

## Genesis 11:1-9

The whole earth had one language and a single vocabulary. As people traveled in the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they settled there. <sup>3</sup>They said to one another, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used mud brick instead of stone for building material, and they used tar for mortar. <sup>4</sup>They said, “Come, let’s build a city for ourselves and a tower whose top reaches to the sky, and let’s make a name for ourselves, so that we will not be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”

<sup>5</sup>The LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the people were building. <sup>6</sup>The LORD said, “If this is the first thing they are doing as one people, who all have one language, then nothing that they intend to do will be too difficult for them. <sup>7</sup>Come, let’s go down there and confuse their language, so that they cannot understand one another’s speech.”

<sup>8</sup>So the LORD scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth, and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup>It was named Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

## Let's Talk

### I.

Words. Language. How important those concepts are! You don’t remember it, but your parents made a big deal out of it—your first word. We use words; we use language in our everyday lives.

Did you ever wonder where language came from? The story of language is even older than our human story. The Gospel of John begins this way: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1, EHV). John speaks about Jesus. He identifies him as God himself. He also identifies him as being present at the very beginning of time. And he calls him the Word. Jesus *is* the Word of God. He *is* the Word by which all things that were made that have been made. He *is* the very Bible itself, which is called the Word of God. The whole story of Scripture is His Story—it is the story of language.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...<sup>3</sup> God said...” (Genesis 1:1, 3, EHV). In the beginning was the Word. Jesus was there. Language begins when God speaks. Again and again in the creation account we are told “God said...”

God’s creation of human beings deviated a little bit from every other thing he created. “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7, EHV). God breathed into human beings. Part of that breathing in seems to be the gift of language, for “Out of the soil the LORD God had formed every wild animal and every bird of the sky, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them. Whatever the man called every living creature, that became its name” (Genesis 2:19, EHV).

### II.

From that time on until after Noah and the worldwide Flood there was only one language. Today’s Old Testament Lesson speaks about the divergence of language.

Imagine how convenient it was for commerce and collaboration and education and everything else you can think of to have only one common language! The people who lived after the Flood couldn’t imagine things any other way.

God had given Noah’s descendants specific instructions to spread out—to repopulate and fill the earth with people once again. “They said to one another, ‘Come, let’s make

bricks and bake them thoroughly.’ They used mud brick instead of stone for building material, and they used tar for mortar. <sup>4</sup>They said, ‘Come, let’s build a city for ourselves and a tower whose top reaches to the sky, and let’s make a name for ourselves, so that we will not be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth’” (Genesis 11:3-4, EHV).

There’s nothing wrong with wanting to make bricks. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to build a city. There’s nothing wrong with dotting the landscape with skyscrapers reaching to the sky. But notice their deliberate disobedience: “so that we will not be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.” Their whole purpose in manufacturing bricks and mortar and all their building projects involving a city and a tall skyscraper was to defy God’s specific command to them.

### III.

Language is powerful. Words mean things. Social media tempts it’s users to wield their words to build themselves up and create a reputation that resonates with their chosen peer group, but just a few words out of place and that carefully crafted reputation is destroyed.

Politicians carefully choose words (at least, many of them do or used to) to create the impression that they are doing exactly the things you expect them to do. At the same time, they carefully craft statements against their opponent to make it look like only an ignorant individual or a fool would choose their opponent’s way; or, of course, a third choice—someone who is evil and devious might choose their opponent to oppress the masses.

The news media also uses language for dastardly designs as well as for good things. Public opinion has shifted drastically about any number of things brought to light by media attention. Bullying, both in-person and over the internet, has become far less acceptable, thanks in large part to the attention directed at it through the media. At the same time, acceptance of homosexuality, which God condemns, has become more palatable to society because of the way it has been covered in the news. Not only are people urged to *tolerate* such behavior, but to embrace it as something that dare never be spoken against.

“The LORD said, ‘If this is the first thing they are doing as one people, who all have one language, then nothing that they intend to do will be too difficult for them’” (Genesis 11:6, EHV). God recognizes the power of language. It has the potential for great good, yes, but also for a great deal of evil.

The problem of the people of this city was that they had given up calling on the name of the Lord. What a great invitation God has given us to call on his name.

### IV.

“Let’s make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:4, EHV). The builders of the city, who thought they were so clever in their use of language, wanted to make a name for *themselves*, rather than calling on the name of the Lord.

Is this not *still* a problem for human beings? People are interested in themselves and their own name and reputation. There were always a few who seemed to not only have a sense of self-importance, but also the means to make a name for themselves—sports figures, politicians, the rich and powerful. But as social media has become so pervasive and so dominant, each individual has the power to satisfy their own lust for a particular reputation. Live streaming isn’t just for church services or events, but for you to yammer on and on about every moment of your life. Build yourself up. Make a name for yourself. See how many “likes” you can get.

### V.

“The LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the people were building”

(Genesis 11:5, EHV). As mighty as their tower was, it is still so small that God had to come down from the heights of heaven to inspect this insignificant structure created by human beings.

The early Christian church looked at these verses and understood them to mean that this was the preincarnate Jesus who came down. When God appears to human beings in the Old Testament we can expect it is in the same way he appears to human beings in the New Testament, in the person of the Son. As John said in his gospel: “in the beginning was the Word.” The Word, who later came in the flesh as Jesus, appeared to Adam and Eve, to Moses, and to others.

“The LORD said, ‘If this is the first thing they are doing as one people, who all have one language, then nothing that they intend to do will be too difficult for them. <sup>7</sup>Come, let’s go down there and confuse their language, so that they cannot understand one another’s speech’” (Genesis 11:6-7, EHV). God’s punishment—God’s answer to the impertinence of mankind—was to confuse their words.

“So the LORD scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth, and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup>It was named Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:8-9, EHV).

We miss some alliteration in our English translations, even the best of them. In Hebrew the name of the city is Babel (with the emphasis on the last syllable). The word for confuse is balal. God made the language of Babel into babble.

The point is that human beings talk big, but talk is cheap. God’s Word is *always* the final answer.

## VI.

Thankfully, this wasn’t the last time in the story of language that God came down to this earth. He came many times through the words of the prophets. Each time he pointed ahead to the coming of the Word in the flesh.

Eventually, God came down in the person of Jesus—*the* Word—to live and die and rise again for the sins of the world—including every single one of the things we have done to try to subvert his Word and his commands to us in the past. Then, and only then, did he return to the heavens.

Jesus’ word from the cross: “It is finished”—declared that all our sins are forgiven, even all of those in which we have tried to build up our reputation to make ourselves as important as God.

The powerful words of forgiveness God gives to us in our worship service at the Confession and Absolution remind us that every single sin has been paid for by Jesus. With every sin already paid for, we are eager to confess our sins to our God, already knowing that he loves us so much he has taken away all our confusion and doubt and has given us his Word that we have become his.

At Pentecost we are reminded that God the Holy Spirit came down and spoke. He didn’t come to teach us all Hebrew and Greek so that we could understand the Bible. Instead, he came down into every language that was spoken—all the languages created at Babel. Now the church uses those gifted in language to translate the Bible into the languages of the world, so that all can taste and see what the Lord has done for them. Amen.