06

SESSION SIX

The Creator Slows the Spread of Evil

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session we see humanity's propensity for inventing ways to build up our own prestige and bring honor to ourselves. As we build our kingdoms and lift up our own name, God sees our plans. He judges our attempts to increase our power, and in His judgment of our idolatrous desires, He shows mercy by slowing the spread of evil. And after He saves us, He gives us the mission of scattering throughout the world to praise the name of His Son.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 11:1-9

THE POINT

God judges and disrupts human attempts to thwart His glory.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Have you ever wished for a fresh start? A re-do at something? Perhaps you look at the school activities you're involved in and wish you had chosen something else. Perhaps it's something you did wrong, a moment when something you said or did really hurt someone and now you wish you could take it back. You wish you could go back in time. If only there were a "reset" button!

- **What event in your past do you wish you could change?**
- **What is a choice in your past you would make differently with hindsight?**

As we reenter the Genesis narrative, we see that God has essentially given humanity a "reset." We've seen how, through Adam and Eve's disobedience, sin entered the world for the first time. Their initial act of disobedience and distrust became a human predisposition in the hearts of their children, an inclination of a sinful nature, the desire to disobey and not trust God. We saw in the previous session how God grieved over the fallen state of humanity and then judged the world through the flood and showed grace to Noah and his family.

What if you were a part of Noah's family after the floodwaters had subsided? Perhaps you think that after witnessing such an intense display of God's judgment toward sin and His mercy in preserving your family, you'd make a new commitment to be obedient. Unfortunately, the next scene shows Noah drunk, the object of mockery from one of his sons. And generations later, sin extends to the point that people all over the world join together to create a tower that would reach the skies for the sake of their own glory.

Option 2

Prior to the session, gather two Lego® projects and place them on a table at the front of the room. Choose two volunteers to complete the projects. Provide the first student all the Legos needed for his or her project, still in the box with the instructions. Provide the other student all the Legos needed as well, but without the box and with instructions written in a language the student cannot read. When the first student completes his or her project, call time. Praise the first student for completing the project, then ask the second:

- **Did you want to complete your project first? Why or why not?**
- **In what ways were your plans for completing your project thwarted?**

Point out that God knows our motivation for everything we do. In today's session we will discover how God thwarted the plans of His people when they sought praise for themselves over Him.

HIS STORY 15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God judges and disrupts human attempts to thwart His glory.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **The people of Babel:** generations following Noah

PLOT

As the Genesis account continues, we encounter an interesting narrative in what is commonly referred to as the Tower of Babel. By the time we reach this account in history, some time has passed since the judgment and mercy of the flood (discussed in the previous session), but like the time surrounding the flood, we continue to see that humanity is still broken from the inside out. There is still a sin problem because there is still a heart problem. Sin still remained in the heart of man after the flood. God knew this was the case, which is why the flood was only meant to slow down the progression of sin in the world.

As we approach this event in history, it is important to ask ourselves what the author would have us understand about God, ourselves, and the way we should live as we look back to this time. Stories like these are recorded for a purpose, and God would have us immerse ourselves into this time in biblical history to teach us something new, and perhaps something we've never thought about before.

GOD SEES THE PEOPLE'S PRIDEFUL PLANS

The descendants of Noah settled in the land of Shinar, and there they decided to build for themselves a city, and within that city a tower that would reach the sky. Watch how the story unfolds:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. (Gen. 11:1-5)

At first glance, we might think, *What's wrong with that? The world is filled with cities and skyscrapers. Why is there anything wrong with deciding to build this particular city and its tower?* But look carefully at how the author of Genesis tells the story.

"As people migrated from the east…" This geographical reference has a moral aspect to it. In journeying "from the east," the people turned their backs on the sunrise and went farther "east of Eden."[1] Some translations read "eastward," but the point is the same—the people were walking farther away from the garden of Eden.

"They said to one another…" Before taking on such a massive undertaking, there was no consulting God. They didn't share Noah's relationship with God, and they weren't interested in carrying out the task God gave Noah's descendants. In this situation, there's an utter absence of God in their minds.

"Let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens." Sure, this seems like a major undertaking, but why does Genesis imply it was sacrilegious? Because the sky represented heaven, the place where God dwells. This reference ought to remind us of Genesis 3; it is another human attempt to become like God.

"Let us make a name for ourselves." The people wanted to build a city with a tower so high that they would make a name for themselves. Feel the arrogance of this statement. They stood in direct contrast to what we will see in Genesis 12, where God promised to give Abram a great name. Here in Genesis 11, the people wanted to achieve greatness for themselves.

"Lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." Wait a minute! Didn't God tell the people to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 9:1)? Yes, and here's where we see humanity's blatant refusal to obey God's command to Noah and his descendants. Instead of giving God glory, they sought their own by huddling together to build their own kingdom, completely ignoring God's command.

TIMELINE

TOWER OF BABEL
Humanity's pride is relentless in seeking praise for itself; but God's glory will never be dethroned.

THE CALLING OF ABRAHAM
God establishes a covenant with Abraham.

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC
Abraham's faith is tested when commanded to sacrifice his son.

We see that these were not benign actions but humanity's attempt once again to cast aside God's goodness and choose for themselves what they define as good.

- **What are some instances in today's culture where people might try to make a name for themselves? (athletes, musicians, TV personalities, reporters, etc.)** *(p. 40, PSG)*
- **Is there anything wrong with wanting to take credit for our personal successes? Why or why not?** *(p. 40, PSG)*

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

The account of Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden (ch. 3) and the Tower of Babylon share many similarities in plot, vocabulary, and theme. Both show people acting with sinful pride to try to make themselves godlike, and both show God expelling sinners from the their homes as punishment for their sin. The people's pride and ambition is expressed in three different ways: (1) the fivefold use of the first-person pronouns—us (twice), 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 over the face of the whole earth, all their efforts amounted to a rebellion against God and His command to fill the earth (9:1). In spite of their best efforts to elevate themselves to God's domain, the Lord still had to come down to look over the city and the tower. Human attempts to achieve glory, which belongs to God alone, always fall pitifully short. [2]

GOD JUDGES THEIR PRIDEFUL PLANS

Because God sees and because God cares, there will be judgment. We'll see in a moment what form this judgment would take for the people, but note first of all how the story describes God's action. These men were building something they hoped would reach the heavens, but it was merely a speck in the eyes of God, such a speck that He "came down to see" it (v. 5).

So God decided to judge the people in Shinar, not because He was threatened by their actions, but because He cared deeply about their hearts. He wanted to slow the spread of sin. Take a look:

And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." (Gen. 11:6-7)

The text informs us that God put an end to the building of this tower by confusing the people's language. He could have destroyed the tower, struck the builders with lightning, or caused a massive earthquake. Instead, He confused their languages so that their progress in this evil was stunted.

Yet there's an element of mercy in this act of judgment, and that's a theme we've seen again and again in Genesis.

Lead students to turn to the following sections in their Bibles and discuss the recurring themes they observe. *(p. 41, PSG)*

- **Genesis 3:** Because Adam and Eve sinned, they were judged and banished from paradise. But was this action only judgment? No. You see, God could have annihilated Adam and Eve right then and there, but instead, He showed them mercy. He sacrificed an animal in order to clothe them, and He promised that through the seed of Eve, a Messiah would be born who would crush the head of the serpent.
- **Genesis 4:** When Cain killed Abel, Cain was judged and forced to wander. But even here God showed an element of mercy. When Cain expressed his fear of being killed in vengeance, God placed upon him a mark of protection.
- **Genesis 6–9:** When the state of humanity was described as creating new evils with their every thought and intent, God brought judgment through the flood. But it wasn't just judgment; He saved a remnant of humanity in the ark.

God continues to show mercy to His children even today. Hebrews 12:5-11 tells us that God disciplines us when we sin, but the discipline is good because it is what proves we are His. The discipline is merciful because even if it isn't enjoyable at the time, it later yields the fruit of peace and righteousness.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God Is Transcendent

God's transcendence refers to the fact that He is distinct from and independent of His created world. He is transcendent over us in regard to His greatness and power as well as His goodness and purity. The implication of this doctrine is that God is inherently superior to humanity; His thoughts and ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). When God saves us, He restores us so we can fulfill our human purpose; this does not mean that we become God or that distinctions between God and humanity are obliterated. Understanding God's transcendence evokes awe and wonder at His goodness and power.

TIMELINE

ABRAHAM'S HEIRS RECEIVE THE PROMISE
The promise of the covenant is passed to Abraham's descendants.

JACOB AND ESAU
Family dysfunction erupts between parents and sons for the birthright blessing.

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD
Jacob, the deceiver, is forever changed after being broken through his encounter with God.

GOD MERCIFULLY CAUSES THEIR PRIDEFUL PLANS TO FAIL

So how did God ultimately respond to the people's pride? He confused their language, and in merciful judgment, He caused humanity's idolatrous plans to fail.

So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called

Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth. (Gen. 11:8-9)

> We must not pass over this story as if it were an obscure historical event with little relevance to our lives. The events of Genesis 11 provide a window into human thought and behavior. We too are a people who travel farther and farther "east of Eden," turning our backs to God's goodness. We are a people who often live with absolutely no thought of God in our minds. In making decisions big and small, "we say to each other," but we don't say to God. We're content to live, act, speak, and make life's decisions without ever consulting God.

Every day, we're building something. And we're tempted to build up our treasures in a way that communicates to the world that this is where we find our identity, our joy, and our life. The temptation to "make a name for ourselves" leads us to believe we are at the center of the universe and that we can accomplish salvation for ourselves. We can work our way up to the heavens; we can be like God, or so we think.

It's good news that God causes idolatrous plans to fail. Time after time, the God who is committed to our good, the God who wants us to find our satisfaction in Him, will slowly strip away everything else in which we try to find joy. Perhaps you've spent years and years building a reputation that would reach to the heavens. What would it look like for God, in His mercy, to strip away some of the things in which you find your security?

When failure comes into our lives, we often interpret it as disaster, or a sign of God's judgment. Genesis 11 reminds us that our plans often fail because they were our plans, not God's plan. And God, in His goodness and grace, often causes these plans to fail. His goal is to turn us toward Himself. He wants us to see that nothing can satisfy us like He can. Without the failure of our idolatrous plans, we would continue on in our rejection of God without ever noticing that something was wrong.

CHRIST CONNECTION

> In Genesis 11, God confused the language of those who sought to make known the greatness of their own name and of their own kingdom. Thousands of years later, at Pentecost, God tore down the language barrier so that His people would scatter across the world and make known the great name of His Son.
>
> Not only that, but this theme of judgment combined with mercy found throughout Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament points to the cross of Jesus. The cross is the ultimate display of both God's judgment and His mercy. At the cross, God fully poured out His wrath against our sin, but He also poured out the fullness of His mercy and grace when He let His own Son take the punishment for our sin.
>
> As Christians, we have new and redeemed hearts. As a result, we are to accept the task the people of Babylon ignored and share the good news of God's kingdom, accomplishing His mission and spreading His fame, not ours.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some ways people today, even Christians, seek to "make a name for ourselves"?** *Examples might include seeking approval from others through social media venues, athletic ability, and/or by making good grades, etc.*

- **Why might it be better for our plans to fail rather than have them succeed without God?** *Answers will vary, but have students consider the truth that apart from God, even the things we deem "successful" are ultimately very unsuccessful.*

- **What are some personal successes you've experience in life? Did you take all the credit for your success or did you glorify God? Explain.** *Answers to this question will vary.*

- **How has today's study helped you recognize the importance of consulting God in the things you do and the decisions you make?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HIS STORY
God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY
Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

HEAD

God's actions toward the people of Babel help us to think once again about mercy and judgment going hand-in-hand. While confusing the languages and bringing disunity to the people was an act of judgment, it was simultaneously an act of mercy as well.

- **What surprises you about the action God took to stop the people's building plans?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **Do you see an element of mercy in God's judgment? Explain.** *Ultimately the merciful element is found in the fact that God didn't just leave the people alone, free to do whatever pleased them. Such unity in sinfulness would have resulted in even greater sin, which is why it was merciful that God confused their language.*

HEART

The story of the Tower of Babel reveals something about the human heart that is both not surprising and shocking at the same time. It is not surprising given that we have already seen some pretty evil things that have resulted because of the contamination of the human heart; yet in a sense it is quite shocking because hearing this story is like looking into a mirror—the pride one sees is all too familiar.

- **What are some questions we could ask ourselves that might help us identify whether we are seeking to make a name for ourselves or please God?** *Answers will vary, but may include some along the lines of: Why do I care so much about my grades? Why do I regularly post selfies online? Why is it so important that I get into this college? Etc.*
- **How can we tell if we are pursuing success apart from a relationship with God?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HANDS

The Tower of Babel warns us against the pride that all of humanity encounters in some form or fashion, seeking to place self before others and even God Himself. However, God is the center of this universe—not us—and there is joy in living out life day by day with that truth in mind.

- **What are some practical ways we can make sure we are working to advance God's kingdom instead of our own?** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What are some ways we can pursue humility and fight pride in our personal lives?** *Answers to this question will vary, but may include things like remembering the gospel, considering others as more important than oneself, putting the needs of others first, etc.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, item #6 can be used during group time. Item #6 is a poster displaying bricks, and is intended to be an interactive object lesson that corresponds with the story of Babel. To set up the activity, explain to your group that like the people of the Tower of Babel who tried to make a name for themselves and build their own platform and kingdom, what are some ways that we also try to promote ourselves or make our name known to those around us today? As students come up with answers, write them on the bricks of the poster.

SOURCES

1. Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Genesis* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), 134.
2. Robert D. Bergen, *HCSB Study Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2010).
3. "Trevor Bayne," I Am Second [online], [cited 9 March 2015]. Available from the Internet: *www.iamsecond.com*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)

Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject