

## Genesis 11

This chapter is the final installment of what commentators have referred to as either the pre-history stories or the sagas of Genesis. What they mean by this is that the stories of creation, fall, Cain and Abel, Noah and now the Tower of Babel are not about actual people or events, but are told to make deep, theological claims about God and humanity. They tell us that God loves the world and desires the best for it. They tell us that humanity regularly chooses to not listen to or love God, neighbor or creation. This final story about language, a tower and scattering perfectly illustrates these themes.

The Tower of Babel story comes from the same strand of tradition as the second creation story. In these stories we read about a God who creates man out of mud, woman out of man's rib, takes walks in the Garden of Eden, has conversations with people and talking snakes, and now comes down to check out the city and tower that human beings are building. What God discovers on this visit is that human beings are not simply constructing a new metropolis, but are constructing a fortress from which 1) they cannot be scattered across the earth by God and 2) they can storm heaven and replace God and God's plan with their own. Upon discovering these plans, God heads back to heaven and in a conversation with the heavenly community declares that something needs to be done to stop this effort.

To fully appreciate this story, we need to return to the previous stories in this tradition in which human beings were given the task of being fruitful, multiplying and caring for God's creation. By so doing they would discover the joy of being who they were created to be. In addition, they were to avoid confusing themselves with God (this was the temptation of The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden), recognize their own limitations as human beings and live in right relationship with their creator. Therefore, if the people in Babel could complete their tower and storm heaven, the results for themselves and for creation would be disastrous. They would lose the possibility of being in right relationship with both God, each other and creation.

The way that God chooses to scuttle their plans is to confuse their language so that they would no longer "*understand*" one another. What is interesting about the Hebrew word translated as "*understand*" is that it can also be translated as "*listen*." In other words, God changed their language so that they would no longer listen to each other, but hopefully would once again listen to God. The result was that the people, because they could not listen to one another (perhaps implying they could not trust each other) are scattered across the earth to fulfill their mission.

The chapter ends with a genealogy that begins with Shem (one of Noah's sons) and continues to Abram. What we learn about Abram is that his father Terah had intended that his family, including Abram, travel to Canaan, but they settled instead in Haran (in modern day Turkey). It is from this location that the story of the people of Israel will have its beginnings.

**Reflection:** The prehistory/sagas of Genesis end with a simple question, "Does humanity have a chance?" The people are scattered. They cannot listen to one another. They have chosen not to listen to God. There is evil afoot. In some ways this may be our impression of the world in which we live and therefore we too wonder if there is any hope for us. Fortunately for us, we can see that the Biblical story didn't end at the end of Chapter 11, but became a rescue mission, which begins in Chapter 12.

### Questions:

1. Which of the pre-history/saga stories is your favorite and why?
2. Have you ever had trouble "listening" to someone with a different perspective on life? How has that impacted your ability to be in relationship with them?
3. Where do you see hope for humanity today?