

Sin From Noah to Nations at Tower of Babel

Genesis 9:18-11:9

Focus Verse

“But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.” – Genesis 11:5

- Noah’s Sin and Noah’s Sons – 9:18-10:32
- The Tower of Babel – 11:1-9
- Takeaways from Genesis 1-11

Engage

Our modern world boasts lessons learned from years of history and technological advancement. We live with gadgets that make work easier. High-speed travel and communication allow global cultures to intersect as never before. Humanitarian causes allow people to engage all around the world. All this progress raises an important question. Have we advanced – *really*? Racism, human slavery, domestic violence and many other societal ills continue to flare as violently as ever, despite our supposed progress. Modern ways seem to provide people new ways to express sin. **There is no human solution to the problem of sin.**

This lesson presents two disappointing examples of mankind’s inborn rebellion and fallen desires. Noah, God’s faithful servant, struggled with public sin, even after dramatic obedience. Still, the noblest people sin and fall short. Even Noah’s descendants combined resources and utilized the technology of their day to exalt their own cause in open rebellion against God. With so many disappointments, where do you find hope? Is your natural response to turn to God? **God sovereignly governs evil enemies and His faithful servants.** He rules in mercy to save many until He accomplishes all His purposes for this world.

Noah’s Sin and Noah’s Sons — Genesis 9:18-10:32

A New Beginning – 9:18-19

God offered Noah and his family a fresh start after the Flood. Noah offered sacrifices and worshipped God. God made a covenant with Noah, sealed with a sign of His faithfulness – the rainbow. **God promised He would fill the whole earth through Noah’s three sons.**

Noah’s Sin – 9:20-21

One proof of the Bible’s truthfulness is that it exposes the flaws and sins of its human heroes. The next scene in Noah’s story surprises us. Noah drank wine from his vineyard and became drunk to the point of being incapacitated. He lay naked in his tent. The Bible does not prohibit consumption of alcohol but does consistently call drunkenness a sin.¹ **Though Noah had obeyed God and experienced His faithfulness, he was not immune to temptation and sin.** Noah’s sin did not require a talking serpent; his sin rose from within his own sinful nature.

Because God is perfect, He can use imperfect people as a part of His plan. Christian leaders struggle with sin just like everyone else and can disappoint us. Sadly, public scandals involving pastors and well-known Christians occur too frequently. Faith never matures us past our need to depend on God’s mercy and to stay on guard against sin. **The spiritually mature maintain a healthy distrust of their sinful desires.** 1 Corinthians 10:12 offers a needed warning: “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” While God’s grace abounds, believers remain vulnerable to sin. Are you openly aware of things that cause you temptation?

Noah’s Sons – 9:22-10:32

Noah’s three sons react to his sin – 9:22-23

The reaction of Noah’s three sons confirms mankind’s ongoing struggle with evil desires and sin. God said, “... every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.”² Ham saw his

father's nakedness, and rather than protect him, he told his two brothers. Shem and Japheth chose the honorable response of refusing to speak of their father's embarrassing exposure. They entered the tent backwards to avoid dishonoring Noah and covered his nakedness. They illustrated the truth that "love does not delight in evil"³

What a lesson for today! Our culture publicizes and even delights in the ridicule and ruin of others. Both unintentional and deliberate sin are found entertaining. In Christian culture, we can redefine gossip as prayer requests. How do you react when you hear of someone's sin or exposed weakness? Do you assume right motives when someone makes a mistake? The sins of others can make us feel smug and superior if we do not honestly assess our own weakness. **Only God's grace keeps you from sin.** Do you often overestimate your goodness and underestimate your capacity to sin? When you understand the grace God extends to you, do you freely offer grace to others?

Noah prophesies regarding his three sons – 9:24-29

Noah awoke from his drunken state to discover the disrespectful response of his youngest son. As further evidence that God uses broken people, Noah spoke to summarize the destiny of the future nations rising from his three sons. He revealed the moral and spiritual history only God could know. Genesis 10 adds further details regarding these nations. God's wisdom in predictive prophecy is undeniable. **God not only knows the future; His sovereignty guarantees the power and authority to accomplish His determined will.** The future rests firmly in God's grip. This truth gives us hope as we, like Noah, simultaneously struggle with personal sin and experience His grace and redemption.

Canaan

Noah used "cursed" as a prophetic word, not an indication that God endorses hatred, harm or persecution. **Canaan rejected God and placed those who came after him in the path of disaster.** Centuries later, the godlessness of the Canaanites reached its peak. Their defiant sin and perversion of God's ways led to their conquest by Israel, descendants of Shem. The path of this nation did not prevent God's grace from saving Rahab, a Canaanite woman who trusted God. She became a part of God's covenant people, interwoven into the family line of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴ God's grace permeates even the damage sin inflicts.

Shem

Noah praised the Lord, the God of Shem. **Shem and his offspring would be a nation marked by their walk with God.** Shem's descendants, the Semites, became the nation of Israel through Abraham and his sons. God used Shem's people to write and preserve most of the books of Scripture. Jesus Christ, the

promised Messiah, was born through the human line of Shem. No wonder Noah opened his mouth in praise! His inspired burst of prophetic thanksgiving foreshadows all the praise that will rise to God and the Lord Jesus Christ for eternity. Jesus Christ came through the lineage of Shem as a promised blessing for all nations.

Japheth

Japheth's blessing can be translated from Hebrew as "May God expand Japheth, and he shall live in the tents of Shem." The original audience understood that to live in a person's tent implied sharing hospitality and blessings. **Throughout history, Japheth's nations have generally prospered through association with the nation of Shem.**

Noah's prophecy elevates the spiritual heritage of anyone who comes to God through Jesus Christ, a descendant of Shem. Through Jesus' sacrifice, Jewish believers unite with believers from every nation and background as "the household of God."⁵ We share the blessings of Shem's nation as we live spiritually "in the tents of Shem," in fellowship with Christ.

God orchestrates human history – Genesis 10

Chapter 10 follows Noah's prophecy to explain the origins of 70 nations all over the world.

This Table of Nations documents the scattering of people after the Tower of Babel in Chapter 11. God commanded Noah's family to multiply and fill the earth, and they did, despite their rebellion. Human history reflects the plan and purposes of God.

Moses' original audience, the Israelites, found these nations quite familiar. Their history incorporated these details. They escaped slavery under the Egyptians shortly before Moses wrote this account. They passed through many of these nations to arrive in Canaan, the promised land. **The nations listed were divided linguistically and geographically** (10:5, 20, 31). Other biblical prophecies, such as Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation, record symbolic meaning and geographical locations using the ancient names in this list.

Sons of Japheth – 10:2-5

They spread east and west to form the Indo-European nations including:

- **Gomer** – Settled north in relation to Israel, likely modern-day eastern Turkey (Ezekiel 38:6)
- **Magog** – with Tubal and Meshek, perhaps the area of the Scythians in modern day Turkey and south-central Russia (Ezekiel 27:13; 32:26; 38)
- **Madai** – the Medes (2 Kings 17:6; Isaiah 21:2)
- **Javan** – the Greeks (Isaiah 66:19; Daniel 8:21; 10:20)

Sons of Ham – 10:6-20

They spread across the Middle East and parts of Africa including:

- **Canaan** – the Canaanites

- **Sidon** – from Canaan, a Phoenician city still present in Lebanon
- **Jebusites** – from Canaan, occupied Jerusalem before David's conquest
- **Put** – the Libyans
- **Egypt** – sometimes translated with the Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mizraim*; gave rise to many nations
- **Philistines** – from Egypt, seafaring people on the Mediterranean coast of Canaan and Israel's great enemy
- **Cush** – the Ethiopians
- **Sheba** – from Cush, Southern Arabia
- **Babylonians and Assyrians** – Israel's fiercest enemies, founded by Nimrod, son of Cush.

This account singles out Nimrod, who is repeatedly described as “mighty.” His acts earn him a cultural saying, “Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD” (10:9). The combined terms warrior and

hunter paired with kingdom expansion lend support to the theory that Nimrod founded a military state by force. This would mean he was a hunter of men in defiance of God's commands about the sacredness of human life. These verses suggest he might have led the people at the Tower of Babel (11:9). He may have founded his empire after God confused their language. The mighty cities listed that he founded are in present-day Iraq.

Sons of Shem – 10:21-32

The Arabian tribes through Abraham, the Israelites, Ishmaelites, Midianites and Edomites include:

- **Eber** – the name from which the word *Hebrew* likely originated.
- **Elam** – or Susiana, whose capital was Susa (Shushan) (Nehemiah 1:1; Esther 2:8; 3:15)
- **Uz** – Job lived in Uz, likely before Abraham's time (Genesis 36:28; Job 1:1; 42:16)
- **Peleg** – in his days “the earth was divided,” perhaps referring to the scattering of Babel.

The Doctrine of the Sovereignty of God

Genesis 9-11 sets God's sovereignty on display through a seemingly tedious genealogy and the Table of Nations. These accounts showcase the expansion of the peoples of the world from Noah's three sons. The lists provide a bridge to the patriarch Abraham and nation of Israel. In His sovereignty, God prepared the world for the coming of Christ. He established a covenant with Abraham and Abraham's descendants. These chapters demonstrate that God controls and guides all history for His glory and our good.

God is sovereign. God determines the outcome of all things according to His own wise purposes. He has absolute authority and rule over His creation (1 Chronicles 29:11-12; Psalm 47:7). Nothing exists outside the scope of God's rule (Ephesians 1:11). He controls and guides all events for His glory and for believers' good (Romans 8:28-29). God governs human history. He does not merely adjust His plans to incorporate people's decisions but determines the course of mankind (Daniel 4:34-35; Acts 2:23; 17:24-27). He calls the saved to Himself (Romans 8:29-30; Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:2).

God is also good. God fulfills His sovereign reign balancing every perfect facet of His character and will. Not only is God in control, everything He does accomplishes a good purpose that is ultimately beneficial. Believers need not rebel against His commands or demand their preferred outcomes. There is no cause to worry that God will be late or make a mistake. Because God is both sovereign and good, we need not fear failures as final or resent His discipline or redirection. God the Son, Jesus Christ, defeated evil, death and sin. His victory gives comfort and security for believers in trials, temptations and failures (Romans 8:31-39). When we understand who God is, we love and trust Him.

God is sovereign, whether we recognize it or not. When I do not believe God is sovereign over my life, I will flounder upon waves of insecurity and indecision. Anxiety will rule over and above the peace of God. Worry and dread will overwhelm me every time I watch the news or hear about our world's evils. I will strive to define truth on my own terms yet never find satisfaction. I will fear failure, doubting God is sovereignly working all things for good. I will fear the future, doubting God's wise control. And I will exhaust myself striving unsuccessfully to control every word, every relationship, every act and every outcome in life.

When I truly believe God is sovereign over my life, I am free not to worry. I realize I do not have enough power or control over my life to thwart the plans and purposes of God. I can take my fears and worries to God in prayer and confidently know His perfect and pleasing will prevails. Romans 8:31 states, **If the sovereign God of the universe is for me, who can be against me?** He is victorious. He rules everything. He has already determined the moment by moment details, the considerations and the circumstances of my life. By His Spirit, He conforms my will to His and weaves my life into His purposes. He alone is good.

The Tower of Babel – Genesis 11:1-9

Humans Reject God's Authority – 11:1-4

God commanded Noah's descendants to fill the earth. They spoke one language and migrated eastward until "they found a plain in Shinar." This area near the modern-day Persian Gulf is also called Babylon. **These people settled, unified and committed to build a city with a tower reaching heaven in defiance of God's command.**

Babel's cultural and technological advancement mirrors that of Cain's descendants in Genesis 4. They baked bricks, a seeming upgrade from the stone God created. They sought to reach heaven through their own inventions, efforts and methods. They replaced faith in God with faith in self, society and idols. This spirit that defined Babylonia's later history is witnessed in our world today. **Is progress that denies and defies God really progress at all?**

Human unity and organization should be desired and valued, if that unity aligns with God's purposes. Unfortunately, flawed humans often unite around causes that oppose God. Outwardly, such unity appears to provide strength, security, progress and success. **No permanent progress exists when God is denied His rightful place as the sovereign center of life.**

Adam and Eve sinned in the garden by seeking independence from God – the "freedom" to determine their own destiny. In Genesis 11, humanity organized to commit the same sin. We often do not recognize our more subtle attempts for personal autonomy and refusal to yield to our Creator. When we elevate our thoughts and will above God's, we build our own towers, which will also fall. **Human attempts to usurp authority that belongs only to God will fail, whether immediately or ultimately.** God's will and ways always prevail.

God Overrules Human Mutiny – 11:5-9

The godless confederacy at Babel did not escape the watchful eye of God. These first Babylonians denied God's authority as governor of the universe. At the right time and in the right way God intervened to stop escalation of the rebellion. The enemy always seeks to overthrow the plans of God. We see God's personal involvement through such phrases as, "The LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building" and "Come, let us go down." **God overruled their plans to accomplish His plans; His personal involvement in world affairs has not stopped.**

God confused their language, forcing these ancient peoples to fulfill His command to scatter and fill the earth. God can do whatever He needs to do to accomplish His sovereign will. In Genesis 11, He confused language to spread out a rebellious people and overrule sin. On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, He multiplied languages to spread the reach of the gospel and redeem sinners. God's purposes can never be thwarted by human opposition. One day, even those who refuse to bow to the Lord in this life will bow before Him.⁶

The default direction of humanity is rebellion against God. By dispersing the people of Babel, God protected the world at this time from being completely engulfed in wickedness, mercifully delaying His final judgment. **God sovereignly governs evil enemies and His faithful servants.** He works among rebels and in His faithful remnant. He moves all events to accomplish His determined will. He determines best how to display His full glory for people and creation.

Takeaways From Genesis 1-11

Chapters 1-11 represent the first major section of Genesis, covering thousands of years and multiple events that shaped the course of this world and its people. These foundational chapters provide the right outlook on God, human history and many other crucial issues. Review of some essential truths prepares us to move into chapters 12-50, the story of Abraham and God's people. At every point, God is the center of the story.

Truths About God

God reigns as the Sovereign Creator. God's amazing creation reveals enough about Him that every person, everywhere and in every age, stands without

excuse – accountable to Him. Everyone ever born knows enough about God's power and divine nature to worship Him.⁷ God personally related to the people He created, beginning with Adam and Eve. He raised up specific individuals and families to call on His name and carry forward His plan to send His Son as Savior. God preserves His revelation of Himself in the Bible to this day.

Truths About Humanity and Sin

Genesis stresses that God uniquely makes humans in His image. Each person finds their highest life purpose knowing and loving God. **God desires people to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.** When Adam

and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden, all humanity fell with them and inherited a sinful nature and the resulting penalty of death. The brokenness we experience in this world can be explained by our sinful nature that values satisfying self over glorifying God.

The depth of sin in people's hearts impacts not only individuals, but society. Cain's family line proudly embraced this sin nature without fear. All those who perished in the Flood and rejected God at the Tower of Babel rejected God's loving rule. **The greatest tragedy in human history is to reject fellowship with God.** The sin of Genesis 11 was not just individual, but corporate. By His grace, God began restoration in Genesis 12.

Truths About God's Judgment and Hope

Rejection of God's truth is unbelief, a root sin in the human heart. Sinners prefer self, darkness and

rebellion to the truth about God. **The reality of sin highlights the depth of God's mercy toward sinners.** God, in mercy, judges sin severely to turn the hearts of people back to Him. He desires all to repent and believe His message of salvation through Christ. When Adam and Eve first sinned, they faced God's just consequences, but also His promise of a remedy for sin.

Jesus Christ is God in all His glory. He came to earth to die for sinners, fulfilling God's plan to redeem fallen humanity. We glorify God when we live at peace with Him and allow His goodness and character to be reflected in us.⁸ **We can know God through the person and work of Jesus Christ.** He lovingly took sin's judgment upon Himself and preserves a remnant to offer eternal hope to the world. He enables all who will repent and believe to share in His love and glory.

Take to Heart

Hold Fast

Sin so firmly grips humanity that even obedient Christians struggle to please God all the time. After the Flood, sin and rebellion quickly reappeared. Noah was praised for his faith and obedience, but he and his family suffered sin's bitter consequences in daily life, continuing through later generations. Individual, family and societal sin brings consequences. God prevailed against mankind's organized and arrogant display of self-rule at the Tower of Babel. **Despite sin's consequences, God shows grace to sinners.**

Chapter 10 reveals God's hand in human history. From this time on and within His deliberate limits, God allowed Gentile nations to walk in their chosen ways.⁹ The rest of Genesis focuses on the line of Eber, from Shem, the ancestor of the Hebrews. The world's Savior and King, Jesus Christ, descends from this lineage.

The people and Tower of Babel illustrate the rebellion against God that grips individuals and society today. The same spirit of human arrogance still prevails. Despite boasts of societal advancement, racism, hunger, disease, terrorism and war continue. The perpetual quest for personal satisfaction and freedom intentionally ignores our God-given consciences and His image within us. What this world offers as freedom destroys and enslaves. Lack of gratitude for God's blessings focuses on what God owes us rather than what we owe Him as our Creator. People believe they can reach God their own way and ignore His commands and outstretched arm.¹⁰ But God, in His perfect Word, tells us otherwise.

The moral and spiritual choices made by individuals matter to God. Stories about human failure, especially in our heroes, disappoint and disturb us. Noah's temporary lapse may sadden us, but the depth of our own sinfulness should sadden us more. Unbelievers can sin freely, often unaware of their offense to God. Believers, who know and love God, also struggle with personal sin. **God's Spirit changes your desires and gives you power to obey.** You please God only in His strength, not your own. Does your ongoing battle with sin only discourage you or drive you to Jesus? This constant struggle with sin helps us remember how much we need Jesus.

God's sovereignty provides security and stability for us. God commanded people to spread out and fill the earth, and He intervened when they refused to do so. Human rebellion did not alter His plan. Do world events or your personal life sometimes feel a bit chaotic or random? Remember that by His power, God holds in orbit every planet in every solar system and every

electron in every atom. Rulers come and go at His command. Nations rise and fall according to His plan. Do you struggle to trust that God rules the planet and *your* world? Do you think your issues are too big for God to handle or too small to deserve His attention? **The God who controls history can handle your life.**

Self-effort plagues humanity. We wrongly think that trying harder, working longer or investing more takes us where we want to go. Certainly, God wants you to work with energy and passion for His glory. The Bible condemns laziness. But self-focus often distorts the pleasure God intended in your accomplishments. The people planning the Tower of Babel built a monument to human achievement. They stacked cutting-edge, man-made bricks to reach the heavens. Did they feel proud sitting in the shadow of their brick-and-mortar tower, unaware that the sun God created cast that shadow? Even Christians who understand that their works contribute nothing to salvation can define personal worth by what their minds grasp

and their hands accomplish. **Our little towers crumble before the greatness of our God.** What kind of monuments are you tempted to build? Where do you wrongly depend on yourself more than God? Right relationship with God infuses your work with worship to God's glory.

The people at Babel sought superficial unity but were dispersed, unable to communicate with one another. The believers at Pentecost experienced true unity and were dispersed to communicate the gospel around the world. Have you experienced the organic unity of true believers? Although our actual languages and backgrounds differ, those who know the Lord and His Word speak one language as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Believers have an inner unity stronger than any distinction or division. Believers unite through the Holy Spirit and in prayer, upholding one another as they intersect with cultures around the world. Where is God sending you to speak His message of reconciliation and redemption?

Check out these footnoted references for further study of God's Word in this week's lesson.

- 1: **Drunkenness:** Proverbs 23:29-35; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Peter 4:3
- 2: **Evil inclination:** Genesis 8:21
- 3: **No delight in evil:** 1 Corinthians 13:6
- 4: **Rahab:** Joshua 2; Joshua 6:17, 22-23; Matthew 1:5
- 5: **Household of God:** Ephesians 2:19-20
- 6: **Bow before Him:** Romans 14:11
- 7: **God's worth and wrath:** Romans 1:18-32
- 8: **Salt and light:** Matthew 5:13-16
- 9: **Gentile nations:** Acts 14:16-17; Romans 1:24, 26
- 10: **Outstretched arm:** Deuteronomy 9:29