

Foundations: Civilization and Its Discontents
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 46:1-7; Habakkuk 2:9-14; Genesis 4:17-26

Today we resume our study of Genesis that started before Lent, and so our final reading is Genesis 4:17-26. May God bless the reading of His perfect, holy, trustworthy Word. “Cain lay with his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael was the father of Methushael, and Methushael was the father of Lamech. Lamech married two women, one named Adah and the other Zillah. Adah gave birth to Jabal; he was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all who play the harp and flute. Zillah also had a son, Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron. Tubal-Cain's sister was Naamah. Lamech said to his wives, "Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times." Adam lay with his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, "God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him." Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD.”

Today marks a historic day in church history. This exact day, 500 years ago, April 18, 1521, Martin Luther made a bold stand before a religious court known as the Diet of Worms. As you might know, Luther was a monk genuinely concerned about his soul. Unlike his fellow monks, he was constantly in the confessional, confessing even the tiniest of errors, realizing that if his salvation depended on his good deeds, he was doomed. A brilliant man, he nevertheless lived in constant fear until he read Scripture for himself and realized that the Bible teaches that we are saved by God’s good grace and not by our own righteous actions. He eventually challenged the Catholic church of his era on many of their doctrines and practices, famously nailing some of his complaints to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany in 1517.

This plea for an academic conversation about the church’s errors became the start of the Protestant Reformation. The church of Luther’s day, angered at what they saw as an attack, brought him up on charges of heresy. Things obviously moved at a much slower pace than they do today! But a little over three years later, what amounted to a church trial began in Worms, Germany. Luther’s views were contested, and he was ordered to recant or face punishment. (And by punishment, we don’t just mean being banished from the church, but execution.)

On April 18, 1521, Luther told his inquisitors, “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason...I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand; I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.” On his way home to Wittenberg after the Diet, the prince of the region had Luther kidnapped to keep him safe from his arrest and sentencing.

Here I stand; I can do no other. Powerful words that tell us just how committed Luther was to his faith. Rather than to recant his beliefs that we are saved by God's grace and not through our own doing, that we are bound to the Bible and not man-made laws (even if those laws are created by the church), that we are saved by Christ and not the church – Luther was willing to give his life. Because of his stand 500 years ago today, I can stand here in this pulpit telling you about the love and grace of Christ.

This might not seem to have much to do with today's passage, which by itself might seem odd and even bizarre. But we have a choice in life. We can either stand with Christ and trust in Him, or we can rebel against God and set out our own way. And the effects of our choices ripple like a stream when we throw in a rock. The ripples go far beyond the place of impact. Today's passage shows that as a harsh reality.

As you might remember from several weeks ago, Cain came under a curse when he killed his brother Abel. Abel had presented a sacrifice that God had accepted, while Cain's sacrifice was not. Angry, Cain went out with Abel to the fields and murdered him. Even as God was pronouncing sentence on Cain for what he had done, Cain was more worried about his own skin rather than over the horrific crime he had committed. While God told Cain that the ground would not give him anything, that he would become a restless wanderer, God also marked Cain so that no one would kill him in retaliation for Abel's death. Considering the crime, God shows considerable mercy on Cain.

As this week's passage begins, Cain is starting a family, and we learn the names of key members of his family for seven generations. A few, we even find out more about them. But before we get too far, we need to look at something. Cain builds the first human city, called "Enoch" after his son. This should make us pay attention. The Bible doesn't make a huge fuss over it, it doesn't point out the implications, but we should see them.

What is Cain doing building a city? The curse on him means that the ground will no longer produce for him. Considering that Cain was a farmer, that's huge. But the second part of the curse was God's word that he would become a vagabond. Now the wording is such that this could be part of the curse – God saying, "you *will* wander by my decree" – or the result of the curse – "you will have to wander because, due to the curse, the only way to feed yourself and your family is to wander from place to place."

But does it really matter? What matters is that Cain is functionally and aggressively doing everything he can to fight it. If anything in this world has a sense of permanence, of no longer wandering, it's a city. While cities rise and fall, we still have Jerusalem. We still have Rome and Athens. We have London, founded in 43 AD. Someone who builds a city has no plans of being a high plains drifter. Cain's building a city is a striving against the words of God. Maybe directly, maybe indirectly, but Cain lives his life in rebellion.

As a first thought from this today, I just want to put this in your head: *the time for repentance is now*. The time for repentance is now. There is no better time than now to turn around and start following in Christ's footsteps. Waiting does nothing but land us in more trouble.

Sometimes, we have heard, “What will happen if you die before you accept Christ?” And yes, there is truth to that. We don’t know what tomorrow will bring, or even the rest of today, so it’s foolhardy to put off your eternal destiny. I understand that; I can get behind it. But also of importance is the damage that is done when we continually delay obeying God’s word and finding faith in Him.

What might have happened if Cain had repented of killing Cain? We can’t say, exactly. We cannot predict the road not traveled. But we see God restoring all sorts of people who committed serious sins when they were genuinely repentant. King David was responsible of having an innocent man killed after committing adultery with his wife. Jonah got an assignment from God and ran the other way. Peter denied even knowing Jesus three times after being one of Jesus’ closest friends. All repented; all were restored. They made other mistakes and committed other sins in their lifetimes, but they still wound up living for God.

Cain’s sin, like that of Adam and Eve, isn’t the action itself so much as the rebellion. Eating fruit isn’t a sin; eating a fruit God said not to eat of is. Cain’s building a city is not a sin. When we think of Revelation and the New Jerusalem in the Kingdom of God, it’s the most massive city anyone could ever even imagine. The sin is that Cain is deliberately trying to subvert God’s declaration to him. Cain has gone from anger and violence towards his brother to anger and disobedience against God. He has gone from bad to worse. Because he did not repent, because he continued on his wayward course, his rebellion becomes all the fiercer.

In Romans 1, Paul warns us that sin begets sin. It starts with denying God the honor and thanks He is due, with forms of idolatry and self-worship, and it degrades from there over time into the worst kinds of depravity. There’s the suggestion in Paul that this downward spiral is what we can expect unless there is repentance. The way forward is not more of the same but a change of heart and mind back towards God. The longer we delay, the harder it is for us to find God’s path again. Indeed, it’s only by the grace of God that we are given that opportunity.

We might ask, is it really so bad for Cain? After all, we don’t read of any further miseries for him. No further punishment. He obviously has a family that spans several generations. Can this be so bad? Yes it can. Here’s a second point for us to ponder today: *the ripple effects of our actions and attitudes can affect generations to come for good and for evil.*

Lamech is part of the sixth generation. He’s Cain’s great-great-great grandson. For us, that would make Lamech far removed, but as we’ll learn in next week’s lesson, the earliest humans Scripture tells us lived hundreds of years. It is extremely likely that Cain is alive during Lamech’s time. There’s no doubt in my mind, at least, that Lamech’s behavior is a direct continuation of the behaviors of his ancestor.

Lamech is the first polygamist in the Bible. We’re not far along in Scripture, but already we have an arrangement that is simply not God’s intention for His people. Sometimes we in the modern world get up in arms that the Bible permitted polygamy. In the New Testament, Jesus says that certain things the Old Testament law permitted but did not require were simply because of the hardness of the people’s hearts. Yes, some of the Old Testament saints practiced polygamy. But in almost every instance, it creates division and strife and breaks hearts.

And Lamech's poem shows his disrespectful nature for others. While it gets worse, the start of the poem commands the attention of his wives. He's bragging to them about his exploits. This is not a tender love sonnet. This sounds more like something we'd expect from a Klingon on *Star Trek* than a human being. His wives are treated like property, ordered to listen to him, rather than as capable people in their own right.

But then we get to Lamech's boasting. He kills anyone who would cross him. (The poetic structure makes it unclear whether he's murdered one man or two.) Not only that, but the English translation makes Lamech seem less brutal than he really is. The word translated "young man" normally means "boy." This guy is arrogant about killing a child! He is truly evil! He ends his poem with a boast – if Cain is avenged seven times, then I will be avenged seventy seven times for anyone's attack on me. This family has descended into the depths of depravity.

This isn't to say everyone in Lamech's family is evil. We'll get to that in a moment. But we do see that at least one of his sons "forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron." While this could be pots and pans and other items, the primary use is going to be weaponry. Tubal-Cain, named in part after his ancestor, is making instruments that would make the actions of Cain and Lamech all the easier. This is the first glimpse we have of the tools of warfare.

Did Cain make his descendants evil? No. Some of them barely get a mention other than their names. But there's clearly an effect that is spelled out in Scripture by following his family line down the generations. The actions and attitudes of Cain set in motion actions and attitudes that would be shared by his descendent six generations down the line. In Exodus 20:6-7, God says that He visits the iniquity of the fathers to the third and fourth generation and loving-kindness to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments.

Today, you may hear some Christians talking about generational curses. They often make a big deal about it. We don't believe in it that way, where everything in your life is dictated by it, here we see the plain fact that there is biblical truth behind it. We see it in plain, uncomplicated, tragic ways. Sons and grandsons follow in their father's addictions or in his anger. Daughters and granddaughters get trapped in cycles of abuse or depression or looking for love in the wrong places. It's not so supernatural as it is following in the patterns that have been modeled for us. When we sin, when we choose to disobey God, we should think first, "How might this impact my family down the line? How might this choice change the lives of those I love and care about, and their families and their families after them?"

The good news is, the ripples can be stopped. There is hope to come. When we repent and turn back to God, the stream can flow in a different direction down a new path. The ripples do not have to keep pushing outward forever. So our final point for today is this: *through His grace and love, God can free you from the patterns of your past and generations past.*

The passage ends with a return to Adam and Eve. God graciously gives them another child. Eve names him Seth, saying God has granted her another child. She makes it a play on words, because in Hebrew, the child's name is pronounced *Sheth*. The word for "given" or "granted" is pronounced *shith*. Virtually identical. Every time she looked at her son, she would think of God's grace in giving her another child after having essentially lost both of them.

Not only that, Seth has a family, and around that time, “men began to call on the name of the LORD.” Eve recognizes the gift she’s been given by God. That faith gets passed down Seth’s family tree. That third generation starts calling on the name of the LORD – God’s proper name YHWH. It’s not a cry to God in the general sense, but specifically calling upon God as He revealed Himself personally to Adam and Eve. If I’m reading this right, the world’s first couple starts to make amends with their creator, and it shows through the line of Seth.

Even when there’s deep-rooted rebellion and sin in a family line, it doesn’t determine your destiny. Lamech has two sons named Jabal and Jubal. One’s a rancher, the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock. What does that mean? It means Jabal left the city of Enoch, the city of his ancestors. He went against what his family had come to stand for to do the job Abel did in his prime. And Jubal is the father of the flute and harp. (One ancient translation suggests that Jubal was the first psalm writer!) He rejects the violent pursuits of his family line to originate the musical arts. Only one of Lamech’s three sons follows in his father’s footsteps.

It can be hard to follow in a new path, to leave behind sinful patterns and traditions and examples set for us. Jesus said, “Whoever loves his father or mother or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” He knew we stick by those we love even when they sin and live in patterns of sin. He was calling us to live in His ways even though it might go against who we have been taught to be, even though it might damage some relationships, because God’s plans for us are so much more glorious than any pattern of sin set before us.

It’s true that you might be able to get out of certain destructive patterns and behaviors yourself. There are a ton of self-help books at the local Walmart that would be happy to tell you how. But unless you start with your root and source in God, trusting in Jesus above yourself, that self-help won’t get to the root of all those patterns, and that’s rebellion against God. Break down every generational issue without God and you’ll find new ones popping up in you. Turn to God to break those chains, though, and in His timing and way, He will do it.

We’re going to end where we started, with the story of Martin Luther. Martin Luther’s father Hans was a hard man, whipping Martin so badly doing his youth that he once ran away from home. Hans was determined that Martin should be a lawyer, which would ultimately benefit Hans and put him in better social circles. While Martin did what would have been considered a pre-law education, when he shifted and started studying theology, Hans was furious, and he considered all the education he’d paid for nothing but a waste.

But Luther moved past the issues of his upbringing. His choice to study theology upset his father’s plans for social climbing, but it eventually led to his becoming the first Reformer of the church. Luther broke his father’s patterns by becoming a deeply devoted husband and father himself. And when he stood for true faith this day 500 years ago, he broke sinful patterns the church, his spiritual mother, had been following for decades.

Friends, we can have a legacy like that of Cain, or that of Martin Luther. We can follow in the sins of those who came before us, or we can follow in the faith of the saints who have led the way for us. Which will you choose today? May all of us pray to be led in the path of our Savior rather than the path of the world.