

# From Babel to Pentecost

Genesis 11:1-9 (text); Luke 2:8-14; Acts 2:1-1  
Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • June 9, 2019 (BSCC)

**D**ear Congregation of Christ: I stumbled upon the website of a Pentecostal ministry called “Prayer Mountain.” Here’s a quote from this website: “For years I have sensed a call for a special place to pray about God’s plans and purposes in these days of the ‘former and latter rain together’ outpouring... [D]uring a powerful Holy Ghost controlled meeting, I was out under the power on the floor for a long time. God spoke to me plainly about this call. The place was to be near Branson. He said angels were holding the land. He said there was to be a Prayer Mountain... A secluded place where weary laborers could come for rest and refreshing. But primarily a place where seasoned prayers would lead in Holy Spirit guided prayers concerning the work of God in the last days.”

Why is it that many Christians want to go to a “prayer mountain” to pray? They say that Jesus himself often went to the wilderness and even to a mountain to pray (Luke 5:16; 6:12). Many Christians have this wrong notion that one can be closer to God on a mountain, since heaven is high. But Jesus’ purpose in praying alone was to withdraw from the crowds. So from ancient days, man always sought to build higher and higher towers to reach up to heaven. In 1889, the race to build the tallest building in the modern world began when the 896-foot tall Eiffel Tower in Paris was built. Today, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, is the king of skyscrapers at 2,722 feet.

Why is mankind obsessed with building these skyscrapers? One of the biggest factors is the lack of space for increasing urban populations. But a big reason is pride: Who can build the tallest building in the world? Our text tells of a proud, unified humanity planning to build a city and a high tower to make a name for themselves (Gen 11:4). From the beginning, mankind has always vainly attempted to reach God in heaven. And just like today, making a name for himself takes the highest place in his life.

In only nine verses, the Tower of Babel narrative is short, but not in significance. Verses 1-4 tell of mankind’s pride and plan to build the tower. Verses 6-9 inform us about God’s perspective on mankind’s plan and how he dispersed them from Shinar. The structure of the narrative centers in verse 5, when God came down from heaven *“to see the city and the tower.”*

But the story does not end there. Millennia later, after Christ ascended back into his exalted place in heaven, he did not leave his disciples as orphans because he sent them the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost Sunday, which we commemorate today, the Spirit filled all of them, and through his Spirit, God reversed the effects of Babel.

Today, our theme is **“From Babel to Pentecost,”** under three headings: first, **Man Glorifies Himself in One Tongue**; second, **God Confuses Man with Many Tongues**; and third, **Man Glorifies God in One Tongue**.

## Man Glorifies Himself in One Tongue

Chapter 10 of Genesis is a table of nations, apparently already scattered and speaking different languages. Why then does Genesis 11 begin the Babel story saying that whole earth had one language? It is because Genesis 11 is meant to be a flashback, explaining why there are now many nations with different languages. Several connections between these two chapters are of note. Babel is mentioned as a kingdom built by Nimrod, a name which means “we shall rebel.” In addition, Shinar is named as another city built by Nimrod (Gen 10:8-10). The name Peleg, which means “division,” is explained by *“in his days the earth was divided”* (Gen 10:25). This is most probably the same event as the dispersion from Shinar.

In rebellion against God’s command to fill the earth, all the people of the earth after Adam’s fall migrated from Eden as one, traveling eastward. When they found the fertile plain in Shinar between the two great rivers, they “settled” there. This means they congregated in this one place. The phrase “from the east” is ominous of bad things to come. In the Bible, “from the east” or “east” usually implies moving away from God’s will and blessing. Adam and Eve were driven out east of Eden (Gen 3:24). Lot (Gen 13:10-12) and Jacob both went to the east (Gen 29:1), resulting in disaster.

If the Egyptians, Mayans, and other ancient peoples built pyramids, Babylonians built towers called *ziggurats*. They were massive structures, several stories high, and with giant terraced steps. What did the people use? Ancient Israel used stone and mortar for their buildings, but the Babylonians used brick and asphalt-like bitumen (verse 3). On the top floor of these ziggurats, they built their temples to their gods, thinking that these temples were their gateway to heaven. So the people conspired together to build a tower reaching up to heaven (verse 4). The higher the temple on top of the tower, the closer they are to heaven when they worship their gods.

Ever since creation, man has always been deceived into thinking that they can reach God in heaven with their own independent efforts. All kinds of unbiblical religions have always sought to appease their man-made gods through all sorts of works, sacrifices, and even pilgrimages. Make sure you are not like those at the tower of Babel trying to reach God by your own works. The Bible says the true religion is man reaching the God of heaven not by being a good person doing good works, but by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone!

Another reason for building the Tower of Babel was *“to make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”* Recognition and even fame are two of man’s perceived deepest needs. Before the flood, the “giants” on earth were “men of renown,” probably mighty warriors and powerful kings. What was the result of making heroes of these men? The earth was full of great wickedness, God sent the great flood to judge wicked mankind (Gen 6:5). Just as then, it is now. The heroes of today are Hollywood celebrities, great athletes, the rich and famous. Even churches have their own celebrity circuit of charismatic speakers. Everyone wants to make a name for himself and be famous for 15 minutes.

Those who are not rich and famous like us are not exempt from trying to make a name for ourselves. We want to have our own “legacy” passed on to our children. We want to be remembered as kind and loving, plus fun-loving and full of life. We want to be remembered by our success. But we are not to glory in our own fame and fortune, but in God. In contrast to the tower-builders who wanted to make their name great, God promised a legacy to Abraham, “*I will bless you and make your name great*” (Gen 12:2). The names of all Old Testament heroes did not become great on their own, but because God honored them because of the faith they showed even in great persecution and suffering. In the end, those of us who also persevere in our difficult pilgrimage will be rewarded by God himself. In heaven, God will give us three great names: his name, the name of the heavenly city, and the name of Christ (Rev 3:12; 22:4).

The tower-builders knew God’s command to fill the earth, but they were rebellious and driven by their aspiration to be independent of God. To prevent their dispersion to the whole earth, they built a great city and a great tower, and settled there. God saw all of these and intervened.

### **God Confuses Man with Many Tongues**

As mentioned before, verse 5 connects the two main parts of our text. After God saw the tower-builders’ rebellion, he took action (see also Gen 18:21). So when God sees that the tower-builders were unified as one people with one language living in one place, God saw that they would do anything that pleased them (verse 6). Was God threatened by their unity? No, he was not intimidated. He did not fear for himself, but for man. If they are unified in their rebellion and independence against God, they will never turn to God. Total wickedness would again prevail over the whole earth, so that God in his righteous anger would destroy them again, just as in the days of Noah.

Because of this, God forced the people to scatter abroad by destroying the tower and confusing their unified language into many tongues. The people then formed groups with the same language in their own separate places. In those days, there were no translators nor subtitles, so the different language groups naturally separated from those whom they did not understand. What they feared most—dispersion—had come upon them. They abandoned their tower project and scattered over the face of the earth. Their plans failed, but God perfectly accomplished his plan and intention.

The word *babel* sounds similar to the Hebrew word *balal*, which means “mixed-up” or “confused.” Thus, from its beginnings in the land of Shinar, Babylon had become a symbol for the wicked, rebellious, godless—and confused—world. All those who are like Babylon will incur the wrath of God (Isa 14). Isaiah prophesied the fall of the Babylonian empire to be like that of Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa 13:19). Isaiah’s oracle against Babylon is full of images from the Tower of Babel narrative:

*How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, “I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will*

*set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High” (Isa 14:12-14).*

John describes Babylon as that proud and spiritually adulterous harlot who also persecutes God’s people. But like the tower of Babylon and the ancient Babylonian empire, it will fall to the ground with a great thud, and burn with a great fire, until it is no more. As a picture of the godless political, economic and military powers of the world today, its destruction will be complete (Rev 18). The wicked, rebellious world that Babylon represents will mourn (Rev 18:9-19), but the heavenly host, together with all the “saints and apostles and prophets,” will rejoice (Rev 18:20).

The tower of Babel narrative ends in verse 9, when “*the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.*” But the story does not really end here, because even with Babylon leading the whole earth in wickedness, there is hope.

### **Man Glorifies God in One Tongue**

Hope begins unexpectedly in Zephaniah’s prophecy of doom. The Lord will gather the self-sufficient, rebellious nations and kingdoms for destruction (Zeph 3:8). But the prophet not only pronounced judgment against the nations; he also gives hope. In the next verse, Zephaniah says, “*For at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord.*” This is a prophecy of the reversal of Babylon. People whose tongues spoke the filthy language of rebellion, wickedness and idolatry, will call upon the holy name of the Lord. Their language will change into the pure language of those who worship God.

Not only will their language be pure; they will all speak one language. How will this reversal happen? After our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, he poured out his Spirit on his disciples, and they started speaking in different tongues. Devout men “*from every nation under heaven*” started hearing the disciples speaking in their own language. And although the preaching was in different tongues, the message was one: the gospel of Jesus the Messiah who was born to die to save his people from sin. They also heard the mighty works of God in their own tongues.

Wherever the gospel is preached, people are united to Christ in one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God the Father of all. All believers might be speaking in 7,000 tongues all over the world, but the Word that we hear and read, the prayers that we pray, and the songs that we sing have the same message of salvation through faith in Christ alone. Because we hear the same Word, we understand one another. We have a bond in the Spirit that unbelievers will never understand. We speak the same pure speech from the pure Word of God. We love our brethren in our church. We comfort and encourage those who are lonely, cast down, or sick. We pray for and help those in other nations who are persecuted and in want.

Those who hear the preaching of the gospel and believe in Christ as their Savior will come out of rebellious wicked Babylon, the unbelieving world. Christ calls us to flee from the sins of this wicked world (Rev 18:4-5). We must abandon our love for the wicked world called Babylon, and our desire to be independent of God.

**D**ear people of God, in the end, the confusion in Babel will be reversed in heaven. The new heaven and new earth will not be built by human hands with the aid of human technology. It will be a city *“whose designer and builder is God”* (Heb 11:10). It will not be built from the earth trying to reach up to heaven. Rather, it is a city *“coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God”* (Rev 21:10-11). There, all the nations will speak one language of praise, united in giving glory to God and to the Lamb, singing, *“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”* (Rev 5:9, 13)

Are you looking forward to the highest heaven where all true believers will be literally speaking one language, worshipping one God and Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, and where there will be no pride, sin and rebellion against God? You can only look forward to this perfect blessedness when you have believed and trusted in Jesus, the Lamb of God who sacrificed his own body and blood for all your sins.