The Tower of Babel

Bible Stories Anthology — Genesis 10:8-10; 11:1-9

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

A Name for Themselves

They had one language, one plan, and one great ambition: to make a name for themselves.

A few generations after the Flood, the descendants of Noah drifted onto a wide, flat plain between two great rivers. There was no stone there, so they invented a better brick — baked hard in a kiln — and set it with the black tar that seeped out of the ground. With it they would build a city, and in the city a tower whose top would stand in the heavens. Everyone would see it. Everyone would stay together around it. And no one would ever again forget who they were.

God had told Noah's family to fill the earth. They had decided to stay put and build a monument to themselves instead.

The Bible tells the story in nine verses. It is one of the shortest and sharpest stories in scripture, full of wordplay, irony and quiet humour at man's expense. It explains why the nations of the world speak different languages. It gives the first mention of the city that would become Babylon — a name that runs through the rest of the Bible to its very last book. And it sets the stage for the next chapter, where God calls one man out of that same land and says to him, *I will make thy name great*.

The Setting

When. After the Flood, before Abraham. Genesis dates the scattering indirectly, by a man named Peleg: **"for in his days was the earth divided"** (Genesis 10:25). By the ages given in Genesis 11, Peleg was born 101 years after the Flood and lived 239 years. As this series understands it, the division in his days is the scattering at Babel, some time within the three centuries after the Flood. Noah was still alive then, and

so were Shem, Arphaxad, Salah and Eber — men who had heard the pre-Flood world described by those who lived in it.

Where. "A plain in the land of Shinar" (Genesis 11:2) — the flat, fertile lowland of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in what is now southern Iraq. Shinar is the Bible's name for Babylonia; Daniel still uses it centuries later (Daniel 1:2). There is almost no building stone in that alluvial plain, which is why brick and bitumen matter so much in the story.

What God had said. When Noah and his sons came out of the ark, God blessed them and gave them a command: **"Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth"** (Genesis 9:1). "Replenish" in the King James English means *fill*. God said it twice (Genesis 9:7). Mankind was to spread out and fill the earth.

The administration. Babel falls in what this series calls the **Patriarchal** administration, which ran from the Fall to the giving of the Law at Sinai. God dealt with men through the heads of families and through conscience, not yet through a written law. After the Flood He added new words to that administration — the covenant of the bow, permission to eat meat, the sanctity of human life (Genesis 9). Babel is the first great rebellion against those words.

The man behind the city. Genesis 10, the chapter just before, names the first ruler of that land:

> **Genesis 10:8** *And Cush begat Nimrod: he began to be a mighty one in the earth.*
> **Genesis 10:9** *He was a mighty hunter before the LORD: wherefore it is said, Even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD.*
> **Genesis 10:10** *And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar.*

Nimrod was a grandson of Ham. **"He began to be a mighty one in the earth"** — the first man in the Bible said to have a *kingdom*. **"A mighty hunter before the LORD"** has been read two ways. It can mean a hunter famous in God's sight, or a hunter *in defiance of* the LORD, since the Hebrew *liphnei*, "before," can carry the sense of *in the face of*. **"The beginning of his kingdom was Babel."** Scripture itself never says Nimrod built the tower. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the first century, says he did, and that he stirred the people up to despise God (*Antiquities* 1.4.2). That is tradition, not scripture. What scripture does say is enough: the first kingdom in the Bible was built by a "mighty one," and its first city was Babel.

The Story, Told Faithfully

One Lip

> **Genesis 11:1** *And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.*
> **Genesis 11:2** *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.*

"One language, and of one speech." The Hebrew says, word for word, *one lip and one words.* "Lip" (*saphah*) is a common Hebrew way of saying "language" — naming the thing by the part of the body that produces it. That is a figure of speech called **metonymy**: one thing named for another closely connected with it. The whole human race, all of it descended from Noah's family, spoke one language and used one vocabulary. No one needed an interpreter.

“As they journeyed from the east.” The Hebrew *miqqedem* can mean “from the east” or “eastward” (the King James margin offers *eastward*). Either way, the families of Noah were moving, as God had told them to. Then **“they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.”** They stopped. The command had been to fill the earth. They found a good plain and settled down.

Brick for Stone

> **Genesis 11:3** *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 morter.*

“Go to.” In older English “Go to!” meant *Come on!* — the Hebrew *havah*, “come, let us.” Mark the phrase. It will appear three times in this story, and the third time it will not be man speaking.

“Let us make brick, and burn them throughly.” The Hebrew has a ringing sound here that English loses: *nilbenah lebenim venisrephah lisrephah* — literally *let us brick bricks and burn them to a burning*. The repetition of a word in its own verb and noun form is a Hebrew way of emphasising, and here it catches the builders’ enthusiasm.

Sun-dried mud brick was the ordinary building material of the ancient East, and it crumbles in the rain. Kiln-fired brick is nearly as hard as stone and far more lasting. It was also expensive, since fuel was scarce on the plain. These builders were not putting up shelters. They meant their work to last.

“And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for morter.” Again Moses plays on the sounds: *brick* is *levenah*, *stone* is *even*; *slime* is *chemar*, *morter* is *chomer*. This kind of play on similar-sounding words is the figure called **paronomasia**. There is gentle mockery in it. Moses was writing for Israelites who built with stone, and the verse reads almost like an aside: *they had to use brick instead of stone, and tar instead of mortar*.

“Slime” is bitumen, the natural asphalt that oozes up from the ground in Mesopotamia and around the Dead Sea — **“the vale of Siddim was full of slimepits”** (Genesis 14:10). Moses’ mother sealed his little ark with it (Exodus 2:3). Archaeologists have found exactly this combination, fired brick set in bitumen, in the ancient temple-towers of Mesopotamia. The detail is true to the land.

A City, a Tower, and a Name

> **Genesis 11:4** *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.*

“Let us build us a city and a tower.” Notice the order: city first. The tower was the centrepiece of the city, its landmark and rallying point.

“Whose top may reach unto heaven.” In the King James Bible the words *may reach* are printed in italics, which means the translators supplied them; the Hebrew says simply *and its top in the heavens*. This was the ordinary way of describing something enormously tall. Israel’s spies said the cities of Canaan were **“great and walled up to heaven”** (Deuteronomy 1:28) — not literally, but so high they seemed to touch the sky. That is **hyperbole**, a deliberate exaggeration for effect. The builders did not imagine they could climb into God’s dwelling on a staircase of brick. But they meant to build something that would seem to reach it — a monument to their own greatness at the centre of their own world. (Some writers have suggested the phrase means a tower with the heavens pictured on its top, as later temple-towers bore images of the stars. That is an interpretation, not a certainty.)

The later temple-towers of Mesopotamia, called *ziggurats*, help us picture it: great stepped mountains of brick, with a shrine on the summit. The greatest stood in Babylon itself. The Babylonians called it *Etemenanki*, "the house of the foundation of heaven and earth," and the Greek historian Herodotus, writing in the fifth century before Christ, described it as eight towers stacked one upon another. It was built and rebuilt over many centuries. Whether it stood on the site of the original tower of Genesis 11, no one can say. But the builders of Babylon never stopped trying to raise a tower into the heavens.

"And let us make us a name." Here is the heart of the matter. A name, in the Bible, is a person's reputation, identity and honour. The builders did not want God's name exalted; they wanted their own. They wanted to be remembered, admired and feared. Centuries later King David's son Absalom did the same thing on a smaller scale: **"he called the pillar after his own name"** (2 Samuel 18:18). Monuments to human glory are one of the oldest things in the world.

Watch this word, *name* — in Hebrew, *shem*. It is about to become the key to the whole story.

"Lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." This is what they feared: being spread out. But being spread out over the earth was exactly what God had told them to do. The tower was not only an act of pride. It was an act of disobedience, built to keep them from obeying God.

The LORD Came Down

> **Genesis 11:5** *And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.*

"And the LORD came down to see." The tower was meant to reach heaven. But from heaven it was so small that God had to come down to see it. That is the irony at the centre of this story, and the Hebrew storyteller surely meant us to smile at it.

God does not need to come down anywhere to see anything. **"The eyes of the LORD are in every place"** (Proverbs 15:3). Scripture describes Him this way to help us understand what He did: He looked closely, He investigated, He judged in person — as He said later of Sodom, **"I will go down now, and see"** (Genesis 18:21). Speaking of God in human terms, ascribing to Him human actions and feelings, is the figure Bullinger calls **anthropopatheia**. It does not mean God has a body that climbs down stairs. It means He paid close attention and acted.

"Which the children of men builded." Literally *the sons of Adam* — mere men, sons of the man made of dust. Beside the LORD, the whole enterprise is the work of creatures.

Nothing Will Be Restrained

> **Genesis 11:6** *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.*
>
> **Genesis 11:7** *Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.*

"Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language." God saw what unity without Him produces. One people, one speech, one purpose — and the purpose was rebellion.

"And this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do." This is not God worrying that men might become too strong for Him. It is God seeing what

human beings, united in pride and cut off from Him, would go on to do. The same pattern of words appears in Eden: **"Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever"** (Genesis 3:22). In both places — *behold … and now* — God steps in to stop something that would make man's fallen condition permanent and far worse. The Flood had shown where unrestrained human wickedness leads. At Babel God stopped it early, with confusion instead of destruction. As this series understands it, the scattering was a judgment, but it was also a mercy.

"Go to, let us go down." The third "go to" — and this time it is God speaking. The builders said, *Come, let us build*. God answers, *Come, let us go down*. Their "let us" goes up; His comes down. When the same word or phrase is turned back on those who used it, with the opposite result, it is a kind of **irony**, and scripture uses it to show how easily God overturns the plans of men. **"He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh"** (Psalm 2:4).

"Let us." Who is "us"? God is speaking with those who stand in His presence — the angels, His heavenly council — as He did at creation (Genesis 1:26) and in Eden (Genesis 3:22). The acting is His alone: the very next verse says **"the LORD scattered them."**

"And there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." "Confound" is the Hebrew *balal*, to mix, to mingle — a word used of mixing oil into flour for an offering. God did not destroy human speech. He mixed it, so that a man could no longer understand the one working next to him. The word "understand" is *shama'*, "to hear"; they would no longer *hear* one another. Anyone who has tried to work alongside people with whom he shares no language can picture the result. The instructions stop. The bricks stop. The project stops.

Scattered

> **Genesis 11:8** *So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.*
>
> **Genesis 11:9** *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.*

"So the LORD scattered them abroad." The very thing they had built the tower to prevent — **"lest we be scattered"** — is exactly what happened. God did not tear the tower down. He did not need to. **"They left off to build the city."** Their own plan fell apart in their hands. **"The LORD bringeth the counsel of the heathen to nought: he maketh the devices of the people of none effect"** (Psalm 33:10).

"Therefore is the name of it called Babel." Here is the final wordplay. In the Babylonians' own language, *Bab-ili* meant "the gate of God." They thought of their city as the doorway to heaven. But the Hebrew storyteller hears in the name the verb he has just used, *balal*, "to confound": Babel, the city of *confusion*. The builders wanted to make a name for themselves. They got one — and it has meant "confusion" ever since. (The Greek translation of the Old Testament goes further and simply calls the place *Synchysis*, "Confusion.")

"From thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth." The chapter before this one, Genesis 10, has already listed the families that came out of Babel — the descendants of Japheth, Ham and Shem, **"after their families, after their tongues, in their countries, and in their nations"** (Genesis 10:20). By the traditional count there are seventy of them, and Jewish teachers spoke

ever after of "the seventy nations." Genesis 10 tells the result; Genesis 11 tells how it happened. And Genesis sums it up: **"by these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood"** (Genesis 10:32).

Was the first language lost? Genesis says the common speech of mankind ended at Babel, but it does not say which language was spoken before, or that it vanished everywhere. Noah, Shem and Eber were alive when it happened, and nothing says their households were at the tower. Many have held that Adam's language survived in Eber's family, the line of the "Hebrews"; others hold that every language afterward was new. Scripture does not say, and this series does not go further than scripture.

The Name God Gives

The story of Babel ends in scattering. But look at the very next verse:

> **Genesis 11:10** *These are the generations of Shem: Shem was an hundred years old, and begat Arphaxad two years after the flood:*

"These are the generations of Shem." *Shem* is the Hebrew word for *name*. The builders said, *let us make us a name — shem*. Immediately after their failure, Genesis turns to the family line of the man called *Name*. As this series understands it, the placement is deliberate: men could not make a name for themselves, so God traced the line through which He would give one. It runs from Shem down ten generations to Abram — and the next chapter opens with God's words to him:

> **Genesis 12:1** *Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee:*
> **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:*
> **Genesis 12:3** *And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.*

"And make thy name great." What the builders tried to seize for themselves, God gave freely to a man who believed Him. The builders said *let us*; God says *I will*, again and again. The builders wanted to stay together and be great; God told Abram to leave, and promised to make him great. The builders feared being scattered over the earth; God promised that **"in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed"** — the very families scattered at Babel. Babel is man's plan for unity and greatness. Abraham is the beginning of God's.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The name above every name. The builders wanted a name. God gave the name to His Son:

> **Philippians 2:9** *Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:*
> **Philippians 2:10** *That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;*
> **Philippians 2:11** *And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

“Every tongue.” At Babel the tongues of mankind were divided. In the end every tongue will confess one name — that Jesus Christ is Lord. He humbled Himself to death on the cross; God raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to His own right hand, and gave Him the name the builders of Babel could never make for themselves.

The way to heaven God sets up. Babel’s builders tried to raise a tower whose top would be in the heavens. A few chapters later, Jacob dreamed of **“a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven”** (Genesis 28:12) — nearly the same Hebrew words, *its top … to heaven*. But that ladder was God’s, not man’s, with angels ascending and descending on it. Jesus Christ told Nathanael, **“ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man”** (John 1:51). There is a way between earth and heaven, but men cannot build it. God provided it in His Son.

The seed of Shem. Through the line of the man called *Name* came Abraham, David, and at last Jesus Christ, **“the son of Sem”** (Luke 3:36) — the Seed promised in Eden, in whom all the families of the earth are blessed (Galatians 3:8, 16).

To the Grace Administration

Pentecost. On the day of Pentecost, God did something that looks like Babel in reverse:

> **Acts 2:5** *And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.*
>
> **Acts 2:6** *Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.*

“Out of every nation under heaven.” The descendants of the scattered families were gathered in one city. **“Were confounded.”** The Greek word, *suncheō*, is the same verb the Greek translation of the Old Testament uses at Babel for “confound.” At Babel God confused one language into many, and men could not understand one another. At Pentecost God gave the apostles to speak in many languages, and **“every man heard them speak in his own language,”** telling **“the wonderful works of God”** (Acts 2:11). Luke does not say in so many words that Pentecost answers Babel, and it did not give the world one language again; each man heard in his own. But what Babel broke — understanding — God restored around the name of Jesus Christ. As this series understands it, that is exactly the point: the barrier fell, and the languages stayed.

One body out of every nation. Babel was man’s attempt at unity without God. The church is God’s own unity, made in His Son. **“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles”** (1 Corinthians 12:13). **“There is neither Jew nor Greek … for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”** (Galatians 3:28). Christ **“is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us”** (Ephesians 2:14). The unity the builders tried to force with bricks, God gives by grace.

A city not built with hands. Abraham, called out of Ur of the Chaldees, not far from Babel, **“looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God”** (Hebrews 11:10). Every Babel man builds will one day fall — **“Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen”** (Revelation 18:2). The city God builds will stand.

Scattered so that men would seek Him. Paul told the Athenians that God **“hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before**

appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord" (Acts 17:26-27). Even the scattering served His purpose. Every nation, in every language, is called to seek Him — and in this administration the good news goes to all of them.

To the Topic of Pride

- **Pride builds for its own name.** "Let us make us a name."
- **Pride often hides disobedience.** The tower was built to avoid doing what God said.
- **What looks great on earth is small from heaven.** God had to come down to see it.
- **God resists the proud. "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble"** (James 4:6).
- **Unity is not good in itself.** United against God is worse than scattered.
- **God gives what pride cannot take.** The builders grasped at a name; God gave Abram one.

The Main Takeaway

After the Flood, mankind united around one language to build a city and a tower and make a name for themselves, in defiance of God's command to fill the earth; God came down, confused their language and scattered them — a judgment that was also a mercy — and then turned to the line of Shem to give, by His own promise, the name and the blessing that men could never build for themselves, fulfilled at last in Jesus Christ and in one body gathered from every nation.

- **God's commands are not up for renegotiation.** "Fill the earth" meant fill the earth.
- **The name that matters is His,** not ours.
- **God sees every tower,** however high we think it is.
- **God's judgments restrain evil** and are often mercy in disguise.
- **What God scatters, He can gather** — as He did at Pentecost.
- **Real unity is found in Christ,** not in human projects.

For Our Learning — The People

- **The descendants of Noah.** The whole human race after the Flood, speaking one language.
- **Nimrod.** Son of Cush, grandson of Ham; "a mighty one in the earth"; the first man in scripture with a kingdom, which began at Babel. Tradition, not scripture, makes him the tower's builder.
- **The LORD.** Who came down, saw, confounded their language and scattered them.
- **Peleg.** Son of Eber; "in his days was the earth divided."
- **Eber.** Ancestor of the Hebrews; alive at the time of Babel and long after.
- **Shem.** Son of Noah; his name means "name"; the line of the promise runs through him.
- **Abram.** Called by God out of the same region, and promised a great name.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Mud brick and fired brick.** Sun-dried brick was common and cheap; kiln-fired brick was costly and lasting.

- **Bitumen.** Natural asphalt, used as mortar and waterproofing throughout Mesopotamia.
- **Ziggurats.** Stepped temple-towers with a shrine on top, the landmarks of Mesopotamian cities; Babylon's was called "the house of the foundation of heaven and earth."
- **City and tower together.** A city's tower was its landmark, its rallying point and its pride.
- **A name.** In the East a man's name stood for his honour and reputation; monuments were raised to keep a name alive.
- **Nations by families.** The ancient world thought of nations as extended families descended from a common father, as Genesis 10 records them.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Metonymy** — naming a thing by something closely connected with it. "One language," literally *one lip* (11:1): speech named by the lips that speak it.
- **Paronomasia** — play on similar-sounding words. *Levenah / even*, brick and stone; *chemar / chomer*, slime and mortar (11:3); *Babel / balal*, Babel and confound (11:9); *shem*, "name," and Shem (11:4, 10).
- **Hyperbole** — deliberate exaggeration. "Whose top may reach unto heaven" (11:4; compare Deuteronomy 1:28).
- **Anthropopatheia** — ascribing human actions to God. "The LORD came down to see" (11:5).
- **Irony** — words turned back on those who used them. The builders' "Go to, let us build" answered by God's "Go to, let us go down" (11:3-7); "lest we be scattered" followed by "the LORD scattered them" (11:4, 8).
- **Repetition** — "Go to" three times (11:3, 4, 7); "scatter" three times (11:4, 8, 9).

What the Bible Actually Says

- **The whole earth had one language** before Babel (11:1).
- **God had commanded Noah's family to fill the earth** (9:1, 7); the builders set out to avoid being scattered.
- **The builders used fired brick and bitumen,** exactly as archaeology shows in Mesopotamia.
- **"May reach unto heaven" is supplied by the translators;** the Hebrew says "its top in the heavens."
- **Scripture does not say Nimrod built the tower;** it says his kingdom began at Babel.
- **God did not destroy the tower.** He confused their language, and they stopped building.
- **God did not say what language was spoken before,** or that it was lost everywhere.
- **Babel is explained by the Hebrew word for "confound,"** not by the Babylonians' own meaning, "gate of God."
- **Pentecost did not restore one language;** each man heard in his own.

God's Will and Intent

- **God wants the earth filled** with people who bear His image.
- **God will not share His glory** with human pride.
- **God watches closely** over what men do.
- **God restrains evil,** in mercy as well as in judgment.
- **God gives a great name** to those who believe Him, as He did to Abram.
- **God intends to bless all the families of the earth** — through the Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ.
- **God gathers what was scattered** into one body in His Son.