

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: “I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it's very difficult to find anyone,” said Gandalf. To which Mr. Baggins replied, “I should think so — in these parts! We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can't think what anybody sees in them.” Perhaps you know that feeling.
- B. Our story begins long, long ago; how long ago I can't say. But I can tell you this: In those days, “*the whole world had one language and a common speech.*” After the great flood, the descendants of Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, had begun to spread out over the earth. The book of Genesis says, “*As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, ‘Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.’ They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’*” **Turn to Gen. 11.** That was a long time ago but...

I. WE LIVE IN A WORLD DESCENDED FROM BABEL (11:1-9)

- A. After God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden they were **east** of Eden. Cain, after killing his brother Abel, “*went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.*” And now we have people continuing to move **eastward**. They were moving away from God's garden temple; eastward away from God.

Shinar is in modern-day Iraq, near the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. There they learned to baked bricks with tar mortar because in Shinar there weren't enough stones for building. Bricks are smaller and easier to build with precision—like Legos. That technological advance allowed them to enter a new era of building, and

these people agreed to build a kind of religious city-center around which they would live.

And at the heart of that city-center would be a great tower. That tower had one purpose: to reach to the heavens. They probably built an early ziggurat. Ziggurats were a kind of pyramid but they weren't like the Egyptian pyramids. There was nothing inside them. They weren't tombs with secret passages. They were just filled with dirt. They were basically **a stairway to heaven** so that the god could step out of heaven and descend to the temple built at its base. (Their worship band was called Led Zeppelin.) We know later ziggurats in that area had a kind of guestroom for the god at the top with a special bed and food and were over 150 feet—15 stories—tall.

While it was a staircase for the god, the real reason they built it, according to v.4 was, “that we may make a name for ourselves.” If there had been a tourism website it would have said, “*Come to the gateway to the gods!*” In fact, that was what they called their city. “*Make your home among the only people on the face of the earth with a staircase from heaven.*” It would put them on the map!

Apparently the town fathers were worried that without some major source of civic pride to rally around, the people would just drift away and in a few years they'd be just another two-bit country town with no power and no name. “*Otherwise we'll be scattered over the face of the whole earth,*” it said in the minutes of the meeting. “*We'd end up as vagabonds ourselves,*” said the mayor. “*Living in tents,*” said the 1st Ward Alderman. So they'd begun and the tower was rising impressively, a wonder of engineering built from baked bricks held together by the plentiful tar (which we refine today into gasoline!). So there it was—early civilization's greatest wonder... and greatest disgrace.

- B. But then, the actual God came down. Vv.5-9... The LORD pushed back against civilization's proud decline. This is a vivid picture of proud people getting their comeuppance from God. “*The LORD came down to see the city and the*

tower the people were building.” He didn’t just step outside his door onto the landing they’d built. And he didn’t use the stairway! They didn’t even see him or know he was there. To the LORD God Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, it was like seeing children building with Legos. It was laughable. As Psalm 2 put it many years later,

*“The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.”*

What troubled God most was not the bricks or the tower, but the dark hearts of the builders. V.6, *“The LORD said, ‘If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.’”* Human beings had crossed a line. They had determined to use their God-given ingenuity to re-create a god—to *reduce God*—to a deity who they could control—a man-sized god.

The divine plan to foil all this was really ingenious, and it was a plan only the true God could pull off. Vv.7-8, *“The Lord said, ‘Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.’ So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.”* So imagine the next morning as the bricklayers start showing up for work. The foreman tells them what to do and everyone stares at him blankly. One guy asks his friend, *“What’d he say,”* and the friend looks at *him* blankly. It was a day like no other with everyone babbling and no one understanding a thing.

C Without the social glue of language, the people began scattering—the very thing they’d feared; the very reason they’d begun building the tower.

These people had called their city *Gate of the Gods*, which is what Babel meant in their language. But when this story was told later among God’s people in *their language* Babel meant *confused*, just as it does in English, *“because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world.”* Babylon eventually became a great civilization but they could never shake that name. **In the Bible Babylon is the**

symbol of the world's great wicked society, a prostitute seducing the hearts of mankind from the love of God.

And in the end, according to Rev. 18:21, “*Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said: ‘With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again.’*”

- C. We live in a world descended from Babel. The population of the world, century after century, has moved further and further eastward, you might say, further from worshipping the true and living God. We live in a civilization that accomplishes more and more, with loftier aspirations and higher accomplishments, while all the time we descend deeper into darkness. We build sky-high stairways for little gods. **Calvin Miller** wrote,

*“The more the gods become like men,
The easier it is for men to believe the gods,
When both have only human appetites,
Then rogues may worship rogues.”* [in *The Song*]

Think of our own national disintegration. In our ravenous appetite to be great, to make a name for ourselves, we only want gods who will kowtow to our whims and welcome our sins. Think only of our upcoming election. Is there any better name for it than Babel? T. S. Eliot wrote:

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

So there the story pauses. Confused languages and people who once aspired to a great name now scattered by God over the face of the earth. And the tower standing there abandoned. **Then what happened??** “*This is the account of Shem's family line.*” **What?!** We get a genealogy?! Yep, the family tree of the Semites. Shem to Arphaxad to Shelah... You get the idea. Generation after generation. Eber and Peleg and Serug and Reu. And then comes Terah, the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

Then the storyteller throws a monkey wrench in the genealogical works: “*Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.*” You just don’t mention such unfortunate information in a family tree because, of course, it’s a dead end.

Now look at **Gen 11:31-32...** Terah and his family head westward, toward Canaan, in a high-arcng route around the vast desert. Ur of the Chaldeans where they all had lived was a sophisticated city with a great ziggurat at its center on the very same plain of Shinar where Babel had stood. They weren’t nomads. They were urbanites. I think the LORD spoke to Abram about going to Canaan and Abram persuaded the family.

But after many miles, when they arrived in Harran, “*they settled there.*” Harran was a lot like home, like Ur. Felt good. So they got a little place. A little income. Familiar food, familiar culture, familiar gods. Terah liked it there. But Abram couldn’t stay. God had put within him a kind of homing instinct, a restlessness, a homesickness, and he had to move on toward Canaan. But Terah, content with the gods he’d always worshiped, stayed. And as one writer put it, “*Where he halted he also died.*” [U. Cassuto]. That’s what happens. “*Where he halted he also died.*”

But now for Abram, Sarai, and Lot, the real adventure began.

12:1-5... Here’s where our adventure in faith begins too.

II. EVERYONE WHO WALKS BY FAITH IN GOD STARTS HERE: “GO TO THE LAND GOD WILL SHOW YOU.”

A. As he did with Abram, God stirs within us a sense we’re in the wrong place in life—attached to the wrong society, established in the wrong country. *Illus.:* Once I not only went to the wrong address, I went *in* to the wrong house. I thought the folks I was visiting didn’t hear the bell so I just went in. Something wasn’t right. It looked right on the outside, but... Then I realized what had happened, my heart started to pound at the prospect of the homeowner coming around the corner to find an intruder, and I quickly slipped out. That’s the spiritual feeling you get when God first says, “*Go.*” This life, that has always been so familiar just isn’t the home my heart desires. We’re in the wrong place!

God has a thousand ways to say, “Go to the land I will show you.” This is about spiritual geography, about where our hearts walk and abide. When God says *Go* he’s also saying *Follow me*. We do this through Jesus Christ because he said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*”

- B. When we head toward God and home we are always going against the flow of human traffic. We’re going westward when the rush around us is east—away from God. We’re often in their way. It can be slow progress.

That stop that Terah, Abram and company made in Harran is a warning—a sober reminder: don’t get waylaid. Jesus said, “*No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.*” Lk 9:62 Jesus said, “*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.*” Lk 9:23 Would you stop and think for a moment? Where in this world are you getting too comfortable—too settled. When do you often forget that “this world is *not* my home.”

- C. **Heb. 11:8-10** says, “*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*” So it is for us as well. Here in this world our home as believers in Jesus is in him—in God and the people of God. Our first family is our church. Here is our tent while we live in Babel. But we *do* have a promised land. **C. S. Lewis** said, “*If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.*”

Conclusion

Abraham's adventure begins as all our adventures with God do. "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." As I said, this is about spiritual geography and residency. Right now, we all live in Babel—in Ur, on the plain of Shinar. But here's what we learn:

1. **Uproot yourself from Babel**, from the culture and society and relationships around us that are moving away from God. Uproot yourself from Babel where religion is man-managed and gods live just upstairs; where making a name for ourselves is the name of the game, the campaign promise of the city fathers; and where nothing is so feared as being scattered, being powerless, being sojourners in this world.
2. **Go toward the Lord, against the flow of the world.** Our live in the Lord Jesus Christ will never make sense to them. They're fine with gods and religions but they will always push back against devotion to Jesus that runs contrary to all this world values.
3. **To go toward the Lord means we obey his commands and trust his promises.** We do not live like the rest of the world. We must obey Christ's commands to serve, to love, to pray, to worship God in spirit and truth, to die to ourselves and live for the Lord. And above all, to believe in Christ in order to be saved. We trust God's promises that Jesus offers glorious immortality, that those who humble themselves will be exalted in God's good time, that God loves us, never leaves us, and is always good, and that Christ has prepared a place for us and will come again to get us.
4. **Never forget your home.** Do not be like Terah who set out on the journey of faith and then stopped. Because "*where he halted he also died.*" We are people who live like strangers in this world, in temporary tents, because we have a better home waiting. We are "*looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*"