

## **The Coming of the Holy Spirit - the Day of Pentecost**

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Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church

Farmington, NM

**Genesis 11:1-9** Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. **2** As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

**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. **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; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

**5** But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. **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. **7** Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

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

**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.

### **"Divine Intervention"**

Awe fills the imagination over the Seven Wonders of the Ancient world. The descriptions of those amazing monuments are very impressive. Then it sinks in that, the Great Pyramid at Giza, for example, was constructed between 2584 and 2561 BC. To be honest, I would be incapable of putting up anything more complicated than a tent for camping, so I'm not an expert on modern building techniques. But I have to believe it would be a lot easier to put up the Hanging Gardens of Babylon or the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus or Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, the Colossus of Rhodes or Lighthouse of Alexandria with the tools and technology, the cranes and equipment we have today. Of all those Seven Wonders, personally it seems the Great Pyramid of Giza is the most impressive. And not only because it was the tallest man-made structure for almost 4,000 years. Even more impressive is the fact that it's the only one of those wonders still standing. One or two may have been damaged in war or destroyed by a mob. But almost all the rest were toppled by earthquakes. It's a simple reality of life on this planet. Few things last very long. Even the greatest accomplishments crumble to dust.

That makes God's message for us from Genesis chapter 11 even more impressive. Human beings can do some amazing things when they unite and resolve to achieve something monumental. But this episode of the Tower of Babel illustrates how much greater is God's resolve. God is determined to intervene in human history. His intervention so often means prevention. He intervenes to prevent us from truly making a mess of our lives. He intervenes to keep his plans on track. He intervenes for the benefit of his people. So his divine intervention means salvation.

A little background to this event is helpful before we dive into God's intervention in Genesis 11. After Noah and his family disembarked onto dry land after the flood, God gave people

the command to spread out and repopulate the earth. Moses writing this record in Genesis doesn't give us the exact chronology of how things go. But it doesn't take long for human beings to call an audible and carry out their gameplan. Together they head for a nice fertile plain in what is now Iraq. And from one perspective, it was a great spot to build a community. The broad valley had plenty of water, making it fertile for growing crops and feeding a large group of people. Once they built the city, it could provide safety and security for this growing population.

Building a city and constructing a tower weren't problems just in themselves. It wasn't in the cooperation or the building techniques or the timing of the project itself. They betray the sinister motives of this monument: **"Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."** (Genesis 11:4) It's hard to say if they were literally trying to climb their way up to heaven. But the rebelliousness in their hearts is undeniable. Their goal isn't to glorify God. They want fame for themselves. They aren't interested in honoring God's name as they spread across the globe. By congregating together in one impressive city they were directly rebelling against his command to scatter. Not just a monument to human ingenuity and determination, but it was planned and constructed as a monument to human pride and arrogant defiance to God.

So God determines to intervene: **"But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building."** (Genesis 11:5) He has to. He can't let them continue on the disastrous path they have chosen for themselves.

And here's where we might be inclined to take the side of the builders of Babel. Why is God even sticking his nose into their business in the first place? Shouldn't free will mean they are allowed to make their own choices for themselves? And if things go poorly, they will just have to suffer the consequences? If God wants to offer suggestions for how people should live their lives, why can't he just leave the rest to us? It's the same human impulse inside all of us that doesn't want to answer to anyone else and we don't feel like we need anyone looking over our shoulders. When it comes to the most personal and private matters in life, we want some independence to do our own thing. We don't need God sticking his nose in our bedroom, giving us a list of dos and don'ts about our expressions of sexuality. We don't need God nosing around in our finances. What I make and how I spend my money are none of his concern. I'll go where I want and do what I want. I have my own goals for life and if I need God's input, I'll ask him about any moral concerns. No bricks. No mortar. But still we construct our own monuments of sinful rebellion against God.

Some attitudes are more concerning than the open, outright rebellion that is so easy to spot. It's easy to look down on the people who are building towers of idolatry and fail to see our own projects piling up bricks of pride. It's easy to spot the materialistic people in our community, because they have so much more material than I do. Others aren't even trying hard since they are taking government handouts. So many of us are buying into this narrative of decline. It essentially says that our society is in a tailspin. Things are bad and getting worse. And so we need to do whatever necessary for Christians to reestablish cultural dominance. And if we need to adopt the tactics of non-Christians to get that might

and power, than we have to do what we have to do. It's a different kind of monument. We pay lip service to serving God, but only after we do things our way on our own terms, then we'll get back to doing things his way. God needs to get rid of those unbelieving rebels and give them what they deserve. At the root of our efforts is the attitude that says: My way is better than God's plan. We've made pretty good progress on our own building projects, erecting monuments built on our own pride and Pharisaical arrogance.

There is good news for you and me. It's the same good news the people of Babel had to experience. It's the good news of divine intervention. In their case, God stepped in to prevent anything more dangerous than just building a tower in a great city: **"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. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."** (Genesis 11:6,7) God's intervention means prevention. God needed to intervene to prevent destruction. This tower would just be a rallying point providing unity of purpose and giving a symbol of defiance against God. Their idolatry would take over and push God out of the picture. And if they would succeed in establishing one common center instead of spreading out, then defiance idolatry would completely replace worship of the true Savior. God had been standing by long enough. He had to intervene to prevent humanity from self-destructing.

I wish it were more rare, but I know many of you are familiar with interventions done for family members or friends. You have watched someone you love head down a path of self-destruction for too long. You can't just stand by and let it end in ruin. You have to step in. You have to do something. Say something. And the results aren't always positive. When you hold an intervention for someone they will probably get upset. Denial. Excuses. Anger. Accusations of hypocrisy. But at the very least you pray, you pray that you will get through to them that you care. You are so concerned about what they are doing, you are willing to take their abuse. But you won't tolerate their destructive behavior any longer.

Divine intervention might not always be pleasant. But God's intervention for prevention of self-destruction lets us know he cares. That's why we have Pentecost. On Pentecost God intervenes again. This time his divine intervention means sending the Holy Spirit to reverse the curse of Babel. At Babel **"the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and...the Lord confused the language of the whole world."** (Genesis 11:8,9) At Pentecost he brought people from all over the world to Jerusalem. He sent his Holy Spirit to his disciples so they could speak his message to all those people from all those countries. Sending the Holy Spirit was divine intervention to save.

Pentecost shows us God's resolution is more powerful than sinful human ambitions. Divine intervention often means feelings of intimidation and terror. When Moses brought the Law of God down from Mount Sinai there were thunders and lightning (Exodus 19:16). But when the Holy Spirit came there was a firmly blowing wind, bringing the good news of Jesus to terrified hearts. On Sinai descended in the fire of holy wrath and indignation against sin, but on Pentecost the fire of love and holy affection took control of the Apostles. (Johann Gerhard, Sacred Meditations, p. 118,119)

We live in a world still reeling from the divine intervention at Babel. The cross of Jesus might seem like chaos and confusion from a purely human perspective. Jesus lowered himself by becoming a humble human being to save people from shame and guilt. Jesus was treated shamefully on the cross. At the cross Jesus conquered the rebellion of hearts hell-bent on eternal destruction. Jesus endured the cross to break the power of pride inside us.

Pentecost celebrates everything Jesus came to this earth to accomplish. It takes the perfect obedience he lived out and the sacrificial death on the cross and the triumphant resurrection from the grave and makes it personal. The Holy Spirit does more than just overcome language and cultural barriers. The Holy Spirit gives us trust that Jesus carried out God's ultimate divine intervention to save souls. Yours and mine. The Holy Spirit gives us the love of Christ which then enables us to love strangers, sisters, and brothers.

The quest to build the world's tallest building has an ancient history. For almost four thousand years, the Great Pyramid of Giza, Egypt, held the title. Then there was the Lincoln Cathedral in England, finished in 1311. Much later, the Washington Monument, the Eiffel Tower, and, most famously, the Empire State Building each became the world's tallest building. Towers of Babel? Perhaps. But towers come down—not only in New York, but also in England, where the spire of the Lincoln Cathedral was destroyed in a storm, and even in Egypt, where the Great Pyramid has lost more than twenty-five feet to erosion. Human achievements are always passing.

By contrast, Pentecost is God's monument to his intervention for salvation. The work of twelve confused men and a handful of others not only brought three thousand to faith in one day but also built a Church that will stand until the end of time—because it was the work not of human hands but of the Spirit and of the Son and of his Father. God still intervenes. God still gives his Holy Spirit through the Gospel. He gathers his people together to hear his Word for their growth in the faith. He gathers them around his altar to give them forgiveness in the body and blood of Jesus. Divine intervention still takes place when the Pentecost monument of the church is built, soul by soul, when the pride and rebellion of unbelief comes crashing down to dust.

You've probably heard of Johann Sebastian Bach before. But you probably didn't know that before you began composing a new piece he would bow his head and pray that Jesus would show his glory through the music Bach wrote. So at the top of the page, he would write "JJ" as a visual reminder that he was working for God's glory. He kept composing and editing. When he was finally satisfied, he would write the letters SDG at the bottom of the page. SDG stands for the Latin phrase Soli Dei Gloria "for the Glory of God alone." Today, JS Bach has built a monumental reputation. But his true goal in life was that whenever his music was played, it would all point toward God.

Whenever we are tempted to rebel against God and make a name for ourselves, may God intervene. May God come with divine intervention to prevent our self-destruction. May God intervene with his Holy Spirit. May God come with divine intervention to fill our hearts with the love of Christ so we give all glory to God alone. Amen.