God Scatters the Nations
Gen 11:1-9
SS Lesson for 09/29/2013

Devotional Scripture: 2 Chronicles 34:22-28

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Introduction

Overview and Approach to Lesson

The lesson reviews how God Scatters the Nations when they have been disobedient. The study's aim is to understand how God dealt with people in the past and to realize how He might deal with us today when we are disobedient. The study's application is to apply in our lives the principles of putting the Lord and His will first in all our plans.

Key Verse: Gen 11:8

8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

The sin of the Shinarites (people in a plain in Shinar) appears to be immense pride. They said, Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves. This was open rebellion against God, an independence of God. Humility is often equated with trust and obedience, and conversely pride is related to independence and disobedience. Here the people came together to strengthen themselves and in pride to make a reputation for themselves lest they be scattered over the face of the whole earth. This appears to be in direct opposition to God’s command to spread out and fill up the whole earth (9:1). Their desire to enhance their unity and strength had potential for the greatest evil, according to the Lord’s evaluation: If... they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Thus what they would not do in obedience (viz., scatter over the earth, v. 4) He did for them in judgment (v. 8). No doubt Shinar (v. 2) refers to the area of Babylon, because the passage culminates (v. 9) in a name play: Babel (bāḇēl) sounds similar to the verb confused (bālah). Written Babylonian accounts of the building of the city of Babylon refer to its construction in heaven by the gods as a celestial city, as an expression of pride (Enuma Elish VI, lines 55-64). These accounts say it was made by the same process of brick-making described in verse 3, with every brick inscribed with the name of the Babylonian god Marduk. Also the ziggurat, the step-like tower believed to have been first erected in Babylon, was said to have its top in the heavens (cf. v. 4). This artificial mountain became the center of worship in the city, a miniature temple being at the top of the tower. The Babylonians took great pride in their building; they boasted of their city as not only impregnable, but also as the heavenly city, babili (“the gate of God”). The account in Genesis views this city as the predominant force in the world, the epitome of ungodly powers, in a word, the “anti-kingdom.” Thus the record in verses 1-9 is polemical in that it shows God’s absolute power in His swift judgment. What the people considered their greatest strength—unity—He swiftly destroyed by confusing their language (v. 7; cf. v. 9). What they considered their greatest fear—scattering (v. 4)—came naturally on them (the Lord scattered them... over all the earth, v. 8; cf. v. 9). What they desired most—to make a name for themselves (v. 4)—ironically came to pass, for they became known as “Babel.” Then they stopped building the city and were scattered abroad.

Commentary from Barnes Notes

The effect of the divine interposition is noted in Gen 11:8-9. "And the Lord scattered them abroad." Not understanding one another's mode of speech, they feel themselves practically separated from one another. Unity of counsel and of action becomes impossible. Misunderstanding naturally follows, and begets mistrust. Diversity of interest grows up, and separation ensues. Those who have a common speech retreat from the center of union to a sequestered spot, where they may form a separate community among themselves. The lack of pasture for their flocks and provision for themselves leads to a progressive migration. Thus, the divine purpose, that they should be fruitful and multiply and replenish the land (Gen 9:1) is fulfilled. The dispersion of mankind at the same time put an end to the ambitious projects of the few. "They left off to build the city." It is probable that the people began to see through the plausible veil
which the leaders had cast over their selfish ends. The city would henceforth be abandoned to the immediate party of Nimrod. This would interrupt for a time the building of the city. Its dwellings would probably be even too numerous for its remaining inhabitants. The city received the name of Babel (confusion), from the remarkable event which had interrupted its progress for a time. This passage, then, explains the table of nations, in which they are said to be distinguished, not merely by birth and land, but "every one after his tongue." It is therefore attached to the table as a needful appendix, and thus completes the history of the nations so far as it is carried on by the Bible. At this point the line of history leaves the universal, and by a rapid contraction narrows itself into the individual, in the person of him who is to be ultimately the parent of a chosen seed, in which the knowledge of God and of his truth is to be preserved, amidst the degeneracy of the nations into the ignorance and error which are the natural offspring of sin. Here, accordingly, ends the appendix to the second Bible, or the second volume of the revelation of God to man. As the first may have been due to Adam, the second may be ascribed in point of matter to Noah, with Shem as his continuator. The two joined together belong not to a special people, but to the universal race. If they had ever appeared in a written form before Moses, they might have descended to the Gentiles as well as to the Israelites. But the lack of interest in holy things would account for their disappearance among the former. The speakers of the primitive language, however, would alone retain the knowledge of such a book if extant. Some of its contents might be preserved in the memory, and handed down to the posterity of the founders of the primeval nations. Accordingly we find more or less distinct traces of the true God, the creation, the fall and the deluge, in the traditions of all nations that have an ancient history. But even if this two-volumed Bible were not possessed by the nations in a written form, its presence here, at the head of the writings of divine truth, marks the catholic design of the Old Testament, and intimates the comprehension of the whole family of man within the merciful purposes of the Almighty. In the issues of Providence the nations appear now to be abandoned to their own devices. Such a judicial forsaking of a race, who had a second time heard the proclamation of his mercy, and a second time forsaken the God of their fathers, was naturally to be expected. But it is never to be forgotten that God twice revealed his mercy "to the whole human race" before they were left to their own ways. And even when they were given over to their own willful unrighteousness and ungodliness, it was only to institute and develop the mystery by which they might be again fully and effectually brought back to reconciliation with God. The new developments of sin during this period are chiefly three-drunkenness, dishonoring of a parent, and the ambitious attempt to be independent of God's power, and to thwart his purpose of populating the land. These forms of human selfishness still linger about the primary commands of the two tables. Insubordination to the supreme authority of God is accompanied with disrespect to parental authority. Drunkenness itself is an abuse of the free grant of the fruit of the trees originally made to man. These manifestations of sin do not advance to the grosser or more subtle depths of iniquity afterward explicitly forbidden in the ten commandments. They indicate a people still comparatively unsophisticated in their habits. The additional motives brought to bear on the race of man during the interval from Noah to Abraham, are the preaching of Noah, the perdition of the unbelieving antediluvians, the preservation of Noah and his family, the distinction of clean and unclean animals, the permission to partake of animal food, the special prohibition of the shedding of man's blood, the institution thereupon of civil government, and the covenant with Noah and his seed that there should not be another deluge.

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

The key verse text for this lesson describes the scattering of nations that occurred after the ancient peoples had begun construction of the Tower of Babel. It is important to remember that those who had begun building this tower were doing so in rebellion against God and His commands in two specific ways. First, they were disobeying God's creation mandate to "replenish the earth, and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). These people were selfishly trying to establish themselves in one place instead of taking seriously God's command to take ownership of creation. Notice their statement: "Lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (11:4). Second, this society of builders constructed the tower out of a sense of pride. They haughtily declared, "Let us make us a name" (Gen. 11:4). Such pride would be their undoing. God would not tolerate man exhibiting so much arrogance, so He scattered humanity across the face of the earth. In doing this, He accomplished what He originally had commanded mankind to do: exercise dominion over His creation. While at first glance this passage of Scripture may seem to have little
application for today, the truth is quite otherwise. Application is found in at least three areas—in the creation mandate, in pride, and in God's plans being fulfilled. Concerning the creation mandate, God has given mankind a charge to subdue the earth (Gen. 1:28). This means that we should be using wisdom and discretion in how we employ the natural resources of creation that are at our disposal. We should pay close attention to how we use things like water, electricity, and fuel. Recycling and making sure light switches are turned off are ways to do this. Regrettably, many conservation organizations put the needs of animals above those of human beings. As Christians, we should display a balanced attitude on this matter, putting human needs first but exercising wisdom in how we utilize resources. On the second point, we should see the pride of the builders as a warning. Just as these ancient people's pride was a motivating factor to build a tower, so we are vulnerable to allowing pride to be a part of our life goals and aspirations. Consider how you conduct yourself at work, at church, or at home. Are you acting out of a sense of pride, discounting others' needs or the will of God so that you may get what you desire? Such should not be the case for a follower of Christ. Humble obedience to God and self-sacrifice would have prevented the events of Babel, and it will prevent painful consequences today as well. Third, God's ultimate plans will be accomplished one way or another. God scattered the people at Babel to accomplish His ultimate purpose for the placement of civilizations on earth. Certainly the population of the world in the twenty-first century is a clear indicator that God accomplished this purpose. When God calls us to a particular ministry or a need to change, we should not resist Him. Conviction and leading in the Christian life are freely available to the person who regularly reads Scripture and develops a growing loyalty to His Word and will.

Approach to the Major Outlines in Lesson

The concept of the outline of the lesson was adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary and from the points revealed by the study of the Scriptural text.

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Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Today's text tells about the attempt to build the Tower of Babel—a project undertaken by people who wanted to "tower" over everyone, including God. Because of their misplaced motivation, God brought judgment on them and abruptly halted their efforts. Some refer to the first 11 chapters of Genesis as primeval history. This means that Genesis 1-11 records events that happened in the earliest ages of history. It should be emphasized that these events are indeed history—they are not to be placed in the realm of myth or fiction. Certainly, the testimonies of Jesus and the New Testament writers are crucial here; all of them treat the Old Testament record with the utmost respect and assume the historicity of any event to which they refer. These include events in Genesis 1-11 (see Matthew 24:37-39; Romans 5:12-14; 1 Corinthians 15:45; 2 Corinthians 11:3; and 1 Peter 3:18-20). Genesis 10, which immediately precedes today's text, includes what is called the table of nations. This describes where the families of the sons of Noah settled after the flood. The chapter concludes
with this statement: "These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood" (Genesis 10:32). Verses 5, 20, and 31 reveal more than one language being spoken by these descendants. The account of the Tower of Babel (today's text) tells how this dividing of humanity in terms of languages occurred. We cannot know with certainty how many years passed between Noah's flood and the point where Genesis 11 begins. Time is not Scripture's primary concern here (which is often true within these early chapters of Genesis). The focus is more on people, especially their relationship with God. That focus lets us see the blessings that accompany obedience and the discipline that accompanies disobedience. After reading the account of the flood in the previous chapters of Genesis, one is led to ask, "Will people change after such a severe act of judgment? Will anything be different?" Sadly, Noah, who is described in such impressive terms earlier (Genesis 6:9), becomes guilty of drunkenness (9:20, 21). One of his sons reacts to Noah's subsequent nakedness in a disrespectful manner (9:22-27). Thus, even at this point it is clear that while sin has been judged, it has not been eliminated.

From the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

Someone once said that the only thing we learn from history is that no one learns from history! This bit of history about the Tower of Babel is one that we can learn from and apply to our situation today. While the Word of God is very clear on the need to have unity in our churches (our local congregations), it may not be His purpose that the whole world be united under any one government or language. In the verses immediately preceding our text, we discover that God purposed for the descendants of Noah to gather in natural communities, families, and nations. This is beneficial in providing mutual care and protection from the elements and in promoting the common welfare. Sadly, the people did not respond to the blessing of God with thanksgiving and obedience. Instead, they struck out on their own with ideas that became destructive.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Unity of the People (Gen 11:1-2)

1 Now the whole earth had one language and one speech.
2 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.

Unity in language (1)

Language that allows unity in the understanding of God's Word (Acts 2:4-11)

4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs — we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"

Language that allows unity in allegiance to God (Isa 19:17-18)

17 And the land of Judah will bring terror to the Egyptians; everyone to whom Judah is mentioned will be terrified, because of what the Lord Almighty is planning against them. 18 In that day five cities in Egypt will speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the Lord Almighty. One of them will be called the City of Destruction.
Language purified by God so that man can serve Him (Zeph 3:9)
9 "Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder.

Unity in location (2)

Unity in location by believing in God's directions (Gen 22:2-5)
2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." 3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

Unity in location by being obedient (Acts 8:26-29)
26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road — the desert road — that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

Unity in location by Divine guidance (Acts 16:6-10)
6 Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. 7 When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. 8 So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Unity in location to accomplish a specific purpose (Est 4:12-14)
12 When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, 13 he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

Unity in location by God's arrangement (1 Cor 12:18)
18 But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

Plans of the People (Gen 11:3-4)
3 Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. 4 And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."
Plan for resources (3)

Plans for resources that are in vain (Ps 127:1-2)
127 Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. 2 In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat — for he grants sleep to those he loves.

Plans for resources that rely on human efforts (Luke 5:5)
5 Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets."

Plans for resources that are outside of God's Will (Isa 49:4)
4 But I said, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God."

Plans for resources that can cause pride and cause one to forget about God (Deut 8:12-14)
12 Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, 13 and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, 14 then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Plans for resources that can cause one to wander from the faith (1 Tim 6:10)
10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Plans for resources that cannot be taken beyond death (1 Tim 6:7)
7 For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.

Plan for building (4)

Plans for building things that perish (Ps 49:11-13)
11 Their tombs will remain their houses forever, their dwellings for endless generations, though they had named lands after themselves. 12 But man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish. 13 This is the fate of those who trust in themselves, and of their followers, who approve their sayings.

Plans for building things that bring power and glory to oneself (Dan 4:29-32)
29 Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" 31 The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. 32 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes."

Plans for building things using schemes (Eccl 7:29)
29 This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes."
Plans for building things without estimating the cost (Luke 14:28-30)

28 "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? 29 For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, 30 saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'

Plans for building things without consulting God (James 4:13-16)

13 Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." 14 Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. 15 Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." 16 As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil.

Intervention by God (Gen 11:5-9)

5 But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. 6 And the Lord said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. 7 Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." 8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. 9 Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Intervention because of seeing people's actions (5)

God sees our actions because His eyes run to and fro throughout the whole world (2 Chron 16:9)

9 For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. You have done a foolish thing, and from now on you will be at war."

God sees our actions because His eyes are upon the righteous (Ps 34:15)

15 The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry;

God sees our actions because the ways of man are before God's eyes (Prov 5:21)

21 For a man's ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths.

God sees our actions because God's eyes are in every place (Prov 15:3)

3 The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.

God sees our actions because He sees through His seven Spirits (Rev 5:6)

6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

Intervention based on God's sovereignty (6-7)

God is sovereign because He is God of Heaven and earth (Deut 4:39)

39 Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.

God is sovereign because all the earth and all it contains is His (Ps 24:1)

24 The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;
God is sovereign because He has control over life and death (Matt 10:28)

28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

God is sovereign because He is the only one who avenges (Heb 10:26-31)

26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. 28 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." 31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

God is sovereign because God created life and the soul through breathing His Divine breath into man (Gen 2:7)

7 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.

Intervention of scattering (8-9)

Sometimes God scatters to have His word reach others (Acts 8:1-4)

8 And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

Even when persecuted and scattered, God's hands are always on His people (Acts 11:19-21)

19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

God has the power and authority to scatter all earth's inhabitants (Isa 24:1)

24 See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants —

Those who are with God gather, while those against Him scatter (Matt 12:30)

30 "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

The phrase bridge to nowhere was used in the U.S. presidential campaign of 2008 to mock a "pork barrel" project: a bridge to be constructed primarily for the purpose of bringing dollars into a certain congressional district regardless of need for the bridge. An Internet search reveals that at least 11 bridges, primarily in the U.S., have been given this negative label. Sometimes bridges were built with all good intentions, but lack of
forethought resulted in an unused or unusable bridge for one reason or another. Genesis 1-11 records earliest humanity's bridges to nowhere in relation to God, and today's lesson sketches one of those. The people intended their tower to bridge the gap between earth and Heaven, but God intervened to ensure that the effort went nowhere. But God didn't just put a stop to faulty plans; he replaced those plans with a better one. Genesis 1-11 is rich with descriptions of God's actions to put humanity back on the right path. God's path is the path to somewhere important: an eternal, sin-free fellowship with him. Perhaps you have seen artistic depictions of a canyon with the words "sinful people" on one side and "Holy God" on the other side. The two sides in such depictions are separated by the chasm of sin and death, but the chasm is bridged by the cross of Christ (John 3:16; 5:24; Hebrews 2:14, 15; 1 Peter 2:24; etc.). Many Bible students have noted how the events that transpired on the Day of Pentecost served to reverse what occurred at Babel. Babel involved a confusion of language. But at Pentecost the gift of tongues (or languages) on those speaking brought about an amazing unity. Each person present could hear proclaimed in his or her native language "the wonders of God" (Acts 2:11). Many languages were present at Pentecost, yet God brought about a unity that those at Babel could not achieve because their plans were divorced from God's plans. Paul Kissling sees what happened in Jerusalem at Pentecost as a "down payment on the reversal of the curse of Babel." The complete reversal will occur in the new Jerusalem, a place where a unity will be demonstrated that those at Babel could not have imagined. John pictures it for us in Revelation 7:9, 10: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne... . And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" Babel—and all undertakings similar to it—will be long forgotten.

**Concluding Thought From Bob Deffinbaugh**

*From the series: Genesis: From Paradise to Patriarchs*

In this brief narrative we find some principles which are vital to true believers in any age.

(1) Man’s plans will never thwart God’s purposes. God had commanded mankind to “fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1). Man preferred to cloister rather than to comply with God’s command to spread out. In spite of man’s greatest efforts, God’s purposes prevailed. My friend, men of every age have learned that God’s will cannot be resisted. You may be destroyed, but God will not be diverted from His purposes. Such was the conclusion to which Saul was forced: And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads’ (Acts 26:14). A friend of mine used to say, “Is that brick wall getting any softer, or is my head just getting bloodier and bloodier?” No man can thwart the will of God. A life lived in resistance to the revealed Lord of God must end in frustration and failure. No one can succeed at resisting God.

(2) Unity is not the highest good, but purity and obedience to the Word of God. Ecumenism is the watch word of religion today, but it is a unity at the cost of truth. Some regard unity as a goal worthy of any sacrifice. God does not. In fact, the Israelites of old were soon to learn that the Canaanites, unlike the Egyptians (cf. Genesis 46:33-34), were eager to unite with the chosen people of God (cf. Genesis 34:8-10, Numbers 25:1ff.). Unity and peace must never be attained at the price of purity. God’s people are to be holy, even as He is holy (Leviticus 11:44f; I Peter 1:16). True unity can only occur in Christ (John 17:21; cf. Ephesians 2:4-22). This unity is to be diligently preserved (Ephesians 4:3). But oneness in Christ results in division from those who reject Christ (Matthew 10:34-36). We must separate ourselves from those who deny the truth (II John 7-11; Jude 3). There can be no true unity with those who deny our God.

(3) The communication gap created in Genesis chapter 11 can only be bridged by Christ. The Old Testament prophets recognized the ongoing effect of Babel, and spoke of a day when it would be reversed: ‘For then I will give to the peoples purified lips, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord, to serve Him shoulder to shoulder. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, My dispersed ones, will bring My offerings. In that day you will feel no shame because of all your deeds by which you have rebelled against Me; for then I will remove from your midst your proud, exulting ones, and you will never again be haughty on my holy
mountain’ (Zephaniah 3:9-11). The phenomenon of tongues in Acts chapter two indicates the ‘first fruits’ of the renewal which is yet to be realized in full. Frankly, I am deeply troubled at the ignorance of Christians today regarding the communication gap we experience in our relationships. The communication breakdown has its roots in Genesis chapter 11. Many wives silently agonize at the way their husbands fail to comprehend what they are trying to tell them, and at their failure to disclose their innermost feelings. While Christ is the answer to this dilemma, most of us fail to grasp the fact that it is a problem which threatens our relationships.

(4) Superficial relationships and artificial activity will inevitably miss the meaning of life. Someone has said that the definition of the ‘upper crust’ is, ‘a few crumbs with a little dough to hold them together.’ What is it that holds your life together? How tragic that the Babylonians of old found their security in a city and put their hope in fired bricks and tar. What frightens me most is that the church has often fallen into the same trap as the world. We find ourselves creating programs to keep people busy and to give them the false security of involvement and activity. While programs are not antithetical to life, they are often a substitute for living faith and devotion and power. In many churches, God could have died 50 years ago and we would still not know it. I cannot but help think of the church building program as I have considered the tower of Babel. How often we enter into a building program, thinking that it will give people a cause to get excited about, and that a lovely building will somehow attract new members. God help us to avoid the artificiality of Babel. It is a counterfeit religion that has no life and no ultimate worth.

(5) The Word of God, and not the works of our hands, is the only thing worthy of our faith. The men of Babel began to look at work as the cure rather than the curse. They believed that the work of their hands could assure them of some kind of immortality beyond the grave. Here, I suspect, is the driving force behind the workaholic. He cannot ever rest because he (or she) is never certain that a large enough monument has been built. Is this not that of which the Psalmist has written? Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved even in his sleep. Behold, children are a gift of the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; the bow shall not be ashamed, when they speak with their enemies in the gate (Psalm 127:1-5). Did you notice the reference in verse two to the ‘bread of painful labors’? Surely it is a reflection of the curse in Genesis chapter three, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, …” (Genesis 3:19a). The Psalmist knew that work could never give man the rest and peace for which he toiled, but only trusting in that which God would provide. God’s blessing would come through the children which God would give in rest and intimate fellowship (Psalm 127:3-5). Is this not what the people of Babylon needed to understand? Human endeavor is never satisfying, never fulfilling. Only work which is done for the Lord and in His strength brings lasting satisfaction. The woman at the well in John chapter 4 sought water to quench her thirst. Jesus offered that which would forever satisfy; Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water shall thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life’ (John 4:13-14). That ‘meat’ which was greater than mere food was to do the will of the Father: In the meanwhile the disciples were requesting Him, saying ‘Rabbi, eat.’ But He said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you did not know about.’ The disciples therefore were saying to one another, ‘No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?’ Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work’ (John 4:31-34). Have you found the satisfaction and rest which God has provided in Jesus Christ? It alone can satisfy the longings of man. This “rest” is that for which Lamech, the father of Noah, looked for in the seed of his son: Now he called his name Noah, saying, ‘This one shall give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the Lord has cursed’ (Genesis 5:29). God has now provided a salvation for men in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. He has assured men that to as many as believe upon Him—that trust Him for forgiveness of sins and eternal life—they shall be saved. That is enough. And that is the only basis for hope beyond the grave.

(6) Much of what man does on this earth is a monument to his insecurity. This passage has impressed me more than ever before because of the intense insecurity of man. I have often felt that the root of man’s sinful actions is willful rebellion or active aggression against God. Man does rebel against God, but the root of much of his disobedience is based upon his insecurity. Behind the facade of achievement, accomplishment, bravado
and self-assurance is the haunting specter of leaving this life with no certainty of what is to follow. That, in my estimation, is the real reason for the building of the city of Babel and its tower. The people of that day were willing to make nearly any sacrifice to have some hope of immortality. They saw this in the name they could make for themselves. Have you ever stopped to think about the role insecurity may play in the things you devote time and energy to? Christians who do not fathom the grace of God and His sovereign control are plagued by the insecurity of supposing that God’s work and will is conditioned by our faithfulness, rather than by His. Our insecurity may be the motive for much of our Christian service. If only we can do more for the Lord, we shall feel more secure and certain of His blessing. Such activity is little different than that of those who lived on the plain of Shinar. We preachers must learn a very important lesson here also. We want to see results from our work. We may be insecure in what God has called us to do. Because of our own insecurity, we may urge others to work harder in Christian activity, and we may motivate this activity by playing upon the wrong motives of guilt and insecurity. These motives are always wrong reasons for Christian service. Service should be based upon gratitude, not guilt or fear. As Paul has written, “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies … ” (Romans 12:1a). The problems we have discussed are complex, but the solution is simple. We should do what the children of Noah should have done, simply trust and obey. This is the way to have blessing in Jesus.

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Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. Unity can be unhealthy if it is without a worthy goal (Gen. 11:1-2; cf. Ps. 2:1-4; Rev. 17:12-13)
2. It is bad enough to sin alone; it is even worse to encourage others to join you (Gen. 11:3-4)
3. No act of rebellion against God escapes His notice (Gen. 11:5; cf. Ps. 139:1-12)
4. God knows the true intent of every man’s heart, including yours (Gen. 11:6; I Kings 8:39)
5. The consequences of our sin can affect generations to come (Gen. 11:7-8)
6. In His mercy and grace, God often limits the extent of man’s evil actions (vs. 9)