

Genesis 11:1-9 "The Danger of Trying to Reach God the Wrong Way"*

Proposition: There are two scenes in Genesis 11:1-9 that warn us of the danger of trying to reach God the wrong way.

I. Scene #1: People tried to reach God in their own way (1-4).

A. They resolved to make bricks (3).

1. It's okay to use your head.

2. It's not okay to use your head to prove you don't need God.

B. They resolved to make a city (4).

C. They resolved to make a tower (4).

D. They resolved to make a name for themselves (4).

II. Scene #2: They didn't make it (5-9).

A. God made an assessment (5-7).

1. We see God's glory here.

2. We also see God's grace.

B. God took action (8-9).

Implications: What do we learn from Babel?

1. We learn about our nature.

· We are worshippers.

· We are proud.

· We try to reach God our own way.

2. We learn about God's nature.

· He is holy.

· He is powerful.

· He is personal.

· He can be reached only one way.

Recently a person said to me these words, "I believe there is one God and that there are many ways to reach him." How would you respond to that assertion? Is it true that there are many ways to God, and that all religions are basically the same?

The Bible warns us of two basic problems. One, it's possible to believe in the *wrong* God. People did in Bible times, as they do today. God prohibited the worship of Baal, Marduk, Dagon, and all other false gods. Yet many people believe in false gods, and do so to their own eternal peril.

But the Bible warns of a second problem. The first is that it's possible to believe in the *wrong* God. The second is that it's possible to try to reach the *right* God in the *wrong* way. Some people believe in the true God, the God who created the universe and revealed Himself in the Scriptures. They believe the Bible is

God's Word. They believe God sent His only Son into the world. They believe in the right God.

What's more, they believe there is a heaven and they plan to go there some day to be with God. Will they make it?

A businessman well known for his ruthlessness once announced to writer Mark Twain, "Before I die I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the 10 Commandments aloud at the top." "I have a better idea," replied Twain. "You could stay in Boston and keep them."

According to God's Word, it's possible to try to reach the right God in the wrong way. The fact is, churches are full of people this very moment who are convinced they are going to heaven, and if you asked them why they'd say, "I'm going to heaven because I believe in God and I'm trying to live a good life. I go to church. I've been baptized. I read my Bible. I even give money to the Lord's work. That's how I know I'm okay with God."

Answer this. Would you want to be handcuffed to that person when he leaves this world and enters eternity? I wouldn't. I believe that person is in serious trouble and doesn't even know it. Why? Because he's trying to reach God--indeed he's banking on reaching God--but he's doing so the *wrong way*.

The Bible is clear. The person who believes in the wrong God won't make it to heaven. But neither will the person who seeks to reach the right God in the *wrong way*.

Quite frankly, it's not a new problem. Cain was the first person to do it--in Genesis 4. But perhaps one of the most vivid examples in the Bible of trying to reach God in the wrong way happened years later at a place called Shinar. It's found in Genesis 11.

I've entitled this message, "The Danger of Trying to Reach God in the Wrong Way." I nearly called it, "Showdown at Shinar," for it's here we see in living color what God thinks of self-righteousness. There are two scenes in the narrative of Genesis 11:1-9...

I. Scene #1: People tried to reach God in their own way (1-4).

Remember the context. Genesis is the book of beginnings. In Genesis 1-2 we see the creation account. In Genesis 3, we observe the Fall of man. In Genesis 4-5 we see the earth's population--and rebellion--expand. In Genesis 6-9 we see the destruction of the earth and the preservation of Noah and his family. Genesis 10 is the record of the repopulation of the earth following the Flood--it's the table of nations which shows the link between Noah and the nation of Israel.

But chronologically, Genesis 10 *follows* the account before us in Genesis 11:1-9. Genesis 11 takes us back to the world that existed after Noah got off the ark.

What was true of that world? Verses 1-2, "Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there."

Noah's ark landed on Mount Ararat (in modern day Turkey). In time Noah's descendants moved from the mountainous region of Ararat and ended up in the fertile plain of Shinar, some 500 miles from the ark.

The land of Shinar is actually Babylonia, as Genesis 10:10 indicates, probably in southern Babylonia. The original text states they moved "from the east," but in Hebrew the phrase is flexible and can mean "in the east," or "eastward." As G. Aalders suggests, "It depends entirely on the perspective from which the direction is indicated."

When the people arrived in Shinar, they found an ideal area for the development of a new civilization. At the time the whole world spoke one language.

You say, "Wait a minute. The whole world? How many people were there? There couldn't have been very many, could there?"

A good question. How many people were on the planet at the time? And what *time* are we talking about anyway? How soon after Noah got off the ark was the tower of Babel built?

Commentators Keil & Delitzsch remark, "With regard to the date of the event, we find from verse 10 that the division of the human race occurred in the days of Peleg, who was born 100 years after the flood. In 150 or 180 years, with a rapid succession of births, the descendants of the three sons of Noah, who were already 100 years old and married at the time of the flood, might have become quite numerous enough to proceed to the erection of such a building. If we reckon, for example, only four male and female births as the average number to each marriage, since it is evident from 11:12ff. that children were born as early as the 30th or 35th year of their parent's age, the sixth generation would be born by 150 years after the flood, and the human race would number 12,288 males and as many females. Consequently there would be at least about 30,000 people in the world at this time."

So people migrated to the plain of Shinar and found a wonderful place to call home. Apparently, they also found an abundance of clay which contributed to the first of four resolves.

A. They resolved to make bricks (3). "They said to each other, 'Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar."

While in Shinar man discovered how to make bricks by baking clay in ovens. Now they had material for the construction of homes and other public buildings.

Apparently, prior to the Flood people used only natural stone for erecting their buildings. At Shinar, they began using bricks. In order to hold them together, they used pitch-like asphalt for mortar, a substance found in Shinar. It's called "tar" in verse 3 ("slime" in the KJV).

What's the difference between stone and brick? One is made by God, the other by man. What's the significance of the use of bricks? True, stone which is plenteous in Canaan is scarce in Mesopotamia. But something else is happening here. Man is now showing his creative ability as an image-bearer of God.

That's good, isn't it? Innovation is a good thing, isn't it? We're supposed to use our heads in life, aren't we? Those are important questions, and here's the biblical response...

1. *It's okay to use your head.* God gave it to you. But...

2. *It's not okay to use your head to prove you don't need God.* Do people ever do that? All the time. In fact, we're about to see it happen right here in Genesis 11.

You see, God has given us everything we have. Everything. But the problem is we're prone to use what God gives us for selfish purposes, to make a name for ourselves.

A man invested 48 years of his life into building a solid business. He earned a reputation as being a man of integrity and was honored in the community. When he retired he turned the business over to his sons. Unfortunately, the sons didn't share their father's values, and saw the business merely as a means to make money. The father pleaded with them to change, but they ignored him. Within five years, though the business profits were still high, the family name was marred by their dishonest practices.

When we hear that kind of a story, we're quick to say, "That's wrong! Those sons shouldn't ignore their father. They should honor him in their use of what he entrusted to them." And that's true.

But it's just as wrong to use God's gifts and ignore *God*. Yet we do it all the time.

Who's the hardest person to talk to about their need for Jesus Christ? In my opinion, it's the so-called "self-made" person. Why? Because he's impressed with his own "goodness." He doesn't see his need for a Savior. He's a self-sufficient man. He's used the brain God gave him, along with the hands, talents, and opportunities--by the way, all God-given--to succeed in life. And he's taken personal credit for his accomplishments.

If you do that when writing a research paper, it's called "plagiarism." Plagiarism is using someone else's goods and failing to give them credit for it. The world is full of "spiritual plagiarists" who use God's gifts and fail to give Him the glory.

Remember, God didn't give us our heads so we could prove we don't need Him, but so we could bring honor to Him.

The first resolve was to make bricks. It didn't stop there. Here's the second...

B. They resolved to make a city (4). "Then 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 and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'"

This isn't the first "city" in the Bible. You may recall that Cain built one in Genesis 4:17 and named it after his son, Enoch.

Why did they build the city anyway? We're told at the end of verse 4. In their own admission the people said they didn't want to be "scattered over the face of the whole earth."

Apparently, the population had increased to the point that there wasn't enough room in the plain of Shinar to maintain a rural lifestyle. They didn't want to leave so they urbanized. Cities are interesting places, aren't they? Cities are crowded places full of lonely people.

Do you see a red flag here? What did God command Adam in Genesis 1:28? "Fill the earth." And after the Flood what did God tell Noah and his sons? The same thing. Genesis 9:1, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."

The peoples' plan was in direct conflict with God's plan. Mankind was not supposed to congregate in one small area. God wanted him to spread over the whole earth and fill it.

But at Shinar the people chose to disobey God's command. Why? They didn't want to be scattered. They wanted to crowd into one place. And with their discovery of brick-making, they now had the means to defy God's plan.

A city is man's attempt to pool resources, to come together for protection and convenience. By the way, Derek Kidner makes an important observation about Babel, "It makes it clear that unity and peace are not ultimate goods: better division than collective apostasy."

It's not wrong to live in a city. It is wrong to do anything--in this case, build a city--in an attempt to defy the plan of God. The defiance continued with resolve #3...

C. They resolved to make a tower (4). "They said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens.'" They decided to make a tower. What kind of a tower? One whose top reached heaven.

Ronald Youngblood describes this tower, "The tower built on the site was doubtless of a particular type known technically as a *ziggurat*. Square at the base, its sloping, stepped sides culminated in a small shrine at the top. The builders of the ziggurats often painted such shrines with blue enamel in order to make them blend in with the celestial home of one or more of their gods. They believed a deity would live temporarily in the shrine when he came down to meet with his people. The worshiper would climb the outside staircase of the ziggurat all the way to the top in the hope that his god would condescend to meet with him in the little chapel there."

Archaeologists have discovered several such temple-towers in Mesopotamia. These ziggurats were meant to serve as staircases from earth to heaven. They were given names that substantiate this. At Larsa there's one called "The House of the Link between Heaven and Earth;" at Borsippa, "The House of the Seven Guides of Heaven and Earth;" at Babylon, "The House of the Foundation-Platform of Heaven and Earth;" and at Asshur, "The House of the Mountain of the Universe."

Wait a minute. Did the people really think they could build a tower tall enough to reach God? I don't think so. But do people today think they can live good enough lives to reach God? They sure do, and if you're one of them, you're in the same condition the people were in at Babel.

Which brings us to resolve #4. The people made bricks, then a city, and finally a tower. What drove them? This...

D. They resolved to make a name for themselves (4). "So that we may make a name for ourselves," the text reads.

Talk about egotism. As one author describes it, "The tower represented a prideful human attempt to storm the bastions of heaven and force the gods to bend to the will of man."

My friend, why were we created? We're here to exalt and honor God's name, right? God has a great name. His name is worthy of honor and reverence.

But what did the people at Shinar do? They sought to make a name for themselves, and they used God-given abilities and resources to do it. What audacity! In essence, they committed *treason*. They used God's gifts for self-centered purposes.

Do people today ever do that? The fact is, every one of us leaves our mother's womb doing that.

You say, "What about the kind, selfless humanitarian, the person who sacrifices for the good of others and wants no recognition in return? There are people like that, you know."

Yes, there are people who do "good" things, and you may be one. But the question you must answer is this. Do you think the good you have done will merit God's favor and earn you a place in His heaven? If so, in essence, you're trying to make a name for yourself, not before people, but *with God*.

Now answer this question. Was God impressed with what the people did at Shinar? We often hear, "It doesn't matter what your religion is as long as you're sincere. As long as you're seeking God as best as you know how, you'll be okay." Is that true?

We need not wonder, for Genesis 11 gives us the answer in living color. In scene #1, people tried to reach God in their own way. What happened? Look at scene #2. To put it short and simple...

II. Scene #2: They didn't make it (5-9).

They didn't even come close. How do I know? Because of two things God did.

A. God made an assessment (5-7). "But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. The LORD said, '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. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.'"

Here we see an example of what's commonly called *anthropomorphism*. That's when the Bible uses human characteristics to describe God.

Verse 5 says that the Lord "came down to see the city." First of all, God is omnipresent. He doesn't have to "go" anywhere to see something, for He's everywhere. What's more, He doesn't have eyes to "see" with like we do. He doesn't have to see something to gain information about it, for He knows all things. He's omniscient.

This descriptive account is for our benefit. God wants us to know that He knows. He sees everything we do.

What's His assessment of human attempts to reach Him? He's not impressed. In this case, He decided to stop the nonsense. How? By confusing the language.

We'll examine *what* God did momentarily, but first a comment about *why* He did what He did. God did what He did at Babel to demonstrate two of His attributes.

1. *We see God's glory here.* God will not play second fiddle to anyone or anything in this universe. Why not? Because He's the Creator and He is passionate about His glory. That's why He threw the people into confusion at Shinar. But there's another reason...

2. *We also see God's grace.* I see His grace in verse 6. "The LORD said, '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.'"

It sounds like what God saw when He visited Shinar caught Him off guard, and that He is afraid of what man might do. Is that it? No. Nothing catches God by surprise.

Granted, this is a difficult verse to translate. The KJV renders it as follows: "And the LORD said, Behold, the people are one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do."

What God is saying is this: "If man is so brash as to think he can build a tower to reach Me, it's only going to get worse. Now he's *deceiving* himself. If I don't stop him, it won't be long before he *destroys* himself." When God separated the people at Shinar, it was as much an act of mercy as it was judgment.

Beloved, we'd be in big trouble if God allowed us to achieve our self-focused pursuits. Sometimes He throws a wrench in the cog of our lives and "messes up" our plans--like He did at Babel. Why? Is He a mean-spirited, kill-joy? Certainly not.

Yes, He is passionate about His glory, but He's also interested in our good. Often, the reason He interrupts our self-centered plans is to get our attention so we'll turn to Him--so we'll turn to Him the *right* way.

What is the right way? It's through Jesus Christ, isn't it? The Cross of Jesus is the only bridge that can take a person to God.

Why is that? The reason is simple. We are sinners--every one of us. Our sins have cut us off from God. We are born separated from Him, alienated from Him, and under His wrath. Ephesians 2:12 describes our condition as "without hope and without God in the world."

When we enter this world, there is an infinite gulf between us and God, a chasm we cannot span. There's no tower we can make that can reach God. In fact, there's nothing we can do to reach God. Nothing. We are helpless.

But here's the good news. God did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Because of His great love for us, He sent His own, perfect Son to make a sacrificial payment for our sins. He died in our place. Where? At the Cross. On the Cross Jesus Christ died for the sins of every person that would ever believe on Him, and then He rose again in triumph.

His Cross is the bridge to God, the *only* bridge.

The question is this. Have you ever crossed the bridge? Have you ever come to God on *His* terms?

Perhaps you're wondering, "How do I do it?" Again, let me make this clear. *You* can't reach God. You need Him to reach you. You must call upon Him in absolute brokenness and dependence. You must admit that you are a sinner, deserving of God's judgment, and you must repent of your sin and selfish ways. You must place your faith in Jesus Christ and His atoning work, and you must accept Him as your personal Savior and Lord.

If you do this, according to John 5:24, God will transport you "across the bridge," from *death to life*. At that very moment, God will reconcile you to Himself and give you eternal life through His Son.

In Genesis 11:5-7, God made an assessment of the people's attempt to reach Him. Then...

B. God took action (8-9). "So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel--because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth."

Wycliffe Bible Translators estimate there are about 6,170 languages in the world today. Mexico alone has 241; India 381; Indonesia 669; and Papua New Guinea 849 languages. The African continent has 1,918 different languages.

And it all started at Babel. The Lord confused the language of the people. Just imagine the chaos that developed. Have you ever been surrounded by people speaking a language you couldn't understand? It's a helpless feeling.

One minute the people were building their blasphemous tower, and the next minute they were staring blankly at each other. They put down their trowels and scattered in confusion. The city became known as "Babel," a word that sounds like the Hebrew for "confusion."

Many believe that Babel is synonymous with Babylon. It's significant that throughout the Bible Babylon represents the number one foe of God and God's people. Babylon is the epitome of man's attempt to reach divinity on his own terms.

In Isaiah 14:13-14 we're given a description of the fall of the king of Babylon--who quite likely is a prototype of Satan himself, "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'" But in the next verse Isaiah says, "But you are brought down to the grave..."

Babylon is the essence of Satan-designed, works-oriented, man-centered religion. In the coming Tribulation, the Beast will lead Babylon in one final, attempt to defeat God (Rev 13:4; 17:3). But as Revelation 18 makes clear, Babylon will fall, never to rise again, the final exclamation point to what God thinks of those who try to

reach Him the wrong way.

Implications: What do we learn from Babel? Let's consider two insights...

1. *We learn about our nature.* What's true of us? From Genesis 11 we learn that...

- We are worshippers. Everyone is a worshipper, even the atheist. We may worship the true God or false gods. Some people worship things their hands have made. Still others worship themselves. But we all worship something. We are all living for something.

The truth is, we were created to worship. When God formed mankind in His image, He designed him to be a worshipping creature. The problem is that in Genesis 3, Adam rebelled against the Lord and brought the curse of God upon his descendants. And ever since then every human being has entered this world worshipping the wrong object.

- We are proud. That's why we go our own way and do our own thing. That's why we don't want to admit we can't reach God on our own. And that's why we reject God's provision of a Savior. And ultimately, it's because of pride that...

- We try to reach God our own way.

A poll was taken that sheds light on this paradox of increased religiosity and decreased morality. According to sociologist Robert Bellah, 81 percent of the American people also say they agree that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious belief independent of any church or synagogue." Thus the key to the paradox is the fact that those who claim to be Christians are arriving at faith on their own terms -- terms that make no demands on behavior.

A woman named Sheila, interviewed for Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*, embodies this attitude. "I believe in God," she said. "I can't remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It's 'Sheila-ism.' Just my own little voice."

When we try to reach God our own way, we're doomed to fail. Just ask the people at Babel.

2. *We learn about God's nature.* We see four of His characteristics in Genesis 11.

- He is holy. That means He is set apart. He's high and lifted up. He cannot be reached by human effort. He is perfect and we are not.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "My concern is not whether God is on our side; my great concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."

- He is powerful. How powerful? So powerful that He could baffle the world's solidarity and scatter the people in a moment.

- He is personal. Our text says, "He came down to see." Centuries later His Son came down to see and to save a people for His glory.

We'll not take time to develop this, but think about it. In Acts 2 we see the reverse of Genesis 11. At Babel, God confused speech. At Pentecost God enabled His people to speak in languages so that visitors from all over the world could understand. At Babel there was division. At Pentecost, restoration.

- He can be reached only one way. And that's *His* way through Jesus Christ. The religions of the world say, "You sin; you pay." But in the Bible God says, "You sin; I paid. Will you accept my payment and come to Me

on My terms?"