

Babel and the Scattering

Genesis 10–11

Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the Table of Nations makes every people on earth one family, that Babel is humanity's project of self-made unity and a self-made name, and that God's scattering is both judgment and mercy, setting the stage for one man through whom all those scattered families will be blessed.

Catholic Touchstone. The unity of the human race (CCC 360–361); the dispersion of the nations as God's limit on fallen pride (CCC 57); the gathering of the nations that begins with Abraham (CCC 60, 762) and is unveiled at Pentecost (CCC 731–732, 767).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Chapter 10, the Table of Nations, looks like the least promising page in Genesis and is one of the most radical. Traditionally counted at seventy, the nations all descend from Noah's three sons: which means the neighbors, rivals, and enemies of Israel's story stand listed as family. Ancient peoples did not, as a rule, write their rivals into their own family trees; Israel did. Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Canaan: cousins. The Catechism draws the straight line: because of the one origin, the human race forms a unity, and no one is a stranger by nature (CCC 360–361). Your group tallied the nations at home; harvest that first.

Notice the narrative order: chapter 10 already shows the nations spread abroad, “each with his own language” (10:5), and then chapter 11 opens with “the whole earth had one language.” Hebrew narrative often works this way: state the outcome, then flash back to explain it. Chapter 11 is the flashback that answers chapter 10's quiet question: how did one family become seventy nations that cannot understand each other?

Read Babel's project in its own words (11:3–4): “Come, let us make bricks... Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered.” Three things to see. First, the tower is best heard against the ziggurat, the staircase-temple of Mesopotamia its first audience knew: religion as self-ascent, a stairway we build to heaven. Second, “let us make a name for ourselves” is the creature grasping what only God can give; remember that the promise line runs through Shem, whose name literally means “Name.” Third, “lest we be scattered” is direct defiance: God's blessing-command was to fill the earth (9:1); they huddle instead. Babel is fallen unity: one language, one project, one fist.

Then the Bible's driest joke: the tower has “its top in the heavens,” and the LORD has to “come down” even to see it (11:5). The narrator is not describing divine nearsightedness; he is measuring the tower. All human self-ascent, viewed from heaven, is a thing God stoops to inspect. The divine “Come, let us go down” (11:7) answers the builders' “Come, let us” word for word, and echoes the divine plural of 1:26, a plural the tradition reads variously (deliberation, majesty, the heavenly court, and, in Christian retrospect, a shadow of the Trinity): heaven's “let us” answering earth's. The confusion of language ends the project without a single casualty: Babel is judged by group text thread. And the name they grasped becomes a pun: Babylon called itself “the gate of the god”; Genesis files it under *balal*, “to confuse” (English's “babble” is a happy accident of sound, not the Hebrew).

Is the scattering only punishment? The Catechism reads it deeper: the division into many nations is “intended to limit the pride of a fallen humanity,” united only in perverse ambition (CCC 57). A fallen race with one language and one will can concentrate evil without brakes; scattering is a mercy that decentralizes it, the social twin of the locked gate of Eden. But God does not abandon His goal of unity; He changes its source. The very next passage (11:10–32) walks the toledot of Shem down to one childless man in Ur, and next session God will speak to him a promise built to reverse Babel point by point. Unity will come, but given, not grasped; and the group’s sealed guesses come out of the envelope in two weeks.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The New Testament’s answer to Babel has a date: Pentecost. At Babel, one language becomes many and the nations scatter from a tower; at Pentecost, the Spirit descends on the Church and “each one heard them speaking in his own language” (Acts 2:6); the crowd list in Acts 2:9–11 reads like the Table of Nations reconvened. God does not restore a single human language; He makes the one Gospel at home in every language. Unity without uniformity: the Catholic thing.

The prophets saw it coming. Zephaniah promises a day when God will “change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord” (Zephaniah 3:9): the un-babbling of the world, aimed not at a tower but at worship. And the book of Revelation shows the finished gathering: “a great multitude... from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues,” standing not around a tower they built but before a throne and the Lamb (Revelation 7:9–10).

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Augustine · *The City of God, Book XVI*

Continuing the story of the two cities he began with Cain and Abel, St. Augustine teaches, in substance, that Babel is the earthly city’s signature project: proud unity, organized around love of self and its own exaltation. The study’s gloss on his two cities: the city of God is built in the opposite direction, not man ascending by his own stairway but God descending to dwell with the humble.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom · *Homilies on Genesis*

St. John Chrysostom teaches, in substance, that even this judgment is medicinal: God’s gentleness appears in the fact that no one at Babel is destroyed. The confusion of tongues halts the project of pride without destroying a single builder, and the scattering plants the nations across the earth God had commanded them to fill in the first place.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH

St. Gregory of Nazianzus · *Oration 41, On Pentecost*

Preaching on Pentecost, St. Gregory teaches, in substance, that the old division of tongues, which once broke an evil harmony of pride, is answered by a new distribution of tongues from the Spirit, which builds a holy harmony of faith: many languages, one confession. What was scattered in judgment is gathered in gift, and the difference between the two miracles is the difference between

grasping heaven and receiving it.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- CCC 360–361: because of its common origin the human race forms a unity; the law of human solidarity and charity assures us that all men are truly brethren.
- CCC 57: the dispersion into many nations, a state at once cosmic, social, and religious, is intended to limit the pride of a fallen humanity, united in perverse ambition as at Babel.
- CCC 60: the people descended from Abraham will be the trustees of the promise, called to prepare the gathering of all God's scattered children into the unity of the Church.
- CCC 762: the remote preparation for the gathering of the People of God begins with the call of Abraham, through whom all the nations will be blessed.
- CCC 731–732: at Pentecost the Holy Spirit is poured out and the Church is manifested to the world; the age of the Church, the age of the gathering, begins.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

- NAME THREAD: Babel grasps a name; next session God gives one: “I will... make your name great” (12:2). The promise line runs through Shem (“Name”). Do not preview 12:2 tonight; let the contrast detonate next week.
- NATIONS THREAD: the seventy families of chapter 10 are the address list for 12:3, “all the families of the earth.” When the group meets that verse next session, chapter 10 is who it means. Plant nothing; harvest then.
- SEED THREAD: 11:10–32 narrows Shem's toledot to Terah, to Abram, and lands on a landmine: “Sarai was barren; she had no child” (11:30). The whole promise is about to be hung on an impossibility. Note it silently.
- Two-cities thread (from Session 4's Augustine voice) surfaces explicitly tonight in his Book XVI voice; you may draw the line aloud from Cain's city to Babel.
- SEALED GUESSES: reveal in Session 8. Remind yourself, not the group, to bring the envelope in two weeks.

SESSION GOALS

1. The group harvests the Table of Nations homework and articulates why chapter 10 makes racism, ethnic supremacy, and idolatrous nationalism theologically impossible (rightly ordered love of one's own country remains a virtue: CCC 2239).
2. The group reads Babel's project in its own words and names its three moves: self-ascent, self-naming, self-gathering.
3. The group can state how the scattering is both judgment and mercy (CCC 57).
4. The group discovers Acts 2 as Babel's reversal by live discovery, including the echo between the two crowd lists.
5. Each participant identifies one “tower” in their own life: a project of self-made security or self-made name, and one act of receiving instead of grasping.

TIMED PLAN (75–90 MINUTES)

- Welcome and opening prayer (5 min)

- Win questions (10 min)
- Build: harvest the nations tally, Q1 on chapter 10 (15 min)
- Build: read 11:1-9 aloud, Q2-Q3 on the tower (25 min)
- Steelman (15 min)
- Live discovery: Acts 2 and Zephaniah 3:9; Send, Live It, memory verse, closing prayer (15 min)

If time runs short: *Cut the Dig Deeper first, then fold Q1's harvest into a two-minute summary you give yourself. Never cut the Acts 2 discovery; the session exists to land there.*

Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

Father, we have all built towers, and we have all wanted a name. Tonight, come down to us: not to scatter, but to gather; not to confuse, but to teach us the pure speech of Your praise. Make this little room a Pentecost, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · OPEN THE ROOM

W1. What is the biggest group project you have ever been part of, and what held it together or broke it apart?

W2. Where does your family actually come from, as far back as you know? Has knowing (or not knowing) shaped you?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

Open with the homework harvest before any reading: “How many nations did you tally in chapter 10? And what does everyone on the list have in common?” Then read 11:1–9 aloud with one narrator; it is only nine verses, and it lands best whole.

Q1. Chapter 10 lists roughly seventy nations, including Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, and Babylon: every future enemy of Israel. What is this chapter claiming about them by putting them in this genealogy? And what does the claim make impossible?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It claims they are all family: one blood, three brothers, one father off the ark, one origin in God. Ancient peoples did not, as a rule, write their enemies into their family trees; Israel did. Israel's Scriptures open the story of the nations by declaring them cousins.

The claim makes every theology of natural superiority impossible. There are no separate creations, no master bloodlines; God “made from one every nation of men” (as Paul will tell Athens in Acts 17:26). The Catechism draws the conclusion: the human race forms a unity, and solidarity is not a policy preference but a fact of our origin (CCC 360–361). Racism is not just uncharitable; in Genesis, it is illiterate.

Q2. Read the builders' speech in 11:3–4 like prosecutors. What exactly do they want? Find the three moves in their own words, and test each one against what God has already said or done in Genesis so far.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Move one: a tower “with its top in the heavens”: self-ascent, a staircase-temple, religion in which heaven is reached by human construction. Against it: everything so far has come down from God: breath, garden, covenant, bow.

Move two: “let us make a name for ourselves”: self-naming, grasping significance as a possession. Against it: names in Genesis are given (Adam names the animals as God's deputy; God will soon give Abram both a great name and a new name). Move three: “lest we be scattered”: self-gathering in direct defiance of “fill the earth” (9:1). Fallen unity: one language, one project, one fist, aimed at heaven.

Q3. Now watch God's response in 11:5–9. What is the narrator doing with “the LORD came down to see”? Whose words does the divine “Come, let us” echo? And is anyone killed in this judgment?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

“Came down to see” is the driest line in Genesis: the tower with its “top in the heavens” is so far from heaven that God stoops to inspect it. The narrator is measuring human self-exaltation from above, and the measurement is comic. The divine “Come, let us go down” answers the builders’ “Come, let us make... let us build” word for word: heaven’s own “let us” answering the earthly one, in the same plural we heard at 1:26 (however one reads that plural: deliberation, majesty, the heavenly court, or a trinitarian shadow).

And no one dies. The judgment is a confusion of speech: the project simply becomes impossible to coordinate. Compare the flood and feel the restraint. St. John Chrysostom read this as medicinal judgment: pride halted without a single death, and the builders dispersed to fill the earth as originally blessed. Judgment and mercy in one act; hold both.

BUILD, THEN PRESS · STEELMAN

Build it at full strength.

“Babel is an obvious etiological myth: a just-so story explaining why languages exist, and linguistics has long since explained that better. Worse, the God of this story looks threatened: ‘this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.’ A deity who kneecaps human cooperation and achievement, from a tower to who knows what next, is anti-progress and insecure. Modern people building vaccines and rockets should read Babel as the villain origin story of religious fear of human greatness.”

Press it: many in the room work in building, tech, medicine, trades. Is God against the work of their hands?

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

On genre, hold the honest line from previous weeks: Genesis 1–11 is primeval history, inspired narration of real spiritual facts in figurative dress (compare how the Church describes Genesis 3’s language in CCC 390). The Church does not stake the faith on a linguistics claim, and the chapter is visibly uninterested in phonetics; it is interested in pride. Judge it by what it asserts.

Then read 11:6 in context instead of in isolation. God is not threatened; the narrator has just spent a verse establishing that the tower is laughably far from heaven. “Nothing they propose will be impossible” is not fear of human ability; it is clear-eyed assessment of human ambition with no brakes: a fallen race, one language, one will, and unanimity in the wrong direction. The twentieth century ran the experiment: our most efficient horrors required exactly Babel’s ingredients, mass coordination plus self-deifying ideology. The Catechism says the dispersion is “intended to limit the pride of a fallen humanity” (CCC 57): God decentralizing evil, the way Eden’s locked gate kept fallen man from immortalizing his fallen state. That is not anti-progress; it is a tourniquet.

And God is not against building; He is against towers that replace Him. The same Bible ends with a city, the new Jerusalem, and fills the meantime with commanded construction: an ark, a tabernacle, a temple: and, at the end, a Church that Christ Himself builds (“I will build my church,”

Matthew 16:18). The difference is direction: Babel is man storming heaven for his own name; the Gospel is God coming down (the true “came down”) to give His name to us. Work, invent, build; the question of Babel is only ever whose name goes on the tower. (And a prudence note for the room: ambition, career, and reasonable security are not automatically towers; Babel is diagnosed by self-naming and “lest we be scattered” defiance, not by effort.)

LIVE DISCOVERY

Live discovery. Send one reader to Acts 2:1–11 and another to Zephaniah 3:9. Read Acts first, slowly, including the list of nations in verses 9–11. Ask: “What is being undone here, and how? Notice what God does not do: does He restore one language?” Then read Zephaniah.

ANSWER · SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Pentecost reverses Babel: the Spirit comes down (again, the descent), and the scattered nations, listed like a reconvened Table of Nations, each hear the mighty works of God in their own tongue. God does not reinstate a single language; He makes the one Gospel at home in every language. Unity without uniformity: one faith, every tongue, which is the Catholic Church's actual Sunday morning across the earth. St. Gregory of Nazianzus preached exactly this contrast: tongues once divided to break a proud harmony, tongues now distributed to build a holy one.

Zephaniah shows the goal was promised all along: speech purified “that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.” The un-babbling of the world ends not in a tower but in worship: a name called upon, not constructed. That is where this study's name thread is heading, starting next week with a man to whom God says: I will make your name great.

DIG DEEPER · SEVENTY NATIONS, SEVENTY MISSIONARIES

Jewish tradition counted the nations of Genesis 10 at seventy, and St. Luke reports that Jesus, after sending the Twelve to Israel, appointed “seventy others” and sent them out ahead of Him (Luke 10:1): a number many Fathers and commentators heard as the nations of Genesis 10 in miniature, the Gospel's advance team for the whole Table of Nations. Whether or not the echo was intended, the trajectory is certain: the mission was always addressed to everyone on the list.

SEND · OUT THE DOOR

S1. What tower are you building right now: the project or achievement you are quietly trusting to give you a name and keep you safe from scattering? What would it mean to receive from God what you are trying to construct?

S2. Pentecost makes the Gospel at home in every language and culture. Whose “language” (a person, a generation, a workplace culture) is God asking you to learn to speak this year?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Name your tower in one written sentence. Then write beneath it the given alternative: what God has already promised you that the tower is trying to fake.

- Pray this week for one nation from which your family does not come: pick it deliberately, learn one fact about the Church there, and ask God to bless it by name.
- At Mass this Sunday, listen for the moment the whole assembly speaks with one voice, and hear it as Zephaniah 3:9 happening to you.
- Read Genesis 12–14 before next session. Read chapter 12's first three verses twice, and bring an answer to this: what has God promised this man, exactly?

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Yes, at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord.” (Zephaniah 3:9)

CLOSING PRAYER

Come down to us, Lord, as You came down at Babel and at Pentecost: not to scatter but to gather, not to end our work but to save it from our pride. Give us Your name, teach us the pure speech of Your praise, and send us to every family of the earth. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in the Discussion Guide, in order.

Where It Is Used	Passage
Homework harvest	Genesis 10
Q1 one family	Genesis 10:5, 10:32; Acts 17:26
Read aloud	Genesis 11:1–9
Q2 the builders' speech	Genesis 11:3–4 with 9:1
Q3 the descent	Genesis 11:5–9 with 1:26
Steelman answer	Genesis 11:6; CCC 57, 360–361
Live discovery	Acts 2:1–11; Zephaniah 3:9
Dig Deeper	Luke 10:1
The narrowing line	Genesis 11:10–32
Memory verse	Zephaniah 3:9