

“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:

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” We have all heard that expression before and we all know just how incorrect it is. Yes, sticks and stones hurt but words can also cause great hurt and great pain. For some people, the words that they hear so often cause longer lasting damage than the physical things they may encounter.

We also say that the pen is mightier than the sword. The idea is that well-written and powerful words can conquer in ways that military might cannot. During wartime, propaganda is a powerful weapon, used to create fear and despair or to inspire and encourage.

Words can hurt. Words can also be such a blessing. We need to be very aware of the words that are in our mouth. The simple words, “I’m proud of you”, can encourage a child who is struggling. How wonderful to hear the words, “I love you.” Perhaps even greater are the words, “I forgive you.” Parents get so excited to hear a baby’s first words (typically arguing whether that first word was “mama” or “da-da”

Have you ever wondered where language came from? Those who believe in evolution see language as part of their evolutionary ideas, coming as man developed beyond the ape stage. Most evolutionists would see language beginning with gestures and guttural sounds, eventually forming sounds that became words. Of course, when you leave God out of the picture, everything is just speculation. Scripture does help us understand the gift of language. From the very beginning, the Spirit and the Word of God were living and active. The whole story of Scripture is the story of language.

Open your bible, look at the opening verses of Genesis and what do we see? ***“And God SAID, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”*** (Genesis 1:3, ESV) The whole of God’s creative work is undertaken as God speaks. God said—and it was, whether it was light and dark, animals, trees, water or whatever. As the highlight of His creation, God created man from the dust of the ground and breathed into him the breath of life. Keep in mind that the word for breath in Hebrew is the same word for Spirit. This breath is a great gift to man. It gives us life and so much more. Man doesn’t develop intellect. It is given as a gift of the Creator. Man doesn’t evolve language. It is also a gift of the Creator. We see man has the gift of language, of words, as God brings all the animals to Adam, who gives them their names. That can only happen with language. When God created woman—that perfect helper for man, Adam *speaks*, saying: ***“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”*** (Genesis 2:23, ESV)

In the opening chapters of Genesis we see God speaking to Adam and Eve. We see them speaking to God. Sadly, we also see the conversation which they have with the serpent and how those tempting words of the devil lead to the fall into sin. Words that allowed a wonderful, intimate relationship with God and His children are corrupted. Loving words are now required to be disciplinary words from God. Adam and Eve don’t speak with love and kindness to one another; they speak accusations against one another. They speak from fear, not love.

James tells us in his letter to the church: ***“From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”*** (James 3:10, ESV) We need to be aware of the words that are in our mouths, and that takes us to our text today.

The first thing we hear is that *the whole earth had one language and the same words*. We can be sure that in a world marred by sin there wasn't perfect unity among all people. Yet there was no separation caused by language itself. They could communicate with one another and work to encourage one another. Unfortunately they came up with the wrong form of encouragement. The gift of language became their downfall as the words in their mouths became corrupt. *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."*

It wasn't the idea of building a tower that was the problem. The problem was that they wanted to build this tower to make a name for themselves. God had told Adam and Eve, and thereby their descendants, to fill the earth and subdue it. These people wanted to remain in this valley. They wanted their name and their glory to be on everyone's lips. How different the words in their mouths were from the words that are to be in our mouths. As Jesus Himself reminds the devil: *"Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."* (Matthew 4:10, ESV) The words these people spoke to one another were misguided and foolish. They kept the people from doing what they needed to do—to call on the name of the Lord.

It doesn't take too much effort to see the power of language. It can be so wonderful to see how a loving word from a parent can soothe a child's heart after a bad day at school. A supportive word from a friend in the face of loss or struggle can make such a difference. Yet we are more accustomed to other words in our mouths. How often does the media seek to reshape people's views on social issues, moving us away from God's will for His creation? Words played a significant role in our recent elections. We often express concern about the ways that social media has given rise to any number of bad, harmful and just ridiculous expressions. We use words to bully other, to discredit others, to belittle others. Our words are far from what God wants them to be.

At Babel, God saw how His gift of language was being abused. 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.* This doesn't mean that God was worried that they would ever be able to build a tower to heaven. It wasn't an idea that these people would become so powerful that He wouldn't be able to deal with them. Pastors often begin their sermons with the prayer from Psalm 19: *"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer."* (Psalm 19:14, ESV) The words in the mouths of these people would become less and less acceptable as they gave up calling on the name of the Lord and honouring it as holy. How sad that so often the only way people call on the name of the Lord today is to use His holy name as a curse.

But now our text says something unique: God came down. There is the irony in this that even though the tower was to reach the heavens it is still so small God has to leave the heights of heaven and come all the way down to inspect this tiny structure of men. The early Christians understood this in the same way that we see God appear to Moses, to the three men in the fiery furnace, to Isaac and to others. This is the Son of God, what we refer to as the preincarnate Jesus.

Isn't it interesting that the One who is Himself the Eternal Word who will later become flesh to save us now comes to discipline these people. God knew that their language could lead them further astray and so He confuses their language. It forces the people to do what God had commanded—to spread out through the earth. He shows them that no matter how boastful our words, He, the Eternal Word, is the first word and the last word.

For us there is great joy in knowing that the Lord came down, especially when He came down in our human flesh and likeness. In the face of our sinfulness He comes to bring forgiveness and life. He comes to live for us, to die for us on the cross, and to rise again before returning to His glorious throne. The Living Word comes and declares that we are forgiven. He puts His word in our mouths. David teaches us to pray: *"O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise."* (Psalm 51:15, ESV) Jesus says in our Gospel lesson today: *"If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."* (John 14:23, ESV) Thankfully Christ also sends His Spirit to make that Word known to us. In a sign of His grace, the Holy Spirit reverses the confusion of language, empowering His apostles to speak that Word in every language so that all people could hear and believe in the Lord of Life.

God gave us the precious gift of language. Even though we have abused that gift, He has used it to declare His love, mercy and grace to us. He also empowers us in the Holy Spirit to be able to have that word in our mouths that we may speak to others of His forgiveness and life. Through the gift of the Spirit, may we all be able to say: *"Let the words of my mouth and the*

meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.” (Psalm 19:14, ESV) Amen.