GENESIS: THE BOOK OF BEGINNINGS · STUDY NOTES

Study 8: The nations and the tower

For personal study or groups

Your name

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How to use these notes. Watch each part's video on biblehelp.net, or read the text below. Look up each passage in your own Bible and write the answer on the lines. The verses are printed at the back if you need them. At the end there are questions to think about on your own or to discuss in a group.

📖 **Before you start: read Genesis 10:1–11:26.** Read it in your own Bible, all the way through, before the videos. Then in this study we go through it together, a few verses at a time. (About 6 minutes.)

PART 1

All the nations from one family

Genesis 10:1–32

Genesis 10 is a long list of names: the peoples who came from Noah's three sons. Many readers skip it, but "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful" (2 Timothy 3:16), and this chapter has much to teach us.

1. Why a list of names? These were real people in real places, and many of the names became the names of peoples and lands of the ancient world. There is nothing quite like it from the ancient world: it covers the whole known world, and does not even mention Israel by name. Notice too the order of the story. Chapter 10 says the peoples spread out "according to their languages", but at the start of chapter 11 "the whole world had one language" (Genesis 11:1). Chapter 10 tells us where the nations went; chapter 11 goes back to tell us why: Babel.

1 **Read Genesis 10:1–5**

Whose sons are listed first? According to what did the maritime peoples separate into their territories?

2. Japheth. Japheth's fourteen peoples went to the north and the west. Madai is the forefather of the Medes; Javan is the Hebrew name for the Greeks; the Kittites lived on Cyprus, and the Rodanites very likely on Rhodes; Tarshish was far away across the sea. Each son's list ends with the same kind of words: clans, languages, lands and nations. These are not nations as we think of them today, and not races. The Bible describes peoples by their families, their languages and their lands, and every one of them comes from the same three brothers.

3. Nimrod. Nimrod "began to be a mighty one on the earth", the first man in the Bible to build a kingdom: "His kingdom began in Babylon, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar." Then he built Nineveh. "A mighty hunter before the LORD" can mean simply that he was great in God's sight, but many teachers have read it as defiance of God. We cannot be sure. But Babylon and Nineveh became two of the most feared names for Israel: Assyria destroyed the northern kingdom, and Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

2 **Read Genesis 10:8–12**

What did Nimrod begin to be? Where did his kingdom begin? What city did he build in Assyria?

4. The peoples Israel knew. Mizraim is Egypt. From Egypt's family came "the Philistines", and from Canaan the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites and the other peoples of the land God would give to Abraham's children. Almost every enemy Israel would face is in this part of the list. But God had not given up on any of them: "The LORD of Hosts will bless them, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt My people, Assyria My handiwork, and Israel My inheritance'" (Isaiah 19:25).

3 **Read Isaiah 19:24–25**

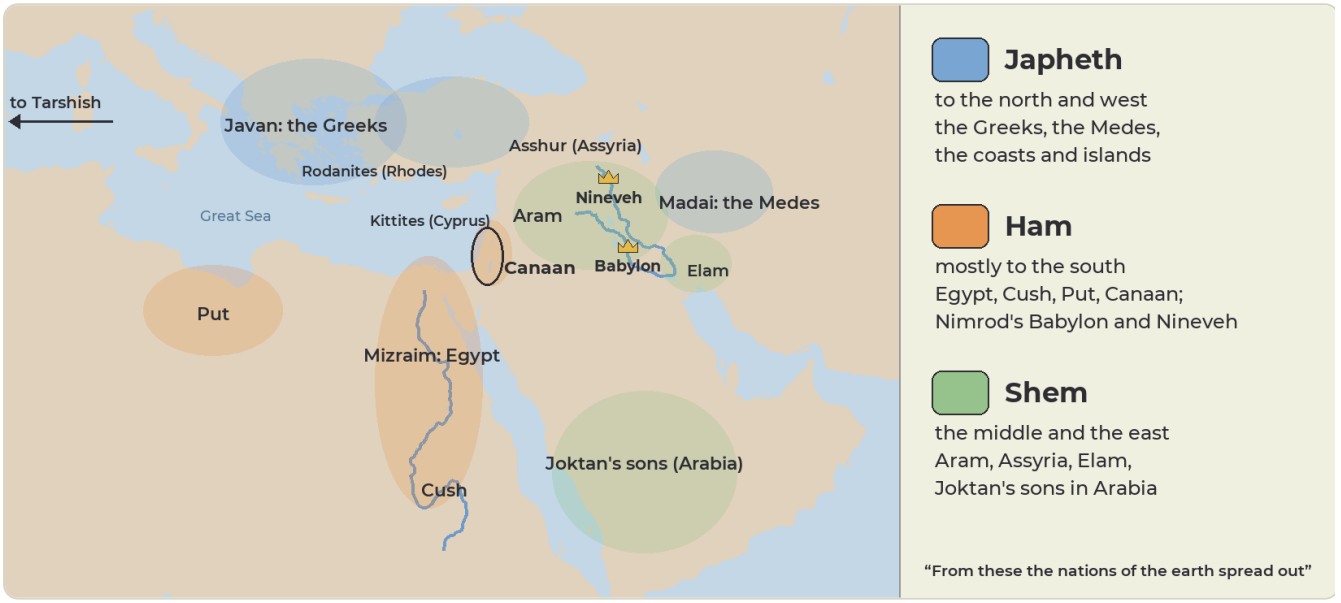
Which nations will join Israel? What will the LORD call Egypt and Assyria?

5. Shem, last of all. As Genesis often does, the chosen line comes last: Cain's line came before Seth's, and here Japheth and Ham come before Shem. "Shem was the forefather of all the sons of Eber", and the word "Hebrew" probably comes from Eber's name. Peleg was so named "because in his days the earth was divided": many teachers believe this points to Babel.

4 **Read Genesis 10:21–25**

Whose forefather was Shem? Why was Peleg given his name?

6. Seventy nations, and Israel not among them. Count the peoples and there are seventy: fourteen from Japheth, thirty from Ham, twenty-six from Shem. Seventy is a full number: the whole world. But Israel is not on the list. Abram had not yet been born. "The LORD did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than the other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples" (Deuteronomy 7:7). God's choice is all of grace.



The table of nations: the peoples of Japheth to the north and west (the Greeks, the Medes, the coasts and islands), of Ham mostly to the south (Egypt, Cush, Put, Canaan; Nimrod's Babylon and Nineveh), and of Shem in the middle and the east (Aram, Assyria, Elam, Joktan's sons in Arabia).

7. What Genesis 10 teaches. Paul sums it up in Athens. We are one family: "From one man He made every nation of men", so there is no room for pride in our own people or contempt for another. God rules the nations: "He determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands." And He has a purpose: "God intended that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us."

5 **Read Acts 17:26–27**

From whom did God make every nation? What did He determine? What did He intend the nations to do?

Wherever you come from, your people are somewhere in this chapter, and the promise is for them too.

6 **Read Genesis 12:1–3**

What did God promise Abram? Who will be blessed through him?

PART 2

Let us make a name

Genesis 11:1–26

1. Eastward to Shinar. "The whole world had one language", and "as people journeyed eastward, they found a plain in the land of Shinar". In Genesis, going east is often a sad sign: the cherubim on "the east side of the Garden of Eden" (3:24), Cain "east of Eden" (4:16), Lot "toward the east" (13:11). There was no stone in that plain, so "they used brick instead of stone, and tar instead of mortar". There is nothing wrong with bricks or building; the question is what they did with them.

7 **Read Genesis 11:1–4**

Where did the people settle? What did they want to build? What two reasons did they give?

2. Pride and fear. "Let us build for ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens": probably a ziggurat, a man-made mountain of baked brick with a temple at the top. They wanted to reach heaven their own way. Their reasons pull in opposite directions: pride, "that we may make a name for ourselves", and fear, "and not be scattered over the face of all the earth". God had said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1). Their plan was a refusal of God's command.

3. The same heart today. Cain "built a city and named it after his son Enoch" (Genesis 4:17). Babel is the same story on a bigger scale, and it is still in the human heart. We can build careers, families, reputations, even churches, for our own glory. The Bible does not tell us not to

build, but for whose name to build: "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1). "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:31).

8 **Read Psalm 127:1**

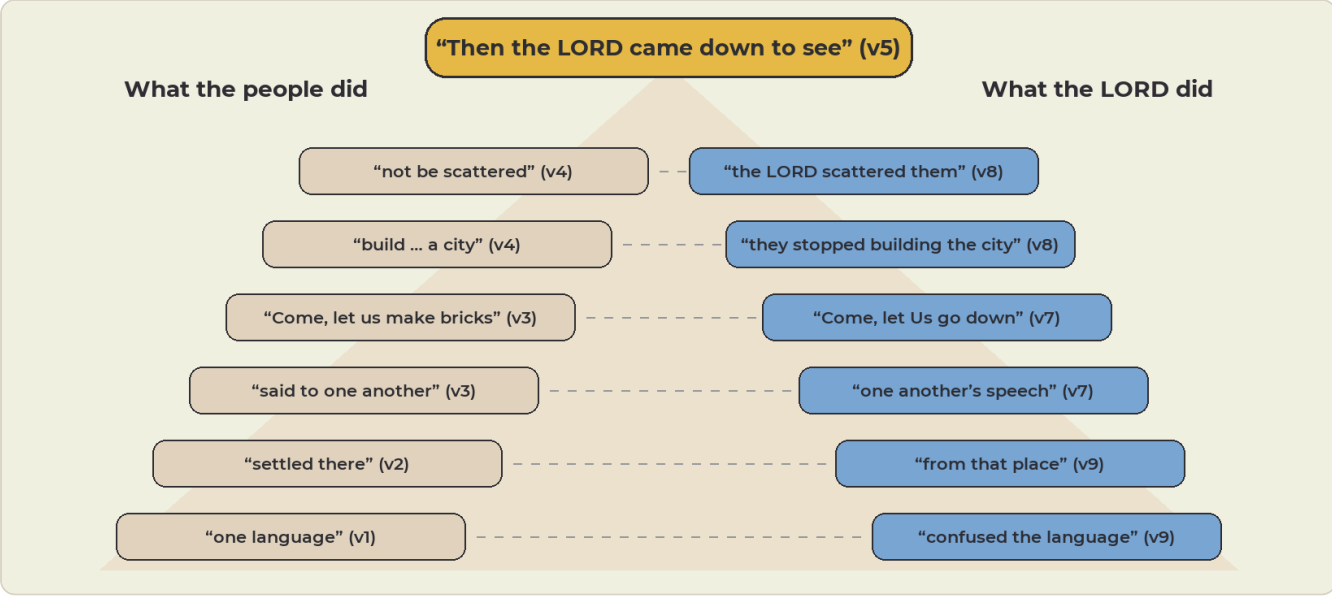
What happens when the LORD does not build the house?

4. The LORD came down to see. The tower reached "to the heavens", and yet "the LORD came down to see the city and the tower". Their pride and joy was so small that the LORD came down to see it. Kevin DeYoung put it like this: "The most impressive achievements of man, done from a heart of pride, are pathetic, minuscule accomplishments in the eyes of God." God did not need to come down to find out; the Bible speaks in a human way. He looks closely before He judges, as at Sodom: "I will go down to see if their actions fully justify the outcry that has reached Me" (Genesis 18:21). "The One enthroned in heaven laughs" (Psalm 2:4).

9 **Read Genesis 11:5–9**

What did the LORD come down to see? What did He do to their language? What happened to the people and to the city?

5. The shape of the story. The first half tells what the people did; the second half tells what the LORD did; and the words come back turned upside down. They had "one language"; the LORD "confused the language". They said, "Come, let us make bricks"; the LORD said, "Come, let Us go down". They built so that they would "not be scattered"; "the LORD scattered them". At the turning point: "the LORD came down to see".



The shape of the story: up the left side, what the people did (one language; settled there; said to one another; "Come, let us make bricks"; build a city; not be scattered); at the top, "Then the LORD came down to see" (verse 5); down the right side, what the LORD did, the same words turned upside down.

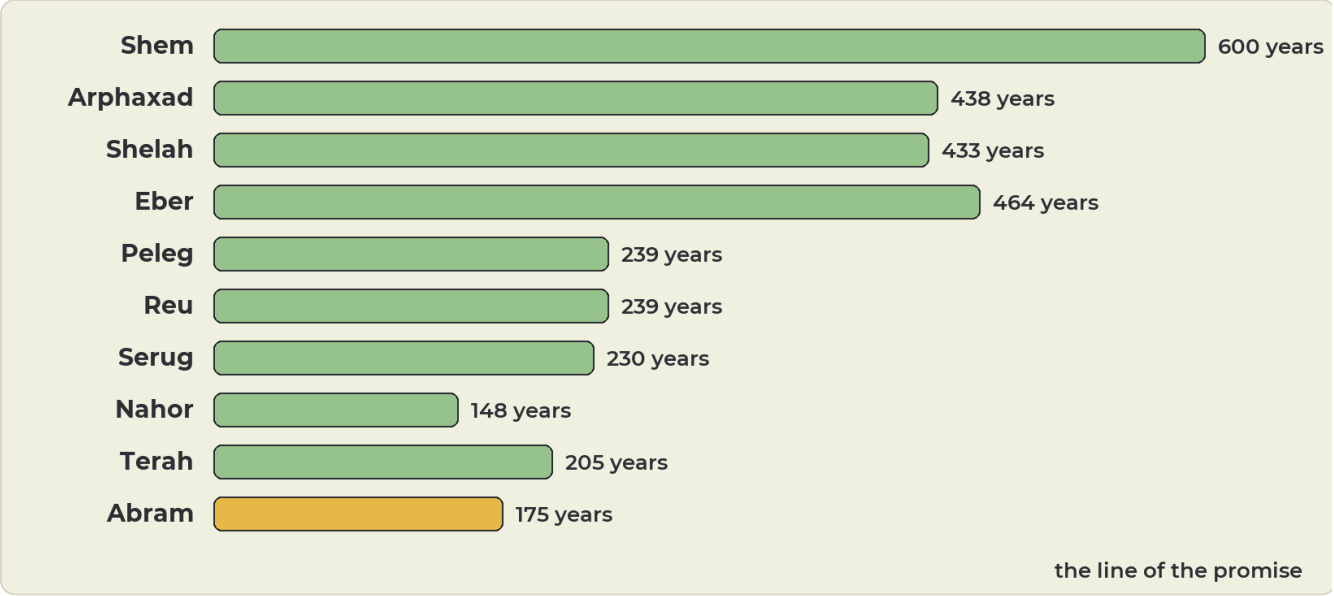
6. Judgement, and mercy. "Nothing they devise will be beyond them." A whole world united in pride against God would go from bad to worse. So God confused their language. It was a judgement: what they feared came upon them. But it was also a mercy: God held back the evil of a world united against Him. And God's purpose stood: people did fill the earth.

7. Babel and Babylon. Babel sounds like the Hebrew word for "confuse". Babylon called itself "the gate of God", but God called it confusion. Babylon runs through the whole Bible. Nebuchadnezzar boasted, "Is this not Babylon the Great, which I myself have built ... for the glory of my majesty?" (Daniel 4:30). At the end of the Bible, Babylon stands for the proud world against God: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" (Revelation 18:2).

10 **Read Daniel 4:30**

What did Nebuchadnezzar say about Babylon? For whose glory had he built it?

8. The account of Shem. The Hebrew word for "name" is "shem". The builders wanted to make a shem for themselves; God had already chosen His Shem, and the blessing would come through his line. There are ten generations from Shem to Abram, as from Adam to Noah, but here the words "and then he died" are not said: the story is heading towards the promise. Human life grows shorter, and Terah, Abram's father, "worshiped other gods" (Joshua 24:2). The line of promise ran by God's grace, not because these men were good.



Shem's line: ten generations from Shem to Abram, with the length of each life (Shem 600 years, Arphaxad 438, Shelah 433, Eber 464, Peleg 239, Reu 239, Serug 230, Nahor 148, Terah 205, Abram 175).

11 **Read Genesis 11:10–26**

How old was Shem when Arphaxad was born? Who was the father of Abram?

9. The name God gives. God said to Abram: "I will make your name great" (Genesis 12:2). Babel tried to grab a name and lost it; Abram believed God, and God gave him the name. And the Lord Jesus did the very opposite of Babel: Babel tried to climb up to heaven, but Jesus came down. "He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross." So "God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above all names" (Philippians 2:8–9).

12 **Read Philippians 2:8–11**

How did Jesus humble Himself? What name did God give Him? What will every tongue confess?

10. Babel turned around. At Pentecost, Jews "from every nation under heaven" heard the apostles declaring "the wonders of God" in their own languages. Many were from the peoples of Genesis 10: Medes (from Madai, son of Japheth), Elamites (from Elam, son of Shem), Egypt (from Mizraim, son of Ham). At Babel, man went up and God came down in judgement; at

Pentecost, Jesus had gone up and the Spirit came down in grace. "For then I will restore pure lips to the peoples, that all may call upon the name of the LORD and serve Him shoulder to shoulder" (Zephaniah 3:9).

13 **Read Acts 2:5–11**

Where were the Jews in Jerusalem from? What amazed them? What did they hear?

11. Every nation around the throne. John saw "a multitude too large to count, from every nation and tribe and people and tongue, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9). They still have their own tongues, but they sing one song. Babel tried to unite mankind around a tower; God unites people from every nation around His Son, by His blood: "by Your blood You purchased for God those from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

14 **Read Revelation 7:9–10**

Where did the great multitude come from? What did they cry out?

12. The true way to God. We cannot climb up to God; God came down to us in Christ. "No one has ascended into heaven except the One who descended from heaven—the Son of Man" (John 3:13). He says, "I am the gate. If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved" (John 10:9). We do not need to make a name for ourselves; we need to call on His name: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13).

15 **Read Romans 10:13**

Who will be saved?

PART 3

Beginnings in five minutes

Genesis 1–11 looked back on

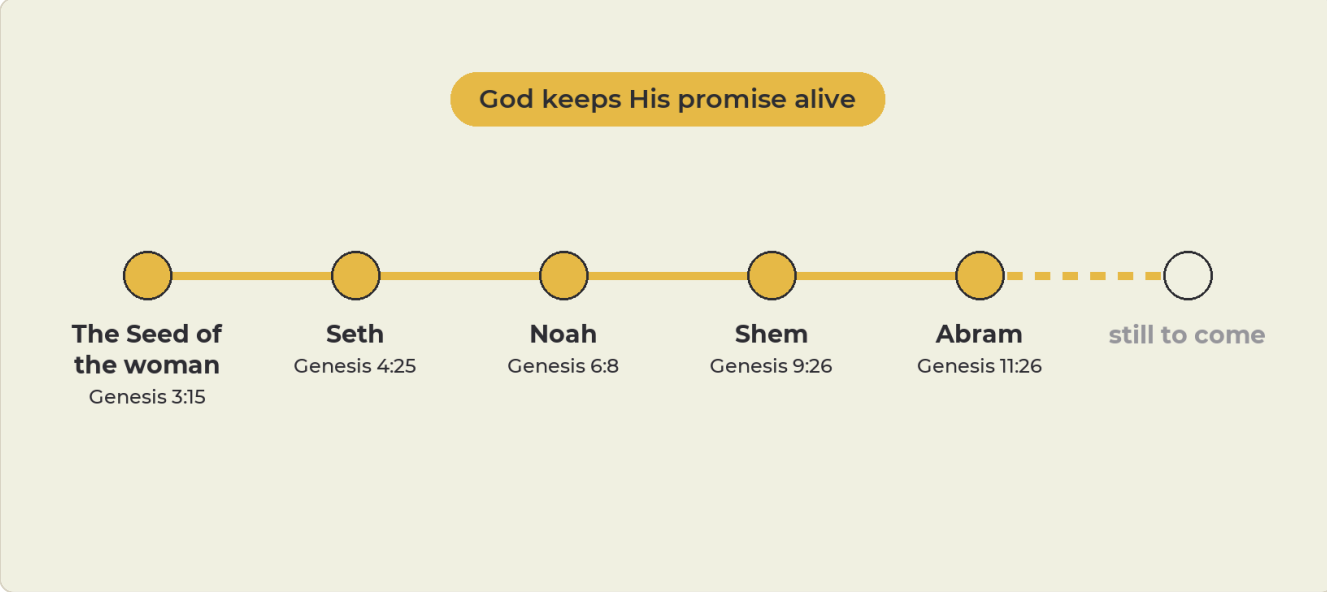
1. Creation (chapters 1–2). God created the heavens and the earth from nothing, by His word, and "it was very good" (1:31). He made man and woman in His image, gave the man work and one command, joined man and woman in marriage, and rested on the seventh day.

2. The fall (chapter 3). The serpent said, "Did God really say" (3:1)? Sin came into the world, with shame, fear and death. But God came looking for them, gave the first promise, that the Seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head (3:15), and clothed them.

3. Sin spreads (chapters 4–5). Cain killed Abel. Yet "men began to call upon the name of the LORD" (4:26). The family tree from Adam to Noah rang with "and then he died", but "Enoch walked with God" (5:24).

4. The flood (chapters 6–9). God judged a violent world, but "Noah, however, found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (6:8). Only those in the ark were saved. God made His covenant with every living creature. But Noah fell too: the flood washed the earth, not the heart.

5. The nations and Babel (chapters 10–11). All nations came from Noah's sons. At Babel they joined in pride and were scattered. Then Genesis follows the line of Shem down to Abram.



The promise thread so far: the Seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15), Seth (4:25), Noah (6:8), Shem (9:26), Abram (11:26), and still to come. God keeps His promise alive.

6. What we have learned. God is the Creator, and everything is His. Every person bears His image. Sin ruins everything it touches, and God is holy and judges sin. And God is full of grace. Adam fell, Noah fell, Babel failed, and later Israel too ended in exile in Babylon. We cannot save ourselves; we need a Saviour, sent by God.

Study 8 in summary

Every people on earth comes from one family, the sons of Noah. God rules the nations, sets their times and boundaries, and placed them where they are so that they would seek Him; and the nations of Genesis 10 are the families God promised to bless through Abram. At Babel, proud and fearful people tried to make a name for themselves and reach heaven their own way. The LORD came down, confused their language and scattered them, in judgement and in mercy. Then God followed the line of Shem down to Abram, to give the name they tried to grab. In Christ, who came down from heaven, God has reversed Babel: at Pentecost the nations heard the wonders of God in their own tongues, and at the end people from every nation will stand before the throne and before the Lamb.

THINK IT THROUGH

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What does Genesis 10 teach us about where every people on earth came from?

2. Why did the people of Babel want to build a city and a tower?

3. In what ways can we try to make a name for ourselves today?

4. What happened at Pentecost, and how is it like Babel turned around?

HIDE IT IN YOUR HEART

Memory verse for study 8

Learn this verse by heart this week. Cut out the card and keep it where you will see it.

GENESIS · STUDY 8 · MEMORY VERSE

“I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you; and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you.”

Genesis 12:3

Berean Standard Bible · biblehelp.net

“I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You.” (Psalm 119:11, BSB)

AT THE BACK

The Bible passages (BSB)

1 **Genesis 10:1–5** *[1]This is the account of Noah's sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth, who also had sons after the flood. [2]The sons of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras. [3]The sons of Gomer: Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah. [4]And the sons of Javan: Elishah, Tarshish, the Kittites, and the Rodanites. [5]From these, the maritime peoples separated into their territories, according to their languages, by clans within their nations.*

2 **Genesis 10:8–12** *[8]Cush was the father of Nimrod, who began to be a mighty one on the earth. [9]He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; so it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD." [10]His kingdom began in Babylon, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. [11]From that land he went forth into Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, [12]and Resen, which is between Nineveh and the great city of Calah.*

3 **Isaiah 19:24–25** *[24]In that day Israel will join a three-party alliance with Egypt and Assyria—a blessing upon the earth. [25]The LORD of Hosts will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt My people, Assyria My handiwork, and Israel My inheritance."*

4 **Genesis 10:21–25** *[21]And sons were also born to Shem, the older brother of Japheth; Shem was the forefather of all the sons of Eber. [22]The sons of Shem: Elam, Asshur, Arphaxad, Lud, and Aram. [23]The sons of Aram: Uz, Hul, Gether, and Mash. [24]Arphaxad was the father of Shelah, and Shelah was the father of Eber. [25]Two sons were born to Eber: One was named Peleg, because in his days the earth was divided, and his brother was named Joktan.*

5 **Acts 17:26–27** *[26]From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. [27]God intended that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.*

6 **Genesis 12:1–3** *[1]Then the LORD said to Abram, "Leave your country, your kindred, and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you. [2]I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [3]I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you; and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you."*

7 **Genesis 11:1–4** *[1]Now the whole world had one language and a common form of speech. [2]And as people journeyed eastward, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. [3]And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." So they used brick instead of stone, and tar instead of mortar. [4]"Come," they said, "let us build for ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens, that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of all the earth."*

8 **Psalm 127:1** *A song of ascents. Of Solomon. Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain; unless the LORD protects the city, its watchmen stand guard in vain.*

9 **Genesis 11:5–9** *5Then the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the sons of men were building. 6And the LORD said, "If they have begun to do this as one people speaking the same language, then nothing they devise will be beyond them. 7Come, let Us go down and confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech." 8So the LORD scattered them from there over the face of all the earth, and they stopped building the city. 9That is why it is called Babel, for there the LORD confused the language of the whole world, and from that place the LORD scattered them over the face of all the earth.*

10 **Daniel 4:30** *the king exclaimed, "Is this not Babylon the Great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?"*

11 **Genesis 11:10–26** *10This is the account of Shem. Two years after the flood, when Shem was 100 years old, he became the father of Arphaxad. 11And after he had become the father of Arphaxad, Shem lived 500 years and had other sons and daughters. 12When Arphaxad was 35 years old, he became the father of Shelah. 13And after he had become the father of Shelah, Arphaxad lived 403 years and had other sons and daughters. 14When Shelah was 30 years old, he became the father of Eber. 15And after he had become the father of Eber, Shelah lived 403 years and had other sons and daughters. 16When Eber was 34 years old, he became the father of Peleg. 17And after he had become the father of Peleg, Eber lived 430 years and had other sons and daughters. 18When Peleg was 30 years old, he became the father of Reu. 19And after he had become the father of Reu, Peleg lived 209 years and had other sons and daughters. 20When Reu was 32 years old, he became the father of Serug. 21And after he had become the father of Serug, Reu lived 207 years and had other sons and daughters. 22When Serug was 30 years old, he became the father of Nahor. 23And after he had become the father of Nahor, Serug lived 200 years and had other sons and daughters. 24When Nahor was 29 years old, he became the father of Terah. 25And after he had become the father of Terah, Nahor lived 119 years and had other sons and daughters. 26When Terah was 70 years old, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran.*

12 **Philippians 2:8–11** *8And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross. 9Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above all names, 10that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

13 **Acts 2:5–11** *5Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6And when this sound rang out, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking his own language. 7Astounded and amazed, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8How is it then that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome, 11both Jews and converts to Judaism; Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"*

14 **Revelation 7:9–10** *9After this I looked and saw a multitude too large to count, from every nation and tribe and people and tongue, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. 10And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”*

15 **Romans 10:13** *for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

Scripture: Berean Standard Bible (BSB), public domain. Quotations keep its American spelling. Like many English Bibles, it often says ‘man’, ‘he’ or ‘brothers’ where it means people in general, men and women alike.

FOR GROUP LEADERS

Study 8: The nations and the tower

> **Memory verse:** “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you; and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:3). Say it together at the end, and ask who can say it without looking.

Aims

- See from Genesis 10 that every people on earth comes from one family; that God rules the nations and set their times and boundaries so that they would seek Him (Acts 17:26–27); and that the nations of Genesis 10 are "all the families of the earth" whom God promised to bless through Abram (Genesis 12:3).
- See from Genesis 11:1–26 the proud and fearful heart that wants to make a name for itself and reach heaven its own way; the LORD who "came down to see", and judged in mercy; and God's answer to Babel: the line of Shem to Abram, the Lord Jesus who came down from heaven, Pentecost, and every nation around the throne.
- Look back over Section 1 (Genesis 1–11) and see God's promise kept alive from Eden to Abram.

Suggested timing (about 90 minutes, or three meetings)

- **5 min** Welcome and short prayer. Ask the group to read Genesis 10:1–11:26 before the meeting.
- **30 min** Part 1 video (16 min); Genesis 10, with Isaiah 19:24–25, Deuteronomy 7:7, Acts 17:26–27 and Genesis 12:1–3.
- **35 min** Part 2 video (20 min); Genesis 11:1–26, with Psalm 127:1, Daniel 4:30, Philippians 2:8–11, Acts 2:5–11 and Revelation 7:9–10.
- **10 min** Part 3 video (4 min), a recap of Section 1.
- **10 min** Reflection questions. Close in prayer, thanking God that in Christ He has come down to us, and for people of every nation who call on His name.

For most groups, take one part each week, with Part 3 added to the end of Part 2. If you do, read the passage for that part aloud together before the video.

Tips

- Genesis 10 has many hard names. Do not let the group get stuck on pronouncing them; the video reads them for you. Use the map (Part 1) to show the big picture: Japheth to the north and west, Ham mostly to the south, Shem in the middle and the east.
- The study says plainly that Genesis 10 is not a list of races, and that it leaves no room for pride in one's own people. If someone in your group has known racism, speak gently, and point to Acts 17:26 and Revelation 7:9.
- Nimrod: the study gives both readings of "a mighty hunter before the LORD" and says "we cannot be sure". There is no need to go further into the many legends about him.
- The tower was probably a ziggurat, a stepped tower with a temple at the top. The point is not the building itself but the heart behind it: "that we may make a name for ourselves".
- "Let Us go down" (11:7): the study speaks of it as in study 1, the one God speaking within Himself. Keep it short.
- The application (careers, families, reputations, even churches built for our own name) can be searching. Let each person think about it quietly before anyone shares.

- Pentecost and Revelation 7 are the heart of Part 2: God does not undo Babel by giving everyone one language, but by uniting people of every language around His Son.
- The pictures (the table of nations, the shape of the Babel story, Shem's line, and the promise thread) make a good recap of the whole of Section 1 at the next meeting.