

Dear Friends in Christ,

Years ago I was in Nogales, Mexico in a tourist gift shop. There was a group of men speaking near the front door. One of my relatives came up and said do you know what they are saying? The men were speaking fluent Spanish. I said, "sure." I told the relative, "*They are talking about a soccer team.*" The person said, "*Oh, I wasn't sure if they were talking about me.*" I assured that the person that they were not talking about any of us.

Years ago some of you may have heard German being spoken in your home. It is a good guess that if they switched from English to German, they were probably saying something that they didn't want you to hear.

I am sure that most of us have been in a situation where we wished we could know a language that someone else was speaking. You may have tried to learn a different language other than your mother tongue and discovered that it was very difficult.

So we might wonder, "Why do we have all these different languages? Where did they all come from? Scholars claim it was human ingenuity. The Bible has a different account. It has to do with a building project long ago. Humanity was set on one kind of building project and God had another one in mind. Humanity stubbornly went its own way. Because of this conflict, the Lord confused the speaking of the people by causing them to communicate in different languages. So we will hear about the origin of the many languages today, but we are also confronted with the question, **What Do You Want to Build?** Not only will we learn about the beginnings of the languages, but we will also learn today that God's building plan for his church is what we want to be a part of.

1. People want to build monuments to themselves.

One Bible commentary suggested that the account of Babel may have happened about 100 years after the Universal Flood of Noah's time. We might wonder what happened after Noah's day? Moses tells us that the people moved together to the plain in Shinar, which may be Babylon, and they settled there. What they wanted to do is to build a monument to themselves.

A. Remember we are looking at a united world. They were all descendants of Noah and his three sons according to the Bible.

1. What unified them the Bible tells us is that they had one language. What was that language? We don't know. But it was easy for them to communicate since they had one language. They wanted to stick together and help each other. So they decided to build a massive tower, skyscraper so they would have a rallying point. Then they would stick together.

2. This was far from innocent. They were disobeying God. In Genesis 9:1 where God said, "**Fill the earth.**" He wanted them to spread out. The natural tendency for human cultures is to gravitate toward what is sinful and wicked. This had been the case before the Flood. The Lord had plans to bless humanity with a Savior and he did not want them ruining his plan.

B. The people at Shinar knew God's will and they united in sinful rebellion.

1. There is special significance in their statement in verse 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.**" Bricks were meant to make a tower that was more permanent. The pitch and tar would hold it together for centuries. They planned on defying the Lord for a long time.

2. We see their defiance again in verse 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; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'**" God said, "scatter" and they said, "No!"

C. One of things humanist scholars try to do is to paint a picture of the ancient people as being unsophisticated, less developed and less moral. They promote the idea that we are so much more sophisticated and better off today.

That pleases our human ego, but it is a lie. First off the Shinar people were very sophisticated in their building and in their thinking. Their plans and aspirations were complex. When we look into the mirror of the Bible what we see is that humanity has not changed much. We have plans and aspirations that are often complex, but in the end just as selfish as the ancients.

When you and I don't listen to the Lord God and we go off with our own plans to build our life, we are doing the same thing the people of Shinar did. How many of us have said, "*I should go to church or Bible class or read my Bible, but I would rather sleep in and rest my body.*"? Or "I would rather rejuvenate and refresh myself with this entertainment." Or some other

scheme that goes against God's will. We think our plans will help ourselves. When we go against God's plans for us, we are rebelling and we are hurting ourselves. The 1st Commandment directs us to trust and obey God above all else. This is for our good.

What was the Lord's reaction to the plans of the people of Shinar?

2. The Lord wants to build his church.

Genesis 11 shows us that the Lord God has other, better plans. The Lord wants to build his church. This is good for us.

A. Moses tells us that the Lord God sees what is going on and he confuses their languages.

1. I think that the phrase **"the Lord came down to see."** (5) is one of the most important lines in this whole account. He could have sent fire and brimstone. He could have ignored them and let them reap the consequences, but he doesn't. He comes and **"sees."** God didn't need to move to see what was going. He is everywhere. By using these words, the Holy Spirit is showing that God pays attention to what is going on in our lives. He even pays attention to our sinful plans and activities.

He understands the significance. If these people continue on their present track he states that **"nothing they plan will be impossible for them."** What that means is that they will be able to carry out their sinful plans until they destroy themselves and end in up suffering in hell for all eternity. Human, selfish thinking does not end in a good place.

2. We see God cares not only to know what we are doing, but he acts to help and to save. Moses reports the words of the Trinity in verse 7, **"Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."** To be sure, the Lord's actions were a judgement. Language barriers arose that still create confusion and suspicion between different peoples.

I hope you also see the Lord God is a saving God and deals with sinners in mercy. He could have destroyed the people for their rebellion, but he does not. He wants to preserve them so they can receive the promise of the Savior coming into the world.

B. We are told that the people were scattered as the Lord intended. The various nations came into being. The plan for the Lord's church was unfolding.

1. The greatest evidence of the Lord's mercy and his desire to save was in his

sending Jesus to win salvation for all people. When the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost it is only 50 days after Jesus had risen from the dead. God's plan was that his Son, Jesus, would pay for our sinful rebellion. It was for all the nations as he said in Mark 16, **"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation."** (15) All of us are brothers and sisters through Noah. We are united in our common sinfulness. Jesus died for all. His blood unites us in a common faith as brothers and sisters in God's family.

2. God's mercy also included his pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The apostles were instantly able to speak in foreign languages. In a way the curse of Babel was undone. Today as people are brought the good news of God's mercy in their own tongue and the barriers come down. We may not always be able to speak in the same language, but we are united in our love for Jesus and in our desire to live for him.

C. I think people enjoy seeing the mission videos that we show in church. We like to see missionaries bringing Jesus to other nations. I wonder if sometimes we walk away not sure of the connection to us.

The story of Genesis 11 ties us to all people. We are of one human family. We all share in sin and death. However, there is one Savior for all of humanity. We can be aware that the Lord wants us to do what we can to share Jesus. It not only brings salvation to people, but it begins to bring down the barriers and suspicions that stand between brothers and sisters. Conclusion: Are you confused by languages? Do you admire those who speak more than one language? Don't count languages as the genius invention of humans. They came from a curse. Humanity wanted to walk apart from God. This would have meant the ruin of his plan of salvation. God did not permit it. His curse was, however, a blessing.

God builds his church. He uses language gifts to do so. Often missionaries spend hours in the classroom and years in a country becoming proficient enough to do church work. They proclaim the Gospel. I pray you are always trying to improve your language skills even if it is only in your mother tongue. Use the gifts the Holy Spirit has given you to tell the story of God's love and of his plan of salvation. We do this because our God is a God of mercy. Amen.

FIRST LESSON – Genesis 11:1-9 (NIV 2011)

1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. 2 As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

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. 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; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

5 But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. 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. 7 Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

8 So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9 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.