

**Genesis 11:1-26**  
*The Tower of Babel*

This is our 20<sup>th</sup> message in the book of Genesis

- The first few chapters were very slow, covering a few verses at a time
- In more recent sermons, I have tried to cover as much as a chapter at a time

As with any book, if you don't understand the author's purpose at the outset, you will probably not understand much of the rest of the book

- That is the same way with the book of Genesis

I spent some extra time upfront helping us to see the power of God in creation

- I wanted us to understand God's original intent for humanity in the Garden of Eden
- I hoped to highlight the drastic effects that sin brought upon Adam and Eve as well as the rest of creation

So here are in chapter 11 of Genesis

- It seems as if humanity would have learned its lessons from the past
- Let's review some of these

**God created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden**

- A perfect environment
- They would eat from any tree, except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil
- The serpent deceived the woman who in turn gave some fruit to the man
- This one act of disobedience and rebellion plummeted them and the rest of humanity into a state of sinfulness
- God drove them from the Garden before they ate of the tree of life which would have caused them to live in their sinful condition forever
- This act of judgment was actually an act of grace

**Fast-forward to chapter four in the account of Cain and Abel**

- They both bring an offering to the Lord
- The Lord accepts Abel's offering but rejects Cain's
- This infuriates Cain who goes out and kills his brother
- Cain shifts the blame as if he isn't responsible for his actions
- God drives Cain from His presence to be a lifetime vagabond

**Then we come to chapter 6, one of the most unusual chapters in the entire Bible**

- Mankind continued to be sinful and corrupt
- In addition to this, some demons deliberately crossed over God-intended boundaries and cohabited with earthly women
- As a result of this, God had to take immediate action
- The Lord expressed sorrow that He had even created mankind
- He decided to blot out all of humanity from the face of the Earth
- Only one man – Noah – found favor in the eyes of the Lord
- So Noah and his family were spared from this worldwide judgment in the Flood

## Life immediately after the Flood was anything but normal

- The Earth was different in many ways
- The climate was different
- But one thing remained the same as before the Flood – sin
- Noah became drunk and uncovered himself inside his tent
- Noah's son, Ham, chose to dishonor his father by not covering him up
- Instead, he went out and told his two brothers about the situation
- When Noah woke up, Ham's actions bore consequences
- Noah desired that God would bring a curse on Ham's son, Canaan

Throughout all of this, God has showed Himself to be faithful

- Despite the continual displays of sin, God remains true to His Word
- He manifests extreme patience, longsuffering, mercy, and grace

Other than a common sinfulness inherited from Adam and Eve, the inhabitants of the Earth share something else in common

- They of the same family, descended from Noah

An amazing reality that we typically overlook is the power of communication

- All of the world spoke the same language with the same dialect
- Imagine the unifying effect this would have created for the inhabitants of the world

But once again, sin enters into the picture and distorts God's blessing

- What God intended for good, sinful mankind turned it into evil

This morning we will see yet another time where sin attempts to alter God's sovereign plan

- But God counteracts the feeble attempts of humanity

**Specifically, we will study two (2) important events in the Genesis 11 that will prepare us to understand God's overall purpose for humanity**

- **The Tower of Babel (11:1-9)**
- **The Genealogy of Shem (11:10-26)**

Let's read Genesis 11:1-26

### **I. The Tower of Babel (11:1-9)**

Last week we discussed the Table of Nations in Genesis 10

- What may seem like a boring list of 70 individuals is actually a critical passage in the context of the book of Genesis

As we discussed, this Table of Nations shows the diversity of the tribes of the Earth as they spread over the planet

- But what caused this?
- Why was this important enough to mention at this juncture?

The author of Genesis has chosen to deal with these events in a thematic, not chronological, order

- The Tower of Babel in chapter 11 actually *precedes* the Table of Nations in chapter 10
- The Tower of Babel provides the reason for the tribes going to the utter ends of the Earth

Regarding the Tower of Babel, we will discuss two contrasting personalities

- The human arrogance
- The Divine action

#### A. *The Human Arrogance (11:1-4)*

<sup>1</sup> Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words.

The chapter opens up with a statement about the similar language that was spoken by “the whole earth”

- Think of everyone in the world speaking the same language!
- Imagine how this would help businesses!

That was the reality for a while after the Flood

- Of course, we don’t know what language was originally spoken<sup>1</sup>

This big family of descendants enjoyed the privilege of communicating with one another

- This brought about great blessings

Mankind was initially gifted with language so that he could communicate with God<sup>2</sup>

- We see this in the Garden of Eden and Adam used to walk with God, thus communicating

But like any other gift from God, it can be abused

- And that is what we see here in chapter 11

<sup>2</sup> And it came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

As these descendants of Noah traveled east, they settled in “the land of Shinar”

- This was southern Mesopotamia, a very fertile area
- This would have been very suitable for living

Throughout the Genesis record, when someone moves toward the “east,” they are moving away from the land of blessing<sup>3</sup>

- Adam and Eve were driven to the east of the Garden
- Cain dwelt in a land eastward

This idea of settling down flies in the face of God’s original design for humanity

- Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it”
- Genesis 9:1, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth”

They were being fruitful and multiplying

- But they were not filling the Earth
- Instead, they were looking for a way to settle down in one location
  - o One **permanent** location

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Griffith-Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary*, 108.

<sup>2</sup> Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record*, 267.

<sup>3</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 2, 104.

In rebellion against God’s design, these inhabitants desired to settle down permanently

- Instead of waiting for God to provide a land – which He eventually would – they took matters into their own hands

<sup>3</sup> And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn *them* thoroughly.” And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar.

As this people settled into this new area of possibility, they began building projects

- Of course, you need something from which to construct these buildings

So they made bricks

- They couldn’t use stone since it was not readily available in this area
- So they made do with what was readily available

They quickly discovered that burning bricks would produce a stone-like quality that could be used for building

<sup>4</sup> And they said, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top *will reach into heaven*,

Once they figured out how to produce bricks, this people group decided to build a city with a tower

This isn’t the first instance of someone building a city

- Cain, after being rejected by God, “**went out from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.** <sup>17</sup> **And Cain had relations with his wife and she conceived, and gave birth to Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city Enoch, after the name of his son.” (4:16-17, emphasis mine)**

We have to understand that it wasn’t the building of a city that was a problem to the Lord

- It was the motives and reasons for building the city

Observe that God did not destroy the city<sup>4</sup>

- Rather, He divided the languages of the people

This “**tower**” was to be the focal point of the city

- It would be a symbol of their unity and strength<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the size of these towers was a testimony to the human efforts to reach into the heavens

It is similar to the ongoing issue of who can build the highest skyscraper<sup>6</sup>

- It used to be the Empire State Building at 1250 feet
- Then it was the Sears Tower
- Two years ago, a skyscraper was built in Taiwan that is 1667 feet

But the efforts of these who were building the city of Babel were doing so from a religious perspective

- But it was all manmade religion that can never satisfy God

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<sup>4</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 234.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, 269.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0001338.html>

The goal of reaching into heaven is a sign of spiritual pride

- It is a very similar attitude as Satan displayed
- We read of how he wanted to be like God in Isaiah 14, “**But you said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. <sup>14</sup> I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’ <sup>15</sup> Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit.**” (14:13-15, emphasis mine)

Satan was the mastermind behind the demonic cohabitation with earthly women in Genesis 6<sup>7</sup>

- It could very well be that Satan was the mastermind behind the building of this city
- It was another attempt for Satan to try to usurp God’s reign as Sovereign

### and let us make for ourselves a name;

As if we have not seen the arrogance of these people yet, they exclaim, “**let us make for ourselves a name**”

- They wanted to be remembered
- They wanted a reputation
- They wanted to be honored

There are three instances in verses three and four where we “hear” the people talking among themselves

- “**let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly**” (11:3a, emphasis mine)
- “**let us build for ourselves a city**” (11:4a, emphasis mine)
- “**let us make for ourselves a name**” (11:4b, emphasis mine)

Having a common language and common dialect allows them a tremendous privilege

- They can understand one another!

Notice that there is no mention of asking God for help

- It is all “**let us**” instead of “**help us, Lord**”

It is very clear that these humans are self-centered and determined to achieve something without the help of God<sup>8</sup>

- They wanted to be self-reliant

In Hebrew the word *shem* is our English word “name”

- These people knew that Shem was the chosen line for the Deliverer

So their desire to make a “**name**” – a Shem – for themselves was a man-made attempt at deliverance

- They refused to acknowledge God’s plan and purpose
- They would rather be rebel than submit

Is it any wonder that Nimrod’s kingdom began with Babel (10:10)?

- This rebellious, arrogant individual whose name means “to rebel” began his kingdom with Babel – the prototype of a godless, self-centered, individualistic society?

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<sup>7</sup> Morris, 264.

<sup>8</sup> Leon J. Wood, *A Shorter Commentary on Genesis*, 55.

Throughout the Scriptures, we are told to magnify the name of God

- He is the One who is to be worshipped, honored, and magnified
- He is the One who will be remembered

In desiring a name for themselves, those who were building the city of Babel were robbing God of His glory

- “I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images” (Isa 42:8)

lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”

The inhabitants of Babel were focused

- But they did have one fear
- They didn’t want to be separated

In God’s providence, their greatest fear became reality

- They would lose their common language
- This drove them to the farthest ends of the Earth

These inhabitants are displaying the twofold attitudes of pride and fear

- Pride – wanting to make their name great
- Fear – not wanting to be separated

This is the human arrogance that was displayed by these early settlers

- God could not allow this to continue
- God must take action
  - o *That is what we will discuss next*

### **B. The Divine Action (11:5-9)**

<sup>5</sup> And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built.

Throughout the book of Genesis, God has manifested a long-suffering in a number of situations

- He waited 100 years before bringing the Flood upon the entire world, for example

But here in Genesis 11, God takes decision action

- He must nip sin in the bud

The Text is rather comical as we view this from a human and a Divine perspective

- From a human perspective, they desired to build “a tower whose top will reach into heaven” (11:4)
- But from God’s perspective, He “came down to see the city”

The Text is highlighting the utter inability of mankind to reach God on his own efforts

- These earth-dwellers thought that they could build a tower that would reach to heaven – the very abode of God
- But no matter how high the humans would have built, God still have to come “down”

Mankind was attempting to go “up” in his sin, even to the heights of God

- God was coming “down” in judgment<sup>9</sup>

We also need to understand that God did not have to come down

- It is not as though He didn’t know what was happening

This is the same God of which Isaiah spoke, “I am God, and there is no other; *I am God, and there is no one like Me,* <sup>10</sup> declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (Isaiah 46:9b-10)

God has no shortage of information

- He has perfect knowledge of every detail of everything

The author is simply bringing out the point that God still has to come down if mankind desires to interact with Him

- There is no way that mankind can ever reach Him on his own initiative and efforts

“It is He who sits above the vault of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.” (Isa 40:22)

Did you notice the last part of verse 5?

- “the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which *the sons of men* had built”

To put it bluntly, God calls them earthlings

- What a humbling rebuke this must have been!

Here they were trying to reach the heights of heaven and God refers to them as mere earthlings – those of us who are bound to this Earth

- Gravity is a reminder that we can’t leave this planet on our own!

<sup>6</sup> And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.

We are allowed to listen as God talks among Himself

- A correct assessment of the situation is taken
- Then action must take place

God determines to put an end to this building before the city is even completed

- We know from verse 8 that the project was not completed

<sup>7</sup> Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.”

The action that God takes is not what we might think

- Perhaps we think that God should have toppled over the tower

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<sup>9</sup> Griffith Thomas, 109.

We have observed our children build towers of blocks only to see someone else come along and knock it over<sup>10</sup>

- But what do we tell our children?
- Start over, and you can build one higher and bigger

God is all-knowing

- He knows that merely knocking over a puny tower would not solve the problem
- Humanity would only come back with a bigger tower

No, the solution must be something that would totally eradicate the problem

- God would strike at their greatest strength – their unified communication

God says, “Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language”

- Now whether God implemented angels or not is not the main issue

The main issue is that God struck these people in a way that totally disabled and disoriented them

- He introduced a myriad of different languages

Imagine the frustration of a foreman who was trying to communicate with his workers<sup>11</sup>

- But there was no longer any common language
- His workers could not understand him

Imagine the frustration of a worker who had no clue of what his superiors wanted him to do

- Perhaps he thought that they were mocking him by their newfound tongue and dialect

We have to keep in mind that this Divine action was *immediate* and *swift*

- One second, everyone is speaking the same language
- The next second, multiple languages – that no one had ever heard – were being spoken

<sup>8</sup> So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city.

God prevented this city from being completed

- This half-built city stands as a reminder and memorial to the impotence of mankind<sup>12</sup>

*What began with thoughts of greatness could not be finished*

<sup>9</sup> Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth.

The name of this city was Babel

- The Hebrew word for Babel means “to confuse”

Our English word “babble” is very close to the name of this city

- To babble means to jabber, gibber, and talk nonsense

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<sup>10</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *NICOT, Genesis 1-17*, 355.

<sup>11</sup> Morris, 274.

<sup>12</sup> Derek Kidner, *Tyndale OT Commentaries, Genesis*, 110.

We oftentimes think of a baby or toddler babbling

- We think it cute
- But we don't understand what they are trying to say

That is very similar to what God did at this city

- "The name was called *Babel* because the Lord 'made a babble' of the language"<sup>13</sup>

If you take away a common language, that will certainly bring confusion

- Imagine a military campaign where no one understand the leader
- Imagine a political campaign where no one understand the issues
- Imagine sitting here in church listening to me in a language that no one could understand

When God brought about action, He "**confused the language of the whole earth**"

- Here we are a few thousand years later
- *I would say that God did a good job, didn't He?*

Certainly small groups shared common language

- Naturally, these groups would stay together since they could understand one another
- Most likely, there was some intermarriage between these groups

Verse nine continues that as a result of this confusion of languages, "**from the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth**"

- This scattering is exactly what we saw last week in the Table of Nations

Yes, we have a common stock in Noah – we are all related

- But we differ in language and customs

As if sinful mankind has not learned by now, they attempt to glorify themselves

- Instead of honoring and glorifying the name of God, they attempt to make a name for themselves
- Thus, they set themselves up in direct opposition to God

Mark this down, beloved

- Whenever a religious system begins to glorify humanity, it won't be long before the living and true God is forgotten
- God is either everything or He is nothing

Those who desired to build Babel were seeking to make "self" #1

- In doing this, they were dishonoring God and robbing Him of the glory that He demands and deserves

In reality, God fulfills one of the goals of these prideful individuals

- They said, "**let us make for ourselves a name**"

God allowed their name to be well-known and remembered

- Babel – confusion, disorientation, perplexity, uncertainty

The name of their city would always be one of shame

- Not exactly what they intended!

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<sup>13</sup> Ross, 236.

Babel – or Babylon – came to be identified for those who stood in opposition to God

- Those who would act independently of God
- Those who would rather rebel against the Sovereign than submit to His Word

In each previous judgment in Genesis, God extended a provision of hope<sup>14</sup>

- With Adam and Eve, God clothed them with animal skin
- With Cain, God gave him a protective sign
- With Noah and his family, God gave the rainbow as a sign of His covenant

But we are left with confusion of languages and people scattering over the known world

The website for New Tribes Mission tells me that there are 7000 ethnic groups in the world<sup>15</sup>

- Guess how many of those have never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ?
- 3000!

Nearly half of the ethnic groups of the world have never heard the Gospel

- Because of the pride and self-sufficiency of the builders of Babel, we speak different languages

This is why we must be a part of missions

- I am praying that we can be challenged to give more to missions
- I pray that we can send individuals on missions trips
- I pray that some of you may be moved of God to consider missions as a full-time vocation

We need to understand that the Gospel needs to be proclaimed to every tribe and nation

- Remember that song in the book of Revelation that we read during our time of Communion last week?
- **“Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation”** (Rev 5:9)

We can't personally go and proclaim the Gospel to every nation

- Because there are some tribes who don't even have a written language
- But we need to pray and ask God to move upon the hearts of His people to reach these people groups

Despite all of our differences in culture and language, the Gospel is the one thing that we all need

- We are all sons of Adam
- As such, we have sin in our hearts
- Our greatest need is not a common language
  - o Our greatest need is redemption & forgiveness from our sins

When the Church was birthed on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, something amazing happened as it relates to languages

- The Holy Spirit took the spoken Word and made it understandable to all the different nations present

God is still Sovereign, even over languages

- One day in the future, there will once again be one language that everyone can understand<sup>16</sup>
- The prophet Zephaniah spoke of this, **“For then I will give to the peoples purified lips, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD, to serve Him shoulder to shoulder.”** (3:9)

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<sup>14</sup> Ross, 242.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.ntm.org/about/>

<sup>16</sup> John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison*, 151.

You know, this must have been a real wake-up call for the nation of Israel<sup>17</sup>

- Seeing how God judges self-reliance, spiritual pride, and disobedience should have been more than enough to keep them on the straight and narrow

But as we know from Biblical history, the nation of Israel was not exempt from apostasy and idolatry

- Granted, they may not have attempted to build a tower to heaven
- But the seeds of rebellion were deeply planted in their hearts

If Israel wanted to be a blessed nation, she would have to be obedient

- Any nation that bristled with pride would be scattered

We know that Israel was divided into the northern and southern tribes

- Some years later, both areas were taken into captivity because of their sin

The New Testament repeats this principle of humility and pride

- Christ Himself taught, “**And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted**” (Mt 23:12)

The apostle James writes, “**God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble**” (4:6)

If we want to bask in the blessings of God, we need to be a humble people

- If we try to elevate ourselves, God will humble us
- But if we humble ourselves, God will exalt us in His timing

We have spent a bulk of our time on the Tower of Babel

- But I want us to discuss the descendants of Shem for a few minutes

## **II. The Descendants of Shem (11:10-26)**

Last week when we discussed the Table of Nations, we saw that it basically traces the descendants of the three sons of Noah

- Sons of Japheth (10:2-5)
- Sons of Ham (10:6-21)
- Sons of Shem (10:22-31)

So if we have already discussed the lineage of Shem, why does the human author repeat this information?

- Well there is a greater purpose for this and we will discover that this morning

We notice that in Genesis 11:10 we encounter the phrase, “**These are the records of the generations of Shem**”

- This is the familiar Hebrew word, *toledot*
- With this word, the author is signaling a new section of Genesis

So far we have seen four other uses of this

- 2:4a – “**This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created**”
- 5:1a – “**This is the book of the generations of Adam**”
- 6:9a – “**These are the records of the generations of Noah**”
- 10:1 – “**Now these are the records of the generations of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah; and sons were born to them after the flood.**”

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<sup>17</sup> Ross, 248.

- 11:10a – “*These are the records of the generations of Shem*”

We continue to focus on the Deliverer Seed who will come from the seed of Adam, the seed of Noah, the seed of Shem...*down the line*

- *The hope of a Deliverer is still alive*

This passage here in Genesis 11:10-26 marks a huge transition in the book of Genesis

- Beginning in Genesis 11:27, the book of Genesis will switch from primeval history to patriarchal history

What I mean by that is this

- From Genesis 1 to 11:26, Genesis has been concerned with the universal outlook on humanity
- From Genesis 11:27 to the end, a more individual approach is adopted

We will also notice that in Genesis 11 the ages are lesser than chapter 5<sup>18</sup>

- Before the Flood, men lived to be several hundred years old
- After the Flood, men are living half that long

Also, we see that men are able to have children at a much earlier age

- Before the Flood, men became fathers at the ages of 65 to 187
- After the Flood, the ages range between 29 to 35

If we compare the genealogies of chapter 10 with chapter 11, we see some similarities

- The first five generations of Shem are listed in the same order<sup>19</sup>

Compare these two chapters

Chapter 10	Chapter 11
Shem (21)	Shem (10)
Arpachshad (24)	Arpachshad (12)
Shelah (24)	Shelah (14)
Eber (24)	Eber (16)
Peleg & Joktan (25)	Peleg (18)
Traces Joktan – the non-elect seed	Traces Peleg – the elect seed

Chapter 10 traced the line of Shem down through Joktan

- Peleg was somewhat skipped over

This is because Genesis discusses the non-elect seed first

- In this case, it would have been Joktan
- That is why his family was traced first

Now here in chapter 11, Peleg is discussed

- He will be the line through which the Messiah will come
- Therefore, he is discussed last so that his descendants will be the transition to the next section of the book

<sup>18</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Genesis 1-15*, 250.

<sup>19</sup> Wood, 56.

There are two lines of descendants from Shem that divide in Eber<sup>20</sup>

- One line ends at Babylon
- Another line ends in the Promised Land

But chapter 11 doesn't merely build on chapter 10

- It really goes back to Genesis 5 which traces the Deliverer Seed from Adam through the three sons of Noah
- It makes sense that chapter 11 will pick up the record of Shem, the elect seed

What is important about this genealogy in chapter 11 is that it ends with reference to the elect seed

- Look at 11:26, “**And Terah lived seventy years, and became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran**”

One of the three brothers – Abram, Nahor, and Haran – would be the lineage through which the Deliverer would come

- Who would it be?
- We will discuss that next week

Here at CBC, we have a number of things that separate us

- Different cultures
- Different preferences
- Different languages that are spoken

But far and above all of those differences, we share several things in common

- We are humans made in the image and likeness of God
- We are sons of Adam – we are all interrelated as earthly family members

For many of us here this morning, our family ties extend even to the spiritual

- We realize our sinfulness and our need of redemption
- So we have asked God for forgiveness through His Son, Jesus Christ

The entire purpose of the book of Genesis is to trace this Redeemer

- To let us know which earthly families carried the hope of this future Hope

But let's not lose focus

- All of these details are great and beneficial to study

However, the question is, “Have you placed faith in this Redeemer?”

- Do you understand that you are a child of Adam?
- Do you realize that you are born separated from God because of your sinfulness?

This morning, I want to make it very clear that you will experience eternal and final separation from if you do not have redemption through Christ

- The inhabitants of Babel tried to build a city whose tower reached to the heavens
- That was their attempt to reach God

I don't know what your tower is this morning

- But no matter how much effort you put into building it, you will always fall short

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<sup>20</sup> Sailhamer, 103-04.

Place your trust in Christ this morning

- Experience the freedom of forgiveness

Let's pray...