

# Adult Teaching Resources

June 9, 2019



## Easter Season (April 21-June 2)

### Resurrection Realities

Acts 16:16-34 – “Doubled Deliverance”

## Pentecost Sunday (June 9)

Genesis 11:1-9 – “What Did You Say?”

## Season After Pentecost (June 16-November 24)

### Trinity Sunday

Romans 5:1-5 – “Imaginary Numbers”

### On the Road with Jesus

Luke 8:26-39 – “A Bad Day for Pigs”

Luke 9:51-62 – “A Hard Row to Hoe”

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# What Did You Say?

Genesis 11:1-9

## FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

### Bible Background

*“The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.” Genesis 11:5*

In the beginning, God created us, and we were all alike, and all was good. Then, God decided the world would be better if there were some differences among us.

Today, we explore the story of the Tower of Babel and how God’s people, who were all the same, began to speak different languages and word spread all over the Earth.

### Opening

After everyone arrives, ask your group to make a list of all the differences they can think of from within your class.

For example where does everyone live in your city or community?

What different neighborhoods do they come from?

Does anyone speak a different language are multiple languages?

In what city or states or countries were members of your class born?

What different states or countries have members of your class lived?

What are the ancestral backgrounds of members of your class?

What other questions can you think of that would point out the differences among your class?

Make a list on the board of all the differences in your small group. Then, discuss the differences.

What about those differences are good and enriching?

What about those differences are challenging?

In your opinion do the differences we all bring to this class make for a stronger class or a weaker class? Explain.

## Reading the Bible

What did the whole earth have at this time? (One language in the same words)

Where did they find a plain to settle? (In the land of Shinar)

What did they make with the bricks? (A city, and a tower)

Why? (To make a name for ourselves; and not to be scattered upon the face of the whole Earth)

How did God find out about what they had done? (The Lord came down to see the city and the tower)

What did God say? (This is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them)

What did God do? (Went down, confused their language, so that they would not understand one another's speech, scattered them over the face of the Earth)

What was the place called? (Babel)

## Making Connections

What languages do you speak? How did you learn them? How often do you use them? How do you feel when you hear others talking in a different language?

When have you built or created something with your hands? How did you feel during the process? Describe your emotions when you finished.

When do you think something too big, or too much? How do you know when it is just right?

Our Lesson Writer says, "The story points to a time when the people decided to build both a city and a tower so tall that its top would reach the heavens. The effort, they believed, would strengthen their unity and civic pride: they wanted to "make a name for ourselves, otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth" (v. 4)." What do you think is the best way to make a name for ourselves today?

When has God come down to you? What was happening in your life? How do you know it was God? What happened?

Our Lesson Writer says, "When people feel no need for God, they no longer rely on divine revelation as a guide for behavior: they do what they like with what power they have." When have you felt no need for God? What did you do? What happened?

Has God ever entered into your plans and mixed them up in a way that got you back on track with God? Share your story.

## So What?

Keep your class in a large group. Share with your group the Lesson Writer's two lessons from the story:

1. The danger of living without reference to God.
2. The danger of becoming insular and isolationist.

Open the floor for discussion about these two lessons.

What do you think each lesson means?

What other lessons do you find in a story?

How do you apply those lessons to your faith journey?

Do you find anything bad about God in this story?

Where is the good in this story?

How does this story speak to current world challenges?

## The Challenge

This week, research and learn a foreign word for hello, and use it to greet someone of a different background in your community. How do they respond to hearing you speak in their native tongue? How does this simple gesture, build community?

## Prayer

*Loving God, thank you for creating us all in your image, and thank you for the differences you've given each of us. Help us to celebrate our differences, knowing we are all your children. Amen.*

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**Cycles of good and bad**—The first eleven chapters of Genesis, known as the “Primeval History” or Israel’s account of its “Pre-History” or “Proto-History,” includes several cycles in which God does something good, after which humans respond with something bad, leading to divine judgment.

The stories of God’s good creation in chapters 1-2 are followed by the account of how the inhabitants of Eden sought more than what was allowed, eating from the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” and then facing various judgments, including expulsion from the garden (chapter 3).

God blesses Adam and Eve with children, but Cain grows jealous of his brother Abel and kills him in a fit of rage, incurring a judgment in which he was sent away from his family to wander the earth, where the author assumes there were other people (chapter 4).

As humankind grows in number (chapter 5), they also grow in wickedness, so that by chapter 6 we read that “every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (6:5). Grieved over humanity’s depravity, God sent a flood, preserving only Noah and his immediate family (chapters 7-8), then renewing the covenant of divine relationship with them (chapter 9).

Noah’s sons gave rise to many descendants who appear to voluntarily spread out to inhabit all the world known to the ancient Hebrews, building their own cities and speaking different languages (chapter 10). An alternate story then portrays humans as stubbornly staying in one place for fear that becoming scattered would deplete their strength, leading God to respond by confusing their languages and dispersing them across the earth (chapter 11).

**Old stories**—The Tower of Babel story preserves a very ancient memory about where civilization began in the Middle East. Archaeologists and anthropologists have demonstrated how, 10 to 15 thousand years ago, peoples who had once lived as hunter-gatherers on the slopes of the Zagros Mountains in what is now western Iran moved down to the plains and learned to cultivate seed crops. The fertile valleys surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers offered an ideal place to live year-round as sedentary, rather than nomadic people.

Our text calls it the area “the plain of Shinar,” an alternate term for the area later populated by the Babylonians.

The flat lands offered no caves for protection, and little stone with which to build, but people soon learned to form blocks from the abundant mud and build crude huts of sun-dried mud bricks. As technology advanced, they learned to fire the bricks in a kiln to

## Digging Deeper *continued*

make them harder, and even to color them with various glazes.

Tar pits, signs of the area's oil riches, contained a naturally occurring type of asphalt they could use to bond the bricks together to form larger and more intricate buildings.

The building techniques described in the story of the Tower of Babel reflect what we find described in ancient cuneiform tablets, and what has been found in archaeological digs. The story is not just about a tower: the people set out to build "a city and a tower."

As they mastered different facets of ceramic technology and architectural mastery to go with developing economic and political systems of control, they created the first truly urban civilization.

**Structure**—The structure of the story of the Tower of Babel can be examined in a fairly simple or a more complex way.

Here's a simple way to outline the text:

*A united humanity decides to build a single large city and a tower (vv. 1-4)*

*God takes note of what the people are doing (v. 5)*

*God confuses the people's languages and disperses them across the earth (vv. 6-9)*

But when we look at the text more closely, we can discover an elaborate chiasmic construction or "palistrophe" marked by similar words and contrasting actions, with God's observation of human actions as the central element. The structure below is adapted from George Wenham:

A "The whole earth had one language" (v 1)

B the people "settled there" (v 2)

C "they said to one another" (v 3)

D "Come let us make bricks" (v 3)

E "let us build for ourselves" (v 4)

F "a city and a tower"

G "the LORD came down . . ." (v 5)

F1 God saw "the city and the tower"

E1 "which mankind had built"

D1 "come... let us mix their language" (v 7)

C1 "so they will not understand one another's speech"

B1 God "scattered them abroad from there" (v 8)

A1 "the LORD confused the language of all the earth" (v 9)

(Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1 of Word Biblical Commentary [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 235.)

## Digging Deeper *continued*

**Names**—The people of Babel wanted to “make a name” for themselves. Take note that the Hebrew word for “name” is *shem*. That may have something to do with the placement of the story, because it is both preceded and followed by lengthy genealogical records of Noah’s son whose name was Shem (10:21-31, 11: 10-30), from whom Abraham and thus the Israelites were thought to be descended. The modern words “Semite” and “Semitic” are derived from the name “Shem,” and thus reflects the same tradition.

**Sources**—The commandments for humankind to “fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28, 9:1, 7) are all from the Priestly source, while the Tower of Babel story comes from the Yahwist, whose work was much earlier. It was the Priestly writer who edited the final version of the growing Pentateuch, however, so later readers would have been familiar with the belief that God’s intent was for humankind to spread across all the earth.

**Stage towers**—Ancient stage towers, or ziggurats, were built on a very large scale, generally having the appearance of a giant square wedding cake, with each story a bit smaller than the last.



The image at left, from Google Earth shows the foundation trenches of the Etemenanki temple, which was later destroyed (both Assyrians and Persians claimed credit for its destruction). The site, once in the city of Babylon, is now in a wetland on the outskirts of Baghdad.

The picture below shows a reconstruction of the lower two stages of the great ziggurat of Ur, near modern-day Basra in southern Iraq.



**“Let us go down”**—The printed lesson notes that phrases like this, as in Genesis 1 (“Let us make man in our own image”), reflect a time when the Hebrews thought of God as sitting at the head of a divine council consisting of other supernatural beings. While neighboring peoples imagined a chief god ruling over lesser gods, the Hebrews pictured Yahweh presiding over an order of angelic beings that were also created by God and often called “sons of God” (see Job 1:6).

Some readers erroneously conclude that “Let us” implies the Trinity: that God the Father is speaking to God the pre-existent Son and God the Holy Spirit. While notions of the Trinity are entirely absent from the Hebrew Bible, another option is possible: some scholars believe the narrator’s use of plural verbs like “Let us go down” indicates a “plural of majesty,” similar to the “royal we” sometimes used by kings and queens. In a similar fashion, the name typically translated as “God” is from *’elohim*, the plural form of *’el*, the generic word meaning “god.”

## Digging Deeper *continued*

**Babel and babble**—Hebrew readers of the text can discern an abundance of intentional wordplay as several words including the consonants *n*, *b*, and *l* are used. Those consonants appear in the people’s desire to “make bricks” (*nilb<sup>e</sup>nah*) so they would have bricks (*halbēnah*) and “build for ourselves” (*nibneh-lānū*, vv. 3, 4) a city and tower. The same consonants appear in Yahweh’s desire to “mix up” (*nablah*) the languages (v. 7), so that they stopped “building” (*libnōt*) the city (v. 8). This is followed by the explanation that the city was called “Babel” (*babēl*) because Yahweh “confused” (*bālal*) the people’s languages (v. 9).

The etiology is inexact: both words use the consonants *b* and *l*, but the Akkadian word “Babel” does not derive from the Hebrew verb *bālal*: it means “Gate (*bab*) of god (*ēl*).” Hebrew has a similar compound: “Bethel” means “house of god.”

### Consider these questions for discussion –

1. The Tower of Babel story is almost certainly closer to legend than to an accurate historical account. It is certainly much different than the modern scientific consensus that humans first developed in Africa and migrated from there to gradually find their way across the earth. Should believers be troubled that a story of faith and a scientific hypothesis do not agree? In other words, can we learn important truths from a story that may not be historically accurate?
2. The lesson notes that we can’t listen to someone if we don’t understand their language, but we also cannot understand someone if we don’t carefully listen to what they are saying. Although it is not the author’s primary concern, what can we learn from the Tower of Babel story about the importance of communication?
3. The Tower of Babel story highlights the danger that comes when a people devote their primary energy to developing self-focused greatness. Does this call to mind any situations in our contemporary world?

# The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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## How should this story be interpreted?

The traditional interpretation of the Tower of Babel story, generally followed in the printed lesson, is basically one of crime and punishment: humans arrogantly sought to build a tower to the heavens and God judged their efforts to be potentially harmful, confusing their languages in order to short-circuit their plan and force them apart.

In recent years, a number of commentators have proposed an alternative interpretation, as reflected in Ralph Klein's exegetical perspective on the text from *Feasting on the Word (C)*.

"The story of Babel in fact deals with the with the origins of cultural difference, not with pride and punishment," he writes. The description of human actions does not expressly say that the building of a city and tower was done in defiance of God: the only motivation stated is that they "make a name" for themselves so they would not be scattered across the earth.

God's mixing of the people's language was still intended to disperse people throughout the earth, but not as punishment, according to this view: the story grows from Israel's understanding of Mesopotamia as the cradle of civilization and speaks to how people spread from there. We recall that Abraham's family reportedly came from Ur, the southernmost part of Babylon.

From this perspective, the story is not a negative commentary on either urbanization or empire building, but mainly points to Babylon as the starting point for the various cultures that make up the world known to the Hebrews.

Klein concludes:

"Cultural diversity is the consequence of God's design for the world, not the result of God's punishment of it. In this story the people desire uniformity, and God desires diversity. In a sense, both desires are good. Humans need identity and cultural solidarity, but it takes divine intervention and initiative to bring about the extravagant array of the world's cultures. The story embraces cultural solidarity and cultural difference and acknowledges the value of both. In the traditional understanding of this story, cultural difference is devalued and seen as a source of confusion and a curse upon the human race, even a judgment of God. The new, alternative understanding values difference highly and explains it as God's aspiration for the new world after the flood." (*Feasting on the Word, Year C*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3 of Accordance electronic ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], paragraphs 12380-12387.)