moreover, Babel exemplified the threat that the indigenous Canaanite cities presented for Israel. These cities were perceived as overwhelming fortresses (Num 13:28; Deut 1:28; 3:5; 9:1); nevertheless they would fall before the judgment of God. Any culture, such as Babel, that defied the moral will of God would meet with the same end as the tower.”<sup>7</sup>

But this isn’t the end of the story. Though the confusion of languages brought on the scattering of people, as mentioned before, what resulted were unique and diverse languages and cultures, a result of God’s continual creativity. And though these differences sometimes bring conflict and misunderstandings, it also brings beauty and patience as we seek to build bridges among nations and cultures. When Jesus came into the picture, because of God’s love for the world (John 3:16), His crucifixion and resurrection led to the salvation and unity of God’s people under Christ’s headship, no matter what tongue, tribe, or nation you belong to. For in Jesus’s last words, He told His disciples, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Not to put words in Jesus’s

## GOSPEL Connection

As a consequence of the rebellion at the tower of Babylon, God confused the language of humanity to scatter the peoples over the face of the earth, but through the gospel of Jesus Christ, God saves people from every tribe, tongue, and nation to make one people united in Christ forever.

mouth, but we can possibly substitute the word “scatter” for “go.” Our human tendency is to stay or settle, like the people in this passage. Sometimes we like to stay among those who are like us, those with the same culture or language, those who have the same religion and beliefs. It’s more comfortable. People know us and like us. There’s less conflict. But as we understand God’s words to “multiply and fill the earth” and Jesus’s words to “go and make disciples,” we should think about how God wants His kingdom to expand and the world to know of the love of God through the works of Jesus Christ on the cross.

***How can we be a group that refuses to “settle” and instead “scatters” and “goes” in obedience to the Great Commission?***

A couple millennia later at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12), we see a picture of a reversal of the events of this passage. Instead of confusing the language of the people, the Holy Spirit enabled Jesus’s disciples to speak to be understood and not misunderstood. The disciples “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them” (v. 4), and the people asked, “How is it that each of us can hear them in our own native language?” (v. 8). But God enabled this because, they were “declaring the magnificent acts of God in [their] own tongues” (v. 11). The apostle John in Revelation 7:9 tells us that in his vision of the end times, he saw “a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” Thus, God desires all nations, tribes, and people groups to be part of the family of God. As we become one body under the headship of Christ, this

unity in diversity (though at times seems difficult) reveals to the world the love of God's people for each other and the power of God to redeem and restore a people as they are transformed into His image. Unity under God is always for His will to be accomplished. Unity apart from God, on the other hand, will always be torn down.



## HEAD

Why do you think God allowed the people to begin a tower they would not finish before scattering them as He had commanded?



## HEART

How does the church reflect true unity with diverse groups of people throughout the world?



## HANDS

How can you help someone who may not look, think, or speak like you to understand the good news of Jesus Christ this week?

### References

1. R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 169.
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3. Donald S. Fortner, *Discovering Christ in Genesis* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2002), 136.
4. Hughes, 172.
5. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Dallas, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1987), 234–35.
6. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 33.
7. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, vol. 1A, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 486.