

a deeper dive

INTO YOUR FAVORITE BIBLE STORIES

“That is, the Lord passed in front of Moses and said, ‘Yahweh, the Lord, is a kind and merciful God. He is slow to become angry. He is full of great love. He can be trusted.’” - Exodus 34:6 ERV

1 - Interpreting Babble

Genesis 11:1–9 esv

“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ 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. ⁴ 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.’ ⁵ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.’ ⁸ So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ 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.”

Moses (writer of Genesis) uses the story of the flood (Chapter 6) and the story of Babel (Chapter 11) for two purposes:

1. **to characterize the ways of humankind and**
2. **to demonstrate God’s acts of judgment toward humanity’s proud efforts to rule over the creation, not as God’s faithful representatives but as rebels.**

a deeper dive

INTO YOUR FAVORITE BIBLE STORIES

- Some scholars identify the tower in this narrative as the three-hundred-foot-high temple of **the man-made god**, Marduk at Babylon. The location of the tower of Babel was in ancient Mesopotamia on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. Bible scholars believe that the tower was a type of stepped pyramid called a ziggurat, common throughout Babylonia.
- The same **arrogant pride** that inspired **rebellious** Eve and Adam to **rival God's knowledge** (Genesis 3:5) and the **ungodly** Cain to build his city (Genesis 4:17), now inspired "the whole earth" (11:4).
- The mention of the region of Shinar and Babel reminds us of the great-great grandson of Adam, **Nimrod and his rebellious kingdom** which spread throughout Assyria and Babylon.ⁱ

With this characterization of human history outside God's saving work, the author, Moses, sets the stage for God's call of Abram out of the post-Babel world to begin his redemptive work that would unfold in Israel's history (Genesis 12 and following).ⁱⁱ

The Human Heart

Up until this point in the Bible, the whole world spoke the same language, meaning there was one common speech for all people.

The people of the earth had become skilled in construction and decided to build a city with a tower that would reach up to the heavens.

By building the tower, the inhabitants of the city wanted to make a name for themselves and to unify the people by preventing the population from being scattered across the earth:

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." (Genesis 11:4, ESV)

a deeper dive

INTO YOUR FAVORITE BIBLE STORIES

God Intervenes

Genesis tells us that God came to see the city and the tower they were building.

He perceived their intentions, and in his infinite wisdom, he knew this great tower would only lead the people away from God.

The goal of the people was not to glorify God and lift up his name but *to build a name for themselves*.

Disobedience

Previously (Genesis 9:1), God told mankind to: "*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.*"

God *wanted* people to spread out and fill the whole earth.

By building the tower, the people were *also* ignoring God's clear instructions.

God's Judgment

Babel is derived from the root meaning "to confuse".

God observed what a powerful force the unity of rebellion created.

As a result, His judgment was to cause them to speak many different languages so they would not understand each other.

By doing this, God thwarted their plans.

He also forced the people of the city to scatter all across the face of the earth.

The project AND the city were abandoned.

a deeper dive

INTO YOUR FAVORITE BIBLE STORIES

Lessons From the Tower of Babel

Bible readers often wonder what was so wrong with building this tower.

The people were coming together to accomplish a notable work of architectural wonder and beauty. Why was that so bad?

To arrive at the answer, we must first understand that the tower of Babel was all about dominance, and not obedience to the will of God.

Sin dominates our lives.

The people were doing what seemed best for themselves and not what God had commanded.

Their building project symbolized the pride and arrogance of humans who were trying to be equal with God.

In seeking to be free from reliance on God, the people thought they could reach heaven on their own terms.

The "Tower of Babel" story emphasizes the sharp contrast between man's opinion of his own achievements and God's point of view regarding human accomplishments.

The tower was a major undertaking—the ultimate human-made achievement.

It resembled the modern masterstrokes people continue to build and boast about today, such as the Dubai Towers or the International Space Station.

a deeper dive

INTO YOUR FAVORITE BIBLE STORIES

A good example is that to build the tower, the people used brick instead of stone, and tar instead of mortar. *They used human-made materials, instead of more durable materials created by God.*

The people were building a monument to themselves, to call attention to their abilities and achievements, instead of giving glory to God.

God said in **Genesis 11:6**

"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." (NIV)

One scholar put it this way:

If the whole human race remained united in the proud attempt to take its destiny into its own hands and, by its self-centered efforts, to seize the reins of history, there would be no limit to its unrestrained rebellion against God.

***A godless human kingdom would try to
displace and exclude the kingdom of
God.ⁱⁱⁱ***

Unity certainly is not the problem.

God made it clear that when people are unified in purpose, they can accomplish impossible feats, both noble and ignoble.

This is why unity in the *Body of Christ* is so important in our efforts to accomplish God's purposes on earth.

Consider these passages:

a deeper dive

INTO YOUR FAVORITE BIBLE STORIES

Psalm 133:1, 3

“How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!”

“... For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.”

2 Chronicles 30:12

“Also, in Judah the hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the LORD.”

God wants us to work in unison for the “common good” of God for the world:

This is why Paul shares this with the church:

1 Corinthians 12:4-7

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. ⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

By contrast, having unity of purpose in worldly matters, ultimately, can be destructive.

In God's viewpoint, division in worldly matters is sometimes preferred over great feats of idolatry and apostasy. For this reason, God at times intervenes with a divisive hand in human affairs.

To prevent further arrogance, God confuses and divides people's plans, so they don't overstep God's limits on them.^{iv}

a deeper dive

INTO YOUR FAVORITE BIBLE STORIES

Questions for Reflection

1. Are there any human-made "stairways to heaven" you are building in your life?
2. Are your accomplishments drawing more attention to yourself than bringing glory to God?
3. Are your goals in line with God's will?
4. Are you seeking the plan of God for your life?
5. Are you in need of the saving grace that Only God can provide?

ⁱ ESV Reformation Study Bible – Commentary.

ⁱⁱ NIV Study Bible Notes, Fully Revised Edition – Commentary.

ⁱⁱⁱ NIV Study Bible Notes, Fully Revised Edition – Commentary.

^{iv} Derived from the research of Mary Fairchild who is a Christian writer, editor, and full-time minister. Since 2005, Mary has authored hundreds of articles on Christianity and the Bible for several Dotdash brands. She worked as the general editor on several Christian books and booklets for Calvary Chapel St. Petersburg from 2006 until 2017. Mary is also a writer for GotQuestions.org, a ministry that assists others in understanding the nature of God, the Scriptures, salvation, and other spiritual topics.