The Meaning of the City

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[0:00] I'm going to invite one of our members, Sam McPherson, to come and to read to us from the scriptures from Genesis chapter 4. My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden.

I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me. Then the Lord said to him, Not so. If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.
And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch.
When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch. To Enoch was born Arad, and Arad fathered Mehujael, and Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech.
And Lamech took two wives. The name of one was Ada, and the name of the other, Zillah. Ada bore Jabal. He was a father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. His brother's name was Jubal. He was a father of all those who play the lyre and pipe.
[1:31] Zillah also bore Jubal Cain. He was a forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Jubal Cain was Nema. Lamech said to his wives, Ada and Zillah, hear my voice.

You wives of Lamech, listen to what I say. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.
And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called him Seth. For she said, God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him.
To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time, people began to call upon the name of the Lord. Amen. We started a new series last week for the autumn term from Genesis 4 to 11, right through November, called Grace Amid the Ruins.
And really, these stories in these chapters are fleshing out Genesis 3 and answering the question, what is wrong with us? What is wrong with humanity? What happened, and how did it go so bad?
[2:35] And in every one of the stories we saw last week, I think you'll see again this week, God's grace always runs further and faster than human sin seems to fall into more and more ruin.

That we keep going down, down, down, but God keeps going further and more excessive in how much grace He's willing to give humanity. And that means that this section of stories, they're false stories.
They're decline stories. They are about sin. And so the first time the word sin ever shows up in the Bible is in Genesis 4. And the first time the word fall, the fall, ever shows up in the Bible is Genesis 4.
And it's in the story of Cain. This is Cain's story. We just read the second half of it, and it really is all about sin. We said last week, sin is a power in the heart that wants to hide itself from you.
Sin wants to dominate you, like a serpent coiled up on your doorstep. It wants to strike you before you ever know it's there, before you ever see it. It wants you to believe that it's not there, that there's nothing wrong, that there's no sin.
[3:41] It's more, you know, we might use words as modern people, like the weight of trauma, the weight of dysfunction, maladaptive behavior, these kind of terms that are trying to describe sociologically, psychologically, what's wrong with us.

But none of them actually find meaning and make sense unless they're dropped into the bucket of the theological meaning of the word sin, which is that all sin, all of the problems we have are the product of moral corruption before God, that our problem really is theological before it is anything else.

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It's the condition we stand in before the Lord. And so last week, if you were here, we saw in Cain's life that sin becomes this force, this power, this state of being, this condition.
And it is, it's words and thoughts and deeds. It's things that we do. It's things that we fail to do. And the Bible says ultimately that this power, this force poisons everything, every motive we actually have, even in the good things that we do.
It's that deep. It's that serious. It's that big. And so we saw last week, I'm trying to stop myself from re-preaching last week, but just to say it in a few seconds that Cain is a classic elder brother.
[4:56] He was the first elder brother. And he, on the one hand, is very religious. He will give his offering. But he, even his name, Cain in Hebrew, means gain or accumulation.

And so we get the sense that though he is religious, he lives life for himself. He's cold towards God. He doesn't want communion with God. And when he sees God favor his brother and show regard to him, it creates loss, competition in his heart, envy, hatred.
And eventually that predator, he pets it like it's a friend. And it leads to murder. It leads to utter destruction in his life. It's the first murder ever committed.
Today we see in the second half of the passage that he goes on into exile and he builds a city. And that is ominous. That is a bad sign, not a good thing.
Now, before I dig into it a little bit more, last week, just a side note. Last week I mentioned that when Cain is exiled from Eden, he says, everybody's going to kill me.
[6:05] And I briefly noted, who are these other people that are living outside the Garden of Eden, outside of Eden? And then today we see that Cain has a wife. And you say, if you're just kind of a thoughtful reader of the text, you say, where did Cain get a wife?

And the incredibly disappointing answer I want to give to that is that the Bible, like ancient Near Eastern literature, and in God's inspiration of it, is incredibly selective.
So there is so much we don't know. And there is so much more that happened in the history of Revelation, what the Bible records, that we won't know until we meet with the Lord.
And that's to say, God has given us as much as he wants to tell us. And so, incredibly disappointing answer, but that's to say, we don't know exactly. And there's so many things to say about that, but I'll just leave it there.
Instead, there was a French sociologist in the 20th century named Jacques Ellul. He wrote some really important books that were prized by academics in the 20th century especially.
[7:10] One of them was The Technological Society. You may have come across that. The other is being revisited a lot right now in the face of AI. The other book that Jacques Ellul wrote that was very famous was called The Meaning of the City.

And in both of those books, he launched from the back half of Genesis 4 and sort of made his argument around what's wrong with humanity, what's wrong with the city, what's wrong with technological society, all from this passage.
And so, you may have noticed in the bulletin, I've stolen his book title as the sermon title, The Meaning of the City. What is the meaning of Cain's city? That's the question of the passage.
And you might not be surprised to know that it has three meanings. Three things that it tells us. Number one, the meaning of Cain's city is the ruin of Cain, the fall of Cain, really the fall of humanity deeper.
And secondly, it's the fall not only of Cain, but of culture, of civilization. And then lastly, it also points us to the fall of the city reversed. So first, the fall of Cain here, the existence of his city represents really the deeper fall of humanity.
[8:20] Now, we started, Sam read for us from verse 10, but if you back up to verse 7, God comes to Cain and he says, Will you not be accepted if you do well? And he wasn't saying there, we learned last week, he wasn't saying there, if you perform better, if you are better at religion, you'll be accepted.

No, he was saying, we know from Hebrews 11, if you come by faith like Abel, I will give you grace. He was being given what we would call now a free offer of the gospel by sheer mercy to come back into God's presence.
But the word, will you not be accepted, can also be translated, it's the Hebrew word for exaltation. So another way to read it is, will you not be exalted? Exalted.
And you have to say, exalted unto what? And remember, they are not outside of Eden, Cain and Abel, Adam and Eve, they're in Eden. So we think of them as being all the way out of Eden.

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No, they're in Eden in this story. They're exiled from the garden of Eden, but not Eden itself. And so when God says, if you come by faith through grace, will you not be exalted?
[9:23] He's saying, will you not have access back to the garden again? That's the real problem of humanity, is that our sin got us kicked out of the garden of Eden, and we want to be at home with God.

And so I don't know if you've ever seen one of the versions of the Sistine Chapel that was painted by Raphael. And Raphael's painting has all these little chubby red-cheeked babies that are supposed to be cherubim.
But in Genesis 3, 24, the cherub that's put at the gate of the garden is not a little chubby red-cheeked baby. It's a warrior. It's a soldier that's saying, you cannot come back into the presence of the garden of God because of your sin.
And that is what is before Cain. And so the rest of this passage is a test. Will Cain take the free offer of God's grace? And God comes to him as a counselor in verse 6 and 7. God comes to him after he murders his brother and says, where's your brother?
It's an opportunity for Cain to confess and repent. God is so gracious and merciful to him multiple times. And so this is a test. Will Cain accept this offer?
[10:32] And we learn here exactly what Cain chooses. God says, the blood of your brother cries out to me from the ground when Cain murders Abel. And that is the language of justice.

Justice is required. The blood of your brother, his dead body, cries out from the ground demanding justice. And here there's this important, subtle, little reversal of language from Genesis 3.
In Genesis 3, when Adam sinned, God came to Adam and said, the ground is cursed because of you. Meaning the Garden of Eden, you can't be in here anymore.
The ground is cursed. Your work is not going to be easy anymore. But it wasn't as much as he could have said. But now in Genesis 4 verse 11, after murder, after the desecration of the image, after this wicked deed, the language has changed.
God says to Cain, cursed are you because of the ground. In Genesis 3, it was cursed is the ground because of you, Adam. But now it's cursed are you because of the ground. Meaning you have to leave Eden altogether.
[11:37] Full exile because of this wicked deed you've done. In other words, there's a descent story going on here. A desecration story that people are getting worse. They're embracing that predator within them more and more.

And it's causing them to be further and further away from God. And yet, at the same time, at the same time, God marks Cain so that nobody can kill him.
He preserves his life. What he's doing when he sends him into exile is he's saying, there is a way back, even for a murderer, into God's full presence. And you see, he says to him, And the blood of Abel cries from the ground, Justice is required here, and yet I do still love you.
And it's so important to see that because the real God is not a God of all love, no justice. And the real God is not a God of all justice, no love. And instead, the God of the Bible, the real God is a God who says yes to justice, yes to saying things are bad, to saying there really is sin, there really is a problem.
And yet, in the way of love and the way of mercy, God is saying to him from the get-go, I'm going to make a way for you. I'm going to give you an opportunity, a free offer to come back into my presence. And here we learn in the main idea, the first point, what Cain does with this.
[12:54] He says, oh Cain, representative of all human civilization here, Cain, two great miseries he plunges himself into. In verse 13, he turns to God and says, My punishment is too great for me to bear.

And, you know, this is like when you try to, you know, you discipline a young child. I've had an experience like this before. You punish a child, and you know that as they go to their room for timeout, they are not sorry for what they did, right?
No, they are, but they are upset at the consequences. They're upset for the price that they are now having to pay for it. But it sounds, this sounds, what Cain says here to God sounds like the modern celebrity PR statement.
When on Twitter, on Instagram, someone says, I apologize if you were offended by my actions, right? Cain here is being given the chance to repent, and instead he says, Woe is me, my punishment is too much to bear.

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Where is the language? Cain, you murdered your brother. And you say, Exile? That seems rather harsh. And that's, you see, that's what he's saying.
[14:07] And this is a half apology. This is an apology completely centered in self-centeredness. And it's pointing toward Paul in the New Testament in 2 Corinthians 7-10, when Paul contrasts godly sorrow with worldly sorrow.

And he says, What is true repentance? True repentance is godly sorrow. It's saying, I am grieved for what I did against God, and what this has cost other people. And Cain here has no care in the world, except that I don't like the punishment I've been given.
And you see this, last week we learned that sin is a predatorial force within you that wants to destroy you. It wants to stay quiet until it's completely taken over your life.
And here, one of the signs of that, that we're gripped by sin in our lives, is the inability to repent. And one of the questions that you have to ask is, Are my apologies half-hearted? You know, when I do confess my sins and come to another person, is it in the language of, I hate the consequences? Instead of the language, think about David, Psalm 51. Like Cain, David was a murderer, remember? And in Psalm 51, what does David say? The murderer, David, like Cain, but David says, Lord, against you and against you only have I sinned.
[15:22] And the difference in Cain and David is subtle. Is there a way back for a murder? And the way back is true repentance. And instead, Cain chooses a half-hearted apology. And we see here that true repentance doesn't ask, true repentance does not ask, what will this cost me?

It asks, what have I done against you, Lord? What have I done to grieve the moral order that you've brought me into? That's the nature of true repentance. The second great misery that Cain falls into here is he builds a city.
So in verse 17, he goes to the land of Nod, and Nod means wandering. And so the irony here is that he settles and builds a city in the land that's name is to be unsettled, or to wander.
And why? This is a direct violation of what God has told him to do. God said, your punishment is to go into exile, and to be a fugitive, and a wanderer, and to be restless. Why? That's a mercy.
Cain owes his life, life for life for what he's done to Abel. And instead, he's being given what Psalm 118 will kind of point us toward, a chastisement that would bring us to repentance. In other words, God's saying, you need to wander, you need to be homeless, because your homelessness needs to help you feel a sense that you will not be home until you repent.
[16:36] And instead, you get down, and it just, so the text just says, it just so happened, Cain at some point built a city. And it's telling you, Cain was in direct obstinance to the exile that was to lead him to repentance.

He directly violated God's commands. And instead of wandering and wrestling with his heart, he chose self-sufficiency. He chose to build roots that would stand ultimately against God.
And that's where we learn sin. Every story, we're learning a little bit more about sin. Sin here, sin here is self-centeredness. It is building walls against God.
It is saying to God, I can make my own way. I can be my own person. I'll build my life without you. Did, did, look, did Cain believe in God? Was, was Cain struggling with atheism?
No. Was Cain an agnostic? No. He prayed. And that's telling you the depths of sin. Sin can get so rooted, a predator in the soul, that you can absolutely believe in God and still say, and I'm going to live my life building walls against you, and building a city apart from you, and building a culture apart from you.
[17:50] Jacques Alou puts it like this. The first city that was ever built was built by a murderer on the premise of defiance against God. And that means that human civilization did not have a good start.

This is the first civilization. This is the first establishment of culture, and it didn't, it didn't start off well. So secondly, let's see the fall of, not only of humanity into deeper depths of sin, but also the fall of culture, of civilization.
Now, you might turn to your neighbor after the service. You might be tempted and say, especially if you're new here, you've just moved to the city maybe, you might say, you see, cities are bad.
I told you we should have stayed in North Uist. You know, I told you we should have stayed in, we should move back to Harris. But that would be a mistake, because it's not, it's not talking here about cities like Edinburgh or London.

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Instead, in the ancient world, a city is what we would call a village. It's a place of society. It's a gathering of civilization. If you build a wall, you've got a city.
[18:57] If you've got multiple homes, you've got a city in the ancient mind. Here, he's talking about the fall of civilization. Look at how badly it starts. Augustine, St. Augustine said, he called this the city of man.

And what he meant by that was any civilization we build as human beings is built on the premise from Genesis 4 on that we are doing so in obstinance against God. You know, we don't wake up every day and think, you know, I'm going to build my life and I'm going to do it against God.
But instead, the subtle lack of recognition of God, of even sin, of the predator within, is a way of building your life, of building a city, of building a culture, of building whatever it is God's given you to build in this world in opposition to God for lack of acknowledgement of him.
And that is the natural condition of humanity. And so what we have here is this, I guess it's not surprising at all because when you get down to this genealogy of Cain, Cain has a baby, a little boy Enoch, and he names the city after Enoch.
Press pause on Enoch. We'll come back to the two Enochs next week. And then there's this long line of names. Sam did so well reading them. And eventually we see down in verse 20 that Jabal, born to Ada, is the father of those who dwell in tents.
[20:13] And have livestock. And then his brother, Jubal, is the father of all who play the lyre and the pipe. And then Zillah's son, Tubal Cain, is the father, the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron.

In other words, it's not surprising at all that as soon as civilization arises, what do you have? You have the beginning of metallurgy, stonemasonry, music, all these different arts and sciences begin to get cultivated.
You see humanity here embracing culture. And what is culture? Culture is Genesis 1. It's that we were made by God to be gardeners, to be sub-creators like him, to take the raw materials of creation and cultivate them into civilization.
But if you take Genesis 1 and you say plus Genesis 3, you get Genesis 4. And that works out mathematically as well as in the logic of the text. Genesis 1 is you were made to be a culture maker, a gardener like God, taking the raw materials of beauty in the world and making art, taking metal and producing sciences.
That's exactly what you were made for, to be like God in that way. And yet when you mix that with Genesis 3, you get Genesis 4. And that's that these first fathers of culture, civilization, are doing so, doing exactly what God made them to do, but they're doing it in what we call, the theologians call antithesis against God.
[21:37] If God has given you a thesis for life, be like me, make culture, the antithesis is saying, I will do it, but I will do it against your thesis, antithesis. I'll do it against the way that you made me ultimately to do it.

And we see here the fall of the first human civilization and the first culture. Human culture, in other words, is good. It is right to build.
It is, cities aren't bad. Cities are wonderful. It's so right to build these beautiful places and do the work that so many of you are doing in the city. And yet they are thoroughly corrupted, right?
So in other words, we've got the right structure, but because of Genesis 3, now we've got the wrong direction. We're doing the wrong things with the calling we've been given in life to build cities. And the genealogy of Cain takes us further and further into that descent story.
And by the time you get, if you were to count, you'll find that the seventh son of Cain is Lamech. And of course, seven is seven for a reason.
[22:38] It's saying fullness. When it came to the fullness of Lamech, of Cain's genealogy, the fullness of descent had finally arisen. And humanity had taken this good calling from God to be gardeners of his world and used it so maximally against him that Lamech, Lamech's story we have here.

So you'll see Lamech's little tune, a little song that he sings. Ada and Zillah, he says, hear my voice. So first, first Lamech has two wives.
The presence of polygamy in the Bible is not positive for polygamy, as it has sometimes been mistakenly argued. If you read, anybody who has more than one spouse in Genesis is always in a decline story, always in a fall story.

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And so if you think back to Genesis 1, God said, be like me, cultivate the land, be a sub-creator, and families are good. And man, it's not good that man would be without woman.
And so God gives marriage. But what do we see? As soon as Genesis 1 plus 3 equals 4, the reversal of that, that human civilization bent in sin corrupts marriage.
[23:50] And so polygamy begins to come. And then right after that, the next thing, unsurprisingly, he says, hear my voice, my wives. Listen to what I say. I've killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.

And the Hebrew scholars are so helpful here because they say that when he says young man, it's like saying lad or young teen, boy.
And when he says for striking me, that's one of the same words that's already been used in the Bible for something like wounded or bruised or even scratched. And so you got to hear how extreme this is.
He's saying a young boy bruised me, punched me, scratched me, and I killed him. I murdered him. And he said, if God protected Cain so that nobody could harm him, know that I will turn around and kill at the same level of his protection.
In other words, as one commentator put it, sin drives humanity to take the goods of civilization. But if we don't repent, we can be driven down, down, down, down, down, further and further all the way into the domain of the beast.
[25:02] Where you seven generations in, the complete fulfillment of Cain's story is Lamech. And he glories in murder. He loves it.

And he glories in corrupting the two great things God gave in Genesis 1, which is family and cultivation. And he takes them both and turns them into a monstrosity.
And that means that we learn here that we are called to see something very important. And I have to move on to the finish. Despite all this, God continues to grant humanity the gifts of metalworking and smithing and music making and architecture and all the vocations in this room that are represented.
Common grace gifts, we call them. God, this is the first moment we see in the Bible where God is actively pouring His common grace to everybody no matter what.
And it is the people that are in the lineage of Cain that are running so far from God in obstinance that are making beautiful music. And that means that you as a Christian have to hold two things together.
[26:13] One, that God made us to create culture and that that is happening all around you in ways that are beautiful. In ways that are good that people are making music all the time and it's wonderful no matter what they believe in.

It's like, I've heard it said, it's like a master musician stealing a piano. You know, on the one hand the direction was wrong. They stole the piano but then you hear the master play.
And that's exactly what's happening with human culture here. And it's all because of God's excessive grace to people who do not deserve it. Not for a second. And that means that the Christian church has to look at the city in the same way.
We have to love the city as much as Jesus loved us, as much as God loves us here. And that's to say the direction is wrong but the structures were right. And Christ looks out at the city and weeps for her.
He wants her back. He wants her to be turned back around. And so that leads us to finally the reversal. We have here shadows of the reversal of the broken city, of the broken culture.
[27:15] And that's what we're at the last week I said as we wrap up I said the overarching question of this section comes from Genesis 3.15 when humanity fell and God said one day there would be a seed a seed of the woman a seed of Eve a son of Eve who would crush the head of the serpent.

And that is the controlling question of Genesis 4.11 who's it going to be? And at the end of this passage you have this it's abrupt even I mean this transition from 24 to 25 Lamech is celebrating murder and then all of a sudden and yet Adam and Eve had a son and they called his name Seth and the word Seth means appointed one.
And so just notice notice Eve's faith. I think that's subtle but striking. she has lost her son to murder Abel and then she's lost her other son to exile and she cries out and says yet God has given us one appointed and so she is thinking there of the promise of Genesis 3.15 and names her son

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according to that promise that there is still one that's appointed that would crush the head of the serpent.
And then in verse 26 people begin to call upon the name of the Lord. Now listen what is the city of Cain? The city of Cain is proto-Babel. The city of Cain will grow in its demise all the way to Genesis 11 where we will have the first Babylon and then Babylon will become the grand theme of the whole Bible of all that's wrong with the city.
And what was the chorus line of Babel? Let us make a name for ourselves. And it's embracing the truth of the power of the predator of sin to say I am fully self-sufficient I do not need the creator I can build my own cities.
[29:14] It's rejecting God and obstinacy but here at the end of the passage it says that all of a sudden people weren't saying let us make a name for ourselves they were saying it was saying we are calling upon the name of the Lord again.

And that means that the just subtle reversal in the passage is that there was a community who said we will not build civilization on the basis of Cain's city of self-sufficiency we will worship and pray and build a new city upon the name of the Lord.
And that was through the lineage of Seth the one that had been appointed. Now that's a little reversal of all that went wrong in Genesis 4 and it points to a far greater reversal and it's this when you jump to Matthew 18 Jesus is asked how many times should we forgive and Jesus what does he say?
He says 70 times 7 and do you know that that's that's the exact language that's taken directly from Genesis 4 when Lamech says my revenge is 70 times 7 in Hebrew it just says 7 7s just like in the New Testament in Matthew 18 you see Jesus is taking the language of Lamech and saying if human culture at the beginning was built on vengeance and murder and never being willing to forgive anyone I'm telling you I'm building a new city and that city is going to be built on the exact opposite on forgiveness 70 times 7 and even more than that what was Cain's punishment?
Cain's punishment was the punishment of humanity yet bathed in mercy you know Cain was exiled from the garden he was exiled even from the presence of God in Eden and he should have lost his life for what he did but he he was stayed that justice was stayed and Jesus Christ he came into the world and what did he get?
[31:11] he said foxes have dens you know birds have holes I've got nowhere to lay my head Jesus Christ came into the world as what?

as a wanderer restless without a home and Cain deserved death and humanity deserved death but what did Jesus get? Cain didn't get it Jesus got it he got death you see in other words Jesus Christ got exactly the justice that humanity deserves that human civilization deserves and he said I will take this into me so that I can give you the power to build a new city to build a better city and how do you enter into that?
how do you enter into that? how do you prevent your life today from falling deeper and deeper from ruin? what's the story telling us? it's by way of repentance it's doing exactly the opposite of what Cain did and saying against you Lord against you only have I sinned it's not saying I hate the consequences it's saying I hate my sin and turning and saying in other words what's the passage calling you to see?
we are little Cains we are city builders that are doing it forgetting about God taking his common grace gifts and using stone masonry to slap him in the face and the way out the way from ruin is repentance and Christ you know the Bible doesn't end there it ends in Revelation 19 through 20 by telling us that we are not merely returning to a garden the garden of Eden we are returning to what? a city you see that great reversal that God takes what humanity ruined the city and turns it around to make the city the ultimate hope of humanity and if you want to be a part of that city if you want to see a little reversal even in your life of witnessing toward the city that is to come then live a life of repentance that knows you know I don't have to build a name for myself anymore I don't have to make my city great my life great no in baptism Christ has put his name on me in faith Christ has put his name on you so you don't need to make a name for yourself and you can go out into the city and witness in all you do to the city that is to come the better city let's pray Father teach us to be witnesses to the great eternal city the new Jerusalem the great reversal of the city of Cain and Lord help us today this week even as Christians in our work in our lives in our vocations to witness to that end in all the details of how we live and we pray now even for hearts of repentance as we close our time with singing in Christ's name

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[33:50] Amen

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