

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 4

Genealogies, Floods and Towers

I think I was in ninth grade. I was sitting in church and reading Genesis when I came across the chronologies/genealogies in Genesis 5. It was fascinating reading that had never before captured my attention. Passages like,

When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he fathered Seth were 800 years; and he had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died. (Gen. 5:3-5).

The succeeding verses listed the descendants in similar fashion, giving the years lived before fathering a significant son, followed by the years lived afterwards and then the total years. I read of Seth living 912 years, of Enosh living 905 years, of Kenan living 910 years, etc. In the midst was the mysterious Enoch who “walked with God” and after 365 years, “was not, for God took him.”

I had heard the expression, “as old as Methusaleh”, and I found out that he did live the longest, clocking in at 969 years. Methusaleh fathered Lamech who in turn fathered Noah. I was then on familiar territory, for I well knew the story of Noah and the flood.

I remember taking an envelope from the rack in front of me (one of the envelopes used for contributions) along with the nub of pencil in the same rack, and using them to do some math. After a few quick calculations, I figured out that Methusaleh had died the very year that the flood came. It made me wonder if he had died in the flood.

Without realizing it, I had stumbled into several passages that have perplexed a number of people for a number of years. The decades since have added some to my knowledge base of these problems, but I am not certain I have figured out all the definite answers!

As we conclude our study of pre-Abraham Old Testament studies (Gen. 1-11), we will cover three areas, honing in on the problems and issues of genealogies, the flood, and the tower of Babel. As with other studies thus far, this lesson does not provide “the” answer for these troubling passages. Instead, the goal is to provide ideas for further prayer and study.

GENEALOGIES

The genealogies have perplexed scholars for centuries. The issues revolve around simple questions:

- Did people really live that long?
- If so, how and why did it change?
- If not, then why does Scripture say they lived that long?

It certainly seems odd to people today that each person would live so long, and would father children at such a late age. Consider:

Adam lived 930 years, fathering Seth at age 130.

Seth lived 912 years, fathering Enosh at 105.

Enosh lived 905 years, fathering Kenan at 90.

Kenan lived 910 years, fathering Mahalalel at 70.

Mahalalel lived 895 years, fathering Jared at 65.

Jared lived 962 years, fathering Enoch at 162.

Enoch lived 365 years, fathering Methusaleh at 187.

Methusaleh lived 969 years, fathering Lamech at 187.

Lamech lived 777 years, fathering Noah at 182.

Noah lived 950 years, fathering Shem at 500!

Even Shem and his descendants lived lengthy years up to Terah, Abraham's father who lived to a mere 205 (fathering Abraham at age 70).¹

Scholars have devised a number of theories to deal with these questions. The first is the blunt one of face value: these people lived as long as the Scriptures set out, fathering children accordingly, and dying at the recorded ages. Those who ascribe to this belief offer several explanations ranging from "God kept them alive that long" to the idea that before the flood, cosmology of the earth was likely different, with different radiation levels, etc. A related theory is that humans were closer to the garden perfection in their bodies and that over time genetic disease crept in along with susceptibilities to other maladies (the "greater vitality" theory).

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¹ The genealogies of Shem to Abraham ("Abram") are found in Genesis 11. The other dates are in Genesis 5.

Other scholars seek to find symbolic significance to the numbers. Because this is less obvious than the straightforward approach, it is worthy of a bit more explanation.

We have three ancient texts that give numbers for these dates. The Hebrew Old Testament is the original and the source used for our English translation. The second source is the “Samaritan Pentateuch” (the “SP”). The SP is comprised of the first five books of the Old Testament (the “Pentateuch”) and, while the precise date of composition is unknown, early textual traditions are found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and scholars estimate the final forming of the SP in the early centuries after Christ.² The third relevant ancient source is the Septuagint, the early translation of Hebrew Scriptures into Greek by Jews in Alexandria Egypt.

In these three sources, the dates are very similar, and yet they differ in several places. The Septuagint, for example, adds 100 years to the age of fathering for the first four generations from and including Adam.³ The SP does not add, but takes away 100 years from the fathering age of Jared, 120 from Methusaleh, and 129 from Lamech!

Some see the variations as the equivalent of typos that occurred somewhere in history. Others, however, see them as indications that the translators and transcribers were more interested in interpreting the symbolism of the numbers than the actual numbers.⁴ Just what the symbolism was, no one seems certain, even among those who argue the numbers are symbolic.⁵

One main example of the theorized symbolism is Enoch, who lived “365 years” before being taken by God. 365 is the number of days in the solar year, the full orbit of earth around the sun. This is seen as potentially indicating that Enoch lived a full cycle before being taken. Perhaps it was seeing this symbolism of the solar year that led subsequent ancient writers to pen two books (“1 Enoch” a/k/a “The Ethiopic Book of Enoch” and “2 Enoch” a/k/a “The Slavonic Book of Enoch”) where Enoch journeys through the heavens with a grand sun-esque view of creation.

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² Crown, Alan D., “Samaritan Pentateuch”, *The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (Abingdon 2009) Vol. 5 at 73.

³ If one follows the Septuagint literally, Methusaleh did not die until some 14 years *after* the flood!

⁴ See, e.g., Heidt, William G., *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-11*, (Liturgical Press 1952) at 47ff.

⁵ See the conjectures in commentaries like Heinisch, Paul, *History of the Old Testament* (Liturgical Press 1952) at 24ff.

Those looking at the genealogies as symbolic also point to the count of exactly ten generations between Adam and Noah, followed by exactly ten more generations between Noah and Abraham. This is seen to signify not simply ten generations, but a fullness that is symbolized by the number ten, tying humanity together.

Jewish translator Robert Alter sees the fact that most of the ancients come close to 1,000 years old, yet none achieve it, as a lesson emphasizing that all of humanity is mortal, none reaching the full number of 1,000. Lamech, he notes, as the last human listed before Noah, reached the perfect age of 777.⁶

Recognizing many of these difficulties led Professor Harrison to conclude,

It would seem evident that while the numbers assigned to the ages of the patriarchs in Genesis had real meaning for those who were responsible for their preservation in the first instance, they cannot be employed in a purely literal sense as a means of computing the length of the various generations mentioned in the text.⁷

Whether the numbers are actual or symbolic, there is consensus that they serve to link the history of Abraham back to the God of creation. The Israelites were able to understand their existence in terms of the creative activity of God and the original sin of Adam, with its resultant curse.

NOAH AND THE FLOOD

The flood story is well known to most everyone. Mankind was evil, save Noah and his family. God decided to destroy creation and start anew, but gives instructions to Noah to save his family and enough animals for a fresh start. It rained and rained, flooding the earth killing everything and everyone outside the ark. The final successful sending of birds confirms the receding waters and time for disembarkation. Life on earth begins again with the rainbow promise that no more floods would wipe out everything.

There are two particular problems that call for a more careful examination. There are also a number of more subtle aspects to the story that enrich its meaning. The problems we address are these:

1. How do we understand the fact that there is a remarkably similar tale of flooding from Mesopotamian sources that predate the writing of the Genesis account?

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⁶ Alter, Robert, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*, (Norton 2004) at 35.

⁷ Harrison, R. K., *Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Hendrickson 1969) at 152.

2. Does the Hebrew dictate an understanding of a truly worldwide flood, or could the Hebrew reference a regional flood?

Other Flood Narratives

In past lessons we have discussed both the *Enuma Elish* and the *Atrahasis*. These Mesopotamian stories are quite ancient, with the *Atrahasis* likely dating in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries BC.⁸ The *Atrahasis* provides the story of the god Enki telling the man Atrahasis of the coming flood designed to destroy mankind. Atrahasis is told to build a boat for himself, his family, and animals before the rains begin.⁹

This story is better known today in its later developed form, The Epic of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh stories date back to as early as 2600 BC, but scholars think the flood narratives were among the later additions dating in the period from 1600 to 1000 BC.¹⁰

In this Epic, the character that survives the flood is named Utnapishtim. He is told by the god Ea to build an ark to survive the coming deluge. Utnapishtim builds the ark (cube shaped!) with “one full acre” of floor space. He loads up his family and kin along with animals and his gold and silver. He gave his builders who helped construct the ark his home for payment (nice guy, huh?) and pulled in the gangplank as the black clouds began gathering on the horizon. The storms leveled the earth and after subsiding some, the ark came to rest on a mountain (Mount Nimush).

After a week on Mount Nimush, Utnapishtim released a dove. The dove had no place to land and returned to the ark. Later he released a swallow, which also came back to the ark. Finally he released a raven, which never returned indicating it was time to disembark. Utnapishtim left the ark and sacrificed to the gods, who were hungry and buzzed around the sacrifice like flies!

When these stories were first uncovered in the 1800’s an immediate response was that proof of the truth of Noah and the flood had been uncovered. By the time Friedrich Delitzsch gave his lectures known as *Babel and Bible* in January and

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⁸ See explanations of dating in Walton, John H., *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context: a Survey of Parallels Between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, (Zondervan 1989) at 20ff.

⁹ See *Atrahasis*, 1.130.II.35ff as translated by Benjamin Foster, *The Context of Scripture* (Brill 1996) at 451-452.

¹⁰ See Walton at 22.

February, 1902, he led claims that the Bible was merely a descended myth of the Gilgamesh flood epic.¹¹

Was Delitzsch right? Is the Biblical account simply an Israelized version of Mesopotamian myths? The answer to the question likely lies not in the evidence of the accounts, but in the presuppositions of the readers. For those readers who believe the Biblical account is authentic, it makes sense that there would be derivations of the account in other cultures.

In other words, if there was a Noah, and if there was a flood, and if he did build an ark, if he survived along with animals, and if the ark came to rest on a mountain, and if he did release birds to determine if it was safe to leave the ark, would not his children repeat the story? Would not their children and succeeding generations? Even as those generations separated and developed separate cultures over the centuries, would not one expect the story to evolve, and yet keep characteristics of the original? Anyone who ever played the childhood game of beginning a whisper and letting it make a circle before then comparing the final version to the original knows the way stories change in transmission. So for those believing in the authenticity of the Genesis account, the similarity of Gilgamesh is confirming rather than challenging.

On the other hand, those who find God using culture and cultural stories in the Old Testament in an effort to convey his messages do not get bogged down in the details of what came first. For these, the emphasis is on the lessons, not the narrative details.

A third group which uses critical presuppositions that see biblical texts as creations of man rather than revelation, easily parse through not only Gilgamesh, but the Genesis accounts also finding in them alleged inconsistencies, claiming, as Delitzsch did,

We find in the Bible two accounts of the Deluge, which are not only scientifically impossible, but, furthermore, mutually contradictory.¹²

We are remiss if we fail to point out those scholars who have since analyzed Delitzsch's findings and motives and explained,

Delitzsch's lectures were not motivated solely by a sense of scientific objectivity. He was a child of his culture as we all are, and his obvious nationalism [German] can now be seen to have been

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¹¹ Delitzsch, Friedrich, *Babel and Bible*, (Putnam 1903) at 44ff. Delitzsch used the Hellenized form of the Sumerian name for Utnapishtim "Xisuthros."

¹² *Ibid.* at 45-46.

encumbered with not only anti-Christian but also anti-Semitic sentiment.¹³

There is another set of questions that arise in relation to the Biblical account of Noah and the flood. These questions relate to whether the flood was universal or regional.

The Extent of the Flood

One would think that among the legions of scientists alive today, those who are geologists would most readily be believers in God and the conservative view of Scripture. For if the flood was actually universal and worldwide, surely the evidence would be readily apparent in the dirt and rock, the geology of earth. Yet those who believe in a worldwide cataclysmic flood have had difficulty getting Ph.D. geologists to sign onto their papers and books. Is this because geology training excludes flood geography or is there something more involved?

As a result two views surface. Some adhere to a worldwide flood, and expect to see it in the geologic record. Others point out that the flood must not have been universal, but was actually regional and do not believe a worldwide flood is supported by the geologic record.

We take time to look at the actual text to see what is said. Our goal is to give the facts that support both views so the reader has the background knowledge to make further study fruitful.

We start with those who believe the story unfolds a worldwide flood. It is easy to see why people would understand this from the words used in Genesis. Consider the following:

Now *the earth* was corrupt in God's sight, and *the earth was filled* with violence. And *God saw the earth*, and behold, it was corrupt, for *all flesh* had corrupted their way *on the earth*. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make *an end of all flesh*, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth...behold, *I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die...* in seven days I will send *rain on the earth* forty days and forty nights, and *every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.*"...And after seven days the waters of the *flood came upon the earth*...on that day *all the fountains* of the great deep burst

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¹³ Walton at 17 citing, Arnold, B. T. and Weisberg, D. B., "A Centennial Review of Friedrich Delitzsch's 'Babel und Bibel' Lectures," *JBL* 121 (2002): 441-57, esp. 442-43.

forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. And ***rain fell upon the earth*** forty days and forty nights. ...The flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters increased and bore up the ark, and ***it rose high above the earth***. The waters prevailed and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the face of the waters. And the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that ***all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered***. The ***waters prevailed above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep***. And ***all flesh died that moved on the earth***, birds, livestock, beasts, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all mankind. ***Everything on the dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died***. ***He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground***, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens. They were blotted out from the earth. (Gen. 6:11-7:23).

The account uses what appear to be absolute words of “all earth” and “all creatures.” This certainly seems to many to indicate, by its plain simple meaning, a worldwide flood.

Added to the Genesis passages is the reference Jesus made which Matthew recorded in Matt. 24:36-39:

But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and ***swept them all away***, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

The major complaint against the worldwide flood is the geologic evidence (or lack thereof). This has given rise to certain theories including the cataclysmic notion of what would have happened in the event of a true occurrence like that given. If the ground was dislodged so that subterranean waters ruptured forth, if the pressure of rains and the shifting weight of full water over all land occurred on earth, it would likely lead to a massive shift of tectonic plates, to the production of mountains, and to a number of other features that are seen today, even though not recognized as “flood produced.”

John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris argued this approach in their bestselling book, *The Genesis Flood*.¹⁴ Whitcomb drafted the book in 1957, reworking theories of Seventh-day Adventist George McCready Price, an amateur geologist

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¹⁴ Whitcomb, John and Morris, Henry, *The Genesis Flood* (Baker 1961).

who wrote a book on the subject in 1923. Whitcomb tried hard to get a Ph.D. geologist to sign on and support his theories, but could not find any.¹⁵ Ultimately Whitcomb took instead the help of Morris, an engineer rather than geologist.

Today the approach is still maintained by an institution created, in part, by Morris called The Creation Research Society. The Society lists on its website a Director named John K. Reed, a Ph.D. Geologist from the University of South Carolina. Reed has edited a book entitled *Rock Solid Answers* where he argues for a worldwide flood citing his assessment of geologic evidence.¹⁶

Because a number of believing scientists and geologists do not ascribe to geologic evidence for a worldwide flood, more attention has been given to closer examination of the Hebrew text to see the range of meaning that can fairly be ascribed to the Genesis text.

Must Genesis (and by extension Jesus in Matthew 24 or Peter in 2 Peter 2:5 and 3:6) be understood to say that the flood was worldwide? Semitic professor and Old Testament scholar Bill Arnold has noted,

The Hebrew words used in these passages do not decide the issue as quickly as one might think.¹⁷

The Hebrew word translated “earth” is used over 2,500 times in the Old Testament. It means, in general “earth” or “land” and refers to all land, as opposed to the heavens and seas. It also refers, at times, to the physical ground on which one stands. In certain constructions it references individual regions or parcels of land. It is also used in a political sense to refer to certain governed areas.¹⁸

“Heaven” is also a Hebrew word that can refer to the entirety of the heavens, or simply to that portion of sky visible in one’s horizon. It is in this sense that it is used in 1 Kings 18:45 when the Lord sent rain after Elijah’s prophecy to that effect to King Ahab.

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¹⁵ For a full account behind the publication of this book, see the well footnoted and documented account set out by historian Ronald Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*, (Harvard 2006) at 213ff.

¹⁶ Oard, Mike and Reed, John K., *Rock Solid Answers: The Biblical Truth Behind 14 Geologic Questions*, (Master Books 2009).

¹⁷ Arnold, Bill T., *Encountering the Book of Genesis*, (Baker Academic 1998) at 60.

¹⁸ See entry in Jenni, Ernst ed., *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Hendrickson 1997) v. 1 at 172ff.

And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind,
and there was a great rain.

There are multiple uses of the terms “every” and “all” in the Genesis flood account as well. The Hebrew word for “all” and “every” is the same word. It certainly means “every”, but just like its Greek equivalent used in the New Testament, it is often used in what scholars term “hyperbole.” By this they mean that it references all in a set, or all within a context, but not truly everything.

We see this in the Old Testament in a number of places including Genesis 16:12 where, speaking of Hagar’s son Ishmael, the angel of the LORD says,

He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against *everyone* and *everyone’s* hand against him, and he shall dwell over against *all* his kinsmen.

The passage does not mean everyone in a total sense, but rather those who would confront Ishmael. Similarly, when David went out to capture the Ammonite city of Rabbah, we read,

So David gathered *all* the people together and went to Rabbah and fought against it and took it (2 Sam. 12:29).

David did not take *everyone*. He took his army he assembled for that purpose—*everyone* within a group. This is the same sense that the Greek equivalent word is used in the New Testament in passages like Matthew 3:5-6 where, writing about John the Baptist, it says,

Then Jerusalem and *all* Judea and *all* the region about the Jordan were going out to him, *and they were baptized* by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

We are not to take from this that the High Priest and Roman soldiers, and others were going out to John for baptism. Rather, all within the group being referenced went out.

This is what drives Arnold to write,

Thus the details of the Genesis account can be used to support either a local or universal deluge.

Arnold’s final comment on the subject is worthy of emphasis,

There can be no doubt that the flood was a real, historical event. We can also conclude that the flood waters covered at least the inhabited earth. The purpose of the flood was to destroy the earth’s

wickedness, and this of necessity means the flood waters covered all the earth inhabited at that time by human beings.¹⁹

Subtleties

As noted earlier, there are a number of subtleties in the Noah story worthy of attention. We select two for illustration. First is the name Noah. We find it set out in Genesis 6:8 as follows,

But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

The Hebrew shows a deliberate turn on Noah’s name. “Noah” is only two letters in the Hebrew, *nun* (“n” sound) and *chayt* (“ch” sound). “Favor” (which is what Noah found in the LORD’s eyes) is the same two letters, but backwards: *chayt* (“ch”) plus *nun* (“n”). This passage is placed on the heels of the statement that God was sorry he had made man. Noah found favor with God in a way that turned things around!

A second subtlety, that doubtless would have meant a lot to Moses, concerns the word used for the ark that Noah built to carry him and his family through the world’s turmoil and sin into safety. That word (*tevah*) occurs only in the Noah story and one other place – it is the word used for the reed basket which held Moses:

When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket [literally “ark”!] made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank (Ex. 2:3).

Noah and Moses! Both famous forever from their experiences in arks with water!

THE TOWER OF BABEL

After the flood story, we read one more major event before the stories of Abraham – the story of the tower of Babel. The tower story takes place in the plain of Shinar, an area most scholars reckon to be near Sumer in southern Mesopotamia (think modern Iraq near Bagdad). It was near what would later be called “Babylon” in the Old Testament.

The story gives building details that are foreign to buildings in Israel or Egypt. Using burned bricks for stone and bitumen for mortar, the people decide to “build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens” (Gen. 11:4). In this way the people planned on making “a name” for themselves.”

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¹⁹ Arnold at 60.

The LORD's response is to "go down" and disperse the people and confuse their language. From that time on, the area was named "Babel."

While not all scholars agree, Walton and others assemble some compelling evidence that the tower in question was what is now called a *ziggurat*. These buildings were part of a temple complex that, in Mesopotamian literature, was described as having their "head touch heaven."²⁰

The important thing about these ziggurats was that they were not built for the people to go up to heaven and access God. Rather they were built as staircases for the gods to descend. At the top of the ziggurats were gates/rest stops which were to entice the gods down to earth.

This importance is magnified when we see the structure of the Hebrew story. It is set out in what scholars call a "chiasm." A "chiasm" references a mirroring of a passage. It is as if one says the same things forward then backwards and forward. It serves to put the emphasis on the middle, rather than at the end (which is where we tend to look for emphasis as Westerners).

See the pattern set out in the Babel story:

-The whole earth has one language (v.1)

-----The people use bricks to build a tower (v.2-3)

-----People do so for reputation and to keep from being dispersed (v.4)

-----God comes down to examine and judge (v.5-6)

-----God decides to disperse the people because of their attitude (v.7)

-----God "unbricks"²¹ the people and disperses them (v.8)

-The earth has multiple/confused languages (v.9)

God judged the people, for it was not their place to command or coax God into their midst, to get the desire of their heart. Instead, God descends with his own plans. The Genesis story would later establish the ladder for God's messengers to ascend and descend from heaven, but it would not be a manmade ziggurat. Jacob dreamt of God's ladder and it was God's creation, not man's. Jacob's ladder was a dream that finds ultimate fulfillment in the cross of Christ, the true staircase that meshes heaven and earth. In the words of the hymn, "Beneath the Cross of Jesus",

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²⁰ See Walton at 120-121.

²¹ The Hebrew word for brick is *nbl*. The Hebrew for disperse is the mirror reverse, *lbn*. The words contain a chiastic structure similar to the passage.

O safe and happy shelter!
O refuge tried and sweet!
O trysting place where heaven's love
And heaven's justice meet!
As to the holy patriarch
That wondrous dream was given,
So seems my Saviour's cross to me
A ladder up to heaven.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Fathering... fathering...fathering...father”* (Gen. 5).

You are in a chain with links that go back to the beginning. No one just “appeared.” No one is an accident. Take a chance this week to look in a mirror and see what God has made. He has placed you in a chain to make it clear, you were meant for more than this fallen world with its curses and death. God wants you restored in eternity. You are part of his chain.

2. *“Noah found favor...”* (Gen. 6:8).

God can take those who follow him, turn them and their names around, and use them to change the world. God can and will do that with you and me. We need to conscientiously pray to put ourselves into his hands. Be more concerned this week about living for him than about anything else. Let him form your priorities. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. Then see how he is faithful to add the things you need to your life.

3. *“Let us build ourselves a tower.”* (Gen. 11:4).

Do you think for a minute you can control God? Can you entice him down with your projects, your charm? No. God meets you and me at the cross of Christ. If we want to commune with God, we go to Christ crucified. If we want to pray to God, we do it through Christ crucified. If we want to live for God, we do it through Christ crucified.

WANT MORE?

Next week we study Abraham. Read his story and look for images and prophetic events that foreshadow Christ. Email me your thoughts at wantmore@biblical-literacy.com.