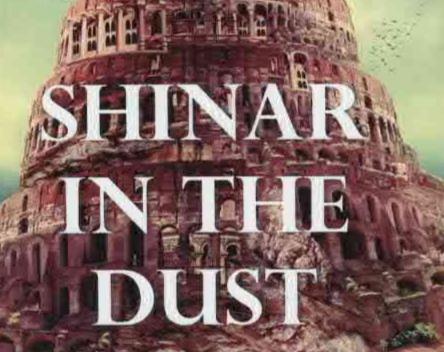
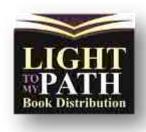
F. WAYNE MAC LEOD



ISOBEDIENCE AND THE DEATH OF A CITY

Shinar in the Dust

Disobedience and the Death of a City



F. Wayne Mac Leod

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PREFACE

Genesis 11:1-9 is a familiar passage. It is the story of how the descendants of Noah, leaving Mount Ararat after the flood, migrated to the fertile valley of Shinar where they built a city and tower to make a name for themselves. It is much more than this, however.

The story of the Tower of Babel is a story about the tension between the will of God and the pull of the flesh. It addresses the struggle between human ability and resourcefulness and our need to surrender to the call of God. The passage also reveals our frailty as human beings and the wonderful sovereignty of God whose purpose advances despite our failures and rebellion.

Genesis 11:1-9 reminds us of the futility of not walking in the call of God and challenges us to examine the inner motivations of our hearts. It gives us courage in light of failure, hope in the midst of confusion and confidence in a sovereign Lord whose purposes cannot fail.

It is my firm conviction that all Scripture is inspired of God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness (see 2 Timothy 3:16). My prayer for this study is that the lessons and gems of truth found in this passage would have an impact to this end in the life of each reader.

May the Lord God bless you as together we seek to listen to what He would have us learn from this important passage of His Word.

F. Wayne Mac Leod

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Every story has its context. This story is no exception. To understand what has been happening we need to go back to Genesis 6. In this chapter we have a clear indication of how God felt about the direction His creation had chosen to take:

5 The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6 And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7 So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them. (Genesis 6)

These verses tell us something very important about the earth at the time. God's creation had rebelled against Him and His purpose. Human beings were living in a way that offended their Creator. This evil was not just in their outward actions but went to the very core of their being. God

tells us that "every intention of the thought of his heart was only evil continually." This so grieved God that He determined to do something about it. Speaking to Noah, God said:

13 And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth. (Genesis 6)

We can only imagine the impact of those words as they reached Noah's ears. We catch a glimpse here of the intense hatred of God for sin and rebellion. Sin was so offensive to a holy God that He chose to destroy all of His creation. We dare not trivialise sin.

Notice how God determined to carry out His plan to destroy the earth and its inhabitants. Genesis 6 goes on to tell us what God decided to do:

17 For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. 18 But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your son's wives with you. (Genesis 6)

The world as Noah knew it would be covered with water. Every living thing would perish in that flood. God, however, granted special favour to Noah and his family. Their lives would be saved and through them, the earth would again be repopulated.

We need to stop here for a moment and consider the nature of this wonderful favour of God on the family of Noah.

This family alone would be spared from the terrible disaster that would engulf the entire earth. They would be the instruments through which the earth would be repopulated and the purpose of God worked out. They had seen the terrible consequences of sin and understood full well what God felt about it. These were very important lessons to learn.

In time, the waters of the flood subsided and Noah's family left the ark. As they placed their feet on the firm soil of the earth, they offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Lord God for His goodness toward them as a family. God not only accepted their offering but commissioned Noah and his family for a vital task.

1 And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." (Genesis 9)

As they stood before God that day, they heard the command of God to fill the earth. This new earth was exploding with potential. Already plants were growing and fruit was being produced on the trees. The earth was fertile and ready to cultivate. There were gems and precious metal hidden beneath the surface for God's people to discover. The earth and its richness were for the taking. God wanted His people to tap into that potential and bring out the best from the earth.

God had great plans for Noah's family. They would multiply and fill the earth. From corner to corner, God's people would lift up His name and rejoice in His goodness. They would harvest the bounty of the earth and experience the rich abundance God had placed on it. They would care for the earth and live in it to the glory of His name. Through

the descendants of this family, the earth would be populated and the glory of the Lord would fill the entire earth as they learned to walk in obedience to their Creator.

Like the people of Noah's day, a whole world of possibilities lies before us. Like these people, we too are called to delight in His benefits and spread His glory from shore to shore. Exciting days lay ahead for those who had been delivered from the judgement of God on the earth. Before them lay a whole world to explore, enjoy and cultivate. Within them was the call of God to be fruitful and fill that earth for the glory of His name.

What potential lies before us today. This same God who has also delivered us, calls us now to be fruitful and fill the earth with His glory. As impossible as that task may seem, the God who calls us will also go before us to accomplish His purpose in us if we choose to accept that call.

For Consideration:

- What was the condition of the earth just prior to the story of the Tower of Babel? How had God demonstrated His anger with the sin of the earth?
- How did the family of Noah experience the rich favour of God? How has the favour of God been demonstrated in your life?
- How does the flood demonstrate the intense hatred of God toward sin and rebellion? What is your attitude toward sin and rebellion? Are there sins we tend to trivialise in our day?

- God blessed and commissioned the descendants of Noah to be fruitful and fill the earth? This was a huge task but one they were called to fulfil. What has God commissioned you to do? Can you trust Him to give you wisdom and strength to accomplish that task?
- Is it possible for us to have a vision that is too small? Is there untapped potential in your life? Explain.
- Does your society or your church understand the seriousness of sin? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for His favour on your life and the life of your family.
- Ask God to help you to understand more fully how much He hates sin and rebellion. Ask Him to search your heart to reveal any sin that He would have you deal with today.
- Ask God to give you a greater understanding of the potential He has put before you. Ask Him to give you the grace to tap into this rich potential for His glory.
- Ask the Lord to increase your vision for your community and for the world. Ask Him to give you strength and wisdom to step out in His calling on your life.

SETTLING IN SHINAR

1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

Having examined the context and the commission God had given the descendants of Noah, we come now to the first two verses of Genesis 11. Verse 1 tells us that the whole earth had one language and the same words.

One Language

The Hebrew word used for "language" can also refer to a boundary or a border. Having travelled to other countries, I can testify that language certainly puts up boundaries. When you cannot speak the language of the people in the region you are visiting, you are hindered in many ways. There have been times when I have sat in uneasy silence with a brother in Christ simply because of the language barrier. We could not communicate. Getting to know each other was very difficult and created a wall between us.

A common language opens the door for communication and getting to know one another. The descendants of Noah had this advantage. They spoke the same language and used the same words to communicate ideas. This united them as a people and gave them a common identity.

There is something very comforting about being able to communicate with people of the same language. I remember travelling alone in a country I had never been before and needing to figure out how to get to a hotel. I was unfamiliar with the bus system and how to get where I was going. I needed help to figure the system out. As I prayed, a gentleman came over to me and asked if he could help me. He spoke in English and I can tell you that this was a great relief for me. I felt isolated in a country filled with people whose language I did not understand. What a blessing it was to hear my own language and be able to find the help I needed.

The descendants of Noah shared the same language and speech. They understood each other and could share in laughter and joy. They could worship together and pray together. They could work together with a common purpose because of this language. Their language united them.

Migrating from the East

In verse 2, we read that these descendants of Noah migrated from the east. Remember that Noah's ark rested on Mount Ararat (Genesis 8:4). These people left the mountains and moved out to explore the vast earth with its rich blessings. This was the intention of God for them.

The mountain of Ararat could not provide them with all they needed. The soil of the mountain would have been rocky

and not suitable for crops and cattle. If they were to experience the fullness of God's blessing they would need to move off that mountain.

Consider this move for a moment. There on the mountain, the sons of Noah had experienced a wonderful victory. They had been rescued from the flood that destroyed the entire earth. Before them was the ark that had been their home for more than a year. The mountain was a place of worship, thanksgiving, salvation, and deliverance.

These men and women who exited the ark, however, did not stay on the mountain. They had been commissioned by God to be fruitful and fill the earth. That required moving off the mountain. They did not know what they would find as they descended into the valley below. The earth as they had known it had gone through a tremendous flood. There would be difficulties in descending the mountain and stepping out into new territory. This required a certain amount of faith in the God who had delivered them from the waters.

What applied to the sons and daughters of Noah applies to us today as well. There is something wonderful about the mountain where we experienced victory and the salvation of God. God, however, has a task for us and that task requires leaving that mountain and taking a risk. It involves pulling up our tent pegs and leaving what we know. It is easy to become so content with the familiar that we never take that risk.

There have been times in my life where I have met people who have never moved beyond their first experience of God and His deliverance. They delight in that experience but never seem to move from there. The experience God gave His people on the mountain was only the beginning

of what He had in store. The lessons learned from this experience would help them as they moved on to the unexplored territory below. They had seen the hatred of God for sin—this would guide them in obedience. They had experienced a wonderful deliverance of God—this would give them courage as they faced the struggles ahead. They knew the call of God on their lives to be His instruments to repopulate the earth and fill it with His glory and this would give them a mandate and direction in life.

The call of God was for the descendants of Noah to move off the mountain and fill the earth. As they did, they would continue to experience the blessing and deliverance of the Lord. The goal was to fill the earth. This was a huge task and one that required the strength and blessing of God. They would need to step out in faith in what God had called them to do.

Have we become so content on the mountain that we are unwilling to take the risk of leaving it to fulfil the purpose of God for our lives? Will we listen to the call of God and step off that mountain into His will? Will we trust that the presence of God is not limited to the mountain and will be with us even in the valley? How tragic it is that all too many believers of our day are content with so little. They do not have the courage to step beyond the mountain into the deep blessings of the valleys and plains below.

The Land of Shinar

From the mountains of Ararat, the descendants of Noah travelled south and west to the region of Shinar. The region of Shinar was a fertile valley watered by the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Adam Clarke describes this valley of

Shinar to be "the most fertile country in the east." We can imagine just how wonderful it would have been to arrive in this valley surrounded by the blessings of God, the abundance of crops and plenty of space for animals. Verse 2 goes on to say that the descendants of Noah chose to settle in this region of Shinar. Shinar was a comfortable place. This was a place they were in no hurry to leave.

While the mountain was a place of deliverance, this valley was a place of comfort, security, and blessing. This valley had everything God's people needed to live a comfortable and blessed life. What more could they ask for? There were no enemy nations around them. They had food for their families. They all spoke the same language and had the same culture. Struggles were likely at a minimum. They seemed to have found a good life. The call of God, however, to fill the earth could never be accomplished if they remained in the comforts of that plain. Leaving the plain, however, meant leaving the blessings it brought. The descendants of Noah were not ready to leave these comforts. They chose instead to "settle" in Shinar and make this their home.

There are times in our lives when we will find ourselves caught between comfort and obedience. Obedience is not always comfortable. Our prayers are often about finding comfort in life—whether that be in health or material prosperity. God is looking for people, however, who will be obedient even when it is uncomfortable. The measure of

¹ (Commentary on the Bible by Adam Clarke, Electronic edition copyright ©2015 by Laridian Inc., Marion, Iowa, Comments on Genesis 11:2)

whether we are where God wants us to be is not found in comfort and blessing but in obedience. Jesus lived on this earth with very little comfort. Answering a teacher of the law who wanted to follow Him, Jesus said:

20 And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matthew 18:20)

The call of God often takes us away from the comfort and security of Shinar. The disciples left their jobs and families to follow the Lord. They often came into conflict with people on the way. The land of Shinar offers us its comfort and riches. Settling in Shinar we lose our desire to move any further. We are lured by the ease and blessings of Shinar and there we remain.

Have you settled in the land of Shinar? Has your walk with God ended in this fertile valley? Have you become deaf to the call of God to fill the whole earth and not be content with this comfortable valley alone? Shinar can lull us to sleep. We can become fat on its blessings. Its privileges can deafen our ears to the call of God. May God give us grace not to fall prey to the blessings of Shinar. May we be, instead, a people who choose to walk in obedience and faithfulness to God's call on our lives no matter the cost.

For Consideration:

How did having one language unite the people of God? How would this have made it more difficult for them to separate from each other to fill the earth?

- What did Mount Ararat represent for the family of Noah? Have you ever had a "Mount Ararat experience"? How easy is it for us to want to remain in that experience of God and not advance beyond this?
- What difficulties would be involved in leaving Mount Ararat? Have you ever experienced such difficulties in your life?
- What did the people of God find in Shinar?
- Can blessing and comfort keep us from the call of God on our lives? Is obedience always comfortable?
- Have you become comfortable with where you are in your faith? Has this kept you from growing in your faith and stepping out into new territory?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord for times when He has delivered you. Ask God to show you the lessons He wanted to teach you through this deliverance.
- Ask God to give you the courage to step out in obedience to His call on your life even if it is uncomfortable for you.
- Ask God to forgive you for becoming so focused on seeking your own comfort in life. Ask Him to give you the grace to be willing to sacrifice whatever He asks for the sake of His kingdom.

 Ask God to give you a willing heart to step out by faith in whatever He calls you to do.

BUILDING A CITY

AND TOWER

3 And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

In the last chapter, we saw how the people of God settled in the land of Shinar. This was a comfortable place for them. As we move now into verses 3 and 4 we see just how comfortable the land of Shinar was.

To this point, the people of God had been living in tents. Now, however, they decided it was time to settle down. They wanted more permanent housing. Because rock was scarce in the region they decided to make brick for their homes. Notice how they wanted to burn these bricks "thoroughly" (verse 3). The idea here is that they wanted very strong brick so that it would last. In saying this, they are committing themselves to remain in the land of Shinar for

the long term. They had no plans of moving from this place.

The bricks they made would be cemented together with bitumen. Bitumen is a tar-like substance that would harden and bond the bricks together.

The city they decided to build in Shinar would provide a permanent place to live. Notice, also that their plan was to build a tower with its top in the heavens. Verse 4 gives us two reasons why they chose to build this city and tower. First, they wanted to make a name for themselves and second, they wanted to keep themselves from being dispersed over the face of the whole earth.

Making a Name for Themselves

The first reason Noah's family wanted to build the city and tower was to make a name for themselves. There is an element of pride here. They wanted future generations to see their greatness. While we could speculate about other purposes for the tower, one thing is clear from the passage—they wanted this tower to reflect on their name. They wanted this effort to draw attention to themselves. They wanted to do something that would cause people to step back and notice them.

Here were a people who had been delivered from the flood. Their God had saved their family alone from this terrible devastation. How grateful they should have been toward Him for this. What we see here, however, is a people who are turning their attention from God to themselves.

If I am honest with myself, I see this sin often in my own heart. The pride of our hearts is all too real. In the churches

of our nations, are we not guilty of building our own towers? The temptation for Christian leaders all over this world is to build a tower of their own making so that people will notice them. This is not just the temptation for Christian workers but for all of us. We want to be known for our achievements and gifts. We want people to notice us. Sometimes we are more concerned about making a name for ourselves than we are about the purpose of God for our lives.

We can live our lives with the sole purpose of having people notice us or think highly of us. Our towers today are not made of brick and bitumen but they are just as real. The tower and the city Noah's family made that day showed that their attention had shifted from the God who delivered them to themselves and their accomplishments. That same sin is never far from each of us today.

Keeping Themselves from Being Dispersed

The second reason the descendants of Noah wanted to build a city and a tower was so that they would not be dispersed over the face of the earth. There may have been a number of reasons why they did not want to be dispersed. They were a family and there may have been sentimental reasons for not wanting to be separated from each other. They may also have felt that there was strength in numbers and that united they could truly make a name for themselves. How could they make a name for themselves if they were scattered? The construction of the city and the tower would require tremendous resources. They would need everyone to help with this project. Their goal was to increase in number and become a great people living in a city with a tower reaching up to the heavens as a symbol of their importance.

To understand what is happening here we need to return to Genesis 9 and the call of God on these survivors of the flood:

> 1 And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." (Genesis 9)

In Genesis 9, God had a two-fold call for the family of Noah. First, they were to be fruitful and multiply. Second, they were to fill the earth. The filling of the earth required that they spread out. God's intention was to repopulate the earth and from the descendants of Noah fill it with peoples and nations again. For this to happen, the members of Noah's family would need to disperse. Noah's descendants were quite happy to multiply but they resisted the idea of dispersing. Instead, they wanted to remain together and make a name for themselves.

How easy it is to take what we want from God's Word and ignore the rest. God is looking for a people who will not only receive the blessings of His Word but also take up its challenges. Filling the earth was a lonely task. It required that individual families leave the larger body and set out on their own. It meant saying good-bye to loved ones and facing the unknown.

By building the city and tower, God's people were defying Him. They were saying in effect, "Lord, we are happy to multiply but we are not willing to send our families out from here. We are going to ignore your call and settle down here in this land."

God's call on our lives will sometimes take us away from fame and privilege. God will call some to remote areas to minister in His name. He will call us to small churches and small support ministries out of the view of human eyes. People may never hear about us or even know what we do but we are being obedient to God and His purpose for our lives.

Have we become so focused on making a name for ourselves that we ignore the clear call of God on our lives. Have we become so obsessed with our comfort that we refuse to make the sacrifices necessary for the kingdom of God? Have we become so hungry for titles and popularity that we sacrifice the preaching of truth in order to please people? Is our obedience selective? Will we accept the good from God but not the hard (Job 2:10)?

The people who built that city and tower did so in defiance of God and His command. They did so to shift attention from God to themselves. Each brick they laid was an act of rebellion against the purpose of God for their lives. How many bricks have you been piling up?

For Consideration:

- What evidence is there that the people of God had become comfortable in Shinar?
- What are the two reasons given in this passage for the construction of a city and a tower?
- How did the construction of the city and tower distract people from the true call of God on their lives?
- What evidence do we have here in this passage that attention is shifting away from God? What is

becoming the central focus of the people of that day?

 In what ways can we be trying to make a name for ourselves today? How can this distract us from doing the will of God?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you a passion for obedience even if it requires sacrifice.
- Ask God to search your heart to see if there is any way that you have been trying to make a name for yourself instead of being content to walk in humble obedience.
- Take a moment to ask the Lord to give you a deeper passion for Him and His glory. Ask Him to forgive you for times when you have tried to take that glory for yourself.

THE LORD CAME DOWN

5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. (Genesis 11)

In the last chapter, we examined the sin of the descendants of Noah. They had turned their attention from God and His purpose for their lives. Instead, they chose to make a name for themselves and settle in the comforts of Shinar. As they began the process of building a city and tower, verse 5 tells us that the Lord came down to see what they were doing.

The Lord Came Down to See

Notice in verse 5 that the focus is not on the tower alone. The Lord also came down to see the city. The phrase, "the Lord came down to see" needs some examination.

Why would the Lord need to come down to see? Couldn't an all-knowing and all-seeing God already see what was happening? The word "see" here can also be translated by the words, approve, consider or discern. The idea is not

that the Lord was simply coming to look at what the people were doing but to approve or consider its worth. In reality, He was judging their actions and intentions.

What the people of that day needed to understand was that they were responsible to God for their lives and actions. The God who had rescued them from the flood now held them accountable. They would have to answer to Him for their actions. What we see in verse 5 is the Lord coming down from heaven to examine the works of His people.

Our works will be examined by God, who will judge their quality and value. Writing to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul said:

11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—13 each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. 14 If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 15 if anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3)

There are several details we need to see in these words of Paul to the Corinthians.

Paul told the Corinthians that they had an obligation now that they had come to Christ. To illustrate this, he uses the illustration of a building in 1 Corinthians 3. The foundation of the building is Jesus Christ and the work He had done

for their forgiveness. The believers of Corinth were to build their lives on that foundation.

Paul warned the Corinthians, however, that it was possible to build on the foundation of Christ using inferior materials such as straw and hay. When the day of judgement came, these efforts would be tried by the fire of God's judgement and burned up. This meant that they would stand before God with nothing to show for their lives lived on this earth.

What we need to understand is that the wood, hay, and straw that Paul refers to here may not look like inferior material to the human eye. In Genesis 11, the people were making brick and burning them "thoroughly" (Genesis 11:3). In other words, the brick they were making had already passed through the fire and was a quality brick. They built the city and the tower with the best material they had available to them. It is possible to invest huge sums of money into projects and still not be doing what the Lord requires. We can dedicate our lives to something and still fall short of God's requirement. The apostle Paul (then known as Saul) dedicated his life to serving God by seeking to get rid of Christians.

The people of Genesis 11 dedicated themselves to building a city and a tower but they were doing so without regard for God and His greater purpose for their lives. I am sure that as they were building this city and tower they had inspectors who assured that the work was being done well. After all, they were trying to make a name for themselves and inferior craftsmanship would reflect on their reputation as a people. These human inspectors, however, did not have the final say in the matter. Ultimately, the judge of all their works would be the Lord God. It was only what He approved that mattered.

The apostle Paul told the Galatians:

10 For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. (Galatians 1)

What the family of Noah needed to understand is that the final judge of their actions was God. They would have to answer to Him alone.

Are we governed by our own ideas? Remember, that the day will come for each of us when God will come down to see our works. If there is one thing I want to hear Him say to me, it would be: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21). If I am to hear these words, however, I must dedicate my life to doing what He wants me to do.

The Children of Man

There is another detail I would like to mention here in verse 5. Notice that the Lord came down to see the "children of man". This phrase "children of man" is quite interesting in this context. It is not the first time this phrase or something similar occurs in the Bible. We read in Genesis 6:

1 When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, 2 the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive and took as their wives any they chose. 3 Then that LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh; his days shall be 120 years. (Genesis 6)

Notice in Genesis 6:2 the phrase "daughters of man". They are distinguished from "the sons of God". While there have been many interpretations of this verse, the idea here is that there were two types of people in those days. There were those who were called of the Lord and chose to walk in His purpose and there were also those who chose to walk in the ways of man.

What does this have to do with Genesis 11:5? The fact that the verse mentions that the "sons of man" were responsible for the building of this city and tower may indicate that there were others who had chosen not to be part of this. God has always had a people who have been faithful to Him. In fact, immediately following this account of the Tower of Babel and the dispersion of the people from Shinar, we have the record of the descendants of Shem who would ultimately be the father of Abraham and the children of God. The judgement of God for this act of rebellion would ultimately separate those who were true to Him from those who wanted to make a name for themselves.

If this is true, we need to understand that even among those who had been delivered from the flood, there were those who did not truly belong to God. These individuals had experienced the work of God in their lives but they were not ready to commit themselves to Him and His purpose. God works in many lives but not all those in whom He works are truly His children.

Some time ago when I lived on the Island of Reunion in the Indian Ocean, I was responsible for some Bible correspondence courses. As I was correcting one lesson a young lady had sent in, there was a question about how you could be sure that you were a child of God. The young lady responded by saying, "I know that I am a child of God because a few years ago I was sick and when I prayed the

Lord healed me." Here was a lady who believed that she was a true believer because the Lord had touched her body and healed it. The Lord touched and healed many people in the Bible who never became His children. It is obvious here in Genesis 11:5 that even among those who were delivered from the flood were those who turned their back on the Lord God.

The day is coming when the Lord will come to see our work and judge our hearts. Those who truly belong to the Lord will understand this and live to please Him. There are many cities and towers we can build in our lifetime. Not all of those efforts are from God.

Here before us are a people who put their best effort into building a great city and tower that God had never called them to build. All our works will be inspected by a holy and pure God who will judge their quality and worthiness. Are we doing what He has called us to do or are we building cities and towers to make a name for ourselves?

For Consideration:

- What does the writer of Genesis mean when he said that the Lord came down to see the city and the tower?
- How does understanding that our works will be judged by God change how we do things?
- Is it possible to be involved in "good" activities but not be doing what God has called us to do?

- How easy it is to seek the approval of people and not God? Who will be our ultimate judge?
- Can we experience the touch of God in some way and still not be a true believer? Explain.
- How do you think your life and work will stand the judgement of God? Are you confident that you are walking in obedience to Him and His call on your life?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to live your life with the reality that you will one day stand before Him.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to walk in absolute obedience to Him and His purpose for your life.
- Ask God to show you if there are strongholds and towers in your life that need to be pulled down.
- Ask God to set you free from a need to seek the approval of other people.
- Thank the Lord that He is willing to lead and guide you fully into His purpose for your life.

NOTHING WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE

And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. (Genesis 11:6)

The construction of the city and the tower had begun. In the last verse, we saw how the Lord came down to see what the people had done. Verse 6, tells us that the Lord's response to what He saw is three-fold. Let's examine this response.

They are one People

The first response of the Lord is, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language." On a very basic level, the statement is quite easy to understand. The people constructing the city and the tower all came from the same family, spoke the same language and had the same

cultural background and way of thinking. This response of the Lord, however, seems to go much deeper than this.

What the Lord saw that day was a unified people. They were one in their effort to build this city and tower. They were one in their desire to make a name for themselves. They were one in their commitment not to be scattered across the surface of the earth. Their one language and culture enabled them to communicate and stand fast in this common vision.

God also heard their words. He heard how they encouraged each other in a purpose that did not come from Him. He heard their proud boasts. What He heard that day grieved His heart. He saw the city and heard the reflections of their heart. They were of one mind in this effort to build a city and a name for themselves. God's heart was grieved.

When God looked at the people who lived on the earth before the flood, He described them as a wicked people whose thoughts and intentions were continually evil:

5 The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Genesis 6).

The flood had not changed the heart of man. Their thoughts and imaginations were still evil. Their words reflected the same rebellious pride that existed in the hearts of those who had perished in the flood.

This is Only the Beginning of What They Will Do

Notice the second statement of God in verse 6. "This is only the beginning of what they will do." God saw the attitude of their hearts that day. He also saw beyond the walls of the buildings that were being erected. He saw what would happen as they continued in this unified rebellion and pride. "This is only the beginning of what they will do," He said. These seeds of pride and rebellion would not take long to germinate and produce even more evil fruit.

If left unchecked, these people would continue in their proud adventures. The city and tower would prove to them that they were a strong and unified people. This would ignite in them a passion for power, influence, self-centredness, and lust. Their concern would be for themselves and not for God and His purpose. God would take second place in their pursuit of glory and power.

It is clear from the context of verse 6 that the focus of the people's efforts was to make a name for themselves. God was not in the minds of the people of that day. Behind this, was Satan. Listen to what the devil told Eve in the Garden of Eden when he tempted her with the fruit of the forbidden tree:

4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3)

Imagine being like God! The temptation of Satan here is to call into question the status of God. If we can be like God, then God is not very big. If we can be like God, then why would we listen to His counsel? If we can be like God, then why do we even need God? This seems to be the logic

behind Satan's efforts in the Garden of Eden. He is trying to turn Eve's attention away from God and her need of Him and His counsel.

As the people of Shinar built that tower, they were making a name for themselves. They were proving to themselves and to the world that they were a powerful, intelligent and capable people. This is exactly where Satan wanted them. He would not stop at this, however. He would continue to press forward with this evil intention until they saw no need for God, whatsoever.

The achievement of the people of Shinar was quite remarkable. They had unified themselves under this one language and purpose. They were advancing in that purpose and would certainly make a name for themselves. They would not stop there, however. They would continue in their proud boasts and do even greater things. In the process, however, they would push God out of their lives and thoughts.

Nothing They Propose Will Now be impossible

The third statement of God in verse 6 is this: "Nothing they propose will now be impossible." This is a remarkable statement from God. Let's consider it in this context.

God has given us, as human beings, an incredible gift of wisdom, intelligence, and skill. In many ways, we reflect Him in these wonderful gifts. In my lifetime, I have been amazed at how much we are able to accomplish. Consider for a moment the way we can send messages through the air by email from one corner of the world to the other. The advances in technology are almost impossible to believe. We stand amazed at what we can do as human beings.

What is the limit to our scientific achievements? The wisdom and skill God has given us are baffling. Things thought impossible many years ago are ordinary today. Where is all this leading? What is within the range of possibility today? Is there anything we cannot achieve? Are we too only seeing the beginning of what we can do? These are the questions being asked in our day. While what is possible has changed since the Tower of Babel, the attitude of the heart remains the same.

As wonderful as these advancements are, we need to examine them in light of what is happening in Genesis 6. There is nothing wrong with our scientific advancement in itself. God has placed an incredible potential before us. I am sure He smiles when we discover how yet another piece of the jigsaw puzzle of life fits together. Our great advances do not threaten God. He remains God despite our growing achievements. No matter how much we achieve, we will always be dependent upon Him for everything.

As the people of Shinar pressed forward in their efforts to build a great city and a tower, the likes of which the world had never seen, God says, "This is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing they propose to do will be impossible for them." These are not the words of a God who feels insecure and threatened by the wisdom and skill of man. They are, however, the words of a grieving God who understood human nature. He understood how far they would continue in their rebellion against Him. He understood that this power they had been given would go to their heads and ultimately lead them away from Him and His purpose for their lives.

We see this today in the mind of the unbeliever who denies God and turns to science and education. We see this in the hearts of gifted servants of God who turn their focus from God to their gifts and to making a name for themselves. How easy it is to worship the gifts rather than the Giver. How tempting it is for us to trust in our skills and not in the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Satan's desire in tempting Eve was to get her to feel that she could become like God and ultimately would not need God or His wisdom. He has not changed his ways since the Garden of Eden. Satan continues to show us how much we can achieve in our own wisdom and skill. He does so to remove our sense of need for God.

The strength and wisdom God provides can be used against Him and His purpose. We can use the gifts He has given for the purpose of making a name for ourselves. We can use our preaching skills to make people think highly of our ability. We can be selfish or even rebellious in the use of our God-given skills and talents. We can build great churches or ministries in this strength and not be in tune with God and His purpose. God has given to us incredible potential, skill, and wisdom. That potential, however, has the ability to take away the sense of our need. Instead of enabling us to accomplish the purpose of God for our lives, these strengths have the potential of drawing us away from Him. God has given us the potential for achieving great things. Not all those achievements, however, are from Him and in His purpose. How important it is that we submit this wisdom and skill to Him and learn to walk in obedience. We will consider this more fully in the next chapter.

For Consideration:

 How important is unity in the church today? Is it possible to be unified in the wrong purpose?

- How do our words reflect the attitude of our heart?
- How can our achievements remove our sense of need for God?
- Is God threatened by our human achievements?
- Is success an indication of the blessing of God?
 Can we be successful in something that is not God's purpose for our lives?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you the grace to unite with other believers in those things that are dear to His heart.
 Ask God to bring this sense of unity to your church.
- Ask God to help you to use the talents and gifts He
 has given you for His purpose. Ask Him to forgive
 you for times you have not been obedient or faithful
 in how you have used your gifts.
- Thank the Lord that He is bigger than all our achievements and human accomplishments.

CONFUSION OF LANGUAGE

7 Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech.

In the last verse, we saw the response of the Lord to the work of the people who were determined to settle in Shinar. The Lord knew that this was only the beginning of what they would do in rebellion against Him and His purpose. He had given them tremendous wisdom and skill and they were using that now in disregard for His purpose.

Let's take a moment to remind ourselves of the context. The people who survived the flood were determined to make a name for themselves. They wanted to build a great city with a tower that reached up into the heavens. This tower was to be built in such a way that it demonstrated their skill and wisdom. Those who saw it would be amazed. The best of human wisdom and skill would go into this tower. It would be a monument to the wisdom of human-kind.

In our day, the towers we build may be more sophisticated. They too can be a monument to human achievement and wisdom. As I travel across the island on which I live I notice the many cell towers that dot the landscape. I am amazed at what is happening through those simple towers. How many conversations between people are running through those towers? How many text messages are being sent? News of the birth of a new child or the death of a loved one is communicated using these towers. The messages that pass through the air and strike those towers are relayed to the far corners of the earth. I do not understand how this works and am amazed that the skill and scientific knowledge that has made this possible. In the age in which we live, we have seen incredible advances in technology and science. We sometimes begin to wonder if there is anything that is impossible for us given the time.

There is nothing wrong with using the wisdom and talents the Lord has given us. What we fail to understand, however, in the midst of all our achievements is just how dependent we are on the Lord God for the wisdom and understanding we need for these things to take place. We dare not take this for granted.

There is an important story about King Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel. Let's take a moment to consider what it says and how it relates to Genesis 11:7.

28 All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. 29 At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" 31 While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, 32 and you shall be driven from among men,

and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will." 33 Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws. (Daniel 4)

King Nebuchadnezzar was a great and mighty king. As he looked over his royal kingdom he boasted of his great achievement. As his heart was lifted up in pride, he heard a voice from heaven speaking to him. That voice told him that all he had achieved would be stripped from him and he would be driven into the fields to live like a wild beast.

In the New Testament, we have the record of the final days of King Herod.

21 On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them, 22 And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" 23 Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. (Acts 12)

In these two passages, we have two very important government officials who through their skill and wisdom had achieved great things. Both of them, however, failed to recognise the source of their wisdom and lost everything as a result.

In Genesis 11:7, the people living in Shinar demonstrated their great skill and accomplishments. As significant as those achievements were, they failed to recognise and honour the source of their ability. Like Nebuchadnezzar and Herod, the results would be devastating.

Notice in verse 7 that the Lord again determined to go down to visit the people in Shinar. The first time the Lord came to see the city and the tower they were building. This time He determined to confuse their language so that they would not understand each other's words and speech.

We are not told how the Lord confused the language of the people but we can only imagine the result. Those people who were unified in language, culture, and purpose now could no longer understand each other. When they spoke to each other now, they were speaking in unrecognized sounds. This would have been totally confusing.

This was something totally unexpected. One day they were building a great city and tower to make a name for themselves and the next they were in absolute confusion and division. This was not something they had any control over. This was something much bigger than themselves. In an instant, all their plans for a city and tower to keep themselves from spreading over the surface of the earth made no sense. Their vision was shattered in the blink of an eye. They came to understand that they were not a big as they thought they were. They began to understand just how dependant on God they really were.

How helpless these proud individuals must have felt in the days following the confusion of their language. All their proud boasts amounted to nothing. The confusion of language halted their plans. In light of the wonderful wisdom

and skills the Lord has given us, do we really understand our weakness?

The absolute longest any human being has ever lived without sleep is eleven days but by that time they were in a vegetative state. ² It is also estimated that death will occur if our body temperature drops to 21 degrees Celsius or 70 degrees Fahrenheit.³ Some people have been known to survive temperatures of 46.5 degrees Celsius (115 F) but brain damage and death usually occur before this.⁴

The air we breathe consists of about 21% oxygen. If the oxygen level in the air drops to 17% we experience impairment in our ability to function mentally. A drop to 14% causes extreme exhaustion. If the oxygen level in the air we breathe drops to 10% we will likely lose consciousness. No human being can survive when the percentage of oxygen drops below 6%. ⁵

What do these facts show us? They show us that if God reduced the oxygen content of the air we breathe by 4 percentage points our ability to think would be impaired and we would not be able to function at full capacity. If the temperature of this earth rose even a few degrees numerous deaths would occur. How dependent we are on the Lord

² http://www.livescience.com/34128-limits-human-survival.html

³http://www.livescience.com/34128-limits-human-survival.html

⁴ https://answers.yahoo.com/question/in-dex?qid=20111013170956AAgSLiw

⁵ http://classroom.synonym.com/minimum-oxygen-concentration-human-breathing-15546.html

God for all things. In Genesis 11, God simply confused the languages of the people and all their plans came to nothing. What would it take for all our plans to come to nothing?

With all our advances in technology and science, there are many things we are simply not in control of. Life will come to an end for each of us. Sickness, tragedy and many other factors contribute to the destruction of our plans. As gifted and as wise as we are, we are not in control of the circumstances of our lives. God remains in control. In an instant, all our achievements can be reduced to dust.

How dependent we are on the grace and mercy of the Lord God. He sustains all things. He is the source of life, strength, and wisdom. The people of Shinar took this for granted. They tasted the gifts and wisdom of God and believed that they were theirs to do with as they pleased. They forgot that God was the source of all they had and that they were accountable to Him. They lost sight of the grace and mercy of God that dispensed these gifts. They failed to see that what He gives He can also take away.

Genesis 11:7 is a reminder of the frailty of our human nature. We puff ourselves up believing that nothing is impossible for us. Indeed, the gifts of God are powerful tools. In an instant, however, the plans of man were destroyed. All his dreams lay shattered on the ground. The people of Shinar were humbled as they stood looking at each other unable to communicate. They realised that they were not in control of the affairs of the universe. There was a God in heaven who demanded their obedience and reverence.

Genesis 11 does not condemn the use of the wisdom, skill, and talents God gives. It does, however, put them into perspective. It warns us of the dangers of allowing those gifts to become gods in our lives. It warns us about the misuse

of the talents and wisdom God has given. Have we been faithful in the use of God's gifts? Have we been walking in obedience to Him in the use of these gifts? Have we been conscious of how every gift is from the hand of a gracious God who can give and take away? Has God given you a spiritual gift? Has He blessed you with a wonderful family and life? Has He provided for your needs? Realise that these are gifts from His hand. Accept what He has given with gratitude and thanksgiving. Commit yourself to use these gifts in a way that would always recognise God as their source and His purpose as the motivation behind their use.

For Consideration:

- What were the sins of Nebuchadnezzar and Herod? How did God humble them?
- What lesson did the confusion of language teach the people who had settled in Shinar?
- How dependent are we on God? Are we aware of that dependence? Is it possible to live without thinking about how dependent we are on God? How has the Lord shown you that you are dependent on Him?
- What should be our response to the gifts God gives us? Have you ever received a gift from God and used it in the wrong way? What was the result?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the way you have built "monuments to your greatness" in your life.
 Ask Him to keep you humble so that His glory is your greatest delight.
- Thank the Lord for the gifts and abilities He has given you today. Ask Him to give you the grace to use these for His glory and honour in your life.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the things He has given you. Recognise Him as the source of all good gifts in your life.
- Ask the Lord to help you to always remember just how much you need Him in all things.

REPOPULATING THE EARTH

8 So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth. (Genesis 11)

We saw in verse 7 that the Lord humbled the descendants of Noah by confounding their languages. The result of this confusion of languages was two-fold. First, the people were dispersed over the face of the earth. Second, they left off building the city. Let's take a moment to consider this.

Construction Stopped

Verse 8 tells us that the construction stopped. This city and tower had been the goal and dream of the inhabitants of Shinar. The problem, however, was that it was not the purpose of God for their lives. There are many things we can do in life but not all of them are in the purpose of God. This city and tower were not for God –it was to make a name

for themselves. It was not in the plan of God that the people settle down but that they spread out and repopulate the face of the earth. Their plans were not in line with God's.

There is an important lesson here for us. Just because we can do something doesn't mean we should. We have the ability to do many things but not all of these things are being done in obedience to the purpose of God. There are believers involved in ministries the Lord has never called them to. As the people of Shinar, they are busy building their city and tower but it is not God's purpose for them.

Notice what happened when the Lord descended and confused their language. All the work of construction stopped. God's blessing was not on this work. It would ultimately amount to nothing. All their efforts to make a name for themselves proved to be a waste of time and effort and accomplished nothing in the end. Only what is done in obedience will bring the blessing of God.

Obedience is not always easy, nor is it always glorious from the world's perspective. God had called the people of that day to spread out and repopulate the earth. This meant separating from their loved ones and setting out on their own. It was much more pleasant to be engaged in this exciting construction project. Imagine building a great city and a tower that would be the talk of the world! As exciting as that project was, it was not the purpose of God.

Obedience can be lonely and hard. It will take us into places we never expected to go. It will stretch us in ways we never wanted to be stretched. It may put us on the front line where the battle is heavy or it may send us to a dark corner where we find ourselves alone at a task, unnoticed by anyone.

What we need to understand, however, is that the blessing of God is on obedience —it is not on those things He has never called us to do. The abandoned city of Shinar and the unfinished tower remind us of the result of not walking in obedience. For a moment of glory, the people of Shinar sacrificed the blessing of God. All their self-motivated efforts amounted to nothing in the end because God was not in it. May God help us to see the picture of the deserted streets and unfinished buildings of Shinar. May God show us that this is the result of trusting in our own fleshly wisdom and surrendering to our own fleshly desires in ministry. All their efforts came to nothing.

Dispersed over the face of the earth

Notice a second detail from verse 8: "So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth." This was the purpose of God from the very beginning. Let's consider this briefly. After the flood, the Lord told Noah and his descendants to be fruitful and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1). As they migrated toward the east and found the plain of Shinar, the people made a conscious decision to disregard the command of God and chose instead to settle in this fertile valley. To keep from being scattered they commenced the construction of a city and tower. In doing so, they openly defied God and His purpose.

In verse 8, however, we see God moving forward with His purpose despite their disobedience. The confusion of their languages forced them to scatter over the face of the earth. God's purposes are being accomplished through rebellious individuals. What is amazing about this is that God's plan is not hindered by the rebellion and unfaithfulness of these people.

The thing we need to understand here is that God is greater than our unfaithfulness and failure. The future of this world is not dependant on our obedience but on God's grace. I am thankful that God is greater than my unfaithfulness. Imagine living with the belief that God's purposes could not advance unless I was perfectly faithful. To be sure, God wants to use us to accomplish His purposes on this earth. It is a tremendous privilege to be part of His plan. Be aware, however, that our shortcomings and failures will not destroy that purpose. God is bigger than my failures. His purpose advances despite my sin and shortcomings.

Not only is God greater than my failures but He is able to use my failures to accomplish His purpose. In Genesis 11, God confused the languages of the people and sent them on their way. These different languages created the diversity of cultures we see in our day. Consider the rejection of the Lord Jesus when He came to this earth. His rejection caused the Jewish leaders to call for His crucifixion. That death brought the forgiveness of my sin. God used the failure of the Jews to accept their Messiah, to bring salvation to the world.

How many lessons have we learned through the difficulties of life? How many times have we seen God pick us up after we have fallen, re-form the broken bits and use them to make us the people He wanted us to be? God is able to take our failures and shape them into blessings. He uses the lessons we learn in times of rebellion to give us a deeper passion for service and ministry. God can use even our failures to teach us and equip us for greater service.

This is not to say that we do not suffer for our disobedience. Because of disobedience, our lives can be forever changed. The people living in Shinar lost their city and tower. They lost their friends and loved ones. They could no longer speak to each other. There was a high price to pay for disobedience. God, however, continued to use them in the accomplishment of His purpose for the world.

There is something quite amazing about a God who can accomplish His purposes while giving us a free will. It is easy to see how someone can accomplish an objective by controlling every aspect of the project they are working on. It is not so easy to imagine a God who can allow us to fail, or even rebel against His plan and still accomplish His purpose. The rebellion in Shinar did not hinder God's plan for the repopulation of the earth —if anything it taught His people an important lesson and enhanced the diversity of cultures around the world. I praise this God for this wonderful sovereignty.

How thankful we need to be that God is working out His purpose. He is not threatened by our sin and rebellion. As we listen to the news of what is happening around the world we are often brought to despair. While He grieves over the rebellion in the hearts of His Creation, God's purpose will move forward. He will not be hindered by Satan and his efforts to thwart the progress of His kingdom. We can have great confidence in a God who is greater than sin and rebellion. We can trust a God whose purpose will not fail even if we fail.

In the midst of this terrible rebellion against the purpose of God we read the phrase, "the Lord confused the language of all the earth." That is all there was to it. He simply confused their language and His purpose went forward. The words, "let us go down and confuse their language," was all it took. Do we really think that the sin and rebellion of

our day will hinder God? Is His purpose limited to our ability and faithfulness? Is He not bigger than our greatest rebellion?

The region of Shinar would become known not for the great city and tower but for the confusion of language and the failure of a people who wanted to make a name for themselves. It would become known as the place where God's plan triumphed over human rebellion and sin.

For Consideration:

- What happened to the plan to build a great city and tower? Was the blessing of God on this project?
 Have you ever found yourself involved in a plan that was not blessed by God?
- What is the difference between being able to do something and being obedient in what you do? Are you walking in obedience?
- Were God's plans hindered by the disobedience of the people of Shinar? Have you ever seen how God has accomplished His purpose despite your failure?
- What was the cost of disobedience for the people of Babel? What cost have you had to pay for disobedience?
- What encouragement do you receive from the knowledge that God is bigger than all your failures and disobedience?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to see if you are walking in obedience to His purpose for your life.
- Thank the Lord that even when you have been unfaithful, He still is faithful. Thank Him that while you often fail, He does not fail.
- Ask God to give you the courage to walk in obedience, even if you do not understand His purpose.
 Ask Him to give you confidence that He will bless what He ordains for our life.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

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