



REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

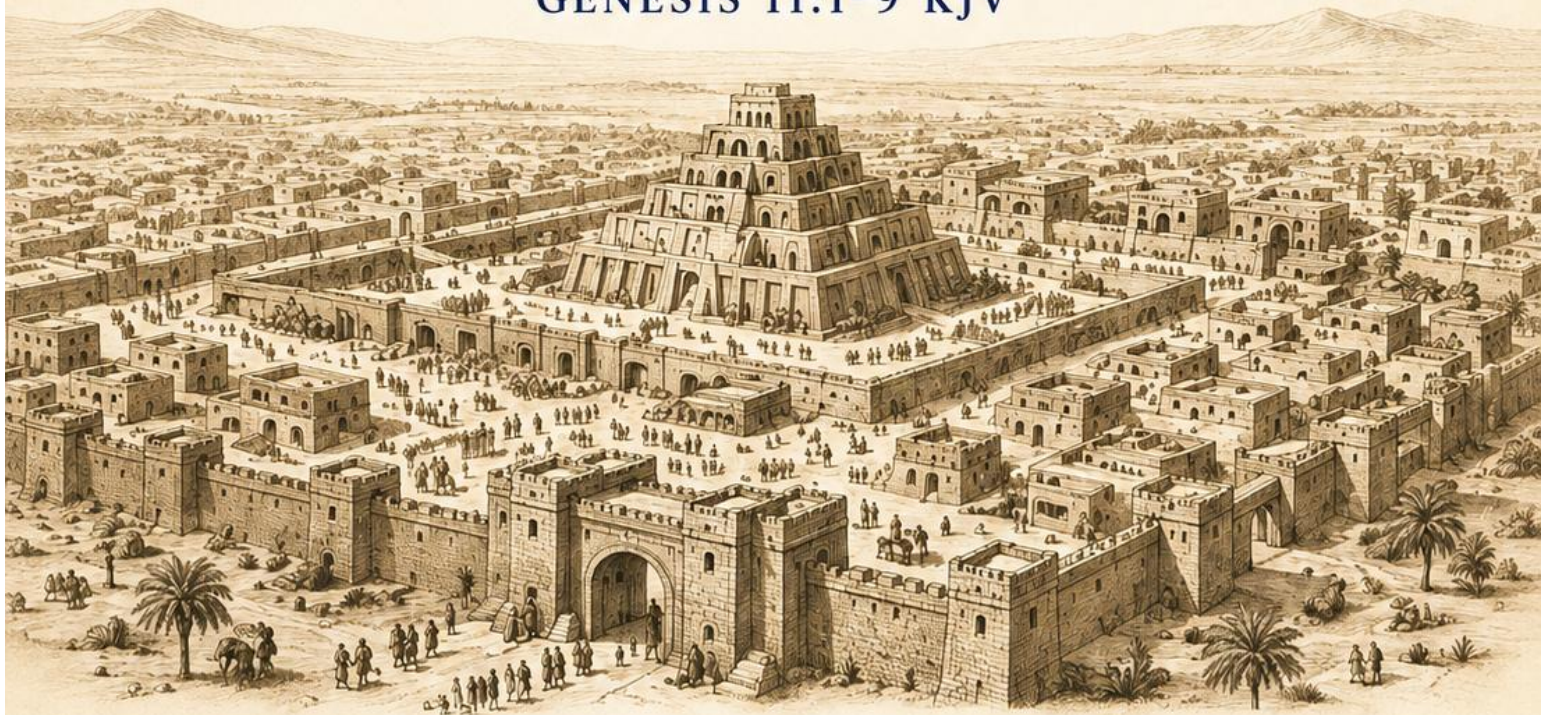
WHAT WERE THEY REALLY BUILDING AT BABEL?



*A Biblical Study of the Tower,
the City and the Name They Sought to Make*



GENESIS 11:1-9 KJV



Sermon & Pastor's Commentary



Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley
Pastor & Teacher



REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

What Were They Really Building at Babel?

Genesis 11:1-9

RTS-027 Sermon Transcript

by Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

www.ReasonTogether.Church

*Bring your questions. Open your Bible.
Let's Reason Together the Word of God.*

Aloha, church family.

And aloha to everyone joining us online.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Today we are going to visit one of the most familiar construction sites in all of Scripture.

Even people who seldom open a Bible have heard about the Tower of Babel.

Most of us can picture it.

We imagine an enormous tower rising above an ancient city.

We imagine thousands of workers carrying bricks higher and higher.

Then, without warning, one worker asks for a brick and someone hands him a bucket.

The supervisor gives an instruction and nobody understands a word he says.

The construction site dissolves into confusion.

That is the familiar version of the story.

But there are questions hiding inside it.

What kind of tower were they constructing?

Were they literally trying to climb into Heaven?

Was it what historians call a ziggurat?

Was Nimrod directing the work?

Were the builders attempting to contact supernatural beings?

Was this a doorway or portal into some other dimension?

And if it was merely a tall building, why did God personally intervene to stop it?

I have heard preaching that takes the story in several of those directions.

Some of it is fascinating.

Some of it is possible.

Some of it moves considerably farther than the words God placed on the page.

So we are going to approach this the way we approach every question here.

We will not reject an idea simply because it sounds unusual.

We will not accept an idea simply because it sounds mysterious.

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We will distinguish between what the Bible says, what the historical setting may suggest and what remains speculation.

Our question today is not merely, "How tall was the Tower of Babel?"

Our question is deeper.

What were they really building at Babel?

Let us pray.

Father, thank You for Your Word.

Thank You for giving us truth that can be examined carefully and honestly.

Give us wisdom as we open the book of Genesis.

Help us recognize what You have plainly revealed.

Help us think carefully about what the passage may reasonably suggest.

And give us humility wherever the proper answer is, "God has not told us."

Show us not only what the people at Babel were building, but also whether we may be building the same thing in our own lives.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Before we read our Scripture, let me take care of a few matters concerning our church family.

If you are visiting with us today, we are honored by your presence.

We do not pass an offering plate at Reason Together Church.

If you have a home church, we encourage you to support the work God has given that church to do.

Our members may use the gift box or the approved online giving method without pressure or interruption.

Any donations or love gifts are greatly appreciated, but they are never required to visit the church or to download any of our free online studies.

Your presence is already a gift to us.

If this is your first time with us, we will not ask you to stand or single you out.

There is a guest card available if you would like to give us only your first name and email address.

After the service, please join us in the Reason Together Café.

The coffee is free.

It is locally grown.

And there are always free refills on conversations.

Now open your Bible with me to Genesis chapter 11.

We will begin with verse 1.

"And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.

"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.

"And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly.

"And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.

"And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven;

"and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

"And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

"And the LORD said, Behold, the people is 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.

"Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

"So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth:

"and they left off to build the city.

"Therefore is the name of it called Babel;

"because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth:

"and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth."

That is the Word of God.

The story begins after the flood.

God had judged the violence and corruption of the old world, but He had preserved Noah, Noah's family and the creatures aboard the ark.

When Noah stepped onto dry ground, God gave humanity a renewed commission.

Genesis 9:1 says:

"And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth."

Humanity was to multiply.

Humanity was to fill the earth.

God did not tell Noah's descendants to crowd onto one plain, build one city and remain there forever.

He intended human life to spread throughout the world He had made.

By Genesis 11, the population is growing, but everyone still speaks one language.

The people journey until they find a plain in the land of Shinar.

Shinar is the region later associated with Babylon in Mesopotamia.

The plain offered room to settle, cultivate and build.

Verse 2 ends with four quiet words:

"And they dwelt there."

There is nothing automatically sinful about settling in a fertile place.

There is nothing automatically rebellious about constructing homes or developing a community.

The problem becomes clear when the people explain why they intend to remain together.

They say, "Lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

God had told humanity to fill the earth.

They designed a project intended to prevent their scattering across it.

God gave them a purpose.

They developed an alternative.

That is one of the first lessons of Babel.

Rebellion does not always announce itself by shaking a fist toward Heaven.

Sometimes rebellion looks like a reasonable plan for comfort, safety and stability.

Sometimes it sounds like, "We know what God said, but we have found a more practical arrangement."

The people did not begin by saying, "Let us declare war against God."

They said, "Let us build."

Verse 3 tells us something unusual about their materials.

"Let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly."

Then Scripture explains:

"And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar."

The plain did not provide the large quantities of natural building stone available in some other regions.

So they manufactured what the land did not readily give them.

They formed bricks from clay and burned them until they became strong.

They used bitumen, which the King James Bible calls slime, as mortar.

This was clever.

It was innovative.

It allowed them to build larger, stronger and higher than sun-dried mud bricks would have allowed.

And we should notice that the Bible never condemns the invention of the brick.

Technology is not the villain in this story.

Engineering is not the villain.

Cooperation is not the villain.

God created human beings with the ability to imagine, organize, communicate and make useful things.

The same mind that can design a tower can design a hospital.

The same cooperation that can build Babel can build homes for families who have lost everything.

The same technology that can spread a lie around the world can place the Word of God into the hand of someone thousands of miles away.

The question is not simply, "What can we build?"

The question is, "Why are we building it, and whose purpose will it serve?"

Human ability becomes dangerous when ability persuades us that we no longer need the God who gave it.

Human progress becomes an idol when we begin to believe that every human problem has a human solution.

The bricks were not sinful.

The mortar was not sinful.

The motives expressed in verse 4 reveal what the structure represented.

Now let us consider the word we mentioned earlier.

Was the Tower of Babel a ziggurat?

The word is spelled z-i-g-g-u-r-a-t.

A ziggurat was a massive terraced structure found in the cities of ancient Mesopotamia.

It looked something like a stepped mountain with one level built above another.
Ziggurats were commonly associated with temples, cities and the worship of local gods.
Some ancient people may have regarded them as sacred mountains or as places where the divine and human realms symbolically met.
The historical setting fits Genesis in several interesting ways.
Babel was located in Shinar, within the Mesopotamian world.
The builders used brick and bitumen, materials strongly associated with building in that region.
The tower stood within a city.
Its top was associated with heaven.
And the entire project appears to have carried both civic and religious meaning.
For those reasons, it is reasonable to think that the Tower of Babel may have resembled what we call a ziggurat.
But now we must draw a careful line.
Genesis never uses the word ziggurat.
It does not provide a floor plan.
It does not tell us how many levels the tower had.
It does not identify an archaeological ruin and say, "This is the one."
So we can say the ziggurat is a strong historical possibility.
We cannot say Scripture has proven the precise design.
That distinction matters.
Historical information can illuminate the world around a Bible passage.
It must never be allowed to rewrite the passage.
The historical background may help us understand what the builders believed they were doing.
It cannot prove that their religious beliefs were correct.
That brings us to the phrase, "Whose top may reach unto heaven."
Were these people trying to construct a staircase into the dwelling place of God?
Did they believe that enough bricks could carry them through the sky and into Heaven?
Perhaps some of them did imagine something like that.
Ancient people could be brilliant builders while still holding false beliefs about the universe and their gods.
But the wording does not require us to imagine a tower physically entering God's Heaven.

In Deuteronomy 1:28, the frightened spies described Canaanite cities as "great and walled up to heaven."

Those walls did not leave the atmosphere.

The expression described something so high and formidable that it seemed to reach the sky.

The Tower of Babel may have been extraordinarily high by the standards of its day.

Its top may also have contained a religious sanctuary dedicated to the heavens.

But Genesis includes a wonderful touch of holy irony.

The people call it a tower whose top reaches unto heaven.

Then verse 5 says:

"And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded."

They believed their tower was reaching Heaven.

From God's perspective, He still had to come down to look at it.

Their greatest achievement did not threaten His throne.

Their tower did not place them within striking distance of the Almighty.

Their combined skill did not make God nervous.

Sometimes we look at human achievement and imagine that humanity has nearly outgrown God.

We split the atom.

We place machines in space.

We communicate across oceans in an instant.

We teach machines to imitate human conversation.

Then humanity begins to sound like Babel again.

"Look what we can do."

"Look how high we can build."

"Soon nothing will be beyond us."

God is not pacing the floor of Heaven, worried that one more discovery will make Him unnecessary.

The Creator is not threatened by the abilities of His creatures.

Whatever humanity builds, God still looks down upon it.

Now what about Nimrod?

Many of us have heard that Nimrod built the Tower of Babel.

Genesis 10 tells us that Nimrod was "a mighty one in the earth."

It describes him as "a mighty hunter before the LORD."

Genesis 10:10 then says:

"And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar."

Nimrod is undeniably associated with Babel.

Babel was part of the beginning of his kingdom.

It is entirely reasonable to suspect that he, his government or the political order connected with him played a role in the city.

That is why ancient tradition so often identifies Nimrod as the leader behind the tower.

But Genesis 11 never names him.

It does not say, "Nimrod commanded the people to build."

It does not say, "Nimrod designed the tower."

It does not even identify a human king in the account.

The builders repeatedly say, "Let us."

"Let us make brick."

"Let us build us a city and a tower."

"Let us make us a name."

We may discuss Nimrod as a reasonable connection.

We should not quote tradition with the same confidence that we quote a verse.

That is part of reasoning together through the Word of God.

We do not have to choose between believing every tradition and rejecting every possibility.

We can simply say what we know, explain what seems reasonable and remain honest about what God did not tell us.

Now we arrive at the more dramatic theories.

Was the tower a supernatural gateway?

Was Babel connected to another dimension?

Were the builders attempting to contact spiritual beings?

Some preachers and writers point to the religious purpose of ziggurats.

They remind us that ancient people sometimes understood these structures as meeting places between earth and the realm of the gods.

From there, some suggest that Babel was an attempt to open a literal portal.

Others suggest that the people possessed forbidden knowledge preserved from before the flood. Some even say that God confused their language because they were close to breaking through a barrier between dimensions.

Those ideas make for a dramatic sermon.

They may keep everyone awake.

But our responsibility is not to make the story more mysterious than God made it.

Our responsibility is to ask whether the text says those things.

Genesis does not say that anyone opened a portal.

Genesis does not say that another dimension became accessible.

Genesis does not say that spiritual beings came through the tower.

Genesis does not say that the builders possessed supernatural machinery.

Genesis does not say that God stopped the work because they had discovered a secret technology capable of invading Heaven.

The passage certainly has a supernatural dimension because God intervenes.

The structure may well have been dedicated to false worship.

The builders may have intended it as a place where they believed heaven and earth would meet.

But believing that a building contacts the spiritual world does not make it a functioning doorway to another dimension.

People have built temples to false gods throughout history.

The existence of a temple proves that people worshipped.

It does not prove that the god they imagined lived upstairs.

We should never remove the supernatural from a supernatural Bible.

Angels are real.

Demons are real.

Spiritual warfare is real.

God's Heaven is real.

But honoring the supernatural does not give us permission to place a supernatural claim into a passage where God did not reveal it.

Sometimes the simplest explanation is also the most unsettling.

The people at Babel did not need interdimensional technology to rebel against God.

Ordinary human pride was sufficient.

They did not need a demon to hand them a blueprint.
They already possessed the sinful desire to construct life on their own terms.
So let us return to verse 4 and listen to what the builders say about themselves.
Their own words explain what they were really building.
First, they said, "Let us build us a city."
The tower gets most of the attention, but Scripture mentions the city first.
This was not merely a construction project.
It was a social order.
They were building a centralized civilization.
The city would give them protection.
The city would give them organization.
The city would give them economic strength.
The city would give them a shared identity.
Instead of trusting the God who told them to fill the earth, they would trust the walls they built around themselves.
Second, they said, "Let us build us...a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven."
The tower would be the visible center of the city.
It would proclaim their skill and unity.
If it was a ziggurat or temple structure, it would also give their civilization a religious center.
They were not trying to live without worship.
Human beings rarely stop worshipping.
We simply replace the true God with something we can manage.
A god located in our building is much easier to control than the God who commands us to go.
A religion designed by our civilization will always bless the priorities of our civilization.
Third, they said, "Let us make us a name."
There is the pride at the center of Babel.
They wanted fame.
They wanted significance.
They wanted a reputation that would outlive them.
They wanted future generations to look upon the tower and remember the greatness of its builders.

There is nothing wrong with having a good name.

Proverbs teaches us that a good name is valuable.

The problem was that they intended to manufacture greatness for themselves while disregarding God.

They were not asking, "How can we honor the name of the LORD?"

They were saying, "Let us make us a name."

Fourth, they said, "Lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

Their project was driven not only by pride, but also by fear.

They feared being separated.

They feared losing the protection of the crowd.

They feared leaving what they could see and control.

They feared obeying God into the unknown.

The city offered security.

The tower offered worship and identity.

The name offered significance.

Their unity offered power.

Babel was an attempt to answer humanity's greatest needs without dependence upon God.

That is what they were really building.

They were building a world in which humanity could say, "We have everything we need because we have one another, our city, our technology and our tower."

And that spirit did not disappear when the construction stopped.

We still build Babel.

We build a career and ask it to tell us who we are.

We build a bank account and ask it to guarantee that nothing can happen to us.

We build a reputation and hope people will speak our name long after we are gone.

We build organizations and become more concerned with preserving the institution than obeying the mission God gave it.

We can even build a ministry and quietly make our own name the name people remember.

A church can place a cross on the building while constructing Babel in its heart.

A pastor can speak about Jesus while secretly measuring success by whether his own name becomes great.

The question is not only, "What am I building?"

The deeper question is, "What am I asking it to do for me?"

Am I asking it to give me an identity that should come from God?

Am I asking it to provide a security that requires no faith?

Am I asking it to make my name great?

Am I building it because God called me, or because I am afraid to go where He called me?

Then God speaks in verse 6.

"Behold, the people is 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."

Some people read that verse as though God were frightened.

They imagine God saying, "We must stop them before they become powerful enough to reach Us."

But that cannot be the meaning.

The God who created the heavens and the earth is not endangered by a pile of bricks.

The God who judged the entire world with a flood is not overpowered by human cooperation.

God was not describing a threat to His throne.

He was recognizing the destructive potential of fallen humanity united around a rebellious purpose.

The people had one language.

They had one location.

They had one project.

They had one ambition.

And there was no internal restraint upon what their collective imagination might pursue next.

Unity is powerful.

But unity is not automatically righteous.

A group of people can unite to feed hungry children.

A group of people can unite to persecute the innocent.

A nation can unite in defense of freedom.

A nation can unite around hatred.

A church can unite to carry the Gospel into the community.

A church can unite to protect a tradition God is asking it to surrender.
We sometimes speak about unity as though agreement itself were the highest good.
It is not.
The value of unity depends upon the purpose around which people are united.
Babel had remarkable unity.
It simply had the wrong lord.
God intervened because concentrated human rebellion would not remain harmless.
He did not destroy the people.
He did not send another flood.
He confused their language.
The worker spoke, but his neighbor could not understand.
Plans could no longer be coordinated.
Instructions could no longer be followed.
The shared project stopped.
Verse 8 says:
"So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth:
"and they left off to build the city."
Notice again that the verse says they left off building the city.
The tower was part of something larger.
God's judgment accomplished the very result they had built the city to prevent.
They said, "Lest we be scattered."
God scattered them.
They said, "Let us make us a name."
The name that survived was Babel, a name associated in the passage with confusion.
They intended to build a monument to their greatness.
Their unfinished project became a monument to the limits of human pride.
The confusion of languages was judgment.
But it was also mercy.
God limited the concentration of human rebellion.
He interrupted a civilization before its unity magnified its sin even further.

Sometimes God disrupts what we are building because He can see what it will become if He allows us to finish.

We may call the disruption failure.

We may call it confusion.

We may ask why God will not bless the project we worked so hard to construct.

But God may be protecting us from succeeding at the wrong thing.

An unfinished tower can be an act of mercy.

A closed door can be an act of mercy.

A plan that refuses to come together can be an act of mercy.

That does not mean every difficulty proves God opposes our plans.

It means we should be willing to ask whether our frustration is calling us back to His purpose.

Now we come to what I believe is one of the most beautiful turns in this entire portion of Genesis.

At Babel the people said:

"Let us make us a name."

Then the story ends and Genesis 12 begins.

God calls a man named Abram.

He tells Abram to leave his country, his kindred and his father's house.

The people of Babel remained together because they were afraid to be scattered.

Abram was told to leave what was familiar and go to a land God would show him.

Then God said in Genesis 12:2:

"And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great;

"and thou shalt be a blessing."

Do you hear the contrast?

Babel said, "Let us make us a name."

God told Abram, "I will...make thy name great."

Babel tried to manufacture greatness.

Abram received a promise.

Babel trusted bricks that could be seen.

Abram walked by faith toward a land he had not seen.

Babel gathered people for its own glory.

Through Abraham, God promised that all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Babel said, "We will stay here."

Faith said, "I will go where God sends me."

The answer to Babel was not a taller tower.

It was a man who trusted God enough to leave everything familiar behind.

You do not have to build a tower to make your life significant.

You do not have to force the world to remember your name.

You need to trust the God who already knows your name.

There is a tremendous difference between making yourself great and allowing God to make your life a blessing.

Human greatness gathers attention toward itself.

Godly blessing flows outward toward others.

Babel wanted a name so that people would remember its builders.

Abraham received a name so that all families of the earth might be blessed.

That brings us from Genesis 11 to Acts chapter 2.

At Pentecost, Jews from many nations were gathered in Jerusalem.

They spoke different languages.

Then the Holy Ghost filled the followers of Jesus, and they began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

The people asked:

"How hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?"

At Babel, one language was used to magnify man.

At Pentecost, many languages were used to magnify God.

At Babel, God confused human speech and scattered the nations.

At Pentecost, God made the wonderful works of God understandable across the languages of the nations.

But notice what God did not do.

He did not erase every language and force everyone to speak the same one again.

Pentecost did not eliminate diversity.

God carried one Gospel into many languages.

That is better than Babel's uniformity.

Babel wanted everyone gathered into one human project for the glory of man.

Pentecost began a worldwide mission that brings different people into one body for the glory of Christ.

I love looking around our own church family and seeing people from different races, cultures and backgrounds.

We do not all share the same story.

We do not all look alike.

We may not prepare our coffee the same way, although I am convinced free coffee helps every language.

But we open the same Bible.

We proclaim the same Gospel.

We worship the same Lord.

That is a small glimpse of what Heaven will look like.

Revelation 7:9 describes "a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues" standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

God does not redeem us by making every redeemed person culturally identical.

He creates unity in Christ that is strong enough to embrace genuine diversity.

Babel shows unity without obedience.

Pentecost shows diversity united by the Holy Ghost.

And the theme of Babel does not disappear after Genesis.

Babel becomes Babylon.

Throughout Scripture, Babylon grows into a picture of human power, pride, idolatry and opposition to God.

Empires rise.

Kings boast.

Wealth accumulates.

False worship promises security.

The city of man appears permanent.

Then Revelation announces the fall of Babylon.

Every human system constructed in defiance of God eventually falls.

But the Bible ends with another city.

John sees the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of Heaven.
Babel was built from the earth upward.
New Jerusalem comes down from God.
Babel was built to make man's name great.
New Jerusalem is filled with the glory of God.
Babel attempted to secure human life without God.
In New Jerusalem, "the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them."
Humanity tried to bring Heaven under its control.
The Gospel promises that God will dwell with His redeemed people by His grace.
So what were they really building at Babel?
They were building more than a tower.
They were building identity without the Creator.
They were building security without obedience.
They were building worship without truth.
They were building greatness without God.
And before we criticize those ancient builders too severely, we should look carefully at our own construction site.
What are you building?
Why are you building it?
If nobody ever knew your name, would you still obey God?
If the project brought glory to Christ but no recognition to you, would you still want to complete it?
Are you remaining somewhere because God placed you there, or because fear will not allow you to go?
Are you asking money to provide what only God can provide?
Are you asking a career to tell you who you are?
Are you asking other people's approval to make your name great?
Are you building a religious life that keeps God close enough to bless your plans but never allows Him to change them?
There is nothing wrong with building something useful.
Build a home.

Build a business.

Build a ministry.

Build relationships.

Build something that serves your community.

But do not ask the thing you build to become your god.

Do not build walls so strong that you cannot hear God calling you beyond them.

Do not place your name so high on the tower that people can no longer see the name of Jesus.

And do not confuse human agreement with the approval of God.

The most important question is not whether we can complete the tower.

The question is whether God called us to build it.

There is also a Gospel picture here that we must not miss.

At Babel, humanity tried to reach upward toward Heaven.

Every human religion eventually attempts the same thing.

We stack one good work upon another.

We add morality to religion and religion to effort.

We hope our tower will become high enough to reach God.

But no tower of human goodness can reach Him.

No religious ritual can erase our sin.

No achievement can reconcile a sinner to a holy God.

The good news of Christianity is not that humanity finally constructed a way up to God.

The good news is that God came down to us.

Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, entered our world.

He lived the sinless life we could not live.

He died upon the cross for our sins.

He was buried.

And on the third day He rose again.

At Babel, the Lord came down in judgment.

In Jesus Christ, God came down to save.

You cannot build your way to Heaven.

You can receive the salvation Christ has already accomplished.

The Bible says in Romans 10:9:

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus,
"and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead,
"thou shalt be saved."

Romans 10:13 says:

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Perhaps you have spent your life trying to make your own name great.

Perhaps you have constructed a life that looks impressive from the outside but leaves no room for God inside.

Perhaps everything you trust is made of brick and mortar and can be taken away.

Today you can stop building upward and receive the Saviour who came down for you.

Admit that you are a sinner.

Believe that Jesus died for your sins, was buried and rose again.

Repent, turning from sin and self-rule.

Place your faith in Jesus Christ alone.

You do not need to be inside this building.

You do not need a pastor standing beside you.

And there is no special formula of words that forces God to save you.

Speak to Him honestly in your own words.

Call upon the name of the Lord.

If you are here with us and have questions about salvation, speak with me after the service.

We would be honored to open the Bible with you.

If you are joining us online, contact us through www.ReasonTogether.Church.

We will not pressure you.

We will reason together with you through the Word of God.

Let us pray.

Father, thank You for preserving this account for us.

Thank You for showing us that human greatness can never threaten Your throne.

Protect us from building our identity without You.

Protect us from seeking security in things that cannot last.

Protect us from using worship to bless our own ambition.

Protect us from trying to make our own name great.

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Give us the faith of Abraham to go when You say go.

Give us the humility to stop when You say stop.

If we are building the wrong thing, interrupt us before we succeed.

If we are building what You called us to build, give us strength to remain faithful even when nobody applauds.

Thank You that the Gospel crosses every language, race and culture.

Thank You for a church family that gives us a small glimpse of the multitude gathered before Your throne.

Make us one in Christ without erasing the beautiful differences among us.

And if someone listening today has never trusted Jesus Christ, draw that person to the Saviour.

Thank You that we do not have to build our way up to Heaven.

Thank You that Jesus came down to save us.

May our lives bring glory not to our own name, but to the name above every name.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Thank you for reasoning together with us today.

Please join us in the Reason Together Café.

The coffee is free.

It is locally grown.

And there are always free refills on conversations.

To all our first-time guests, Aloha Nui Loa.

PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

What Were They Really Building at Babel?

RTS-027 | Genesis 11:1-9 KJV

A reader's companion to the sermon

Reason Together Church

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

www.ReasonTogether.Church

*Bring your questions. Open your Bible.
Let's Reason Together the Word of God.*

About This Commentary

The Pastor's Commentary is a readable public companion to the sermon. It explains the principal Biblical reasoning, historical setting, interpretive cautions and pastoral applications behind RTS-027. It is not a second sermon, and it is not the internal Study Vault. Readers may use it for personal study, group discussion or careful follow-up after hearing the message.

The question is larger than the height of an ancient tower. Genesis 11 describes a city and tower built by a united people who wanted to make a name for themselves and prevent their scattering. Mesopotamian history makes a ziggurat a strong architectural possibility. The text also invites questions about Nimrod, heaven-associated worship and supernatural ambition. Yet Scripture does not describe a functioning portal, forbidden machinery or a successful breach into another dimension.

This Commentary therefore follows a simple discipline. What Scripture states may be taught confidently. What the historical setting strongly suggests may be presented as a responsible conclusion. What remains possible should be labeled as possible. What lacks Biblical or historical support should not be preached as fact. Mystery deserves careful study, but mystery does not release us from the authority of the words God actually gave us.

Commentary in Brief

The people at Babel were building more than a tall structure. They were building a centralized civilization intended to provide identity, security, unity and human greatness apart from obedience to God. Their city would gather them. Their tower would symbolize their common religious and political order. Their project would make their name great and resist the scattering that followed God's command to replenish the earth.

A ziggurat is the strongest historical model for the tower, but Genesis never uses that term or identifies a surviving ruin. Nimrod's kingdom is genuinely associated with Babel in Genesis 10, but Genesis 11 never names him as the project's architect. The tower may have represented contact between earthly and divine realms in the builders' worldview, but the passage gives no evidence that they created a literal dimensional doorway. God's intervention was real and supernatural. The builders' technology was human.

The decisive contrast comes immediately afterward. Babel says, "Let us make us a name." God says to Abram, "I will bless thee, and make thy name great." Babel pursues self-made greatness. Abram receives God-given significance and becomes a channel of blessing. The Gospel completes the pattern: humanity cannot build its way up to God, so God came down to us in Jesus Christ.

1. Read the Story Before Reaching for a Theory

"And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech." (Genesis 11:1 KJV)

Genesis places Babel after the flood. God had preserved Noah's family and commanded them to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Genesis 9:1). The nations listed in Genesis 10

begin to spread by families, tongues, lands and nations. Genesis 11 then pauses to explain the judgment through which human language was divided and the people were scattered.

The passage repeatedly emphasizes human coordination. The people share one language. They settle together on a plain in Shinar. They speak to one another, develop a building method and adopt a common purpose. Their repeated phrase is “let us.” Let us make brick. Let us build. Let us make a name. Their unity is real, but unity is not automatically righteous. Agreement becomes dangerous when everyone agrees to resist the will of God.

The first interpretive guardrail is therefore important. Babel is not mainly a puzzle that requires a hidden technological key. Genesis itself tells us the builders’ materials, stated goals and divine response. Archaeology may illuminate the setting. Later Biblical passages may illuminate the theological pattern. Neither should be used to erase the plain motives written into Genesis 11:4.

2. Was the Tower a Ziggurat?

The usual spelling is ziggurat. A ziggurat was a massive, stepped temple platform associated with the cities and religious life of ancient Mesopotamia. It was constructed in stages or terraces, rose prominently above the surrounding city and supported sacred activity at its summit. Ziggurats were not simple observation towers. They belonged to a larger civic and religious world in which city, kingship, temple and divine patronage were closely connected.

Several details make this model historically persuasive. Babel is located in Shinar, a Biblical designation associated with Mesopotamia. The builders use fired brick because suitable building stone was not readily available on the alluvial plain. They use slime, commonly understood as bitumen, for mortar. They build a city and tower together. The tower’s top is associated with heaven. Taken together, these features fit what is known about monumental Mesopotamian temple construction.

The conclusion should still be stated with precision. Genesis does not call the structure a ziggurat. It does not identify the tower with one specific excavated ruin. It does not provide dimensions, number of levels or a ground plan. “The tower was probably ziggurat-like” is a responsible historical conclusion. “Archaeology has located the exact Tower of Babel” goes beyond the available evidence.

This distinction does not weaken the sermon. It strengthens it. The ziggurat model helps us see that the builders were not merely stacking bricks as high as possible. They were constructing a sacred and civic center, a visible statement about who they were and how their world would be ordered.

3. Did “Unto Heaven” Mean They Expected to Reach God?

“Let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven.” (Genesis 11:4 KJV)

English readers may hear this as an engineering plan to climb physically into Heaven. The expression can certainly communicate extraordinary height. Yet similar Biblical language can describe something that seems immense rather than something that literally touches God’s

dwelling. Deuteronomy 1:28 speaks of cities “walled up to heaven.” The walls were intimidatingly high, not infinite.

In the Mesopotamian setting, a heaven-associated summit also carried religious meaning. A monumental tower could symbolize the meeting of the earthly and divine realms, the ordered center of a city under its god. The builders may therefore have believed they were creating a place of divine-human contact or drawing divine presence toward their city. That possibility is historically meaningful, but Genesis does not tell us the content of every ritual or belief involved.

The narrative answers human pretension with holy irony: “And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower” (Genesis 11:5). Whatever height impressed the builders remained so small before the Creator that the LORD is pictured as coming down to inspect it. God did not intervene because human bricks were approaching His throne. The language exposes the distance between human self-importance and divine majesty.

4. What Were They Really Building?

Genesis does not say, “Let us build a tower” and stop there. It says, “Let us build us a city and a tower.” The city is as important as the monument. A city gathers population, organizes labor, concentrates authority, protects resources and gives a people a common identity. The tower stands within that system as its religious, political or symbolic center.

The builders then reveal their motives. First, “let us make us a name.” A name in Scripture can speak of reputation, identity, honor and lasting significance. They do not ask God to name them or bless them. They intend to manufacture their own greatness through a project everyone can see. Second, they say, “lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” They are building against dispersion. Their city is meant to secure them against the future God had commanded.

The deepest problem is not brick, bitumen, architecture or human skill. The problem is a civilization asking a created thing to give what should be received from the Creator. Babel becomes identity without God, security without obedience, worship under human control and unity in service of human glory. The structure matters because it embodies the allegiance of the builders.

That conclusion also prevents an anti-technology reading. Scripture does not condemn fired brick simply because it was innovative. Human ability is a gift that can serve love, stewardship and worship. The moral question is what ability is made to serve. The same skill can build a shelter for the vulnerable or a monument to pride. Technology enlarges the reach of the heart that directs it.

5. Was Nimrod the Mastermind?

“And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar.” (Genesis 10:10 KJV)

Nimrod belongs in the conversation because Genesis itself connects the beginning of his kingdom with Babel. He is described as a mighty one in the earth and a mighty hunter before the LORD. Later Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions developed extensive stories about his pride, tyranny

and relationship to the tower. Those traditions explain why many sermons and paintings place him at the center of the scene.

The direct Biblical evidence remains limited. Genesis 10 associates Nimrod's kingdom with Babel. Genesis 11 never names the organizer, king, architect or priest behind the construction. The builders speak collectively as "they." We may responsibly say that Babel stood within the sphere Scripture associates with Nimrod's kingdom. We should not claim that Genesis records Nimrod giving the order unless we clearly label that as tradition or inference.

This restraint matters because a named villain can make the story feel safely distant. The text places the words in the mouths of a people, not only a tyrant. Babel is what ordinary human beings can build when shared fear, ambition and pride become a common program. The warning reaches farther than one ancient ruler.

6. Was Babel a Portal to Another Dimension?

Some modern preaching describes the tower as a portal, stargate or machine intended to open another dimension. That theory often combines Mesopotamian religion, spiritual beings, pre-flood mysteries and the language of a top "unto heaven." The theory is dramatic because it appears to explain why God intervened so decisively.

A careful answer should grant what the evidence can bear. Ancient Mesopotamian sacred architecture could express a connection between heaven and earth. The builders may have expected their tower to function as a religious meeting place between the human city and the divine realm. The Biblical world is not materialistic. Angels, demons and divine judgment are real, and Genesis 11 records an actual supernatural act of God.

The evidence does not establish a functioning dimensional portal. Genesis mentions brick, bitumen, a city, a tower, a name, coordinated labor and fear of scattering. It does not mention machinery, energy, a gate opening, beings crossing through, recovered pre-flood technology or an attempt that was moments from tearing the fabric of creation. No known archaeological discovery proves that the builders possessed such technology.

Rejecting the portal claim does not require removing the supernatural from Babel. The supernatural center of the passage is the LORD who comes down, confounds language and scatters the people. We do not need to invent a human machine to make God's intervention serious. God judges a spiritually rebellious civilization whose coordinated power would deepen its resistance and spread its harm.

7. Why Did God Stop Them?

"And now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do." (Genesis 11:6 KJV)

This verse is sometimes read as though God feared that humanity would become technologically equal to Him. That cannot be the meaning. The Creator is not threatened by towers, tools or

collective intelligence. Scripture consistently presents God as sovereign over nations and kings. The builders cannot reach His throne, surprise His wisdom or weaken His power.

The statement recognizes the capacity of coordinated fallen humanity. One language, concentrated authority and shared ambition can turn imagination into action on a vast scale. Human cooperation can accomplish extraordinary good, but it can also organize oppression, idolatry and violence more efficiently than isolated individuals could. God's judgment restrains the momentum of a unified rebellion.

The judgment also contains mercy. God does not destroy the people as He destroyed the violent world in the flood. He disrupts their communication and scatters them. The project stops because the social power necessary to continue it has been divided. Restraint limits the evil they would do to one another and prevents their centralized project from becoming the unquestioned center of human life.

The builders wanted one place, one speech and one name under their own control. God created boundaries they could not overcome by willpower. Sometimes divine mercy does not look like uninterrupted progress. It looks like a limit placed upon a path that would have carried human beings farther into bondage.

8. Babel's Reversal and Abram's Answer

Every stated ambition at Babel is reversed. They build so they will not be scattered, and the LORD scatters them. They build a city and tower, and they leave off building the city. They seek a celebrated name, and the name Babel becomes permanently associated with confusion. The story is constructed to show that human beings cannot secure blessing by organized defiance.

“And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing.” (Genesis 12:2 KJV)

The call of Abram follows immediately in Genesis 12. Babel says, “Let us make us a name.” God says to Abram, “I will...make thy name great.” The contrast is one of the clearest theological turns in Genesis. Babel grasps for greatness. Abram is called to trust. Babel gathers to protect itself. Abram leaves country and kindred at God's command. Babel seeks a name for self-exaltation. Abram receives a name so that blessing may reach others.

This is not a promise that every believer will become famous. It reveals the difference between significance seized apart from God and significance received within God's purpose. God-given blessing is never merely a larger pedestal for self. It makes the recipient a blessing. The Lord answers the city of self-made greatness by beginning a covenant family through whom all families of the earth will be blessed.

9. From Babel to Pentecost

Acts 2 does not explicitly quote Genesis 11, so we should call the relationship a strong canonical pattern rather than a direct interpretation supplied by Luke. At Babel, one language serves a project

of self-exaltation and enforced centralization. At Pentecost, the Holy Ghost enables the apostles to speak in the languages of the nations so that the wonderful works of God may be proclaimed.

Pentecost does not erase language or culture. The hearers recognize their own tongues. The miracle honors communication across difference and creates unity around the risen Christ. Babel's unity says, "Make our name great." Pentecost's witness declares the name of Jesus. Babel gathers humanity around a monument. The Gospel gathers a people from many nations around a Savior.

This matters for the Reason Together Church family. Our racial, cultural and personal differences do not have to be flattened in order for us to belong to one body. Revelation 7:9 pictures a great multitude from all nations, kindreds, people and tongues before the throne and the Lamb. God's answer to Babel is not colorless sameness. It is reconciled worship centered upon Christ.

10. Babel, Babylon and the City That Comes Down

The name Babel is related to Babylon in the Biblical story, and Babylon becomes a recurring image of human power organized in pride, luxury, idolatry and persecution. Revelation announces the fall of Babylon the great. The city of man does not endure forever, no matter how impressive its towers, wealth or influence appear.

Revelation then shows the holy city, new Jerusalem, "coming down from God out of heaven" (Revelation 21:2). That direction is the Gospel-shaped answer to Babel. Babel is human ascent: let us build upward and establish our own name. New Jerusalem is divine gift: the city comes down from God, prepared according to His grace and filled with His presence.

Humanity cannot engineer its way into the presence of God. God comes down. He came down in judgment at Babel, but in the fullness of time He came down in saving grace through Jesus Christ. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. The final Christian hope is not that we will finish the tower Babel began. It is that God will dwell with His redeemed people in the world He makes new.

11. The Babel Projects We Still Build

Babel survives wherever we ask a created achievement to provide our identity, security and name. A career can become a tower. A ministry can become a tower. A bank account, political movement, family reputation, online following or technological system can be asked to tell us who we are and guarantee that nothing can scatter what we have gathered.

The question is not simply, "What am I building?" The sharper question is, "What am I asking this thing to give me?" Work, planning, leadership and excellence are not sins. They become Babel-like when we demand that they make us secure apart from God, important apart from His calling or united around a glory that belongs to us.

Babel also warns the church about unity. We should pray for unity, but Biblical unity is unity in truth, love and obedience to Christ. A crowd can agree on an idol. An institution can coordinate

around pride. The test of unity is not its size or efficiency. The test is the lord it serves and the fruit it produces.

God may sometimes interrupt a project we believed was essential. A closed door, exposed weakness or forced change can feel like confusion. Not every interruption is a direct judgment, and we should not claim secret knowledge about providence. Yet Babel teaches us to ask whether God is mercifully preventing an achievement from becoming our master.

The Final Answer

What were they really building at Babel? They were building a city-centered civilization, probably marked by ziggurat-like sacred architecture, through which they intended to preserve their unity, resist scattering and manufacture a great name apart from God. The tower may have symbolized contact between heaven and earth in their religious imagination. Scripture does not establish that it operated as a literal dimensional portal.

God stopped the project because coordinated rebellion can carry human sin farther and bind people more deeply. His judgment confounded their language and scattered them, reversing the security they tried to create. His mercy limited the reach of their rebellion. His redemptive answer began with Abram and leads ultimately to Jesus Christ, the name given for salvation among all nations.

Questions for Personal or Group Reflection

1. Which conclusions about Babel are stated directly in Genesis 11, and which depend upon historical reconstruction?
2. How does the city change the meaning of the story when it is considered alongside the tower?
3. Why is a ziggurat a strong historical model, and why should it still be described with appropriate humility?
4. What is the difference between a religious symbol of heaven-earth contact and a functioning dimensional portal?
5. What does Genesis 10 permit us to say about Nimrod, and what does Genesis 11 leave unsaid?
6. Why is God's statement in Genesis 11:6 a warning about coordinated fallen humanity rather than evidence of divine fear?
7. How does the contrast between "Let us make us a name" and "I will...make thy name great" expose two different paths to significance?
8. What achievement, institution or relationship are you most tempted to ask for identity or security?
9. How does Pentecost preserve human difference while creating unity in the Gospel?

10. What would it mean for your present work to become a blessing rather than a monument to your own name?

Interpretive Cautions

- Do not identify an exact archaeological ruin as the Tower of Babel when the evidence cannot establish that certainty.
- Do not say Genesis calls the tower a ziggurat. Present the ziggurat model as a strong historical fit.
- Do not make Nimrod the named architect of Genesis 11. Scripture associates his kingdom with Babel but does not name him in the account.
- Do not teach a functioning portal, supernatural machine, released beings or forbidden pre-flood technology as Biblical fact.
- Do not remove the supernatural from the story. The LORD truly intervenes, confounds language and scatters the people.
- Do not describe God as frightened by human height or technology. The passage reveals divine sovereignty and human limitation.
- Do not praise unity without asking what purpose, truth and lord that unity serves.
- Do not turn every interrupted human plan into a direct Babel judgment. Apply the passage humbly rather than claiming private knowledge of providence.
- Do not let the theories overshadow the Gospel movement from self-made name to God-given blessing in Christ.

A Personal Invitation to Christ

Babel reveals a problem that still lives in every human heart. We try to make our own name, secure our own future and build a life that does not need God. Scripture calls that rebellion sin. No tower of achievement can carry us above our guilt. No religious work can purchase peace with a holy God. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23 KJV).

The good news is that God came down to us. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, lived without sin. He died on the cross for our sins, was buried and rose again the third day. He did what our works could never do. Through His death and resurrection, forgiveness and eternal life are offered as the gift of God.

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” (Romans 10:9 KJV)

“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Romans 10:13 KJV)

Turn from trusting your own name and place your trust in Jesus Christ. Call upon Him honestly. Confess Him as Lord. Believe that God raised Him from the dead. Salvation is not another tower for you to complete. It is grace to be received from the Savior who came down, bore your sin and rose in victory. If you have trusted Christ, tell a mature believer and begin following Him in the fellowship of a faithful church.

Pastoral Note

Unusual theories should not make a sincere questioner feel foolish. The desire to understand Babel's ancient world can lead to worthwhile study. A faithful church should make room for honest questions about ziggurats, Nimrod and supernatural claims while teaching people how to weigh evidence.

Kindness toward the questioner does not require confidence in every theory. We can say "possible," "probable," "unsupported" or "God has not told us" without fear. Scripture is not diminished when we refuse to add details to it. Biblical authority is honored when our level of confidence matches the evidence God has provided.

The most important question is not whether Babel concealed a portal. It is whether we recognize the Babel instinct in ourselves. Christ frees us from the exhausting labor of manufacturing a name. In Him we receive a new identity, become part of a people from every nation and learn to build for the glory of God and the good of our neighbor.

Selected Scripture and Interpretive Resources

All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

- Genesis 9:1; 10:8-12; 11:1-9; 12:1-3. The command to replenish the earth, Nimrod's kingdom, Babel and the call of Abram.
- Deuteronomy 1:28. "Walled up to heaven" as Biblical language for imposing height.
- Acts 2:1-11. Many languages used to proclaim the wonderful works of God.
- Romans 3:23; 10:9, 13. Human sin and the invitation to salvation in Christ.
- Revelation 7:9-10; 18; 21:1-3. The nations before the Lamb, the fall of Babylon and the city coming down from God.
- Brown, Driver and Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament. Lexical background for Genesis 11.
- Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17, New International Commentary on the Old Testament.
- Nahum M. Sarna, Genesis, The JPS Torah Commentary.
- John H. Walton, Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament.
- Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary.
- A. R. George, Babylonian Topographical Texts. Ancient Babylonian sacred geography and temple traditions.
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Ur: The Ziggurat." Historical introduction to Mesopotamian ziggurat form and function.
- The British Museum, Babylon Teachers' Resource. Historical background on Babylon, monumental building and Mesopotamian religious culture.

A Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for giving us a Word strong enough to receive our questions and clear enough to guide our faith. Give us wisdom to distinguish what You have revealed from what we have imagined. Protect us from pride, fear and the desire to make our own name great. Teach us to use every gift, skill and opportunity in obedience to You. Where we have built for our own glory, call us to repentance. Where we have trusted our achievements for security, teach us to rest in Your care. Thank You for coming down to us in Jesus Christ, for His death in our place and for His resurrection in victory. Unite Your people in truth and love so that many languages, cultures and lives may proclaim Your wonderful works. In Jesus' name, amen.

Until We Reason Together Again

Babel's builders wanted a city that could hold them, a tower that could define them and a name that could outlive them. God scattered the project, then began His answer through Abram. The final answer is Jesus Christ. We do not build our way up to God. In grace, God came down to us.

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13 KJV)

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