

# THE UN-BABBLING OF THE GOSPEL

Genesis 11:1-9

The Day of Pentecost (Series C)

June 9, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Old Testament lesson for the Day of Pentecost comes from *Genesis*, chapter 11, verses 1 through 9. It is on page 7 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Genesis 11, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. <sup>2</sup> And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." <sup>8</sup> So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. <sup>9</sup> 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.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

---

God wants to be known. He wants you to know him. He wants all the people of the world to know him. And when we say that God wants to be known, we don't simply mean that this is some wish of his. It's not like God is some lonely guy sitting up in heaven thinking to himself, *I wish all those people down there knew how great I am. I bet they'd really like me if they got to know me.* That's not what we mean. When we say that God wants to be known, we mean that it is his will to be known. It is God's good and gracious will that we would know him. And when it comes to matters of God's will, God does not sit idly back hoping it will happen. God is a God of action. He does things. He is not passive. He is not idle. When he wills something, he acts to make it happen.

And God wills to be known. It is his good and gracious will that we would know him, and he springs into action to make this happen. He does this, because it is good for us that we should know him.

---

So this sermon is not simply on the confusion of languages at Babel. It's more so on the relationship between the confusion of languages at Babel, and the un-confusion of languages on the Day of Pentecost. In many ways, God reverses what he did at Babel. The obvious connection is that he reverses the confusion of languages. At Babel he divided their languages, and in Jerusalem, on the Day of Pentecost, he overcame that division. But there's really much more to

## THE UN-BABBING OF THE GOSPEL (Genesis 11:1-9)

it. As we consider and compare both events, we will see how God was acting mercifully in both instances, and that he continues to be merciful today.

---

The problem at Babel was that the people refused to spread out on the earth. This goes back to creation in Genesis 1. The first command recorded in the Bible is, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (1:28). It’s also the first command given after the flood (8:17; 9:1), which is just a few chapters before the account of Babel. God gave Noah and his family the same command he gave Adam and Eve. “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (9:1). God wanted man to spread out on the earth. This is good, both for man and for the earth. The earth was made for man, and man for the earth.

As a side note, we get a biblical kind of environmentalism from this. Man was given charge to care for the earth. It is our responsibility, as God’s creatures, to watch over and care for what he has created. We avoid the one extreme of saying the earth would be better without us, and we avoid the other extreme of abusing the earth for our pleasure. In fact we stay far away from both extremes. We fill the earth, we use it, and we enjoy it, but we do so with the understanding that it belongs to our Creator, that he created it good, and that he still cares about it.

It is good for us, and it is good for the earth that we fill it and subdue it. So the problem in Genesis 11 is that, as people migrated after the flood, they found a place they liked and decided to stay there. This was an act of rebellion. They specifically declared that they would build this city and tower so that they would not be dispersed over the face of the earth (11:4). This was an act of rebellion against God. So God basically says, “Okay, if they won’t willingly obey my command to fill the earth, I will make it so they have to.”

And God intervened to confuse their language and spread them out over the face of the earth. But God’s intention was not necessarily to divide the people. God’s intention was simply to accomplish what he had commanded—to fill the earth—because this is ultimately good for man and for the earth. Had they not rebelled against God’s command, they would have kept the same language and preserved the unity of humanity. The division among them was the consequence of their rebellion.

---

The big problem here is really a First Commandment issue. That’s the one that says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7). Instead of being obedient to the one true God, they wanted to make a name for themselves. It was idolatry. It wasn’t the crass kind of idolatry where you build a statue of a false god and worship it. Instead, they were worshipping themselves. They wanted to make a name for themselves.

The idea was that they would make this great city, and they would accomplish great things for themselves. This is a subtler form of idolatry. To have a god simply means that you have something you fear, love, or trust more than anything else. Instead of trusting in the one true God, they would trust in their new society. And I suppose this can be a temptation for us as well, just as there are a great many things that compete with the one true God for our faith.

One of the interesting details of this text is that God recognizes that they would actually be able to accomplish great things, and he is concerned about it. He actually sees it as a negative. He says, “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.” (11:6). This sounds kind of strange. Why would God not want humans to accomplish great things? This might strike us as jealous or petty. God gave them their intellect and creativity, but now he doesn’t want them to pool it together to do great things. The problem isn’t that they

will do great things. The problem is that they will look to these great things as their god instead of looking in faith to the one true God. They will seek life and salvation from their own creations.

At Bible study on Wednesday night we were discussing the First Commandment, and we noted that the fundamental problem with having other gods is that they are unable to save us. When God says, "You shall have no other gods before me," he doesn't say that because he's some kind of jealous and controlling narcissist. He says it because he knows that other gods can't save us. They are inadequate. The one true God is the only God who can save us, and that is why he commands us to have no other gods. The commandment is really for our benefit, not for God's.

So the problem with building this great city was that it would numb their hearts to the only God who could give them eternal salvation. I suppose this city could have given them safety, wealth, happiness, community, glory, and power. In short, it could have provided a long and happy life for many people. And this is good, but it was all temporal. None of it would last beyond death. It could never grant them eternal salvation. So God confused their language and dispersed them over the face of the earth.

---

So from that day, the human race has been divided into many different languages and nations. And most of the nations of the world were completely oblivious to what God was doing in one particular nation. Even that one particular nation was usually oblivious to what God was doing.

In the nation of Israel, a small and insignificant nation compared to the great empires of the world, God was working to bring forth a King and Savior and Christ for all the nations of the world. I say that Israel was often oblivious to this, because they usually believed that God had chosen them to bless them, and only them, and not the other nations of the world. But it had been God's intention from the very start to bring from them a King and Savior and Christ to bless all the nations of the world.

This King and Savior and Christ is God's own Son, Jesus of Nazareth. He was crucified for the sins of the entire world, was raised from the dead, and lives and reigns to all eternity. This salvation was not for the people of Israel only, but for all the people of the world.

Perhaps you can see the problem though, which stretches back to Genesis 11 and the division of languages and nations from Babel. *How are all the nations of the world going to know of this salvation, which occurred in some small, insignificant nation in the Middle East?*

---

This is how the confusion of languages at Babel and the work of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost are tied together.

The Feast of Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks, occurred fifty days after Jesus' resurrection.

Here's a brief timeline of events: So Jesus is crucified on Good Friday, then Saturday is the Sabbath day, and he rose on Sunday, the day after the Sabbath. Then we count fifty days to get to Pentecost. There is also Jesus' ascension into heaven in there. We don't want to forget that. That was forty days after his resurrection. So there are forty days from his resurrection to his ascension, and then ten more days until Pentecost.

The Day of Pentecost is what we read about from the book of Acts where the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples, and they start preaching the Gospel in all these different languages.

## THE UN-BABBLING OF THE GOSPEL (Genesis 11:1-9)

Besides just being really awesome, it also marks the start of the evangelization of the world. That's what Pentecost is about for Christians.

There are two common misconceptions about Pentecost. One of them is that the Holy Spirit was given to the Church that day. But that's not really true. The three thousand souls who were added to the Church received the Holy Spirit in Baptism that day (Acts 2:38, 41). But those who had believed before that received the Holy Spirit on Easter Sunday, when Jesus appeared to them in a locked room, breathed on them, and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22).

So the disciples speaking in other languages, that wasn't the general gift of the Holy Spirit, which is given to all Christians, because they already had the Holy Spirit for fifty days now. Rather, it was a powerful manifestation of the Holy Spirit to begin the evangelization of the world.

And there seems to be a theological connection to the Old Testament feast in this respect. The Old Testament Feast of Pentecost was the firstfruits of the wheat harvest. And this day, on which the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, marked the start of a different kind of harvest. It is a spiritual harvest where the Holy Spirit gathers people from every nation and language into one people of God. It started in Jerusalem—that's the firstfruits, but it soon spread all over the world. This was indicated by the many different languages the Gospel is proclaimed in. The Gospel would be proclaimed all over the world and in every language. This harvest continues today, and it will continue until Christ returns.

The miracle at Pentecost was an undoing of the confusion of languages at Babel. You see what I mean? There were Jews from all over the world there at Pentecost. They were from many nations and had many different native tongues. At least most of them would have understood Hebrew, because they were Jews who had come to Jerusalem for a feast, but the Holy Spirit wanted to preach to them in their native tongues. And this indicates that God is reversing what he did at Babel. Instead of division, God gathers people back together again, and he gathers them back into something better than what the people had at Babel.

This occurs a few thousand years after the confusion of languages at Babel. At any point during those thousands of years, God could have overcome the confusion. But he didn't. He was waiting. He was waiting until he had something really important to say. It's kind of like if you have some kind of device that could interrupt every TV, radio, and internet signal at once. You save it until you have a really important announcement to make. And here is the announcement God makes: Jesus is the Christ. This Jesus, who was crucified, God raised him up. He is our King and Savior and Christ. Instead of being divided, God is now gathering us together into this Christ. So Peter says at the end of his Pentecost sermon, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." (Acts 2:38-39).

The Holy Spirit overcomes the confusion of languages, and he gathers people from every nation into one people of God. At Babel the people sought unity in the god of their own accomplishments, so God confused them and divided them. But beginning with the Day of Pentecost, and continuing through the present day, he brings us back together in the one true God, who took on flesh and suffered for us. He restores unity to mankind, and he bases this unity in someone who can actually save us from death and grant everlasting salvation.

---

This is the point of Pentecost: Jesus is for you. So here's the second common misconception about Pentecost: it's about the Holy Spirit. It's not, not really. The Holy Spirit is obviously at

## THE UN-BABBLING OF THE GOSPEL (Genesis 11:1-9)

work on Pentecost, and we see his work in a marvelous way. But Pentecost is not really about the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is about Jesus. This is how the Holy Spirit wants it to be. He doesn't show up to draw attention to himself. He shows up to draw attention to Jesus, for it is in Jesus that we have forgiveness, life, and salvation. The work of the Holy Spirit is to draw people to Jesus. This is what he did at Pentecost, and this is what he has continued to do ever since. He takes the Gospel to every nation and language under heaven, and he gathers people as one people of God, baptized into the one Lord Jesus Christ.

---

God wants to be known, and he wants to be known through Jesus Christ. This is how God has revealed himself. He has revealed himself in human flesh—human flesh that has suffered, died, and been raised from the dead. God wants to be known through sacrifice, because it is through this sacrifice that he has accomplished salvation for all mankind. And that, of course, includes you.

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” Amen.

---

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.