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Genesis 4:19-22

19th Message

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TO WHAT END MUSIC?

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Psalm 150 calls on everything that has breath to praise the Lord—Hallelujah—and to do so using every available instrument: trumpet, harp and lyre, timbrel, strings and pipe, clashing and resounding cymbals. Our offertory, written by Doug Plank and Bob Kauflin of Sovereign Grace Music, was based on this psalm: “Praise Him now with trumpet sound, Lift your voice and dance around... Praise the Lord with instruments, Praise Him for His excellence... Praise the Lord with all you are, Mind and soul and will and heart.”¹ Some of you were here early enough to see our music team employ a variety of instruments for the prelude: flute, harp, trumpet and hammered dulcimer in addition to the usual guitar, piano and drums. We’ve used the artistic and technological skills of many people: the technology of those who developed the metals with which craftsmen could make these instruments; the artistic skill of the psalmist who wrote Psalm 150, and of Doug Plank and Bob Kauflin who rewrote those words into a new song.

Where do these creative urges come from—this desire to make things? What moved Charles Wesley on the first anniversary of his conversion to write not a piece of prose but eighteen verses of poetry, six of which we sang this morning as the hymn, “O for a thousand tongues to sing”? But there are Christians who prohibit such creativity for worship: we should sing only the psalms without any musical accompaniment.

We have creative desires. We like to make things. Mankind has been described as *Homo faber*, Man the Maker, the Fabricator. We make things, firstly, because we need them. Necessity is the mother of invention. This drives even some animals to use tools to accomplish a task, usually to get some food. But there’s more to it than mere necessity. We like to make things that don’t simply do the job, but that do it beautifully, elegantly, aesthetically. Some of you have workshops at home. Perhaps some of you make your own furniture. Rather than buy something merely functional at Ikea, you devote large amounts of time and effort to make something that is beautiful and that brings the pleasure of having made it yourself.

Our creative urges extend to things that are not simply practical. We write poetry, sing, make music, paint, dance... In Isak Denison’s short story *Babette’s Feast*, the last words from Babette are, “Through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me leave to do my utmost!” She expressed her artistry through cooking, elevating a mere meal into a memorable banquet.

Society tends to divide these two areas of creativity. On the one side the “practical” arts of technology: the mechanical and industrial arts. On the other side the “impractical” arts: the fine arts and the performing arts, the aesthetic arts. Good designers try to bridge the gap, applying aesthetic principles to the design of “practical” objects. The world waits to see if Steve Jobs and Jonathan Ive can once again bring their aesthetics to bear on the world of technology: will Apple introduce an iPad that doesn’t simply work but that works beautifully, elegantly?

As we work our way through the early chapters of Genesis we come today to the Bible’s first mention of the arts, both the aesthetic and the technological arts. We are in Genesis 4, in Adam’s first genealogy which traces his line through his eldest son Cain. Verses 17-18 have quickly listed the line from Cain to Lamech, stopping briefly to note the first city-builder. At Lamech, seventh in line from Adam, the genealogy is interrupted again to tell us about this Lamech and his family.

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 stringed instruments and pipes. Zillah also had a son, Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron. Tubal-Cain’s sister was Naamah. (Gen 4:19-22 TNIV)

The narrator gives us extensive information about Lamech’s family: two wives, three sons and one daughter, complete with all their names. Lamech took to himself not one but two wives, the first instance of polygamy. We’ll look at this next week when I’ll focus on Lamech. Today I want to focus on Lamech’s children through these two women.

The genealogy of Cain’s descendants has listed only one son for each generation, though presumably other sons and daughters were born in each generation. But for Lamech three sons and even a daughter are listed, each with their names. This listing of three named sons is a technique that these early genealogies of Genesis use repeatedly to indicate a terminus.

The genealogy of chapter five, tracing the line from Adam through Seth, ends, “Noah...became the father of Shem, Ham and Japheth” (5:32). With Noah and his three sons a terminus is reached. What follows is the Flood whereby God wipes the earth clean and starts over again. The genealogy of chapter 11, tracing the line from Noah’s son Shem, ends, “Terah...became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran” (11:26). Again a terminus is reached. What follows is the Lord’s call of Abraham, marking another new beginning. By listing the three sons of Lamech the genealogy is indicating that some sort of terminus is reached. What sort of terminus is it? We’ll return to this question next week.

For each of the three sons we are given both his name and his occupation. These occupations are not theirs alone; rather, each son is the progenitor, the ancestor of all who follow him in his occupation. Jabal was the ancestor of those who live in tents and raise livestock. He was the first pastoral nomad and the progenitor of those who followed him in this activity. His brother Jubal was the ancestor of all who play stringed instruments and pipes; he was the first musician. Their cousin Tubal-Cain was the ancestor of those who forge all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron; he was the first metalworker.

As for the first city-builder (4:17), we have to ask why we are given this information. Genesis 4 is part of Israel's story of origins, giving her her pre-history, the story leading up to her origin as a people in the call of Abraham. Genesis 4 gives us six early occupations, using a similar Hebrew construction for all six. Cain was a ground-tiller and Abel a flock-keeper (4:2). Cain or his son Enoch was a city-builder (4:17). Jabal was a tent-dweller with livestock (4:20). Jubal was a harp- and pipe-player (4:21). Tubal-Cain was a bronze- and iron-forger (4:22). These six occupations are characteristic of early civilization: farming, grazing, city-building, pastoral nomadism, music and metalworking.

Explaining Civilization

When, how and why did early civilization arise? We have three sets of answers to these questions: those provided by modern archaeology, those provided by ancient mythology, and those provided by the Bible.

1. Archaeology

Archaeologists and anthropologists seek to provide modern answers to these questions. The quest of anthropologists for the rise of humans as a species focuses on East Africa. The archaeologists' search for the rise of civilization focuses on the Near East, for this is where they find the earliest evidence. The rise of civilization required the prior domestication of plants and animals, which they date to some 10,000 BC. This allowed the first soil-tillers and flock-keepers, the first farmers and herders. Archaeologists tell us that cities arose in Mesopotamia in the fourth millennium BC; the kings of this time were the first city-builders. The onset of the Bronze Age proper is dated to about the same time, about 3300 BC, and the Iron Age to around 1200 BC. Archaeological finds show that people were playing music and writing poetry from an early date.

Archaeology can put dates to these developments, but isn't so good at explaining how they came about. There's an element of wonder about the rise of civilization. How did people manage to domesticate the first wheat or the first animals? How did they even think of doing so? Why was there this sudden explosion of urbanism in the fourth millennium? How did the first metalworkers figure out their craft? Take the example of bronze. It is an alloy of copper. Perhaps some of you know of the frozen mummy, nicknamed Ötzi the Iceman, that was found in 1991 protruding from a glacier on the Austrian-Italian border. He has been dated to 3300 BC. With him was an ax head of pure copper. But copper is not very durable by itself. It becomes much more durable when small amounts of other materials are mixed in to form an alloy, which we call bronze. How did people figure that out? The earliest bronze was an alloy of copper with arsenic. Then someone found that if you add tin instead of arsenic you get an alloy that is both easier to work and much harder. How did someone figure that out? This is especially remarkable since tin had to be brought from very far away. The primary tin mines in the ancient world were in Cornwall in Britain! It was the development of tin-bronze that inaugurated the Bronze Age proper; this was a technological revolution.

If mankind were really evolving we would expect the earliest metal artifacts to be rather clunky. But that's not what we find. They are remarkably sophisticated. The ice-man's copper ax head, now in a museum in northern Italy, is an advanced implement. One of the finest examples of ancient metalworking is the Nahal Mishmar hoard of arsenic bronze, found in 1961 in a cave near the Dead Sea. They are

dated to 3700 BC. I've had the privilege to see these exquisitely beautiful implements several times in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Archeologists have uncovered early depictions of musical instruments and even the instruments themselves. In the 1920s Leonard Wooley excavated the royal tombs at Ur, dated to 2600 BC. Among his finds are several lyres and the depiction of a lyre on the so-called Standard of Ur which may in turn be the sound box of a musical instrument. You can see these today in the British Museum.

It's easy to understand how some musical instruments were developed. Just watch children at play: they blow into things and bang on things and knock things together. But who found out that strumming the gut of an animal produced a nice twang?

Archaeology can describe the marks of ancient civilization. But it is at a loss to document just how ancient peoples developed their remarkable technical and artistic skills.

2. Ancient Mythology

Ancient mythology offered a set of answers to these questions. These myths show us how ancient people understood their world. These were their stories of origins. Cities and metalworking and music were not ordinary things. They couldn't have been developed by mere mortals. They must have been gifts from the gods. And that's what their ancient stories, their ancient myths, say.

Perhaps the myth with which the modern world is most familiar is the Greek myth of Prometheus who stole fire from Zeus and gave it to the mortals. It wasn't the gods' intent that mankind have this ability. There is something fearful and wonderful, even magical, about fire. Fire can work magic, transforming things from one state into another: copper and tin into bronze that can be molded and shaped; sloppy clay into durable bricks. But fire can also be terrifyingly destructive. How else to explain the origins of this amazing stuff fire? It must be the gift of the gods. In Roman mythology it was Vulcan who was the god of fire and of metalworking.

The ancient Mesopotamians attributed the tools of civilization to the gods. The seven *akpallu*, demigods portrayed as half-fish, half-men, rose from the sweet waters to serve as sages or advisors to the first kings, bringing with them the arts and crafts. Civilization arose as the gift of the gods to mankind. That's the second set of answers, the explanation offered by ancient mythology.

3. Genesis 4

The Bible gives a third set of answers. Genesis 1-11 gave Israel its story of origins, an explanation of how things came to be the way they were. These chapters gave Israel an alternative story—alternative not to modern stories of origins, but to the ancient stories of origins told by the surrounding peoples, the peoples of Mesopotamia, of Egypt and of Canaan. There are some superficial similarities: both sets of stories concern the origins of cities and of the arts of civilization. But there are profound differences.

What does Israel's story have to say about the gifts of civilization, about the technical and aesthetic arts? Very little really! It covers this matter in just three verses. There are no gods here. The development of civilization is all traced to humanity: agriculture, livestock, cities, pastoral nomadism, music and metalworking. The last four of these are developed by the line of Cain, by humanity living outside God's presence, in the land of Nod, east of Eden, by creatures living their lives with no reference to the God who created them.

Three Observations

I want to explore three implications of this observation.

I. Common Grace

The ability of godless humanity to develop these marks of civilization is a sign of God's common grace. He has created humanity in his image, according to his likeness. We are endowed with amazing abilities. Though marred by the fall, the image of God is not entirely lost. We have the ability to think and to analyze that enables us to work on a problem and come up with a solution. We can experiment: what happens when you add arsenic to copper? What happens when you add tin instead? There's an element even of play to this; perhaps those of you who work in biotech laboratories experience some of this. Humans have creative ingenuity. Yes, the technology developed by humans might seem so amazing as to appear magical, but we don't have to resort to the gods to explain why humans can do these things. Humans have these abilities because we're made in the image of God.

Just because we're humans made in God's image, we have the ability to engage in the aesthetic arts: to develop musical instruments, to write poetry, to compose songs, to sing, to paint, and all the other arts that bring us so much delight. We play with sounds and words and images; we play with them not to help us be more productive but because they give expression to what's going on inside us, be it pleasure or pain.

God gives people this ability whether they acknowledge him or not. This is his common grace, and we see it working even in the line of Cain. Though he had placed a curse upon Cain, consigning him and his line to a dead-end, God allowed his line to continue, even to flourish. But it was all without reference to God. Cain went out from the Lord's presence (4:16); in the rest of the story of Cain and his line (4:17-24) there is not a single mention of the Lord's name. We continue to see godless society flourish today. Producing works of technology and aesthetics are marks of our humanity.

2. A Mixed Blessing

Because the arts of civilization are developed by the line of Cain they are a mixed blessing. They can be used for good or for ill. The development of tin-bronze revolutionized ancient society; it was now much easier to make tools, and the tools were much better. These tools could be used for beneficial purposes. But they could also be used for destructive purposes, as weapons of war.

This is vividly illustrated on the Standard of Ur, that box that was unearthed from the royal tombs. One side depicts scenes of peace; here's where we find the harpist. But the other side depicts war; here are chariots and soldiers with swords and spears who are leading captives who have been stripped of their weaponry. In the words of later Biblical imagery, metalworkers can use their craft to create plowshares or swords.

The fine and the performing arts can also be used for good or for ill. The first words from Adam were a poem, a set of finely crafted words. He greets the woman whom God brings him with these beautiful words:

**"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."** (Gen 2:23)

Two chapters later we find a completely different sort of poem, written by a man living east of Eden, away from the Lord. In terms

of structure it's an equally beautiful poem, showing skillful parallelism and word pairing. But the content of the poem is vastly different. To his two wives Lamech spits out a poem full of self-centered, self-avenging hatred:

**"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."** (Gen 4:23-24)

The Old Testament also shows technology and the arts used for positive things, and the most positive use of all is connected with God's presence among his people. Most of the references to bronze in the Old Testament are to the artifacts made for the tabernacle and the temple. For the tabernacle the Lord set aside Bezalel to be the chief craftsman, saying to Moses,

I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts. (Exod 31:3-5; cf. 35:31-33)

For building the temple the chief craftsman was Hiram, born to an Israelite mother and a father from Tyre. This father was "a skilled worker in bronze," the same phrase that was used of Tubal-Cain. Hiram is described in language reminiscent of Bezalel:

Hiram was filled with wisdom, with understanding and with knowledge to do all kinds of bronze work. (1 Kgs 7:13)

I suggest that the perspective offered by Israel's history is that bronze-working, though developed by the line of Cain living in self-imposed exile from the Lord, reaches its true destiny when it is employed on the temple which restores God's presence to his people.

The Book of Chronicles offers a similar perspective on music. This book is a retelling of Israel's history that had already been recorded in Samuel and Kings. Our Scripture reading was from 1 Chronicles 16. Here the Chronicler is retelling an episode recorded in 2 Samuel 6:17-20. Those four verses record how David brought the ark of the Lord into Jerusalem and placed it in the tent. He offered sacrifices, invoked the Lord's blessing on the people, gave them gifts of dates and raisins, then sent them home and went home himself. The Chronicler repeats all this, but he makes one huge modification, inserting 39 verses. After David gave gifts to the people, but before he sent them home, the Chronicler describes how David set aside the Levites

to minister before the ark of the LORD, to extol, thank, and praise the Lord, the God of Israel (1 Chr 16:4)

As they sang they were to play their musical instruments: harps and lyres, cymbals and trumpets. The song that David appointed for them to sing is drawn from the psalter (Pss 105, 96, 106). It reaches its climax with the words

**Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.** (1 Chr 16:34 = Ps 106:1)

As the Chronicler retells Israel's history he focuses on this event as the very high point of Israel's story. When David brought the ark into Jerusalem the Lord came to dwell in the midst of his people. This called for song. The Chronicler records that the song, "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever" is sung at the most significant moments in Israel's history, beginning with

this occasion, then again as the priests offer sacrifices at the tabernacle in Gibeon (1 Chr 16:41), when the ark is installed in the temple (2 Chr 5:13), when the Lord accepts the first sacrifices offered on the new altar outside the temple (2 Chr 7:3), at the dedication of the temple (2 Chr 7:6), and when the people march out into holy war (2 Chr 20:21).

I suggest that the perspective offered by the Chronicler is that music-making, though developed by the line of Cain living in self-imposed exile from the Lord, reaches its true destiny when it is employed to celebrate the Lord's presence among his people.

Sadly all too often Israel behaved like the surrounding nations, misusing the tools of civilization. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the case of the bronze serpent Nehushtan. Moses had made this at the Lord's express command after the Lord had sent serpents to afflict his people for grumbling against him and Moses. The people were to look to the bronze serpent, raised up on a pole, and live (Num 21:4-9). Centuries later Israel venerated it as an object of worship, prompting Hezekiah to smash it to pieces (2 Kgs 18:4).

Art and technology continue to be a mixed blessing today. They can be used for great benefit or for great harm. Words can be used for the praise of God or to blaspheme him, to stir people to love or to incite people to hatred and violence. Pat Robertson did not use words well in his comments about Haiti on Wednesday. The splitting of the atom can be used to create vast amounts of power or to bring unspeakable destruction. What purposes does Iran have in mind as it pursues its atomic program: constructive or destructive, beneficial or harmful? Modern medicine has the ability to heal many people, but also provides the means for aborting millions of babies. Today is Sanctity of Human Life Day on which we particularly remember this mass slaughter of human life using medical technology.

3. Christian Attitude to Culture

The final topic I wish to explore is what the attitude of Christians today should be towards culture.

On one extreme are those who try to isolate themselves from modern civilization: the desert monks of the early church, the Amish today (though they don't take offense at modern technology, but at what modern technology does to people). There are other Christians today who try to live in Christian enclaves isolated from secular society. At the other extreme are those who become so involved in secular culture that they become indistinguishable from it. How do we remain *in* the world but not *of* the world?

In 1951 Richard Niebuhr, professor of theology and Christian ethics at Yale Divinity School, published what has become a famous book: *Christ and Culture*. He described five different paradigms for the relationship between Christianity and culture. By culture he meant the whole world which mankind builds for itself, what we might also call civilization, encompassing both the aesthetic arts developed by Jubal and the technology developed by Tubal-Cain.

Niebuhr's first paradigm, Christ *against* Culture, lies at one extreme: Christ and culture have nothing to do with one another; a rising Christian culture is implacably opposed to and rising triumphant over a dying pagan culture. His example is Tertullian who famously said, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?"

His second paradigm, Christ *of* Culture, is at the other extreme: Christ and culture have a lot to do with one another. Christianity works within culture, seeking common ground between the two.

Niebuhr's other three paradigms lie between these two extremes. All three see some degree of conflict between the two realms but see different outcomes. The paradigm of Christ *above* Culture believes a synthesis is possible, rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. The paradigm of Christ *and* Culture *in paradox* sees the two realms dualistically so that the Christian lives in constant tension between the two. The paradigm of Christ *transforming* Culture offers a conversionist view of the two realms: Christianity can transform culture by its involvement in it.

Against, of, above, in paradox with, or transforming: this might all leave your heads spinning. It can be difficult to keep the five positions clear. Niebuhr's views have come under some criticism, but they have also had an enormous impact upon all subsequent thinking about the interaction between Christ and culture.

But I find it more helpful to think of the issue in a different manner, in terms of redemption history. What is God up to in the world? What is he doing with this world? There are two very different views on this. One side sees that God will destroy this world once he has taken all his people to another realm, to heaven. The other side sees that God is at work to redeem this world; earth's destiny is that heaven descend to it and transform it. What lies ahead for planet earth: destruction or renewal? What lies ahead for humans: a disembodied life in heaven or a reembodyed life on a heaven-infused earth?

If you see destruction in store for the earth then the only thing that really matters is to get people saved so they can be spared destruction and have a ticket to heaven. Art and technology are useful only as they help promote that purpose. The arts for their own sake are a waste of time. This window was a waste of money; we should have just put up some sheetrock.

The alternative view is that God will renew the earth and that he has already begun to do so through the church. The church is both God's renewed humanity and God's renewing presence in the world. Art and technology, when beneficial rather than destructive, are valid expressions of renewed humans made in the image of God. God has given all humanity the ability to be creative. Who better to be creative than those whom God is restoring into his image in Christ Jesus? By so doing we express our true humanity. By so doing we extend the lordship of the Lord Jesus Christ. May God be glorified in all we do.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ by which we are restored to our true humanity, the love of God who loved us even when we were misusing our humanity, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit who is at work in us to transform us so that we use our humanity to God's glory, be with us all now and forever more. Amen.

1. Doug Plank and Bob Kauflin, "Praise the Lord." Track 2 on *Psalms* (Sovereign Grace Music, 2008).

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