

**Exegetical Notes, Genesis 11:1-9**  
**“Oh Say Can You See”**

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**Genesis 11:1-9**

**Verse 1**

*Now the whole world had one language and common speech.*

- Since all humanity descended from the survivors of the flood, Noah and his family, all the people had a common heritage. This heritage included language. They all spoke the same language as did Noah.

**Verse 2**

*As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.*

- Shinar is located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It is part of ancient Babylon.

**Verse 3**

*They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar.*

- Bricks were a technological innovation developed because the area lacked stones. They were made of mud and straw and sun dried.
- Because this culture used brick we know that they were technologically advanced using the most modern man-made innovations of the times. They were very modern people.

**Verse 4**

*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 and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”*

- In Genesis 9:1, God told Noah and his sons, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.” Therefore the plan of these people, as here exposed, is in direct opposition to the will of God. They proposed

- to build a city with a tower, so as to keep everyone together, that is, to prevent them from scattering so as to “fill the earth.
- They proposed to use their knowledge of technology to build a city. In the city would be a tower, commonly called a Ziggurat, which would be so high as to reach the heavens. It would serve as a rallying point for the people and as a symbol that would claim worldwide fame for them.
  - Rather than working to fulfill the plan of God, to “fill the earth”, these people designed their own plan in direct opposition to God and chose to use their own ingenuity to provide for themselves without being dependent upon God. Their plans are egotistical and proud. Their intention is to take charge of their own destiny. This is an open act of rebellion against the plan and purpose of God.

#### **Verse 5**

***But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building.***

- God came to see what the men were doing.

#### **Verse 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.”***

- If the people of the earth remain united in their attempt to flaunt the plan and purpose of God and are able to take their destiny into their own hands, then they will persist in their rebellion against God. There would be no limit to their rebellion. They would become totally godless. The whole world would become a reflection of this godless state.

#### **Verse 7**

***“Come let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”***

- The Lord, understanding the extent of mankind’s intended rebellion and the dangers thereof, proposed a simple solution. If he confused their languages so that it was difficult for them to communicate with each other, they would be less able to cooperate with each other in their rebellion against him.

### **Verse 8**

***So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.***

- The Lord “scattered them.” This was his declared intention after the flood (see 9:1). Even the best-designed plan of humanity cannot long defy the plan of God!
- This scattering stopped the building of the city with the tower in it and their plan to defy God and seek to control their own destiny.

### **Verse 9**

***That is why it was called Babel -- because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth***

- The word “BABEL” is not Hebrew in origin. It is Akkadian. It literally means, “gateway to god” and was, apparently the name of the tower these people intended to build. The Hebrew word translated “confused” is “BALAL” which sounds like Babel. The Hebrew word for Babylon is also rooted in this word. So the name of the place was “Gateway to God.” That name has become confused with the Hebrew word which means “confused” and the English word, “Babel” takes its meaning from these roots.
- The point is that languages are a reminder of one of man’s first planned rebellions against the plan and purpose of God. They serve to remind us that “the imaginations of man’s hearts are continually evil.” And they called us to submit to the plan and purpose of God.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Oh Say Can You See*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship* & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen. They are used here by permission.)