

The Temple of God and the Towers of Men

Deuteronomy 12:1-12

Introduction:

The Garden of Eden was not the whole earth, but a sacred sanctuary God Himself planted—a place where Adam and Eve enjoyed His presence. We know this because they were driven out of Eden (Gen. 3:23), and because God stationed cherubim at its eastward entrance to guard the way to the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:24). Their worship was expressed through faithful obedience and the holy work of tending the garden. In many ways, Eden was heaven on earth—the first dwelling place of God with His people, the first tabernacle where God and humanity met in perfect fellowship.

When Adam and Eve sinned, their innocence was stripped away, but God immediately spoke hope into their judgment. In Genesis 3:15, He promised that a future Son—the Seed of the woman—would crush the serpent’s head. Adam and Eve responded in faith by doing what God commanded from the beginning: they conceived and bore sons beginning with Cain, then Abel, and finally Seth (Gen. 1:28).

But the curse quickly revealed itself. Cain murdered Abel, violence filled families and nations, and by Genesis 6:5, “**every intent of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.**” God judged the earth through the flood, yet in His mercy preserved Noah and established a covenant never again to destroy all flesh by water (Gen. 9:8–17). Still, the flood did not cleanse the human heart.

As humanity repopulated the earth and shared one language, their rebellion resurfaced. In Genesis 11, they journeyed east—a biblical sign of moving away from God’s presence—and settled in Shinar. Determined to build something impressive and permanent, they said, “**Let us make bricks and fire them thoroughly...**” and, “**Let us build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens.**” Their motives were unmistakable: “**Let us make a name (*šēm*) for ourselves.**” Instead of spreading over the earth as God commanded, they sought unity, identity, and greatness apart from Him. It was human pride attempting to reach heaven without God.

As a result, God dispersed the people throughout the earth and confused their language (Gen. 11:8–9). Immediately following this event, the narrative shifts to Abraham—a man whose background included worshipping other gods (Josh. 24:2). God called Abraham, promising to make his descendants exceedingly numerous, to form a great nation from him, and to bless all nations through his lineage. It was from Abraham’s family that the twelve tribes of Israel emerged, including the tribe of Levi, from which Moses and Aaron would later arise.

Through Moses, God delivered the Ten Commandments and the Law (Exod. 20). Through Aaron and his sons, God established the priesthood (Exod. 28). And between the giving of the Law and the ordination of the priests, God commanded Israel to build the Tabernacle (a sanctuary)—a dwelling place for His presence: **“Let them make a sanctuary for Me, so that I may dwell among them...exactly according to the pattern I show you”** (Exod. 25:8–9).

This brings us to the heart of the matter. Why does the Tabernacle exist, and what does it have to do with Babel—and with you as a Christian today? That is what I want to help you understand.

The Tabernacle: God’s Kingdom is Built by His Presence

Before Adam and Eve sinned in Eden, they lived in the immediate presence of God. Eden was the first earthly Tabernacle—the first place where God dwelled with humanity.¹ Adam was commissioned to cultivate the garden, to be fruitful and multiply, and to exercise dominion as a kind of priest-king. The role God gave Adam is echoed later in the ministry of Israel’s priests. Just as Adam was commanded to “work and keep” the garden (Gen. 2:15), the priests who served in the Tabernacle were charged with tending its furnishings and performing its sacred duties (Num. 3:7–8).

After Adam and Eve rebelled, God pronounced judgment yet also extended hope. In Genesis 3:15, He promised that a Deliverer—the Seed of the woman—would one day crush the serpent’s head and undo what sin had destroyed. Yet the immediate consequence of their sin was exile from God’s presence: **“So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword...to guard the way to the tree of life”** (Gen. 3:24).

To understand the purpose and significance of the Tabernacle, we must begin by asking a foundational question: Why did God command Israel to build it? According to Exodus 25:8–9, God commanded a sanctuary so that He might once again dwell among His people—in a manner that echoed Eden itself.

But human history—from Eden to Babel—shows us that people in their sin insist on approaching God on their own terms rather than His. In Genesis 11, humanity sought to reach heaven through their own greatness. In the same way, the nations worshiped their gods **“on the high mountains...on the hills...and under every leafy tree”** (Deut. 12:2). Israel was not allowed to imitate this. Deuteronomy 12 makes it clear that there is only one true God, and He must be approached His way, not ours. The Tabernacle existed so that God’s people could meet Him—but only on His terms.

¹ On the earthly Tabernacle as a model of the heavenly Tabernacle, see Hebrews 8:4-5, “Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, ‘See’ He says, ‘that you make all things by the pattern which was shown to you on the mountain.’”

The Garden of Eden served as the first tabernacle, and the Tabernacle God instructed Moses to build was intentionally designed to reflect Eden. Consider the parallels:

- **Eastward entrance:** The Tabernacle opened to the east (Exod. 27:13–16), just as Eden did when the cherubim were stationed there (Gen. 3:24).
- **Tree imagery:** The lampstand (menorah) was fashioned like an almond tree in bloom (Exod. 25:31–36), recalling the Tree of Life.
- **Cherubim guardians:** In Eden, cherubim guarded the Tree of Life; in the Tabernacle, cherubim covered the mercy seat above the ark (Exod. 25:18–20).
- **Priestly ministry:** Adam served as the first priest; Israel’s priests continued the priestly calling Adam failed to fulfill.

Because the Tabernacle was constructed to be set up and taken down throughout Israel’s wilderness journey, it functioned as a portable Eden—a traveling sanctuary where God’s presence dwelled among His people. For forty years in the wilderness, God Himself led His people by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, visibly demonstrating that He alone was their Guide, Protector, and King. Whenever Israel made camp, the Tabernacle was deliberately placed at the very center of the community. This was no accidental detail; its central position proclaimed a foundational truth: we do not climb our way up to God—He graciously comes down to dwell with us.

To reinforce this truth, the layout of the Tabernacle was divided into three sections, each revealing something of God’s holiness and the reverence required to approach Him. The closer one moved toward the center, the closer one came to the manifest presence of God:

- **The Outer Court** — accessible to the people, where sacrifices were brought and offerings were made.
- **The Holy Place** — entered only by the priests, where the lampstand, table of bread, and altar of incense stood.
- **The Holy of Holies** — the innermost chamber where God’s presence rested above the mercy seat, entered only once a year by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement.

Far from being a religious ornament or symbolic tent, the Tabernacle was the tangible expression of God’s desire to dwell with His people. Its daily presence reminded Israel—and reminds us—that humanity was created by God and for God, and that our life, identity, and purpose can only be rightly ordered when He is at the center. And even then, as precious as it was, the Tabernacle pointed beyond itself. It was a signpost leading God’s people toward a greater reality—a true and better Tabernacle who would one day come and dwell with His people fully and forever.

The presence of God was what set Israel apart from every other nation. In Exodus 19, God said to His people: “**You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you**

on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples—for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (vv. 4–6).

God did not exist for Israel; Israel existed for God. As His covenant people, they were called to be His representatives before the nations.

The Tower of Babel: Man's Kingdom is Built by His Pride

So what about Babel? Let me state the obvious first: The very name of Babel should immediately bring to mind the Babylon that would rise to empire status 1,500 to 2,000 years later after the events of Genesis 11. We do not have the time to exhaust all that can be gleaned from Genesis 11, but I will point out some things that will make sense of why Babylon is such a big deal in the Bible. Here is a list of characteristics from Genesis 11 that captures the spirit of Babylon that we see both in the Bible and the world:

1. A desire to build Eden without God — a city in their own likeness.

They journeyed east (Gen. 11:2), a clue in the Bible that they were moving away from the presence of God (cf. Gen. 3:24; 4:16). Rather than longing for the God of Eden, they attempted to recreate Eden according to their own design—a human-centered world where they defined what was good, beautiful, and true.

The spirit of Babel wants the blessings of Eden without the God of Eden.

2. Confidence in human ingenuity as the foundation of security.

They urged one another, “Come, let’s make bricks and fire them thoroughly.” Their trust was in what they could craft, engineer, and construct apart from the Creator. Their hope rested not on God’s provision but on human innovation, technology, and technique.

The spirit of Babel believes salvation is self-made.

3. Access to the heavens on human terms rather than God’s terms.

They resolved, “Come, let’s build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven...” The structure was almost certainly a ziggurat—an artificial mountain intended to bridge earth and heaven. Babel is humanity’s attempt to redefine God, remake Him in their own image, and gain access to the divine realm without submission to divine rule.

The spirit of Babel wants God’s realm without God’s rule.

4. A mission driven by human greatness instead of God’s glory.

Their ambition was explicit: “Let us make a name for ourselves...” Yet God had commanded humanity to fill the earth with His glory through image-bearing worshipers (Gen. 1:28; 9:1). Instead, they gathered to consolidate power, exalt themselves, and build

a city like Eden—but rooted in pride rather than worship. Their identity was tethered to reputation, not to obedience. Their mission was fame, not faithfulness.

The spirit of Babel builds kingdoms for the greatness of man instead of the greatness of God.

So, what is the point? Why is Babel an important theme that runs through the Bible? Babel serves as the prototype for every empire founded on human arrogance—whether Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome, or any contemporary nation that pursues greatness apart from God.

Why did God instruct Moses and the Israelites to build the Tabernacle after their deliverance from the bondage of slavery in Egypt? The Tabernacle is the blueprint of God’s kingdom—marked by humility, obedience, sacrifice, and God’s presence among His people.

What we learn from Deuteronomy 12, is that God must be worshiped on His terms, not ours. Not on the high places we create on our terms. Not under the leafy trees we desire. But in the place where He chooses to make His name dwell.

Conclusion

The tower of Babel and the Tabernacle represent two kingdoms and two ways to live.

- Babel represents man’s attempt to reach up to the heavens. The Tabernacle is about the God who came down.
- Babel exalts human greatness. The Tabernacle revealed God’s glory and holiness.
- Babel glorifies humanity. The Tabernacle gathered a people for God’s glory.
- Babel is fueled by human pride, rebellion, and independence. The Tabernacle symbolized the grace, redemption, and freedom only God can provide.

The spirit of Babel is most clearly seen in the rise of national superpowers and empires throughout history. We see this vividly in the book of Daniel, where Daniel and many others from Judah were exiled into the heart of the Babylonian empire. In Daniel 2, King Nebuchadnezzar received a dream from God in which he saw a massive statue—a single image made of four different materials. That statue represented four successive world empires, each of which embodied the same proud, self-exalting spirit of Babel: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.

But in the dream, something remarkable happened. The king saw a stone “cut out without hands”—not made by human ingenuity or empire-building power. This stone struck the statue on its feet, shattering the entire image and reducing every kingdom to dust carried away by the wind. Of this stone, Daniel declared to the king: **“In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed... It will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever”** (Dan. 2:44–45).

Brothers and sisters, there is One who is greater than the Tabernacle! The Tabernacle and the sacrifices and worship that took place within it all pointed to that first Christmas when God made His dwelling among us through Jesus His Son: **“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt [tabernacle] among us; and we saw His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth”** (John 1:14). The Tabernacle pointed to the day when mankind would experience God as Immanuel: **“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and she will name Him Immanuel [God with us]”** (Isa. 7:14).

Where Babel said, *“Let us climb up to heaven,”* Jesus said, *“I will come down from heaven.”*

Where Babel said, *“Let us make a name for ourselves,”* the Word of God declares: *“His name is above every name, and at the Name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under earth.”* (Phil. 2:9-11)

Where Babel used bricks to build a monument to their greatness, Jesus gave Himself as the Lamb of God to build His Church and Kingdom for the glory of the Father.

Where Babel confused languages, the gospel of Jesus Christ unites every tribe and tongue in worship because the Lion of Judah conquered as the Lamb of God.

We learn from Deuteronomy 12 that we come to God on His terms to worship in the place where He chooses to make His name dwell. For you Christian, that place is not a tent or a building, but Christ Himself! Is our Tabernacle, He is our High Priest, He is our sacrifice, He is our Mediator and our access to the Father!

Every empire built on the spirit of Babel—whether ancient or modern—will fall. Only the kingdom established by God will stand forever. And the stone not cut by human hands points us directly to the true King — Jesus Christ, whose eternal kingdom will crush every Babel that rises against God.

There is coming a day when Babylon will be defeated! Our faithful High Priest who entered the Holy of Holies once and for all will return and when He comes, we will experience the promise that the people of God have longed for since the first Eden:

“Behold, the tabernacle of God is among the people, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” (Rev. 21:3-4)