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Genesis 4:17-18

18th Message

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A MIGHTY FORTRESS

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

We return today to Genesis 4. Maybe some of you are wondering how many more weeks I can possibly spend in this chapter, since we spent four weeks looking at the story of Cain and Abel. Apart from that story it seems an unpromising chapter to spend much time in, especially because the chapter is primarily a genealogy, the first of four in these first eleven chapters of Genesis. We tend to skip over genealogies; we hit the fast forward button. But I'm not going to allow us to do that, because these genealogies are here for a reason. The book of Genesis is the first volume of Israel's history. Her story begins in chapter 12 with the call of Abraham. Chapters 1–11 give the pre-history, the back story that is necessary for Israel to understand her origins as a people. These four genealogies, in chapters 4, 5, 10 and 11, are part of this pre-history, and we'll pay attention to each of them.

The genealogy in chapter 4 is divided into sections by the three-fold statement that a man knew his wife and she bore a son: Adam knew his wife Eve (1), Cain knew his wife (17), and Adam again knew his wife (25). The genealogy is interrupted several times with narrative. The longest of these interruptions is the story of Cain and Abel (2-16) which had such a tragic end: Abel was dead and Cain was cursed and self-exiled from the presence of the Lord. But life goes on; the genealogy continues with the descendants of Cain.

Any genealogy raises the question of what translation to use, and this particular genealogy makes that doubly difficult. Any biblical genealogy is full of begetting, but this genealogy, uniquely of all those in Genesis, includes also the activity that leads to begetting. As you probably know, Hebrew describes this with a verb having to do with knowledge: the man *knew* his wife. But this is not part of our English idiom, so, while some English versions simply do use "knew" (KJV, ESV), others try to render the word into English idiom: knew intimately (HCSB), had relations with (NASB), lay with (NIV), made love to (TNIV), had marital relations with (NET), or slept with (Message).

Since I've used TNIV so far in this Genesis series I'll continue to do so, though I don't particularly like its translation of "knew":

Cain made love to 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. (Gen 4:17-18 TNIV)

These two verses are our text for this morning. They don't seem very promising. Most people would quickly pass over them. If they do pay any attention to these verses, it's to ask who was Cain's wife. But that's the wrong question; the text isn't interested in who was Cain's wife.

The framework of these two verses is the genealogy of Cain through Enoch, Irad, Mehujael and Methushael to Lamech, seventh in line from Adam. Into this genealogy is inserted a very brief nar-

rative, just nine words in Hebrew, a few more in English. Why is this here?

I have a couple of disagreements with the TNIV and most other translations. Here's a more wooden translation of v 17:

Then Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. He was a city-builder. Then he called the name of the city after the name of his son Enoch.

The Hebrew text doesn't say "Cain built a city" but "he was a city-builder," using the same construction used for Cain and Abel (v 2): Abel was a keeper of sheep, Cain was a worker of the ground, and this person is a builder of cities. These were their occupations. The same construction will be used three more times in verses 20-22 to describe the occupations of Lamech's sons. But who is this city-builder? It is unclear whether it is Cain or his son Enoch. Normally, "he was a city builder" would refer to Enoch, conceived and born in the previous line. But the last word of the verse sows confusion: is Enoch the subject of the verb "called" or the name of the son? So commentators differ on whether it was Cain or Enoch who was the first city-builder. Ultimately it doesn't matter too much whether it was Cain or Enoch; what matters is that the first city-builder was in the line of Cain.

This little story first came to my attention more than thirty years ago. Early in my geography studies at university I was set an essay on the origins of cities. I read academic books about the city, such as Lewis Mumford's classic *The City in History* (1961). But I also turned to the Bible; I was curious what it had to say on the origin of cities. I found that this is its first reference to the city. I consulted some commentaries, but at the time I didn't know what to make of this. I had no theology of the city. But I think I now do. The Bible has a lot to say about the city.

What is the origin of the city? Archaeologists have concluded that something very remarkable happened in the fourth millennium B.C. There are traces of earlier settlements elsewhere, in places like Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia and Jericho in Canaan. But in the fourth millennium a new type of settlement arose in southern Mesopotamia near the head of the Persian Gulf. By the beginning of the millennium a substantial settlement had developed at Eridu. As the millennium progressed Eridu was superseded by the world's first city, Uruk. So important was this development that the entire fourth millennium is called the Uruk period. It is clear, reading histories of the Ancient Near East, that no one really knows why there was this sudden flowering of civilization 5500 years ago with cities, technology and political organization. Books about the history of the Ancient Near East are full of conjecture: must have, presumably, probably, possibly... No one really knows why urbanism arose.

I have been re-reading Mumford's, *The City in History*. It's clear that he couldn't explain the rise of the city, but he did offer a suggestion:

What I would suggest is that the most important agent in effecting the change from a decentralized village economy to a highly organized urban economy, was the king, or rather, the institution of Kingship.

He sees this as a development of the earlier rise of the village chief:

Suddenly this figure assumed superhuman proportions: all his powers and prerogatives became immensely magnified, while those of his subjects, who no longer had a will of their own or could claim any life apart from that of the ruler, were correspondingly diminished.¹

This connection between city and kingship is exactly what the ancient stories tell us. Archaeologists have not uncovered the minutes of the Uruk planning committee, but they have found tablets on which are inscribed the stories told by the people of Sumer, this early civilization of southern Mesopotamia. We usually call these stories myths. Several of them explain the origin of their cities. One of these is the Sumerian King List.

It begins, "When kingship was lowered from heaven, kingship was (first) in Eridu. (In) Eridu, A-lulim (became) king and ruled 28,800 years." But after the second king the kingship moved to another city, to Bad-tibira. After eight kings and five cities the list concludes, "There are five cities, eight kings ruled them for 241,000 years. (Then) the Flood swept over (the earth). After the Flood had swept over (the earth) (and) when kingship was lowered (again) from heaven, kingship was (first) in Kish."² After the Flood, kingship continued to move around: the second post-Flood city was Eanna, a sacred precinct of Uruk. The most famous king of Eanna (Uruk) was the fifth, Gilgamesh. The third city of post-Flood kingship was Ur, and the list continues beyond that.

Is this Sumerian king list true? No doubt there's an element of truth behind the mythology: Ur did supersede Uruk as the center of power in Sumer early in the third millennium B.C. Other parts of the list are harder to accept: it's hard to imagine kings living for 28,800 years. But whether this list is true or not is really the wrong question. What documents like this show is how these ancient peoples understood their world. These were their stories of origin. In their view, kingship was a gift from heaven, a gift from the gods. The kings were the mighty men of old, the heroes. Both ruler and city had divine legitimacy.

These stories are the backdrop against which we are to read the early chapters of Genesis. These chapters are not written to debunk modern science, today's stories of origin, but to debunk ancient mythology, the stories of origin told by the cultures surrounding Israel.

In contrast to ancient mythology, Genesis 1-11 takes a very dim view indeed of the ancient cities and their rulers. It told Israel a very different story.

The first narrative inserted into the genealogy has told us the story of Cain and Abel. After Cain murdered his brother the Lord pronounced him cursed and consigned him to the life of a vagrant and a wanderer (4:11-12). Cain was now afraid:

"My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." (4:13-14)

Cain's statement is laden with ambiguity as we saw last summer. At the core, he was afraid, afraid that he would be killed. The Lord

countered this fear by promising Cain that any Cain-killer would suffer seven-fold vengeance. He placed a sign for Cain so that anyone finding him might not kill him. The Lord had said nothing about Cain having to leave his presence; that was Cain's idea. Cain found being in the Lord's presence unbearable and so he left it:

So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden. (4:16)

From now on Cain would live outside the Lord's presence, in the land of Nod, east of Eden, which is really three ways of saying the same thing. Here in the land of Nod, which means "wandering," he settled down. This is the setting for the subsequent genealogy of Cain: outside the Lord's presence and in fear of his life.

Note that the Lord did allow the line of Cain to continue. He had cursed Cain, meaning that he would bring him to a dead-end but he didn't activate that dead-end right away. He allowed the line of Cain to continue on to the eighth generation. But it was life lived outside the Lord's presence. The first thing that Cain did outside God's presence was to father a city-builder.

For us today a city is primarily a political entity. An ancient city was not like a modern one. Every ancient city had three closely interconnected features: a wall, a ruler and a temple. The ancient myths told the people that their cities with their rulers, temples and walls had divine legitimacy for they were at the initiative of heaven. Genesis 4 told the Israelites that these cities and rulers had no legitimacy at all; they were built by humanity living outside God's presence.

By building his city this first city-builder was ruler of his own domain. That's what happens when you live outside the Lord's presence. John Milton in *Paradise Lost* has Satan say this on his banishment to hell:

...Here at least

We shall be free...

Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice,

To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:

Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven. (1.258-263)

"Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven." Better to reign in the gutter than serve in paradise. Therein lies the root of all sin. Therein lies so much of our pursuit of life, liberty and happiness.

Kingship of the city-building variety has no divine legitimacy. Yes, God created humans to be rulers: rulers over all creation, but they were to do so on his behalf. He also created them as priests, to serve under him, whom to serve is perfect freedom. But this rule of the city-builder was outside God's presence, in rejection of the Lord.

Secondly this first city-builder entrusted his security to the walls he had made, for Cain was afraid that anyone finding him would kill him. Building the city was a rejection of God's promised protection, a rejection of the sign that God had placed for him.

Walls and kingship: these are the two fundamental problems with the city built by the city-builder from the line of Cain.

Two more city-builders are mentioned in the primeval history (Gen 1-11). The second city-builder is Nimrod whose brief narrative is embedded in the genealogy of Ham:

The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Uruk, Akkad and Kalneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah—which is the great city. (10:10-12)

Nimrod took city-building to the next level: empire building. Here we have the first mention of the great city which will loom large in the rest of the Bible. I agree with those who see this as based on Sargon; after taking power in 2334 B.C. he built the world's first empire based on the city Akkad. He was not content to rule over his own city; he wanted to rule over everyone else's cities as well. The *Sargon Chronicle* says of him: he "spread his terror-inspiring glamor over all the countries."³ The Bible takes a negative view of this activity, placing it within the genealogy of Shem along with the other enemies of God and his people such as Egypt and Canaan. Subsequent generations glamorized Sargon for his heroic empire-building, but the Bible dismisses him with the name Nimrod, "we rebel."

The third city-builder is all humanity gathered together to build a city and a tower at Babel (11:4). For God this was the final straw. Chapters 4–11 show what happens when God leaves humanity to its own devices. After the Tower of Babel God steps in and takes the initiative to save humanity after it has become abundantly clear that humanity left to its own devices sinks deeper into evil.

What is God's answer to the city? Should we all leave the city and go live in the countryside? What about the suburbs, halfway between the city and the countryside? Are they acceptable?

God's answer to the way humanity lives life in chapters 4–11 is to start something new with Abraham. The Lord called him to leave the cities of Mesopotamia, to leave Ur which by the end of the third millennium B.C. was once again the chief city of southern Mesopotamia. "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Gen 12:1). In this new land, the land of Canaan, Abraham lived as a nomad without a settled home. Eventually his descendants became slaves to the great king Pharaoh, building his great cities. But God's long-term plan for his people was neither that they live as nomads in the countryside nor that they live in slavery building cities for tyrannical rulers. His long-term answer to the cities of man was to put another city of earth, a city with a king and a temple each of which had divine legitimacy. After delivering his people from Egypt he repeatedly told them that he would choose a place to put his Name (e.g. Deut 12).

Centuries later, after a false start with Saul, David became the divinely-approved king over Israel. Almost immediately he captured Jerusalem, brought the ark of the covenant into the city, representing God's presence in the city, and wanted to build God a temple, a task which God deferred to his son. City, king and temple all had divine legitimacy; all were approved by God. For this was the city of God where God dwelt with his people. The city had a king, but it's clear that David understood that he was ruling under God, that God was the king. The city had walls but it's clear that David entrusted his security to the Lord not to his walls. The psalms are full of references to God as the fortress.

From now on there were two cities on earth: the city of man and the city of God. The city of man is the city created by man where he can live outside God's presence, where man can rule independently from God, where security is achieved through walls of man's making. The city of God is the city established by God for people to live in his presence. Its inhabitants surrender their sovereignty to God and trust him for their security. The city of man is the great city. The city of God is the holy city. What makes the holy city holy is that God is there. The prime examples of the great city in the Old Testament are Nineveh, Babylon and Tyre, frequently mentioned in the prophets. Each was surrounded by vast walls which made it feel secure; each

city thought it was invincible. Each was ruled by mighty kings, so mighty that they reach mythical proportions and are described in language that many see as referring ultimately to Satan (e.g., the king of Babylon, Isa 14; the king of Tyre, Ezek 28).

The great city opposes the holy city both overtly and covertly. Overtly the great city oppresses the holy city and seeks to take it captive. Covertly, and more dangerously, it seduces it. Not only does it seduce its own inhabitants but it can seduce the residents of the holy city. Solomon, second king of Jerusalem and builder of its temple, was seduced. He was supposed to entrust his security to the Lord, but he built three other cities to house his military machine; he was trusting in his horses and chariots. He was supposed to rule his people with righteousness and justice but he subjected them to slavery to build these cities. As future rulers led the people further and further astray Jerusalem became indistinguishable from the cities of man, and so was ripe for judgment. Then no wall and no king could protect her from God's wrath.

But even while God was warning Jerusalem of judgment, he told his people through the prophets his future plans. For example,

In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:

**We have a strong city;
God makes salvation
its walls and ramparts.**

**Open the gates
that the righteous nation may enter,
the nation that keeps faith.**

**You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.**

**Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal.**

**He humbles those who dwell on high,
he lays the lofty city low;
he levels it to the ground
and casts it down to the dust. (Isa 26:1-5)**

The Lord would throw salvation around the city as its wall. Gates would not be shut to keep people out, but opened to let people in. Elsewhere the Lord declared that Jerusalem would have no walls; instead the Lord himself would be a wall of fire around her (Zech 2:4-5). The Lord announced that this city would have a righteous king, a Branch of David from the root of Jesse.

Where is this city: this city where God himself is the wall of protection, this city where the gates are open to let people in rather than shut to keep people out, this city ruled by a righteous king? Should we look to the physical city of Jerusalem to find this city? The New Testament writers realized that the earthly Jerusalem was a prefigurement, a type of a future heavenly city to which all God's people come when they come to Christ:

**But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God,
the heavenly Jerusalem...to the church of the firstborn, whose
names are written in heaven. (Heb 12:22-23)**

The holy city is the heavenly city, of which Jerusalem was an earthly outpost. Now it is the Church that is the earthly outpost. God calls all people to come out of the city of man and enter the city of God where the gates are open. Its walls are salvation. Its ruler is the Lord Jesus Christ, whom God has appointed as King of kings. It

has no temple for the whole city is the temple, the dwelling place of God among his people.

Revelation ends with a vision of the Holy City, the new Jerusalem:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. (Rev 21:2-3)

This city has walls but its gates are never shut; they’re open for all to come in. Furthermore the city is as big as the cosmos, so there is no outside beyond the walls from which the inhabitants need protection. It, too, has no temple, for the presence of God and the Lamb fills the city.

Cain settled down in the land of wandering. Here he and his line built their cities where they ruled and trusted in their own security. God called Abraham to what seemed like a life of wandering, but on the horizon lay the city of God’s making: firstly the earthly Jerusalem, beyond that the Church, and ultimately New Jerusalem. This made Abraham’s journey not a wandering but a pilgrimage. The same is true of us who join Abraham in walking by faith. Our Scripture reading presented this pilgrimage to the city of God:

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God...

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:8-10, 13-16)

John Donne used city imagery in his 14th sonnet. “Batter my heart, three person’d God,” he began. Not the battering of a man beating a spouse, but that of a battering ram, for Donne likened himself to a “usurp’d town, to another due.” He longed to let God in, but couldn’t, hence the call to God to batter down the defenses of his heart:

Batter my heart, three-person’d God ; for you
As yet but knock ; breathe, shine, and seek to mend ;
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp’d town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betroth’d unto your enemy ;
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

God calls each one of us out of the city of man, the city built by Cain and his descendants, the city where we took refuge behind walls of our own making, the city where we reigned as kings over our lives. He calls us into the city of God where he provides our security and where we submit ourselves to the rule of King Jesus. In the city of man we think we’re free, but it’s in the city of God that we find true freedom. This doesn’t mean we leave our physical cities for God is at work infiltrating his holy city throughout the cities of the world.

Each day I have a choice of whether to live in the city of God or in the city of man. Sadly all too often Christians, while claiming to live in the city of God, actually live according to the principles of the city of man. All too often we assert our independence, set ourselves up as kings, build our own walls, rely for security on our own devices. God calls us to entrust our security to him and to surrender our sovereignty to the king he has appointed. God is our mighty fortress.

1. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 35.

2. “The Sumerian King List,” translated by A. Leo Oppenheim (*ANET*, 265).

3. “The ‘Sargon Chronicle,’” translated by A. Leo Oppenheim (*ANET*, 266).