Unit 1, Session 5

Sin and God’s Authority

Summary and Goal
In the previous session, we saw that after the flood, God reaffirmed His creative purpose for people to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28; 9:1,7). Sin, no matter how grievous and pervasive it may be, cannot stop God’s plan from marching forward. But the account of Noah ends in a surprising way, with Noah drunk and disgraced in front of his sons. The flood had brought judgment on the world, but it had not removed sin. In this session, we pick up the story and see that it did not take long for humanity once again to shake its fist at God in active rebellion against Him. God’s command to spread out to fill the earth was not simply ignored but rejected in the city of Babylon, or Babel, as its residents sought to glorify their names instead of God’s.

Session Outline
1. Sin occurs when we glorify our names instead of God’s name (Gen. 11:1-4).
2. God will put an end to every kingdom that is not His (Gen. 11:5-7).
3. God’s ways are higher than our ways (Gen. 11:8-9; Isa. 55:8-9).

Session in a Sentence
Sin drives people to seek to make themselves great, even in direct disobedience of God, but sin cannot halt God’s plans.

Christ Connection
God confused the language of and scattered those who wanted to make a great name for themselves. At Pentecost, God tore down the language barrier so that His people would scatter across the world and make known the great name of His Son. One day, God will gather together people from every tribe and language to worship Him in unity.

Missional Application
Because we have experienced the greatness of God through His gracious salvation through Christ, we set aside all desires to make our names great and instead seek to proclaim the kingdom of the Son of God throughout the whole world.
SAY: According to research reported by the Linguistic Society of America, as of the year 2009, at least a portion of the Bible has been translated into 2,508 different languages—an amazing advance in world missions, but still a long way to go, seeing as the Society also reports nearly 7,000 distinct languages spoken around the world.  

EXPLAIN: Help group members understand the difficulties caused by a language barrier, and even the misunderstanding that can result from the same language in different cultures and regions.

- **Stressful:** Imagine checking into a hotel, ordering a meal, or even finding a bathroom in a foreign country where you do not speak the language.

- **Costly:** A financial services company spent $10 million on a rebranding campaign to repair the damage caused by its slogan “Assume Nothing” being mistranslated in various countries as “Do Nothing.”

- **Confusing:** Cars in the United States have “trunks” and “hoods,” but in other English speaking nations, they have “boots” and “bonnets.” When offered a “biscuit” in some countries, Americans might be surprised to receive a “cookie.”

- **Insensitive:** Who really knows what a particular southerner might mean by “Bless your heart”?  

PACK ITEM 6: CONFUSED LANGUAGES: For each group member, hand out the words cut out from the pack item, and ask them to stand up and try to find the person with the matching word from a different language. Give a time limit of 45 seconds for them to pair up, and then read the answers from the handout.

INTERACT: Ask group members to share briefly some of their answers to the opening question on page 47 in their DDG.

**When have you experienced frustration, confusion, or something humorous because of language? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)**

SUMMARIZE: Use the following paragraph in the DDG to summarize the direction of this session.

All of our frustration over language goes back to Genesis 11 and the tower of Babylon, also known as Babel. According to the Bible, the multiplicity of languages we now experience was God’s response to one of humankind’s most spectacularly sinful displays. But beyond the history of languages, the story of this tower gives us a glimpse into something much more important—the root cause of every sin.
**Point 1: Sin occurs when we glorify our names instead of God’s name (Gen. 11:1-4).**

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read Genesis 11:1-4 (DDG p. 48).

1. The whole earth had the same language and vocabulary. 2. As people migrated from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3. They said to each other, “Come, let us make oven-fired bricks.” (They used brick for stone and asphalt for mortar.) 4. And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky. Let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered throughout the earth.”

**INSTRUCT:** Ask group members to highlight the last sentence in verse 4.

**EXPLAIN:** God isn’t against cities and towers necessarily. The problem behind the city and tower of Babylon was the wayward heart of humanity, disregarding the express command of God.  
- God had first told Adam and Eve to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28).  
- Then after the flood, He gave the same command to Noah and his descendants (Gen. 9:1,7).  
- God’s intent was for His name to be glorified as people populated and ruled over His creation. But instead, God’s image bearers wanted to build a city and tower for their glory and to exalt their name, expressly so they wouldn’t be scattered throughout the earth.

**READ** the following paragraphs in the DDG to show how these people in Genesis were looking to themselves instead of toward God to fulfill their needs.

The people wanted to build a city and a tower because their hearts yearned for a secure place to belong, a home—represented by the city. They wanted to do something significant with their lives—represented by the tower. They wanted greatness—represented by their desire to make a name for themselves.

The problem of sin isn’t necessarily that we want belonging, significance, or even greatness but that we look for these things in the wrong places, namely, in ourselves. We say, “By my will, in my strength, for my glory,” instead of looking to God to fulfill our needs.

**INSTRUCT:** Encourage group members to take a minute to draw a tower in the space provided in their DDG (p. 48) and to fill it in with examples of things we look to for fulfillment instead of to God.

**SAY:** We look to small things like sex or family or career or achievement to fill a God-sized void in our hearts, so it’s no wonder these things never satisfy our longings.
EXPLAIN: The true wickedness of sin doesn’t begin with an immoral act. It begins with the heart behind the act. That’s why the rebellion of Babylon becomes, throughout the Bible, a picture of humankind’s worst wickedness.

Commentary: On the surface, what happened at Babylon doesn’t look like something horrifically evil. They’re just building a tower, right? Building the tower may not have looked bad, but the root of sin was there—a persistent and powerful root called pride. It’s the heart that says, “I will…” and, “My will,” instead of, “God’s will be done.”

Later in Scripture, Babylon represents sin in its full flowering fruit. Babylon becomes the symbol of violence, sexual immorality, and Satan’s activity (see Rev. 17–18). Jesus described Satan as a liar and a murderer (John 8:44), and since his first appearance in the garden of Eden, Satan has always “followed his heart” and been “true to himself.” Through his kingdom on earth, he has fought against God and attacked God’s image bearers with sin’s mantra: “By my will, in my strength, for my glory.” He successfully tempted Adam and Eve in this manner, and the fruit of his work was further illustrated at the tower of Babylon.

INTERACT: Ask the group the following question.

Where in your community do you see people living according to the mantra “By my will, in my strength, for my glory”? (graffiti art; getting good grades to outdo classmates; the criminal element; striving for wealth and accolades from work; striving for “righteousness” and the attention of others through good works; rejection of the church)

SAY: “By my will, in my strength, for my glory” in many ways could be the mantra of our age. Self-determination is prized in our society, and we look up to those who exude strength and power. But if that’s our attitude, the person in Scripture we most resemble is the devil.

So even as we have answered this question about others in our community, we should examine our own hearts for the root of pride. Let’s open our prideful hearts to God and let Him transform us with a will that doesn’t falter, a strength that doesn’t fail, and a glory that never fades.
**Point 2:** God will put an end to every kingdom that is not His (Gen. 11:5-7).

**READ** Genesis 11:5-7 (DDG p. 49).

5 Then the Lord came down to look over the city and the tower that the humans were building. 6 The Lord said, “If they have begun to do this as one people all having the same language, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. 7 Come, let’s go down there and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”

**INSTRUCT:** Ask group members to circle the phrase “the Lord came down” in verse 5.

**EXPLAIN** the meaning of the Lord’s coming down to inspect the tower, His words about the potential for human evil, and His jealousy for His own glory (refer to the first paragraph on DDG p. 49).

- Most of us tend to assume that God is, more or less, just like us. As Christians, we rarely do this intentionally, but practically, we conceive of the God of the Bible as just a bigger, smarter, better version of ourselves. But the author of Genesis says the Lord “came down” to see what they were building. While the people were trying to build a tower that could reach up to the highest heavens, God, as it were, had to stoop down to see it because, by comparison, it was pitifully small.

- God’s words, however, do indicate that **humanity has enormous potential, if only to create evil.** Left unchecked, their unified language would lead to further declarations of human might, declarations of rebellion against their Creator. Every form of evil would continue to flow from them as naturally as water from a spring. So God put the brakes on, confusing their language and spoiling their plans.

**SAY:** For those of us who grew up in church, there are a lot of details in Bible stories we “remember” that actually aren’t in the Bible. For instance, many of us seem to think that the tower of Babylon story ends with God’s destroying the tower, but it doesn’t. God left the tower there, a monument to the disappointment of human rebellion.

**EXPLAIN** the significance of “towers of disappointment.”

**Commentary:** Matt Carter preached a sermon on this Bible story titled “Building Towers of Disappointment,” emphasizing that God left the tower of Babylon unfinished, left it to decay. The tower would stand for a time as a monument to the fallout of human rebellion, a warning about the final destination of sin.
Commentary (continued): God often does that for us: He frustrates our sinful plans, but He’ll leave the “broken towers” there with their consequences so we'll stay close to Him and remember His grace. Broken towers in our lives feel like God’s judgment. And in a sense, they are. But any judgment before the ultimate judgment is mercy because it can wake us up before it’s too late. God’s small judgments in this life are warnings to us, towers that scream out: “Don’t go down that path! It will only leave you empty!”

INSTRUCT: Ask group members to list in their DDG (p. 49) some of the “broken towers,” places of disappointment, in their own lives.

What are some of the “broken towers,” places of disappointment, in your life?

READ: Ask a volunteer to read the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 49), which explains God’s mercy and love in breaking our idolatrous towers.

The idols of our lives promise so much, but they always end up as broken and rotting towers. They promise safety, security, to make us beautiful, significant, and loved. But even as we diligently try to build our godless towers, God Himself comes along and knocks the tools right out of our hands, not out of spite but for our good—that our disappointments, our broken towers, would drive us to return to the love of God.

INTERACT: Read the “Voices from Church History” quote; then ask group members the following question.

What would change if we began to see the “broken towers” in our lives, areas of disappointment and pain, as God’s merciful attempts to draw us back to Himself? (we would be able to respond to our disappointments with joy, knowing we are loved by God; we would begin to boast in our weaknesses and highlight the strength of God in our lives; we would more readily confess our sins to one another for healing)

Voices from Church History

“The world calls [a thing] a disappointment...but there is no such word in the dictionary of faith. What to others are disappointments, are to believers intimations of the will of God.”

—John Newton (1725-1807)
Point 3: God’s ways are higher than our ways (Gen. 11:8-9; Isa. 55:8-9).

READ Isaiah 11:8-9 (DDG p. 50).

55:8 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways.” This is the LORD’s declaration. 9 “For as heaven is higher than earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

READ the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 50).

Stories like the tower of Babylon tend to hurt our heads. As we will see, God allows humanity to defy Him and He is justified to punish human beings for their sin, but He even uses that defiance and judgment as part of His plan. That’s the peculiar mystery of providence—the term theologians use to describe God’s guiding hand on history.

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 50).

God’s Providence: Christians believe in God’s personal and direct intervention in the world—as opposed to a hands-off approach to creation—that affects not only the natural order but also the individuals and events within human history.

Essential Doctrine “God’s Providence”: Providence refers to God’s continuing work and involvement in His creation. This includes, in various degrees, God’s preservation of the created order, His governance, and His care for His people (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3; Gen. 8:21-22). Christians believe the world, and even the cosmos itself, is contingent upon God, incapable of existing apart from Him. Christians also believe in God’s personal and direct intervention in the world—as opposed to a hands-off approach to creation—that affects not only the natural order but also the individuals and events within human history.

EXPLAIN Isaiah’s words regarding God’s providential wisdom in comparison to our own thoughts and ways.

Commentary: God told Isaiah that His providential wisdom is as high above our thoughts as the stars above our heads. That’s high. God has so structured the universe that we’ll never figure some things out this side of eternity (cf. Deut. 29:29). Thus, if we make our faith contingent on being able to figure everything out, we’ll never make it. You can’t read just one more book or attend one more lecture or meditate on one more truth and then, at last, it will all make sense. It’s literally impossible, God says, this side of heaven, to understand all that He is doing. If you must understand, then you’ll never believe.

In response to our questions and wondering what God is up to, God does not always give us answers. And even if He did, we must remember that God’s thoughts and ways are above ours, so we still likely would not grasp His purposes. But what God always does for us is show up. He is always with us. Where we desire explanation, God gives revelation.
INTERACT: Ask group members the following questions.

What mysteries in your life do you wish God would explain to you? What “explanations” have other people given that don’t satisfy? (be prepared to give answers of your own to jump-start the conversation)

READ Genesis 11:8-9 (DDG p. 50).

11:8 So from there the Lord scattered them throughout the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9 Therefore it is called Babylon, for there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth, and from there the Lord scattered them throughout the earth.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 50), which summarizes the end result of the tower of Babylon and God’s providential work through it, and another volunteer to read Revelation 7:9-10.

Humanity attempted to build a tower to regain what they lost in their rebellion against God—but they failed miserably. On account of God’s judgment for their prideful sin, their project ended in confusion and disunity. Yet God would redeem these circumstances: God’s image bearers were now scattered to fill the earth as He had commanded them. And one day, the gospel will accomplish the inverse of Babylon. Despite their many languages, human beings will be united in proclaiming not their own glory but the glory of God in our salvation through Jesus (Rev. 7:9-10).

EXPLAIN: The inverse of Babylon in the future has already begun with the outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit on believers in Jesus Christ, resulting in a diverse unity for the glory of God.

Commentary: We don’t need to wait until that future day in the fullness of God’s presence to see Babylon undone; we see the beginnings of this in Acts 2. When the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, Jesus’ disciples began preaching in other languages in Jerusalem, and then they were scattered to unite Jew and Gentile as one through the gospel’s power. Pentecost is a big flashing signpost indicating that God is reversing the curse of Babylon, which we experience even now in the diverse unity of the church. To God be the glory!

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

How should the fact that God is breaking down barriers through the gospel of Jesus impact how we live in a broken and scattered world? (we should see the gospel as the ultimate solution to the struggles and division between people; we should tell others about the good news of Jesus so they can find peace with God and with one another; our churches should illustrate the unity of the gospel for the world to see)
My Mission

EXPLAIN: The human heart is made to build. Either we can build towers to our own strength and might or we can participate in what God is building, a structure of eternal significance. Through the work of His Son and the Spirit, God is building Jesus’ tower of refuge that we can run into and be saved, represented in His body, the church (Prov. 18:10; Col. 1:18-23). The question is what tower will you be a part of building: a monument to yourself or a monument to God’s glory and grace in Christ?

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 51), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

Because we have experienced the greatness of God through His gracious salvation through Christ, we set aside all desires to make our names great and instead seek to proclaim the kingdom of the Son of God throughout the whole world.

- What towers to your own greatness do you need to abandon to better fulfill God’s command to fill the earth with His glory and gospel?
- What can we do to pursue deeper, gospel-centered unity as a group to reveal God’s power and glory to others?
- What opportunities has God given you in your neighborhood, workplace, community, and beyond to make God’s name great and proclaim His kingdom? What steps will you take this week to do so?

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Father, You are just when you judge sin, and You are gracious in doing so for Your children. May we abandon our towers for our own name’s sake, and we ask You to frustrate that work when we persist in it. Help us to live, work, and speak for the glory of our Savior—Jesus Christ—that people would run to Him for salvation from their sin. Amen.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the Daily Study devotions in their DDG (pp. 52-54), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use Encourage One Another (p. 55) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.
Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The **Daily Study** devotions in the DDG (pp. 52-54) help group members get into God’s Word for themselves. **Encourage One Another** (p. 55) helps group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

**Daily Study**

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 52-54) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for **Day 4** as a part of point 3 in the session: “God’s ways and God’s thoughts are not ours. They are higher, loftier, and grander than anything we can muster. True repentance requires we grasp this.”

Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God’s Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- **Day 1:** “Our trinitarian God is by nature relational, and He has created us in His image—wired for relationship with Him and others.”
- **Day 2:** “Our perceived greatness is relative. The structures we build are massive in our eyes but tiny in God’s.”

Visit [www.GospelProject.com/blog](http://www.GospelProject.com/blog) for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God’s Word.

**Encourage One Another**

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the DDG (p. 55) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using *The Gospel Project* in their groups.

- Encourage group members to remind one another that while we oftentimes seek to build our own kingdoms, God still mercifully calls us to live in His.
- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.
Additional Commentary

**Point 1: Sin occurs when we glorify our names instead of God’s name (Gen. 11:1-4).**

“The description of the tower ‘that reaches to the heavens’ has been taken as the builders’ ambition of autonomy. This does not mean that they intended to depose God. A similar expression describes Jacob’s ladder with ‘its top reaching to heaven’ (28:12). In recognizing the sacredness of ‘Bethel’ (‘house of God’), the patriarch exclaimed, ‘This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven’ (28:17). Taken in this sense the tower at Babel was conceived as a stairway that would give them access to the realm of the divine. Others have regarded the phrase as saying no more than that the tower was especially tall, as in our modern term ‘skyscraper.’ This is the sense of the same language that portrays Canaan’s city-walls as tall as the ‘skies’ (Deut. 1:28; 9:1). Yet this verbal association with the despotic Canaanite cities would for later Israel cast even greater suspicion upon the motives of the Babelites.”

“The repetition of ‘ourselves’ and the focus on their ‘name’ shows that the people have made themselves the centre of life. Not only that, but their desire to avoid being scattered over the face of the earth was in opposition to God’s command to fill the earth (1:27-28; 9:1). Rather than spreading out horizontally to progressively occupy and manage the whole earth entrusted to them by the Lord, they wanted to act independently, clustered together and rise vertically (climbing towards heaven). Their sin was the same pride and desire to be like God that had caused the fall and the rapid spread of evil (3:5).”

**Point 2: God will put an end to every kingdom that is not His (Gen. 11:5-7).**

“We know that God always watches the activities on earth, but this is one of many occasions in Genesis where, perhaps in an attempt to emphasize God’s concern, the narrator uses the words he came down to see what was going on (11:5). He acknowledged their impressive technology, but was concerned about their motives in developing it. The builders of such a tower could use their skills to suppress others and eliminate diversity. Acting in unity, they could achieve evil goals (11:6). In order to put a stop to this and prevent people from achieving God-like status, God intervened. He put a stop to their cooperation by confusing their language. As a result, the different people groups could no longer understand each other or work together (11:7).”
The rebellion of Babel was stopped by God’s intervention but since then God has allowed other people groups to apply the same principles in the construction of other great and powerful civilizations, with their capitals residing in influential cities. Examples include Memphis of the Egyptian Kingdom, Nineveh of the Assyrian Empire, Babylon of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, and Rome of the Roman Empire. In a way, each of these cities was the ‘Babel’ of its day. Each embodied the spirit of rebellion and human glorification that began with Adam and Eve (3:6-7,11-13), who passed it to their son Cain (4:17), and is then continued here in [Genesis] 11.”

Point 3: God’s ways are higher than our ways (Gen. 11:8-9; Isa. 55:8-9).

“let the wicked forsake his way...let him return [Isa. 55:7-9]. Thorough repentance is required, for God’s thoughts are not your thoughts—that is, they are as high above man’s thoughts as the heavens are above the earth and vastly superior to the expectations of human intuitions (cf. Ps. 145:3; 1 Cor. 2:9). neither are your ways my ways. In the immediate context, this is an appeal to people to exchange their sinful ‘thoughts’ and ‘ways’ (Isa. 55:7) for God’s, which are higher (nobler and more magnificent). More broadly, theologians have recognized that God, the incomparable Creator, is far above his finite creatures and beyond their ability to describe him or comprehend him fully; though they may know him truly, such knowledge is always partial and imperfect. But because God is perfectly wise in all his thoughts and ways, his people can take great comfort amid hardship and when inevitably they are unable to understand the mysteries and tragedies of life.”

“[Isaiah 55:]8 begins with the word For, making a connection with verse 7, and there are two ways to look at that connection: (1) We should forsake our wicked ways and thoughts (v. 7a), for God’s ways and thoughts are not evil like ours but are holy and exalted; or (2) God’s lavish forgiveness (v. 7b) is so astonishing that it soars above ours as far as heaven is above the earth. God is really, really good at forgiveness; we generally are not. Either way, we come away in awe at how lofty God is and how gracious to invite sinners like us to sit at his banqueting table!”

References
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For a story to be great, it must include a great beginning. The story of the Bible, which tells the true story of our world, is no exception.

In the Book of Genesis, we see God the Creator in all His majesty and goodness as He spins the world into motion and lavishes His image bearers with love. We have an “inciting incident” that introduces conflict into this good world, as the first humans raise their fists in defiance toward their loving Father and bring havoc into this peaceful paradise. But even here, we have a promise—God will make things right again. God will cover His people’s sins and crush their adversary. The rest of Genesis shows how even though sin spread throughout the world, God remained faithful to His promise to Eve, His promise to Noah, and His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Book of Genesis is a glorious and earthy tale of rebellion and redemption, of sin and salvation, of failings and faith. Here is a book that shows us who we are in our sin and who God is in His grace. May this study lead you to express gratitude for God’s love toward you and then extend His love to everyone who inhabits this world He has promised to restore.