

Many of you are familiar with Wycliffe Bible Translators, an organization that has helped people around the world translate the Bible into their own languages. Wycliffe got started 100 years ago. In 1917 a missionary named William Cameron Townsend went to Guatemala to sell Spanish Bibles. But he was shocked when many people couldn't understand the books. They spoke Cakchiquel, a language without a Bible. Cam believed everyone should understand the Bible, so he started a linguistics school (the Summer Institute of Linguistics, known today as SIL) that trained people to do Bible translation. The work continued to grow, and in 1942 Cam officially founded Wycliffe Bible Translators.

Over the following decades, Wycliffe celebrated many milestones—from the first translation completed in 1951, all the way to the 500th translation completed in 2000. Around the same time, Wycliffe adopted a new challenge—a goal of seeing a Bible translation project started in every language still needing one by 2025. Today, more than 1,600 languages are still waiting for a Bible translation to begin, and Wycliffe is working faster than ever to reach those languages as soon as possible.

What does Wycliffe Bible Translators have to do with Genesis 11? Well, did you catch verse 9? *“That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world.”* Back in chapter 10 the text suggests that after the apocalyptic flood, God has once again been forgotten. Perhaps that's the greatest sin of all. But let's look closer. What exactly is the sin in the story of the Tower of Babel? Ambition? Rebellion? Pride? The story in Genesis 11 is framed by verses 1 and 2 and verses 8 and 9. It's really a literary masterpiece. In verses 1 and 2 we read that people had one language and were settled. In verses 8 and 9 we read that their language was confused and they were scattered. That's the envelope in which the story takes place.

Reading between the lines of Genesis 11 we can see that the people's action in building the tower was caused by their fear of scattering. They say, *“Come, let us build...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.”* Toward the end of the story, in verses 7 and 8 God says, *“Come, let us go down and confuse their language...”* and he scatters them. The main reason this building project upset God, so it seems, was that it was motivated by their fear of being scattered when, in fact, scattering is exactly what God keeps telling them to do. And still does, for that matter. God doesn't tell disciples to stay put. He tells them to, *“Go and make disciples of all nations”* (Matt. 28:19). Let's hope that begins to sink in one of these days.

Tremper Longman says, “Genesis 11:1-9 is a powerful illustration of the pervasive and profound literary artistry of the book of Genesis.” His book, *How to Read Genesis**, contains the following summary of the Dutch biblical scholar J. P. Fokkelman. Fokkelman's reading of the Tower of Babel story has revealed its intricate design. The reversal of the consonants shows the reversal that God's judgment effected in the plans of the rebel human beings. This reversal is also reflected in Fokkelman's analysis of the chiasmic structure of the story. (*A chiasm is a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order. The result is a “mirror” effect as the ideas are “reflected” back in a passage.*)

There's unity of language (A) and place (B) and intensive communication (C) that induces the men to make plans and inventions (D), building (E) a city and a tower (F). God's intervention, then, is the turning

point (X). God came down to see the buildings (F) people make (E) and launches a counter plan (D) which makes communication impossible (C) and the unity of place (B) and language (A) is broken. Fokkelman's analysis of Genesis 11:1-9 shows that Genesis is an artfully constructed piece of literature.

The people's sin results in the building of the tower. The exact form of this tower is a matter of debate. Typically, and perhaps rightly, the idea behind it is the great Mesopotamian ziggurat, a stepped pyramid that represented a ladder from earth to heaven. Babylon (or Shinar) is explicitly mentioned as the location of this assault on heaven, so perhaps this connection is justified. In any case, whatever the exact form of this building activity, it is an act of pride, an affront to God. It appears to be an attempt to scale heaven and represent human greatness, and it is also a countermeasure to God's desire, in response to the fall, to scatter the people over all the land.

God will not have it, however, and in a judgment speech he determines to scatter them by scattering their language. Up to now the passage implies, humans spoke a single language. God would foil their attempts to scale heaven by confusing their language. However, what about the token of grace? At this point Genesis 10 enters our interpretation. God is actually showing his grace to human beings by splitting them into language groups, rather than destroying them as he did in Noah's day or completely silencing their voices. In other words, communication becomes more difficult, but not impossible. Humans can no longer communicate with all other human beings, but there are some who speak the same language, and translation remains a possibility to speak to those outside of our own language group.

The episode concludes with the execution of God's judgment. God confuses their language, and the result is that they disperse across the face of the earth. The Day of Pentecost provides a reprieve from this language confusion when Jews from every nation hear the good news of Jesus in their own language. Then, at least four millennia after the tower of Babel, Wycliffe Bible Translators comes along with the aim of making the gospel available to every language group on earth.

Human sin, God's judgment speech, a token of grace and the execution of judgment is the pattern once again in this story. Human beings are addicted to sin. Have you noticed that? Human rebellion does not improve or get better with time—it arguably gets worse. And as it gets worse, God is there to consistently judge it. God does not let sin slide. We should all take note of this and be warned. But we should also be encouraged. After all, God does not abandon us human beings; he stays involved with us. As in the other great stories from Genesis, God continues to pursue human creatures with his grace.

A pastor friend wrote this about a personal experience: Last week I had a problem with my computer. I would turn on my computer and it literally sounded like someone was throwing bolts into my computer. So I called up Dell and I'm switched to a call center in India. I gave this young man my identification code for my computer and then he asked me what the problem was. I told him it sounded like "bolts" were being thrown around inside my computer." He said "boats." I said "bolts." He said "boats" again. Louder, I SAY "bolts." And this went on for a while. Then I said "Listen to your phone very carefully." I turned off my computer and turned it back on then prayed it would happen again. Fortunately it did and all I heard him say was, "Oh my, I will get you over to our warranty desk." I think I can blame the people who settled on the plain of Shinar for this one.

When Noah and his family came out of the ark after the flood God gave them a command. “*Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth’*” (9:1). Fill the earth does not mean to settle in one place, but to send people out in all directions to live. But as humans we would rather forget a command from God or change it to suit ourselves. We can be really coy, thinking, “Did God really say that?”

“*Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth*” says verse 4. There were several things wrong with this. The people were settling in one place, not spreading out as they were told to do by God. Plus, God desires for us to make a name for *him*, not to live and make a name for *ourselves*. In life we sometimes think we can do things that God either does not notice or our hearts can become hardened and we honestly don’t care what God thinks.

The pastor and the man from Dell were babbling on the phone for a few minutes because God’s command to Noah in Genesis 9 was ignored. What was that command? “*As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it.*” When God says to do something, why don’t we do it? We continually break the covenant with God. Why?

Here are a few possible reasons: 1) We don’t fear God. 2) We are not in awe of God. 3) We don’t care what God thinks. 4) We are just too busy to think about God, so we *forget* God. But God will not be forgotten, Christian friends.

Through thousands of years of biblical history we can clearly see that we serve a truly patient God. Yet even God has his limits. God may have told us to reconcile with a family member or a coworker and we responded by giving him the stiff arm. God may want us to change jobs, but we go on like we never heard him. God may want a fuller relationship with us but we keep ignoring God’s invitation so it prevents us from drawing closer to God.

The story of the Tower of Babel shows us that when we stand in awe of God we are “One in the Lord,” no matter how many languages we speak, or how far apart we live. This story doesn’t end like Frank Baum’s classic story, *The Wizard of Oz*, with someone saying, “There’s no place like home.” Instead it demands that we stand in awe of the God who hung the stars in the sky, holds the oceans in place, and does a billion other wondrous things every second of every day. The tag line for this story is, “There’s no place like God.”

Let us work and pray for unity, and support the sort of work Wycliffe Bible Translators do, so we may be “One in the Lord.” And may the Lord restore our faith and open our eyes to a world that until now was hidden from us. If we take but one step toward God, God will take ten steps toward us. Glory to God!

**How to Read Genesis (How to Read Series)*, © 2005, InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition, pp. 119-122.