

Sin and God's Authority

SESSION IN A SENTENCE: Sin drives people to seek to make themselves great, even in direct disobedience of God, but sin cannot halt God's plans.

MAIN PASSAGES: Genesis 11:1-9; Isaiah 55:8-9



When have you experienced frustration, confusion, or something humorous because of language?

All of our frustration over language goes back to Genesis 11 and the tower of Babylon, also known as Babel. According to the Bible, the multiplicity of languages we now experience was God's response to one of humankind's most spectacularly sinful displays. But beyond the history of languages, the story of this tower gives us a glimpse into something much more important—the root cause of every sin.

Group Time

Point 1: Sin occurs when we glorify our names instead of God's name (Gen. 11:1-4).

¹ The whole earth had the same language and vocabulary. ² As people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ They said to each other, "Come, let us make oven-fired bricks." (They used brick for stone and asphalt for mortar.) ⁴ And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered throughout the earth."

The people wanted to build a city and a tower because their hearts yearned for a secure place to belong, a home—represented by **the city**. They wanted to do something significant with their lives—represented by **the tower**. They wanted greatness—represented by their desire to **make a name for themselves**.

The problem of sin isn't necessarily that we want *belonging*, *significance*, or even *greatness* but that we look for these things in the wrong places, namely, in ourselves. We say, "By my will, in my strength, for my glory," instead of looking to God to fulfill our needs.



Where in your community do you see people living according to the mantra "By my will, in my strength, for my glory"?

Point 2: God will put an end to every kingdom that is not His (Gen. 11:5-7).

⁵ Then the LORD came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Come, let’s go down there and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”

God is by no means threatened by humanity’s rebellion against Him. His majesty is hardly threatened by a pile of bricks, but that does not mean He will ignore our sin either. **God is jealous for His glory** (Ex. 20:5, Deut. 4:24, Ps. 79:5), and He will not allow anything to detract from it. This is why, in one way or another, at one time or another, God puts an end to every kingdom that is not His.

What are some of the “broken towers,” places of disappointment, in your life?

The idols of our lives promise *so much*, but they always end up as broken and rotting towers. They promise safety, security, to make us beautiful, significant, and loved. But even as we diligently try to build our godless towers, God Himself comes along and knocks the tools right out of our hands, not out of spite but for our good—that our disappointments, our broken towers, would drive us to return to the love of God.



What would change if we began to see the “broken towers” in our lives, areas of disappointment and pain, as God’s merciful attempts to draw us back to Himself?



Voices from Church History

“There is many a thing which the world calls disappointment, but there is no such a word in the dictionary of faith. What to others are disappointments are to believers intimations of the way of God.”¹

—John Newton (1725-1807)

Point 3: God's ways are higher than our ways (Gen. 11:8-9; Isa. 55:8-9).

^{55:8} “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways.” This is the LORD’s declaration. ⁹ “For as heaven is higher than earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Stories like the tower of Babylon tend to hurt our heads. As we will see, God *allows* humanity to defy Him and He is justified to *punish* human beings for their sin, but He even *uses* that defiance and judgment as part of His plan. That’s the peculiar mystery of *providence*—the term theologians use to describe God’s guiding hand on history.

God’s Providence: Christians believe in God’s personal and direct intervention in the world—as opposed to a hands-off approach to creation—that affects not only the _____ but also the _____ and _____ within human history.



What mysteries in your life do you wish God would explain to you? What “explanations” have other people given that don’t satisfy?

^{11:8} So from there the LORD scattered them throughout the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ 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.

Humanity attempted to build a tower to regain what they lost in their rebellion against God—but they failed miserably. On account of God’s judgment for their prideful sin, their project ended in confusion and disunity. Yet God would redeem these circumstances: God’s image bearers were now scattered to fill the earth as He had commanded them. And one day, the gospel will accomplish the inverse of Babylon. Despite their many languages, human beings will be united in proclaiming not their own glory but the glory of God in our salvation through Jesus (Rev. 7:9-10).



How should the fact that God is breaking down barriers through the gospel of Jesus impact how we live in a broken and scattered world?

My Mission

Because we have experienced the greatness of God through His gracious salvation through Christ, we set aside all desires to make our names great and instead seek to proclaim the kingdom of the Son of God throughout the whole world.

- **What towers to your own greatness do you need to abandon to better fulfill God's command to fill the earth with His glory and gospel?**
- **What can we do to pursue deeper, gospel-centered unity as a group to reveal God's power and glory to others?**
- **What opportunities has God given you in your neighborhood, workplace, community, and beyond to make God's name great and proclaim His kingdom? What steps will you take this week to do so?**

Notes

Daily Study

Day 1: Read Genesis 11:1-4

If you have ever attended or viewed a sporting event, you have experienced humanity's hunger for unity. Tens of thousands of people who may have very little in common gather for a few hours around the common bond of sports. Before long, complete strangers stand and cheer together and high five each other in a powerful demonstration of our inner desire to connect with others.

As Christians, this should not surprise us. We know that our trinitarian God is by nature relational, and He has created us in His image—wired for relationship with Him and others. The question is *where* will we seek the unity we crave?

The opening verses of the Babylon account reveal how people often pursue unity in the wrong places—apart from God. The whole earth was united in one language (v. 1). They migrated and settled together (v. 2). They worked together (v. 3) and made plans together (v. 4) as they sought their collective glory together. Notice that God is not mentioned. The people were together but apart from Him.

Voices from the Church

“At Babel God halts the unbridled human efforts to build a united, secular city, which would leave no room for the kingdom of God.”²

—Sidney Greidanus

And with that, the stage was set for God's intervention. God was about to disrupt their plans and break the unity they achieved so that they could experience His plan for them to have true unity from Him.



How can the universal desire of people to belong, to be in relationship, open doors for pointing them to the source of true unity in Christ?

Day 2: Read Genesis 11:5-7

It's difficult to stand at the base of the tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, and look up toward its top reaching 2,717 feet—over half a mile—into the sky and not feel a sense of awe. Or to gaze upon the pyramids in Egypt and not marvel at how they were constructed without modern cranes and equipment. These structures stand as monuments that testify to what humanity can achieve. And yet, they also stand condemning us for how little we can achieve. All it takes is seeing a bird flying high above these structures to humble our thinking.

Our perceived greatness is relative. The structures we build are massive in our eyes but tiny in God's. That is why He had to “come down” to see the tower in Babylon. Our good works may earn the respect of others, but they are no better than filthy rags in God's eyes (Isa. 64:6). The problem is that we use the wrong standard, which leads to the wrong definition of “greatness.” We are not our own measure—God is. This is what God would teach the people of Babylon and what He teaches us.



What are some areas in your life that you tend to evaluate by the wrong standards of the world? How has God been kind to humble you in these areas?

Day 3: Read Genesis 11:8-9

From the beginning, God's instruction to humanity was to spread out across the earth to subdue it and rule over it as His image-bearing representatives (Gen. 1:28; 9:1,7). In fulfilling this cultural mandate to every corner of the globe, the pinnacle of God's creation—people—would glorify their Creator.

But the sin that had begun in Eden continued to dig deeper into the hearts of people and their rebellion grew. God's command to spread out was not simply misunderstood or even ignored—it was rejected outright in the land of Shinar. God's plan, however, cannot be thwarted. The people would not scatter across the earth, so He would do it for them. But instead of spreading out as one people of God, they did so as a broken, fragmented, and divided people—a people in need of someone to rescue them from this condition and restore them as one family of God. That someone would be Jesus.



How have you seen God's authority shine forth and His plans advance even in light of your disobedience?

Day 4: Read Isaiah 55:1-13

Isaiah 55 is a call for all people—all the nations (v. 5)—to come to the Lord and experience the goodness of covenant relationship with Him. The picture is of God abundantly satisfying His people. Thirst-quenching water and the choicest of foods will be available at no cost.

Along with the invitation to the people to come and experience the Lord's goodness is also an admonition for *how* they are to do this—through repentance (vv. 6-7). All who want to come to God must turn from their wicked ways and abandon their sinful thoughts and return to the Lord. Then He will have compassion on them and freely forgive.

The reason why repentance is essential is stated in verses 8-9: God's ways and God's thoughts are not ours. They are higher, loftier, and grander than anything we can muster. True repentance requires we grasp this, that we completely forsake any perceived goodness in our hearts and instead completely entrust ourselves to God's mercy and grace. This is the one and only path to eternal joy and peace in Christ (vv. 12-13).



In what ways are you placing your trust in yourself rather than fully relying on God? Go to God in repentance for these ways and bathe in His mercy, grace, joy, and peace.

Day 5: Read Genesis 11:10-32

Reading through genealogies in Scripture can be challenging. They are full of obscure, hard to pronounce names, and the cadence can make even the most committed Bible reader's eyes glaze over. However, God has included them in Scripture for a reason—and not just to serve as mile markers of the advance of redemptive history. The genealogies often teach much more than that. The genealogy of the line of Seth in Genesis 4 reminds us of the truth of God's promise that sin leads to death. Throughout that chapter we read "then he died" over and over again—a phrase that acts as an exclamation mark on God's promise in Genesis 2:17. Here in Genesis 11, the genealogy serves as a bridge between Shem, Noah's blessed son (Gen. 9:24-27), and Abram, the one through whom God would form the people of promise. Humanity's willful rebellion in Babylon did not hinder God's plan for people to scatter, nor did it stop the advance of God's unfolding plan of redemption.



How has God worked in surprising ways in your life? How can you use these stories to show others His power, grace, and beauty?

Encourage One Another

Join together with 2-4 people from your group, or with your family, sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and you are responding.

Share your thoughts and reflections on the truths from Scripture in this session:

- Sin occurs when we glorify our names instead of God's name (Gen. 11:1-4).
- God will put an end to every kingdom that is not His (Gen. 11:5-7).
- God's ways are higher than our ways (Gen. 11:8-9; Isa. 55:8-9).



How have you responded to these truths from Scripture?



What have you observed this week that reminds you that earthly kingdoms are temporary and that only God's is eternal?



How can you help others keep in mind that building our own kingdoms will not bring us ultimate satisfaction?

Notes
