

*“Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 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. 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.’ And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. 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. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.’ So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 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.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

The Tower of Babel is among the better-known accounts of the Old Testament. I remember learning in Sunday School how the various languages came to be, when God confused the language of the people who were defying Him with their prideful thought: *“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.”* We also know that the events that we celebrate on this Pentecost Sunday assure us that God has restored what was broken, in giving the Holy Spirit to the apostles so that they were able to communicate the Gospel in languages they had never learned.

When I think back to those Sunday School days, I know I only focussed on the fact that God confused the language of all the earth. It helps us understand how the common language known to the descendants of Adam and Eve and then of Noah and his children after the Great Flood became the many languages of our world today. But the main focus of this account is not on the languages but on the sin that lies at the heart of the building of the tower—that sinful pride that causes these people to fall back into the same trap that Satan used to lead Adam and Eve astray; the pride that puts self in the place of God.

The Babel account tells us about the loss of the ability to communicate and the havoc that it caused. It reveals a greater problem: our inability to communicate with others really flows from the loss of communication we have with our Creator. When we are not communicating with God, then we are not able to communicate with one another. Alienation from God results in alienation from one another. It creates chaos!

That chaos continues in our world. We keep “babel-ing” with the same pride and stubbornness that would set ourselves on a par with God, or above God. That pride is nothing more than idolatry, which we are warned against in the first commandment. That idolatry is revealed when we think there is no God, or when we turn from the truth of God to trust in our own truth. We see that idolatry when our life is not founded on the pattern that the Lord of creation has established, but on our own ideas of who we are and what we can do. Idolatry ignores the holiness of God and gives itself over to our misguided sense of right and wrong. We may tell ourselves that we have come so far we’ve moved beyond God, but we only see the greater chaos that is part of our world. It is not by accident that we are told in wisdom of Proverbs: *“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”* (Proverbs 16:18, ESV)

Yet that pride was so evident in the hearts of the people who gathered together in Shinar. There were two problems here. The descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth who came off the ark did start to repopulate the world. Chapter 10 of Genesis tells us about their descendants, although the full list give in chapter 10 comes after the events recorded in chapter 11. God had told Adam and Eve, and again told Noah and his sons: *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”* (Genesis 9:1, ESV) As these families grew, they were to move apart and fill the earth. But they decided they had a better plan. They settled in the plain of Shinar. In defiance of God’s will, they say: *“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.”* They want to make a name for themselves. They want to be gods. The tower was to reach up so high that everyone would acknowledge how great they were.

We often shorten the words of Proverbs to simply be, “pride goes before a fall”. That fall was coming. We are told that *the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.* God 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.* It wasn't as if God really thought that they could build a tower which would reach heaven. To do that they would, in the words of Buzz Lightyear, have to go to infinity and beyond. (And think of the silliness of trying to go beyond infinity!) It wasn't as if God was saying that they might become equal to Him or a threat to Him. No, God sees something more. He sees how sin is growing in the hearts of these people. God always deals with sin. He does punish it as He does here by confusing their language so that they are scattered throughout the earth. But God isn't just a mean ogre, waiting to give people what they deserve. He sees that their sinful hearts will lead them further and further into sin. He sees how they are moving further and further from Him. God intervenes, but He is dealing with the situation before it gets out of hand. He strikes the people with confusion; He scatters them throughout the earth. Yet He does it so that they do not spiral deeper and deeper into sin. When Adam and Eve sinned by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God cast them out of the garden. He did that so that they could not eat of the tree of life, for that would trap them in their sinfulness forever, leaving them separated from God. God threw them out and posted fiery angel guards to keep them away. Here, God confuses the language. But He had planned something better for them, and that will lead us into the other language event in our lessons today.

But first, we need to remember that we continue 'babel-ing' in our lives. The Babel story repeats itself over and over, as we try to put ourselves in the place of God. We tend to think too highly of ourselves, both collectively as a society and as individuals in this world. Isn't this exactly why truth is so relative? We won't accept the absolute truth of Scripture, because we are smart enough to determine our truth for ourselves.

What does God do in this world of idolatry? What does He do for people who are so trapped in their sin? God comes down to us. In Christ, God comes and joins Himself to us. He lives to lead and shepherd His people. He teaches us by His own humility to set aside our pride, telling us: *"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."* (Luke 14:11, ESV) He takes our sin into Himself, suffering and dying in our place on the cross. He pays the price for all our sins, including our babel-ing idolatry. He defeats our enemies of sin, death and hell as He rises again from the dead. Paul will remind us: *"Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."* (1 Corinthians 1:20-24, ESV)

This Saviour is God, who came to be with us. He also made the promise that is fulfilled today in the coming of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, the language that was confused to separate people is changed, as the Spirit gave the apostles the means to share the good news of Christ in all those other languages. There is a renewed unity—not of foolish pride, but a unity that comes in communicating the message that God gave His Son to bring us peace and unity with Him and with one another.

The Holy Spirit not only helps this message to be spoken, but He opens our eyes, our ears and our hearts to know this wonderful Gospel message is for us. Jesus promised: *"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."* (John 14:26, ESV) Even though we were spiritually blind, dead and enemies of God, the Holy Spirit calls us. He makes Christ, the Living Word known to our sinful hearts. He leads us to see, to understand and to believe. We are no longer scattered. We are one in Christ.

There are many voices that clamour for our attention today. They are like the sirens of Greek mythology, who lured sailors to their death, promising fulfilment and a new age of untold happiness. The voices we often hear in this world tempt us to the sin of Babel: urging us to see ourselves as God. Thankfully, in Christ we can stop the 'babel-ing' as we listen to the clear voice of God, speaking to us in His Word and in the living Word, Jesus Christ. The Spirit, our Helper and Counsellor, restores the broken lines of communication. He also gives us what the people of Shinar wanted for themselves—a lasting city, but this is the city God Himself has prepared for us, that we may rejoice in His presence and glory forevermore. Amen.