

Longing for Control

December 5, 2021



Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Genesis 11:1-9

Session Outline

1. The Light of Your Own Fire (Genesis 11:1-4)
2. A Name for Ourselves (Genesis 11:4-7)
3. The Lord Scattered Them (Genesis 11:8-9)

Theological Theme

God is the sovereign King of the universe and will not share His glory with another. Furthermore, God, according to the counsel of His own will and for His own glory, uses even the sinfulness of man to accomplish His purposes on the earth.



Leader Guide

Longing for Control

Introduction

- ? Have someone read James 4:6 for the group. What do you think this verse means?
- ? Can you think of an example of someone being humble in the Scriptures? What about someone who was proud?

It could be argued that no mere man underwent greater humiliation than Nebuchadnezzar. He ruled over all of Babylonia and was the most powerful and longest-reigning ruler of that great kingdom. Yet, God drove him from among men and made him dwell with the beasts of the field where he ate grass like an ox. His hair grew as long as eagles' feathers and his nails were like birds' claws (see Daniel 4:28-33). What humiliation! The reason Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation was so great was the high position from which he descended.

But Christ's humiliation was even greater. He ruled over all the universe and "everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him" (Colossians 1:16). Yet, "when the time came to completion, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Galatians 4:4), Jesus Christ "humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). Christ's humiliation was greater than Nebuchadnezzar's.

Nebuchadnezzar was humiliated for his sin, but Christ was without sin. Jesus submitted to humiliation for the sin of God's people. Nebuchadnezzar was humiliated against his will, but Christ willingly underwent humiliation. He willingly gave up His life for sinners. Nebuchadnezzar was humbled so he would give God glory. Jesus was humiliated so we could give God glory as beloved children (see 1 John 3:1).

In our lesson today, we will consider the pride and humiliation of the people of Babel. They showed their arrogance by seeking to control their situation to make great their own name. Yet, God, in His sovereign wisdom, used their sinfulness to accomplish His purpose.

Session Summary

After the flood, God commanded Noah and his family to multiply and fill the earth. This was the same command he had given to Adam and Eve in the garden before sin entered the world. Noah's descendants did not obey. While they did multiply, they did not fill the earth. Instead they migrated together to the Plain of Shinar where they formed a great city. There they grew in number and in pride. They began to depend on themselves and set up their own greatness as an idol in their hearts. They did not depend upon God. They relied upon their own strength and wisdom. They leaned upon their own understanding (see Proverbs 3:5-6).

Although God had commanded them to fill the earth, they chose to stay together in one place. They had received God's words. They knew what God commanded. Yet they disobeyed. Sadly, this was only a continuation of a pattern that is evident in the book of Genesis (and continues throughout the rest of Scripture). Adam and Eve received God's words but disbelieved what He said. They chose to believe the words of Satan instead. Cain received God's words warning against the sin that was waiting at his door. But he disregarded it and followed the passions of his own heart. The people of Noah's day were warned by Noah's preaching, but they ignored his message (see 2 Peter 2:5).

The Scripture testifies of itself that, "The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God remains forever" (Isaiah 40:8). Those who fear God also believe in His Word. It is illogical and incongruent for a person to claim to be a Christian while disregarding the Word of Christ. Those who are in Christ should pay careful attention to all of the words of Scripture so they might obey them. During the season of Advent, we are reminded that at His first coming, Jesus reversed the effect of Babel (Acts 2) and at His second coming, He will make true peace (shalom) throughout the earth.

1. The Light of Your Own Fire (Genesis 11:1-4)

After the flood, as the earth was being repopulated, all of the people had the same language. The Scriptures explain that the people migrated from the east and settled on the plain of Shinar. 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" (Genesis 11:4).



What evidence does this passage give that the people were not humble before or dependent upon God?

The People's Rebellion

The people's pride and ambition is expressed in three different ways: (1) the fivefold use of the first-person pronouns—us (three times), ourselves (twice), and we; (2) their desire to build ... a tower into the sky, thus giving them access to "the heavens," the domain of God; and (3) their attempt at self-glorification—let us make a name for ourselves. Because they did it to avoid being scattered throughout the earth, all their efforts amounted to a rebellion against God and his command to fill the earth (9:1).

The words and actions of the people of Babel indicated that they were prideful and independent. Instead of depending on God, they looked to their own wisdom and might for security. Of course, this has been (and continues to be) the fundamental temptation of all people who have been given freewill. Satan, in his pride, desired rise to God's place and receive the worship that is due to God alone. Why did he do this? Because he trusted in his own feelings and will over God's word.

The Bible is clear that God opposes the proud (James 4:6). The Proverbs exhort us "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding" (3:5). When created beings place their hope and trust in their own intelligence, they have not only placed themselves in danger due to their own limitations, but they have offended their Creator. An offense against an infinitely holy God is due divine justice.



What are some ways people take matters into their own hands rather than trust God?

Isaiah gave a stark warning to those who would lean on their own understanding in his day. He said, "Who among you fears the Lord and listens to his servant? Who among you walks in darkness, and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord; let him lean on his God. Look, all you who kindle a fire, who encircle yourselves with torches; walk in the light of your fire and of the torches you have lit! This is what you'll get from my hand: you will lie down in a place of torment" (Isaiah 50:10-11). This is a vivid illustration of what the people of Babel did. They walked in the light of their own fire.

When God grants a person saving faith and repentance, He also nourishes in them faith in and love for His Word. A Christian who disregards the Word of God is contradictory. God's Word is one of the primary means by which God sanctifies His children. Still, believers may drift away from warming themselves by the fire of God's Word and begin to find comfort and direction in their own intelligence. As they make decisions regarding their money, where to live, job opportunities, church attendance, their children's education, and so on, it can become easy to give more weight to voices and counsel from sources outside the Bible.





Application: What are some areas in your life where you tend to lean on your understanding and walk by the light of your own fire?

2. A Name for Ourselves (Genesis 11:4-7)

Pride is the root of man's desire for control. When a person has the audacity to disregard God's Word to follow their own wisdom, they show that they hold their own word in higher regard than God's. The prideful


person not only follows their own way, but also believes they are deserving of adulation and glory.

The people of Babel said, “Let’s make a name for ourselves” (v. 4). They held themselves in such high regard that they put their energy and resources into a monument in recognition of their greatness.

-  Recall the story of Nebuchadnezzar in which God made him like a beast of the field (Daniel 4:28-37). What similarities are there between that account and the text we are studying today?
-  How do you see people seeking their own glory today? Why is this always a temptation for people?


Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon who was so full of pride that when he looked out over his kingdom he said, “Is this not Babylon the Great that I have built to be a royal residence by my vast power and for my majestic glory?” (Daniel 4:30). To humble Nebuchadnezzar, God gave him the mind of a beast of the field and drove him out. He separated Nebuchadnezzar from the people and this great and glorious king ate grass like a cow. His body was made wet with the dew, and his hair and nails grew to resemble the claws of an eagle.

The king of Babylon and the people of Babel were prideful, provoked the anger of God, and suffered punishment. As James 4:6 reminds us, “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.” These are negative examples in Scripture that Christians can look to today. Humility should characterize God’s children because all they have is from God. The Christian lives not by strength or by might, but by God’s Spirit (Zechariah 4:6). As Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me” (John 15:5).

-  Application: Has there ever been a time in your life when you were living to make yourself great? How did God humble you?

3. The Lord Scattered Them (Genesis 11:8-9)

God was displeased with the prideful hearts and actions of the people of Babel. They were infatuated with themselves and disregarded the instructions He had given them. For this reason, God confused their language and dispersed them through all the earth.

-  Why did God disperse them? How would this impact their goal of making themselves great?

God is the sovereign King of the universe. He can and will accomplish all of His holy will. God “can do anything and no plan of [His] can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). It was God’s will that the earth be filled with families, tribes, tongues, and nations. Out of those, God would draw people to his Son for salvation. Despite man’s sin and disobedience to God’s Word, God is still able to accomplish His will.



Can you think of another biblical account in which we see God accomplish His will even when people acted according to their own evil desires? How do we see this principle in the story of Joseph?

Joseph was hated by his brothers, and they sold him as a slave to traders on their way to Egypt. After he had served in Potiphar’s house for some time, he was falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife and was thrown in prison. Years later, when Joseph’s brothers were before him, he said, “You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people” (Genesis 50:20).

God, the Creator of all things, is both holy and sovereign. He directs all affairs of heaven and earth for His own glory and for the sanctification of those who are His. God is willing and able to use even those things that we think are terrible for His divine purposes. We must never think that when it seems as though evil is prevailing, God is losing the battle or is absent from the situation. When we find ourselves at the lowest, we often see God more clearly and grow even more in our relationship with Him.

Spices and herbs are most fragrant and effective when they are burned and crushed. It is the violence that presses out the virtue. Affliction, for those who are in Christ, fetches out the fruit of the Spirit. Furthermore, the maturing power of suffering is very great. Despite the sinfulness of man, God accomplishes His purposes in the world and in His children.






Application: Can you think of a way God has used something bad to do good to you? What happened?

Conclusion

The people of Babel had gone down a dangerous yet well-worn path when they began to lean upon their own understanding. Their forefathers before them and many after them did what was right in their own eyes. Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death.” Those who are so prideful as to reject the light God has given and walk by the light of their own fire are bound for destruction. Those who continue in that way will suffer eternal punishment. When those who are in Christ begin to tread that path, God graciously disciplines them (Hebrews 12:6).

Furthermore, God is a great and sovereign God. No one can thwart His purposes. God can accomplish His holy will. Even the sinfulness and disobedience of man is made to submit to God's purposes. This is a great comfort to the children of God. Even when evil rages around them, they can rest assured that their Eternal Father is working all things to their good and His glory.

During this season of Advent, be reminded that Christ humbled Himself so that we could be brought into right relationship with God, despite our pride and desire for self-exaltation. We don't have to be in control because He is perfectly in control of all things. The best way of living is in humble adoration of God, seeking to love Him and others.

-  Where do you seek to maintain control of your own life to a degree that reveals that you believe God needs your help? How might you seek to relinquish this desire for control during this season of Advent?
-  How does the selfless coming of Christ give us a model for living together within the church in a sacrificial way?
-  Who do you know who needs to hear about Christ's humility for their sake? How will you tell them?

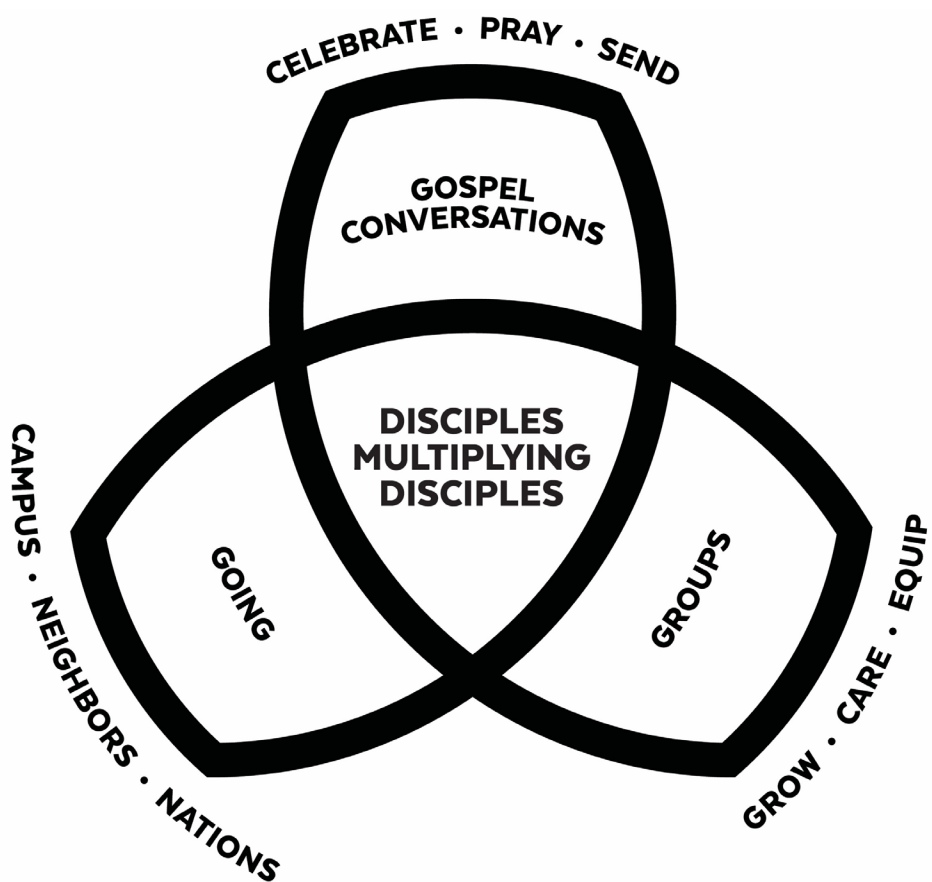
Prayer of Response

Ask the Lord to give you clarity about areas in your life where you are seeking to take back control from God. Pray that He would give you the humility to repent and turn from that arrogance. Ask the Lord to use all things to bring Him glory and do you good.

Additional Resources

- *The Dawn of Redeeming Grace* by Sinclair Ferguson
- *Good News of Great Joy* by John Piper
- *The One True Story* by Tim Chester

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



For Next Week

Session Title

- Longing For Relationship

Main Passages

- Genesis 45:1-2

Session Outline

1. The Brothers' Condition (Genesis 45:1-3)
2. The Brothers' Hope (Genesis 45:4-8)
3. The Brothers' Assurance (Genesis 45:9-11)

Memorize

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.

- Genesis 11:9

Historical Context of Genesis

Purpose

Genesis lays the groundwork for everything else we read and experience in Scripture. Through Genesis we understand where we came from, how we got in the fallen state we are in, and the beginnings of God's gracious work on our behalf. Genesis unfolds God's original purpose for humanity.

Genesis provides the foundation from which we understand God's covenant with Israel that was established with the giving of the law. For the Israelite community, the stories of the origins of humanity, sin, and the covenant relationship with God helped them understand why God gave them the law.

Author

Since pre-Christian times authorship of the Torah, the five books that include the book of Genesis, has been attributed to Moses, an enormously influential Israelite leader from the second millennium BC with an aristocratic Egyptian background. Even though Genesis is technically anonymous, both the Old and New Testaments unanimously recognize Moses as the Torah's author (Jos 8:35; 23:6; 1Kg 2:3; 8:9; 2Kg 14:6; 23:25; 2Ch 23:18; 25:4; 30:16; 34:14; 35:12; Ezr 3:2; 6:18; Neh 8:1; 9:14; Dn 9:11, 13; Mal 4:4; Mk 12:19, 26; Lk 2:22; 20:28; 24:44; Jn 1:17, 45; 7:19; Ac 13:39; 15:21; 28:23; Rm 10:5; 1Co 9:9; Heb 10:28). At the same time, evidence in Genesis suggests that minor editorial changes dating to ancient times have been inserted into the text. Examples include the mention of "Dan" (14:14), a city that was not named until the days of the judges (Jdg 18:29), and the use of a phrase that assumed the existence of Israelite kings (Gn 36:31).

Setting

The Torah (a Hebrew term for "law" or "instruction") was seen as one unit until at least the second century BC. Sometime prior to the birth of Christ, the Torah was divided into five separate books, later referred to as the Pentateuch (literally, five vessels). Genesis, the first book of the Torah, provides both the universal history of humankind and the patriarchal history of the nation of Israel. The first section (chaps. 1–11) is a general history commonly called the "primeval history," showing how all humanity descended from one couple and became sinners. The second section (chaps. 12–50) is a more specific history commonly referred to as the "patriarchal history," focusing on the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants: Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons. Genesis unfolds God's plan to bless and redeem humanity through Abraham's descendants. The book concludes with the events that led to the Israelites being in the land of Egypt.

Special Features

The book of Genesis is the great book of beginnings in the Bible. True to the meanings of its Hebrew and Greek names (Hb *bereshith*, "In Beginning" [based on 1:1]; Gk *Geneseos*, "Of Birth" [based on 2:4]), Genesis permits us to view the beginning of a multitude of realities that shape our daily existence: the creation of the universe and the planet earth; the origins of plant and animal life; and the origins of human beings, marriage, families, nations, industry, artistic expression, religious ritual, prophecy, sin, law, crime, conflict, punishment, and death.

Extended Commentary

Genesis 11:1-9

11:1-9. The incident of 11:1-9 occurs chronologically earlier than some of the material in chapter 10. This section on the Tower of Babel provides the reason for the scattering of the people and the necessity for the confusion of human language.

The structure of Genesis 11:1-9 is often referred to as an hourglass or chiasm. The narrative portions are found in verses 1-2 and 8-9, while the 108 discourse material is in verses 3-4 and 6-7. Verse 5 acts as the transition between the first and second parts.

11:1-2. The survivors of the flood (the whole world) had one language and a common speech. This would change as a result of their rebellion and God's judgment. They moved eastward and found a plain in Shinar and settled there. Since there were mountains and then the Caspian Sea to the east of Ararat, humanity's movements must first have been south and then eastward as they settled in the Mesopotamia region. It is clear that humanity settled in a plain called Shinar. The city will be called Babel, which sounds very similar to the Hebrew word Babylon. Nimrod (Gen. 10:10) had one of the centers of his kingdom at Babylon. All these facts indicate that the area was somewhere in Mesopotamia, probably very close to the later city of Babylon.

11:3-4. A portion of humanity decided to build a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens. Just how much of the population of the world was involved in this enterprise is not known. But the results would affect the entire world.

The purpose of this building was so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth. Genesis 11 does not teach, as many interpreters have suggested, that the builders were trying to build a tower that would reach to outer space or to God's dwelling place of heaven. Nor is the novel idea that the builder's hope was that the top of the tower would provide a place of refuge in the event of another flood. These explanation have no textual basis. Even if this had been their hope, the number who could have enjoyed a place of refuge would have been few. Besides, another ark would have been a more suitable haven.

The Scriptures teach that there were two purposes for their building. First, they were seeking immortality based on achievement. The name they desired probably refers to the reputation or fame they were seeking. Their action was a manifestation of their independence from God. The term name has been used this way in Genesis 6:4. Later God would promise Abram that "I will make your name great" (Gen. 12:2). By embarking on a massive building project, rebellious mankind hoped to create such a reputation that future generations would remain in the region and continue to honor the original builders. Humans want to make a difference in the world in some way so they will be remembered.

Second, they wanted to assure themselves of a strength that would come with unity. As a unified group they could be powerful—even without God's help. The tower was to prevent the goal that they should be scattered over the face of the whole earth. God wanted humanity to "be fruitful

and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). The Lord repeated this to Noah and his family in Genesis 9:1. Theologically, he had caused Cain to be separated from godly mankind. Cain protested, “Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth” (Gen. 4:14). Now mankind was rebelling against God, but they were anxious to stay together.

They used bricks instead of stone and tar for mortar, because stone was scarce in Mesopotamia. Tar could have been available from the oil resources that have been discovered in this region. Using what was available, they sought to create a monument that would be majestic enough to keep mankind in the surrounding area.

11:5-9. The Lord is described as coming down to see. This is a figure of speech, known as “anthropomorphic,” when God is described as having a human form or attributes that belong to humans. The presence of the Lord is said to be on earth in order to obtain information. Certain theologians insinuate that this was required because God is not an all-knowing God but must seek out information. But the God of creation is an eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing God. This figure of speech is better taken as informing the readers that the transcendent God is also the imminent God who responds to man’s actions.

God’s evaluation was that if as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. The Lord recognized the powerful nature of peer pressure and the great appeal immortality has to mankind. Humans would be able to create a society in which they would control the community at large.

God’s solution was to agree to go down and confuse... the language of the whole world. Although all of Noah’s descendants were probably not gathered in this one area, the effect of God’s judgment seems universal. Perhaps each division or clan descended from Noah’s family began to speak a specific language among themselves. The effect, in order to accomplish the cessation of building, seems to be immediate rather than a gradual development of separate languages over hundreds or thousands of years. Someone has stated that the Tower of Babel became a din of iniquity.

It is obvious that the present world speaks different languages. Many rooms in the United Nations buildings in New York require earphones and translation booths so that modern, civilized mankind can have a measure of communication. SIL International (a service organization that works with people who speak the world’s lesser-known languages) reports that their Ethnologue system of language identification has assigned a three-letter code to each of the more than seven thousand known living and recently extinct languages of the world. Their Web site (www.ethnologue.com/codes/) has a listing of the 6,800 main languages.

This gives powerful testimony to the incident at Babel. The fact that some modern languages are developments from other main languages is obvious. 110 However, the number of original languages must have been significant to develop the array of languages that have evolved in the modern world.¹

References

1. Kenneth O. Gangel and Stephen J. Bramer, *Holman Old Testament Commentary: Genesis*, ed. Max E. Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>.

Author Bio

Kenneth Gangel (Genesis)

Dr. Kenneth O. Gangel (1935-2009): A prolific author and an experienced leader has been influential in the field of Christian education for over forty years. He's written numerous articles and over 50 books, while pastoring, teaching, raising a family and leading schools. His impact reaches around the world through students, co-authored books, and working with leaders of churches and schools.

Stephen Bramer (Genesis)

Dr. Bramer taught for 16 years at Briercrest Bible College and at Briercrest Biblical Seminary in Saskatchewan, Canada, before joining the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary. He serves as an adjunct professor for Word of Life Bible Institute, Hungary; Briercrest Seminary, Canada; as well as at the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS) in Jordan. He is a teaching pastor at Waterbrook Bible Fellowship.

Sinclair Ferguson (The Dawn of Redeeming Grace)

Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson is a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow and Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary. He previously served as senior minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C., and he has written numerous books, including *The Whole Christ*, *In Christ Alone*, *Devoted to God*, *Some Pastors and Teachers*, *In the Year of Our Lord*, and *Maturity*.

John Piper (Good News of Great Joy)

John Piper is founder and teacher of desiringGod.org and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is the author of more than 50 books, and more than 30 years of his preaching and teaching is available free of charge at desiringGod.org.

Tim Chester (The One True Story)

Tim Chester (PhD, University of Wales) is a faculty member of Crosslands and a pastor with Grace Church, Boroughbridge, North Yorkshire. He is an author or coauthor of over forty books, including *A Meal with Jesus*; *Reforming Joy*; and, with Michael Reeves, *Why the Reformation Still Matters*.