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Genesis 4:23-26

20th Message

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CALLING ON THE NAME OF THE LORD

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Long ago, when I was in college, I read J. I. Packer's *Knowing God*. One paragraph in particular stuck in my mind and has been there ever since. It's the opening paragraph of chapter 2, "The People who Know their God":

I walked in the sunshine with a scholar who had effectively forfeited his prospects of academic achievement by clashing with church dignitaries over the gospel of grace. "But it doesn't matter," he said at length, "for I've known God and they haven't." The remark was a mere parenthesis, a passing comment on something I had said, but it has stuck with me, and set me thinking.¹

That remark stuck with Packer, and it has stuck with me now for more than thirty years. What really matters in life? Would you be able to say the same thing? That what matters most in life is to know God? That being passed over for the world's rewards doesn't really matter compared to the worth of knowing God? That knowing God is more than sufficient reward?

What really matters in life? Genesis 4 poses this question in light of the first few generations of humanity upon the earth. Jesus posed the question two thousand years ago: "What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?" (Matt 16:26). He told a parable of a rich man who tore down his barns to build larger ones so he could say to himself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But that very night he found that he had put all his eggs in the wrong basket. "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" (Luke 12:20-21). Too late he found that he had devoted his life to what ultimately didn't matter. This parable speaks as strongly today as it did two millennia ago.

Genesis 4 offers a profound analysis of human society. Today we come to Lamech, seventh from Adam in the family tree traced through Cain. Last week we jumped over him to focus on his three sons, to whom is traced the origins of much of human civilization.

Lamech took two wives, the first instance of polygamy in the Bible. Since I'm asked about this fairly often, I should say a few words about polygamy. The Bible never comes right out and prohibits polygamy but it does portray it pretty negatively. There is no polygamous marriage that really works. Abraham took a second wife at his first wife's instigation. Seeing her continued barrenness Sarah gave her servant Hagar to Abraham hoping she would bear a child in her place. She acted from a lack of faith in God's promise of a child. Ominously, Abram listened to the voice of Sarah, indicating that he too had lost faith in God and his promise (Gen 16:2-3). Jacob ended up with two wives through the trickery of his uncle Laban (Gen 29:21-29). Esau's two wives made life bitter for his parents; when he realized this he tried to make amends by taking a third wife, as if that would help (Gen 26:34-35; 28:6-9)! Elkanah had two wives, Peninnah and Hannah, but this was no happy family. Peninnah is described as Hannah's "rival" who "kept provoking her in order to

irritate her" (1 Sam 1:6): not a recipe for family harmony. David's multiple wives caused problems in the line of succession. Solomon's multiple wives were acquired for political reasons, and led his heart astray into idolatry.

So, polygamy does happen in the Bible, even in Israel, but nowhere does the Bible speak of it approvingly. Yet, remarkably, in many of these polygamous marriages the Lord showed tender care to the underdog: to Hagar, to Leah, to Hannah, bringing good out of less than good circumstances.

That Lamech is the first polygamist is certainly no endorsement of the practice, but rather an indication of his character: he'll take whatever he wants and however much he wants.

Other than his two wives the only thing the narrator tells us about Lamech is a poem he tells his wives.

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

This is a magnificent poem, exhibiting the highest artistic skill and employing many of the features of Hebrew poetry: parallelism, word pairs, even a chiasm in the final couplet. A Hebrew class could spend a long time analyzing this poem. Every word is skillfully chosen and carefully placed. But when we turn to the content of the poem we find something less delightful. Form and content are in dissonance: this is not what poetry should be for! In this, the only word Lamech left for posterity, he exalts self and exults in violence and revenge. The poem is self-focused: seven times in just 21 Hebrew words the focus is on Lamech: "me, my, I..." At the center of Lamech's world lies Lamech himself. He is what matters.

The poem consists of three couplets, each of two beautifully balanced halves. In the first couplet Lamech commands his two wives to listen to him, to give him all their attention.

In the second couplet he boasts of his violence. The meaning of the couplet is ambiguous. It reads, "A man I have killed for/with my wound, a young man for/with my bruise." Whose is the wound and whose the bruise? Did Lamech receive it or deliver it? Most translations understand it as an injury Lamech receives: for a mere blow he kills a man. But it could also be read as a blow that Lamech delivers: a mere blow from Lamech is enough to kill a man, even a young man in his prime—like André the Giant but without his bumbling geniality. Neither presents an attractive picture of Lamech. Either way we have an escalation and an exaltation of violence. Israel's law would later limit such escalation, limiting punishment to retributive justice: "eye for eye, tooth for tooth...wound for wound, bruise for bruise" (Exod 21:23-25). We tend to think of that as being unneces-

sarily violent, but this law was given partly to limit violence. Punishment was limited to no more than the injury. This is the principle of *lex talionis*, the law of talion, where the penalty equals the offense. Lamech did not abide by this. His anger knew no limits. He would kill any who merely bruised him. Moreover he gloated in this. Cain had nonchalantly brushed aside his murder of his brother Abel: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” But Lamech boasted of his killings.

In the third couplet Lamech gives his principle of life: whoever crosses me will pay for it. Cain had been afraid that anyone finding him would kill him, a justified fear since Abel’s blood was crying out for justice, for someone to avenge this shedding of innocent blood. The Lord graciously set a protective mark for Cain, promising that anyone killing him would suffer sevenfold vengeance (4:15). The Lord himself would avenge the death of Cain for it would be a wrongful death. Lamech uses the same words, escalating the level from sevenfold to seventy-seven-fold. But the principle is completely different. There is no promise of divine vengeance here. Instead Lamech lives by the principle of revenge. There is a world of difference between vengeance and revenge. Both imply putting things right, but there’s a big difference in how this is done. Avenging is prompted by a true concern for justice; it is dispassionate and executed by a third party. Revenge usually takes the form of retaliation, and is executed by the recipient of the real or perceived injustice. Revenge tends to escalate and prolong the injustice, while avenging brings closure.

This short poem reveals Lamech’s world. He is at the center, might is right, and the strongest man wins. He is what matters. It’s not how God created humans to live, but many do live this way today.

Who is this Lamech? He is the seventh generation from Adam traced through Cain. Being the seventh he is the line of Cain in “perfection,” the fulfillment of escalating sin from Adam to Cain to Lamech. This is humanity living outside the Lord’s presence, east of Eden, in the land of Nod. This is humanity living life with no reference to God; the Lord’s name is entirely absent from the line of Cain (4:17-24). This is humanity living life solely with reference to self.

There is great prosperity in this line. Living away from the Lord’s presence the line of Cain was nevertheless able to develop cities, pastoral nomadism, music and metalworking. Children were born, the population grew. But morality degenerated. Mankind lost its humanity.

The Bible takes a dim view of this line. For all its achievements it is not praiseworthy. But there is hope, and it is expressed in three areas.

1. The End of Cain’s line

Adam’s second genealogy through Seth ends in three named sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth (5:1-32), indicating a terminus has been reached: what follows is the Flood, a new beginning. The genealogy of Shem ends in three named sons, Abram, Nahor and Haran (11:10-26), indicating another terminus: what follows is the call of Abraham, a new beginning.

Here Cain’s line ends with named three sons: Jabal, Jubal and Tubal-Cain. A terminus has been reached: the line of Cain will not continue. God had pronounced Cain cursed (4:11), meaning that he would bring his forward trajectory to a dead-end. In the short term God did allow Cain’s line to continue. But there is a limit to God’s forbearance. His forbearance reaches its limit with Lamech. God allows evil to continue in the world but only up to a certain level. With Lamech he says, “Enough.” This line of humanity from which

God has been absent will now be absent from the earth. This line that removed itself from the presence (face) of the Lord, the Lord will now remove from the face of the earth. We hear no more of the line of Cain.

2. A Replacement Line

But now what? Genesis 4 has given us the stories of two sons, Cain and Abel. They are not just any sons. Coming immediately after chapter 3 we must read them as the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. But now one is dead and the other cursed and his line at an end. The two lines of humanity have both hit a dead-end, and we’re not even at the end of chapter 4. What will God do? As he so often does, he arranges for a baby to be born:

Adam made love to 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. (4:25-26a)

Adam again knew his wife and she bore a son, naming him Seth. But Eve is not the same woman she was at the beginning of the chapter when Adam first knew her and she first bore a son, naming him Cain. Then she said, “I have gained a man with the Lord.” Now she says, “God has set me another seed.” In both cases there is a word play between the name and the verb, and we can achieve nearly as good an effect in English as in Hebrew: Cain because I have gained; Seth because God has set.

In the first naming Eve is the subject of the verb: her focus is on what she has accomplished. The Lord’s name is merely tacked on to the end of her statement in a way that has baffled scholars ever since. In the second naming God is the subject of the verb: Eve’s focus is on what God has done.

In the first naming Eve exclaims that she has gained an *ish*, a man, an unusual choice of word which has puzzled commentators ever since. Now she sees that God has set “another seed.” Here we have to think of the Lord’s promise in 3:15 that there would be enmity between the woman’s seed and the serpent’s seed. She now sees that God is at work to move that promise toward fulfillment. She now looks on her son as this seed, which was not the way she looked on Cain.

Finally, Eve recognizes that this seed is a replacement for Abel not for Cain. Both sons are lost but in very different ways: one is lost to injustice while doing what was right—innocent blood that was shed. The other is lost to sin by doing what was wrong. Which of her two dead sons would Eve identify with? She aligns herself with Abel not with Cain.

What brought about this change in Eve? The Lord had warned that the bringing forth of children would be filled with pain (3:16). Eve experienced that aplenty. But out of the pain came new life for her, for the pain of her children turned her focus off self and onto God.

God’s gift of Seth launches a new genealogy for Adam, a replacement line. This line is traced down one more generation: to Seth also was born a son whom he named Enosh, one of several Hebrew words for “man.” This one, *enosh*, denotes man in his frailty. It’s the opposite of how Lamech saw himself, as a *gibbor*, a strong man.

3. Calling on the Name of the LORD

At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD. (4:26b)

The chapter ends by noting that at that time people began to call on the name of the Lord.

These early chapters of Genesis are Israel's story of origins. This chapter has presented the origins of many things: the first keeper of flocks, the first farmer, the first city-builder, the first pastoral nomad, the first musician and the first metal-worker. These were all fundamental developments in the rise of civilization. But in this Biblical story of origins the most important development of all is that people began to call on the name of the Lord. It is surely no accident that humanity began to call on the name of the Lord only when it became aware of its frailty, that it was *enosh*. Such a development would never have happened in the line of Cain which lived its life with no reference to God. Its prime example was Lamech who saw himself as *gibbor*, the strong man.

What does it mean to call on the name of the Lord? Here in chapter 4 we're not told. The chapter ends with this pregnant phrase. Perhaps we can best describe it as simply living life in relation to the Lord. Cain had exiled himself from the Lord's presence. Humanity looked doomed: one line dead, the other in self-exile from the Lord. But with Eve and Seth and Enosh humanity is pulled back from the edge of the abyss to once again face towards God. Is this because of any renewed ability in humanity? No, this comes out of Eve's pain and out of Seth's recognition of human weakness.

The world would not have noticed this. The world would have been paying attention to the line of Cain, to the development of all those tools of civilization. It would have paid attention to Lamech the mighty warrior. It would not have paid attention to people simply calling on the name of the Lord. But God pays attention; he pays attention to those weak mortals who call on him.

This is just a glimmer of light, of hope, but it is enough to take us out of chapter 4. The line of Cain is at an end, there is a replacement seed, and one line of humanity is turned toward the Lord. The Lord is at work, and this is enough.

This story of origins was given to shape Israel's understanding of reality, of what really matters. The Lord brought this pre-history to an end and began Israel's own story by calling Abraham to leave Ur, to leave Mesopotamia which surely is mirrored in Cain's line in chapter 4. In obedience to the Lord, Abraham left the cities of Mesopotamia with their culture, their music, their metalworking, their sophistication, their tyrant rulers. He headed he knew not where, to the land the Lord would show him. When he got there "he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD" (12:8). With that we know that life is on the right trajectory. Abraham abandoned his life as a moon-worshiper in what the world would consider the glittering center of the world, and he began living his life in relation to the Lord. This was what really mattered in life.

But Abraham was still weak in his faith. Just two verses later his faith faltered. When a famine struck the land he went down to Egypt where he tried to pass off his wife Sarah as his sister. The Lord graciously delivered him from his fear-induced folly. Abraham returned to the land and went "where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the LORD" (13:4). Calling on the name of the Lord again was like hitting the reset button. Yes, out of fear and lack of faith he had run from the Lord's promise, but now he was back, once again oriented on the Lord. And the Lord was there to hear his call.

One of the functions of the temple in Jerusalem was to serve as a reset button like this. Our Scripture reading (2 Chr 6:18-21) was

drawn from Solomon's prayer dedicating the temple in Jerusalem. He understood that God could not be confined to a building in Jerusalem; even the highest heavens could not contain him. Nevertheless God condescended to put his presence in the temple. Solomon understood that one of the most important functions of the temple was as a house of prayer, the place to which the Lord's people could direct their prayers when they called upon the Lord.

"Yet, LORD my God, give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence. May your eyes be open toward this temple day and night, this place of which you said you would put your Name there. May you hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. Hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive." (2 Chr 6:19-21)

Solomon then lists seven different situations in which people might need to pray. Several of these are predicaments Israel might fall into as a result of sin: defeat by an enemy (24), drought (26), famine or plague (28), even exile (36). In each case Israel is to pray to the Lord. Solomon petitions the Lord, "hear from heaven and forgive." The temple was a house of prayer where the Lord heard the prayers of his people when they turned to him, no matter how deep the consequences of their sin. Even foreigners could avail themselves of this, turning to the Lord in prayer.

The Lord accepted this prayer of Solomon's:

"I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices."

"When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there." (2 Chr 7:12-16)

Verse 14 is often quoted with respect to the Lord healing America. It's a misuse of the text: this applies to Israel in the Old Testament.

This is a wonderful promise: the Lord is a God who hears. His ears, eyes and heart are open. He hears the cry of those who call on his name. Sadly Israel did not avail itself of this tremendous resource in its midst, a house of prayer that gave access to the throne at the center of the universe, to the highest command, to the one who alone could save them. Israel turned its face from the Lord, until finally the Lord turned his face, withdrew his presence and allowed the house of prayer to be destroyed. No one was using it.

But Isaiah saw an even brighter future. In the new age the Lord's house would be "a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isa 56:7). This is the verse that Jesus quoted when he cleansed the temple,

"Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" (Mark 11:17 cf. Matt 21:13; Luke 19:46)

The Jewish leaders were preventing the temple from serving its purpose as a conduit to the Lord's ear. Instead they had made it a den of rebels, a hotbed of rebellion against God himself. God would once again remove this unused house of prayer. But this did not

mean that the Lord's ear was closed. The Jewish leaders were not calling on the name of the Lord. But there were people who were doing so: the tax collectors, the lepers, the sinners; all the ones who were aware of their frailty, their weakness, their mortality; those who were aware that they were *enosh*, the frail mortal, not *gibbor*, the strong man. These ones cried out, "Lord, have mercy!" And they found one whose ear was open. Even the rebel on the cross cried out to Jesus, "Remember me," and found a listening ear (Luke 23:42-43). Jesus had replaced the temple as the place where the Lord hears the prayers of those who call on his name; he was a mobile house of prayer. And he serves that function still today. He is still our conduit to the Father's ear.

Back in the Old Testament the Lord announced through his prophet Joel a day when he would pour out his Spirit. Then, "every-one who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved" (Joel 2:32) This verse is quoted twice in the New Testament. By Luke (Acts 2:21), recording the Day of Pentecost when Peter quoted these words from Joel, among others, and urged his hearers to turn to the Lord. They turned and found forgiveness. And by Paul to show that God shows no discrimination between Jew or Gentile in hearing those who call on his name (Rom 10:13).

This is who our God is: a God whose ear is open. Our biggest hindrance is not the closed ear of the Lord, but our failure to recognize that we are *enosh*, weak and frail, that we are mortal.

What really matters in life? Genesis 4 has set out two paths. The way of Cain or the way of Abel. The way of Cain and his line or the way of Seth and his line. There are two seeds, as the Lord foretold in Genesis 3:15, the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. The one seed lives life outside the Lord's presence, with its face turned away from the Lord. At the center of its world is self. The other seed turns its face towards the Lord and calls upon his name. At the center of its world is the Lord.

The line of Cain might have all the achievements of civilization but that is not what really matters. The line of Cain has self but the line of Seth has something infinitely more precious: it has found God.

In his book *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, Jeremiah Burroughs, a Puritan pastor from the mid-17th century, wrote of the Christian,

...he is the most contented man in the world, and yet the most unsatisfied man in the world... A little in the world will content a Christian for his passage, but all the world, and ten thousand times more, will not content a Christian for his portion... A soul that is capable of God can be filled with nothing else but God.²

For Packer's scholar friend it didn't matter whether he had that academic post or not. I'm sure it hurt in the short term, but that's not where his identity was. He had found the ear and the heart of God, and with that he was content.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom our prayers are heard, the love of God who loved us long before we ever called on his name, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who moves us to cry, "Abba, Father," be with us all, now and forever more. Amen.

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 20.

2. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964 [1648]), 42-43.