

# The tower of Babel

## Genesis 11:1–9

### Story summary

People settled in the plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. They developed the ability to fire bricks. They began building a tower to reach the heavens and make a name for themselves. God came to stop their proud plans. What began as one language, one city, and one people was turned topsy-turvy. God gave the people many languages in place of one. They quit building and scattered to fill the earth.

### Opening prayer for the teacher

*God, when we work to make names for ourselves we often forget to seek your ways. Guide me. Open my eyes to your purposes. I want to spend my strength building for you. Amen.*

### Tips for this week

Teenagers are surrounded by a culture that covets fame and popularity. Reality television shows convert unknown people into overnight sensations. Celebrity is often based on little more than popularity. Yet for all the pressure youth feel to fit in, this kind of renown is deceptive and often fleeting. The question should not be how many people have heard of us, but what we are known for.

Like the people in the Bible story, youth often feel vulnerable. More than ever before, youth are exposed to tragedy and human failings, which can sometimes lead to hopelessness. Youth are ready to be challenged to work for God's purposes on earth, which will help them find meaning in their lives.

### To do

- Select the options you will use and gather needed supplies. (See gray boxes.)
- Print enough copies of the reproducible page for each person in the group, plus a couple of extras for guests (Option #3, Sending).

### Faith focus

Work together for God's purposes.

## Bible insight

Genesis 11:1–9

By Herb Smith

### The ziggurat of Babel

During the devastating war in Iraq, U.S. troops were careful not to destroy a stately ziggurat of ancient Babylonian culture from the biblical age. This intriguing structure, which the Israelites may have seen during their exile in Babylon, probably inspired the tower of Babel narrative.

Ziggurats were swirling towers reaching skyward. The word ziggurat is derived from *zagaru*, meaning “tall” or “lofty.” They were sacred monuments with ramps that were meant to reach literally to the heavens. We believe that originally the ziggurats were brilliantly color-coded in seven distinct stories. Each story represented a sphere of the heavens ruled by a major heavenly body, including the sun, moon, and visible planets. Rather than the colorless barren architecture that is all that remains today, it is believed that the towers had fragrant flowers in verdant gardens planted on different levels. Recall the legendary hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The story of the tower of Babel is thought by some to refer to the temple of Marduk called Etemanaki. This immense structure, upon which the pyramids of Egypt may have been modeled, is described in ancient clay cuneiform tablets. According to Babylonian mythology, Marduk became the chief god in the Babylonian pantheon by defeating the monster Tiamat. It is written that his tower reached heavenward toward the boundless sky called Apsu. Like so many of the world's great religious monuments, it was thought to represent a cosmic mountain rising from a primordial sea.

This was an age in which many believed that Milky Way stars were very close to the earth. The heavenly bodies were thought to hover just above the horizon, perhaps attached to a firmament. To construct a magical stairway to promenade to the abode of the gods was thought to be possible. The ancient Egyptians sometimes even buried a miniature ladder with their pharaohs to help them climb to the stars.

### Myriad languages

In the Genesis account, the tower of Babel is viewed as a symbol of exaggerated, unwarranted, and even self-destructive human pride. As an etiological story, one designed to describe the origin of a custom, it is also seen as a narrative to explain the multiplicity of languages. Today there are a myriad of languages and dialects in our world culture. In China alone there are at least two-hundred and thirty-five major languages spoken, many unintelligible to one another. During the biblical age, many Semitic dialects and Afro-Asiatic languages existed.

Thought to have been written during the exile, the period when the Israelites had been carried away by Nebuchadnezzar after the destruction of Jerusalem, this narrative critiques the oppressor. The term *babel*, which inspired the name Babylon, originally meant “gate of God.” In Genesis 11:9 it is interpreted as “confused.” Today we use the term babbling to mean incoherent speech. In their culture shock the captive Israelites might have experienced the foreign language of their captors as baffle.

### Building for ourselves; building for God

The Babylonians built a tower out of chest-thumping pride. They baked the bricks in the stiflingly hot desert terrain and stacked them high. These religious architects desired to make a name for themselves rather than to honor and glorify God.

This story can also be seen as applicable today. Metaphorically, we build our interior towers of pride, fortified by our own self-effort rather than trusting in God. When we remove these towers, we open the possibility of drawing closer to God. We are asked to build for God's purposes, not our own.

## Gathering

1. Play “Fame game.” Read the following questions aloud and ask youth to call out their answers.

- Who is known for creating a popular software system that brought him great wealth? (Bill Gates)
- Who is famous for his hair, fortune, and the line, “You’re fired”? (Donald Trump)
- What European tower is famous for the unusual way it is standing? (Leaning Tower of Pisa)
- What name of a well-known chain of stores begins with the first three letters of the owner’s last name? (Wal-mart)
- What boat’s story is linked to an iceberg? (Titanic)
- What person is famous for being the youngest player to win all four major golf titles? (Tiger Woods)
- Who is the most recent president of the United States? (Barack Obama)
- Who is famous for working with poor people in Calcutta, India? (Mother Teresa)
- Who is the most popular person in your school, and why?

2. Wrap up the game by inviting youth to think about what they’d like to be remembered for some day. Invite youth to keep this hope for fame in mind during the session.

3. Move into a brief time of sharing joys and concerns.

4. Pray, saying these words or your own.

**God, many possible paths lie in front of us. Let our first priority be to honor you. Make us into team players who work for you. Amen.**

### Faith focus

Work together for God’s purposes.

### Teaching tip

Sharing times, even brief ones, help to build community. Some youth have little connection with each other apart from group meetings. Check-in times help youth to be aware of what is happening in others’ lives.

## Sharing the Bible story

Divide the group into two or three sections. Everyone will read Genesis 11:1–4 in unison. The rest of the verses will be read in the style of a round. One group will read verses 5–9. Once that group reaches the end of verse 6, the second group begins reading verses 5–9. When the second group reaches the end of verse 6, the third group begins reading verses 5–9. Each group should continue reading through verse 9.

### Teaching tip

Reading today’s Bible story in a round reinforces the difficulties that are created when people work at odds with each other. Youth will retain the sense of the passage because they are reading, even though others are reading different verses at the same time. If you like, reread Genesis 11:5–9 to be sure all have heard it clearly.

### Teaching tip

Today’s story should be seen in the context of the larger saga of Genesis. In the garden of Eden, people were not content to enjoy the blessings that God had provided for them. In this Bible story, people also try to grab what they think is good rather than being centered on God.

### Talk about why

you think the people in today’s Bible story wanted to make a name for themselves. If they had been successful in finishing their tower, would they have been satisfied? What is the difference between working for God and working for ourselves?

**Distribute a block** to each group member. Ask youth to think about methods people use today to find security or fame (for example, they may master a skill, try to become wealthy, surround themselves with popular people, do something outrageous). Invite youth to write their answers on sticky notes, and then stick the notes to the sides of their blocks.

As youth share what they wrote, they may add their blocks to the stack and form a tower.

**Supplies:** blocks, sticky notes, pens or pencils

*More ideas on page 12.*

**Invite the group** to share about the best experience they have had working together with others for a common goal. What makes a team successful? What hinders a group's progress? Invite youth to share a favorite memory of being part of a team that showed God's love, mercy, or justice.

Pass out copies of the reproducible page and invite volunteers to read "A different kind of building." Discuss how this story inspires you. What do you find challenging about the Fullers' life story? Why do you think Habitat for Humanity has been widely recognized? What would it be like to be part of a Habitat team? If any group members have participated in a Habitat team or similar project, have them tell about it.

**Supplies:** copies of the reproducible page

## Teaching tip

One solution is to create paper tubes or triangular sections by folding the sheets lengthwise. Let the youth struggle a bit before offering suggestions.

**Ask each person** to write one word on a sheet of paper summing up what it takes to be a good team player. Then challenge the group to build the tallest free-standing tower they can, using only these papers as building supplies. Have tape nearby but do not draw attention to it.

Talk about this experience. What were the challenges? How did group members use their skills together? What words did people write on their papers? Which of these qualities did people show during the exercise?

**Supplies:** paper, pens or pencils, tape

## Other ideas

- Invite youth to reflect quietly on the skills they possess. How would they like to use these skills to work for God's purposes? Encourage youth to think of ways to apply their answers to their lives now.
- Explore the way biblical writers used various storytelling methods to help people understand God and find answers to their questions. Invite your pastor or church librarian to help you find commentaries and other resources.

## Sending

1. Invite a volunteer to lead the litany on the reproducible page and everyone else to read the part labeled "All."
2. Ask everyone to stand in a circle and join hands. Then invite them to take a step backwards so that their arms become taut, in order to feel the strength of standing together.
3. Read this blessing as a closing for today's session.

**I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen** (Ephesians 3:18–21).

## Faith focus

Work together for God's purposes.



# A different kind of building

**S**ome might call Millard Fuller downwardly mobile. His was a story of rapid wealth, a radical decision, and renewed focus. Fuller came from humble beginnings. While in college, he and a friend began a marketing business. By age 29, Fuller was a millionaire. However, his health, marriage, and integrity struggled as his wealth grew.

Fuller examined his life. He renewed his Christian commitment and reconciled with his wife. Millard and his wife then made a dramatic decision. They sold all they had and gave their money to the poor.



Eventually, the Fullers worked with others to develop a housing ministry. Homes were built for people in need, who contributed to the project by working alongside the team. These new homeowners also helped build homes for others. Fuller's family tested the project in Africa, where it was successful. In 1973, Fuller and some friends created an organization called Habitat for Humanity International.

In 1996, former United States president Bill Clinton gave Fuller the Presidential Medal of Freedom. This award is the highest honor a U.S. civilian can receive. Clinton called Habitat for Humanity "the most successful continuous community service project in the history of the United States."



Habitat For Humanity volunteers constructing a house in Seattle's eastern suburbs.



**One:** God, I am only one person,

**All:** but joined with others, I am part of a powerful force.

**One:** It's tempting to only look out for myself.

**All:** Show me the needs of others.

**One:** Instead of building a monument to myself

**All:** I will partner with others to work for you,

**One:** now and always. Amen.

