Genesis 1–11

Our Story of Origins

Sermons by

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SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Today I begin a new series after spending the past six years preaching through the book of Revelation. Fifteen months ago I decided that my next series would be Genesis 1–11. I was teaching through these chapters in a classroom setting. In light of the questions that arose and the discussions we had, I decided that the whole congregation needed to be in on the discussion. Besides, since I have successfully navigated my way through the controversial book at one end of the Bible, I might as well tackle the controversial book at the other end. I know this means doing the two ends in the wrong order. But there is an advantage to doing it this way: you already know how the story ends; you know the great goal towards which God is moving his creation. Indeed my last few sermons on Revelation have prepared for today's sermon.

I am entitling this series "Our Story of Origins." Over the next few years I intend to cover the first eleven chapters of the Bible, up through the call of Abraham. In these chapters we'll find foundational truths that explain why the world is the way it is. They also provide the backdrop for the call of Abraham, which we'll see is God's answer to the sin and death of chapters 3–11. Through Abraham God births his people, Israel. Genesis 1–11 is the account given to Israel for her to understand her origins. We as the church are still the children of Abraham, the people of God. These early chapters of Genesis are for us also. They are our story of origins.

Today I take just the first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"—one of the most famous verses in the whole Bible. Actually I'm taking just the first half of the verse: "In the beginning God."

What does that word "God" conjure up in your mind? What do you think about him? A.W. Tozer opens his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, with this arresting statement: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."[1]

Who or what is God? There's a hymn that starts, "Great God of wonders, all thy ways are matchless, godlike and divine." But to say that God's ways are godlike and divine doesn't get us very far! The fourth question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, "What is God?" The answer: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." Theologians conventionally divide God's attributes into those that are incommunicable and those that are communicable. His incommunicable attributes are those which only God possesses; attributes which he does not communicate or grant to any of his creatures: his omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence; the "infinite, eternal and unchangeable" of the catechism. Here we have a problem: it's much easier to describe what God is not—what the theologians call apophatic theology. We've just sung that God is immortal, invisible; that he is indescribable, uncontainable, untamable. In sum, God is not like us. Nevertheless, there are attributes he does share with, communicate to, his creatures: the "being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth" of the catechism. But we don't possess these attributes in an infinite, eternal and unchangeable way.

It is not, however, my intention today to give you an exposition of the attributes of God as developed by systematic theologians. Instead I want to use the Nicene Creed to guide our thinking about God. This is *the* ecumenical creed, the creed accepted by all three major branches of the church: Eastern, Roman and Protestant. It was first developed at the first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325, then modified into its current form at the second council in Constantinople in 381. Throughout the fourth century the bishops of the church wrestled to come to an understanding of the Godhead. Out of these debates they formulated the doctrine of the Trinity. It might be argued that the doctrine of the Trinity is not taught in the Bible itself. But the creed is an attempt to formalize the teaching of Scripture; each statement in the creed is built upon Scripture. The creed has stood the test of time: for over 1600 years now no one has come up with a better formulation.

The creed begins,

> We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

The first thing to note is the opening verb: "We believe." A creed (from Lat. *credo* "I believe") is something believed. This is not a matter of believing impossible things, as the White Queen who said to Alice, "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."[2] A creed is something we accept as fundamental truth, as bedrock truth.

"We believe in God." "In the beginning God." The Bible opens with God already there; it makes no attempt to prove the existence of God. God is beyond proof. The one who says in his heart, "There is no God" is dismissed by the psalmist as a fool (Ps 14:1; 53:1). This would be the psalmist's verdict on Richard Dawkins and his current book, *The God Delusion*. "We believe": all our enquiry about God must begin from a position of faith. As Anselm famously put it, "faith seeking understanding" (Lat. *fides quaerens intellectum*). We don't seek understanding so that we can believe. Rather, it is from a position of faith that we seek to understand.

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Much attention is focused on how to reconcile Genesis 1 and science. But this is the wrong debate. Genesis 1 should be read not against current science books but against other stories of origins, especially the stories of the cultures surrounding ancient Israel: the Babylonians, Canaanites and Egyptians. Genesis 1 is best read as a polemic against these stories. Beneath some superficial similarities the Biblical account presents a profoundly different understanding of God, the world and humanity.

"In the beginning God created." Here we have an immediate profound difference from the other creation stories. In the Biblical account there is no theogony, no account of the creation of gods. There is no primeval struggle between good and bad gods. There is only one God, and he is already there as the curtain opens on the beginning. Belief in one God, in monotheism, was a bedrock of Israelite faith, as expressed in the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4). We affirm it in the creed: "We believe in one God." There is no multiplicity of gods. God himself is not created; there is no theogony. There is only cosmogony, creation of the cosmos. There is thus a fundamental divide between Creator and his creation, between the Maker and what he has made: heaven and earth, all things visible and invisible. All of creation owes its allegiance and worship to its creator.

The creed continues its statement of what we believe:

> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Though we affirm one God, we also affirm belief in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is himself fully God. This status of the Son was the primary issue being debated in the fourth century. Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, was teaching, "There was a time when the Son was not." No, the councils insisted; the Son is himself eternal. There was never a time when the Son was not. He is begotten, not made. Though begotten, he is eternally-begotten, and in such a way as to share one substance with the Father.

Here we are treading on holy ground. John's gospel especially highlights the relationship between the Father and the Son. In a clear echo of Genesis 1:1, it begins,

> **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3 TNIV)**

Four times in John (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18), Jesus is called the *monogenēs*, the "only begotten" (NASB), "the one and only Son" (TNIV). God has always been a Father, and he has always had an only-begotten Son. This Father-Son relationship lies at the very heart of God. The Son is "in the bosom of the Father" (NASB), "in the closest relationship with the Father" (TNIV; John 1:18). The Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20), indeed has done so since before the creation of world (John 17:24). The Son shared the Father's glory before the world began (John 17:5). The Son is in the Father and the Father in him; the Son and the Father are one (John 17:21-22).

After Jesus' baptism, the Father spoke from heaven, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11; cf. Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22). On the Mount of Transfiguration he again spoke from heaven, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" (Mark 9:7; cf. Matt 17:5).

The Son is the Father's only-begotten, and he is the Father's beloved. The Fourth Gospel makes it clear that the engine driving everything is the love between the Father and the Son. The Father loves the Son; the Son loves the Father and does his pleasure. They bask in shared glory. And they have done so since before the beginning.

Being there in the very beginning, the Son was involved in creation:

> **The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together…God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. (Col 1:15-17, 19)**

Next week we will see that God spoke the cosmos into existence. From John's prologue we learn that that word was the Son himself. God created all things in him, through him and for him.

Alongside our faith in one God we declare our faith in one Lord Jesus Christ, the eternally-begotten and beloved Son who is himself God. One of the most remarkable things about the early church is its worship of Jesus Christ. The early Christians were all Jews, staunchly committed to monotheism, to the Shema's declaration that "the Lord is one." Yet they immediately began to worship Jesus alongside God, indeed as God, without sacrificing their monotheism.

There is still more to the creed. It continues with a third statement:

> And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son];[3] who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified.

God's Spirit was also present at the beginning of creation (1:2). It is clear from the rest of Scripture that the Spirit is in a closer relationship to God than even the most exalted angels or cherubim—that he is God.

Who is God? God is triune: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Son eternally begotten of the Father; the Spirit eternally proceeding from the Father and or through the Son. This is the core declaration of the creed.

The statement "In the beginning God" invites the inevitable question, "What was God doing before the beginning?" This is an age-old question. It was already a standard question when Augustine wrote *Confessions* (398). He notes that the standard answer to the question "What was God doing before he made heaven and earth?" is "He was preparing Hell for people who pry into mysteries."[4] Augustine himself refused to give this answer, noting that since God created time itself the question is irrelevant: before God created time there was no "then," so how can we ask what God was doing "then"? Instead Augustine heads in a different direction.

What was God doing before the beginning? The triune God was basking in mutual love and glory. The Father loved the Son; the Son loved the Father. In his treatise *On the Trinity* (399-419), Augustine notes that there are three components to love: the lover, the beloved and the love itself.[5] He then identifies the Father as the lover; the Son as the beloved; and the Spirit as the mutual love flowing between Father and Son.[6]

The three persons of the Trinity coinhere: they are mutually involved in each other while yet remaining distinct. The past two decades have seen a great resurgence of interest in this way of understanding the Godhead. The main term used for this coinherence, this mutual loving involvement in one another, is *perichoresis*, the Greek term used by John of Damascus, one of the Greek Fathers.

There are some important implications of this. The triune God was fully satisfied within himself before the beginning. He has always been a loving and relational God. God is love. The archetypal love is the loving relationship between Father and Son. He has no

need for anything else, being fully satisfied within the Trinity. The theological term for this is *aseity*: God is fulfilled from himself (Lat. *a se*). Nevertheless, God chose to create a cosmos. He did so not out of any need, but solely for his good pleasure. Each day he looked on what he had made and saw that it was good. God himself is "the eternal Beholder of creation…the divine Spectator of the world he's created. God looks at everything in admiration; and whatever he admires, he simply lets be."[7] God didn't have to make the world; "it's the overflow of the totally unnecessary love of the Trinity as they tell each other how delicious they find things."[8]

This aseity of God is actually very good news. He is not codependent or contingent. He made this cosmos not because he had to but because he wanted to. God likes this world he has made. It's because he is the Creator who takes pleasure in his creation that he goes to such great lengths to redeem it. God as Redeemer is predicated on God as Creator. Both creation and redemption flow out of the shared love within the Godhead.

Likewise, God made us humans not because he had to but because he wanted to. Here is another big difference between the Genesis account and those of the surrounding cultures. In the Babylonian account, *Enuma elish*, humans are created because the lesser gods, who are themselves created, make so much noise pestering the greater gods to make some laborers to do the grunt work for them; the greater gods make humans to get some peace. But Genesis shows that God makes humans because he delights to do so. He likes us. Even when we sin he puts up with us and sets to work to bring us back to himself. We so easily think of God waiting with a two-by-four to whack us over the head when we step out of line. But to Moses he revealed his glory and proclaimed his name: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exod 34:6-7). And this just after the golden calf incident! To Israel he revealed himself as a lover wooing back his adulterous wife. Why? Because he needs us? Because we're deserving? Because he owes us? No, because he loves us. The model for that love is the love he has for his Son, which he freely chooses to extend to us, to do so in his Beloved, even at the cost of his Beloved, his one and only.

God makes us because he delights to do so. When God creates humans on the sixth day as the climactic act of his creation, he makes them in his own image. There is a heavenly model for this image, for the Son is the express image of the Father. It has been aptly said that in the beginning God made man in his image and man has been returning the compliment ever since. God critiques the wicked in Israel, "you thought I was altogether like you" (Ps 50:21). There are many ways in which mankind makes gods in his own image.

Walking around Athens, Paul was grieved as he saw a city full of idols, even an altar to an unknown God. He therefore proclaimed to them the God of whom they were ignorant:

> **"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else…Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill" (Acts 17:24-25, 29)**

The most obvious way of making gods in our image is worshiping a man-made, manlike statue in a man-made temple. Speaking through Isaiah to the Jewish exiles in the idol-filled city of Babylon, God ridiculed the idol-worshiper: taking a tree, he burns half of it for warmth and to bake his bread; the other half he makes into an idol, to whom he prays, "Save me; you are my God" (Isa 44:9-20).

I've lived in countries where people do prostrate themselves before man-made statues in man-made temples. The Western world is too enlightened, rational, sophisticated to do that. But we are still very good at creating idols. We too easily give our devotion to that which has not created us. But more subtly, we align God to our programs rather than aligning ourselves to God's program. This is what happens when our thinking begins with self not with God. Donald McCullough writes of this in *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*.[9] The cover displays the word "God" on a big yellow campaign button, illustrating the point that we so easily try to co-opt God into our own program. When asked during the Civil War whether he thought God was on his side, Abraham Lincoln replied, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right." McCullough identifies some of the ways in which we co-opt God as God of our cause. As "God of my comfort" we treat him as the Great Therapist who is obliged to make us happy. As "God of my success" we treat him as our Personal Trainer who will coach us to prosperity. As "God of my nation" we treat him as Guardian of Christian America. In these and many more ways we trivialize God. We fail to begin our thinking with God. We fail to start with the first verse of the Bible: "In the beginning God." It is a tragedy because God is up to things far grander than my comfort, my success, my nation. He doesn't promise me life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He invites me into his love, the love which he has shared with his Son since before the beginning.

In this love he has created us to know him. The oracle at Delphi said, "Know thyself." But knowledge of self is only true knowledge within the context of knowledge of God. Calvin begins his *Institutes* with this statement: "Nearly all the knowledge we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."[10] The two play off each other: knowledge of God enhances knowledge of self and vice versa. Knowledge of God begins with this first verse, "In the beginning God." God is the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient Creator, but what most characterizes him is the relationship of mutual love within the Godhead. Our response is worship, to "love and sing and wonder." But then we look at self, seeing not how good we are but how bad we are. We are driven to despair until we look up again and see God. Reminded that nevertheless God loves us in Christ, we are again "lost in wonder, love, and praise." Rather than co-opting God into our programs, we see ourselves raised into God's program. And as we contemplate the Lord we find ourselves "being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory" (2 Cor 3:18).

This double knowledge of God and of self has been a key to healthy spiritual life for most of the church age. Alas this is not the popular view today. We have everything backwards. Rather than seeing how we fit into God's great plan, we focus on how God can help us achieve our great plans. And so we fret and worry, seeking the right formula for success. We fail to begin with God. Tozer writes, "The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems."[11] David is a great example of this sort of life, of a man who thinks rightly about God. Many of his psalms are laments, written when he was far from comfort and success, but he always ended by looking on God. In Psalm 34, for example, he

wrote, "Fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing" (Ps 34:9). I especially like the rendering of this verse in the metrical psalms of Tate and Brady (1696):

> Fear him, ye saints, and you will then
> have nothing else to fear;
> make you his service your delight;
> your wants shall be his care.[12]

If your thinking does not rest on God but on yourself, if you forget "In the beginning God," if you have too small a view of God or too high a view of self, then you are placing too great a burden on yourself, a burden you were not made to carry. It then depends upon you to get God onto your side. Fear God and you will have nothing else to fear. Don't fear God, and you will have everything else to fear. Come to a right belief about God and you'll be relieved of 10,000 temporal problems.

The Bible begins, "In the beginning God." It ends, "Come, Lord Jesus," the prayer for the glorious return (parousia) of the eternal Word, to bring in the completion of the stories of creation and redemption. The story begins with the triune Godhead as a community of perfect love; it ends with God drawing his people into that communion of love. It begins with God in eternal glory; it ends with God and his people in eternal glory. At the center stands the cross where God revealed his glory through his Son—his Son on whom he periodically shone the radiance of his glory, declaring, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." At the end God will welcome us into his presence, saying, "I will be his God and he will be my son" (Rev 21:7). He will shine the radiance of his glory on us and say, "This is my beloved son/daughter in whom I am well pleased." The love between the Father and the Son mediated by the Spirit is the engine which drives the stories of creation and redemption. He extends that love to his creation not because he has to but because he delights to do so.

> **See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! … Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:1-2)**

"In the beginning God." May he be our vision.

1. A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978 [1961]), 1.

2. Lewis Carroll, "Wool and Water," chap. 5 in *Through the Looking Glass* (1871).

3. The creed as originally formulated states that the Spirit proceeds from the Father. Over time the Western Latin-speaking church, based in Rome, added a single Latin word (*filioque*), stating that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. This remains a divisive issue between the Eastern and Western churches.

4. Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin; London: Penguin, 1961), 11.12.

5. "Therefore there are three things—he who loves, and that which is loved, and love" (*Tria sunt, amans, et quod amatur, et amor). Augustine, On the Trinity* (*De Trinitate*) 9.2, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (ed. Philip Schaff; repr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994) 3:126.

6. "There are three things—the lover, the loved, and the mutual love" (*Tres sunt, amans, amatus, et mutuus amor*).

7. Robert F. Capon, *Genesis: The Movie* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 60.

8. Capon, *Genesis*, 60.

9. Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995).

10. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.1 (ed. J.T. McNeil; trans. F.L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:35.

11. Tozer, *Knowledge*, 2.

12. Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady, "Through all the Changing Scenes of Life" (1696).

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LIGHTEN OUR DARKNESS

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Genesis 1:2-13
Second Message
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January 13, 2008

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Few chapters of the Bible are as controversial as the very first chapter. I avoided the controversy last week by staying in the safety of the first half of the first verse. But I can't stay there forever; I do have to venture out into the minefield of the six days of creation. I know that I will not please all of you here with what I have to say about these days. So polarized is the debate over this first chapter that I think it impossible for anyone to preach through it without offending one side or another.

How are we to read Genesis 1? What sort of literature is it? Is it history or myth? Is it to be taken literally or literarily? Let me first make some comments about the literary features of Genesis in general and of chapter 1 in particular. You'll have to judge whether these comments calm or stir up the waters.

The book of Genesis is structured into ten major sections by a heading that occurs ten times: "This is the account of…" (NIV, TNIV) or "These are the generations of…" (KJV, NASB, ESV). These ten accounts are readily divided into two sets of five. The first five cover primeval history (2:4–11:26). The second five cover patriarchal history (11:27–50:26). In each set of five, the odd accounts are narratives and the even accounts are shorter genealogies. In the first set the accounts of the heavens and the earth, of Noah and of Shem are interleaved with the genealogies of Adam and the sons of Noah. In the second set, the longer narratives of Terah, Isaac and Jacob are interleaved with the shorter genealogies of Ishmael and Esau. In this series we will cover the first five accounts, the primeval history.

The first account doesn't begin until 2:4. Genesis 1:1–2:3 stands outside the main structure of the book. It serves as an introduction to the whole book—one might say to the whole Bible. Chapter divisions were added to be Bible only in the thirteenth century (by Stephen Langton in 1227). They were added for convenience in referencing the Bible. Chapter divisions do not always coincide with logical divisions within the text. The very first chapter division is wrong. Whenever I refer to chapter 1 please assume I am including the first three verses of chapter 2.

The opening creation story is not to be read the same way as the ten accounts. Four of the accounts are genealogies; the other six are narratives that employ standard Hebrew narrative style. Language-wise there is nothing to distinguish the patriarchal narratives from the primeval narratives. The narrative expects me to take Abraham, Jacob and Joseph as historical, and likewise to take Adam and Noah as historical. There is nothing in the Hebrew style that would allow me to accept the second five accounts as historical and the first five accounts as non-historical.

But Genesis 1 is different. It is narrative but it is narrative that is so crafted that it is half-way to poetry. I'm a little old-fashioned in my understanding of what constitutes poetry. It is not prose with random carriage returns inserted. I'm struck by the first definition given on dictionary.com: poetry is "the art of rhythmical composition, written or spoken, for exciting pleasure by beautiful, imaginative, or elevated thoughts." That certainly applies to this chapter. It has rhythm, pattern and structure. We should therefore read it as poetry not as narrative. When we read a good poem we savor the words, we appreciate the structure, we feel the beat of the meter, we delight in the word plays. We feel a poem in a way that is not true of a narrative. If you reduce this chapter to straight narrative then you misread it; you won't feel it as it should be felt. I will elaborate on this when we look at the days themselves.

So, Genesis 1 stands outside the general structure of the book, and it is not to be read as straightforward narrative, but as poetry.

This first section of Genesis has five sections:

1. summary statement (1:1)
2. initial state of the earth (1:2)
3. the six days of creation (1:3-31)
4. another summary statement (2:1)
5. epilogue about the seventh day (2:2-3).

Today we'll look at the initial state and the first three days

Summary statement (1:1)

The chapter opens with a summary statement:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Gen 1:1 TNIV)

This is balanced by a concluding summary statement:

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. (2:1)

"The heavens and the earth" is a merism for the entire cosmos. We're simply told that God created it all.

I said last week that these early chapters of Genesis can be read as a polemic against the stories of the surrounding cultures. These chapters were given to Israel as their account of origins over against the stories of the Babylonians, Canaanites and Egyptians. These accounts typically contain three elements: theogony: creation of the gods and the invisible realm they occupy; cosmogony: creation of the visible, physical world; and the creation of mankind.

The most famous of these accounts is the Babylonian *Enuma elish*. It opens with a theogony: from the intermingling of pre-existent Apsu (fresh water) and Tiamat (salt water) were born six gods, the last being Ea (subterranean fresh water). When these gods disturbed Apsu's rest he plotted to kill them, but Ea killed him and then fathered Marduk (storm). Now Tiamat found her rest disturbed by the gods and plotted to kill them, appointing Kingu as her commander, but Marduk killed her and captured Kingu. The account proceeds to cosmogony: Marduk sliced Tiamat in half and created the cosmos from the two halves of her body. Finally, humans were created at Marduk's suggestion in order to relieve the gods of their labor; Kingu was killed and humans were made from his blood.

This sounds a little confusing and chaotic, and it is. The *Enuma elish* expresses how the Babylonians understood their world. Their spiritual world was inhabited by multiple gods who were at war with each other; these gods were capricious and unpredictable. The physical world was birthed out of conflict between good and evil; there was no guarantee that good would prevail. Finally humans were created to do the grunt work for the gods. Only the king had a special status. Such creation stories shaped how people saw everything: themselves, other people, the king, their world and their gods. With such cosmologies the world is a scary, unpredictable place. You have to placate the gods with sacrifices to get them onto your side. With the exception of the king, humans have no dignity.

How different is the Genesis account! There is no theogony. Instead, "In the beginning God." Though evil will intrude into the world, it is not a divine force equal and opposite to god. There is no primeval struggle between good and evil. Some of our understandings of Satan come dangerously close to this view: we magnify the power and status of Satan. No, he is not an equal and opposite force to God. The cosmos came into being because God created it as a free act of his love and pleasure. Not because he had to, nor as a result of conflict, but because he wanted to.

The Initial state (1:2)

The summary statements in 1:1 and 2:1 present the creation of an ordered and filled cosmos. There is no chaos or conflict here. But they do not describe how God did that. Verses 2-31 give a poetic account of the making of the ordered and filled cosmos. It begins with the initial state:

> **Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (1:2)**

Here the earth must mean the planet plus all the surrounding space, the entire visible, physical cosmos. We are not told how this came into being; this is presumably covered under God's creation of heaven and earth. But we are told of the initial state in a threefold statement. The earth was formless and void, the artful Hebrew phrase *tohu wa-bohu*. The earth was formless: it had no structure. It was void: it had no contents. Formless, it was uninhabitable; void, it was uninhabited.

This is not a state subsequent to verse 1: that the whole cosmos was created but then became formless and void, degenerating into chaos. This so-called gap theory was popularized by the notes in the Scofield Bible. It assumes a lengthy gap between verses 1 and 2, which became a convenient dumping ground for all manner of things that didn't fit elsewhere including the dinosaurs and the fall of Satan. The gap theory has no merit at all; verse 2 cannot be translated, "The earth became…" Verse 2 describes the initial blank state rather than a subsequent negative state.

The second statement tells us that two elements were present: darkness and the deep. Perhaps we should describe these as non-elements, as nothings, for in the Biblical view darkness is the absence of light and the deep is the absence of safe land. Both represent absence of formation. Once the earth has been formed, both represent reversion to unformation, descent into disorder. In Canaanite mythology darkness and sea are malevolent forces, evil deities threatening to overwhelm the world. Here they are simply initial states of uncreation which flee at God's command.

The third statement tells us that God's Spirit was already present hovering over the waters of the deep, as a mother bird hovers over the young in her nest, ready to execute God's purposes.

Here then is the initial state at the start of the six days of creation: formless and void. In six days God will reverse this state: in the first three days he will form the cosmos; in the second three days he will fill it.

The first three days (1:3-31)

The bulk of chapter 1 is the recital of the six days of creation. The language here is poetic, highly structured, artful. The most obvious structure is the six days themselves. There is a rhythm to these verses. Each day follows a similar pattern with six elements:

1. divine command: "Then God said"
2. the resultant act
3. statement of fulfillment: "And it was so"
4. naming: "Then God called"
5. evaluation: "Then God saw that it was good"
6. conclusion: "and there was evening and there was morning, the *n*th day."

This rhythm is obvious to all. But the text has a much richer texture to it. These six days form two triads, each of three days. The various rhythmic elements are distributed across these six days in a highly significant manner.

Ten times we read, "Then God said:" once on the first day of each set of three days, once again on the second day, then twice on day three and four times on day six. God fashions the world in eight creative acts: one on each of the first two days and two on the third day of each set. There are seven statements of fulfillment: once on the first day, once on the second day, and twice on the third day of each set—except that the statement is omitted on day two of the second set, to achieve a seven-fold statement of fulfillment. Likewise there are seven statements that God saw that it was good: once on the first day, once on the second day, and twice on the third day of each set, except that this time the number seven is obtained by omitting the statement on day two of the first set. Finally, it is only in the first set of three days that God names what he had made; in the second set this element is omitted because God will delegate that task to the human.

So, ten words, seven declarations of fulfillment, seven declarations of goodness, two similar sets of three days. This is not a normal narrative. These rhythmic repetitions carry meaning, for of course seven and ten are highly significant numbers, symbolic of fullness, completion, perfection. We should not read this as a scientific text book. We should read it as we do a poem, rolling it around and around on our lips and in our mind. Its imaginative beauty should excite pleasure.

Listen, therefore, as I read the account of the first three days:

> **And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.**
>
> **And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.**

And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed–bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day. (1:3-13)

God spoke his world into being using ten words. On the first day he said, "Let there be light," and there was light. This is creation by divine fiat (Lat. *fiat* "let it be"). The Hebrew Bible has an exalted view of God's word. The New Testament has an even more exalted view, recognizing that the word is the Son. God creates through his word; God creates through his Son. Here again we are on holy ground as we explored last week.

The drama of God speaking light into a dark world is well-captured in Haydn's *Creation*. It opens with the orchestral "Representation of Chaos." Then, after a recitative, the chorus sings pianissimo, "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said: Let there be light, And there was…" At this moment both orchestra and chorus explode into fortissimo on the word "LIGHT." It's a very dramatic moment. It captures the sense of what it must have been like in the beginning as into darkness God suddenly speaks light and everything changes.

I can't make things this way. I've spent much of the past two weeks working on our house. The house doesn't take shape at my command. I've been rewiring the house; Friday I had the power off until 6 p.m. As darkness fell at 5 p.m. I wished I could have said, "Let there be light." But I can't. I had to struggle on in the gloom and darkness, till I could finally turn on the master breaker at 6 p.m. But God can. He speaks and it happens. He says, "Let it be," and it is. How? I don't know. Genesis 1 doesn't tell me, and I really have no capacity for knowing.

People ask, "How could there be light on day one if the sun, moon and stars are not created until day four?" This is the wrong question to ask: those who ask it are trying to read the chapter as a science book. Theologically there is no difficulty, for at the end there will be no need for sun or moon, yet the light will be more radiant than ever, for God himself is that light and the Lamb is the lamp (Rev 21:23). The question is, "Why does the creation account allocate light to the first set of days and the light-bearing bodies to the second set?" Light is part of the forming of the world; the light-bearing bodies are part of the filling of the world. Biblically there is much more to light than the photons emitted by the sun and reflected by the moon. Light is a metaphor for order, darkness for disorder.

In speaking light into darkness God speaks order. If you read Genesis 1 as a science book, just in terms of photons, you'll miss this. God continues this ordering on days two and three. On day two he speaks into place a firmament, expanse or vault, separating the waters above from those below; he names the vault "sky." On day three the waters flee at his command so that dry land emerges; he separates the two realms which he names "land" and "sea."

In a second creative act on the third day God commands the vegetation. Again people ask, "How can there be vegetation before the sun enables photosynthesis?" Again, it's the wrong question! The question is, "Why does our poet put the vegetation in the first set of days not the second set?" Plants are viewed as part of the structure of the world rather than of its contents; they are part of the structure that enables life.

In four acts on three days God forms a world that started unformed. He gives it structure, shape, order. As Haydn's *Creation* puts it in the aria after the recitative on day 1: "Confusion yields, and order shines most fair." That's what God is up to: bringing order most fair. Darkness and the waters yield before his word.

What about these days? How long are they? Advocates of "twenty-four hours" point out that this is the natural meaning of the word "day" (*yom*). "Day-age" advocates appeal to the statement that a day is like a thousand years in the Lord's sight (Ps 90:4; 2 Pet 3:8). I know that here there are advocates of both positions. So what do I say? People want to know where I stand on this issue. I say, "A plague on both houses!" Both are trying to read this chapter as a science book. Both misread Scripture. Let "day" stand as "day" and read this as poetry.

Am I a young-earth six-day creationist or an old-earth evolutionist? Again, I know that both are present here. But again, wrong question! Genesis 1 is not written to present a young-earth six-day creationist position nor an old-earth evolutionist position. Both sides misuse it by reading it as a science book.

I am interested in the work of the Institute of Creation Research in San Diego and a few years ago I brought in an ICR speaker. I am glad that there are PhD scientists doing research within a creationist framework, as long as their science is good science. But I do object to reading Genesis 1 as a science book.

On the other hand there are people here interested in the old-earth day-age positions of people like Hugh Ross. But I dislike the way that they too are reading Genesis 1 as a science book and trying to make it fit into their framework.

Let me say a few words about science. It is important to distinguish three elements: facts, interpretations and presuppositions. Facts or data cannot be denied; if they are wrong they are not really facts or data. We say, "Just the facts, ma'am," but that's a myth. Rarely are we content with mere facts; rarely are they what we actually want to know. As inquisitive creatures we seek explanations. Interpretations are greatly influenced by the presuppositions we bring to the facts. Evolution is not a fact, though evolutionists frequently insist that it is; it is an interpretation, albeit a widely accepted one. It is the best interpretation of the data for those who hold certain presuppositions; indeed it is the only acceptable interpretation for those who hold certain presuppositions. But we have to admit that certain processes seem clear on the micro-level: adaptation, survival of the fittest, natural selection. The biotech industry, which has a major presence here in the Bay Area, and in which a number of people in this congregation work, depends upon these things happening. But at the macro-level things are a lot more sketchy.

Among my own presuppositions that I bring to bear in thinking about this are "In the beginning God," "faith seeking understanding" and that Genesis 1 is not a science book. What is needed on both sides is a major dose of humility. Evolutionists need to admit that they are far from a complete explanation, that there are many oddities that don't fit. Creationists need to read Genesis 1 with humble wonder rather than shrilly insist on its incorporation into school curricula as a scientific text.

I don't know how God made the world. I seek understanding, but I do so from a position of faith—that's a basic presupposition.

So if I don't see Genesis 1 as a science book, what do I see when I read the first three days as poetry? I see that God brings order to his world and does so by his word. Why do I believe that he did this in the beginning? Because I see him continuing to do this throughout history, speaking order into chaos, light into darkness, form into formlessness, and doing so by his word.

In the prologue to John's gospel, Jesus is portrayed as both the word and the light. Jesus was God's final prophet whom he sent to his people, but he was also the word proclaimed. He was both messenger and message. Into a world of darkness God sent his Son as the light. But the world preferred to live in darkness and put out that light. Nevertheless, God continues to send his light into the world, not allowing darkness to prevail. What a great word "nevertheless" is. Even though the world put out the light, *nevertheless* God continues to shine light into this world through his Spirit, bringing the resurrection life of his Son to broken, disordered, deformed lives.

In 1984 Gordon McDonald wrote a book, *Ordering your Private World*, after his own world fell apart. It touched a nerve in people, selling over a million copies. People are looking for order; they want their lives to be formed. They sense that all is not well, that there is chaos and disorder within. God doesn't promise us life, liberty and happiness. But he is at work shining light into darkness, speaking order into disorder, bring form to formlessness.

God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)

God who first shone light into darkness on day one now shines the light of his Son into our lives through his Spirit. Notice that in our window the sun in the first bay and the dove in the third bay are at the same level. I did this in order to draw attention to this parallel. But that light goes beyond us, as God shines his light through us into the world beyond, represented by the globe at the bottom of the third bay. Jesus is the Light of the world, but we also are now the light of the world through whom God is shining his light, both here in Cupertino and throughout the world.

There is more yet to come. In the first three days God spoke into existence a formed, ordered, structured world. Starting with just darkness and the deep, his word drove back the darkness and the waters as order emerged. The darkness and sea remained, though on the periphery. Within this world there is now space and time. There is spatial separation (waters above and below; land and sea), and there is temporal separation (day and night). God is content for it to be so: this was all good, yea very good. But it's only an intermediate stage.

In the new heavens and the new earth there will be no more sea, no more darkness (Rev 21:1, 25; 22:5). All will be fully ordered. Space and time as we currently understand them will cease. There will be no more spatial or temporal separation. The story begins with lack of differentiation: all is darkness and waters. It ends with lack of differentiation, but the complete opposite: the darkness and sea have been completely removed.

So I read Genesis 1 not as a science book, but as poetry. As I savor this account I am formed in my understanding of God, of the world, of myself, of others. God is effortlessly sovereign: he speaks and it happens without a struggle. There is no conflict with God. Concerning the world, I see that this world, though disordered now, is yielding to God's ordering. I look forward to the day when all will be ordered. In the meantime, God is speaking order into my life and the lives of people throughout the world. Though we preferred darkness to his light, nevertheless, he is shining his light into our dark hearts. There is no heart so dark that God cannot shine his light into it. There is no life so chaotic and disordered that God cannot speak order into it. There is no personality so deformed that God cannot form it. This what God is up to. This is what he's been doing since the beginning, speaking light, order, formation.

In the Book of Common Prayer there's a wonderful collect as part of Evening Prayer: "Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord." That's what God is in the business of doing.

Genesis 1 is not a scientific textbook. It is part of our story of origins. It shapes how we view God, the world, ourselves and others.

We'll close by singing a lovely hymn, *Thou Lovely Source of True Delight*. Its six verses tell the story of a Christian who finds his soul in disarray. In verse 5 he cries out,

Jesus, my Lord, my life, my light
O come with blissful ray
Break radiant through the shades of night
And chase my fears away,
Won't you chase my fears away.

May God do just that through his Son and through his Spirit. May he shine his light into the dark corners of our lives, breaking through with his radiance to chase away our fears, our disorder, our darkness, our formlessness.

[Give] joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:12-14)

The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)

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AN IMAGE FOR GOD'S TEMPLE

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Genesis 1:14-31
Third Message
Bernard Bell
January 20, 2008

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Today is National Sanctity of Human Life Day, a day created by presidential decree in 1983. It is observed on the Sunday closest to January 22, the date in 1973 when the Supreme Court ruled on Roe v. Wade, thereby legalizing abortion. The dignity and sanctity of human life are under attack throughout the world. Nearly thirty years ago Francis Schaeffer and Everett Koop presented a film series and companion book, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race* (1979), in which they described the triple threat to human dignity of abortion, infanticide and euthanasia. The three decades since have seen the fulfillment of many of their warnings. Practices once thought taboo are now accepted. Dr Jack Kevorkian brought doctor-assisted suicide to national attention in the early 1990s. Michigan sent him to prison for his actions, but voters in Oregon approved a doctor-assisted suicide measure. Abortion continues unabated at the rate of about 46 million per year worldwide. Though numbers are down in the US, there are still over 1.2 million a year, about a quarter of all pregnancies (excluding those ending in miscarriage or stillbirth). A disturbing trend is that an increasing number of abortions are performed not to terminate pregnancy in general but to terminate the pregnancy of a particular fetus whom prenatal tests show does not measure up in terms of gender or development. In the West, infanticide is usually due to mental illness; our papers regularly carry reports of these shocking stories. But in other countries, infanticide, especially of baby girls, is practiced by the sane, who understand exactly what they are doing.

Western society is confused in its attitude to people. Abortion and euthanasia view life as disposable, yet in other arenas we do everything we can to avoid death, for death is feared. Huge amounts are spent trying to keep people alive at the end of their lives. We can no longer stomach the death of our troops on the battlefield.

What are we to think about human life? Who are we as humans? Are we just animals? Are we disposable? What is our purpose?

Today we continue our analysis of the six days of creation. These days are presented as a highly-structured, artistic, semi-poetic account of how God made an organized cosmos. These days are presented in two sets of three days, two triads of days. God started with a blank slate: the earth was formless and void (1:2). In the first three days he reversed the formlessness of the earth; he formed the physical world, giving it structure by separating light from darkness, the waters below from those above, and the sea from the dry land. In forming the world, God moved from the heavens, to the sea and sky, to the land. Finally he put vegetation on the land, the final structural element required for life. The account of each day is presented in an orderly manner: God's command, the resultant act, statement of fulfillment, naming, evaluation, and evening/morning formula.

In the second triad of days, God fills the cosmos which he has formed. There is the same progression in the successive days from the heavens to the sky and sea to the earth. On each day he fills the realms which he had formed on the corresponding day in the first triad. On day 1 he formed the day and the night; on day 4 he fills the day with the sun and the night with the moon and stars. On day 2 he formed the sky and the sea; on day 5 he fills the sea with fish and the sky with birds. On day 3 he formed the dry land; on day 6 he fills the land with animals.

The general pattern of the days is the same as those of the first set, with one notable exception. On each of the first three days God had named the new structural elements: day and night, sky, land and sea. God names nothing in the second set of days, for he will delegate this privilege to the human.

Day Four: Lights

> **And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day. (Gen 1:14-19 TNIV)**

The first realms formed in the first set of days are the day and the night, so they are the first realms for which God makes the contents: the sun, moon and stars. Day-age advocates propose that these were made on the first day, but became visible only on the fourth day, perhaps due to a reduction in the opacity of a vapor layer over the earth. But the text seems clear: the light appeared on day 1, but these light-bearing bodies were made on day 4. This may pose problems scientifically but not theologically or Biblically for there is more to light than mere photons.

These lights in the heavens have multiple roles. They are to illuminate the earth. They are to govern the day and the night, as rulers over their realms, separating light from darkness. They are to serve as signs, seasons, days and years. These lights mark out time: day and night. More importantly for Israel, they will mark out holy time; the rhythm of Israel's life as she moves back and forth between ordinary time and holy time. To be worshiped is not one of their purposes.

Day Five: Fish and Birds

> **And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky." So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day. (1:20-23)**

The realms created on day two are the waters below and the waters above the vault which God made. The waters above are beyond our observation for the vault marks the outer limit of the physical cosmos. Into the vault have been placed the lights. Across the vault now fly the birds. In the waters below the vault now swim the sea creatures.

The fish and the birds mark a major new stage in creation for they are the first living creatures. A distinctive verb is therefore used here for God's work. God made the vault and he made the lights and he will make the animals, but he creates the sea creatures. The verb "create" (Heb. *bara*) is distinctive: it is only ever used with God as the subject: humans may make but we cannot create. The verb is used in three places in this chapter: in the summary statement (1:1), for the creation of the first living creatures (1:21), and for the creation of the human (1:27). I don't know how God created the living creatures, but, however he did it, "create" is the appropriate verb: living creatures are qualitatively different. I find this hard to reconcile with evolution.

God invokes a blessing upon the fish and the birds, the first instance of blessing in the Bible. To bless means to endow with abundant and effective life, to facilitate success. God will give the birds and fish the potency to fulfill his command to be fruitful and multiply and fill their realms.

Day Six: Animals

And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. (1:24-25)

The final realm to be filled is the earth itself, the dry land formed on the third day when the waters fled at God's command. For this realm God makes three categories of animals: livestock, wild animals and creepy-crawlies, each according to its kind. Since these are living creatures, like the fish and the birds of the fifth day, the narrator returns to the verb "make" rather than "create."

By midway through the sixth day, the realms of the formed cosmos have been filled with their appropriate residents. The three realms of the inhabited world—sea, sky and land—have been filled with their appropriate living creatures. There is no realm that is empty. After seven acts the cosmos seems complete: it has been formed and filled. But, since the third day of the first set had a second act, we expect the same for the third day of the second set.

Day Six: Humans

Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created human beings in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. (1:26-31)

The account of the first 5½ days has been very rhythmic, establishing a pattern. The pattern leads us to expect to read, "Then God said, 'Let the earth produce man according to its kind.' Then God made man according to its kind." But that's not what we find. Instead we read, "Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness…' Then God created." The pattern is broken in every possible way. I see six ways in which the pattern is broken.

1. The first seven acts have been in response to divine fiat, to God's declaration, "Let it be." But now it is different: now we have divine deliberation, "Let us make." This switch to first person plural continues to keep commentators busy. There are three main interpretations: that it is a plural of majesty, that it refers to the divine council (God's heavenly court), or that it is a premonition of the Trinity. I doubt that it's a plural of majesty because it's not used this way anywhere else. As for the other two, I don't know, and I don't think that's the point. The point is that the pattern is decisively broken. The switch to first person plural emphasizes that the human is the special creation of God, that he is according to God's deliberate intention.

2. The narrator returns from the verb "make" to the verb "create," which he uses three times in v 27. Whereas God makes the animals, he creates the human. God creates the heavens and the earth, that is, the entire cosmos. God creates living creatures. God creates humans. These demarcate a three-level hierarchy of special status: all creation, living creatures, humans.

3. The human is not made according to its kind, but in God's image. Ten times we have been told that things are made according to their kind: the vegetation, the birds and fish, and the animals. To then read that the human is made in God's image can only mean that he is made after God's kind.

4. Each divine declaration has been immediately followed by an action. These have all been given in narrative form, but the creation of the human in response to the divine speech is given in poetry. Many of the narratives of Genesis come to a climax with a poem. This poem has three cola, each with the verb "create."

5. Uniquely among the living creatures, it takes male and female to be the human.

6. Alone of all that he has made, God speaks to the human, not once but twice. He blesses them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Though God spoke this same blessing over the sea creatures on the fifth day, he did not address these creatures directly.[1] But in v 28 God does speak to the humans in blessing them. He speaks to them again in vv 29-30, informing them of his provision of the plants and trees for food. Of God's ten words, eight are used to bring things into existence. The other two are reserved for addressing the human directly. This is a high honor indeed given the significance of the word in this account.

The creation poem could not express in any stronger terms the special status of the human.

This is in great contrast to the accounts of the prevailing cultures. The Mesopotamian stories all give a similar reason for the creation of mankind. The minor gods, themselves created, complained to the greater gods of all the work they had to do; mankind was created to take over this work. In these accounts, mankind was not part of the original plan; when he was created it was to relieve the gods of their labors. Mankind was created as an afterthought to do hard labor.

I don't know how God created humans, but, however he did it, it was of even greater significance than the creation of the living creatures. Humans are qualitatively different, even more so than living creatures. I find this hard to reconcile with evolution.

The Image of God

Rather than making the human after its kind, God created him, male and female, after his kind, in his image. What does it mean to be in the image of God, to be created according to God's kind? Many have attempted to identify the characteristics that distinguish us from other living creatures: we are capable of speech, of rational thought, of social organization, and so on. The problem with such approaches is that animals seem capable of some of these things, at least to a limited extent. Parrots can speak; Koko the gorilla could use sign language and understand English words. Certain animals display remarkable intelligence. Some have highly-developed social organization. And what of humans who do not exhibit these characteristics, the developmentally-challenged who cannot speak, who have low intelligence, or have poor social skills? Are they less than human? Are they not in God's image? We share almost all our DNA with chimpanzees. Chemically and genetically we are very similar to the animals, but we all know that we are profoundly different, though in ways not easily accessible to science. There is much more to being human than our DNA, but what is it?

The imaging of God in humanity lies in another direction, that of being representative and representational. The human is God's representative on earth. The Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word used here for image is *eikōn*. Thanks to computers we all now understand that an icon points to something else. The icon doesn't have to look like the thing to which it points; its role is to represent not imitate. Until the advent of graphical user interfaces, an icon was usually found in a sanctuary. In Egypt and Mesopotamia the king was regarded as the image of the deity, but it was only the king who was so regarded. The king didn't look like the deity but represented the deity on earth, ruling on his behalf. Similarly, a temple contained an image of its god, standing in as a representative for the deity. These two concepts were joined in Mesopotamian thought for the focal point of each year was the king's ascent of the ziggurat to the temple on top; there the two images met.

In Genesis 1 there is no mention of a sanctuary within the cosmos. It's as if the whole cosmos is God's sanctuary. Into this sanctuary God places his image to be his representative, both ruling over his kingdom and pointing to him. In chapter 2 we'll see that God places the human in the garden, and I'll argue that the garden is God's sanctuary, but here in chapter 1 the whole earth is the sanctuary. The Mesopotamians and Egyptians understood only the king to be in God's image; all other humans were slaves to the gods and the king. But Genesis understands the human in general to be in God's image. All humans are God's representatives on earth. God created the whole cosmos, but he doesn't make himself personally visible in this cosmos. Instead he makes himself visible through his representative, the human. The cosmos is God's realm, but he doesn't rule directly. Instead he exercises his rule through the human he has made. The human is God's vice-regent, his viceroy, given rule over all three realms: over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the animals of the land. This is God's purpose for the human (v 26) and part of his blessing upon the human (v 28).

In chapter 2 the human will also be commissioned to administrate the garden; he is the vicegerent. As vice-regent he rules (Lat. *rego*); as vicegerent he manages (Lat. *gero*). Such rule is benevolent not despotic. It is not the vice-regent's world to do with as he pleases. He rules it under trust from God, for it is God's world. He must never forget the "vice-" in his title. We are God's representative presence in the world. The founders of Regent College understood this when they named the school "Regent."

The human is not created as the image of God but in the image of God, as his representative. Nevertheless, there is one who is the very image of God, the Son who is "in the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). The Son's relationship to the Father sets the pattern for the human's relationship to God. It is because the Father has a Son who is his image that they can make one who is in the image. The image-bearing nature of the human on earth is a reflection of the image-sharing nature of the Son in heaven.

Sadly the human will not long remain a wise ruler and administrator. In chapter 3 he rebels against his sovereign and is expelled from the garden; the image is cast out of the sanctuary. By the time of Jesus it is clear that the image is so badly damaged that a new image is required. Jesus Christ is this new image. The Son gave up his equality with the Father in heaven, and took on human form as he came to earth. He who has always been the image of God now became in the image of God as the new human, the man from heaven, the second Adam. In salvation, God takes us out of being in Adam and places us into Christ, out of the old broken image and into the new perfect image. We are thus a new creation. In sanctification, the Spirit is remaking us into God's image perfectly expressed in Christ. In becoming Christ-like we not only become more like God, we become true humans. This is what God saves us and sanctifies us for: to become true human beings. There is no heart so dark, no life so disordered, no personality so deformed that God cannot speak light, order and formation into it. There is no human in whom the image is so marred that God cannot restore it into his image in Christ; there is no one so deeply sunk in Adam the old man that God cannot move him over to being in Christ the new man.

God invites us to return to him, to be placed in Christ, to be reformed by his Spirit, and thereby to become truly human. What does it mean to be truly human? The creation account of Genesis 1 shapes our understanding of God, of the world, of ourselves and of others. We see God as the Creator to whom we as creatures owe our allegiance.

We see the world as God's handiwork that he made for his pleasure. At the end of the sixth day he looks at it all and pronounces it very good. This means that it fulfills the purposes for which he has made it. It's exactly what he wanted it to be when he spoke his words. It is not the end-state which he has in mind, for the last two chapters of the Bible show a new heavens and a new earth that is beyond the state of the first two chapters of the Bible. But we affirm that this world is our Father's world. He loves this world he's made.

We see ourselves as the objects of God's care, created not as an afterthought, but for his pleasure. He loves us whom he has made.

We see others as being also in the image of God. Who matters in this world? Only the beautiful people? The rich? The educated? Even the prophet Samuel fell into looking at the things man looks at, looking at outward appearances. We affirm that all people matter.

To understand what it means to see others as made in God's image we can look at what the Scriptures say about Israel, about Jesus, and about the church, the three stages of redemption history in which God was at work to restore humanity to its intended nature.

God gave his laws to Israel to show them how to live differently as a nation, how to live as a new people. These laws are notable for the care enjoined upon the helpless. Israel is repeatedly commanded to help the poor, the widow, the orphan and the alien. It seems taken for granted that these people will always exist. It's no good simply imagining a world without them, though I'm told it's easy if you try. It's no good railing against the evils of the system that generates such unfortunates. I think that this side of the new heavens and the new earth there will always be such people in our midst. God doesn't seem particularly bothered by their presence in society, but he cares very deeply about how society treats them.

My parents were missionaries in Thailand for nearly forty years. They both worked with lepers. When they went to Thailand in the mid-1950s, leprosy was a feared disease. Lepers were outcasts, forced to live on the outskirts of villages. Most people would do nothing to help them, because Buddhism taught that they were suffering the just desserts of some horrible sin in a previous life. But missionaries came in, bringing the gospel of a God who loves all who are made in his image. Each day missionary nurses would set out, two-by-two, to cycle to a village. Here they would set up under a tree and invite the lepers to come. They touched them, treated their wounds, gave medicines, and shared the gospel. Astonished to hear of a God who loved them, many of these lepers were converted. Filled with gratitude at God's grace they grew into strong Christians. With much time on their hands they taught themselves to read and studied their Bibles. Later my father ran Bible classes for them when they came to the mission hospital for rehabilitation. It's a wonderful story of God's grace to those whom society seeks to dispose of.

Of all the books I've read in the past few years, the one I find myself talking about the most is *The Rise of Christianity*, written by Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion. His subtitle gives the purpose of his study: how the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world in a few centuries. At the time of writing (1996) he described himself as an agnostic. He did not write the book to promote the church or Christianity; he wrote out of professional interest in the sociology of the early church. He writes,

> The simple phrase "For God so loved the world…" would have puzzled an educated pagan. And the notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd… the idea that God loves those who love him was entirely new… [C]lassical philosophy regarded mercy and pity as pathological emotions—defects of character to be avoided by all rational men. Since mercy involves providing *unearned* help or relief, it was contrary to justice… This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues—that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful. Moreover, the corollary that *because* God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they *love one another* was something entirely new. Perhaps even more revolutionary was the principle that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and tribe to "all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2). Indeed, love and charity must even extend beyond the Christian community.[2]

He concludes the book by writing, "Finally, what Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than their humanity."[3] What an extraordinary statement by an agnostic sociologist of religion! This understanding of God and of humanity turned the world upside down. Richard Dawkins' selfish gene cannot do that.

In the ancient Near East it was only the king who mattered, for he was the only one in the deity's image. Today it might seem that it's only the beautiful, the educated, the rich, the well-born who matter, for they are in society's image; that it's only those with sufficient usefulness and quality of life who should be allowed to live. The Biblical view is that all people matter, no matter how broken; that all are in God's image as his representatives, that all are God's presence on earth.

It is not always easy to discern God's image, but we are easily mistaken. I know a family who used to be here at PBCC whose third child was born with Down's Syndrome. The father was extremely angry at God for this curve ball thrown into his perfect family. But now the family views this child as God's great gift to them, for she has taught them so much about unconditional love. In her God is present in the world.

Let me close with a statement by C. S. Lewis from his remarkable sermon, "The Weight of Glory."

> It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you say it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare… There are no *ordinary* people.[4]

God calls us to love him, to love his creation, and to love one another. There are no ordinary people. We are all God's presence in the world.

1. "God blessed them and said," (NIV, TNIV) obscures this point. Other versions translate, "God blessed them, saying," (NASB, ESV, JPS). Better still to take the last word (*lĕmōr*) as simply introducing direct speech: "God blessed them," (HCSB).

2. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997 [1996]), 211-212.

3. Stark, *Rise*, 215.

4. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001 [1949]), 45-46.

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ENTERING GOD'S REST

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Genesis 2:1-3
Fourth Message
Bernard Bell
January 27, 2008

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Today is Sunday. Is it also the Sabbath? How will you spend the rest of the day? Will you treat it like any other day? Or are there certain things that you will not allow yourself to do on Sunday? I'm from Scotland, the land of strict Christian sabbatarianism. In the movie *Chariots of Fire* Eric Liddle chides two young boys for playing soccer on Sunday: "Sabbath's not a day for playing football." Is that what Sabbath is about—a day for not doing things, a day that interrupts our regular pattern of life? For me growing up, Sunday was completely different from other days. With my parents Sunday's meals were the simplest of the week. Now when I return to the UK Sunday lunch is the biggest meal of the week, for my sisters and their families observe the time-honored tradition of the Sunday roast after church; but still the day is different. Through college and grad school I never did any school work on Sunday; I spent the day at church and with church families, usually enjoying leisurely meals.

Then I came to the US and found a completely different feel to the day. In the UK shops were not open on Sundays, but here everything was open. I still remember my angst the first time I went to the mall on Sunday; I wasn't sure I should be doing what I was doing.

I find that Christians are very confused about Sunday. Is it a day of rest? Should it be like any other day or should it be distinctive? Or should we instead be observing Saturday, like the Seventh Day Adventists and Seventh Day Baptists?

In our study of the creation account we come to the seventh day.[1] But before the seventh day there is a summary statement.

The Cosmos (2:1)

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. (Gen 2:1 TNIV)

This matches the summary in 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." God created it all, forming and filling a world for his pleasure. Starting with a blank slate, an earth that was formless and void, God has formed it and filled it. In three days he formed the cosmos, creating different realms in space and time. He separated light from darkness, the waters above from those below, and the sea from the dry land. This dry land then sprouted vegetation. After three days the world had form; it had the structure to support life.

In the second set of three days God filled the cosmos, filling the realms he had formed with their appropriate residents: the sun, moon and stars in the day and night; the birds and fish in the sky and sea; the animals on the land. In seven acts God formed the cosmos and filled all of its realms. Then in an eighth act he went further, creating the human—male and female—to be his presence on earth.

He created the heavens and the earth "in their vast array." Other translations render this "and all their host" or similar. This word *host* is most frequently encountered in the title "the Lord of Hosts," where it refers to the armies of heaven that are ready at his disposal. The word is used for troops arrayed in order. Here it is used for the contents of the heavens and the earth: the lights in the heavens, and the living creatures in the three realms of the earth. They are all arrayed in order. They are all in their proper place, where they belong.

The Septuagint translates this term with the Greek word *kosmos*. The Greeks used this word to denote order: armies drawn up in battle array, rowers seated at their oars, the constitution that regulated human society. Greek philosophy used this term for the world, the whole universe functioning in an ordered manner. That's what the cosmos is: a harmonious, orderly, functioning whole. The Greeks marveled at how this could be: there must be some underlying world order, they said. The Israelites had an answer: of course it functions as an orderly whole, for God made it all. It all fits together. It all works together: what we now call the web of life—this interconnectedness of all things. It all seems so finely tuned. This is one of the primary arguments of those who advocate Intelligent Design. The earth orbits at just the right distance from the sun. The earth is pitched at just the right angle to give a suitable alternation of seasons. The birds, the fish and the animals depend upon one another. The land interacts with the sea. And on and on and on. This is a major part of what it means to be good, to be very good: it all works, it all does what it is supposed to. This is the host of the heavens and the earth, this is its vast array: it is all ordered.

But the semantic range of the Greek word *kosmos* extends further to include adornment, especially of women. Hence our word cosmetic. From the Latin word used here, *ornatus*, we get our words ornate, adornment and ornamentation. This is what God did in forming and filling the world. He not only made it functional; he also made it beautiful. He adorned his cosmos.

He made two categories of vegetation: the seed-bearing plants and the fruit-bearing trees; the birds and the fish; and three categories of animals: the livestock, the wild animals and the creepy-crawlies. That's seven categories, if you're keeping count—and I hope you've seen by now that we need to keep count of such things in this chapter. But God didn't just make one of each; he could presumably have made a functional world like that. No, he made each according to its kind: ten times for seven categories we're told that each is after its kind. He made lots of different types of seed-bearing plants, but they are all seed-bearing plants after their kind. He didn't make just one type of creepy-crawly, though we might wish that he had; he made millions of them, but they're each after their kind, they're each a creepy-crawly. Why did God do this? Purely in order to make a well-ordered universe that functioned well? I don't think so. Many of you are engineers, so you understand that the fewer variables the more easily you can control a system. It would be much simpler to create a functional, well-ordered cosmos in which everything worked if God had filled it with one type of seed-bearing plant, one type of fruit-bearing tree, one type of bird and so on. But God didn't do this. He filled it with enormous variety. He adorned his world with beauty.

When Job doubted God's management of the moral universe, God directed his attention to creation. He challenged him, "Tell me, if you understand…Surely you know!" (Job 38:4-5). For four chapters God pointed Job to the created order, pointing out all sorts of animals and asking if he could understand it, much less control it. At the end Job humbly confessed, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:5). Looking at the created world helped Job have confidence in God. If God could look after all this, sustaining it all, then he was a God who would uphold moral order.

I planted a bird-of-paradise plant in our garden specifically to remind me of God's ornamentation of his world. Can evolution really explain the beauty of its flower? All around us are animals, plants and "natural phenomena" through which the Lord displays his glory. Many of them are never seen by any human: God put them there for himself not for us. Jesus said that it is God who feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies (Matt 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-31); Jesus uses this example to encourage us to have faith in God, just like Job. Last year's BBC series *Planet Earth* captured some of the marvel of this wonderful world. Scientists are far from understanding how it all works together. The believer is left marveling at God who created the heavens and the earth in all their vast array. We should be bemused with the creativity, good humor and extravagance of the Creator.

And then there's us. We're also part of this vast array. But we aren't made after our kind. There aren't different species of humans. We're all one species and we're all made in God's image, after God's kind. The humans take their place in this ordered, ornamented cosmos. But we haven't been told yet where the humans are to live. The birds are in the sky, the fish in the sea, the animals on the land. We won't find out where God intends for the human to live until the next section (Gen 2:4-25).

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed and all their hosts. Everything is in its right place, and it all works. It works because it's all very good, that is, it serves the purposes for which it was made. It's very good because God made it. He's the only one with sufficient wisdom, understanding and power to pull it off.

But there's more; something lies beyond the ordered, ornamented cosmos created in six ordered days. Beyond the six days lies a seventh.

The Seventh Day (2:2-3)

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (2:2-3)

After the six days comes the seventh. After six days of work comes a day of rest. But look how many verbs there are on this day: God finished, rested, blessed and made holy. For one who was enjoying sabbath rest God had a busy day, such a busy day that many modern translations help him out by moving some of his work to the sixth day. Did God finish his work "on the seventh day" (NRSV, ESV, JPS), "by the seventh day" (NIV, TNIV, NASB, HCSB), or "on the sixth day" (REB)? Can we be bold enough to leave God's act of completion on the seventh day?

The account of the seventh day does not have the same structure as the six days, but it is carefully structured nonetheless. It can be laid out as three poetic couplets followed by an explanatory statement:

And God finished on the seventh day
his work which he had done,
And God rested on the seventh day
from all his work which he had done,
And God blessed the seventh day
and he sanctified it,
because on it he rested from all his work which God had created to do.

In Hebrew each of the three couplets has exactly seven words; TNIV uses 34 English words to translate these 21 Hebrew words. Within each couplet the first line ends with "the seventh day." Each time it is specifically *the* seventh day, not just a seventh day. This triad of sevens highlights the thrice-mentioned seventh day. It is the only day mentioned more than once. Parallelism requires that we keep the act of completion on the seventh day. What was God doing in these four actions? I think they belong together as a related set of verbs.

Finished: There is no need to move God's completion of his work to the sixth day. Neither the narrator nor countless generations of scribes who transmitted the text saw any contradiction between verses 1 and 2. After six days the heavens and the earth were complete in all their vast array, but it was only when God entered into the seventh day that his work is considered complete. On the seventh day his work arrived at its intended goal. Otherwise the seventh day becomes a mere appendage, rather than the day that lends meaning to the other six days.

Rested: Having brought his work into a state of completion, to its intended goal, God rested. Rest is a confusing concept. Is one allowed to do anything when resting? From a scientific perspective, rest is the absence of motion. True rest is achieved at absolute zero, the temperature at which all motion ceases. This can't be the state that God entered for the cosmos would have come to an immediate halt. It also doesn't sound very attractive, living at 0 K? Is there a better way of understanding rest?

The Bible describes both spatial and temporal rest, using different verbs for the two. The spatial verb, *nuah*, is first used in Gen 2:15, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden." The verb "put" is the causative form of "rest," i.e., "cause to rest." This can't imply absence of motion, for the Lord immediately gives Adam two tasks: working and guarding the garden. Later God brought the Israelites into the Promised Land, where he gave them rest. This didn't mean that they did nothing. No, they carried on all the activities of living as a nation. What it does imply is that God took them from a realm where they didn't belong and put them where they did belong, there to live out their daily lives. He took Adam from the ground (*adamah*) and settled him in the garden, the sanctuary; he took Israel from Egypt and settled them in the Promised Land, the new sanctuary. In both cases God put his people where they belonged; both Adam, the first human, and Israel, the new humanity, belonged in the sanctuary, for God had made and redeemed them for himself.

I think that temporal rest works in a comparable way in time. Here the Hebrew verb is *shabbat*. When God entered into temporal rest on the seventh day he didn't come to an absolute stop. He continues to uphold his creation through his word; if he were to stop this then the universe would immediately cease to function. He carries on his everyday activity of being God within the realm of belonging.

Blessed: God's third activity on the seventh day is to bless it. On the fifth day he had blessed the sea and winged creatures (1:22). They were the first living creatures created. I assume that the land animals, living creatures like them, are covered under this blessing also. On the sixth day he had blessed the human (1:28). In each case the blessing was, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Blessing endows abundant and effective life. God would grant the living creatures and the human the potency to fulfill his command, namely to fill the earth. Blessing confers success; it confers a forward moving trajectory in life. Now for the third time God confers a blessing. I assume a progression: blessing the living creatures is significant, blessing the human is even more significant, blessing the seventh day is the most significant of all. The living creatures are special, the human is more special, the seventh day is most special. What does it mean to endow the seventh day with abundant and effective life, to grant it potency so it will be successful? It means it will achieve the purpose God intends for it. This purpose is given in the next verb.

Sanctified: God's fourth and final activity on the seventh day is to sanctify the day, to make it holy. The Bible distinguishes between two realms: the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, the common and the sacred, the profane and the holy. To be common or profane does not imply that something is bad, no matter how we use those words in English. It implies that it is ordinary. The fundamental idea of the holy is that it is other. God is holy; God is other. There is a fundamental divide within the universe, between creator and creature. On one side is God who is altogether other than his creation. On the other side is his creation. By the end of the sixth day there are these two fundamentally different realms: God the Creator in the realm of the other, and his creation in the realm of the common. This doesn't imply that creation is bad. Quite the opposite: the creation is very good, it is exactly what God intended it to be. But God did something special with the seventh day; he sanctified it, he made it holy, he transferred it from the realm of the common into the realm of the holy. He pulled the seventh day into his realm.

So the climax of creation is the consecration of time. Here we have yet another major difference from the creation accounts of the surrounding cultures, for their accounts all end with the consecration of space, usually the building of a temple. The temple that God builds for himself is a temple in time not in space.

This remarkable action establishes an eschatology. Eschatology is the study of last things, of what will happen in the last days. We usually associate it with books like Daniel and Revelation. But eschatology begins at least as early as Gen 2:3. God's action of sanctifying the seventh day establishes a discontinuity within the time fabric of the universe: six days in ordinary time, and a seventh in holy time. Beyond the very good lies the holy. Might not God therefore want eventually to move all of time into the holy? There is plenty in Scripture to suggest that the seventh day be interpreted eschatologically, that it be understood as the goal towards which God is moving his entire creation. Notice that this eschatology exists before the Fall, before the need for redemption.

The seventh day has no evening or morning. God does not leave his state of rest. Though he continues to be active in the world he has made, upholding creation and pursuing redemption, he does so from a state of rest. This seventh day is God's realm, but it is not yet the human's realm.

Israel and Sabbath

In the Old Testament the paradigmatic act of redemption is the exodus from Egypt. God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt where they had no rest. He brought them into the land promised to Abraham, where he gave them spatial rest. Along the way, at Sinai, he gave them the gift of the Sabbath day (*shabbat*). God commands his people to sanctify the Sabbath, observing it as a day of rest on which no work is done. In the Ten Commandments as given at Sinai, he bases this on creation:

> **"For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." (Exod 20:11)**

In the ten commandments as repeated by Moses forty years later, he bases this on redemption:

> **"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day." (Deut 5:15)**

God created Israel for the Sabbath and redeemed Israel for the Sabbath. Or, better, God created humanity and then redeemed Israel as a new humanity for something which the Sabbath symbolized.

On the Sabbath, Israel was invited to fall into the pattern established by God when he completed his work and rested. This established a rhythm to the week. Each week the Israelites took a journey through time, through six days of ordinary time into one day of holy time. The Sabbath was the goal of the week, the day that gave meaning to the other six days. Each week Israel mimicked God. But after each Sabbath they returned to ordinary time and had to start the journey over again.

This rhythm was observed within two larger rhythms. Every seventh year Israel was to give her land a sabbatical year, a year of rest from cultivation (Lev 25:1-7). After every seventh sabbatical year, i.e., every fiftieth year, Israel was to celebrate a Jubilee Year, a year of liberty in which slaves were set free and land restored to its rightful owner (Lev 25:8-55).

These cycles of a week, of seven years, and of fifty years were powerful reminders that there lay something beyond. Beyond the common lay the sacred, the holy. Beyond the six days lay the seventh. Beyond the six years lay the seventh. Beyond the seven sevens lay the fiftieth. Israel had an eschatology long before the prophets spoke of the day of the Lord.

Such was the ideal. It is doubtful whether Israel ever observed this rhythm. The prophets chastised Israel for neglecting the Sabbath. One of the reasons given for the exile is Israel's failure to observe the sabbatical years. Therefore Israel was expelled from the land so the land could enjoy its backlog of sabbath rest (2 Chr 36:21). It seems that the exile cured Israel of sabbath neglect. The exile produced the scribes who devoted themselves to studying Torah and teaching it to the people. Judaism as it emerged over the next few centuries went in two different directions in its thinking about Sabbath.

One strand of thinking, represented by the Pharisees, by Rabbinic Judaism and by modern Orthodox Judaism, sought to legislate Sabbath observance, ruling on what actions were and were not permissible on the Sabbath day. This is the attitude we see among the Pharisees in the gospels. This is also the direction taken by much of Protestant Christianity.

But a different attitude emerged. Some of the early rabbis understood Sabbath as a "token of eternity." They saw that God had granted his people the privilege of a foretaste of eternity every seventh day. This created a longing for Sabbath, both the Sabbath each week and the Sabbath that would not end. Medieval rabbis regarded Sabbath as a queen, whose arrival they welcomed each Friday evening. From this attitude developed a beautiful liturgy, extolling Sabbath. We get a glimpse of this in *Fiddler on the Roof*, where Sabbath is not an interruption to the week, but the goal of the week.

Jesus and Sabbath

Jesus lived in a Jewish world much concerned about the proper observance of Sabbath. The Pharisees treated him as almost one of their own, as a rabbi who taught Torah to his disciples. But Jesus kept doing things that offended them. Not least of these are his healings on Sabbath days. He healed a man with a withered hand (Matt 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11), a crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17), a man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6), a paralytic at the pool of Bethesda (John 5), and a man born blind (John 9). Why did Jesus choose the Sabbath for doing so many of his healing miracles? Was it just to tweak the noses of the Pharisees? Or did he see something in the Sabbath that made it the most appropriate day on which to heal someone? The seventh day was the climax and goal of creation. The Sabbath was God's gift to Israel, rooted in both creation and redemption. Surely, then, Sabbath was the most appropriate day for Jesus to release people from bondage, for him to restore people's useless limbs and eyes to being good once more. Sabbath was the day for making people complete so they could enter into rest. Jesus' Sabbath healings were also a token of eternity. As Jesus said when he healed the crippled woman, "should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" (Luke 13:16).

The Church and Sabbath

The early Christians met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), but they did not transfer the Sabbath to Sunday. Paul, formerly the most fanatical of Pharisees, and therefore extremely zealous about Sabbath observance, realized that Sabbath was just a shadow of a reality that had now arrived. He told the Colossians,

> **Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Col 2:16-17)**

Sabbath was a token of eternity. It pointed forward to the eschatological goal at the end of time. But God has brought that eternity to earth in the middle of time in Jesus Christ.

The fullest treatment of Sabbath rest is in Hebrews 3–4, where the writer engages in a lengthy discourse on Psalm 95:7b-11. This psalm calls Israel to worship the Lord and avoid the disobedient example of the generation that came out of Egypt. The psalmist urges the worshipers, "Today, if only you would hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did…in the wilderness" (Ps 95:7-8; cf. Heb 3:7-8). The first generation had hardened its hearts in unbelief, provoking God's judgment, "You shall never enter my rest" (Ps 95:11; cf. Heb 3:11). Instead, they wandered aimlessly around in the wilderness for 38 years until God replaced them with the next generation. But, argues Hebrews, God has appointed a day, called "Today," for people to enter into his rest, just as he entered into his rest on the seventh day.

> **There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also rest from their own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience. (Heb 4:9-11)**

How do we enter into God's rest? We enter into God's rest by faith and obedience. This entrance into God's rest is actually a two-stage process. We first enter into God's rest through faith in Christ. Ceasing from our own labors, we finally admit that we need to be made whole by God in Christ and through his Spirit. Coming to Christ we find rest. But this rest is itself a token of eternity, a down-payment of something yet to come. The goal of entering into God's full rest still lies ahead. In the last two chapters of the Bible we see a glimpse of the end of time. In the new heavens and the new earth there will be no sun or moon, not even any darkness or night. All time will be holy. God will move all of time into his seventh day. He will do the same with space. The whole cosmos will be holy, will be in the realm of the other, in the realm of God. What will this look like? I have no idea; I have no way of knowing, for I am so bound to ordinary space and time. But what I do know is that we shall be in the realm of God. We shall see him. We shall be bathed with the radiance of his glory, radiance with which he bathed the seventh day. And we who persevere in faith and obedience will enter into God's full rest. Not by our own efforts, but through what God has done in and through his Son. I say both faith and obedience. The Bible sees little distinction between the two. The obedience isn't about what you can and can't do on the Sabbath. It's about hearing God's word and responding with faith to his call to Today enter into his rest.

Today is the day for accepting Jesus' invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28). When we are living in Christ, invigorated by the Spirit, we are living in the realm of the holy. Holy time is not restricted to one day in seven, whether that be Saturday or Sunday. Today is not Sabbath; it is what Sabbath pointed to. In turn, both Sabbath and Today point towards the Seventh Day that will fill all of time. Both are tokens of eternity. Sabbath was one day in seven. Today is seven days in seven. The rest to come will be timeless.

So it is not a matter of the observance of days and what we can and can't do on a Saturday or Sunday. Entering into God's rest is a matter of hearing the word of the Lord as Jesus says, "Come unto me and rest." We finally admit that we are broken and weary. Out of our bondage, sorrow and night we come to Jesus, into the freedom, gladness and light that he gives us when we come to rest in him. And we look forward to that day when our faith shall be sight and we shall live fully in the realm of God. In the meantime, as God fills us with his Spirit, we live in the realm of the holy, seven days a week.

1. See also my earlier sermon, "Sabbath: A Token of Eternity (Gen 2:1-3)." Sept. 20, 1998, Catalog no. 1176.

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LIFE IN PARADISE

Catalog No. 1567
Genesis 2:4-14
Fifth Message
Bernard Bell
July 13, 2008

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

"Sometimes my soul will yearn to reach another land."[1] This is summer when we all yearn to go to another place, to find our own paradise where we can enjoy a vacation. But where is Paradise?

Last month I visited our missionary Eli Fangidae in Timor, Indonesia. On my way both in and out I stayed overnight in Bali, a place many think of as Paradise. There are some beautiful places in Bali, but there is much that is unsavory about the place, at least for a Christian. Moslem fundamentalists found the main tourist resort of Kuta so distasteful that in 2002 they set off two powerful bombs that killed 200. Both bombs were triggered by suicide bombers who believed that by blowing up this so-called paradise they were themselves on the fast track to an eternal heavenly Paradise, there to receive 72 virgins. Paradise is in the eye, or better, the heart, of the beholder.

Last week, while cruising around in Google Earth identifying the places I had visited in Timor, I took a side trip to Thailand. I swung by the beach where I spent my holidays as a child. I could scarcely recognize it. Hua Hin with its "tranquil 5-km white sand beach" now bills itself as "Paradise City." To me it looks more like hell, because I knew that beach before any hotels arrived.

Where is Paradise and what makes it Paradise? What happens when we find Paradise? Do we inevitably ruin it? Do we always turn the verdant garden into an ugly city?

The Bible tells us about Paradise, both at the beginning and the end. The Biblical story begins and ends in a garden, in Paradise. We turn today to earth's first paradise, the garden which God planted in Eden. In this garden God settled the man and he made the woman as a helper suitable for him.

This narrative in Genesis 2 is so important that we'll spend four weeks in it, looking at the garden itself (vv 4-14), at Adam's role in it (v 15), at his choice between life and death (vv 16-17), and at the woman who helps alongside him (vv 18-25). What was life like in that first Paradise? What went wrong? Can we attain Paradise today? What will the future Paradise be? And what is this whole Paradise idea anyway?

The Account of the Heavens and the Earth (2:4)

> **This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens. (Gen 2:4 TNIV)**

Our text begins, "This is the account of…" (TNIV, NASB), or, "These are the generations of…" (KJV, NRSV, ESV). This heading occurs ten times in the book. The first five of these accounts cover primeval history (2:4–11:26), and are the subject of this series, "Our Story of Origins." The "account of *x*" doesn't tell us how "*x*" came to be, but what proceeded forth from "*x*." The account of the heavens and the earth doesn't tell us about their creation—that's given in chapter 1—but about what came forth from them. This is the first account of Genesis; it's the beginning of the story-line. The poetic telling of the creation of the heavens and the earth stands outside this story-line as an artistic introduction to the whole Bible.

The narrative proper begins here in 2:4. This is the narrative given to Israel, a narrative that runs through the end of the Books of Kings—nine books in all.[2] It gave Israel an unbroken history of its world from the very beginning through its exile from the land. The story begins with the creation of the first human and of the land into which this first human was put.

The first half of the verse looks back. The second half of the verse looks ahead. Notice that God is described as the LORD God, a term that is used twenty times in chapters 2-3, but only one other time in the first five books. This shift from "God" to "LORD God" has led many scholars to rule that we have a different source, reflecting a different understanding of God—the J source over against the E source of chapter 1.

But we don't need to resort to this radical idea. There is good reason why God is called "the LORD God" in these two chapters. The word "LORD" is in small caps. This indicates that the Hebrew word is Yahweh, the personal name of God. This means "He is," not in the sense that he exists, but that he is present. It's the name that God uses with his covenant people. The God who will form the man and build the woman is the LORD who is in relationship with them.

The Initial State (2:5-6)

> **Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. (2:5-6)**

After the heading, the story opens in a surprising manner: with a string of four negative clauses. The non-existence of two things is explained by the non-existence of two other things. It's an odd way to begin! Verses 5-6 give us background information necessary to understand the subsequent action; TNIV indicates this with "Now" (v 5) and commences the action with "Then" (v 7).

Three different geographical terms are each used twice in vv 5-6: the field (which unfortunately TNIV does not even translate), the ground, and the earth. The non-existent shrub and the plant are specifically the shrub of the field and the plant of the field. The field will later be the open uncultivated countryside where livestock can graze on the shrubs of the field. Some of this vegetation will be brought into arable use as humans till the ground to yield plants of the field. The first pair of negatives tell us that there were not yet domesticated animals or plants. Archaeologists tell us that the domestication of plants and animals around 10,000 BC was a necessary precursor to civilization. Scholars are still uncertain quite how this happened. But the Biblical story of origins is quite different. The non-existence of

the vegetation of the field is explained by the non-existence of rain and of a human to work the ground. Each of these will subsequently happen, but only in response to sin. Adam will be expelled from the garden to work the ground (3:23). God will send rain in the days of Noah as judgment upon human sin (7:4).

So these four non-existences, these four negatives, are actually positives. There was no human working the ground, and contrary to what some say, it was not God's intention that he work the ground. There was no rain to sustain arable farming, and it was not God's intention that humanity be dependent upon the vagaries of the weather. The transition to farming, whether of livestock or crops, is a curse not a blessing.

Instead, the ground received its water from below not from above. Scholars and translators are uncertain what to do with the word here translated as "streams," but the general meaning is clear. Subterranean waters welled up upon the earth and watered the ground. These waters were constant and dependable. This then was the initial state.

God's Garden (2:7-9)

Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (2:7-9)

The story-line commences with v 7. Here I have to take issue with the TNIV, which keeps v 7 with vv 5-6, then inserts a paragraph break and commences v 8 with "Now," suggesting that this verse is background prior to continuing the narrative in v 9. Verses 7-9 belong together as a paragraph with a string of verbs indicating sequential action. The Lord God formed and animated a man, planted a garden into which he placed the human, and caused fruit trees to grow.

Firstly the Lord God formed a man, or better, *the* man, from the ground. Man is *adam*; ground is *adamah*. God formed the *adam* from the *adamah*. We might say he formed the earthling from the earth. The verb "formed" is used of a potter shaping clay. The picture is of God stooping down, making some dust into clay, then shaping it into a human form. He then breathed into its nostrils the breath of life so that it became a living being. "It" became "he"; the inanimate form became an animated being. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. Physically our bodies don't amount to much, just some chemicals and minerals worth perhaps a dollar. When we die our bodies quickly decompose back into these elements. But there's more to us. We are animated; something makes us living. Our Biblical narrator attributes this to the breath of life which God himself breathes into us. This is true also of the animals, who are likewise described as living creatures in whom is the breath of life. Like animals we have a body made of physical stuff. Like animals we have life in us. Body and life together make us living beings. As evolutionists are fond of pointing out, there's not much to distinguish us physically from animals. But God intended the human for a very different destiny than the animals.

Where is this human to live? In chapter 1, God put the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea, and the animals on the land. The human is created to rule over the creatures of all three realms. But in chapter 1 we were not told where the human himself is to live.

The Lord God next made a home for the human. In the east, in Eden, he planted a garden. There is no need to put this in past time, as does TNIV, perhaps reasoning that since vegetation was made on Day 3, the garden must have been planted on Day 3. Our narrator is purposeful: having formed the human, God makes him a home.

"The Lord God planted a garden." How that word "garden" fills us with delight. How much more appealing than a yard. A yard may be paved over with concrete and be sterile, but a garden is filled with plants and flowers and teems with living creatures.

The Hebrew word *gan*, translated "garden," denotes a place that is enclosed, protected. Maybe you know the book and movie, *The Secret Garden*, featuring a walled garden that is both a protected enclosure and a beautiful garden. That garden was a sanctuary.

God planted his garden in Eden, which means "delight." This garden is the first paradise, for that's how the term is translated into Greek. Our word "paradise" derives from an ancient Iranian word meaning a walled enclosure. It was used of the walled garden attached to the palace, and of the royal hunting preserve. The kings of Renaissance Europe had similar parks. Fontainebleu was the reserve of the French king at Versailles; Richmond Park was the reserve of the English king at Hampton Court Palace. This garden which God planted in Eden was his park. It was the earthly preserve of the heavenly King. This garden was God's sanctuary on earth. In chapter 3 we read of him strolling through this sanctuary at the time of day when the breeze blew.

Where did God want the human to live? Not out in the field, toiling in the ground to get some arable crops to grow. Not out in the field, trying to keep the sheep and the goats from straying too far. Though God made us from the ground, he didn't intend for that to be our destiny. He took Adam from the ground and put him elsewhere: in paradise, in his garden, in his sanctuary on earth. This was not Adam's garden, it was God's garden. Having placed the man in the garden, God filled the garden with fruit trees, causing every type of tree to sprout. These trees were all pleasing to the eye and good for food. The man had available to him all the nourishment he needed, and all without any toilsome labor. It was all provided by God. Of the many trees, two are specifically mentioned: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We'll look at those in two weeks' time.

The Rivers (2:10-14)

A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. (2:10-14)

The narrative is interrupted with five verses about a river. These verses have puzzled many. Why should the narrator interrupt his story to tell us about this river in such great detail? From somewhere within Eden, the land of Delight, a river flowed forth in order to water the garden, ensuring the fruitfulness of the trees. This is the water of life. From God's sanctuary the river flowed out into the rest of the world, dividing into four as it brought life to the four corners

of the earth. We are given a surprising amount of information about these four rivers. The narrator seems deliberate. The four rivers are presented in two pairs, the first unknown, the second known. The first pair are described using 20 and 10 words; the second pair using 8 and 4. The narrator's detail is in inverse proportion to what we know about the rivers! The second pair is well-known: the Tigris and the Euphrates are the two great rivers of Mesopotamia. The Tigris indeed ran just east of Ashur, the city that gave Assyria its name. Of the former pair, the Pishon is unknown, and the Gihon is a tiny spring in Jerusalem. But probably we shouldn't be looking for rivers called these names, for Pishon means "Leaper" and Gihon "Gusher." The Pishon wound through Havilah, and the Gihon through Cush. Cush was a region of the upper Nile, centered on the meeting of the Blue and White Niles, in what is today the Sudan. Where is Havilah? The Table of Nations identifies Havilah as a son of Ham through Cush, and also as a son of Shem through Joktan. The Shemite Havilah had a brother named Ophir, from whose land Israel later got much of its gold. Shemite Havilah is usually identified with Yemen. Ophir is often located in the horn of Africa, opposite Yemen. I therefore understand the Pishon and Gihon to be the Blue and White Nile which meet to form the mighty Nile.

Can we use this information to locate the garden of Eden? The Euphrates and Tigris originate close together in Turkey, but the Blue and White Nile originate in East Africa, thousands of miles away. Some favor the Mesopotamian rivers and locate Eden in eastern Turkey, in the ancient kingdom of Urartu. Others say that the narrator must be looking upstream not downstream, pointing out that a river doesn't divide into branches as it flows downstream; citing evidence of an ancient river flowing east across northern Arabia they locate Eden at the head of the Arabian or Persian Gulf.

But, quite apart from the fact that the flood would presumably have obliterated pre-Flood geography, our narrator here is giving us not physical geography but spiritual geography. The Tigris and Euphrates are the two great rivers on which Mesopotamian civilization depended. The Blue and White Nile combine to form the Nile that nourished Egyptian civilization. But in the spiritual geography of Eden, these rivers themselves flow from God's sanctuary, for he is the source of life. Even godless and god-defying Mesopotamian and Egyptian kingdoms and empires derived their life from God, whether or not they acknowledged it.

What about the gold? Our narrator is particularly interested in the resources of Havilah: gold, onyx stones, and bdellium which is probably aromatic resin; moreover the gold is "good," what later in the OT will be called "fine gold." Why are we told this? Because Israel would later use these materials in God's sanctuary. Israel built the tabernacle using gold plundered from the Egyptians, whose main source of gold lay upstream on the Nile in Nubia, whose very name means gold. Israel built the temple using fine gold shipped in from Ophir, whose eponym the Table of Nations identifies as the brother of Havilah. The high priest carried on his shoulders two onyx stones in gold settings, inscribed with the names of the tribes of Israel. As the high priest ministered in God's presence, all Israel was symbolically present with him before the Lord. Here the narrator is preparing Israel for the building of the tabernacle. Whence come the gold and onyx stones? From a land watered by the river of life flowing from God's sanctuary. The overall picture is of the garden as a sparkling jewel in a setting of gold and onyx stones. The garden is a sanctuary which will be later recreated in the tabernacle and temple.

Life with God in Paradise

Where does God want us to live? He didn't create humanity to work the ground. He did all the work, planting the garden and ensuring its fruitfulness. Here he settled the human to enjoy the abundance that he provided. God is the great workman. This is such an important theme that I'll devote next week to it, looking at just one verse, v 15.

God has created us for his presence. As Augustine put it in the opening paragraph of his *Confessions*, God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in him. God put the human in his sanctuary. What made it his sanctuary was that God himself was there. Here God and his people were to have fellowship.

But humanity ruined paradise, just as we ruin all the so-called paradises that we find. God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, from his sanctuary. Henceforth Adam would have to toil in the ground for his sustenance. But God is not content that his image-bearers remain outside the sanctuary. He set to work both to restore his sanctuary to earth and to restore humanity to his sanctuary. He set about bringing humanity home.

God redeemed his people from Egypt so that they might worship him and that he might lead them to the land promised to Abraham. He gave them the awesome privilege of building him the tabernacle, a sanctuary in which he might dwell in their midst. He brought his people into the Promised Land—a land likened to the garden of the Lord. Here was the garden of Eden replanted on earth. It was a land flowing with milk and honey, where the people enjoyed rain at the right time and abundant provision—if they remained loyal to God. In the middle of this land the king on behalf of the people built a temple for God. Here God dwelt in the midst of his people. Around the temple was Jerusalem, the city of God's people. Jerusalem was a place in physical geography, but more important was its place in spiritual geography: God and his people dwelling together. Zion has always been a spiritual city: God's presence, God's people, and God's rule, all in the same place. This dwelling of God amidst his people is what the sons of Korah celebrated in our Scripture reading, Psalm 84.

How lovely is your dwelling place,
LORD Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.
Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young—
a place near your altar,
LORD Almighty, my King and my God…
Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.
Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked. (Ps 84:1-4, 10)

Do you have that sort of appetite for God? Do you long to be with God in his sanctuary?

Alas, Israel was as disobedient as Adam and was expelled from the land, from God's sanctuary. But the prophets saw a day coming

when God would make the barren wilderness like his garden, when the river of life would flow from his rebuilt sanctuary. The Jews were expecting this to happen in the physical land. But God has done an amazing thing in Christ. He has expanded his restorative work beyond any constraints of physical geography. Jesus traveled around the land dispensing life wherever he went to broken people in their barren wildernesses. Jesus was God's sanctuary through whom he was pouring his life-giving waters. Jesus himself said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them" (John 7:37-38). Jesus was saying that not only was he God's sanctuary from whom living waters flow, but that his followers would be sanctuaries also—whoever they are and wherever they go!

The end of Revelation ties together the twin sanctuary themes of city and garden. John saw the new Jerusalem descending from heaven. The city is prepared as a bride, for she is the people of God, sanctified for his Son. The city is filled with God's glory for it is God's sanctuary. It is a city of gold, and its foundations are precious stones including onyx. It is the heavenly city come down to fill the whole earth. It is God and his people dwelling together, as God himself proclaims, "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 21:3).

There, from the throne of God flows the river of the water of life, flowing down the middle of the city. On either side stands the tree of life. City and garden join together with no contradiction; both express the idea of sanctuary. It is the presence of God and the Lamb that makes this garden-city the sanctuary, that makes it Paradise. But God does not keep it for himself. He intends it as the home for his people. This has always been God's purpose.

There in the garden-city we will see the face of God (Rev 22:4). That will be our great reward: not the sensual delights of 72 virgins, but God himself.

What awaits us in Paradise? The same thing that was there in the first paradise. The same thing that it available to us now wherever we are if we are in Christ and God's Spirit is in us: fellowship with God. We can be in the most miserable rat hole, but if God is there with us it is Paradise. Conversely, if God is not with us, the most beautiful unspoilt place on earth will not satisfy our deepest longings.

We don't have to wait for the New Jerusalem to enjoy life in God's presence. When we finally admit that we are thirsty, toiling in a wilderness, God calls us to come to Christ. He fills us with his Spirit and takes up residence in us as his sanctuary.

The Book of Revelation ends with a wonderful invitation,

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let those who hear say, "Come!" Let those who are thirsty come; and let all who wish take the free gift of the water of life. (Rev 22:17)

If you have not come, then I urge you to come out of your barren wilderness. If you have already come to Christ, then I urge you to examine your spiritual appetites. What paradise are you looking for? Do you long for God himself?

We'll close by singing three songs. "As the Deer" expresses the longing of Psalm 42:

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God? (Ps 42:1-2)

"Better is One Day" is drawn from our Scripture reading (Ps 84). Our final song closes with the lines, "I will glory in my Redeemer, who waits for me at gates of gold, and when he calls me it will be paradise: his face forever to behold."

God has made us for himself, to live with him in his sanctuary. May he intensify our appetite for himself, then deeply satisfy us in himself.

The Lord bless you and keep you,
the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)

1. P.A. Baggaley & I.D. Blythe, "How Lovely Is Your Dwelling Place," *City of Gold*. Sung as the offertory immediately prior to this sermon.

2. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings.

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WHOM TO SERVE IS PERFECT FREEDOM

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Genesis 2:15
Sixth Message
Bernard Bell
July 20, 2008

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

At boarding school in England we started each day in the chapel with Morning Prayer, following the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. At the time I had little regard for the Prayer Book, but I have steadily grown in my appreciation of it, especially of the Collects or prayers. Most of these were written by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury in the turbulent days of Henry VIII and Edward VI in the mid-sixteenth century. Cranmer's work was not original; most of these collects are his felicitous renderings into English of Latin texts from the prayer books of the early church. The collects of the Prayer Book continue to give expression to the prayers of the church from 1500 years ago. For the past couple of months one particular prayer has been on my mind. Since it is in the liturgy for Morning Prayer it is said every day around the world. In the service of Morning Prayer, the Second Collect for Peace begins:

> O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom…

It is the phrase, "whose service is perfect freedom," that has been on my mind. Alongside it has been another phrase, drawn from a very different source: the US Declaration of Independence. The second paragraph of this Declaration begins,

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

In the context of 1776 these rights were being asserted against the tyranny of King George III as the colonies sought self-governance. But the right to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" has been used to justify all manner of other agendas. Wherein lie life, liberty and happiness? These are the themes we'll explore over the next two weeks as we look at the mission that God gave Adam in the garden (Gen 2:15-18). Our text today is a single verse:

> **The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Gen 2:15 TNIV)**

The Ideal State in the Garden

We saw last week that the narrative of Genesis 2 begins with a fourfold negative statement. There was as yet no shrub of the field nor any plant of the field, because the Lord God had not yet sent rain and there was no man to work the ground (2:5). There was as yet no animal husbandry or agriculture. Instead, God planted a garden, filled it with fruit trees and ensured its abundant water supply. God formed the human from the dust of the ground but he did not make him to work the ground: the lack of a man to work the ground is a positive statement! God had a different destiny in mind for the human: life in his sanctuary. God took the man from the stuff of which he had been made and he put him elsewhere, in his garden. His origin was the ground, but his destiny was the garden. Now in v 15 we learn his mission in this garden.

Verse 15 resumes the story-line from v 9 after the interlude about the fourfold river (vv 10-14). The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden. Here we have both the origin and destiny of the man. God took him from the realm in which he had been made, the dust of the ground. He put him in the realm for which he was destined, the garden. This is not a mere repetition of v 8 where the Lord God put the man in the garden. Though it is translated the same in most English versions, a different Hebrew verb is used here. Verse 8 uses the generic word for "put," but v 15 uses a more nuanced word, the causative form of the verb "rest." We might better say the Lord God settled the man in the garden. He transferred him from one realm to another, from the merely physical dust of the ground to God's own sanctuary. Here God settled the human; here the human had rest; here he belonged.

What is rest? We all long for it, but what is it? In scientific terms it is the absence of movement: true rest is achieved at absolute zero, the temperature at which all motion ceases. But life at zero K doesn't sound very attractive! Rest is not the absence of activity, but the condition under which that activity is performed. God rested on the seventh day, his sanctuary in time that bespoke eschatology. Adam rested in the garden, God's sanctuary in space. But just as God has been active on his eternal seventh day, so the human was given work to do in the garden.

God commissioned the man with two tasks: to work and to guard. Work precedes the Fall, though its nature has been radically altered by God's judgment upon human sin. What was Adam's work? It was clearly not to work the ground. The lack of a man to work the ground was reversed not by the settlement of the man in the garden, but by the expulsion of man from the garden. The man's work was not to provide for his own sustenance. God had settled him in his sanctuary, in which he, God, had supplied everything the man needed. God had filled this garden with fruit trees, all of them "pleasing to the eye and good for food" (2:9). Unlike grain which has to be harvested, threshed, winnowed, ground and baked, eating fruit requires no work. All the man had to do was reach out his hand and pick whatever he wanted. In the next verse God will tell the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden" (2:16); he uses an intensive construction to emphasize the abundant eating. One tree only is off-limits. It was God who has done all the work; Adam got to enjoy God's magnificent bounty.

The man's second task was to guard or keep. This implies that God has entrusted something into his care: the garden sanctuary. The man was to care for that which was precious to God. This entailed two tasks: to guard the sanctity of the sanctuary and to keep God's word, namely the commandment that he will give him in the next two verses.

Both verbs denote service. Indeed the word translated "work" is the usual verb for "serve." The man is to serve his master, God. In the master–servant relationship, it is the master's responsibility to ensure that the servant has everything he needs to do his will. The servant's only responsibility is to be faithful and obedient. Herein lies his liberty. He does not have to provide for himself; that is his master's responsibility. He does not have to anticipate the future; that is his master's responsibility. All he has to do is to be faithful and obedient in the present. This requires that he have confidence in the word of his master.

To work and to guard, to serve and to keep; these are priestly tasks. In chapter 1 God commissioned the human to be a king, ruling over his creation on his behalf. In chapter 2 God commissions the human to be a priest, caring for his sanctuary on his behalf. In both respects he is under God, acting on God's behalf. As ruler, he is God's vice-regent (Lat. *rego*, rule); as priest, he is God's vice-gerent (Lat. *gero*, manage). In all things he is to remember that he is vice-; that he is responsible to another. He must never take upon himself the responsibilities of the other. His responsibility is to be the servant, not the master. Herein lie his life, liberty and happiness.

What did it actually look like for the man to work and to guard, to serve and to keep? Unfortunately we don't get to see the man functioning in this ideal environment, because he immediately fails. It's hard for us to envisage because our concept of work is so tainted by toil. But we can learn from tracing this theme through Scripture.

The Ruined State Outside the Garden

The man failed to guard the sanctuary from the serpent who mis-spoke God's word, and he failed to keep God's word. Satan had already rebelled against his position as a heavenly servant of God, grasping for self-governance. 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.

The man and the woman were expelled from paradise. God banished the man "to work the ground from which he had been taken" (3:23). He forfeited his destiny and was sent back to his origin. Henceforth he would toil in the dirt, working the ground. In passing judgment upon the man (3:17-19), God cursed the ground so that it would not readily yield its produce. In its cursed state it would yield thorns and thistles, but through painful toil and the sweat of his brow the man would be able to wrestle food from it. Gone is the abundance of trees which he had not planted but was given to enjoy. Having expelled the humans, God placed the cherubim at the entrance to the garden as replacement guardians.

Matters went from bad to worse. After Cain killed his brother Abel, God cursed Cain from the ground: though he work the ground it would not yield him any crops (4:10-12). Consigned instead to be a restless wanderer, he went out from the Lord's presence and dwelt "east of Eden" (4:16). Humanity continued to revel in its self-grasped freedom, doing what was right in its own eyes, taking what it saw to be good (6:2), until God intervened and sent rain for the first time to wipe all life from the earth he had made (7:4). Noah alone was saved with his family, because "he did all that the Lord commanded him"; he kept God's word.

Adam…Cain…the sons of God in the days of Noah: in just a few chapters humanity had used its freedom to bring pain, toil, misery, ruin and death upon the earth. Humanity has continued to live east of Eden. Life, liberty and happiness cannot lie in the direction of humanity doing what is right in its own eyes.

Israel

Fortunately God did not leave mankind to its own devices. Beginning with Abraham he called out a people to be a new humanity, to be his servants. He commended Abraham for keeping his requirements (Gen 26:5). He delivered his people from harsh servitude in Egypt so that they might serve him. Repeatedly Moses brought the Lord's word to Pharaoh: "Let my people go, so that they may worship me." The word translated "work" or "serve" can also be translated "worship" when its object is God, or the false gods of the other nations. Herein lay Israel's life, liberty and happiness. God delivered his people from one service into another: from harsh servitude to one who had set himself up as god in order to serve the one true God. The one service led to death; the other leads to life. As many of the psalms proclaim, serving the Lord brings gladness and joy. All Israel was called to serve the Lord and to keep his word. Serving him meant keeping his word; far from being oppressive this word was life, for it showed the people how to live.

It was God's responsibility to make every provision for his servants. As he led them on pilgrimage through the wilderness he provided for them: water from the Rock, manna from heaven, ensuring their clothes didn't wear out. The destiny of Israel's pilgrimage was the land flowing with milk and honey, where God again provided for his people. If they served him and kept his word, he sent the rain at the right time and ensured bountiful crops. He provided everything for Israel to live in liberty and rest.

Within Israel, God gave one tribe the privilege of serving him in a special way. To the priests and Levites he entrusted the work of the tabernacle. Using the same two verbs used of Adam, together with their cognate nouns, in a way that is impossible to capture in English, the Lord instructed them to perform the duties and do the service of the tabernacle. They were to serve and to guard on behalf of all Israel. Unlike the other tribes, they had no inheritance, no land to work. Instead, God provided for their material needs by giving them the tithes and offerings of the people. This freed them to care for that which was precious to God, to be faithful and obedient in their service in the tabernacle. They were a picture in microcosm of what a restored life is about. Repeatedly God used the language of gift: he *gave* the service to the priests; he *gave* the Levites to the priests to assist them; he *gave* the Levites to all Israel; he *gave* the tithes and offerings to the priests and Levites.

The climax of Israel's life of worship was the building of the temple. Here God dwelt with his people in his sanctuary. Here the priests and Levites served and guarded on behalf of all Israel. But no sooner was the temple finished than Solomon subjected his own people, God's own people, to harsh servitude, the very thing from which the Lord had delivered them in Egypt. Why did Solomon do this? In pursuit of empire: to build his own palace and the three cities in which he stored his military hardware.

Jesus

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was very clear that he was a faithful servant doing his Father's will. He did the work that the Father had given him to do (John 5:36; 17:4). The Father prepared all the work; Jesus' role was to be the faithful and obedient servant, succeeding where Adam and Israel had failed. Jesus did not act independently. "Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work" (John 14:10). In calling people to follow him, Jesus invited them to exchange one yoke for another, to exchange service leading to death for service leading to life:

> **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt 11:28-30)**

The Church

This brings us to the church age. What does it mean to serve and to keep today?

The first thing is to recognize that we have been in servitude all our lives. Claiming to be free we have actually been in bondage, hostage to our wills and passions—the bondage of the will, as Luther called it. We will never truly come to freedom in Christ if we don't feel that bondage to an evil master. And we will never feel that except God's Spirit quicken us. And then, as we sang, "Out of my bondage, sorrow and night, Jesus I come." As our Scripture reading shows, God liberates us from our bondage as slaves to sin leading to death, so that we might be slaves to obedience, to righteousness and to God who gives life (Rom 6:15-23). We have exchanged service leading to death for service leading to life. We are liberated unto life, but it is a life lived in service. We are not liberated to do whatever we want. Rather, we are free to be whom God intends us to be. To serve and to keep means that we accept, nay we welcome, being conformed into God's image in Christ. As servants we submit to the Master's hand.

To serve God is a great privilege. To be called "the servant of the Lord" was the highest honor in the OT. God is the great workman. He could do everything himself, but he chooses to work through us. Since he is the Master, his role is to provide everything that is necessary for us to do his will. Since we are the servants, our role is simply faithful obedience. God does not expect us to do his job. This division of labor between master and servant has lots of ramifications, which I can only begin to explore here.

Firstly, it is God's responsibility to equip us. He puts his Spirit in us, renewing us so that we are able to do his will. More particularly, he gives each of us spiritual gifts so that we can serve him. Moreover, he ensures that the church, which is the body of Christ, has the right mix of gifts to function as a body. We don't all have the same gift, but every one of us has a gift if the Spirit is in us. In the OT God set aside the priests and Levites to a special role of service. But in the church age we affirm the priesthood of all believers; we are all servants and we are all gifted. Among these gifts, God gives gifts of leadership so that the body is shepherded; gifts of teaching and wisdom so that it is instructed; gifts of help and mercy so that it is comforted. It's his responsibility to ensure the right distribution. It is not our role to aspire after the gifts that others have, but to be faithful with the gifts that God has given each of us. This is liberating: we don't have to try to be someone that we're not; we can just accept and rejoice in whom God has made us to be and how he has equipped us through his Spirit. We cannot overestimate the power of God filling us with his Spirit, without which we cannot serve him.

Next, it's God's responsibility to create the good works which he wants us to do. As Paul told the Ephesians, in the text that's on the bulletin cover,

> **We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph 2:10)**

For our part as servants, we are called to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices for this is our service or worship (Rom 12:1). We are his to do with, however he please. This requires trust, which we often find so very difficult. There's a hymn that begins, "Be still my soul, the Lord is on thy side." Do we really believe that? The faithful servant can trust that the master is on his side, for he is on his master's side. Do we really believe that God delights to work in and through us?

I am very grateful for growing up within the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, formerly China Inland Mission founded by Hudson Taylor. He labored under the burden of China's millions who had never heard the gospel. His burden lifted when he finally learnt in the depth of his heart this principle that he was simply the servant and God was the master who was pleased to work through him. He was transformed. The needs were still there, but he now rolled them all onto the Lord.

> It was deeply felt from the first that not many men and not large means were the supreme necessity; but just "to get God's man, in God's place, doing God's work, in God's way, and for God's glory."[1]

He realized that "God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supplies."[2] He understood that "A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in little things is a great thing."[3] These became like mottoes within CIM and OMF. I'm very glad to have grown up in a community shaped by these truths.

God's man, in God's place, doing God's work, in God's way, and for God's glory. So often it is really our own plans that we pursue, the world's methods that we use, our own glory that we seek. Too much Christian work is really personal empire building by modern-day Solomons who subject people to harsh servitude.

The hymn "Be still my soul" continues, "Leave to thy God to order and provide." This, too, is very hard for us to do. We so easily think it all depends upon us. We take matters into our own hands. We try to make things happen, doing so in our own strength, according to our own natural abilities.

There are several ways in which we do not leave it to God to order and provide. We doubt that he is at work ordering and providing. Or we think that he has not yet ordered and provided, that he has not yet put us in the arena in which we can serve him. Or we think that he no longer has us in the arena in which we can serve him; the grass is greener elsewhere and it's time to move on; if only we can get somewhere else then we can serve him more fully. But the truth is that God knows exactly what he's doing in placing us. If we are being faithful to him we can be sure that he will put us exactly where he wants us to be and that he will order and provide for our lives. Our responsibility is not to second-guess him but just to be faithful and obedient where we are, doing what he has given us to do, walking into the opportunities he creates for us, using the spiritual gifts he has given us, and enjoying the provision he makes for us.

In these and so many other ways we fail to be faithful and obedient servants. Our first priority is to ensure that we faithfully serve the Lord where he has us right now. If we are God's man or woman, in God's place, doing God's work, in God's way, and for God's glory, then we will have life, liberty and happiness in abundance. We will find that our service of him is perfect freedom.

There are certain ways in which we try to put these principles into effect here at PBCC, ways in which we function differently than most churches. They flow out of an understanding of what we might call the exchanged life, that "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Christ, through his Spirit, is at work in and through us, both individually and corporately. We do not draw up an annual budget, because we expect God to be at work providing the resources for his work to be done in his way; we don't want to second-guess God or presume upon him. We do not hold elections for church office, because we expect God to be at work raising up new leaders. Instead, when the elders appoint a new elder they are giving formal recognition to what God has already done, raising up a leader who is already functioning as an elder. We do not advertise pastoral positions for the same reason. Instead we look to see what God is already doing. All of this comes from the conviction that Christ is the Head of the church, that God is at work to equip his church with all it needs to function. This frees us up to be faithful and obedient. This frees us up to not be God. It's tremendously liberating.

Some might object that this is an invitation to passivity or laziness. But learning to be faithful and obedient where God has us now is anything but passive. Ensuring that you are God's man or woman doing God's work is not passive. It has often been remarked that the problem with a living sacrifice is that it can get down off the altar. Probably the greater problem is that we get onto the wrong altar, mistaking our altar for God's altar.

Finally, this has implications for how I view my ministry here among you. I don't harangue you and give you a list of things to do. Rather, I seek to cultivate your affections for God and for Christ. With your desires aflame I expect to see God at work in and through you. Your own spiritual vitality will overflow into those around. Here I follow Augustine's marvellous dictum: *dilige et quod vis fac*, Love God and do what you want.[4] When you truly love God, then you can do whatever you want, for your deep desire will be to serve him and to guard that which is precious to him. Herein lies perfect freedom.

To serve God in his sanctuary is what he has made us for. It was Adam's calling at the beginning. It will be our destiny at the end in the New Jerusalem:

> **The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads…And they will reign for ever and ever. (Rev 22:3, 5)**

We his servants shall serve him and we shall reign. This is oxymoronic to the world, but fundamental to the Biblical view of redeemed humanity. This is the paradox enshrined in the early Latin prayer upon which Cranmer based his collect:

> *Deus, auctor pacis et amator, quem nosse vivere, cui servire regnare est…*
>
> God, author and lover of peace, whom to know is to live, whom to serve is to reign…

We'll close by singing three songs. The first is "Make me a captive, Lord." It is by George Matheson, the beloved "Blind Preacher" of Scotland, best-known for his hymn, "O Love that will not let me go." American hymnals set this to the tune *Paradoxy*, which George Hustad wrote specifically for this hymn. He called it *Paradoxy* because of the paradoxes expressed in this hymn. Here are some of them:

> Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free.
> Force me to render up my sword, and I shall conqueror be.
>
> My heart is weak and poor until it master find…
> It cannot freely move till Thou has wrought its chain;
> Enslave it with thy matchless love, and deathless it shall reign.
>
> My power is faint and low till I have learned to serve…
> It cannot drive the world until itself be driven.
>
> My will is not my own till Thou hast made it Thine;
> If it would reach a monarch's throne, it must its crown resign.

I close with the Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo, August 28:

> Lord God, the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: Help us…so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord… Amen.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

1. M. Geraldine Guinness, *The Story of the China Inland Mission* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1894), 238.

2. Guinness, *Story*, 238.

3. Dr. & Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor in Early Years: The Growth of a Soul* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1911), 100.

4. Augustine, *Ep. Io.* tr. 7.8 (*Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, Homily 7, para. 8; on 1 John 4:9).

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LIFE AND DEATH CHOICES

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Seventh Message
Bernard Bell
July 27, 2008

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Choices. Every day we make them, not all of them good. Some we quickly realize as wrong; some we recognize as wrong only much later; and some we know are wrong even as we make them. Many of our choices, especially the bad ones, we make thinking only of ourselves, insensitive to the many who will be impacted. Some choices work out just as intended, but many bring unintended consequences. Parents try to teach their children to make good choices, but then watch them make bad ones, starting in infancy and continuing into adulthood. Asked Augustine in his *Confessions*, "Who can show me what my sins were? Some small baby in whom I can see all that I do not remember about myself."[1] Most parents have been embarrassed to see their bad habits mirrored back at them by their young children. The children are understandably confused if they are punished for choices which they see adults making. Looking back on his childhood, Augustine wrote,

> we enjoyed playing games and were punished for them by men who played games themselves. However, grown-up games are known as "business," and even though boys' games are much the same, they are punished for them by their elders.[2]

We make choices leading to life and we make choices leading to death. This is our topic for this morning. Why do we make the choices we do? What enables us to make the right choices? Having made choices leading to death how can we return to making choices leading to life?

The Ideal State in the Garden

God planted a garden in Eden, provided it with abundant water, and turned it into an orchard:

> **The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Gen 2:9 TNIV)**

Into this garden sanctuary he placed the man he had formed, giving him the twin commission to work and to guard, to serve and to keep. Now he gave him a single command,

> **And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die." (2:16-17)**

Here the Lord provided for the man's needs. He had not made the man to work the ground, to provide for his own needs. Instead God provided for him, filling the garden with trees, each of them "pleasing to the eye and good for food." These were to be the human's food, heavenly food as it were, since the garden sanctuary was an intrusion of heaven on earth. Here the man was free to enjoy the bounty that God provided for him. There was much for him to enjoy, both esthetically and physically. God told him, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden." "Free to eat" is the translators' attempt to capture the emphatic syntax of the Hebrew, which repeats the verb "eat" for emphasis. The man was invited not just to nibble but to feast.

Among the trees, indeed at the very center, was the tree of life. The life conveyed by this tree was something beyond the breath of life which God had breathed into the human body that he had fashioned out of the dust of the ground. The breath of life had made the inanimate body into a living creature, an embodied life. The tree of life was provided to give him eschatological life, life carrying on into the beyond. Presumably the human had full access to this tree, as free to eat from it as from any other.

Many religions have featured some sort of tree of life, but generally this tree could be found only after an arduous quest. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, the epic's namesake went down to the ocean depth to obtain the plant that would restore his youth. But here in Eden, the tree of life was in the very center of the garden, freely available to the man. All he had to do was reach out and eat.

There was a second tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Like all the other trees in the garden, this one also was "pleasing to the eye and good for food," as the woman later saw (3:6). But the Lord God ruled this tree off-limits: "you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die." "Certainly die" has the same emphatic syntax as "freely eat."

The man had no need to eat of this tree, no need for the knowledge of good and evil. God had not created him with the ability to distinguish between good and evil, nor the need to do so. Only the creator of something can determine if it is good. As one within the system, the man did not have the capacity to declare good from evil. Only God, being outside the system as its creator, had such capacity. Nevertheless, the man knew what was good, for God told him. All the trees of the garden were good, but eating of the one tree was not good. Not because there was something wrong with the tree itself, something about it that warned, "not good," but because God said that the eating of it was not good. The goodness or not lay in God's declaration. The reliability of that declaration lay in God's character. The man's freedom lay in acceptance of God's word, in confidence in his character. His life lay in knowing God, not in knowing good and evil. Death lay not in something magical about the tree itself, whereby the fruit itself conveyed death, but in the disobeying of God's command.

The man had a choice: he could obey God leading to life, or he could disobey God leading to death. Notice how heavily God had stacked the deck in favor of choosing life. In the garden he gave the man an abundance which he allowed him to freely enjoy. Only one thing out of very many was off-limits. Many people view God as a spoilsport, and think that Christians are characterized by what they are not allowed to do. There have been Christians who have focused on giving up things, but the Bible focuses on what God gives his

people. He is a generous God who wants his people to enjoy life. He creates humans with appetites and desires, and he wants to satisfy those desires. But the man was to submit the satisfaction of his desires to the will of his Maker and Master.

The man had the ability to choose. This was part of the dignity God conferred on him. He could choose to obey or to disobey, choose to act as a servant or as a rebel, choose life or death. As Augustine succinctly put it, *posse non peccare et posse peccare*, able not to sin and able to sin.[3] He had the choice and the freedom to do either.

What would motivate the man to make the right choice? There was nothing about the tree itself that repulsed him. Like the other trees it was good. It was the command not the tree itself that made the eating thereof bad. Therefore the man was to be motivated by the command not by the tree. Rather, he was to be motivated by his love for the giver of the command. He was to submit his own will to a higher will, and to delight in doing so. This is a hard word for us to hear, for submissive obedience and delight do not belong together in our thinking. Monks take a three-fold vow of poverty, chastity and obedience. They say that poverty and chastity can be learnt, but the really hard one is obedience. Adam did not yet know that struggle to submit oneself to one in rightful authority. There was as yet no conflict between submissive obedience and love.

Why did the Lord God give the man this commandment? In the preceding verse God had commissioned the man to priestly service, working and keeping, serving and guarding. Now he was being tested in his faithfulness to this commission. It was not a complicated test. He had only one choice and the deck was heavily stacked in favor of making the right choice. God's intent was that he pass, that he be proven as a faithful servant. But he also gave him the freedom to be able to fail.

It is customary to say that the man was on probation. We can conjecture that perhaps after a certain period of testing God would have declared his servant proven and removed the possibility of sinning. Unfortunately we don't get to find out, because as soon as the Lord provides the man with a companion to assist in this choice, they both fail. But we can see what God's intentions were by tracing this theme of life and death choices through the rest of the Bible: the unraveling of everything in the Fall; God's work of restoring humanity in Israel, Jesus, and the Church; and the achievement of his purposes in a restored earth at the End.

The Fall

Within just a few verses both the man and the woman have eaten the forbidden fruit. The serpent's unraveling of the woman's will was two-pronged. He cast doubt on God's word and on his character, so that she doubted his goodness. And he focused her attention on the one thing denied so that she lost sight of the abundance permitted. Every temptation since has been but a variation on this approach. With her mind doubting God's word and character and her eye focused on the tree itself the woman made her own determination of what was good. She saw that it was good, she took, and she ate. She herself decided how to fulfill her desires.

When the couple ate the fruit they were immediately changed. They knew they had done wrong for they hid from one another and from God. They now knew good and evil, but this was not a good thing; it terrified them. God had not created them with the innate ability to discern and declare good from evil. He had not made humanity to carry that responsibility. But this first couple had assumed that responsibility; it was a heavy burden. They had done what was right or good in their own eyes, but their choice led to death.

Contrary to the serpent's assertion, they did die. They died relationally: they immediately hid from one another and from God. They died spiritually: in their grasp for knowledge they no longer knew him and were cast out from his presence. They died eschatologically: expelled from the garden they lost access to the tree of life. They died physically: God decreed that henceforth humanity would return to the ground from which it was taken, *adam* would return to the *adamah*.

It was not only Adam and Eve who died. All humanity died with Adam, for we were all represented in him. He was our head, our federal representative. As our Scripture reading began,

> **sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned. (Rom 5:12)**

In community solidarity, we are all born into Adam; we are all born into sin. This doctrine of original sin is not popular, but it is unmistakable. As Augustine said, you have only to look at babies to find proof!

Again Augustine gives us a succinct phrase: no longer *posse non peccare*, able not to sin, all humanity had become *non posse non peccare*, not able not to sin. This is the tragedy of total depravity. Not that every thing we do is bad, but that every part of us is touched by depravity, so that we are unable to live a sinless life, unable to make all the right choices.

This week I received an email from one of you: "Where is the Scripture that talks about that all men are sinners, and how do you explain this to an engineer?" Our Scripture reading (Rom 5:12-21) is unrelenting in its insistence on the universality of sin, but this theme runs throughout Scripture. It's not just engineers who have a hard time with this; all who insist on self, which is to say all of us, have a hard time.

When the first humans sinned, they were in the best of all possible worlds. It was in paradise that they made the wrong choice. This gives the lie to environmental ethics, that people make bad choices only because they are in bad environments. We all know that is not true. We see people make bad choices even when they have it all—especially when they have it all: look at Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, Amy Winehouse, Lindsay Lohan. Conversely, people in awful situations make very heroic choices.

Since Adam, every human life has ended in physical death, excepting only Enoch and Elijah. As many have observed, the success rate of death is 100%. Even Jesus died. In the OT when people died they went down to Sheol, to Death, to the Grave, to the Pit. The body decayed, but the self continued in a disembodied state. All peoples believed in the afterlife. Some societies made enormous efforts to ensure a prosperous journey into the afterlife, at least for royalty, the most extreme example being the pyramids.

The next few chapters of Genesis describe a downward spiral, as humanity sank deeper and deeper into sin: Cain murdered Abel and his descendent Lamech boasted of his violence; the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were good and they took; humanity gathered at Babel to build a tower to heaven. These chapters make it abundantly clear that left to its own devices the natural tendency of humanity is to spiral downwards not upwards, as William Golding shockingly portrayed in *Lord of the Flies*.

Thankfully, God has not allowed humanity to go to ruin, to frustrate the purposes for which he created it, and to take the earth with it. He has intervened to restore life to humanity. And not just life, but with it the ability to make right choices, to choose life. He has done so through Israel, through Christ, and through the Church.

Israel

God liberated Israel from a harsh servitude leading to death into a service leading to life. He saved his people so that they might worship or serve him. He put his presence in their midst so that they might know him. To show them how to live in the presence of a holy God he gave them his law, his Torah, his instructions, whose general principle was, "Be holy as I am holy." Through Moses he set these before Israel:

> **"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live…This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life…" (Deut 30:15-20)**

The Israelites had a choice to make, one path leading to life, the other to death.

But the Law intensified sin: sin was now disobedience against explicit command—613 of them according to the rabbis' classification. Though Israel had been redeemed from bondage in Egypt, they were still the same people, still children of Adam, still *non posse non peccare*, not able not to sin. The Law just made this more obvious, so that instead of sinning unconsciously they sinned consciously. But God provided for this, too, giving Israel a sacrificial system for the atonement of their sins.

But despite the Torah and despite the sacrificial system, every Israelite died sooner or later. They all went down to Sheol. But they began to see that something must lie beyond Sheol, that there must be a resurrection back out of Sheol into physical life. They began to see that Sheol, or Hades in the NT, is merely the holding place for the disembodied. They based this belief in a future bodily resurrection upon the very character of God.

Jesus

Into an environment fervent in observance of the Law and in the hope of the resurrection, Jesus was born. He was tested in the wilderness, just as Adam and Israel had been tested. The issue was the same: obedience to God's word. Three times Satan challenged Jesus. Each time Jesus responded by quoting God's word from Deuteronomy. Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus did his Father's will. Not only was he obedient, he also delighted to be obedient. It was his pleasure to do his Father's will. It was his Father's pleasure to say of him, "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased." There was no contradiction between submissive obedience and love.

How was Jesus able to succeed where Israel had failed? How was he able to make the right choices? He was a human like us, but a different type of human. "Conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary," he was a man from heaven. He was not a man after Adam's pattern; he was not "in Adam." He was a new Adam, a new human in the image of God. The old image was so fatally flawed that a new impression was needed. Jesus was this new image, as the Son took humanity upon himself. Like the first Adam in the beginning, but unlike every human since, he was *posse non peccare*, able not to sin. Unlike the first Adam who made the wrong choice, this second Adam made the right choice, the choice leading to life. He chose obedience, submitting himself to God's will.

And yet he died, the only human to ever die sinless. "He descended into hell" as we affirm in the creed. That statement troubles many, but it's asserting that Jesus really died, that he went to the place where all had gone when they died. But for the first time Death or Hades held one over whom it had no right. What would God do about it? How would God vindicate the choice of the one who had chosen life yet now lay dead, the only faithful and obedient servant the world had ever seen? Declaring that death could not hold this one, he raised him from the dead. He gave him back a physical body, but one unlike any body hitherto seen on earth. It was a transformed body, able to do things a normal physical body couldn't do. After forty days God brought this re-embodied human back to heaven. The Son who had taken humanity upon himself when he came down from heaven did not lay it aside when he returned to heaven. For the first time there was a human in heaven; a human who was *non posse peccare*, not able to sin.

The Church

That's all well and good for Jesus. But what good does that do us who continue to be born into the first Adam? Just as the first Adam was the federal head of all who follow him, so this second Adam is the federal head of all who follow him. The first Adam led his followers into death. The second Adam leads his followers into life. How then do we follow Christ into life?

It doesn't happen by keeping laws, by following a rule book. God has to do the work. He pours his Spirit into our lives to do several things. The Spirit opens our eyes to see ourselves as we really are, and it is not a pretty sight. This is the only way anyone, be they engineer or non-engineer, will ever come to a true assessment of themselves.

"Know thyself," proclaimed Apollo's temple in Delphi. Self-knowledge is indeed important, but true self-knowledge is not obtained in seminars that boost our self-esteem. God's Spirit shows us not how good we are but how bad. This is the beginning of the road back to life. Having shown us ourselves, the Spirit then shows us Christ, to whom we come with the faith that the Spirit gives us. God transfers us from the kingdom of death into his kingdom of life, from being "in Adam" to being "in Christ."

We are made the beneficiaries of the obedience of Christ. Our Scripture reading (Rom 5:12-21) developed this great contrast between the disobedience of the one man Adam which brought death and the obedience of the one man Christ which brings life. In Adam we all died; in Christ we are made alive.

Still the Spirit continues to work, transforming us so that we are able to make right choices. When we act in the Spirit we are *posse non peccare*, able not to sin. But we oscillate between acting in the Spirit and acting in the flesh, between not sinning and sinning. And God seems content to allow us to oscillate like this. Why? It certainly keeps us humble. It reminds us that all is of grace, not of self; that all is God's gift not our own accomplishment.

We do not live according to rules or commandments. The general principle still stands: "Be holy as I am holy." We do that not by look-

ing up the rule book, but by the Spirit in us. As we grow spiritually we find out what pleases God and do it.

Jesus Christ is described as the firstfruits of those who rise from the dead. He is our pioneer in this resurrection. But our passage from death to life is not a single event. Rather, it unfolds in three stages, in each of which we follow Christ our pioneer.

The first resurrection happens in the middle of our physical lives. When we come to Christ, God transfers us from being dead in Adam to being alive in Christ, from Adam being our federal head to Christ being our federal head. This is symbolically represented by baptism, in which we die to our old selves and rise to newness of life, identifying with Christ in his death and resurrection.

The second resurrection happens at the end of our physical lives. Our bodies decay, while our disembodied selves go into Sheol or Hades. But God declares that Death has no claim upon us, so he immediately releases us from this realm, for Christ has the keys of death and Hades (Rev 1:18; 20:4). We are present with the Lord as disembodied selves.

The final resurrection happens at the end of time, when God re-embodies our selves. The new body he will give each of us is a transformed body of the same order as the body he gave Jesus. Our re-embodied selves will live on a restored earth, in full fellowship and peace with one another and with God. In that state we will be *non posse peccare*, not able to sin. Notice that this is a state beyond that enjoyed by Adam, who was only *posse non peccare*, able not to sin, not *non posse peccare*, not able to sin. This is God's intended destiny for humanity. But it will not alter our status as servants. Our destiny is to be God's servants in paradise restored, in which state we will have perfect freedom.

Conclusion

To summarize, using Augustine's succinct phrases: mankind passes through four stages in its ability to make choices.

1. In Adam's pre-Fall state, mankind was *posse peccare et posse non peccare*, able to sin and able not to sin.
2. In Adam, ruled by our selfish desires, we are *non posse non peccare*, not able not to sin.
3. Made alive in Christ, walking in the Spirit, we are *posse non peccare*, able not to sin, though too often we revert to walking in the flesh.
4. The day is coming when, as perfected human beings with resurrection bodies, we will be *non posse peccare*, not able to sin.

Such is the fourfold state of human nature.

Here we are today, in the third of these states, between resurrections. God has begun to make us alive, to release us from the tyranny of death, from the disastrous results of Adam's choice. He has transferred us from being in Adam to being in Christ. He has put his Spirit in us, and is at work transforming us. Empowered by his Spirit we are able to make right choices. God is especially concerned about how or why we make these choices, for right choices are made when we submit our will to God's. But too many Christians, insisting on a God-given right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, want God to affirm and bless their own choices. To give but one example, the Anglican Communion is on the point of breaking apart over the issue of homosexuality. On one side are those who insist that God affirm and bless their desires and choices; on the other are those who seek to submit their desires and choices to the will of the Father. But there are many other ways we expect God to bless our self-driven choices. Tragically, this often happens in Christian ministry.

Every day we face choices. Christian maturity lies not in asserting ourselves in our quest for freedom, but in submitting ourselves to God, whom to serve is perfect freedom. Moreover, we delight in doing so. It is those who truly love God who submit themselves to him and delight to be obedient. The choices of such are choices for life.

I close again with the Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo,

> Lord God, the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: Help us…so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord… Amen.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

1. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.7 (trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin; London: Penguin, 1961), 27.

2. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.9; 30.

3. Augustine, *Treatise on Rebuke and Grace*, 33.

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TOGETHER

Catalog No. 1570
Genesis 2:18-25
Eighth Message
Bernard Bell
August 3, 2008

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Among the most bitterly contested issues today are those relating to marriage, sex and gender, both within the church and in wider society. There is much confusion over what constitutes marriage and gender. For the past seven weeks gay marriage has been legal here in California; in November the state will vote on Proposition 8, the proposed constitutional amendment to define marriage as between a man and a woman. The very notion of sex and gender is breaking down as progressives distinguish sex which is biologically defined from gender which is socially defined; society should therefore affirm the transgendered. A high school in Thailand was in the news this past week because it opened a separate bathroom for transgender males, for boys who consider themselves female.

This confusion about sex, gender and marriage extends to the church. As I noted last week the Anglican church is in turmoil over gay ordination. Within the evangelical church the role of women is a hot-button issue. We can dismiss the behavior of San Francisco and of the mainline churches as the inevitable result of liberal godlessness. But we are part of the evangelical community and the confusion over the role of men and women within families and the church touches us more directly. I think ourselves fortunate that this has generally not been a divisive issue within our body, but it has in many. We are greatly blessed by the many capable women in our body. In nearly every newcomers' class we are asked about our position on the role of women. There is no more sensitive issue within the evangelical church today. Both sides are convinced they are right, but on each side are godly believers whom I respect. I am therefore well aware that I am venturing out into a minefield more treacherous than the six days of creation or the millennium, both of which I've traversed in the past 18 months.

In the first creation account God created humans as his final creative act.

> **Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule…"**
>
> **So God created human beings in his own image,**
> **in the image of God he created them;**
> **male and female he created them.**
>
> **God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it…" (Gen 1:26-28 TNIV)**

That is how TNIV renders these verses. The NIV reads,

> **Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule…"**
>
> **So God created man in his own image,**
> **in the image of God he created him;**
> **male and female he created them. (1:26-27 NIV)**

The TNIV, published in 2005, is a major upgrade of the NIV whose last major revision was in 1984. Any translation is from a source language into a target language. In the past twenty years the translators' understanding of the source material has developed considerably, but the target language has also changed. English is a language in constant flux. Among the most significant changes have been those dealing with sex and gender. It is unfortunate that the flexibility and ambiguity of "man" have been lost; it can be used with or without the article, as a singular or a collective, and to refer to males specifically or to humans generically. No other word has that flexibility. But for many, especially the younger generation, "man" no longer conveys this range of meanings; it has become gender-specific. I therefore support the revisions of the TNIV, and am grieved by those who have disparaged the integrity of its translators, several of whom I know. For the past 15 years I have tried to be sensitive about gender language, not because I've gone liberal but because I'm trying to be a good steward of language and facilitate hearing. Perhaps you've noticed my struggles with language these past few weeks; someone remarked on it last Sunday.

In creating a human in his own image, God created both male and female. They were equally in his image and likeness. These are biological terms. God has so designed it that it would take male and female together, with their complementary anatomy, to fulfill the command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

Now in chapter 2 we are given a second complementary account of the creation of the man and woman. We have seen that the Lord God formed the human out of the dust of the ground and placed him in paradise, there to enjoy the bounty he provided. Here he was to serve and to guard, keeping a single command. Given this idyllic environment, our text opens in a surprising manner,

> **The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (2:18 TNIV)**

Something was not good in paradise. God did not intend the human to live in isolation; he intended him to be in community, in relationship with others. He would therefore make him "a helper suitable for him." This term has generated much discussion. A helper (*ezer*) is someone who comes alongside to help, not someone who serves under. The term is most frequently used of God himself who comes to the aid of his people. There is no hint of hierarchy; if God had intended such he would have used the word "serve" as in v 15. The human serves under God, but the helper will help alongside. The term "suitable for him" or "corresponding to him" (*kenegdo*) has at its heart a preposition meaning "in front of one's face." When the helper is brought in front of the human he will recognize a face-to-face match because the other is either identical or complementary. In no manner is this a demeaning term, nor is there any hint of hierarchy.

In making a suitable helper for the human, God adopted a two-stage approach, first showing what is not a match, then what is a match. His first approach is to bring the animals before the human:

Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. (2:19-20)

There is no need to put the forming of these animals into the pluperfect as TNIV has done, presumably to harmonize with chapter 1. The Lord made the animals and the birds in exactly the same way he had made the human: he formed them out of the ground, as a potter forms clay. He then brought them to the human for naming. God had named all he made on the first three days, but he delegated to the human the naming of the living creatures. The human thereby exercised his rule over the animal kingdom. Since this naming is referred to three times, we can assume God took delight in what the human was doing, for he was doing what he was created for. But, though the birds and animals had the same origin as the human, formed from the ground and filled with the breath of life, no suitable match was found. Each time the human looked into the face of an animal only to be disappointed.

The Lord knew that the human would find no helper. He did this both to allow the human to exercise his rule and to build his appreciation for the helper the Lord had in mind.

So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. (2:21-22)

The Lord dropped a deep sleep onto the man. This was a supernaturally induced sleep, similar to what he dropped on Abram and Saul (Gen 15:12; 1 Sam 26:12). It rendered the man non-active; the provision of the helper would be entirely the Lord's doing. A different verb is used for the making of this helper. Removing a rib from the human, the Lord built this part into a woman. The woman has a different origin than the first human and the living creatures.

Just as God had brought the animals, so now he brought the woman. The man's response was instantaneous recognition of a match, as he erupted into poetic exclamation:

The man said,

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

Here is the man's first recorded speech. Its climactic nature is indicated by poetry, as elsewhere in Genesis. The man's excitement is expressed in his three-fold use of the demonstrative pronoun "this," including both the first and the last words. Most translations obscure this; a more literal translation is,

"***This* time!**
bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
of *this* it will be said 'woman,' (*ishah*)
for out of man (*ish*)
was taken *this*."

The first words out of his mouth are, "This time!" After all the other times when he had looked each animal in the face he knew that this time was different. He immediately recognized that the woman was of the same stuff as himself: "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." This identity is expressed in her name: she would be called *ishah*–woman because she has come from *ish*–man; a wordplay that works as well in English as in Hebrew. Many have said that the man showed his authority over the woman by naming her. This is not so. Rather than naming her as he named each animal (v 20), he announced what the world would say of her, and indirectly of himself. Not only is this the first instance of *ishah*–woman, it's the first instance of *ish*–man. He proclaimed universal recognition of the complementarity of the man and the woman as different but the same. The human had now been differentiated into man and woman and the man couldn't be happier. He began and ended by drawing attention to "this one." We can picture him showing her off to the world, immensely delighted and proud, thereby showering her with glory.

The section concludes with a dual epilogue. The first is a timeless principle; the second a statement about the happy state of the first couple.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (2:24-25)

The differentiation of the human into man and woman, male and female, forms the basis for marriage. The human has been differentiated not so he can be apart, but so he can be together. The two become so together that they become one again. To this end, a man will leave and cleave. These are strong verbs, covenantal verbs, which God will later use of Israel, calling it to forsake false gods and cling to him. Forsaking his identity as his parents' son, each man establishes a new identity with his wife. The two become one flesh through intercourse, whereby the man knows his wife. It takes male and female acting together to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth.

Here we have several principles of marriage. Marriage is heterosexual: the union of a man and a woman who forsake their prior identity and cling together as a couple. Marriage is life-long: the strong covenantal language of leaving and cleaving implies a permanent bond. The Law will later allow divorce for human sin, but this is not the original intent of marriage. It is a deep tragedy that the divorce rate among Christians is as high as among non-Christians. Marriage is the environment for sex: it is only after leaving and cleaving that the two become one flesh.

Thus joined together the man and the woman were naked and unashamed. They were together in harmony with one another, with creation, with God. All was well.

This text portrays man and woman in the garden as fully equal. The woman was not subservient to the man. She was a helper alongside him rather than a servant under him. He did not exert ownership or authority over her by naming her. Nevertheless there was an order: the man preceded the woman; three times it is stated that the rib or woman was taken from the man. The woman was made to help alongside the man. She helped the man not be alone. I think she was also to help him work and keep, serve and guard. Matthew Henry beautifully described the togetherness of the woman with the man:

> Not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with

him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.[1]

In all things the man and the woman were together.

Unfortunately we don't get to see the man and the woman live life together. So many arguments could be avoided if we now had a chapter describing their daily life in the garden. Instead we immediately see their togetherness unravel. Chapter 3 shows them oscillating back and forth between being together and not together. Physically they were together the whole time, but relationally they were not.

- They were *not together* in facing temptation: the woman faced the serpent alone, though the man was with her (3:1-6).
- *Together* they immediately felt shame and fear after eating (3:7-10).
- *Not together* as God interrogated them, they passed the blame (3:11-13).
- *Together* they received judgment (3:16-19).

Though the man and woman were together in receiving judgment, God drove a wedge between them. He inflicted each with pain but in different arenas: the woman in child-rearing, the man in working the ground to get food. The harmony between the two was upset, as God said to the woman,

"Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you." (3:16)

This is best understood with reference to God's rebuke of Cain's anger, which uses the same vocabulary and syntax.

"[sin] desires to have you, but you must rule over it." (4:7)

Just as sin's desire was to master Cain, so the woman's desire would be to master her man; just as Cain must exercise dominion over sin, so the man would exercise dominion over the woman. This is not the ideal state; this is human relationship in a fallen state under judgment. The togetherness of the man and the woman has been fractured by assertiveness and male dominance. This male dominance was immediately exercised when the man named his woman Eve (3:20), using the same conventional naming formula as for the animals (2:20).

Expelled from the garden, the man toiled at wrestling food from the ground, and the woman in pain bore children. Together in sin, shame, fear and judgment, they were no longer together relationally. How would God heal their relationship?

Much of the debate about the role of women today in the church is prefaced by discussion of women's role in Israel and in the ministry of Jesus. The great honor that Jesus gave women is a worthy study, but neither Israel nor the ministry of Jesus form the paradigm for the role of women in the church today. We need to turn directly to the NT documents about the church. It is here that we find the controversial texts about the relationship between men and women. These texts are of two types. Some are within what are known as household codes governing reciprocal behavior between pairs of individuals within church households. Others are found within passages dealing with corporate gatherings of churches.

Twenty years ago evangelicals aligned into two major groups in their interpretation of these texts. On one side is the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), for which Wayne Grudem and John Piper are the major spokesmen. It argues a complementarian position: men and women are equal before God, but have different and complementary roles within families and within the church. In both arenas male headship is the norm, and certain roles within the church are excluded to women.

On the other side is the group called Christians for Biblical Equality, founded by Catherine Kroeger. It argues the egalitarian position: men and women are equal not only in value but also in gifting and ability. Their roles are interchangeable, and no role within the church is denied a woman simply because she is a woman.

CBMW generally favors the ESV and decries the TNIV; CBE favors the TNIV. This puts me in an awkward position for I use both!

Let me again say that both sides are evangelical, both sides have people whom I highly respect. For the past few weeks I have been reading the books of both sides. Both have good things to say, but I've also been appalled by some of the arguments on both sides. Both can be guilty of trying to make Scripture fit their preconceived ideas. I take this as a warning to myself.

First a general observation: all these texts are addressed to churches—not to individuals, not even to couples or families, but to church communities. The egalitarians frequently start with this verse:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)

But the context is often forgotten. This verse is about membership in God's family, not about roles within that family. In Abraham God began to call out a people that was ethnically defined. But now in Christ he has opened up membership in that family to all who belong to Christ through faith, irrespective of ethnicity, economic status or gender. This is his new society in which he is healing fractured relationships. The church is the society in which each member lives in healthy relationship with everyone else: Jew with Gentile, master with slave, parent with children, male with female. It is a society which transcends these pairings, even those between parent and child, and between husband and wife. The true locus for healed relationships, then, is the church: the individual members one with the other, and the whole body with Christ. It doesn't matter who you are: whether you're married or single, male or female. Husband and wife belong together, but there is a greater level of belonging beyond their togetherness. If both are in Christ, then both belong within the church. The church together belongs in Christ.

Three months ago Lauren Winner spoke at PBC Palo Alto about "What is Real Sex?" What I most appreciated about her talk was her insistence that our sexual behavior does not occur within a vacuum but within the community of God's people, whom it impacts. We are so prone to forget that we belong in the community of faith. Thinking in community terms is especially foreign to rugged American individualism. Unfortunately much of the debate about the role of women within the church is influenced by this individualistic thinking: what do I have the right to do? what does she not have the right to do? But all the controversial NT texts are about what is seemly for and beneficial to the community.

The household codes (Eph 5:22-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet 2:18-3:7) address relationships within the community. All are one in Christ, but the distinctions continue between individuals. The general principle is given at the beginning of the Ephesian code: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (5:21). The nature of this mutual submission depends upon your position: husband or wife, parent or child, master or slave. But the general principle is the same: behave so as to promote the welfare of the other party, and do so because

of Christ. Thus the whole community will live together in a manner that is fitting to its status as renewed humanity.

The church community is the setting for the other difficult texts, but this time it's the church gathered for fellowship. There are three particularly controversial texts: two addressed to the church in Corinth (1 Cor 11:2-16; 14:34-35), one to the church in Ephesus (1 Tim 2:8-15). In both churches their regular gatherings were disruptive and unseemly; and it wasn't just the women who were causing the problems. We don't fully understand the cultural specifics of each situation, but Paul's general principles are clear. When the church gathers together, both men and women should behave in such a way as to bring honor, not shame, not only upon themselves but upon others. For example, it wasn't about the head-coverings per se; it was about the message conveyed by the head-coverings or lack thereof (1 Cor 11:2-16). Men are to behave so as to bring glory to God; women are to behave so as to bring glory to men. It's not about yourself; it's about how your behavior enhances the community.

I'm quite prepared to say that this is culturally conditioned. What is considered fitting changes with the times. Paul urged the women in both Corinth and Ephesus to wear clothing that was modest and becoming. But clothing that would be considered very modest today would have shocked a Victorian. In the developing world public breast feeding is not shocking, but men wearing shorts is. In my early teens my mother explained to me in Thailand that the time for wearing shorts in public was over. I didn't like it at the time, but I respect it now, because I've come to understand that it's not about me, it's about how my behavior affects others. This respect for others now governs how I dress when I travel, especially to non-Western countries.

In each of these texts Paul maintains that there is still an order within relationships. The woman came from the man and to help the man, but God has so arranged it that all men have to be born of women (1 Cor 11:8-9, 12). We are therefore all interdependent, and all dependent upon God. We are all together.

Our real problem in determining the role of women is that we don't understand how the church should function as a community. Here, for example, is an egalitarian's argument for women leaders:

> As women move into ministerial positions, they bring a renewed understanding of ministry. They tend to challenge the older hierarchical understanding of church leadership, and in its place promote a cooperative approach. Women leaders often emphasize a collaborative, mutually facilitating and participative style of leadership.
>
> The more consensual style of female leadership finds its parallel in a more egalitarian understanding of the church. This stands in stark contrast to hierarchical models that focus on the distinctions between clergy and laity. Female ministers tend to view the primary task of clergy as empowering the laity for ministry. In addition they tend to see the church as a caring community of faith, which encourages character traits typically associated with the feminine, such as compassion, mercy and the giving of nurture.[2]

The problem here is not the lack of woman leaders, but the wrong understanding of the church. I agree with everything said here, but as a man. Our elders, as men, are committed to all these principles.

We are the family of God, reconciled to God and to one another. Our model for relationships is given by God himself. Restored parent-child relationships take as their model the relationship between the Father and the Son. The Son delights to do the Father's will; the Father delights to say of his Son, "This is my Son, whom I love, in whom I am well pleased." Restored husband-wife relationships take as their model the relationship between Christ and the church. Christ has given himself for the church; he points to her and says, "This one! Isn't she glorious." The Father and the Son glorify one another. Christ and the Church glorify one another. The purpose of order within Christian relationships is to enhance the other within the community. All discussion about the role of women must take place within this understanding of relationships.

Together, as man and woman, we are God's family. We best express that togetherness, not by arguing over our rights, but by sharing a meal. Our Scripture reading (1 Cor 10:16-17, 23-24, 31-33; 11:1, 27-29) was a selection of verses in which Paul urged the Corinthians to see themselves as one body, especially in the context of eating the Lord's Supper. (The head covering passage is in the middle of this text!) He called them to eat and drink recognizing the Lord's body—that is the church. Let us eat and drink together in fellowship with God and with one another.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom 15:5-6)

1. Matthew Henry, *Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1706).

2. Stanley J. Grenz & Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 25-26.

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TRIED AND FOUND WANTING

Catalog No. 1571
Genesis 3:1-7
Ninth Message
Bernard Bell
January 11, 2009

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Last Wednesday the Congressional Budget Office announced that the 2009 budget deficit would exceed $1 trillion. The National Debt now exceeds $10 trillion. These enormous numbers show only too clearly what we all know: our appetite to consume far exceeds our ability or willingness to pay. At every level of society our excessive appetites have landed us in deep trouble. We've supersized ourselves into obesity. Easy credit has persuaded us we can have it all now. Individuals have rung up huge amounts of credit card debt. Households have taken on mortgages beyond their ability to pay. Banks and investment houses have pursued profits through ever-more arcane financial arrangements such as collateralized debt obligations. Governments at every level from local to state to federal struggle to cope with massive deficits. All because we are not content to restrain our appetites in order to live within our means.

When it comes to satisfying our desires there are two ways to pursue contentment: consume more or desire less. Alas, it is much easier to do the former than the latter. The government gives us a helping hand. President Bush gave us a tax rebate last spring, urging us to spend it on consumption. Consumer spending fuels the economy and the jobs of many of you.

Why are our appetites so distorted? Does God want us to have appetites? Or should we simply say, as did the ancient Greeks, "Everything in moderation; nothing in excess"?

Today we return to Genesis 1-11, which we are studying under the title, "Our Story of Origins." We come to chapter 3 where we find the first distortion of human appetite and its terrible consequences that have reverberated throughout human history. Our story of origins which started off so well now takes a terrible fall.

There is so much in this chapter that I'll take five weeks to work through it. Today we'll look at the temptation and fall (vv 1-7). In the following weeks we'll see how Adam and Eve hide from God, refuse to take responsibility for their actions and instead pass the blame (8-13), how God curses the serpent and promises to send someone to defeat the forces of evil (14-15), how he inflicts pain upon the man and the woman (16-19), and how he expels them from paradise (20-24). These are weighty topics. These events happened thousands of years ago, but we still live with their consequences even today.

The setting for the events of chapter 3 was given in chapter 2. The LORD God had formed the man out of the dust of the ground, but he did not intend him to live by scrabbling around in the dust of the ground. Instead the LORD planted a garden in Eden, the land of delight. This garden was his sanctuary on earth. It was an intrusion of heaven onto earth, where God came down to earth. It was here, in his sanctuary, that God put the man. He gave the man a dual task: to work and to take care, to serve and to guard (2:15). Whatever that work or service looked like, it was not for the purpose of producing his food. Instead it was the LORD who provided everything for the man. The Lord had filled the garden with every type of tree, all of them "pleasing to the eye and good for food" (2:8). He urged the man to enjoy the bounty of the garden, to satisfy his appetites on the LORD's provision. He had free access to any tree of the garden except one:

> **And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die." (Gen 2:16-17 TNIV)**

God had created the man with appetites, and had provided everything necessary to satisfy those appetites. In simple obedience to God lay man's fulfilment, happiness and true freedom. This was paradise, life with God. Sin, when it happened, occurred within Paradise, the land where God was present and where he provided everything necessary for the satisfaction of human appetites. The first sin did not take place in a wasteland of deprivation. It is not true that if only man had been in a better place he would not have sinned; he was in the best place on earth.

Here, in paradise, he had the freedom to obey or not. He had the ability to not sin or to sin. To assist him in serving, guarding and keeping the commandment, God provided a helper corresponding to him: the woman. Chapter 2 closes with the man and woman in harmony with one another, with God and with all creation. But how quickly everything goes wrong in chapter 3!

The chapter opens with a new character: the serpent.

> **Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. (Gen 3:1a)**

Though this serpent is described as one of the wild animals made by God it will quickly become apparent that this is more than a mere animal. Some sinister evil power is at work through the serpent. The New Testament is unambiguous about identifying this power with Satan, referring to "the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan" (Rev 20:2; cf. 12:9).

But who is Satan and where did he come from? The Bible tells us little about him, much less than you might expect from what others have written about him. Nowhere are we told the origins of Satan. He appears in only three places in the Old Testament. Satan is a Hebrew word meaning accuser. In both Job 1–2 and Zechariah 3 the Satan, the Accuser, has access to God's heavenly court where he brings accusations against God's people. God permits Satan to lodge these accusations, but then he rebuts him. This is the Biblical pattern: to show us not where Satan came from but what God is doing about him.

There are two opposite dangers in thinking about Satan: we can belittle him or magnify him. Sophisticated Westerners deny the existence of Satan, dismissing him as the product of superstition. But how then do you explain the presence of evil in the world? Evil must then be blamed on the environment, but Genesis 3 shows that the first sin took place in the very best environment on earth, and we all know that environment has no relationship to morality.

The opposite danger is to magnify Satan, to grant him more power than he really has. Evangelical Christians seem particularly prone to this when they read too many books about demonic warfare. The result is dangerously close to the ancient view of two gods battling it out for supremacy, one good, the other bad. Chaos threatens to overwhelm order, so we have to give God a helping hand. The Bible does not allow this view. Satan is not an equal and opposite power to God. The Bible constantly shows us that God is effortlessly sovereign; this will be abundantly clear here in Genesis 3. Where does evil come from? What is the origin of Satan? We're not told. What we are shown again and again is what God is doing about evil and about Satan.

Why is this evil power presented as working through the serpent? The serpent means little to us today. But in the ancient world it carried a powerful symbolism. These early chapters of Genesis were given to Israel as its story of origins. Israel was surrounded by peoples with very different stories: the Mesopotamians, Egyptians and Canaanites. Each of these exalted the serpent in one way or another. The serpent with its ability to shed its skin was a symbol of life and fertility. The Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh records its namesake's quest for the Tree of Life; he found it but fell asleep and it was eaten by a snake which thus acquired eternal life. In Egypt, the serpent was a symbol of authority and protection: the cobra head or uraeus worn on the headpiece of the Pharaoh was his symbol of rule, and indicated he was under the protection of the patron goddess of Egypt. In Canaanite mythology the serpent Nahash was one of many powerful supernatural creatures, several of which make appearances in the Bible, including Leviathan the dragon and Tannin the sea monster. But God is effortlessly sovereign over these monsters. In Canaanite temples the snake was a fertility symbol. Genesis 3 is a polemic against all these world-views. What the world saw as good, conveying fertility, power, authority, healing, God sees as evil. Life does not lie in this direction.

Though the serpent here is described as crafty, he is still one of the animals which God has made. Though Satan has power, he is under the sovereignty of God.

Though this serpent is a creature in God's world, he quickly shows that he is opposed to God's purposes. Since he is the manifestation of the adversary, his purpose is to oppose God. He does so by engaging the woman in a conversation about God, talking about him behind his back, as it were.

> **He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (3:1b)**

God really had spoken in the garden, but what he had said was not at all what the serpent said. God had said that the man could freely eat of any tree except one. Furthermore, it was not simply God who had said this; it was the Lord God who had told the man so. The narrator has been consistent and deliberate in using the name "the Lord God" in this account (2:4–3:22). "God" is God's title: he is God, everything else is not. "The Lord," which represents the Hebrew name Yahweh, is his personal name, known by those with whom he is in covenant relationship. It is the Lord God who has made the wild animals; they are under the umbrella of his covenant relationship with all creation. But the serpent refuses to acknowledge him as "Lord God." The serpent refuses to know the Lord, knowledge of whom is the beginning of wisdom. Not content to be himself out of relationship with the Lord, he spreads this lack of knowledge to the woman, as shown by her reply:

> **The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.' " (3:2-3)**

The man has presumably repeated to the woman the instructions that the Lord God had given him. But she makes several changes in what she passes on to the serpent. Three are worth noting. She now sees the Lord God as simply God: she has lost sight of the fact that she is in relationship with him; instead he is now some remote deity. Secondly, she waters down the intensity of the Lord's command. He didn't say simply, "You may eat," but, "You may freely eat": it's an emphatic construction in Hebrew. He didn't say, "You will die," but, "You will surely die"—the same emphatic construction. The Lord was emphatic about both the freedom to eat and the consequences of disobedience. Thirdly, the woman does intensify part of the command, extending it to not touching the tree. But the emphasis is in the wrong place; this makes the Lord's command seem more restrictive that it actually is.

This inability of the woman to respond with the Lord's actual command opens the door for the serpent to close in for the kill:

> **"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (3:4-5)**

Now the serpent adds the emphasis "certainly die" that was missing from the woman's response, but he does so in a way that directly contradicts God's word. The Lord had said, "You will certainly die"; the serpent says, "You will not certainly die." The serpent's final step is to throw out a lure, just like an angler trying to entice a fish to bite. In front of the woman he dangles the reward that will come from eating the fruit. The reward is great: the woman will find her eyes opened, she will know good and evil, and she will thereby be like God.

What has the serpent done? The serpent, who has no relationship with the Lord God, has distracted the woman from her relationship with the Lord, so that she sees him as simply God. He is now a remote deity who does not have her best interests at heart. It is then but a short step to accept the serpent's argument that God is withholding something from her.

Secondly, the serpent has distracted the woman from the Lord's bountiful provision and focused her attention on the one thing forbidden. God had placed the man and woman in paradise, the best place on earth. Here he had provided them with not just the minimum required for life, but with a great bounty for a full and abundant life. It was all very good: thousands of things were permitted, and only one thing forbidden. Not only were the good things permitted, they were actively encouraged; God wanted the man and the woman to enjoy life. But the serpent focuses the woman's attention on the one thing denied until she loses sight of everything else. She sees her environment not as a land of bounty but as a land of deprivation. Next the serpent persuades the woman that she needs to have this one thing now, that she owes it to herself to take it now to make herself more complete, to achieve her full potential. God is denying her this one thing because he doesn't want her to attain to her full womanhood. Finally, the serpent persuades the woman to evaluate the fruit through her eyes rather than through her ears. Her eye sees that the fruit is good, but her ear is closed to the Lord's declaration that the eating of it is not good. The woman has no need of the knowledge of good and evil. She already knows what is good:

that which God has declared in his word. She has no need of what the serpent dangles in front of her.

Perhaps you recognize some similarity with modern advertising. With our attention distracted from all that we already have, we are told there is one more thing we need, we need it now, and we owe it to ourselves to make us more complete. We deserve it and anyone who might suggest otherwise does not have our best interests at heart. Though a little voice of reason whispers in our ear not to take, our eyes are overwhelmed with the advertising images. We look… and we take.

The methods used by the serpent against the woman are the same as those used by Satan today. He seeks to distract us from the Lord and from the bountiful provision he has given us to enjoy. He focuses our attention on the one thing forbidden. When we understand this anatomy of temptation, then we can plot a course of defense—what the Puritan Thomas Brooks called "precious remedies against Satan's devices." We remind ourselves that we are in relationship with the Lord who really does care about us. We remind ourselves of all that he has already provided. We resist the urge to live only in the "now." We live by faith in God's word not by our own sight.

The serpent's work is done. He has penetrated the woman's defences. Her moral and spiritual collapse is quick and complete:

> **When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. (3:6)**

The woman made a three-fold evaluation of the fruit. On the first two counts, that it was good for food and pleasing to the eye, the Lord God was in full agreement. We were told that all the trees that he caused to sprout in the garden were pleasing to the eye and good for food (2:8). This presumably included the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But that didn't permit the eating of the fruit of this tree. There was nothing in the tree itself to render it inadvisable to eat; it was not a magical tree. The non-permissibility of the tree's fruit lay in God's command not in the tree itself. The man and woman were to refrain from eating the fruit not because of the fruit but because of their delight in God and his word.

The woman's third evaluation, that the fruit of this tree was desirable for gaining wisdom, had no counterpart in God's evaluation. But by this point, the woman was not interested in the Lord's evaluation. The serpent had so distracted her from the Lord God that she made her own evaluation. She saw what was good and she took. She forgot what the Lord had declared to be good. She acted in moral autonomy, setting herself up as God. God is able to declare what is good and what is not good; he has the authority to do so because he has made all things. The woman did not have that authority, nor did she have any need for it. Herein is the heart of sin: the woman decided what was right in her eyes, ignoring what God had said was right in his eyes. The Lord wanted her to live by faith in his word; the serpent wanted her to live by sight.

The woman saw that it was good and she took. Every subsequent sin has been but a variation on that theme. Sin is self-centeredness, what Augustine called *incurvatus in se*, a curving in on oneself. Losing sight of the Lord who calls us into relationship with himself, we see him as simply God whom we can hold at a distance while we turn inwards on ourselves to satisfy our own desires.

Where has the man been while the serpent and the woman have been discussing God? He has been absent from the text, but in verse 6 we find that he is with the woman. He has presumably been there all along, but he has been passive and silent. The Lord had commissioned him to guard the garden sanctuary. As soon as he heard the serpent abusing and misusing God's word he should have stepped in to guard the sanctity of this sanctuary by silencing the serpent. But he was passive, and so he willingly ate when the woman passed the fruit to him.

The final verse shows us the initial consequences of their actions:

> **Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (3:7)**

The serpent was right: when they ate the fruit their eyes were opened. The serpent had promised that this would give them new knowledge. This knowledge of good and evil would liberate them to be like God. Again, he was right, but only partly so. They did gain new knowledge, but far from liberating this knowledge was terrifying. They now knew good and evil, but this is a knowledge God never intended them to have. They already knew the good: it was what God had declared to be good. In simple faith in God's declaration lay their freedom, security and enjoyment. Now they knew good and evil not as what God declared to be good but as what they determined to be good. Their perception of everything in the world changed. They had been naked all along and thought nothing of it. Now they knew that they were naked, but this newfound self-knowledge inflicted shame and fear. Rather than walking tall in their liberation they crouched in terror, hiding from one another and from God.

Why did God allow this to happen? What was his purpose? He had created the man and the woman with appetites, and he provided everything necessary for the satisfaction of those appetites. He gave the man a simple command to keep. It was not an onerous command. The keeping of it was heavily stacked in the man's favor: he was surrounded by abundance which he could enjoy. God commissioned him to serve him. As God's servant he was to delight in doing God's word, not because it seemed good in his own determination, but because it was said by God. Delight in God's word was delight in God himself. Fulfilment came in being God-focused.

God allowed the serpent to approach the woman. He did not intervene with either the woman or the man, though he could clearly have done so. It is usually understood that God had put the man on probation. He was testing him to prove his faithfulness. In English we have different words for what we consider to be two very different concepts: testing and temptation. But both Hebrew and Greek use the same word to cover both activities. Testing and temptation are the opposite sides of the same coin. The issue before the woman was the same: would she heed God's word? On this God and the serpent were agreed. But they wanted opposite outcomes: the serpent wanted the woman to fail, God wanted her to succeed. We call the serpent's activity temptation and God's activity testing.

The man and the woman failed the test, succumbing to the temptation. But God sent a second Adam to undo the work of the first. Immediately after his baptism by the prophet John and the descent of the Spirit which commissioned him to ministry, Jesus went into the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by Satan (Matt 4:1-11). But it was God's Spirit who drove him into the wilderness, for God was testing him. Three times Satan spoke to Jesus, each time

using God's word to offer him something now: he could have food now, protection now, power now. But Satan was misusing God's word. Each time Jesus responded by quoting God's word from Deuteronomy. He refused to be enticed by the present attractions offered by Satan. He refused to put himself at the center of the universe. Instead he lived by faith in God's word; he remained God-focused. Thereby he resisted Satan's temptation and passed God's test. Adam was tried and found wanting. Jesus was tried and found proven. And now God extends to us the victory which Christ has won. He extends to us the possibility of walking in the footsteps of the second Adam not the first Adam.

God has created us with appetites, and he wants to satisfy those appetites. Walking with God and following Christ does not require the suppression of appetites. It is Buddhism that calls for the negation of desire. Walking with God entails the conversion of our appetites from ones driven by sight to ones driven by faith, from ones focused on self to ones focused on God.

Following Christ does not render us immune to temptations. God allows us to face temptations because he is at work testing us. He tests us so that we might grow in our faith, in our reliance upon him, and in our satisfaction in him. Because he wants us to pass he gives us the resources necessary to do so. He has put his Spirit inside us. As the Spirit works within us, renewing us in God's image in Christ, our desires are increasingly weaned away from merely physical appetites and onto an appetite for God. Our self-centeredness is converted into an increasing God-centeredness.

When we fail, as surely we will, we have an intercessor who understands us, even the Lord Jesus Christ:

> **For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tested in every way as we are, yet without sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb 4:15-16)**

Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. God wants us to be deeply satisfied. The only way we will be deeply satisfied is to be satisfied in God himself. God is at work through Christ and his Spirit to rescue us from the tragedy of Genesis 3.

> *To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)*

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FACING GOD

Catalog No. 1572
Genesis 3:7-13
Tenth Message
Bernard Bell
January 18, 2009

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

I heard from several people after last week's sermon about temptation and sin. One of you wrote, "I listened attentively to your sermon today and have a small question. What happens once your 'eyes have been opened'?" That's not a small question! She continued, "What does the Lord provide when one's eyes have already been opened?" This person speaks for all of us, for we have all followed in the footsteps of the first man and woman. All of us have had our eyes opened to the knowledge of good and evil. For the next four weeks we'll look at what happens in the immediate aftermath of the first sin, at what happens when the eyes of the first couple have been opened. We'll look at the responses of the man and the woman, and, more importantly, the response of God.

Last week we saw the woman succumb to the serpent's temptation. Yielding to his lies and half-truths, her world collapsed in on herself. She forgot God and thought only of self. She forgot all that she had and saw only what she did not have. In this self-focused frame of mind, she herself decided what was good. She saw that the fruit was good and she took.

As soon as the man and woman ate the fruit their world changed:

> **Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (Gen 3:7 TNIV)**

An observer, had he been present, would have seen no change in their environment. The garden remained the same, filled with the same trees. The man and the woman looked the same on the outside. The change was in their internal world not their external world. Though their external world remained the same, now they saw it differently because now they were looking through new eyes. Their eyes had been opened, just as the serpent had promised. But far from this being a liberating experience they found it to be terrifying. Their perception of their world had radically changed.

Their eyes were opened to a new consciousness of self, of one another and of God. It was not a pleasant experience. Just a few verses before they had been at peace with themselves, with each other and with God. Now they found they couldn't live with themselves, with each other or with God. As they looked at themselves and at one another they now knew that they were naked. They had been naked all their lives but had thought nothing of it. They must have known, in a sense, that they were naked, but that knowledge conferred no shame. Their new-found knowledge did confer shame. Shame is "the painful feeling arising from the consciousness of something improper done by oneself or another."[1] There was a silver lining to their shame, for it showed that they had a conscience. Their consciences were given them by God to prod them, to show them that they had done evil. They now had the knowledge of good and evil, but they knew it from the wrong side. They knew it from the side of evil. Their shame showed that they knew they had done evil. It also showed their inability to handle this new-found knowledge. They were unable to handle it because they had not been created for it. How were they now to deal with their shame? How were they to assuage their troubled consciences? The next few verses show that they tried three remedies.

First, they tried to deal with their shame before one another. They hid themselves from one another among the leaves of the garden, sewing fig leaves into skimpy coverings. In their self-consciousness they were each ashamed to allow the other to see themselves as they really were.

Next they hid from God among the trees of the garden:

> **Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (3:8)**

What they heard was not a new sound; they had heard it before. It was only God moving around in his garden. It was, after all, his garden, his sanctuary on earth. God was taking a stroll through his park, just as we might take a stroll in the evening. There was nothing unusual in this: he did it every day. But what the man and woman had formerly found unremarkable, a normal feature of every day life, they now found terrifying. Already ashamed of themselves and of one another they now found themselves ashamed of God's presence, even at a distance. Unable to bear facing God they hid among the trees. This was, of course, ludicrous. How could they possibly hide from God? That they even tried shows their desperation, shows how troubled were their consciences. They had been created for fellowship with God. He had conversed with the man in the garden. They had been made for his presence, but now they could not abide that presence. They couldn't bear to feel him in their lives. His presence, which should have put a spring in their step, was now an oppressive weight. The problem was that they had accepted the wrong presence. They had had no trouble with the presence of the serpent; as a result they could not now abide the presence of God. They had listened to the wrong voice. The woman had listened to the voice of the serpent; the man had listened to the voice of the woman. As a result they could no longer bear to hear the voice of God. They didn't want to see God and they didn't want to be seen by God. And so they hid.

But there is hope. Notice that it is the LORD God who was walking in the garden. The serpent did not know God as the LORD, his personal name Yahweh by which he is known to those in relationship with him. The serpent had rejected relationship with the LORD, and so knew him only as God. He had deceived the woman into seeing him only as God, no longer as the LORD. But the narrator knows that it is the LORD God who was walking in the garden. Though the serpent, the woman and the man no longer knew him as such, he still remained the LORD. He is not a distant creator, but a relational God. Though the man and the woman had bought into the serpent's lie of dismissing God as the LORD, the LORD had not dismissed them. Though they were hiding from him, he came after them. He did not allow them to stay hidden.

But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" (3:9)

With the question, "Where are you?" the Lord God summoned the man into his presence. It is the briefest of questions: a single word in Hebrew. But it is one of the most urgent questions, then and now. The Lord didn't need to ask the question for his own sake. Since he is God he already knew exactly where Adam was. But Adam needed to be asked the question. What would Adam do with this question? Would he allow himself to be found? Would he accept that God was still the Lord who was inviting him to return to relationship with himself? Would he accept the invitation to confess his sin? Would he accept the invitation back into the Lord's presence?

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." (3:10)

Adam was honest in his reply, confessing that he was hiding from God. But it was a partial honesty. He confessed to being afraid of God's presence, but he didn't confess why this now provoked fear. He confessed to being afraid of being naked in God's presence, but he had always been naked in God's presence. He had never been afraid of God's presence before. Summoned to give an account for himself, he was back in God's presence but unable to enjoy that presence. He was unable to admit what he had done.

The Lord God did not give up on the man. He continued to pursue him, asking two more questions:

And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" (3:11)

Again, the Lord didn't need to ask these questions for his own sake. He knew full well what the man had done. He asked these for the man's sake, giving him further opportunity to confess. But the man refused to avail himself, instead adopting a third method of dealing with his shame. He had already hidden from himself and his wife among the leaves of the garden. He had hidden from God among the trees of the garden. Now he hid from responsibility by passing the blame:

The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." (3:12)

The man was again partly honest. He had eaten the fruit of the tree, but he confessed this in such a way as to absolve himself of all responsibility. How could he be responsible? It was the woman who did it! And it was God who did it, because he put the woman there! It's as if the man were saying to God, "I didn't ask for her. She's yours not mine. Look at what she's done. It's her fault, and she's your fault." And so the man claimed the time-honored status of victim.

When the man ducked responsibility by passing the blame the Lord declined to question him any further, and turned to the woman:

Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (3:13)

The woman followed the lead of her husband. She, too, claimed the status of victim. While admitting that she had eaten, she, too, refused to take responsibility for her actions. The man blamed the woman, the woman blamed the serpent, and the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on. Yet, by passing the blame, the woman had continued to cede leadership to the serpent and the man had continued to cede leadership to the woman, and implicitly to the serpent above her. Though the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on, he was at the top of the pile.

In the space of just a few verses the created order has been turned on its head. The Lord God had settled the man in the garden to serve and to guard. To assist him he had provided the woman. As God's designated ruler and steward he had authority over the earth and its inhabitants. He was to listen to the Lord's voice, and the woman was to listen to his voice as he passed to her the command the Lord had given him. Instead, the order was stood on its head. The woman listened to the serpent, and the man listened to the woman. This reversal of order is indicated by the narrator in a subtle way. We are introduced to the characters in their correct order, in their pecking order as it were: the man (2:7), the woman (2:22), the serpent (3:1). Their rebellion happens in the reverse order: the serpent, the woman, the man. Leadership in sin happens from the bottom up as the man fails his duty to guard and the woman fails her duty to help him. The Lord corrects the order, speaking to the man, then the woman, then the serpent. He offers the man the opportunity to resume leadership in accepting responsibility for his actions. But by taking the role of victim the man accepts his position at the bottom of the pile; he places himself under the woman, and the woman places herself under the serpent. In the next six verses (14-19), which we'll look at in the next two weeks, we'll see that the Lord reverses the order again. He does not give the serpent a voice, but passes directly to judgment upon him, then upon the woman, and finally upon the man. The Lord will act to restore the proper order.

In the meantime I want to explore what the man and the woman should have done. The man and the woman hid from each other because they were ashamed of self. They hid from God because they were afraid of his presence. They hid from responsibility because they were ashamed of guilt. The serpent had promised them knowledge. They did obtain knowledge but it was not the knowledge they needed. To correctly handle this knowledge they needed to know two very important things: they needed to know themselves and they needed to know God. More specifically, they needed to know how bad they now were and how good God remained. It is the same for us today. We need what has been termed the double knowledge: knowledge of self and knowledge of God. Only with this knowledge can we face God. Here's how John Calvin begins his *Institutes*:

> Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern… [T]he knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.[2]

What the first couple needed to know, and what we need to know today, is that God forgives sin. Indeed the forgiveness of sin is a fundamental aspect of his character wherein he reveals his glory and power. The man and the woman were too ashamed and terrified to come into God's presence in their sin, but therein lay their hope. Coming humbly in confession and repentance they would have found a God who forgives.

Much later, God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt. He brought them to Sinai where he entered into covenant with them: to be their God, to take them for his people, and to dwell with them. He gave them his commandments, his Torah. When he sealed his covenant with his people, they said, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey" (Exod 24:7). Their confidence was misplaced

for within just forty days they were worshiping the golden calf. This provoked God's anger: he said to Moses, "Stand aside while I wipe them out, then I'll begin again with you." Moses had the audacity to plead with God, urging him to remember his promises to Abraham, urging him to relent from the disaster he was about to bring on his people. The Lord did relent from bringing this disaster (Exod 32:10-14). That word "relented" is one of the more difficult words of the Hebrew Bible to translate, but it's a most important word. It is variously translated as *change one's mind, relent, repent, take pity, be grieved*. We are uncomfortable with the idea of God changing his mind, but our life depends upon it.

In the next chapter, Moses made a request of the Lord:

"If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people." (Exod 33:13)

When the Lord agreed to do so, Moses made a further request:

"Now show me your glory."

And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence." (33:18-19)

This is one of the high points of the Old Testament. The Lord is about to reveal his glory to Moses, to reveal what it means to be the Lord. What would you expect the Lord to proclaim about himself? His holiness? His awesome power? He hid Moses in a cleft of the rock.

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands [of generations], and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished…" (34:6-7)

That's who the Lord is. His love is overflowing, not because of his people's faithfulness, but because of his faithfulness. He's a God who forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin. I think this took Moses completely by surprise, as shown by his response:

Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. (34:8)

Moses knew that this was Israel's only hope. Her only hope was to have a God who forgives sin, a God who relents of bringing the disaster he has pronounced upon his people. Our only hope is to have a God like this.

Less than a year later Israel was again in deep trouble. The people had moved on from Sinai and were on the edge of the Promised Land. They sent in twelve spies to scope out the land. But when they brought back a report of the strength of the inhabitants, the people were afraid and rebelled against the Lord and Moses. The Lord again told Moses to stand aside while he wiped the people out after which he would begin again with him. Again Moses urged the Lord to relent. But now he had an extra argument:

"Now may the Lord's strength be displayed, just as you have declared: 'The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion…' In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now."

The Lord replied, "I have forgiven them, as you asked." (Num 14:17-20)

Again the Lord relented of the disaster he was about to inflict on his people. Thereby he showed his great strength, not weakness.

This self-characterization of the Lord as the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin became a rock for the faithful within Israel. Repeatedly the prophets urged the people to throw themselves upon the Lord's mercy. Joel, for example, pleaded:

"Even now," declares the Lord,
"return to me with all your heart…"
Rend your heart
and not your garments.
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity.
Who knows? He may turn and relent
and leave behind a blessing. (Joel 2:12-14)

Isaiah invited God's people:

"Come now, let us reason together,"
says the Lord.
"Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool." (Isa 1:18)

But the people persisted in shutting their ears. More typical of their attitude was what Jeremiah twice said of the people of Judah:

Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct?
No, they have no shame at all;
they do not even know how to blush. (Jer 6:15; 8:12)

Nevertheless Jeremiah saw that the Lord would bring a day when his people would wake up to their sin. On that day they would say,

"After I strayed,
I repented;
after I came to understand,
I beat my breast.
I was ashamed and humiliated
because I bore the disgrace of my youth." (Jer 31:19)

To which the Lord's response would be,

"Is not Ephraim my dear son,
the child in whom I delight?
Though I often speak against him,
I still remember him.
Therefore my heart yearns for him;
I have great compassion for him,"
declares the Lord. (Jer 31:20)

When the people of Israel and Judah would come to realize how bad they were, they would realize how much God still loved them.

This comes to fruition in the New Testament when that day arrives. The early chapters of Acts record the first preaching of the gospel after Pentecost. Again and again Peter proclaims, "This Jesus, whom you killed, God has raised up to life. Therefore repent and find in Jesus Christ the forgiveness of sins." This unholy alliance of Jew and Gentile had done the most heinous thing imaginable, executing God's son. Yet still God abounded in love; still he was willing to forgive. And he still is, for it is God's glory and strength to forgive sin.

Adam did not understand this about God. Though the Lord had not yet revealed himself as a forgiving God, the man would presumably have found forgiveness had he confessed his sin, had he thrown himself upon the mercy of God. The Lord has now revealed himself as a God whose glory and strength is to forgive sin, transgressions and iniquity. How much more reason for people today to throw themselves upon God's mercy.

The man and the woman made their excuses, but they never asked God for mercy. God doesn't forgive the excusable. He forgives the inexcusable. That's mercy. In his address "On Forgiveness" C. S. Lewis said,

> I find that when I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality (unless I watch myself very carefully) asking Him to do something quite different. I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing… If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites… we shall go away imagining that we have repented and been forgiven when all that has really happened is that we have satisfied ourselves with our own excuses. They may be very bad excuses; we are all too easily satisfied about ourselves… All the real excusing He will do. What we have got to take to Him is the inexcusable bit, the sin.[3]

My correspondent asked, "What happens once our eyes have been opened?" Once our eyes have been opened and we have grasped the knowledge of good and evil, we are sinners in the hands of an angry God. But when we confess our inexcusable behavior and throw ourselves on God's mercy in the name of Jesus we find that God is abounding in love and forgiveness. The further question was, "What does the Lord provide when one's eyes have already been opened?" by which was meant, "What happens when we have already experienced the Lord's forgiveness and still we sin?" Again we confess our inexcusable behavior, throw ourselves on God's mercy in the name of Jesus, and find him to be abounding in love and forgiveness. Moses interceded for God's people, asking God to forgive them. We have a greater than Moses interceding for us, even the Lord Jesus Christ. As we sang earlier, "Thy mercy is more than a match for my heart."[4] For he is

> **The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.**

Blessed are those
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed are those
whose sin the Lord does not count against them. (Ps 32:1-2)

1. "shame." *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* at dictionary.com.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), §1.1.1, 35-37.

3. C. S. Lewis, "On Forgiveness" (1947), in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 178-180.

4. John Stocker, *Thy Mercy, My God, Is the Theme of My Song* (1776).

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THE DAWN OF WORLD REDEMPTION

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Genesis 3:14-15
Eleventh Message
Bernard Bell
January 25, 2009

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

One of my favorite radio programs is *Forum* on KQED. I rarely hear a whole show; I usually catch snippets as I'm driving around, resulting in many of what NPR calls "driveway moments." I happened to listen in half-way through Friday's second hour. Dave Iverson was hosting a program entitled "How We Decide" under the tag line "How did the US Airways pilot decide so quickly to land his disabled plane in the Hudson River?" My attention was grabbed by a comment by one of the guests, Zachary Shore, author of *Blunder: Why Smart People Make Bad Decisions*. He said, "The ability to admit mistakes is essential." This was contradicted by a strip in the comics section of yesterday's paper. I happened to notice Wiley Miller's strip *Non Sequitur*: Danae, the little girl, had set up her booth offering, "History revised while-u-wait: Learn why nothing was my fault."

Intellectually we might know that Zachary Shore is right, but existentially we tend to side with Danae. We know in theory that admitting our mistakes is the right thing to do, but we find it incredibly hard to actually do so. This was certainly true of the first man and woman, as we saw last week. They evaded responsibility, claiming, "Nothing was my fault." Lest we be too hard on them, we're all in the same boat. It is very hard for us to admit our mistakes, to admit our sin. The question now is how would God respond to this evasion of responsibility, this inability to come clean and ask for forgiveness.

The narrator has directed our attention back and forth across the man, the woman and the serpent. He introduced us to them in their order within creation: the man, the woman and the serpent. The man was to heed God's voice in the instructions given him. The woman was to heed the man's voice as he passed those instructions along to her. As ruler over the earth and guardian of the garden, the man had authority over every living creature on earth, with the woman as his equal helper. But the order was turned on its head. Sin and rebellion happened from the bottom up: first the serpent, then the woman, and finally the man. The woman heeded the serpent's voice and the man heeded the woman's voice. God questioned them in the reverse of this reversed order, i.e., in the correct order, starting with the man, then the woman. He gave them the opportunity to admit their mistakes, but they refused to do so. The man blamed the woman and the woman blamed the serpent, thereby showing their acceptance of this upside-down order. By evading responsibility the man accepted his place under the woman, and the woman accepted her place under the serpent.

The man and the woman were in a state of fear and shame: of self, of each other, of God, and of responsibility. By refusing to take responsibility and admit their mistakes, they were rejecting the offer of the only one who could help them. What would God do with their rejection? What would God do with this situation where the man and woman so clearly needed to be helped yet refused help? God's questioning of them had gotten nowhere other than clarifying the depth of the problem with the man and the woman. Yet through it all God remained the LORD God, the LORD who pursues relationship.

The LORD asked three questions of the man and one of the woman. He gave the man and the woman each a voice, but they squandered the gift. They used their voice only to evade responsibility and pass blame. Though they stood before the LORD God, they continued to hide in their shame and fear. The LORD God treated their evasions with silence, signaling his non-acceptance of their arguments. Without asking the serpent any questions he turned to judgment. With all three offenders now in front of him he assumed the role of Judge. He alone could pronounce judgment because he was the Creator. He was the one sinned against. He delivered his judgment in the reverse order: first on the serpent, then on the woman, and finally on the man. Today we'll look at his judgment on the serpent (3:14-15). Next time we'll look at his judgment on the woman and the man (3:16-19).

So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,

"Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!
You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.
And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel." (Gen 3:14-15 TNIV)

The LORD had questioned the man and the woman but he does not question the serpent. He gives the serpent no opportunity to speak; he deprives him of a voice, giving evil no opportunity to explain itself. The LORD had no wish to hear the voice of the serpent, whereas he had wanted to hear the voice of the man and the woman. Instead he launched straight into judgment upon the serpent, first assigning blame: "Because you have done this." The evil power masquerading as the serpent is given no opportunity to evade responsibility, but is immediately condemned. God's first words of judgment carry a weighty solemnity and finality: "Cursed are you." "Curse" is a jarring word in a book that has hitherto been about blessing. God had created the world in a state of blessing. On the fifth day he blessed the first living creatures. On the sixth day he blessed the humans. On the seventh day he blessed that day itself. To bless means to endow with potency for an abundant and successful life. Because God is the creator, it is in his gift to grant this potency. I find it helpful to think of blessing as an arrow signifying a forward-moving trajectory in life. God endowed his creation with abundant life, so that it would successfully fulfill the purposes for which he created it.

Curse is the opposite of bless, meaning to deprive of abundant life. Where "bless" is a forward moving arrow, "curse" is a line with

a dead-end. By cursing the serpent God consigns him to frustration and futility. It is not simply the serpent that God is cursing; he is cursing the evil powers that are working through the serpent. The serpent is the tool and representative of an evil power which the New Testament unambiguously identifies as Satan. The Bible gives us very little information about the origins of evil, but tells us much about what God is doing about evil. This is the information we really need to know. It might satisfy our curiosity to know the origins of evil and of Satan, but what we really need to know is what God is doing about them. This is what the Bible gives us, beginning in this verse.

God makes no attempt to redeem the serpent, Satan or evil, whereas he does make considerable effort to redeem humanity. Instead, God moves straight to judgment upon evil. By cursing the serpent God announces that he will frustrate evil; he will not allow evil to be successful. He will frustrate all Satan's attempts to oppose his purposes. But God does not immediately remove evil from the world. He certainly had the power, the authority and the justification to do so. It would have spared the world a lot of trouble had he done so. But had he done so, he would have had to remove humanity, for humanity had been seduced into evil. In just a few more chapters evil will become so extensive that God will remove almost all humanity, but he only tries this solution once. God allows evil to continue, but does not allow evil to get the upper hand. There are many things about evil which I do not understand. I must be content to leave them hidden within the inscrutable purposes of God. What the Bible does show me clearly is what God is doing about evil. As the hymn says, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform." There have been many times when it seems that evil has gained the upper hand, but God is always at work frustrating evil. That same hymn continues, "Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his works in vain." It is with the eye of faith that I have to look at the world, seeing not the evil that seems so often ascendant, but God who is at work behind the scenes overturning evil with good.

Cursing the serpent consigns evil and Satan to a dead end in history. But God allows them to continue in existence up until that dead end. That dead end will be a long time coming. Pronounced here in the third chapter of Scripture, it is not reached until the third last chapter of Scripture. In Revelation 20 God throws Satan, portrayed as the dragon, the ancient serpent, into the lake of fire, the place of eternal judgment, where he is removed from having any effect upon the earth. Once all evil is removed from the earth, the earth can then be joined with heaven into a holy cosmos, as we see in the last two chapters of the Bible. Revelation 20 still lies in the future. In the meantime God allows Satan to operate in his cosmos, but Satan operates under the curse. It's as if God has Satan on a chain; indeed the New Testament portrays him as bound in chains. God does allow Satan freedom but it's a freedom within limits. God allows Satan to continue to oppose his purposes, but God constantly frustrates those efforts. Satan is never portrayed as an equal and opposite power to God. He is always subject to God's sovereignty, and under God's sovereignty he is cursed, subject to futility and frustration.

This humiliation of evil is symbolically pronounced in the second half of verse 14. God consigns the serpent to a life of eating dust and crawling on his belly. These metaphors had the same meaning then as they do now: humiliation. The Bible suggests in a few places that Satan's sin was pride and a grasping for what he did not have, namely equality with God. Instead of achieving that higher status he is humiliated, cast down into the dust. Though he will continue to grasp he will fail for God has cursed him, consigning him to humiliation. The naked eye will not always be able to see this, for often it seems that evil is triumphant, but the eye of faith sees God triumphant over all Satan's evil designs.

Verse 15 elaborates on this humiliation of evil to glimpse its defeat. Surprisingly, evil will be defeated at the hands of humanity. How is this possible since humanity has aligned itself with evil? It will require divine intervention to impose enmity between the woman and the serpent. God had created humanity for relationship with himself. He had placed the man and the woman in the garden that he might commune with them on earth. But the serpent had persuaded the woman that God was the enemy, withholding from her the knowledge of good and evil, withholding from her the opportunity to attain her full potential. Through his deceptive words the serpent had insinuated himself into the woman's friendship. The man, entrusted with guarding the garden, should have recognized the assault and defended both his helper and the garden. His failure allowed the redrawing of the boundary lines. Instead of acting to impose a boundary between the woman and the serpent, he allowed the serpent to impose a boundary between the woman and God. Instead of acting to maintain friendship with God he allowed the serpent to pose as the friend. The redrawn boundary was solidified by the failure of the man and the woman to accept responsibility. The man's transfer of blame to the woman and the woman's transfer of blame to the serpent did nothing to redress the situation. They both implicitly admitted that they had taken their lead from the serpent. Classifying themselves as victims implied that they would continue to be hostage to the serpent, that they would continue to be under the power of evil. But God was not content with this situation, for it frustrated the purposes for which he had created humanity. He would not allow the present situation to continue, with the woman perceiving the serpent as her friend and God as her enemy. It would take divine intervention to redraw the lines, for the man and the woman had shown themselves incapable of doing so. Here as elsewhere divine initiative is essential if there is to be any hope.

God would also extend this enmity to cover future generations: "between your offspring and hers," that is between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring. There is both good and bad news here: both the woman and the serpent will have seed or offspring. The man and the woman have rebelled against God, yet God does not terminate the human race with them. Though death has entered the world through the disobedience of the first couple, God promises that life will continue. The woman will have seed and propagate the human race. This is grace indeed. That's the good news. But the serpent will also have seed or offspring. This doesn't mean broods of little snakes, or even hordes of demons, but humans who are under the control of Satan just as the serpent is. In generations to come people will be deceived into walking in the serpent's way of life, living life under the control of Satan and his evil powers. There will thus be two lines: a line in whom Satan is at work and a line in whom God is at work.

This enmity will ultimately result in a showdown not between the two seeds but between the woman's seed and the serpent itself, that is Satan. Both will be wounded but in different ways. Though TNIV uses different verbs, they are the same in Hebrew, but their target is different. The serpentine evil will wound the woman's seed on the heel, but will itself be wounded on the head. Evil will be crushed underfoot.

Genesis 3:14-15 marks the dawn of world redemption. Verse 15 is often described as the *protoevangelium*, the first gospel. We read these

verses with the benefit of the New Testament. We know how the story plays out in the person of Jesus Christ. The author of Genesis didn't have the benefit of the New Testament; he didn't know how the story would play out. But he knew that evil would be defeated through the seed of the woman, at the end of a long story of enmity between two lines of humanity.

The rest of the Bible is the outworking of these two verses, tracing both the enmity between the two lines and the generation of the woman's seed. Five times in the rest of this series on Genesis 1–11 we'll encounter the contrast between the two lines. Again and again we are shown that there are two ways of living life: Satan's way or God's way, walking as the serpent in paths of wickedness or walking with God in paths of righteousness. This will be shown in the contrast between Cain and Abel (Gen 4), between Lamech and Enoch (Gen 4–5), between the Nephilim born to the daughters of men by the sons of God and Noah (Gen 6:1-8), between Ham and his brothers Shem and Japheth (Gen 9:20-27), and between Eber's sons Yoktan and Peleg (Gen 10:25). It's a theme that we will revisit several times. The two lines persist beyond the end of Genesis 11, all the way through the Bible.

A major theme of the book of Genesis is the development of the woman's seed or offspring; the word is used 59 times. This word *seed* or *offspring* is as ambiguous in Hebrew as in English. It can be used as a singular or as a collective; it can refer to one or many; it can refer to the next generation or to a far distant one. The Bible uses the term with this full range of flexibility and ambiguity.

The generation of this seed does not get off to a good start. In the next chapter Eve will have two children, but by verse 16 the godly son is dead, murdered by the ungodly son who, under God's curse, has exiled himself from the Lord's presence. Survival of the human race, of the woman's seed, is possible only because God graciously gives a replacement son, Seth. It gets worse: by chapter 6 God is sorry that he ever made mankind in the first place. Undoing creation in the Flood, he wipes out humanity, all save Noah and his family. After the Flood he graciously commits to never do that again, even though mankind remains desperately wicked. He will keep the world and humanity going, ensuring that the woman's offspring will continue.

With Noah's sons God begins to narrow the line. Though all Noah's descendants are the offspring of the woman, not all are the woman's offspring as envisaged in Genesis 3:15. Of Noah's sons God selects Shem, choosing to work in the Shemites. Of Shem's descendants he chooses Abraham in whom to do a new thing. This call of Abraham is where our series in Genesis 1–11 will end. God announces to aged Abraham that he will give him and his barren wife a multitude of offspring, whom he will take into covenant as his people. Henceforth the two lines will be those within and those without this covenant. Within are the children of Abraham as further narrowed through Isaac and Jacob; the people who will become Israel; the people whom he will call to know him as the Lord. Without are the Gentiles whom he allows Satan to deceive into worshiping false gods. But even in Genesis 12 God envisages the day when he will bring those outside inside, when he will bring those far off near, when he will bring the ungodly line into the godly line. He promises Abraham that in him and his offspring the Gentiles will find their blessing. By the end of Genesis God has begun to build a numerous offspring of the woman: the children of Israel. Within this offspring he has singled out the offspring of Judah for special significance. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament there are only two further developments in this theme of the seed or offspring. The offspring within the offspring, the seed within the seed, already narrowed down to Judah within Israel, is further narrowed to David's line within Judah. Secondly, it becomes increasingly clear that though all Israel has been called into covenant with God, only a small minority actually walk with God; the majority walk in the way of wickedness. Though physically the offspring of Abraham they are spiritually the offspring of the serpent.

The serpent had been told that he would be wounded in the head by the woman's seed. Satan therefore does everything he can to prevent the generation of this line. He adopts a brutal approach. He acts through Pharaoh to destroy all the baby boys born to the Hebrews in Egypt (Exod 1:22). He acts through the wicked queen Athaliah to destroy all the royal princes of Judah (2 Kgs 11:1). He acts through Herod to destroy all the baby boys born in Bethlehem (Matt 2:16). But because he is cursed all his efforts come to nothing. God frustrates his efforts by using godly members of the woman's offspring: he uses the midwives in Egypt to preserve Moses from Pharaoh. He uses Athaliah's own daughter Jehoshaba to preserve Joash from her. God even uses the pagan Magi to preserve Jesus from Herod; they are the serpent's offspring who abandon their idolatry to come and worship the true King. Try as he might there was nothing Satan could do to prevent this seed being born. And so in the fullness of time "God sent his Son, born of a woman" (Gal 4:4).

The woman's singular offspring Abraham generated a collective offspring Israel which generated a singular offspring Jesus. This Jesus went into battle against Satan. Satan opposed him, arousing the Jews and Gentiles to enter into an unholy alliance to kill this final seed. But therein lay Satan's defeat. Though Jesus was killed by humanity under the power of Satan, this was Satan's undoing. Jesus was dead; Satan had succeeded in killing the seed, even the Son of God. But Death had no claim on Jesus for he had done nothing deserving of death. For the first time there was in the grave one who did not deserve to be there. Therefore God raised him to new life, proclaiming the defeat of death, of sin, and of Satan.

Then, wonder of wonders, God extends to his enemies the gift of new life in Christ Jesus. In the Old Testament God was at work in the nation of Israel, while allowing the Gentiles to be deceived under the power of Satan. But now in Christ he extends salvation to these Gentiles also, to Jew and Gentile alike. It matters not whom you are; God extends salvation to all peoples. It is not his friends that he saves but his enemies.

Our Scripture reading was drawn from Romans 5. Christ died not for the godly but for the ungodly (Rom 5:6). This had to be so for he alone is the seed of the woman; he alone walked righteously with God. We all are the seed of the serpent, walking in unrighteousness. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Paul goes on to show how the one obedient man Jesus has undone the disaster of the one disobedient man Adam. He has undone it in a very lopsided way. The one disobedient act of Adam was enough to plunge the entire human race into condemnation and death. But the righteous act of the one man Jesus counteracts all sin, resulting in life for all.

> **For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. (Rom 5:19)**

Satan and the power of evil, already cursed to futility in Genesis 3:14, have been defeated in the crucifixion and resurrection of the

Lord Jesus Christ. But God has not yet removed Satan from the scene. He still allows Satan to operate, but within more circumspect limits than ever. He has been bound more tightly. We still await the day of his final doom, when he is removed from having any further influence on earth. In the meantime God is still at work frustrating his purposes, only much more so now than in the Old Testament. Christ is at work plundering Satan's kingdom, liberating the captives, redeeming the serpent's offspring. Transferring them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, God is adopting them as his offspring to walk with him in righteousness. There is nothing Satan can do about it. This is the power of the gospel.

In cursing the serpent God announced the humiliation of evil. But the remarkable thing is that he defeated evil through the humiliation of his own Son. Satan grasped after what was not his, and, through the serpent, seduced the woman and the man to grasp after what was not theirs, namely equality with God. Therefore God cast them out. But God's Son voluntarily gave up and did not grasp what had always been his, namely equality with God. He emptied and humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him.

In God's wisdom he allowed evil to pour itself out fully upon his Son, but it thereby exhausted itself. God has conquered evil by drawing all evil onto his Son.

What wisdom once devised the plan
Where all our sin and pride
Was placed upon the perfect Lamb
Who suffered, bled, and died?
The wisdom of a Sovereign God
Whose greatness will be shown
When those who crucified Your Son
Rejoice around Your throne.[1]

In the midst of darkness dawns world redemption. What grace and mercy that the success of this plan does not depend upon the cooperation of the first man and woman, for they were unwilling to admit their mistakes. Arising entirely from God's initiative it depends upon his love, first for his Son, then for the seed of the woman, and even for the seed of the serpent.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 9:15; 1 Cor 15:57)

1. Bob Kauflin, *The Glory of the Cross* (2002).

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THE GIFT OF PAIN

Catalog No. 1574
Genesis 3:16-19
Twelfth Message
Bernard Bell
February 8, 2009

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Last week the media reported that the FBI had reopened the case of the 1982 Tylenol poisonings. In that year seven people in the Chicago area died from taking Tylenol contaminated with cyanide. I remember that well for a couple of weeks later I arrived in this country on my first visit. The whole nation was gripped in fear. James Lewis, long considered the culprit, and the focus of the FBI's attention last week, was convicted only of trying to extort $1 million from Johnson & Johnson to "stop the killing." This crime hit the country where it hurt. Family members took Tylenol to deal with the pain of losing a loved one only to die themselves. Johnson & Johnson recalled its product at great financial pain: there were an estimated 31 million bottles in circulation, worth over $100 million. That's one bottle for every seven people in the country! Fear and hysteria brought great mental pain to the whole country. But the country recovered: tamper-proof bottles were developed, and now more Tylenol than ever is sold. Painkillers are a multi-billion dollar business, in which the United States leads the world.

America should be the happiest country on earth. It is officially founded on the "self-evident," God-given, "unalienable" right to pursue happiness. Yet there is a lot of pain in this country: physical, emotional, psychological. Despite the highest per-capita spending on health-care we rank near the bottom in the West on any measure of health. Despite massive consumption of painkillers the pain persists. Despite numerous counselors the anguish endures.

Many who have visited Third World countries on mission trips have been struck by how happy people seem, even though they live in relative poverty, with poor access to health care and no painkillers. Many of us know people who have remained remarkably joyful in the midst of great pain: they don't deny the pain, but the pain doesn't paralyze their lives. In short, there does not seem to be a direct correlation between pain, suffering and happiness.

We wish the pain would go away, but pain is valuable. It is God himself who inflicts pain upon the world. Though he does so in the context of judgment it is nevertheless a gift. That pain is a gift is a message we don't want to hear, but one we need to hear. Today I want to rehabilitate pain, not by removing it, but by showing its positive effects.

In our study of Genesis 3 we come today to God's judgment upon the woman and the man. Upon both of them he inflicts pain.

Judgment on the Woman

To the woman he said,

> **"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;**
> **with pain you will give birth to children.**
> **Your desire will be for your husband,**
> **and he will rule over you." (Gen 3:16 TNIV)**

Before we turn to what the LORD God does say to the woman, we should note two things which he does not say: he neither blames the woman nor curses her. God did blame the serpent: "Because you have done this" (3:15), and he will blame the man: "Because you listened to your wife and ate" (3:17), but he does not blame the woman. Primary responsibility for the catastrophe is placed upon the serpent, acting as Satan's agent, and upon the man.

God had cursed the serpent, subjecting him and the evil he represents to frustration and futility. Making no attempt to save him God consigned him to a dead-end in history. There is an end-point into which God will ultimately remove Satan and evil. But God does not curse either the woman or the man. Though life will not be easy for them, at this stage he does not intend that they reach a dead-end.

God's judgment upon the woman is two-fold: pain in raising children and discord in marital relations. In passing judgment upon the serpent God had announced that he would defeat evil through the woman's seed. We would expect therefore that God would facilitate the birth of this seed. Instead he hobbles the process. The procreation of children was part of God's creation purposes. When he created the man and the woman, he blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (1:28). Now, through God's grace, they will still have offspring, but it will be accompanied by much pain. Using the same sort of emphatic construction that he had used to invite the man to "freely eat" (2:16) and to warn him "you will surely die" (2:17), God tells the woman, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing." In case she misses the point, he restates it, "with pain you will give birth to children." This pain affects the whole process of generating offspring: conception, pregnancy, birth, rearing. It is not simply that such pain is a consequence of the Fall, but that God deliberately inflicts the woman with pain. The subsequent narrative of Genesis shows that this is not just physical pain but emotional pain as well. Throughout Genesis the procreation of the woman's seed is wracked by pain.

One of the greatest of these pains is barrenness. Throughout the Old Testament God is repeatedly at work overcoming that barrenness to continue the line of the woman's seed. Through his prophets he announced that the pain of barrenness would be overtaken by birth pangs. Indeed birth pangs became a metaphor for the salvation that God would bring to his barren people. Yes, God inflicts pain upon the woman but out of this pain he brings redemption.

The disruption of the woman's life extends also to her relationship with her husband: "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." What does the LORD intend by this much debated couplet? Help comes from looking at a very similar statement in the next chapter. Before Cain killed his brother Abel, the LORD asked him why he was angry:

> **"If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." (Gen 4:7)**

The last part of the two verses have identical syntax and vocabulary. To Cain he says, "to you its [sin's] desire, but you will rule it." To the woman he says, "to your husband your desire, but he will rule you." His statement to Cain is easier to understand. Sin's desire for Cain is a desire to master him. God warns Cain that he must not give way to this desire, but instead must master sin: he must resist sin's evil urges, overcoming evil with good. Cain, of course, disregards God's warning and allows sin to exercise mastery over himself. The parallel suggests that the woman's desire for her man is a desire to master him. Contrary to most English translations, we should read the second statement as adversative and imperatival: *but* he *must* master you. The husband, who has failed to exercise leadership against the serpent, and who in the next verse will be blamed for obeying his wife, must act to exercise authority. Whatever this means it is clear that the harmony of chapter 2 is seriously upset. God created man and woman as equal but complementary. The man and the woman were alike except that he was male and she was female. Within this likeness there was an order: God had made the man to work and guard the garden; he had made the woman to be his helper and companion with no secondary status implied. But now the battle of the sexes had begun. The man had failed to act as guardian as his helper and companion was seduced by the evil serpent. Instead, he had yielded to her, for which God clearly blames him not her. The implication seems to be that this first-time failure of the man establishes a precedent for the woman to follow. Awoken to the possibility for self-centered independence the woman will try to repeat the trick; her desire will be to master her husband. He must respond adversely to exercise dominion over her. The marriage relationship, out of which the seed is born, will henceforth be adversarial rather than cooperative. This, too, is borne out in Genesis, especially in the lives of the patriarchs and their womenfolk. Abraham's faithful walk with God is jeopardized by Sarah's suggestion that he bear a son through her maidservant. Ominously, "Abram listened to the voice of Sarah" (16:2), and the Middle East has been in turmoil ever since. Isaac was mastered by his scheming wife Rebekah. Jacob's body was the battleground between unloved but fertile Leah and loved but barren Rachel.

Here, too, it is surprising that God should allow his plan to defeat evil through the woman's seed to be put in jeopardy by marital discord. But in both cases—the pain of birthing and raising children and the pain of marital strife—God makes it clear that the successful birth of the seed depends not upon human cooperation but upon his supernatural superintendence of the process. No matter how much barrenness, family pain and marital discord, God will ensure the birth of the seed who will deliver the mortal blow to Satan.

Judgment on the Man

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,'

"Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return." (3:17-19)

Again, God does not curse the man: he does not intend for the man to reach a dead-end. But just as he disrupted the woman's world, so he disrupts the man's world. Just as he inflicted pain on the woman, so he inflicts pain upon the man, but in a different arena: that of his work.

Though God had put the man in the garden to work it, this work was not toil, nor was it to provide his food. It was his service within the Lord's sanctuary. Here God provided his food: the trees from which he could freely eat. Because the man heeded the voice of his wife rather than the voice of God, because he ate of the one forbidden fruit instead of enjoying the great bounty of God's provision, he loses access to that voice and that provision. Shortly God will expel him from the garden to work the ground (3:23). Henceforth he will have to work for his own food. Just as God hobbled the procreation of human offspring so he hobbles the man's work for food. God does not curse the man or the woman, but he does curse the ground which the man has to work. The ground will yield food, but only reluctantly. Hard human labor will wrestle arable crops from the ground, but its natural produce will be thorns and thistles. The man has to eat, but it will be only through painful toil that he can provide for himself. Gone are the days when he enjoyed for free the rich bounty of God's provision.

Man will experience this painful toil all the days of his life until he dies. The serpent which had assured the woman, "You will not certainly die" (3:4) was wrong. The Lord who had warned the man, "You will certainly die" (2:17) was right. Eating plunged the man and woman into spiritual death. At the end of their lives lies physical death. Death is the greatest pain of all. It is an undoing of life, a descent back into the dust from which the man was taken. Death invites the question, "Does life even matter?" If the man dies and returns to that from which he came, does his life have any meaning? Is he gone and forgotten? How can life have any meaning if death swallows it up?

Why Pain?

God inflicted the woman with pain in the realm of offspring and marital relations. He inflicted the man with pain in the realm of his sustenance and his very existence. He did not curse them, but this infliction of pain seems to be not far short of a curse. Why did God inflict pain upon both man and woman? I dismiss the idea that this was simply vindictive punishment. God's judgments generally have a silver lining. It is very important to note that God does not curse the humans. He does not consign them to the same fate as Satan: futility and frustration in the present and a dead-end in the future. He intends to defeat Satan and restore humanity to friendship with himself. And he will use pain as a tool to that end. Pain has a positive purpose: though it is given in the context of judgment it is actually a precious gift from God.

The woman will interact with her husband and bear children until the chosen seed is born, but will do so in pain. God will not allow her to find her ultimate rest and blessing in that. The man will work for his food and ultimately die, and will do so in pain, so that he never find his rest and blessing from the cursed ground. This deprivation of rest east of Eden is a gracious gift from God. It is not that God intends for the man and the woman always to live in pain.

What he does intend is that their life outside his garden sanctuary be one of pain, so that ultimately they not find their rest there.

In the rest of Genesis we see this working, albeit on a small scale. The woman had sinned by being self-focused. God uses pain to shift her focus away from self and onto himself. In the next chapter Eve names her first son Cain (*gained*), saying, "I have gained a man" (4:1). By the end of the chapter, after the pain of losing both Cain and Abel, she names her third son Seth (*set*), saying, "The Lord has set me a replacement child" (4:25). Pain has shifted her focus from self onto God.

In the contest between the unloved but fertile Leah and the loved but barren Rachel, the names they give their sons are God-focused. Out of their respective pain they cry out to God and he hears their cries. Leah names her first son Reuben (*see, a son*; sounds like "he has seen my misery"), "because the Lord has seen my misery"; and her second son Simeon (*heard*), "because the Lord heard that I am not loved." Her fourth son, the one who will bear the seed, she names Judah (*praise*), saying, "This time I will praise the Lord" (29:31-35).

A similar thing happens with the man. In chapter 5 Lamech names his son Noah (*rest*), saying, "He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord has cursed" (5:29).

Eve, Leah and Lamech show that both men and women were feeling their pain. That was good: God wanted them to feel their pain. He had afflicted humanity with pain so that they feel it, and that, feeling it, they cry out to him.

Even death, the greatest pain of all, is a gift. God does not allow man to live forever in painful toil east of Eden. But what happens to the person when he dies? Is it all over? This question becomes particularly urgent just a dozen verses later when Abel is killed by Cain (4:8). How can life have any meaning if the one on whom God looks with favor is blown away? Or is it just meaningless? Indeed, Abel's name (*Hevel*) means a puff of wind; it's the word rendered "futility" or "meaningless" in Ecclesiastes. There is a hint of hope in the genealogy of chapter 5 where, amidst the repeated refrain, "then he died," we find that Enoch, who "walked with God" "was no more, because God took him away" (5:24). Yet the other faithful people in the Old Testament who walked with God died, all except Elijah. What happened to them? It slowly becomes clear in the Old Testament that Death—also known as the Grave, the Pit, or Sheol—is not the end. God will release the righteous from Sheol in resurrection.

Pain Today

So far we have looked only at the Old Testament. What about pain today, especially for the Christian? Does God take away all our pain now that we are in Christ? It is true that Christ makes a great difference. The promised seed has been born. Through all the woman's pain and marital strife, God ensured that the seed would be born. No amount of pain or discord could prevent that. The glory for this belongs to God not to mankind. And yet, as we affirm in the Apostles' Creed, this promised son "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell." The woman brought pain upon herself because she asserted self. God allowed his Son to face incomparable pain and suffering even though he had abdicated self in self-giving love to his Father. He allowed his Son to experience the unspeakable pain of separation from his Father, to die at the hands of evil, and to enter Sheol, the realm of the dead. What would God do? Is all life meaningless? The Son's entry into Death is a far greater problem than Adam's entry into Death. But Death had no claim on this Son. God raised him from the dead, the firstfruits of those who will follow him in resurrection. At the center of God's response to evil lies the pain, suffering and death of his Son. This was not sadism on the Father's part nor masochism on the Son's part, but a subjection of the Son's will to his Father, an emptying of self that he might please the Father. The Father was well-pleased: in the resurrection he declared that life does matter.

In Christ God is reversing the effects of his judgment on the man and woman. Through this one seed God is birthing a new seed, those who are being reborn into Christ. Fractured relationships can be healed in Christ. He has set the model for what true relationships look like. The disrupted relationship of Gen 3:16 is just that: disrupted. It is not to be taken as paradigmatic of relationships in Christ. The new paradigm is given is Ephesians 5: mutual submission to one another, with the husband loving his wife self-sacrificially as Christ loves the church. Christ has set us the pattern for rule: self-sacrificial giving.

We might expect that new life in Christ would bring an end to our pain. But God seems to take a rather cavalier attitude to our pain. He doesn't seem interested in giving us a pain-free life. But he is at work using pain to accomplish his purposes both in those who acknowledge him and in those who don't. He uses pain to get our attention and to shape our character. As C. S. Lewis famously put it,

> We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities…we can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.[1]

Awoken, we cry to God. Our call to worship was Psalm 130: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." It is so often true that we have to realize we're in the depths before we cry out to God. By the fifth century the church had designated this one of seven penitential psalms used in confession of sin. Gregory the Great wrote that God uses pain to prick us until we weep tears of sorrow over our own sin and wretched condition. God then turns our gaze to himself so that our tears of sorrow are transformed into tears of appreciation for what he has done in Christ. But then, alas, we avert our gaze and focus on ourselves again, so that God has to prick us again to get our attention.

Most Christians don't like the idea that pain doesn't disappear when we come to Christ. We want a life like Jabez, whose mother named him Jabez, which sounds like the Hebrew for pain, saying, "I gave birth to him in pain." Jabez cried out to God,

> **"Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." (1 Chr 5:10)**

Bruce Wilkinson's book about this prayer sold 9 million copies in two years and spawned a mini-industry. If we will but pray this prayer every day, he argues, we will break through to the blessed life. Unfortunately he doesn't ask whether a prayer like this still has validity in the New Testament age. He advocates a simple "name it and claim it" "health, wealth and prosperity gospel" which bears no relationship to what I see in the New Testament or in 2000 years of church history.

The Christians whom I admire are not those who have prayed the prayer of Jabez, but those who have suffered considerable pain. Their pain hurt, but God has used the pain to shape them into beautiful,

humble, gentle, loving saints. I think of Bob Roe, a former pastor of PBC, who was given six months to live, but lived another seventeen years in constant pain. I think of the author Marva Dawn, who is afflicted with numerous serious health problems, but is one of the most joyful people I know. I think of a Chinese nuclear physicist whom I met here and then visited in Beijing; despite tremendous suffering during the Cultural Revolution his face was radiant. Rather, I should say his face had been made radiant through that suffering. God uses pain in the lives of his people to shape their character.

God uses pain to rob us of contentment east of Eden. He does not allow us to be fully at home in this world. He has made us for so much more. To quote C. S. Lewis again,

> Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.[2]

God uses pain to rip open what Lewis calls "the inconsolable secret" in each of us.[3] As Augustine said, our hearts are restless till they find their rest in God. As long as we do not know that rest, pain is a gift. The day is coming when God will remove all pain, but that will not be until he has removed all evil and brought us out of exile back to himself to live with him in his sanctuary. Then,

> **He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Rev 21:4)**

The antidote to pain is not Tylenol. It's not relationships, or marriage, or family, or work. It's certainly not death. The antidote to pain is God. Our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. God uses pain as a tool to keep us from ourselves, to keep us from enjoying lesser things too much, to keep us from being too easily pleased.

The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001 [1940]), 90-91.

2. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" (1941), in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 26.

3. Lewis, "Weight of Glory," 29.

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EXILE

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Catalog No. 1575
Genesis 3:20-24
13th Message
Bernard Bell
February 15, 2009

This past week the world has been celebrating the bicentennial of the birth of Charles Darwin, born on February 12, 1809. This year also marks the sesquicentennial of the publication of his most famous book, *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin has given the world a story of origins that has gained widespread support. Several of you work in biotech. Your work demonstrates the reality of Darwin's basic mechanism: natural selection by the survival of the fittest. You observe micro-evolution in the laboratory. But there are many things which Darwin's theory of origins cannot explain.

I have entitled this series on Genesis 1–11 *Our Story of Origins*. This is the story of origins that God gave to Israel, and it remains the story of origins for the church today. I read these early chapters of Genesis as a polemic against the theories of origins of Israel's surrounding cultures: Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Canaanite, each of whom had their stories of the origins of the gods, of the cosmos, and of mankind. These chapters still serve a polemic purpose today. But I don't think they are a polemic against Darwin's "scientific" theories; that is to say, I don't read Genesis 1–11 as a scientific document giving us an alternative to Darwinian evolution. Rather, it gives us an alternative to the strict materialism of Darwinism. Because Darwin's theories are strictly materialistic they fail to explain the non-material within the universe. But it is these non-materialistic matters that are the most important. These are the big questions of life: why is there good and evil? Why are people altruistic, that is, why do people do good things when it does not benefit them personally? How will it all end up? Darwinian evolution can offer only the selfish gene, an answer that is deeply unsatisfying.

An example of these deeper questions is that of pain, which we looked at last week. Pain does have a materialistic component, but there is much about pain that is non-materialistic. Receptors generate impulses and send them along neural pathways, but ultimately pain is in the mind and cannot be fully explained on merely materialistic grounds.

Many of you told me that last week's message on pain was exactly what you needed to hear. Pain is not a popular sermon topic. Church marketing experts tell us we should preach sermons that leave you feeling positive and upbeat. Yet we all deal with pain. Pain is a fact of life in this fallen world, and it remains a present reality for Christians. But God, who inflicted the pain in the first place, is at work using pain to accomplish much good.

Genesis 3 gives us the Biblical perspective on why the world is in such a mess. It addresses issues that Darwinian evolution cannot address. It gives us the divine perspective on what went wrong. Today we come to the end of the chapter. These last five verses are no more upbeat than last week's verses on pain, for here we find the man and the woman expelled from God's presence, driven out of his sanctuary. We continue to deal with matters outside the scope of Darwinian theory. Sadly they are also outside the scope of much Christian teaching, which has reduced spiritual life to the materialistic realm of health, wealth and prosperity.

Our five verses today fall into two parts. The first two verses (20-21) describe the human and divine responses to judgment. The last three verses (22-24) describe God's expulsion of the humans from his garden sanctuary.

Responses of Hope (3:20-21)

The first two verses (20-21) form the conclusion to the judgment scene (14-21). After the divine sentencing we are given first the human response (20) and then the divine response (21). Both responses are hopeful. First the human response:

> **Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. (Gen 3:20 TNIV)**

In passing judgment upon both the serpent and the woman, the LORD had implied that the woman would have offspring. Even though death had entered the world, God would graciously allow life to continue. The man responds in faith and hope by naming his wife Eve (*Chava*), meaning "living." The woman is given a second identity. Hitherto she has been called "the woman," a female human ("his wife" is simply "his woman"). Now she is given a name.

In the debate about the role of women in the church, the complementarian side argues that the man's naming of his wife shows his authority over her, both here and when she was first brought to him (2:23). But that earlier verse does not use the standard naming formula. After the man had looked into the face of each animal and found no face-to-face match, God brought the woman to him. He immediately recognized the match and exclaimed that the whole world would recognize it too: "of this one it will be said 'woman' because from 'man' was taken this one." He was simply stating that there would be universal recognition that she is a feminine form of him. Man and woman, *ish* and *ishah*, together constitute the human. Here in 3:20 the man does use a standard naming formula, but to argue that this shows his authority over the woman is, I think, to place a weight upon the verse that it is not intended to carry.

The significance of the naming is given by the narrator's editorial comment: "because she would become the mother of all living." Her identity as "woman" expressed her *origin*: she was built from the man as a female match for him, complementing him as a face-to-face equal. Her name Eve or Chava expresses her *destiny*: to be the mother of all the living. Though death has entered the world and though the man and the woman will die and return to the dust, life will continue through Eve. Most importantly, the seed will be born through Eve—this seed that God will use to oppose Satan and ultimately to defeat evil. In the fullness of time God would send his Son, "born of a woman" (Gal 4:4). The man's naming of his wife as Eve is an expression of hope and faith in God's word.

This hopeful response from the man is followed by a hopeful action by God:

> **The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. (3:21)**

The serpent had promised the woman that when she and her husband ate the fruit their eyes would be opened. He was right: their eyes were opened, but the results were terrifying. The first thing they *saw* was each other's nakedness. The first thing they *knew* was that they were naked. The first thing they *did* was to attempt to hide their nakedness. Their skimpy fig-leaf aprons might have been enough to hide their nakedness from each other but they weren't enough to face God. They had tried to hide from God amidst all the trees in the garden, perhaps hoping that the abundance of leaves would hide them more effectively than a few fig leaves sewn together. But God had summoned them out into the open to face him. The problem wasn't simply that they were naked—they had always been naked. The problem was that now they were naked in a sinful state. The garden was God's sanctuary; it was holy space. God's presence made it such. God had made the man and the woman to dwell there in his sanctuary. But now they were unfit residents. God deals with this unfitness by discarding the skimpy coverings they had made, replacing them with more adequate garments of his own manufacture.

Clothing is richly symbolic. Even though our society has become much less formal, clothing still has symbolic meaning. For example, judges and many ministers wear robes, signifying their office. The word "investiture" is derived from the verb "to clothe." God divests Adam and Eve of their self-manufactured garments and invests them with garments of his own manufacture. Adam and Eve were tarnished by sin. No garments that they could make would ever be adequate to cover themselves in God's presence. If they were to have adequate garments God would have to make them; and he did. Sinful humans have to be adequately covered if they are to appear in God's presence in his sanctuary. This divestiture and investiture is a theme that will be repeated throughout Scripture, as we'll see.

Exile (3:22-24)

Even though God has provided the man and woman with more adequate garments they are still sinful and thus no longer fit to dwell in God's sanctuary. The final scene is therefore their expulsion from that sanctuary:

> **And the Lord God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove them out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. (3:22-24)**

Again the serpent had been right. It had promised the woman that if she and the man ate the fruit they would "be like God, knowing good and evil" (3:5). What the serpent had promised had happened. But contrary to the woman's expectation this was not a good thing. God had not intended for the humans to be like him, knowing good and evil. He had made them to know the good, to accept on faith that which he declared to be good. They had no need of any other knowledge of good, and they certainly had no need of the knowledge of evil. But the serpent had deceived the woman to act with autonomy, without reference to God. She had made her own determination of the good, but this was evil in God's eyes. Such knowledge of good and evil was the preserve of God and those with him, by which he probably means the heavenly council surrounding his throne.

The danger now is that the man and woman would eat also of the tree of life, and live forever in a fallen state. It is not that God does not want the man and woman to live forever, but that he does not want them to live forever in their current state. Because they are no longer fit for his sanctuary and in order to prevent their access to the tree of life, God expels them from the garden. This is stated twice for emphasis: he sent them away and he expelled them.

This scene marks an undoing of the first scene of life in the garden in chapter 2. God made the man from the dust of the ground, but he did not intend for him to make his living working the ground. Instead he planted a garden in the east in Eden. Numerous aspects of the garden make it clear that this was God's sanctuary. It was here, in the very best place on earth, in paradise, in his sanctuary, that God settled the man. Here he was to work and to keep, to serve and to guard. These were noble callings, the callings of a priest serving in the sanctuary. The work or service was not toil; it was not for the purpose of producing his livelihood. God provided everything he needed for life. God ensured that the garden was well-watered and full of trees. God encouraged the man to freely enjoy the great bounty that he had provided. God gave the man the noble calling of guarding this sanctuary, of keeping its sanctity.

But now everything is lost. The vocabulary of the first scene is repeated in order to emphasize this. God had settled the man in the garden of Eden; now he expels him from the garden of Eden. The man was to work the garden, serving in the sanctuary; now he must work the ground outside the garden. This work will be painful toil until eventually he crumbles back into the dust from which he was taken. The man was to enjoy the bounty of God's provision; now he must work for his provision. He was to guard the garden but now he has forfeited this calling. He is replaced as guardian by the cherubim.

These cherubim are not the chubby infants of Raphael's art. Ancient Near Eastern art depicted them as winged lions with human heads; that is, as winged sphinxes. They had a dual role: to guard the sanctity of holy places and to serve as throne attendants. Their presence here confirms that the garden was God's sanctuary, his earthly throne room. They guard this garden sanctuary against the sinful humans and block their access to the tree of life.

The Lord had planted a garden in the east; it's still there at the end of chapter 3 but now in the east are the cherubim and a whirling flaming sword blocking entrance to the garden. Humanity is expelled to wander east of Eden exiled from God, from home and from eternity.

This account of the garden of Eden began so well, with such great promise. God created humans to live in his sanctuary, to enjoy his presence. Life was very simple and straightforward: they were to live by simple faith in his word. This word was not difficult. God provided everything they needed. Human life was full of dignity and honor. Here in paradise humanity was to glorify God and enjoy him forever. But in just 46 verses it's all over. God himself expels humanity from his presence to scratch a living in painful toil east of Eden.

That's how serious sin is. Sin is not just a little mistake that can be papered over. Sin is a rejection of how God created the cosmos. Sin is our assertion that we can be like God. The problem is that we're not God. We didn't create the cosmos. Apart from God's word we don't

know what is good. When we act in our own best judgment, on our own authority, we will inevitably make poor choices which have unintended consequences. Because of sin God has expelled humanity into exile from home and from himself.

Bringing Humanity Back Home

Fortunately, this is not the end of the story. We're only on page 3, but the Bible has a thousand pages. The rest of the Bible is the story of what God does to rescue humanity from the calamity of this chapter. It will take until the third last chapter of the Bible to deal with the problems arising in this third chapter. In that third last chapter, Revelation 20, God removes all evil from the earth: Satan, his followers, and death. They are thrown into the lake of fire, which is the dead end to which God consigned Satan when he cursed him (Gen 3:14).

But the removal of evil from the earth is not the final goal. It is a necessary way point on the path to the final goal. The final goal is to restore humanity to God's presence, to live with him in his sanctuary, where we can again glorify him and enjoy him forever. This is what humanity was created for. This restoration of mankind to God's sanctuary is a major theme of the Bible.

The story of this restoration does not get off to a promising start. In the next few chapters the story goes from bad to worse. Wandering east of Eden, humanity wanders further and further away from God, descending deeper and deeper into sin and rebellion. In the next eight chapters it becomes abundantly clear that the natural direction of mankind living away from God is downwards not upwards. Cain and Abel, the sons of God and the daughters of men, the Tower of Babel: these stories show that sin is endemic and progressive. There is no upward evolution in human behavior. By chapter 11 it has become clear that mankind is without the ability to find its way back home, back to God. It has become clear that if there is to be any hope the initiative must come from God. And this is exactly what God does. He takes the initiative in calling Abraham, who was no better than anyone else. To Abraham and his descendants he made the promise, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." This promise expresses the heart of God's purpose: that humanity be his people and that they dwell with him.

When the Lord redeemed Abraham's descendants from Egypt he brought them to Mt Sinai where he formally took them to be his people, binding them to himself in covenant, and again expressing his purpose: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." Since the people were not yet fit to be brought into his sanctuary, God did the next best thing. He put a symbolic copy of his sanctuary in the midst of the people. He had the people build him a tabernacle where he might dwell in their midst. This is such a high point that the last third of the book of Exodus is devoted to describing it in great detail: seven chapters of instructions on how to build the sanctuary, followed by six chapters of near-verbatim repetition describing its actual construction. Sadly we tend to hit the fast forward button at that point. The great detail shows the importance of this tabernacle in God's purposes: he was putting his presence in the midst of his people. In between the instructions and the construction lies the sorry episode of the golden calf. But even this heinous sin would not deter God from his intent to have his people dwell with him.

Since the tabernacle was God's sanctuary, it included guardian cherubim. Their images were woven into the curtains that hung in the Holy Place and that formed the entrance veil to the Most Holy Place. Here in the Most Holy Place, God put the glory-cloud of his presence. Here he was symbolically enthroned atop the ark of the covenant between two solid gold cherubim who were his symbolic throne attendants.

Along with the detailed instructions for the tabernacle, God gave detailed instructions for the garments to be made for the priests. Moses was to invest Aaron and his sons with these garments to hide their nakedness when they entered God's presence.

All these careful instructions were to teach Israel that though God was putting his presence amidst his people he could not be approached lightly. Sin remained a major problem limiting access to God. Outside the tent was the altar where sacrifices were offered morning and evening to atone for Israel's sin. Only once a year could one man pass through the veil with its woven cherubim and enter God's throne room. He had to be clothed aright and he had to take in the blood of atonement to make atonement for the sins of all the people.

The tabernacle was holy space, but it was erected in the middle of the desert where little grew. Though God provided food and water for his people in the desert, the destination he had planned for them was a land flowing with milk and honey. In several passages it is clear that the land of Israel, the Promised Land, was to be a restoration of the garden of Eden. The whole land was a sanctuary, the Holy Land as we still call it though no longer with any justification. Here the king, who was God's earthly representative, built for God a more permanent sanctuary, the Temple. It had the same symbolism as the tabernacle. Cherubim were carved on the walls of the Holy Place and on the entrance door to the Most Holy Place. There in the Most Holy Place the glory-cloud representing God's presence was enthroned between two cherubim.

Yet despite all these gracious acts on God's part, putting his presence amidst his people, Israel persisted in its sin. Though God put up with sin for a long time, he finally had enough. He removed his presence from the temple, and expelled his people from the land. Just as Adam and Eve had been expelled out the east side of the garden of Eden back into the ground from which they had been taken, so now the Israelites were expelled out the east side of the Promised Land back to godless Mesopotamia from which they had been taken so long before. Mankind dwelling in the garden sanctuary had been undone by their sin. Israel dwelling in the sanctuary of the Promised Land had been undone by their sin. What hope is there? What would God have to do to restore mankind to his presence?

We have the benefit of the New Testament which shows the great lengths to which God has gone to restore sinful humanity to himself. At the moment of Christ's death the temple veil was torn in two, from top to bottom (Matt 27:51). This was the curtain, embroidered with cherubim, that hung between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. No longer did the cherubim guard the way into God's presence. As the writer to the Hebrews shows in several places, Christ has passed through the veil and entered once for all into the holy sanctuary of God's presence. Since the ascended Jesus remains human, for the first time God brought a human back into his true sanctuary. Jesus was fit for God's presence because he was without sin. He has gone there as "our forerunner…on our behalf" (Heb 6:20). We too will follow, but we must be made without sin to be fit for God's presence.

The New Testament uses the language of clothing to symbolize this being made fit for God's presence. We divest ourselves of our old self and are invested with our new self (Eph 4:22-25; Col 3:8-12). The New Testament uses this language of investiture for both Spirit and Christ: we are clothed with the Spirit of power (Luke 24:49) and we are clothed with Christ (Rom 13:14; Gal 3:27). In Christ God has dealt with the problem of sin. He removes the filthy rags of our sin and clothes us with Christ, through whom we who were far off have been brought near. He clothes us with his Spirit to make us holy and thus fit for his presence.

The end of the story lies in the last two chapters of the Bible. The new heavens and new earth are portrayed as both the temple-city and the garden. Both are images of God's sanctuary in which his people dwell with him. In the garden sanctuary stands the tree of life to which mankind once again has full access. Here we will glorify God and enjoy him forever. There are no cherubim blocking access to God. The cherubim, known in Revelation as the four living creatures, are still the symbolic throne attendants of God. They lead the heavenly chorus of praise. And there joining in are humans whom Christ has redeemed to be his people.

Sin is a serious matter. Darwinian evolution offers neither an explanation nor a solution for sin. Sin is not part of its vocabulary. Sadly, sin is not part of the vocabulary of too many churches. But sin is a reality, as we're all aware. We wander in a far country until, like the lost son, we come to our senses and turn back home. The Hebrew word for repentance is *shuv*, to turn around and head back in the other direction. When the lost son turned around he found a father eager to embrace him, to clothe him with the best robe, and to call for a feast. "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

We've spent five weeks in this third chapter of Genesis. It's not been pleasant reading but it's been necessary reading, for this gives us our story of origins to account for the human condition. Without this we cannot understand what God has been up to and what his purposes are. Though God has driven humanity into exile, he says, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." By his grace he brings us to our senses and brings us home, back from exile.

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

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PRESENTING OURSELVES TO GOD

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14th Message
Bernard Bell
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SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

The story of Cain and Abel is among the most famous in the Bible. It has provided inspiration for artists and writers. The story has entered our language. Who does not know the phrase, "Am I my brother's keeper?" From this story has sprung the idiom "raising Cain," which in turn has inspired movies and songs. John Steinbeck used the story of Cain and Abel as the organizing motif for his novel *East of Eden*, spinning out the story to nearly 800 pages. Yet the original is brief: just sixteen verses. It is a masterful piece of writing. So much is covered in these sixteen verses that we will spend three weeks on them. You may wonder how we can spend three weeks on this story, but I'm wondering how I'll to be able to cover this story in only three weeks. [I wasn't able! It took four weeks.]

This is a story about two brothers, but they aren't just any brothers: these are the first two brothers. Furthermore, they're archetypal brothers, representative of two ways of living life. In the previous chapter the Lord had announced that he would place enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between the serpent's seed and the woman's seed (3:15). Henceforth there would be two seeds: the serpent's seed through whom Satan would work out his evil destructive purposes on earth, and the woman's seed through whom God would work out his good constructive purposes on earth. The next several chapters show the contrast and interaction between these two seeds.

Cain and Abel are brothers, the offspring of the same parents. The narrative does everything possible to present them side by side as brothers. But at a certain point they take different directions. Physically they are the same seed, but spiritually they are different seeds. They are archetypal of these two seeds. This is why this story has such power today and has inspired so much reflection. This short ancient story still speaks volumes. In Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, three characters are discussing this story. Says one, "No story has power, nor will it last, unless we feel in ourselves that it is true and true of us." Says another, "Two stories have haunted us and followed us from our beginning…We carry them along with us like invisible tails—the story of original sin and the story of Cain and Abel." Then of the latter he says, "such a little story to have made so deep a wound."[1] We live in a very different environment than Cain and Abel, but, as Steinbeck knew, their ancient story still speaks to us because it rings true. In terms of good and evil our environments are not so different.

The first people to whom this story spoke were the Israelites. These early chapters of Genesis are their pre-history, showing what the world was like before God called Abraham to be the father of a new nation. They show what life was like when lived east of Eden. Living east of Eden humanity sank ever deeper into evil as the serpent's seed multiplied: Cain killed Abel, the sons of God took the daughters of men to wife resulting in the Nephilim, and humanity concentrated its evil in building the tower of Babel. These stories are the backdrop for the call of Abraham. God allowed evil to spread, but only up to a certain point. Then he stepped in by calling Abraham to begin a new society, a society of the woman's seed who were to live life according to God's design. The story of Cain and Abel was intended to be archetypal for Israel, showing the way of life to imitate and the way of life to avoid.

The story remains archetypal for us today who are spiritually the descendants of Abraham. Cain and Abel still speak. The New Testament tells us that "by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead" (Heb 11:4), and warns us, "Do not be like Cain" (1 John 3:12).

The framework of chapter 4 is a genealogy. It begins in verse 1 with the birth of Cain, resumes in verse 17 with the birth of Cain's descendants, and concludes with the birth of Seth (25-26). In between the genealogy is interrupted twice with the stories of Cain and Abel (2b-16) and of Lamech (19-24). It is always worth paying special attention to what is inserted into genealogies: we'll see this again in chapters 5 and 10.

Two sons (4:1-2a)

> **Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. (Gen 4:1-2a TNIV)**

The story opens with a brief genealogy. "Adam knew his wife Eve." A generation ago the NIV helped us out with the idiom, rendering it, "Adam lay with his wife." The TNIV has gone a step further for today's generation: "Adam made love to his wife." As a result, Eve conceived and bore a son, the very first human ever conceived and born. In the previous chapter Adam had "named his wife Eve (*Chava*, meaning "living"), because she would become the mother of all the living" (3:20). Through his grace God allows life to continue among a humanity now subject to death. This life is procreated through the physical intimacy of a man knowing his wife, an action which also unites the two as one flesh. At times the church has been embarrassed that this is how life is produced, but there need be no embarrassment. God has ordained such intercourse both for the uniting of two as one flesh and for the procreation of life. Both results are ordained by him and are not to be trivialized by humanity.

Eve names her firstborn Cain, saying, "I have brought forth a man with the help of the Lord." What does she mean by this? This is the first of about five phrases in this short narrative that present challenges for the translator and exegete. For those able to read this story in Hebrew this adds further interest to a story that is already interesting enough. Those who have read Steinbeck's *East of Eden* might know that one of these ambiguities lies at the core of that book.

Each part of Eve's short statement presents problems. Does the verb mean acquired, brought forth, or even created? Why does she call this child a "man"? And what role does she see for the Lord? The verb is not the usual one for begetting, but it seems to have that sense here, with the emphasis on what Eve has gotten. The name she gives

her son, *Qayin*, is significant not for any intrinsic meaning but for its similarity in sound to this verb, *qanah*. We can achieve the effect by saying that she called him *Cain*, saying, "I have *gained*…" Perhaps she thought that this would be the seed the Lord had promised in the previous chapter. Though Eve does acknowledge some role for the Lord, her focus is on what she has done: "Look what I've gained." She, not the Lord, is center-stage. By the end of the chapter she will have a different attitude. When she names her replacement son Seth her focus will be on what the Lord has done: "God has granted me another child" (4:25). The tragic loss of her two sons, one to death, the other to exile, will shift her focus from self to God.

The birth of Eve's second son is given more briefly. The narrator sees more significance in his being Cain's brother than Eve's son. Seven times we will be told that he is Cain's brother. His name Abel is given without any explanation. It will prove to be a very significant name, but we'll have to wait for the story itself to illuminate the name.

Now the narrator breaks into the genealogy to give us the story of these two brothers. Skipping over their childhood, he presents them to us as adults.

Two brothers (4:2b-5a)

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. (4:2b-5a)

Having started with the births of Cain then Abel, the narrator continues with Abel then Cain, Cain then Abel, and finally Abel then Cain. Switching back and forth like this presents us the brothers side by side three times: in their occupations, in their offerings, and in the Lord's response to those offerings. It's a skillful piece of writing. Unfortunately this skill was not appreciated when the narrative was later broken into verses. These divisions were made based on the names, so that, for example, verse 4 contains Abel twice. Instead each verse should contain both names with the order reversing each time: Abel–Cain, Cain–Abel, Abel–Cain.

Abel and Cain are presented side by side in their occupations: Abel as a keeper of flocks, Cain as a worker of the ground. One occupation is not inferior to the other. Both the keeping of flocks and the tilling of the soil will be suitable occupations for the Israelites. There is no hint of rivalry between shepherds and farmers.

Next Cain and Abel are presented side by side in their offerings. At the end of a period of time they each brought an offering to the Lord. Presumably it was the end of the agricultural year when the harvest was in and the flocks had produced their offspring.

How did they know to bring an offering to the Lord? Perhaps their parents had told them about the Lord. But even had they not, they should have known. As Paul wrote to the Romans, evidence for God is clearly visible in the universe (Rom 1:18-25). Throughout history there has been within most people an awareness of a transcendent power beyond themselves. The best efforts of Voltaire and Rousseau, of Dawkins and Hitchens have not been able to eradicate this.

In the garden Adam and Eve had easy access to the Lord for they were living in his sanctuary. Expulsion from the garden stripped them of this access. But the Lord was still accessible; he could still be approached. Both Cain and Abel understood that he could be approached, and that it was not fitting to approach him empty-handed. They each brought a gift.

Quite naturally each offering consisted of the fruit of their occupation: Cain brought grain, Abel brought animals. Again, one is not inferior to the other. A common misinterpretation is that Abel's offering was superior because it was an animal sacrifice. But the offering they brought did not require an animal sacrifice. Their offering was a *minhah*, a tribute offering. Later on for Israel it was quite acceptable to bring grain as a tribute offering.

How did Cain and Abel know that they should bring a tribute offering to the Lord? We're not told, but their minds, hearts and consciences should have instructed them to do so. A tribute is a present that an inferior brings to a superior; it is an acknowledgement of that vertical space between the two parties. As created humans it was fitting that Cain and Abel bring tributes to the Lord who was their creator. As workers it was fitting that they bring tributes to the one who had given them fruitful crops and flocks.

A tribute is focused on the one to whom the gift is given: it is given in appreciation for whom the recipient is. A tribute is sacrificial: Cain and Abel both voluntarily surrendered some of their produce. A tribute is not self-interested: it is not offered in the hopes of getting something back. A tribute is given for the pleasure of the other party, but in the pleasure of the recipient lies the pleasure of the giver. A tribute is an act of worship, of ascribing worth to the other party, of paying homage to the one to whom homage is due. Our word "worship" means to ascribe worth. The Hebrew equivalent is to "give glory"; the word for glory (*kavod*) is from the word for weight. In ascribing glory or worth to God we acknowledge that he has weight.

Our call to worship this morning ties all these ideas together:

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering (*minhah*) and come into his courts.
Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness. (Ps 96:8-9a)

The psalmist calls on not just Israel but all nations to come before the Lord this way. Our opening hymn continued the theme: "Praise, my soul, the King of heaven, to his feet your tribute bring."

Had they been genuine acts of worship, the offerings of both Cain and Abel would have been worthy tributes, the one from the ground, the other from the flock. But there was a subtle difference between their two offerings. Cain brought some of the fruit of the ground, but Abel brought some of the firstborn of his flock and, even more specifically, their fatty portions. In two ways we are told that Abel brought the best of his produce. Later on Israel would be told that all the firstborn belonged to the Lord and were to be given to him. The firstborn animals were offered to the Lord. The firstborn sons were redeemed: the first generation of firstborn in exchange for the Levites and subsequent generations in exchange for a redemption price. As for the fatty portions it is hard for us in our health-conscious age to see these as the choicest parts. But if you've been to more traditional parts of the world you might have been offered fat as a delicacy. For Israel the fatty portions were the choicest portions which were to be offered to the Lord, for "all the fat is the Lord's" (Lev 3:16).

"Unfair," cry some, "how was Cain supposed to know what to bring the Lord?" But it's of the very nature of a tribute offering that you bring the best. The offerings of Cain and Abel reflected their heart. So the writer to the Hebrews can say, "By faith Abel brought

a better offering than Cain did" (Heb 11:4). Abel's faith was a correct understanding of the relationship between himself and the Lord. His tribute was an act of true worship. Emptying himself of self, he had eyes only for the Lord. He gave sacrificially of his best but with no thought that he was making any sacrifice because his eyes were on the Lord.

Cain withheld the best of his produce: his offering was not from the firstfruits of his crops. Why did he not bring the Lord his best? Perhaps he was too conscious of the sacrifice he was making in giving up some of the produce of his hard labor. Perhaps he viewed this as a duty which could be minimally discharged. Perhaps he thought that God wouldn't know the difference. Whatever his reason there was one common element: self had intruded into his worship, so that it was no longer purely God-focused. It was thus no longer true worship. He had too high an opinion of himself and too low an opinion of God. He therefore did not have faith. He was not ascribing true weight or worth or glory to the Lord.

This intrusion of self into our lives is an ever-present danger. We come to Christ out of ourselves and thereby find our true selves. God puts his Spirit in us to wean us off of self and onto himself, but this is a lifetime process: our old selves are constantly seeking to reassert themselves, to reinsert themselves back into our lives.

Friday was the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. Here's how he begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

> Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other. …Every person, therefore, on coming to the knowledge of himself, is not only urged to seek God, but is also led as by the hand to find him.[2]

Knowledge of God and knowledge of self go hand in hand. Knowledge of self should propel us to seek God. Abel had a right understanding of himself and God; Cain had a faulty understanding. The one had faith, the other did not. Though the brothers were side by side in presenting their offerings they had taken different paths. They were no longer the same seed.

Sensitive now to the fundamental difference between the offerings of the two brothers and the inner state that these offerings expressed, we should not be surprised to see the Lord's response. Still the brothers were side by side as the Lord gazed upon both them and their offerings. Upon one he gazed with approval; upon the other he did not. It was not just Abel's offering that was pleasing but Abel himself. It was not just Cain's offering that was not pleasing but Cain himself. The Lord saw through the offerings into the heart of the offerer. Offerings themselves are meaningless if the heart of the offerer is not right. The value lies not in the offering but in the offerer.

The Lord saw Abel's heart. Therefore, "By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings" (Heb 11:4). "Righteous" means that God considered Abel to be in right relationship with him, to be living appropriately to their relationship. His offering was external evidence of an internal faith.

Later in Israel some understood this connection between offerer and offering but others did not. David, even after his dual sins of adultery and murder, remained a man with a right heart. As he sought to get right again with the Lord, he understood that the state of his heart was more important than any sacrifice he might bring:

> **You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;**
> **you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.**
> **My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;**
> **a broken and contrite heart**
> **you, God, will not despise. (Ps 51:16-17)**

A few centuries later it was the people of Judah who were wondering how to get right with God again:

> **With what shall I come before the Lord**
> **and bow down before the exalted God?**
> **Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,**
> **with calves a year old?**
> **Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,**
> **with ten thousand rivers of oil?**
> **Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,**
> **the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Mic 6:6-7)**

Micah told them that none of this was what the Lord was really after. What the Lord wanted was an inner state of heart as evidenced by how his people treated both one another and himself:

> **He has shown all you people what is good.**
> **And what does the Lord require of you?**
> **To act justly and to love mercy**
> **and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:8)**

Micah's contemporary Isaiah was much more blunt with the people: "Stop bringing meaningless offerings!" (Isa 1:13). Meaningful offerings flow from hearts of faith. Therefore, seemingly insignificant offerings can be much more meaningful to the Lord than the most ostentatious ones, as illustrated by the story of "the widow's mite":

> **As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. "Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." (Luke 21:1-4; cf. Mark 12:41-44)**

You men who were at this year's Men's Retreat may remember a story, a modern parable, told by our speaker Reed Jolley. It struck me at the time, and I came across it again in Tim Keller's book *The Prodigal God*.

> Once upon a time a gardener grew an enormous carrot. He presented it to the king, saying, "This is the best carrot I'll ever grow; I give it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." He turned to leave. But the king discerned the man's heart and said, "I own the land next to yours; I'll give it to you to garden as well." One of the king's nobles saw this and thought he could do better. The next day he brought the king a beautiful horse, saying, "This is the best horse I'll ever raise; I give it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." The king discerned his heart, thanked him, took the horse and dismissed him. When the noble was perplexed the king said, "The gardener was giving *me* the carrot, but you were giving your*self* the horse."[3]

The intrusion of self diminishes the meaning of any offering we bring to the Lord. The surrender of self gives meaning to anything we bring. Of course, when we surrender self we surrender any concern about the value of what we bring. It is only when self intrudes that we are so concerned. Because Cain was thinking of self his response is not too surprising.

One angry brother (4:5b)

So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. (4:5b)

The narrator shows us only Cain's response; there is no need to show Abel's response. How did Cain know that the Lord did not look with favor on himself or his offering? Some have tried to read between the lines by saying that the Lord caused fire to fall from heaven and consume Abel's offering but not his own. It's unnecessary to read this into the story. All Cain had to do was look over at his brother Abel. There he would have seen a worshiper with his gaze upon the Lord, giving himself and his best to the Lord with no thought of self. If Cain had any conscience he would have realized a gulf both between himself and God and between himself and Abel. But rather than choose the path of humble repentance, he chose the path of anger and resentment. In that moment he was estranged from his brother Abel, and further estranged from God. In that moment he identified further with the seed of the serpent, an identification that had begun with his choice of offering.

The entire scene is effectively captured by Annie Vallotton, the Swiss artist who drew the 500 or so line drawings for the *Good News Bible* back in the 1970s. In the background stands Abel beside his altar, gazing up into heaven with his eyes on the Lord. His outstretched hands express his surrender to the Lord. In the foreground stands Cain beside his altar. His arms are folded in on himself, his eyes are on his brother, and his face wears a thick scowl. This simple drawing captures the profound dynamics of these three verses.

If Abel, with his limited knowledge, knew how to approach God in faith, how much more should we to whom the Scriptures have revealed so much more about God and about ourselves. Abel knew the Lord as Creator and as the one who had prospered his flock. We know him as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who emptied himself and surrendered himself so completely to his Father to deliver us from sin and death. We know him as the one who has put his Spirit in us to deliver us from ourselves, to remake us into the image of God in Christ, that we might become our true selves.

We no longer bring offerings of grain or lambs. Instead we present our whole selves to God as those who have been brought from death to life (Rom 6:13). This surrender of ourselves is our true worship (Rom 12:1).

Both Cain and Abel presented their offerings to the Lord, but only Abel was really presenting *himself* to the Lord. By faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. Let us not be like Cain.

The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)

1. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin, 1986 [1952]), 350-352.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) §1.1.1, 35-37.

3. Abbreviated from Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York: Dutton, 208), 60-62.

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BATTLING THE DEMON OF SIN

Catalog No. 1577
Genesis 4:6-9
15th Message
Bernard Bell
July 19, 2009

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Why do we do the things we do? Why do our kids make such bad choices? They get started at such a young age! We tell little Johnny not to hit his sister Susie, but he goes ahead and does it anyway, knowing full well that what he is doing is wrong. As they grow into adolescence and enter adulthood the consequences of their poor choices become much more serious. Why do some adults make such bad choices? Politicians continue to provide us with spectacular examples, Governor Mark Sanford of South Carolina being the most recent. You would think mature adults would know better. Why do *we* make so many bad choices?

Every day we are faced with choices. I'm not talking about the big choices: where to go to school, what job to take, whom to marry, what house or car to buy. We usually put a lot of thought and care into these choices that come along but occasionally. It's the "little" choices, the ones that we face many times each day. How to respond to the driver who cut us off, to the colleague who spoke ill of us, to the family member who said a cross word, to the pretty woman who caught our eye. Even when we know what we ought to do we choose the other path. We respond in anger or resentment, we throw a pity party, we stomp off in a huff, we bear a grudge, we yield to temptation. What pitiful people we all are. How do we explain our propensity to make bad choices? Whom or what do we blame? Our environment, our genes, our stress level, our family, our boss? Yet a moment's reflection shows that there isn't much correspondence between these factors and the choices people make. Purely material explanations are unable to account for our choices. There is only one explanation that makes any sense: it's the plain, old-fashioned word "sin." Today we come to the Bible's first use of this word.

Last week we left Cain and Abel beside their altars. Each had brought the Lord an offering of some of the produce of their labors. But their offerings were not equal. Abel had brought the best of his produce, reflecting a heart of faith, and so the Lord had looked with favor on both him and his offering. Cain had not brought his best, reflecting a heart that thought too much of himself and too little of God. The Lord did not look with favor on him or his offering. This provoked Cain to anger and a fallen countenance.

We pick up the story in verse 6.

Questioning Before the Act (4:6-7)

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." (Gen 4:6-7 TNIV)

The Lord reasoned with Cain just as a parent might reason with a child who has thrown a temper tantrum. Holding a mirror up to Cain, he asked him why he was behaving in such a way. He gave Cain the opportunity to own up to his behavior, to take responsibility for his attitude, and to choose a different path. In verse 7 the Lord moved on to explain the dynamics of the situation. This has been called the most obscure verse in Genesis. There are several translation difficulties and ambiguities but the thrust of the verse is clear.

The Lord showed Cain that he had a choice between doing what is right and not doing what is right. Each choice had its own outcome. Furthermore Cain knew this: the Lord was asking a rhetorical question.

The Hebrew of the first clause is ambiguous. It reads something like, "Is it not if you do well, uplift." The result of doing well is a lifting up. But what would be lifted up? Would it be Cain's countenance, which had fallen (NASB)? Would it be Cain and his offering which would be lifted up so as to be accepted by the Lord (TNIV etc.)? Would it be Cain who would be lifted up so as to walk tall in the face of sin's attack? Or would it be Cain's sin that would be lifted off his shoulders in forgiveness? Though it is ambiguous what would be lifted up, the general point is clear: "Is it not true that if you do what is right, you will be fine?" (NET). It is assumed that Cain knew what doing right meant, and that he knew the outcome. To do right would presumably mean to turn from his anger and to approach the Lord with an acceptable offering and an acceptable heart.

There is an alternative: not doing what is right. Cain had already started down this path, taking two steps. He was dismissive of God in the offering he brought, and he responded to non-acceptance with anger and a sullen face. The Lord patiently warned Cain of the precarious position that he was now in. If he does not do what is right then sin is at the door. Sin is viewed as a dangerous entity, described with the Hebrew word *rovets*. Here too there is disagreement on how to understand this word. Most take it as a verb meaning "to lie down," likening sin to a wild animal crouching down at the door ready to pounce on its prey. Others take it as a noun meaning "demon": sin is a demon at the door. Either way the general meaning is again clear. The Lord was warning Cain that there were serious consequences to his current path of choosing to do what is not right. Sin was right there at the door and sin was dangerous.

The second half of the verse is very terse, just five words in Hebrew: "for you its desire, but you rule over it." This is usually understood as meaning, "Sin's desire is to rule over you, but you must rule over it." The verse is nearly identical in vocabulary and syntax to 3:16 where the Lord said to the woman, "for your husband your desire, but he rules you," which is usually understood as "Your desire will be for your husband, but he will rule over you." In both cases there is a struggle for supremacy. The verb for "rule" means gaining and exercising dominion over someone or something, bringing into subjection. In both cases the first half of the statement expresses an undesirable direction of subjection that must be resisted and reversed. The woman desires to subject her husband to her dominion; sin desires to subject Cain to its dominion. Both must be resisted.

But when God tells Cain to resist sin's desire for dominion over him, does he issue a command, make a promise, or offer a possibil-

ity? Does he say to Cain, "you *must* rule over it" or "you *will* rule over it" or "you *may* rule over it"? Those who have read Steinbeck's *East of Eden* may recognize that this ambiguity lies at the very heart of the book. Lee, the Chinese servant of Adam Trask, ponders this question, studying it for many years. He finally concludes that this word *timshol* means "you *may* rule" over sin. Lee assumes that this verb applies not just to Cain long ago, but to his master Adam in the present, and indeed to all people.

As the Lord addressed Cain, humanity stood poised on the brink. Cain had started down the path of choosing to do what is not right. The Lord offered Cain the opportunity to reverse his path and warned him of the dire nature of his current situation. There was still time to turn around and choose the right, but barely so. At the door lurked sin, whether as a lion ready to pounce or as a demon. In either case sin was eager to take control over Cain. It was not too late: whether as a command, a promise or a possibility, Cain could prevent the demon of sin from taking control of him. God did not allow Cain to proceed without issuing this stern warning. What would Cain do?

The Act (4:8)

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. (4:8)

Cain spoke to his brother Abel. This is striking for the Lord has just been speaking to Cain. Hebrew narrative is full of speech, usually dialog between two parties. Dialog implies that the two parties speak back and forth, as, for example, in 4:9-15 where there are 2½ rounds of dialog between the Lord and Cain. Here the Lord had initiated dialog with Cain; he has asked him two outright questions and one rhetorical question. These invited a reply. In the previous chapter when the Lord questioned first Adam then Eve they both responded, however inadequate their responses were. But Cain made no response to the Lord. Instead he turned and said something to his brother. It doesn't really matter what he said to his brother; he was speaking to the wrong person. The Lord had been addressing Cain directly, saying "you" a total of seven times. His brother had nothing to do with it; the Lord had said nothing about Abel. Cain's refusal to reply to the Lord was ominous. He had nothing to say to the Lord for he had already made up his mind. He had already allowed sin to take mastery over him. He had already redirected his anger onto Abel.

What Cain said to his brother is not in the Hebrew text. TNIV supplies the words from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament: "Let's go out to the field." This fits the context, but it is an addition. Why might the Hebrew text have told us that Cain spoke to Abel but not supplied the words? This enhances the terseness of the text. It also enhances the facelessness of Abel. Abel is an almost non-existent character in this story. He never speaks, we never hear any words that are spoken to him, he is the subject of only two verbs.

Perhaps Cain really did say to Abel, "Let's go out to the field." In which case we can imagine Abel meekly following his elder brother, tagging along with him as he had perhaps done all his life, like a lamb to the slaughter. And so one day they were out in the field. There was nothing unusual in this. The field was the open countryside beyond their settlement. This was where they both pursued their occupations: in the field Cain grew his crops and Abel grazed his flocks. It was territory familiar to both of them; there was nothing to make Abel suspicious. It was not dangerous country. But it was beyond their settlement, meaning it was out of earshot. Israel's law would later distinguish between crimes committed in the open countryside where no cry for help could be heard and crimes committed in a settlement where a cry could be heard.

Suddenly, Cain rose up against his brother and killed him. The report of his action is very brief and matter of fact. There is no build-up, no elaboration and no aftermath. The terrible deed is told with the minimum of words. Why did Cain kill Abel? How did he think this was going to resolve the situation? Abel had done nothing wrong, and the Lord had said nothing about him. Shortly before they had been standing side by side as brothers, worshiping the same Lord. Now one lies dead at the feet of the other. It is sobering how quickly their position changes. In the 1990s we had several stark examples of communities that had lived in peace with one another for generations, even centuries, suddenly turning on one another in murderous hatred: Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Indonesia. How fickle we all are, how quick to swing from loving acceptance to murderous rejection, from warm embrace to violent exclusion.

John Donne wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself…any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind."[1] Simon and Garfunkel turned this around: "I am a rock, I am an island. And a rock feels no pain; and an island never cries." Cain felt no diminishment from Abel's death; he felt no pain, cried no tears over his brother's dead body. Cain's murder of Abel was a rejection of community, a determination to go it alone in life. Presumably he now felt free, free to pursue his own course in life. Of course he was not free; he was now subjugated to sin.

Questioning After the Act (4:9-10a)

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"
"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"
The Lord said, "What have you done?" (4:9-10a)

The Lord's questioning of Cain before the murder is now balanced by a questioning after the murder. He did not leave Cain alone, but pursued him just as he had pursued Adam. Adam and Eve had hidden from one another and from God because of shame. Therefore the Lord had asked, "Where are you?" (3:9). Cain had not hidden himself, though he will later do so. He had no sense of shame, no remorse over his actions. The Lord therefore asked a different question: "Where is your brother Abel?" Just as with Adam, the Lord didn't need to ask this question for his own sake. He knew very well where Abel was: dead at Cain's feet. Cain needed to be asked the question. Would he confess and take ownership of what he had done? Now Cain did reply. Adam had replied honestly, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid" (3:10). Cain's reply was both dishonest and callous: "I don't know." Of course he knew: Abel lay dead at his feet. But he didn't care to know. He then asked the rhetorical question that has echoed down through the centuries, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain's rhetoric implied the answer, "No." But down through the centuries every hearer and reader has shouted back, "Of course you are." With his callous reply Cain further cemented his rejection of life in community, his determination to live life on his own as a rock, an island. He had rejected both the Lord and his fellow human.

The Lord's second question, "What have you done?" echoed his question to Eve, "What is this you have done?" (3:13). Eve gave an answer, albeit a very poor one as she cast blame onto the serpent.

Cain gave no answer; he made no excuses; he had nothing to say about the sin he had committed. We'll leave the story there with this question ringing in our ears, "What have you done?"

Battling the Demon of Sin

I want to spend the rest of our time looking at the struggle between humanity and the demon of sin. The Lord had warned Cain about the struggle, seeking to arouse him to fight off sin. Cain had made not even the slightest effort, capitulating entirely. Sin easily exercised dominion over him, so that his anger and sullenness intensified into murderous rage. Sin multiplied among Cain's descendants, reaching its climax in Lamech, the seventh generation. He boasted of his murders: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me" (4:23). Cain opened the door for sin to enter; sin came in and took full possession of him and his descendants.

Our own experiences show that we yield only too readily to the demon of sin. How can we get sin back outside the door and how can we keep the door shut? The Bible makes it abundantly clear that we can't, but that God can. There are really two different problems here. The first need is to save humans from past sins committed, from all the occasions in the past when we have opened the door and allowed sin to master us. God's solution to this problem is *salvation*. The second need is to transform people so that we are able to master sin in the future each time it lies in wait at the door, so that we are able to shut the door in sin's face and refuse it entry. The solution to this need is *sanctification*. Salvation and sanctification: God saves his people not so that they can carry on living the same lifestyles, but so that they might live new lifestyles. We all know that once we've been saved from our past sin, sin does not leave us alone. It continues to lurk at the door. So God not only has to forgive us for past sin committed but change us so that we are able to resist sin in the future.

God began his twin program of salvation and sanctification with Israel. He called Abraham out of his sinful idolatrous life in Mesopotamia to be the progenitor of a new people, the people of God, the people who would be the beneficiaries of his great promise: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." God saved this people by bringing them out of Egypt. He brought them to Sinai to meet with him and worship him. Here he took them as his people, as his treasured position, chosen out of all the nations of the earth, not because they were better than anyone else, but because through an act of free grace he had set his favor upon them. Here at Sinai he gave them his Torah. We usually translate this word as Law; it is better understood as instruction. The Torah showed Israel how to live life. The general principle, repeated again and again, is " 'Be holy as I am holy,' says the Lord your God." Keeping Torah did not save the Israelites. They had been saved by God's action of rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. Keeping Torah sanctified them; they kept Torah in order to be holy. The Torah showed Israel how to battle the demon of sin. Eventually the Jews classified the Torah into 613 separate commandments. Keeping Torah remains a big deal for observant Jews today. At the age of 13 a boy has a bar-mitvah ceremony, a girl a bat-mitzvah. The name means son or daughter of the commandment. At that age they enter adulthood and undertake to keep the Torah, all 613 commandments.

Israel was cheerfully confident that it could keep the commandments, that it could keep Torah. When the covenant was sealed at Sinai they said, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey" (Exod 24:7). It did not take long for them to be proved wrong: within just forty days they were worshiping the golden calf. The Torah pronounced a curse upon any Israelite who did not keep it: "Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out" (Deut 27:26). God knew they would sin, so he provided Israel with a system of sacrifices whereby both intentional and unintentional sins could be atoned for.

In one respect God's work with Israel was not a success. Israel proved unable to keep Torah, unable to keep sin outside the door. But in another respect it was a great success, because Israel birthed the Messiah, Jesus. Throughout his life Jesus did keep the door closed on sin. Nevertheless, though Jesus was the only Israelite never guilty of breaking Torah, God placed upon him the curse due those who did break Torah, who did break the Law, so that he might redeem God's people from the curse of breaking that Law. And who are God's people the other side of Jesus taking that curse upon himself? They are those who identify with Christ Jesus in faith, first the Jews who were called to keep Torah but were unable to do so, and then also the Gentiles who had been promised blessing through Abraham's descendants (Gal 3:10-14).

Paul came to see that this was God's intention all along. As a zealous Pharisee he had bound himself to keep Torah, trying hard to keep all the commandments. But he found that the Torah kept showing him how sinful he was.

Our Scripture reading was the end of Romans 7. Earlier in that chapter Paul elaborates on the role of the Law—every time he mentions Law what he has in mind is the Torah, this Law that God gave specifically to his people Israel. He says, "I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law" (Rom 7:7). The Law clarified how sinful he was, even though he, of all people, made every effort to keep it. So he says, "the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death" (7:10).

But elsewhere he says that the Law itself was a beautiful thing, a precious gift that God had given his people. But the Law brought death not life. But Paul also saw that the Law led to Christ. In Galatians he describes the Law, the Torah, as a guardian, a pedagogue (Gal 3:24-25). A pedagogue was a household slave whose task was to lead the master's children to the tutor for their daily instruction. The Torah's purpose was to lead to Christ; having led Israel to Christ its work was done.

This is hard for some people to grasp. Christian theology talks of different uses of the Law. The first use of the Law was to show Israel how to live, to give them a guide to life. The second use of the Law was to lead to Christ. Both of these are fine; they are clearly in the New Testament. But in some theological systems there is also a third use of the Law: to show Christians today how to live life. But it's quite obvious that there are parts of Israel's Law that no longer seem applicable: Christians no longer offer sacrifices or avoid pork. Therefore theologians have distinguished between three categories of commandments within the Law: civil, ceremonial and moral laws. The ceremonial law has been fulfilled in Christ and so no longer applies. The civil law applied to Israel as a nation, so it too no longer applies. But the moral law does still apply. This takes a bit of casuistry to demarcate the Law into civil, ceremonial and moral. I don't think ancient Israel had any concept of such a three-fold demarcation. What is the moral law? It is encapsulated within the Ten Commandments. This is the rationale for putting the Ten Commandments in courtrooms and schoolhouses. The Ten Commandments are held to be still binding on Christians today as God's moral law.

This is a big issue in Scotland today. A few hours ago a ferry set sail from Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis bound for Ullapool on the mainland, the first scheduled sailing on the Sabbath Day. This has caused great controversy in Scotland today, because some hold the moral law to be still binding upon Scotland. But how is it concluded that a law given to Israel to govern its life thousands of years ago still applies to Scotland today?

This understanding of the Law has been a bedrock of much theology for the past 500 years. But Paul is quite clear in the New Testament that the Law, by which he means this Torah given to Israel, has run its course, has achieved its purpose. It was very good—in its time. It was given to Israel to show Israel how to keep sin outside the door, how to live holy lives. It failed and instead showed Israel how sinful they were. But God intended that for its second purpose was to act as a guardian over Israel, restraining sin until it could lead Israel to Christ, where they would find a savior who could save them from their sin.

Those who are raised on this system of theology get very uncomfortable with the idea that we are no longer under Law, even if it is just the moral law as encapsulated in the Ten Commandments. How then do you prevent Christians from sinning?

Though the Law was a gracious gift to Israel it never dealt with the underlying problem: how to change people's hearts so that they were actually able to master sin. Paul writes in Romans 7, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (7:18). The Law was unable to change him from the inside. The Law was written on tablets of stone not on the heart. But through Jeremiah the Lord said that one day he would write his law on people's hearts (Jer 31:33). This is what he now does through his Spirit.

We are *saved* from our past lives of sin through our identification by faith with Christ. We are *sanctified* through the Spirit in us. Sin continues to lurk at the door. But as the Spirit changes us, renewing us into God's image in Christ, we are actually able to exert mastery over this demon. We are actually able to choose to do what is right. It's clear that we don't always do so. God knows this. He could have tied salvation and sanctification more closely together, changing us completely at the moment we identify with Christ in faith and so become a part of God's people. But God has chosen not to do that. He has chosen to take a lifetime to work on our character. Even then, when we die we are still so far from being the people that God intends us to be, restored to being fully human. Throughout our lives we continue to struggle between acting in the Spirit and acting in the flesh. Sin will always be lurking at the door this side of glory. When we act in the Spirit we are able to overcome the demon, to close the door in its face. When we act in the flesh we succumb to the demon, we open the door for it. What we should expect to see is that increasingly we act in the Spirit. But at the same time, as we grow in the Spirit we become increasingly aware of all the times we act in the flesh. Here is a paradox: the less sinful we actually become the more aware we become of how sinful we are. One of the purposes of this is that God keeps us humble.

At the end of Romans 7 Paul concludes, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:24-25). Then at the beginning on chapter 8 he goes on and lays out a theology of the Spirit, pointing out that all those who are in Christ have the Spirit in them, and that "those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires…the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace" (8:5-6). The Spirit is able to do in us what the Law could not do.

So how do we know what is the right thing to do? How are we able to overcome the demon of sin lurking at the door? Not by looking up a rule book of 613 commandments. There was nothing wrong with the rule book; it was a precious gift to Israel, but its work is done. Not even by looking up an abbreviated rule book of the Ten Commandments. But by having the Holy Spirit at work in us, renewing our inner selves, transforming us into God's image perfectly expressed in Christ Jesus. The Spirit teaches us how to do what is right before God and how to be our brother's keeper. God himself is present in us through his Spirit, so that it is God himself enabling us to do what is right. We should remove the Ten Commandments from all the courtrooms and schools. Scotland should get rid of the idea that the moral law has any binding upon it today. The appropriate symbol is the dove representing the Holy Spirit, which is God's presence among us to enable us to live lives pleasing to him, to change us from the inside out.

How, then, do we yield to the Spirit? How do we facilitate the Spirit's work in our life? We should cultivate our passion for God. As our appetite for God increases, so the Spirit will be increasingly at work in us. We should expect to see growth in our ability to shut the door on sin. All the credit for that is due the Spirit, for it is the Spirit in us who so enables us. But as we grow in our ability to shut the door, we also grow in our sensitivity to the many, many times when we don't shut the door, when we act in the flesh rather then the Spirit. It is a struggle; it calls for discipline; it calls for making hard choices. But God empowers us to make those choices. And so we should expect to see the fruit of the Spirit growing in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). The demon of sin cannot get in the door when the fruit of the Spirit thrives.

Thanks be to God that he rescues us from our sin and that he is at work in us to enable us to resist sin and become people who are pleasing to him.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thess 5:23-24)

1. John Donne, *Meditation XVII*.

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WHEN INNOCENT BLOOD IS SHED

Catalog No. 1578
Genesis 4:8-10
16th Message
Bernard Bell
July 26, 2009

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

"His love can never fail." Much of our service has been structured around this idea of God's unfailing love. Our call to worship was the closing verses of Romans 8: nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord, not even death. We sang, "O love that will not let me go," by George Matheson, the beloved blind preacher of Scotland. He wrote the hymn in five minutes when his heart was in a state of great anguish; the grip of God's love on his life brought him great comfort.

But God has a funny way of expressing his love to those who love him, to those who are faithful to him. Our Scripture reading was drawn from the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11, the great cloud of Old Testament witnesses who lived by faith. The first three listed are Abel, Enoch and Noah. But their lives of faith had very different outcomes. Abel lived by faith and died at the hands of his brother. Enoch lived by faith and did not die because the Lord took him up. Noah lived by faith and everyone else died. What sense do we make of that?

After extensive portraits of Abraham and Moses, the chapter quickly presents heroes of faith who accomplished great things:

> **I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. (Heb 11:32-34 TNIV)**

But then there is a dramatic turn:

> **There were others who were tortured…Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated…They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. (Heb 11:35-38)**

"These were all commended for their faith" (11:39). Yet some lived long successful lives, while others suffered and were brutally killed. Does God know what he is doing? The text on the cover of the bulletin is Psalm 116:15, "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints" (NIV) or "of those faithful to him" (TNIV). How can the death of his people be precious to God?

The pattern continues in the New Testament: John the Baptist, Stephen and James were brutally killed. Reliable tradition holds that both Peter and Paul were brutally killed under Nero. Why does God allow those faithful to him to be killed, often savagely? Does he do anything about their deaths?

Cain's murder of Abel created three problems for God: what should he do about Cain, what should he do about Abel, and what should he do about sin? We find out immediately what God does about Cain the murderer (4:11-16); we'll look at that next week. It was the easiest of the problems because Cain was still around for God to do something about. The problem of Abel is much harder: Abel was no longer around to do anything about. He was no longer a living being; all that was left was a dead body and some spilled blood. We'll look at this matter today.

The third problem, that of sin which Cain had allowed in the door, was our topic last week. Before we turn to Abel I want to say a few more words about last week's sermon since it provoked several long conversations. Some people thought that I was joking in some of my comments. Not so: I spoke in earnest.

I distinguished salvation and sanctification. God saves us *from* something *for* something. He calls us to a new lifestyle, a life of holiness in which sin is kept outside the door. How does God guide his people into this life of holiness? Under the old covenant God gave Israel the Torah, the Law, to show them how to live holy lives. But the Torah could not change their hearts. Under the new covenant God puts his Spirit in us to transform us into his image, to change our hearts so that we actually are able to live holy lives when we walk in the Spirit.

The Torah was a precious gift, given specifically to Israel whom it served as a guardian pending the coming of Christ. It was a guide for Israel's life and it led to Christ. The death of Christ marked the end of the Torah: he took upon himself the curse that was upon Israel for its failure to keep the Torah. The gift of the Spirit on Pentecost marked the beginning of the new age: it unleashed upon the world both the gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ, and the enabling presence of God in the lives of his people to transform their hearts, renewing them into God's image.

The Torah is done, even the Ten Commandments. The Torah was given only to Israel. There is no third use of the Law: the moral law, encapsulated in the Ten Commandments as a guide for Christians.

Does this mean that I dismiss the Old Testament? No. But every time I read the Old Testament, including the Torah, including the Ten Commandments, I have to pass it through the lens of Christ and the Spirit in order to appropriate its message for today. There is much we can learn from the Torah concerning the love of God and the love of neighbor, as long as we remember it was for Israel.

Does this mean that it's all right to murder, commit adultery, steal or bear false witness if we don't have the Ten Commandments to tell us not to do these things? I'm always amazed when people jump to this conclusion, as some did last week. Not at all! May it never be, as Paul would say. The same principle of sanctification applies under the new covenant as under the old: we are to be holy as God is holy. We are called to "be imitators of God" (Eph 5:1 NIV), to "find out what pleases the Lord" (Eph 5:10).

We are not free to be and do whatever we want, seeking God's approval for our lifestyle. Some want to say, "The Lord has shown me that my behavior is OK." But life in the Spirit tends to be the exact opposite. As the Spirit probes deeper and deeper into our lives we find that parts of us that we thought were all right are in fact riddled with sin. The more the Spirit works on us the worse we find ourselves to be. Life in the Spirit is not a lessening of the standard of living, but an intensification of the standard. Through his Spirit God is at work to root out the rottenness in the farthest recesses of our hearts.

Some of you defended the presence of the Ten Commandments in courtrooms as a symbol that we are a nation under law. It is a great privilege to live in a nation under law. But the laws of this nation are shaped not just by the Ten Commandments but also by other bodies of law: the Code of Hammurabi, Roman Law, the Magna Carta. Those who place the Ten Commandments in courtrooms, sometimes covertly in the middle of the night, are usually trying to show that we as a nation are under God's moral law expressed in those commandments. But those who argue for the moral law are actually very selective. The penalty for breaking most of the Ten Commandments was death. We don't put to death disobedient children or idolaters. In fact the controversy about the moral law mostly swirls around the fourth commandment, the law about the Sabbath. This is why the sailing of that ferry in Scotland last Sunday was such a big deal.

I'm not arguing for a lessening of our standards of behavior but that God is up to something far greater, seeking to transform every corner of our lives and to renew us into his image in the Lord Jesus Christ. Through his Spirit he puts his enabling presence within us.

Let's return to the story of Cain and Abel, and specifically to Cain's murder of Abel. As we saw last week, Cain's murder of Abel is told with the minimum of detail:

> **Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. (Gen 4:8)**

Cain attacked Abel out in the field, out of earshot. He thought no one would hear Abel's cries for help. But Cain had forgotten that there is one who always sees and hears: God himself.

> **Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"**
>
> **"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"**
>
> **The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." (4:9-10)**

The Lord saw Abel's absence and gave Cain the opportunity to explain it. But Cain refused to take any responsibility for his brother. The word "brother" haunts this narrative. It is used exactly seven times in the Cain and Abel story, with a particular concentration in these verses: six times in verses 8-11. The word is always used of Abel being Cain's brother, never of Cain being Abel's brother. "Cain has a brother but *is not* a brother, whereas Abel is a brother but *does not have* a brother."[1]

The Lord then said to Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground." Abel, though dead, still had a voice, even if it was only the voice of his spilled blood. What was the voice crying out for and what would the Lord do about it? These two questions are our topic for today.

In our opening hymn we sang "sin and death shall not prevail."[2] But at this point both sin and death have prevailed. Why did God allow this to happen? Why did he allow Abel to die? Even worse, why did he allow Abel to be killed by his brother? Worst of all, why did he allow the good guy to be killed by the bad guy? This is the very first death in the Bible. Death is a consequence of the Fall in the previous chapter. But this first death was not by "natural causes" but by murder. Surely God could have easily intervened to prevent this.

Abel has a very light presence in this narrative; he's an almost non-existent character. He never speaks, and we never hear any words spoken to him, since Cain's statement "Let's go out to the field" (8) is not in the Hebrew text but added from the Septuagint. Abel is the subject of only two verbs: he was a shepherd and he brought an offering. He's the object of four more: he was born, the Lord looked on his offering, Cain rose up against him and killed him. That is the sum total of Abel's life. In that short life he was faithful as indicated by his offering and by the Lord's approval of both his offering and Abel himself.

Now we're ready for the meaning of Abel's name. His name is *Hevel*. It's the word used 38 times in Ecclesiastes and translated as "vanity" (KJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV), "meaningless" (NIV, TNIV), "futility" (HCSB). It designates something that is empty or transitory. The meaning of Abel's name was not given at the beginning of the chapter because the story illustrates that meaning. Abel was blown away like a puff of wind. Here one moment, living a life of faith; the next moment gone. His name appears exactly seven times to emphasize the point. Can God allow life to end just like that? What meaning does life have if a good life can be snuffed out, especially if it is snuffed out by the bad guy?

Yet Abel was not completely gone. His blood still spoke. It spoke because it was innocent blood. Guilty blood would not have been able to speak. Abel's shed blood was crying out to God. The verb "crying out" implies utter helplessness and deep distress. It was to the Lord that the blood was crying out. Though Cain's murder of Abel was out in the field, out of earshot, it was not out of God's earshot. The blood cried out and God heard the cry. The blood was crying out for justice and vengeance.

Vengeance is a concept that is open to grave misunderstanding. In English we now distinguish between *revenge* and *avenge*. (It is unfortunate that while "revenge" can be used as both verb and noun, there is no noun corresponding to the verb "avenge.") Both imply putting things right, but there is a big difference in how this is done. Revenge is negative, avenge is positive. Revenge is prompted by negative attitudes of anger or shame, though it can easily be disguised as a concern for justice. It usually takes the form of retaliation, and is executed by the recipient of the real or perceived injustice. Avenging is prompted by a true concern for justice. It is therefore dispassionate, not driven by emotions. It is therefore best left to a third party, to one entrusted with upholding justice. David understood this when he said to Saul, "May the Lord judge between you and me. And may the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you" (1 Sam 24:12).

Israel's law, the Torah, laid down procedures for the avenging of innocent blood. When innocent blood was shed, the next of kin had the responsibility to act as the Avenger of Blood. The word is *go'el*, the same word used for kinsman-redeemer. The basic premise of the kinsman-redeemer is to come to the aid of the next of kin who is in a helpless condition. The most extreme form of helplessness is being dead. The Blood Avenger had the weighty responsibility to track down the killer and bring him to justice. But if the death was unintentional, the killer could flee to one of the cities of refuge where

he would be safe. These cities were provided "lest innocent blood be shed" (Deut 19:10).

In Abel's case the next of kin was the murderer and so in no position to avenge. Cain needed to be the target of the vengeance not the executor thereof. Indeed he would be afraid that vengeance would be taken out on him.

Vengeance is retributive justice. Cain was guilty and God would pass judgment upon him to avenge Abel's blood, as we'll see next week. Retributive justice is necessary in order to punish, limit and ultimately remove evil from the world. But retributive justice is not full justice. It just produces a lot of dead people. Retributive justice does nothing to establish justice for Abel. It can't bring him back to life again. What Abel needs is restorative justice.

What happens when one dies? What happened to Abel when he died? When Abel died he entered the afterlife, the realm which the Old Testament calls Sheol, the Grave, the Pit, or Death. Abel continued to exist but no longer as a living creature; he was now disembodied, separated from his body which decayed back to dust. All ancient peoples believed in this afterlife. But God's people slowly came to realize another truth: that the Lord who sent people into Sheol could also bring them back out of Sheol. He could and would resurrect his people, restoring physical bodies to them. If there was any justice, any order in the cosmos, then God must do this for his people. His justice must be not only retributive but also restorative. He must vindicate his faithful people in resurrection.

By the time of Jesus belief in the resurrection was fully formed. It had been especially shaped in the crucible of martyrdom, the death of God's faithful people, especially at the hands of the enemies of God and his people. Precious though the death of his saints might be in his eyes, God could not allow his faithful saints to stay dead.

The loudest cry of innocent blood was shouted by the spilled blood of Jesus. His was the most innocent blood that had ever been shed. Like Abel's it was shed by his brothers. As we affirm in the Apostles' Creed, Jesus "descended into Hell," into Sheol or Hades, the realm of all dead, disembodied people. But Jesus had done nothing deserving of death. His innocent blood cried out. For three days the world hung in the balance, the cosmos waited to see what God would do. Would he allow his son to stay in the grave? Would he allow Death to hold on to innocent blood? On the third day God raised his son from the dead. He didn't simply bring him back into some spiritual state or resuscitate his body. He gave him a new body. This re-embodiment of Jesus brought justice to his shed innocent blood. The hope of the Jews was true: there was life beyond life-after-death, and that life was a bodily life. But this resurrection also surprised the Jewish hope in several ways. What the Jews expected to happen to all God's people at the end of time, God had now done to one person in the middle of time. The Jews expected resurrection into normal physical bodies, but Jesus was resurrected into a transformed body. The Jews thought that the crucifixion showed that Jesus was not the Messiah, but in the resurrection God showed that he was the Messiah.

Why is the bodily resurrection of Jesus so important? Why is it such a serious issue when churchmen or theologians deny the bodily resurrection? Without the resurrection there is no defeat of death, no vindication of innocent blood, either for Jesus or for us. Jesus is the firstborn of those who rise from the dead. He has paved the way in the middle of time for what God will do to all his people at the end of time: raise them from the dead.

What happens when we die? Yes, we go to be with the Lord. But if that's all there is then justice has not really be done. If we go to be with the Lord then those who kill us are really doing us a favor, hastening our departure for the Lord's presence. Furthermore, this negates the value of life on earth. If God saves us simply to take us out of this world to heaven, then life on earth has little meaning. This is the view of platonism, which under the guise of neoplatonism has had such a powerful influence upon the church. Platonism belittles the physical world: death frees the soul from the body in which it is imprisoned. But God created this world and he will restore it by ridding it of evil. He will then restore his people to it in bodies which presumably will be after the pattern of the resurrection body of Jesus Christ, firstborn from the dead.

If we are in Christ then God himself has taken up residence in us through his Spirit. Therefore, for God's people, any death, be it violent death at the hands of the wicked or peaceful death in sleep, is the shedding of innocent blood. Justice is done for that innocent blood only in bodily resurrection. This passage from death to life is prefigured in baptism.

This passage through death is symbolically presented in Revelation. When the fifth seal was opened, John

> **saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rev 6:9-10)**

These were the faithful witnesses, faithful even unto death. Each was given a white robe indicating God's verdict that they were in the right, and they were told to wait until more of them had been killed. Near the end of the book John has a vision in which he sees the verdict God delivers to his saints:

> **I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. (Rev 20:4-6)**

There are some unfortunate translation choices here which obscure the meaning of this paragraph. Those seated on the thrones are the martyrs who had been killed for their faithful witness and refusal to worship the beast. "Judgment was given to them" (NASB): not the authority to judge others (TNIV), but a ruling issued by God the judge. As a result of the ruling they lived, just as Christ lives though he was once dead (Rev 1:18).

I used this text at my father's funeral service last December. He died a faithful witness. What is God's verdict on him? That he lives because he follows Jesus Christ, "the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead" (Rev 1:5). The risen Christ has the keys of death and Hades (Rev 1:18), so that those who follow him follow him through death into life. Not just a disembodied life with the Lord in heaven, but ultimately a resurrection life just as is true for Jesus.

On my father's headstone in the cemetery in Edinburgh is the text "Blessed are they who die in the Lord," abbreviated from "Blessed

are the dead who die in the Lord from now on" (Rev 14:13). Why are they blessed? Because they are freed from their bodies so as to be with the Lord? No, more than that: because they follow Jesus through death into life beyond the grave. They will not stay dead.

Meanwhile, how are we to live in a world where innocent blood is being shed? Paul tells us:

> **Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:**
>
> **"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;**
> **if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.**
> **In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."**
>
> **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:17-21)**

This last phrase is a very familiar one for me, for it is the motto of my school in England (St Lawrence College, Ramsgate, Kent): *in bono vince*, "conquer with good," drawn from the Latin translation (Vulgate) of verse 21, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Vg *noli vinci a malo sed vince in bono malum*).

We leave vengeance to the Lord, and seek every opportunity to overcome evil with good. God is doing the same.

Around AD 200, little over 100 years after Revelation was written, Tertullian, a brilliant lawyer from North Africa and an adult convert to Christ, wrote a defense of the faith addressed to the "Rulers of the Roman Empire." He said of the Church,

> We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods… The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.[3]

From this last statement was developed the famous saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." In the face of violent persecution the Church had grown to fill every corner of the Empire. The fearlessness of these martyrs in the face of death was striking to the Romans. God used it as a powerful testimony to draw many to Christ.

In the Apostles' Creed we affirm, "I believe in the resurrection of the dead." The blood of Abel cried out for that resurrection. The blood of Jesus cried even louder for that resurrection. In Jesus God has begun that resurrection.

God's justice is both retributive and restorative. Retributive justice is necessary to rid the world of evil. But it's his restorative justice that has the last word. Retributive justice fills hell with disembodied people. Restorative justice fills a renewed earth with re-embodied people resurrected from the dead.

> *Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)*

1. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), citing Ellen van Wolde, "The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study," *JSOT* 52 (1991): 25-41.

2. Anon., *Praise the Lord! ye heavens, adore him* (1796).

3. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.

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FORBEARANCE

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17th Message
Bernard Bell
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SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

"Forbearance" is a useful word that is too little known and too little practiced. Last Thursday we saw the president host a beer summit in the White House with a Harvard professor and a police sergeant. Lack of forbearance in both actions and comments had landed all three in hot water. They met to try to defuse the situation.

We live in a multicultural, pluralistic society which exalts tolerance as a supreme value. A tolerant society ought to be a forbearing society, yet our society shows little forbearance. We are quick to take offense, quick to speak out, quick to initiate legal action. Forbearance is a virtue, but are there things we should not forbear? This is a particular challenge for a "tolerant" society. If there is behavior beyond forbearance, who decides what that behavior is?

Forbearance is also a virtue when it applies to our own circumstances. Life is difficult. It may get so difficult for some people that they decide their circumstances are unbearable and they do radical things to escape them: have a midlife crisis, divorce their spouse, run away, commit suicide. Yet other people are able to bear much more difficult circumstances without finding them unbearable.

Cain's murder of Abel was the tragic outcome of a lack of forbearance: towards God, towards his brother, and towards his circumstances. God's non-acceptance of his offering aroused Cain's anger. He rejected God's reminder that if he did what was right he would be fine. Instead, rejecting any notion that he might have responsibility toward his brother, he decided that his circumstances required killing his brother who was a reminder to him of what it meant to do right. Today we look at the aftermath in Cain's life of this murder. Would God forbear Cain's behavior or judge it unbearable? Would Cain find his life any more bearable now that he had rid himself of his brother? We'll see that there are certain things which God will not forbear, and that Cain found his life to be more unbearable than ever.

The centerline of the story of Cain and Abel is the murder itself (4:8), briefly reported with the minimum of detail. This is bracketed either side by the Lord questioning Cain. Prior to the murder, God warned Cain but Cain was silent. After the murder the Lord again spoke to Cain. This time there was dialog as Cain responded to the Lord. But there was no meeting of the minds. Thursday's beer summit ended without any apologies; the police sergeant said that he and the Harvard professor "agreed to disagree." God's dialogue with Cain will end without any apologies and with the two parties going their separate ways.

We pick up the story after Cain's murder of Abel with the Lord addressing Cain.

Curse: Unbearable Evil (4:11-12)

The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth." (Gen 4:10-12 TNIV)

For the third time in Genesis we hear the word "cursed." Following the woman's act of taking the forbidden fruit the Lord had cursed the serpent (3:14) and the ground (3:17). Now for the first time a human is cursed. "Curse" is a jarring word to hear because Genesis ought to be a book about blessing.

God had created the world in a state of blessing, blessing the first living creatures, the first humans, and the seventh day. To bless means to endow with fruitful life. I find it helpful to think of blessing as an arrow signifying a forward-moving trajectory in life. By blessing something God endows it with fruitfulness to successfully fulfill the purposes for which he created it. Thus he endowed the living creatures, the humans and the seventh day.

Curse is the opposite of bless, meaning to deprive of fruitful life. If "bless" is a forward-moving arrow, "curse" is a line leading to a dead-end. When God curses something he frustrates it, rendering it futile. God curses what he will not forbear. He cursed the serpent; he would not forbear what the serpent had done. Later Scripture shows that he was also cursing the evil powers that lay behind the serpent. He cursed the ground, frustrating its fertility. The ground would yield its produce but only as the result of much toil and sweat on the part of the human.

God had not cursed the first man and woman, though since they had disobeyed him he could clearly have done so. But he had greater purposes in mind: he would forbear humanity, ensuring that life continued so that the woman would bear a seed who would defeat the serpent and the evil forces behind it.

But now God cursed a human. By cursing Cain he robbed him of a forward-moving trajectory in life, instead imposing a dead-end. This is actually good news. It indicates that God would not tolerate what Cain had done. He tolerated the disobedience of Adam and Eve but not Cain's murder of his brother. Cain's behavior was unbearable to God; he would not forbear it.

Since Cain's sin was connected with the ground, so God connected his curse with the ground. Cain was a worker of the ground and it was of the fruit of the ground that he brought an offering to the Lord. He had poured Abel's blood out upon the ground, and from the ground that blood was crying out to the Lord. Therefore the curse upon Cain concerned his relationship to the ground. But here lies another of the many ambiguities in this narrative. What was that altered relationship between Cain and the ground? More "literal" translations render it "you are cursed from the ground" (NASB, ESV), but this leaves the statement ambiguous. Is it that he was cursed more than the ground (JPS), or that the ground was the source of his cursing since it was the custodian of Abel's shed blood, or that he was cursed by being separated from the ground (TNIV,

HCSB, NET)? All are justifiable translations, but the latter best fits the context and is the way most translations render it, usually with the help of some additional words to resolve the ambiguity (e.g., TNIV adds "and driven").

In passing judgment upon Adam the Lord had cursed the ground. Instead of enjoying the bounty of God's provision in the garden Adam would have to toil for his sustenance from the ground that would only unwillingly yield its fruit. It was presumably through toil, sweat and pain that Cain wrested produce from the earth. But under curse he would no longer be able to do even that. No longer would the ground give its strength or "yield its crops" to Cain. His occupation would no longer be a worker of the ground, a tiller of the soil. Instead he would be a "restless wanderer" on the earth. The ground (*adamah*) is the area brought under agriculture, whether growing crops or grazing flocks. Now Cain would have to live beyond that realm, beyond the limits of human society. God would not forbear Cain's behavior nor should human society forbear such behavior. Henceforth Cain would have to live beyond human society.

"Curse" seems a harsh concept to us, but there is a silver lining to it. By cursing Cain the Lord was saying that Cain's behavior was unbearable, intolerable, something he would not forbear. By cursing Cain the Lord frustrated him, rendering his life futile. He placed a dead-end across his trajectory in life. But he did not immediately execute that dead-end. He allowed Cain to live, though with a serious degradation in the quality of his life. He even gave him a protective sign. He allowed his line to continue down to the seventh generation. And then we read no more of Cain's line. It died out, presumably in the Flood. It reached the dead-end that was implicit in the curse on Cain. God allowed Cain to continue. He even allowed sin to multiply in Cain's line, for Lamech made Cain look gentle. But in the long run he would not tolerate Cain's line; it was unbearable.

Cain was the first human cursed but he would not be the last. After the Flood the Lord cursed Canaan (Gen 9:25) because of the behavior of his father Ham which involved some sort of sexual immorality with his father. Again the Lord would not forbear such behavior, so he placed a dead-end across Canaan's trajectory in life. But he allowed Canaan to live, indeed allowed Canaan's line to continue for many generations, even many centuries. He promised to give Abraham their land, the land of the Canaanites or the Amorites, but not yet because "the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Gen 15:16). In the short term God forbore the sin of the Canaanites but in the long-term it was unbearable.

The Lord executed the dead-end implicit in the curse when he brought his people into the land. He instructed them to completely destroy the Canaanites (Deut 7:1-2). The technical term for this is *herem*, a Hebrew word meaning devotion to complete destruction. This episode of Israel's history has received a lot of bad press. It is hard for people to understand, and is one of the topics I am most frequently asked about.

Herem was the fulfillment of the curse pronounced on Canaan. This was genocide; there's no getting around that. It was specifically targeted at removing an entire people. This is not a pleasant topic, but there are three very important things to realize about this judgment.

Firstly, God did not give Israel carte blanche to do this to any people they liked. They were to do this to the Canaanites or the Amorites, the inhabitants of the land into which God was bringing his people. And they were to do this also to the Amalekites for their attack upon God's people as they journeyed through the wilderness (Exod 17:14; 1 Sam 15:3). This concept of *herem* could not be used by Israel against any other people, and it cannot be used today as justification for seeking to destroy any people.

Secondly, God provided a way of escape. This is illustrated in the back-to-back stories of Rahab and Achan. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho, the city that blocked the entrance of God's people into the land, and therefore the first city in the land that was to be completely destroyed. Rahab had heard about the Lord: what he had done in Egypt and what Israel had done to the Amorite kings on the east side of the Jordan. She responded in faith and asked for mercy:

> **"I know that the LORD has given this land to you…the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you." (Josh 2:9-12)**

She asked the two Israelite spies to show her *hesed*, covenant loyalty, as she had shown to them in hiding them. When Jericho was captured the city and its inhabitants were completely destroyed (*herem*), except for Rahab and her family (Josh 6). She responded in faith to the Lord, was saved, was incorporated into Israel, and was even grafted into the lineage of the Messiah, appearing in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5). A Canaanite prostitute, on the eve of the execution of the curse that had been hanging over the Canaanites for centuries, in faith responded to what she had heard about what God had done for his people, and she was saved. But in the very next chapter of Joshua (7) we read of Achan the Israelite. He took some of the things from Jericho that should have been destroyed. When he was discovered he and his family were completely destroyed (*herem*). Rahab and Achan traded places. On what basis? On the basis of Rahab's faith and Achan's disobedience. And so Rahab the Canaanite prostitute is included in the Hall of Faith:

> **By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. (Heb 11:31)**

The third thing about the Canaanite genocide is that it is a forerunner of final judgment, of what God will do at the end of time. All evil, wickedness and sin is unbearable to God. In the short term he does forbear it, allowing humanity to go its way. But the day is coming when God will execute a dead-end. Why does the Lord forbear what is ultimately unbearable? Why does he delay? So that people might be saved, just as Rahab the prostitute. In the context of the delay in final judgment, Peter writes,

> **The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Pet 3:9)**

The Lord cursed Cain and Canaan, but the most frequent target of the word is actually his own people Israel, the people whom he chose to restore blessing to the world. If Israel kept Torah, the Law that God gave to show how to be holy as he was holy, then it would enjoy God's blessing. But if not, it would fall under God's curse. When the people entered the land the Levites were to pronounce a twelve-fold curse upon Israel, to each of which Israel was to respond "Amen!" (Deut 27:15-26). The twelfth was the most comprehensive of all:

> **"Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out." (Deut 27:26)**

The warning was driven home in the next chapter:

"However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you:

"You will be cursed…cursed…cursed…" (Deut 28:15-19)

"Cursed, cursed, cursed…" six more times on top of the dozen in the previous chapter. Disobedience to God is a serious matter. At the end of the curse lay death:

"The Lord will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him." (Deut 28:20)

The Lord would not tolerate the breaking of Torah, of his commandments. It is unbearable behavior. Though Israel signaled its willingness to keep Torah, it was of course unable to do so. And so God did begin to bring these curses upon Israel. But he delayed in bringing complete destruction; he showed forbearance to Israel until…

…until Christ. After quoting the last and most severe of the dozen curses from Deuteronomy 27, Paul wrote, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal 3:13). Jesus took upon himself the curse for breaking Torah, though he was the only one not liable for that curse. Thereby he redeemed God's people from the curse. He bore the curse for unbearable sin, for sin that God would not forbear.

He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. (Gal 3:14)

At the end of time God will bring evil, sin and wickedness to an end. The cursing of Cain and of Canaan were forerunners of that. In the meantime he is delaying the dead-end while he offers salvation. How is one saved? The same way as Rahab: by responding in faith to who God is and what he has done.

Unbearable Sin (4:13-14)

Cain said to the Lord, "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 responded a second time to God, but his speech was self-focused. There was no real dialogue.

Cain's first statement is yet another ambiguous one. It could be translated "My sin or my guilt or my punishment is too great to bear or is too great to be forgiven." However one translates it, Cain clearly thought his situation unbearable, whether he meant too great for him to bear or too great for anyone else to bear in the sense of forgiveness.

His next statement made explicit what was implicit in the Lord's curse: "Today you are driving me from the land." But then Cain went a step further, with yet another ambiguous statement: either "I will be hidden from your presence" or "I must hide myself from your presence." But here Cain went beyond the Lord: the Lord had said nothing about Cain having to leave his presence—the ground yes, but not his presence. Because of verse 16 I read this as Cain deciding that he must hide himself. So unbearable was the weight of his sin or guilt or punishment upon him that he felt God's presence to be also unbearable. What a tragedy, for his only hope lay in the presence of the Lord.

What a ridiculous thought, for where can one go to escape the Lord's presence? The psalmist found this a source of great comfort (Ps 139:7-12, read as our call to worship). Cain found it oppressive. Jonah tried to run away from the Lord's presence; what a futile exercise that was! We sang, "I want to be where you are, O Lord" (based on Psalm 84). That's the last place where Cain wanted to be.

How many think the same thing today! Some find God unbearable because they are not good enough. They remain aloof until they can clean up their act enough to be acceptable. How futile! No one will ever be able to clean up his act enough to be able to stand in his own merit in God's presence. But nor does God ask one to do so. It is necessary to be woken up to a sense of one's own sin; this is an important part of the work of the Spirit. But then one must be awoken to see the Savior who bids sinners come and find salvation. There is no sin too great for him to bear.

Others find God unbearable because they want to live their own lives. The subsequent narrative shows that this was Cain's attitude. There is no indication of remorse or repentance, no throwing himself on the mercy of God. Instead, he was sorry only for the consequences: his life had been made more unbearable.

After acknowledging God's sentence that he "be a restless wanderer on the earth," Cain expressed his deep fear: "whoever finds me will kill me." Throughout this encounter Cain showed no fear of God; it was other people he was afraid of. And well he might be afraid: anyone subsequently finding him would be a blood relative of Abel and would thus want to avenge the shedding of Abel's innocent blood. Furthermore, Cain had opened the door for sin, opened the door for a way of life characterized by violence. Sin, ever ravenous, could easily turn around and devour him.

Cain's fear was real, and it was justified because his fear was misplaced. If it was the Lord he feared then he need have no fear of anyone who found him. "Fear him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear."

God's Protection: Making Life Bearable (4:15)

But the Lord said to him, "Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. (4:15)

The Lord showed forbearance with Cain. He graciously countered Cain's fear, promising that should Cain be killed he would be properly avenged. He also gave him a sign to prevent such a killing even happening. This has been popularly understood as a mark upon Cain, but the text simply says that the Lord placed a sign for Cain. There has been much speculation about what this might have been, both among Biblical commentators and in popular culture. The nature of the sign is unimportant; its meaning is clear: it signified that Cain was a murderer but also under God's protective care.

God's Unbearable Presence (4:16)

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

The Cain and Abel story began with Cain and Abel bringing an offering to the Lord. Though the Lord had expelled Adam and Eve from his garden sanctuary, he had not expelled them fully from his presence. There was not the same degree of access as in the garden, but the Lord could still be approached. The story now ends with Cain leaving the Lord's presence. In chapter 3 it was clearly the Lord

who expelled Adam and Eve from the garden: he is the subject of both verbs of expulsion (3:23-24). But here Cain not the Lord is the subject of the verb. It was Cain who went out from the Lord's presence, not the Lord who drove him out of his presence. Cain voluntarily exiled himself from the Lord. The Lord's presence was unbearable because he felt his sin or guilt or punishment to be unbearable. Henceforth Cain and his line would live life away from God.

He settled in the land of Nod, the land of Wandering. Now there's an oxymoron! There beyond human society he would establish an alternative society, a godless society away from God's presence. There his line would build cities, develop music and metal-working, and sink deeper into violent sin. And God would allow them to do so, showing forbearance. Of course they were never really out of his sight; he saw their wickedness, and so once he deemed their sin complete he cut them off, bringing the curse to fulfillment. And what of their cities, metallurgy and music? Did they have any value? That important topic will have to await our return to Genesis 4 in a few months time.

Conclusion

We have reached the end of the Cain and Abel story, this little story of only sixteen verses that has fascinated so many over the centuries and has occupied us for four weeks, this little story with all its ambiguous phrases which have fueled discussions among both commentators and novelists' characters.

This story forms part of Israel's story of origins, part of its prehistory. Here Israel was introduced to several important themes that were to inform its own behavior.

1. The theme of how to approach the Lord in worship. One brings one's best to the Lord, approaching him in faith with a whole heart.
2. The theme of doing what is right. There are two ways of living life: the way of Abel, doing what is right, and the way of Cain, doing what is not right. If one does what is right one will be fine. Otherwise, sin is a dangerous beast or demon lurking at the door. In the Torah God had shown Israel how to do what is right. When Israel departed from what was right, God sent prophets to urge Israel to do what is right (e.g., Jer 7:3), just as he warned Cain.
3. The theme of being a brother's keeper. Contrary to Cain's denial, Israel was to understand that each one was his brother's keeper. They were in covenant both with God and with one another. They were to care for one another, especially for the weak such as the widows, the orphans, the poor, the strangers. They were not to shed innocent blood.
4. The theme of innocent blood crying out for justice. God would see and hear every such crime, and he would ultimately provide justice. Nothing is hidden from God's gaze or ear. He sees every time one of his faithful saints, doing what is right, is killed.
5. The theme of exile from God's presence. God warned that if Israel refused to do what is right he would cast them away from his presence (e.g., Jer 7:15). One of the reasons given for the exile is the amount of innocent blood shed by Manasseh, king of Judah.

This is also our story of origins, for Cain and Abel still speak today. It tells us things which secular stories of origin don't tell us—evolutionary biology, astrophysics, geology. Yet for us there is a very important difference in how we read this versus how Israel read it. We look back on this story through the lens of Christ and the Spirit. In Christ God provided one who bore the curse for Israel and who bears away our sin. There is no sin so unbearable that Christ cannot bear it away. In the Spirit God puts his presence within us to change us so we can do what is right. With Christ as our advocate and the Spirit crying out within us, we find God's presence to be not unbearable but our greatest delight and comfort. And so we can sing, "I want to be where you are, O Lord."

And for those who do find their sin or their life unbearable, God is showing forbearance so that you might find forgiveness in Christ before he declares that the sin of the world is complete. If a Canaanite prostitute found salvation, so can you.

> *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other (forbearing one another* KJV*) and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Col 3:12-14)*

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A MIGHTY FORTRESS

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Bernard Bell
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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 narrative, 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 Ham 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).

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TO WHAT END MUSIC?

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Genesis 4:19-22
19th Message
Bernard Bell
January 17, 2010

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 area 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 iTablet 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.

1. 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 Huram, 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. Huram is described in language reminiscent of Bezalel:

Huram 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 reembodied 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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CALLING ON THE NAME OF THE LORD

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Genesis 4:23-26
20th Message
Bernard Bell
January 24, 2010

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, Penninah 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 had 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, "everyone 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.

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TWO WAYS OF LIVING, TWO WAYS OF DYING

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Genesis 5:1-24
21st Message
Bernard Bell
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SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Whose life can be described as blessed? We all want blessing and most of us have ideas about what a blessed life looks like. Our Scripture readings and some of our songs today have described the one who is blessed. For a prelude our worship team sang Aleph written by our own James Garcia, based on the first stanza of Psalm 119, the *aleph* stanza (vv 1-8), which begins:

Blessed are those whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the law of the LORD. (Ps 119:1 TNIV)

Or as James rendered it in his song:

Blessed are those who blamelessly walk
and place themselves under the teaching of God;
careful attention to each step they trod,
seeking communion and longing for God.

Our call to worship included this verse:

Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you,
who walk in the light of your presence, LORD. (Ps 89:15)

More literally that first line could be translated as "Blessed are those who know the joyful shout." That joyful shout is not the shout that some of you hope to make this afternoon when the Super Bowl gets under way. It's the joyful shout raised in praise to the Lord.

Finally our Scripture reading was Psalm 1, which begins:

Blessed is the man
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers. (Ps 1:1 NIV)

I like how TNIV renders the first couplet: "Blessed are those who do not walk in step with the wicked." The first two psalms form an introduction to the entire psalter. Psalm 2 ends with the line,

Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Ps 2:12)

So these two introductory psalms are bracketed in the first and last verses with this declaration of who is blessed. This sets a tone for entering the rest of the psalter.

What does it mean to be blessed? In each of these psalms the Hebrew word is *ashre*—used 26 times altogether in the psalter. It's not the word used for God blessing people. It's an acclamation used to describe people whose lives are headed in the right direction. Some people translate it as "happy," but it doesn't mean quite what we mean by happy. It's the word that lies behind the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit,…those who mourn,…the meek…" (Matt 5:3-10). We would hesitate to call those people happy. When Scripture describes someone as blessed (*ashre*), it is holding him up as a role model. His life is headed in the right direction and he should be emulated.

Who is blessed? The psalter has told us: the one who is not in step with the wicked, but walks in God's ways, who knows how to praise God, who walks with God. Psalm 1 sets out two ways of living life, the blessed way and its antithesis. We have seen that Genesis 4 does something very similar, showing two ways of living life. It should be no surprise that there are those whose lives are headed in the right direction and those whose are not, for God announced there would be a mighty struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.

After seven weeks in Genesis 4 we move on to chapter 5 where we find that this theme continues. There are two ways of living and two ways of dying. There is life and then there is life that is headed in the right direction, the sort of life that the psalmist would later call blessed.

The chapter begins:

This is the written account of Adam's family line. (Gen 5:1a TNIV)

Genesis is structured as a series of ten accounts, preceded by a prologue (1:1-2:3). These ten are in two sets of five: the first five cover life before the call of Abraham (2:4–11:26); we might call this the Primeval History. This series in Genesis will cover this material. The second set of five begins with the call of Abraham (11:27-50:26); this is the Patriarchal History, which I will not cover. These ten accounts give structure to the whole book.

The first account was that of the heavens and the earth (2:4–4:26). We were in it so long (16 sermons, nearly 20 months) that it's hard to remember that we're supposed to understand it as a unit. The placing of the man in the garden with the woman as his helper; sin, judgment and expulsion from the garden; the division of the human race into Cain and Abel. What started so promisingly, so beautifully quickly went downhill. Of Adam's two sons the one who did what was right was killed; the one who rejected doing what was right flourished and his line flourished, but he was cursed and his line came to an end. But the account ended with a note of hope: God gave a replacement son and people began to call on the Lord's name.

The second account is much briefer (5:1–6:8). Labeled the account of Adam, it describes what came forth from Adam, namely his family line. The account has two parts: a genealogy (5:1-32) and a short narrative about the sons of God and the daughters of men (6:1-8).

Chapter 4 was a genealogy but it was broken up by pieces of narrative that kept our interest. Chapter 5 is straight genealogy—how exciting! What should we do with the genealogies of the Bible?

One response is to hit the fast forward button, skipping over the genealogy to get to more interesting material the other side. That's what many of you want me to do because you want to know what I'll say about the sons of God and the daughters of men.

But perhaps you're committed to taking all of Scripture seriously, so you try to slog your way through the genealogy, but you get bogged down. I was talking with one of you a few days ago who set out to read through Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. This person

did fine until he hit Chronicles. If you've been there you know that Chronicles begins with nine straight chapters of genealogies. Here he got bogged down and lost heart.

Some use genealogies to calculate chronology. This genealogy here in chapter 5 and the one in chapter 11 are unique in the Bible in that they give ages. Archbishop Ussher, in the seventeenth century, used these genealogies to calculate that the first day of creation began on the evening before Sunday, October 23, 4004 BC. But most people now accept that these genealogies are unreliable for calculating precise chronologies, for they were not intended for this purpose.

Others think that this genealogy uses a secret code. One popular interpretation assigns meanings to the names then strings these meanings together to give a hidden message showing how to escape impending judgment:

> God has Appointed that Mortal man shall Sorrow; but The Blessed God, Came Down, Teaching, that His Death Shall Bring, Strength and Comfort.[1]

But there is disagreement on the meaning of some of the names. And is this really what these genealogies were for, to pass on a secret message?

Why do we have these genealogies in the Bible? The Biblical authors incorporated them for a reason. They are not to be skipped over. They don't provide detailed chronology. They don't contain secret messages. These genealogies are there to place people into their history. We're more ready to understand this today because of the recent interest in tracing our own genealogies. Everyone is trying to find some Scottish blood so they can wear a kilt, stay in a castle and eat haggis—well, maybe not the haggis. Genealogies place us into our history. They give us a mental map of where we fit into the world and its history.

I've told this story before, but it bears repeating. It's a story told by Joanne Shetler in her book, *And the Word Came With Power*.[2] Joanne went to the Philippines with Wycliffe Bible Translators. When she arrived in the remote tribal village which was to be her home for the next many years, one of the older men took her under his protective, fatherly care. Joanne set about learning the language, teaching the people to read, and translating the Bible, starting with Matthew. Her new "father," though he took great care of her, never showed any interest in her work, but shortly after she had finished Matthew, he picked up the finished booklet, saying he wanted to see the fruit of her labors. He opened the booklet to the first page and started to read. Joanne, knowing what was on that first page, urgently suggested that he skip to the next page. But it was too late. He had started reading chapter 1, and he was hooked. After reading the genealogy he said to Joanne, "Why did you never tell me this was in here?" He was soon converted, and immediately wanted to take the gospel to the neighboring villages. He became an energetic and successful evangelist. He had a single evangelistic tool. With Joanne's help he wrote out a genealogy on a long sheet of paper. When he explained the gospel he would hold up this sheet and explain the people's genealogy, starting with Adam, through Abraham, David, Jesus, and down to themselves.

This "primitive" man knew what to do with a genealogy. He understood that it placed him and his people into a bigger story, a story that went back to the beginning of time.

All the genealogies of the Bible serve this sort of purpose. They are not straight historical documents. They are not intended for detailed chronology. They are stylized and selective. They often highlight the seventh and tenth generations. For example, in that genealogy with which Matthew begins his gospel, he has arranged Israel's history into three periods of fourteen generations, defined by four major events: Abraham, David, Exile and now Jesus, who will make sense of all these defining moments: he is the son of Abraham, the son of David, and will surely bring Exile to an end.

So it is with the genealogies of Genesis. There are four in these early chapters:

1. Adam's line through Cain (4)
2. Adam's line through Seth (5)
3. Descendants of Noah's three sons (10)
4. Shem to Abraham (11:10-26)

The second and fourth of these are very similar: each runs for ten generations, each ends with three named sons, and each gives the ages of each generation. These two genealogies separate the early history of the world into three major events: creation, the Flood, and the call of Abraham. The world might look chaotic, humanity might be in rebellion against God, but history does make sense. There is an order. God is moving his purposes along. Israel, indeed all of humanity, fits into this history somewhere or other. That's what these and all Biblical genealogies do: they show where people fit.

This genealogy of Adam comprises ten paragraphs, covering ten generations, preceded by a prologue.

Prologue

> **When God created human beings, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them "human beings." (5:1b-2)**

It is a pity that TNIV has robbed this prologue of its lyrical quality. No English version lays it out as poetry but it cries out for such treatment. KJV at least captures the lyrical language:

> **In the day that God created man,**
> **in the likeness of God made he him;**
> **Male and female created he them;**
> **and blessed them, and called their name Adam [Man],**
> **in the day when they were created. (5:1b-2 KJV, breaks added)**

Here in this prologue several important truths are affirmed, or rather re-affirmed, for there is little new here: this little poem borrows heavily from 1:27-28,

> **Then God created man in his image,**
> **in the image of God he created him,**
> **male and female he created them.**
>
> **God blessed them… (1:27-28)**

Despite the chaos of chapters 3 and 4, certain fundamental things remain true:

1. God created man. The verb create (*bara*) appears three times, in the beginning, middle and end, reflecting its threefold use in 1:27. This is a special verb, used only of God and only for significant new creative acts.

2. God created man in his image.

3. God created man as male and female. The two of them together he called "man" or Adam, though this would also be the name of the first male.

4. God blessed them, repeating 1:28. He blessed them so that they would be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. It's very appropriate to put this at the beginning of a genealogy.

It is significant that these four truths are repeated after the sin and judgment of chapters 3 and 4. It is important that we reaffirm them today when these four truths are denied by much of society.

1. Humans are more than just animals. However God actually made the first humans, they were more than just evolved animals. The use of the verb "create" in chapter 1 separates the cosmos into a hierarchy of 3 levels of increasing specialness: inanimate objects including the heavenly bodies and the vegetation; then the living creatures; and finally humans. Humans are more special that the animals. We are the special creation of God.

2. Humans are made in the image of God, no matter how badly that image might be marred by the fall. This is why we should treat all people with dignity including the unborn, the aged, the sick.

3. Humans are male and female. Both have equal dignity but they are not interchangeable. Marriage is made of a male and a female.

4. Procreation is good. Sex within marriage is good. It is under God's blessing. The continuation of life is part of God's intention.

With these truths reaffirmed the genealogy begins.

The Genealogy

The genealogy itself consists of ten paragraphs covering ten generations. There is a standard format to each generation; each consists of three elements:

1. X lived *i* years and fathered Y.
2. Then X lived *j* years after fathering Y and fathered other sons and daughters.
3. All the days of X were *k* (=*i*+*j*) years, and he died.

That's what the life of each of these people is reduced to: living, procreating, dying. What a sad obituary!

But in four paragraphs the pattern is broken: the first (Adam), seventh (Enoch), ninth (Lamech) and tenth (Noah). We need to pay close attention to these places.

Adam the first generation

> **When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth. After Seth was born, Adam lived 800 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Adam lived a total of 930 years, and then he died. (5:3-5)**

The pattern is broken slightly for this first generation to state that Adam passed on his likeness and image to his son Seth. Since Adam was himself in the image and likeness of God, it means that the image of God is passed on down from generation to generation. Again this is despite the sin and chaos of chapters 3 and 4. Humans continue to be special.

From Seth to Jared

The genealogy continues with the pattern unbroken from Seth, to Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel and Jared, until it reaches the seventh generation Enoch. All these people lived remarkably long lives. This genealogy and the one in chapter 11 are the only ones to give ages. For each generation three numbers are given: the age at fathering what is presumably the first-born son, the remaining years of life, and the total. What numbers these are! Most lived into their tenth century. What are we to make of these numbers?

One approach is to assume that conditions before the Flood were more conducive to long life. Perhaps a protective blanket of water vapor filtered out harmful ultra-violet light. A comparison with the genealogy in chapter 11 shows that lifespans before the Flood were indeed much longer.

Another approach is to assume the numbers have some sort of symbolic meaning. Many have noticed a similarity to the Sumerian king list of the pre-Deluge rulers of the land of Sumer in southern Mesopotamia. The earliest version lists eight kings; a later version gives ten. Both lists give the length of reign. These numbers are huge: the eight-king list covers 241,200 years, the ten-king list 432,000 years. But in both lists each of the numbers can be divided by 3600 (60-squared), an important number in their sexagesimal system which we still use today. This is surely significant, but no one can agree on what the significance is.

People have tried to treat the numbers of Genesis 5 similarly, but with much less success. If you multiply by this number, and add that number, or maybe subtract twice that number, perhaps you have something significant. I assume that these numbers are significant but no one has yet found that significance. This is true even of the two numbers that are asking to be taken symbolically: the 365 years of Enoch, and the 777 years of Lamech.

Enoch the seventh generation

When we come to the seventh generation the pattern is broken dramatically:

> **When Enoch had lived 65 years, he became the father of Methuselah. After he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked faithfully with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enoch lived a total of 365 years. Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away. (5:21-24)**

Enoch's life covers four not three verses. When I teach this chapter in a classroom setting I have three people each read a verse in turn. For the first six paragraphs they each read the same element. This makes the breaking of the pattern for Enoch very vivid.

There are two major changes. We expect, "Then Enoch lived after he fathered Methuselah 300 years…," but we read, "Then Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah 300 years…" Instead of "then he died," we read, "Then he walked with God and he was no more for God took him." Instead of merely living, Enoch walked with God. Instead of merely dying, he walked with God.

Enoch is contrasted with all the others in the line of Seth. "Then he died" has terminated each generation like a drumbeat, and it will terminate the generations after Enoch. For only two generations does this drumbeat not sound: Enoch and Noah, and for Noah it is merely delayed until after the Flood (9:29). But Enoch avoided death altogether. His avoidance of death is linked with how he lived his life.

Enoch, seventh in line through Seth, is also contrasted with Lamech, seventh in line through Cain. Since each is seventh in line they represent the "perfect" outcome of their lines. Cain had let sin in the door, then exiled himself from God's presence. Those choices came home to roost in Lamech, who is the inevitable end towards which the line of Cain had been descending.

Enoch's ancestors had begun to call on the name of the Lord. The outcome of this line, in the seventh generation, is one who walked with God. We are not told anything about what it meant for Enoch to walk with God. But what is clear is that he had a meaningful life and a meaningful passage from this life. In both respects he was what the psalmists would hold up as blessed, one to be aspired to.

Throughout the entire history of the world people have devoted enormous energy and resources to trying to avoid death. Ancient mythologies included stories of the quest for immortality. These usually involved a quest for something magical. The Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, recorded its namesake's quest for the tree of life; he found it but fell asleep before he could eat it, and it was eaten by the serpent which instead got immortality. The Egyptian Pharaohs devoted a large percentage of their nation's resources to preparations for death.

Enoch was different. He was spared death, but not by eating any magic plant or potion. He was spared death because of how he lived his life: he walked with God. This was something that started long before. He walked with God both in his life and in his "death." His earthly life and his passage from earthly life were matched. In both life and "death" he walked with God. There was a consonance. It wasn't a matter of getting a magic potion that gave him a ticket to immortality at the end of life without respect to how he actually lived his life. Sadly many today treat the gospel this way.

This short notice about Enoch is held up as a model for Israel. The ideal way of living life, the way exemplified by the seventh from Adam, is to walk with God. Three generations later Noah found favor with the Lord (6:8). The next verse shows why: "it was with God that he walked" (6:9). Subsequent verses do show what walking with God meant: whatever God commanded Noah, so he did (6:22; 7:5, 8, 16). Later the Lord called Abraham, "Walk before me and be blameless" (17:1), calling him to the same life as Enoch and Noah.

We are told tantalizingly little about Enoch. This paucity was so tantalizing that many legends developed about him. But there is no factual basis to any of these stories. The New Testament does mention Enoch twice, once as an example to those walking with the Lord, the other as a rebuke to those not walking with the Lord. Enoch is the second listed in the hall of faith:

> **By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Heb 11:5-6)**

Enoch pleased God. This is how the Septuagint translated the term "walked with God" in both instances. It pleases God when people walk with him. Enoch did so by faith, not by sight. He had to believe that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Enoch, though himself pre-Israel, was held up as a model for Israel. The writer to the Hebrews held him up as a model for Christians of the first century. And he is still a model for us today. Of him we can acclaim, "Blessed!" Blessed was Enoch for he walked with God.

Jude also invoked the example of Enoch, but in a negative sense as a warning to the ungodly. Writing about wicked men who had infiltrated the church, Jude said,

> **Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about them: "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the defiant words ungodly sinners have spoken against him." (Jude 14-15)**

Enoch's life of walking with God is an example to both the godly and the ungodly: an example for the godly to emulate, and a warning to the wicked of impending judgment.

What does it mean to walk with God? Walking is a frequent metaphor in both testaments for how one lives one's life. Walking with God means walking to the beat of a different drum. Walking in step with God means walking out of step with the world. Walking with God means to take delight in the Lord. Walking with God means following his commandments. The focus is not on keeping the commandments per se, but on doing what pleases God, following the pattern which he has laid out for the blessed life. The Pharisees of Jesus' day got this very wrong. They were very serious about their walk, about keeping all the commandments which they thought God had prescribed. They called this *halakah*, "walking." But they were so focused on keeping these laws that they lost sight of God and ended up walking far away from him. Jesus dismissed it all as the traditions of men. Sadly there are many today who have turned walking with God into a list of rules and regulations.

None of this is easy. But God doesn't leave us alone. Through Christ he brings us into a new line of humanity, a new genealogy. Through Christ he has broken the power of death. When we read of Enoch that he walked with God through death we don't know how it was possible. But with the death and resurrection of Christ we now do know. And God puts his Spirit in us to transform us, to change our passions and abilities, so that we actually can walk with him.

This genealogy was given to form part of Israel's mental map. History has meaning; it is headed somewhere under the protective care of God. And walking with God is what matters in both life and death. Blessed are those who walk with God.

1. Ray Stedman, "Adam's Book," sermon no. 324, Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, 1968.

2. Joanne Shetler, *And the Word Came With Power* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1992).

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WEARY OF PAIN

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Genesis 5:25-32
22nd Message
Bernard Bell
February 14, 2010

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

On Friday evening the Winter Olympics opened in Vancouver amidst great pain. What should have been a joyous celebration was tinged with sorrow over the death earlier that day of an athlete in practice. The fact that he was engaged in a deadly sport on a deadly track did nothing to lessen the blow. As the team from Georgia entered the arena, hearts went out to them: the hearts of the athletes, the hearts of the spectators, and the hearts of the TV audience around the world. Over the next two weeks the Olympic athletes will put themselves through all sorts of pain. They suffer in the hope of glory. For some that glory will be winning a medal; for others merely finishing or even just competing will be sufficient glory. Many will suffer the agony of defeat, a pain far worse than the physical pain. But worse still is the pain of death.

This morning our hearts go out to the Poon family as they mourn the passing of their husband and father Robert. For the Christian death is a bitter-sweet time. The pain of losing a loved one is tempered by the assurance of his passage to glory. The pain of observing a dear one suffering in the closing years of life is replaced by relief that the days of suffering are over.

In our pain we search for comfort. At such times we cling to the Crucified. We cling in our grief, he gives relief; we cling in our pain, he will sustain.[1] That hymn, sung as our offertory, is from an old hymn book: *Lyra consolationis, or Hymns for the Day of Sorrow and Weariness*, compiled by Horatius Bonar, "the prince of Scottish hymn writers," who is best known for his hymn *I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say*. It's hard to imagine a publisher today being willing to publish a collection of hymns for the day of sorrow and weariness. Which is a pity, because we all experience such days. Many Christians want their worship to be happy and clappy. But that's not how we always feel. Now, thanks to Kevin Twit and the other musicians of Indelible Grace, old hymns such as this are brought back to life, and thanks to Google Books, old hymn books are once again accessible.

"The world is weary of its pain."[2] We all experience pain: physical pain, and the far deeper wounds of emotional and psychological pain. Some claim that they have overcome their pain. Others say that if you don't live in pain then you're living in denial. Pain management is a big business: medications, counseling, 12-step programs, all designed to deliver us into a life where we manage the pain rather than pain managing us.

Looking through the ads in the paper the other day I noticed an ad for the Jesus Bracelet which promises to "end your pain!" Is it that simple? Put on a magnet-embedded copper bracelet inscribed with the word "Jesus" and your pain is ended!

Pain is nothing new. The world has been in pain for nearly its entire history. Jeremiah lamented his pain 2600 years ago. Two of the most remarkable services we've had here were the two lament services ten years ago when John was preaching through Jeremiah. These were shaped around two of Jeremiah's laments: "Why is my pain perpetual and my wound incurable?" (Jer 15:18), and "Why was I ever born?" (Jer 20:18). John didn't skip over those verses in his preaching and we didn't skip over them in our worship.

The first person to lament the world's pain was long before Jeremiah. He is found in the genealogy of Genesis 5. We saw last week that this genealogy spans ten generations. There is a regular pattern to the way each generation is reported. But this pattern is broken in four places. The effect is to highlight two generations in particular: Enoch the seventh and Noah the tenth. Seven and ten are symbolic numbers, so Enoch and Noah are of special significance. Last week we focused on the seventh generation, Enoch. Today we turn to the tenth, Noah.

Methuselah

After Enoch the pattern resumes for the eighth generation:

> **When Methuselah had lived 187 years, he became the father of Lamech. After he became the father of Lamech, Methuselah lived 782 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Methuselah lived a total of 969 years, and then he died. (Gen 5:25-27 TNIV)**

Methuselah is probably the most famous individual in this genealogy. With our fondness for Bible trivia we know that Methuselah is the longest-lived person in the Bible, at 969 years. His name has become proverbial. The cover story of this week's *Time* Magazine is about "The Science of Living Longer." The Methuselah Foundation sponsors the Mprize to encourage research into longevity. Social scientists use life expectancy as a measure of a nation's development. During the 20th century life expectancy in the USA increased by more than three decades, but we are actually rather low on the table of Western nations. The quest for longevity is big business, as is the quest for youthfulness. The two are not the same thing.

In Greek mythology, Eos, goddess of the dawn, kidnapped Tithonus, son of the king of Troy, to be her lover. She asked Zeus to grant him eternal life, but neglected to ask for eternal youth—a terrible mistake, since she herself had eternal youth. As Tithonus got old and decrepit he begged for death. There are those today who are not so sure that longevity is necessarily a good thing.

For all our interest in Methuselah, the narrator focuses no attention on him. For all his longevity even Methuselah had to die. Even he did not make it to the age of a thousand.

Lamech

With the ninth generation the pattern is again broken:

> **When Lamech had lived 182 years, he had a son. He named him Noah and said, "He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed." After Noah was born, Lamech lived 595 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Lamech lived a total of 777 years, and then he died. (5:28-31)**

The pattern is broken to explain the naming of Lamech's son. This is the only name in the genealogy that is explained, though Seth's name was explained at the end of chapter 4. The name Lamech gives his son, Noah, means "rest." His explanation employs the similarity in sound between the verbs "rest" (*nuah*) and "comfort" (*naham*). The name is not drawn directly from this verb, though a modern Jewish name is: Menahem (as in Begin, the former Israeli prime minister, and Pressler, the pianist).

Lamech laments not only his own condition but that of all humanity: "the labor and pain of our hands." He attributes this pain to the ground (*adamah*) which the Lord had cursed. Back in chapter 3 the Lord had inflicted pain upon both the man and woman when he passed judgment upon them.

On the woman he had inflicted pain in childbearing:

"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with pain you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you." (3:16)

On the man he had inflicted pain in his work:

"Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return." (3:17b-19)

The Lord had put the man in the garden to work it and to keep it. This work involved no pain or toil, for God himself provided everything for the man. All he had to do for food was to reach out and pick the fruit of the trees that the Lord had planted. But after expulsion from the garden life would not be so easy. God cursed the ground so that it would not cooperate with humanity. Only through pain and the sweat of his brow would the man be able to wrest his food from the ground.

Nine generations later, Lamech was weary of this work and pain. Pain was having its intended effect, provoking him to cry out for comfort. As C. S. Lewis famously said, pain is God's megaphone to a deaf world. Pain was speaking loudly to Lamech. What was it that made Lamech cry out for comfort, rather than one of his predecessors? We're not told, though careful readers point out that in the interval between his own birth and the birth of his firstborn Lamech had seen both the death of Adam and the passage of Enoch. Of course, from the point of view of the genealogy the reason that it is Lamech who feels this pain is because he is the one to father Noah who will have a role in assuaging it.

Weary of his pain, and speaking also on behalf of a world weary of its pain, Lamech looked to his newborn son. On this son he placed all his hopes and the hopes of the world: "This one will comfort us." That's a heavy burden for Noah to carry. Right from birth he carried the hopes of the world upon his shoulders. Many fathers are guilty of placing onto their sons the weight of all their hopes and dreams, their unfulfilled expectations, their longings for relief from pain. But never was such a weight placed as that which Lamech placed upon Noah.

With this weight of expectation upon Noah, we turn to his record to see how he will fulfill his father's hopes, how he will comfort the world in its pain.

Noah

After Noah was 500 years old, he became the father of Shem, Ham and Japheth. (5:32)

Here in the tenth generation, that of Noah, we find three departures from the pattern. Firstly, at 500 years Noah is very much older at the birth of his sons. Prior to this the oldest had been Methuselah who was 187 when he fathered Lamech.

Secondly, instead of just one son, three sons are named. We've seen this before in the line of Cain where three named sons were given for Lamech: Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-Cain (4:19-22). We'll see it again in the genealogy of Shem's line where three named sons are given for Terah: Abram, Nahor and Haran (11:26). In all three genealogies this listing of three named sons indicates that a terminus is reached.

Thirdly, the genealogical record for Noah is broken off after just one verse. The record ends abruptly, with no mention of his subsequent life or of his death. Does Noah escape death? The record actually isn't terminated entirely, merely delayed. We find the rest of the record four chapters later:

After the flood Noah lived 350 years. Noah lived a total of 950 years, and then he died. (9:28-29)

Noah's seeming escape from death was only temporary. In the end he, too, had to die. But here we have another difference to the pattern. Noah's subsequent years are counted not from his fathering of his firstborn, but from the Flood. The Flood marks a new reference point in the counting of time, a new year zero.

We had expected to hear of how Noah would comfort the world of its pain. But there's no mention of it here in the genealogical record. Some think that Noah does comfort the world in its pain after the Flood by planting a vineyard and drinking its wine (9:20-21). If only life were so simple: pour a glass of wine and feel your pain ebbing away. Many do just this, but it's not the answer. The narrator does take the time to tell us that Noah planted a vineyard and drank its wine, but I don't think we're to see that as the fulfillment of Lamech's hope. There's something else going on.

The answer is found in an elaborate wordplay involving multiple words that spans the Flood Narrative. It is very evident in Hebrew but impossible to translate into English. Lamech names his son Noah (rest) because he hopes that he will comfort the world from its work and pain which arise from the ground which God has cursed. Lamech was feeling pain but he was not the only one. In the next chapter we find that there is someone else who is feeling pain and in need of comfort.

The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them." (6:5-7)

We might translate verse 6, "The Lord regretted that he had made man (*adam*) on the earth, and he was pained to his heart." The Lord was pained because of human wickedness. Verse 5 is very emphatic about the extent of human evil. This is not what he had created humanity for. He "regretted" (TNIV, HCSB) that he had made humanity. Other translations read that he "was sorry" (NASB, ESV), or that he "was grieved" (NIV). Elsewhere this verb is translated as "change one's mind" or "take pity." We have great trouble with saying that God changed his mind. When we return to Genesis in the summer I intend to devote a whole sermon to this very topic. However we translate it, the verb is used twice here in chapter 6, in verses 6 and 7. It is actually a form of the same verb as Lamech's hope for comfort (5:29). Lamech felt sorry for himself in his pain. The Lord felt sorry, not for himself, but for what someone else had become, which caused him pain. Both saw a problem and a solution. But they saw very differently. The problem Lamech saw was not the problem God saw, and therefore the solution Lamech saw was not the solution God saw.

Lamech had too small a view of the problem. He had an earth-bound view of the problem and therefore he had an earth-bound view of the solution. He thought the problem of pain could be resolved by a man. Quite what he expected Noah to do we don't know, but he saw Noah as the solution. What Lamech didn't see is that man himself was the problem.

Throughout these early chapters of Genesis there is a repeated wordplay between the words man (*adam*) and ground (*adamah*).

1. Genesis 2 opened in the days when there was no *man* to work the *ground* (2:5). This was a good thing because the Lord did not intend man to work the ground.
2. The Lord formed *man* as dust from the *ground* (2:7), but then placed him in the garden. The ground was his origin but not his destiny.
3. After man's disobedience, the Lord pronounced the *ground* cursed because of *man* (3:17); the result was pain for man (3:19).
4. At the end of man's life he will return to the *ground* from which he was taken (3:19). His destiny is now the same as his origin.
5. The Lord banished *man* from the garden to work the *ground* (3:23).
6. The Lord cursed Cain, who was a worker of the *ground*, from the *ground* (4:11); though he work the *ground* it would not yield at all to his efforts. Cain viewed himself as driven from the *ground* (4:14)
7. Lamech was looking to a man to provide comfort from the pain resulting from a cursed *ground* (5:29)
8. Chapter 6 opens with *man* multiplying upon the *ground* (6:1) but this resulted in a multiplication of *man*'s evil (6:5)
9. Now, out of a pain-filled heart the Lord determined that he would blot out *man* from the *ground* (6:6-7). This would bring comfort to his regret at creating man.

This is a profound analysis of the human condition. Man is made from the ground but created for so much greater a destiny: God's own sanctuary there to enjoy God's presence. Through his disobedience and sin man forfeited this destiny. Banished from the garden to a life of pain in the ground, then banished from the ground to wander outside the Lord's presence, East of Eden, and now wiped off the face of the ground. How costly is human sin! How it estranges us from God.

The Lord's pain was deep for he had created man. Parents whose children have wandered into destructive lifestyles can only begin to imagine God's pain over what mankind had become. Human evil was the problem and so God wiped humanity away. The Flood came in the year 1656, counting from creation. Noah was 600. His father Lamech had died five years previously. He didn't live to see how Noah might bring comfort. All Lamech would have seen was multiplying evil and his son building a strange boat. Methuselah died in the year of the Flood. But God graciously preserved Noah and seven members of his family. Through the waters of the Flood God simultaneously worked judgment and salvation.

Did the Flood solve the problem? Yes and no. After the Flood was over, Noah and his family and all the animals exited the ark.

> **Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done." (8:20-21)**

The Flood didn't solve the problem of human sin. Before the Flood "every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time" (6:5). After the Flood "every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood" (8:21). The Lord was under no illusion that humanity had gotten its act together, that humanity had learned from the Flood and would be better the next time around.

But there was one very big change. The phrase "pleasing aroma" is actually "aroma that puts at rest." It's the same verb that lies behind Noah's name. God's heart was put at rest, not by the Flood with which he wiped man from the earth, but by the aroma arising from Noah's burnt offering, the first such sacrificial offering in the Bible. This was an act of tremendous grace on God's part. He allowed himself to be put at rest. The theological term for this is propitiation. It wasn't because humanity had changed and suddenly become obedient and faithful. It was an act of pure grace. Humanity after the Flood is no better than humanity before the Flood. But something in God has changed; of course here I have to speak anthropomorphically, using human language to describe what is otherwise indescribable.

The Lord said, "Never again will I curse the ground (*adamah*) because of man (*adam*)," despite human beings being no better than before. Noah did bring comfort to the world but not at all in the way Lamech was expecting. Noah brought comfort to the pained world by bringing comfort to the pained heart of God, if we can put it like that. Of course, putting it this way is rather crass. It was God who was driving this all. He allowed himself to be put at rest by Noah's sacrificial offering. But this still leaves the fundamental problem unresolved: sinful man is still on the ground, *adam* on the *adamah*. Only now God has forsworn his earlier remedy: he will never again curse the ground, and he will never again blot all humanity off of the ground. So how will God ultimately deal with the problem of pain and evil in humanity?

Ultimately God resolves both the pain and the sin of the world by taking it upon himself. The prophet Isaiah wrote of the Suffering Servant who was familiar with pain: familiar with it because of his own pain, and familiar with it because he took upon himself the pain of others.

He was despised and rejected by others,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted. (Isa 53:4)

It's not until the New Testament that we understand to whom this refers. The Father asked his Son to voluntarily take upon himself the humiliation of becoming man: not man in all his glory, but man in his sinfulness. And he did so, as Jesus Christ,

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human being,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! (Phil 2:6-8)

In religious art, there are several standard motifs for how Jesus is portrayed. One of these is as the Man of Sorrows, a term used for the Suffering Servant (Isa 53:3). Sometimes this motif is known by the Greek phrase, *akra tapeinosis*, meaning "utmost humiliation." *Tapeinosis*, humiliation, was another characteristic of the Suffering Servant (Isa 53:8 LXX; Acts 8:33), and the verb is used in Philippians 2:8. Artists have used this motif to paint some very harrowing pictures of Jesus. The one with which I'm most familiar is hidden away in the monastery on the island of Patmos; it's by El Greco. These paintings remind us of how extensive was the humiliation of Christ, the degree to which God asked him to take upon himself the pain of the world. The Son emptied himself (NASB, HCSB), made himself nothing (ESV, NIV), made himself of no reputation (KJV), in order to enter this pain-filled world and become *adam*.

Lamech was looking for comfort from his pain. The Lord was also looking for comfort from his pain. Lamech hoped that his son might provide such rest. The Lord knew that no mortal human could deal with the world's pain: man is the source of the problem not the solution to the problem. And so he sent his Son as the man from heaven to take upon himself the pain and sin of man, that he might set us free.

And so in our pain we cling to the Crucified. In our grief he gives relief; in our pain he will sustain. Cling to the Crucified: cling to his side, in him abide; hope shall arise, joy light thine eyes.

Thanks be to God.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, who took upon himself our pain and sin; the love of God, who allowed himself to be put at rest by the sacrifical death of his Son in our place; and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who is sent to be our Comforter, be with us all, now and evermore. Amen.

1. Anon., "Clinging," in Horatius Bonar, ed., *Lyra consolationis, or Hymns for the Day of Sorrow and Weariness* (1866), and "Cling to the Crucified," in Horatius Bonar, *Bible Hymn-Book* (1860). Combined by Kevin Twit, "Cling to the Crucified," on *Wake Thy Slumbering Children: Indelible Grace 5* (2007).

2. John Masterman, *Almighty Father, Who Dost Give* (1922).

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LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN

Catalog No. 1585
Genesis 6:1-8
23rd Message
Bernard Bell
August 1, 2010

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

I have always liked maps. This is one reason why I studied geography at university followed by a Masters in surveying. When I was single I decorated my apartment walls with maps. I have many books of maps, old and new, and can happily spend an afternoon looking through these. One of the fascinating features about old maps are the artistic flourishes of the map-makers. They liked to fill in the blank spaces on both land and sea with animals, both real and imaginary. Claus Magnus's *Carta Marina* (1539) depicts a particularly fine collection of sea monsters cavorting in the North Atlantic. Medieval copies of old Roman maps, such as *The Anglo-Saxon World Map* (1025), show lions with the phrase *hic abundant leones*, "here lions abound." On the Lenox globe (1510) appears the phrase *hic sunt dracones*, "here be dragons." This phrase has entered the English idiom, denoting dangerous or unknown territory. This phrase came to mind this past week as I was thinking about today's passage.

After a hiatus of six months, we return to my series on Genesis 1-11 entitled "Our Story of Origins." Today we arrive at chapter 6. Here be dragons! The first few verses of this chapter are notoriously difficult. Here we find the sons of God, the daughters of man, and the Nephilim. Consult any volume on Bible difficulties and you're sure to find these verses. Who are these people? Scholars are divided on the issue. It's not just a division between liberal and conservative: evangelicals are divided on the issue. Prominent evangelical scholars whom I highly respect interpret these three groups in very different ways. I've been pondering these verses for over thirty years. For many years, as I read the different arguments, I used to feel like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, saying "He's right" of whomever had just spoken. If scholars disagree on how to understand these three groups what hope is there for us? The good news is that I don't think the identity of these three groups is the most important thing about this passage.

There are two very important things to bear in mind as we seek to understand this text: context and structure.

1. Context

5:1-6:8 belongs together as a unit, forming the second account (*toledot*) of Genesis, "The written account of Adam's family line" (TNIV) or "The book of the generations of Adam" (ESV). The third account, that of Noah, begins at 6:9. So, 6:1-8 belongs with the preceding genealogy as the conclusion to the account of Adam. There are numerous connections between the genealogy of chapter 5 and the narrative of 6:1-8.

2. Structure

These eight verses are presented as two parallel panels, each with a similar three-part structure. Someone sees and acts, then the Lord speaks, and finally a person or group of people is described. In the first panel it's the sons of God who see; they see that something is good and then act upon this evaluation. In the second panel it's the Lord who sees; he sees that something is evil and then responds. In the first panel the Nephilim are described; in the second panel Noah is described. These two panels offer us earth's view and heaven's view on the situation when humanity began to multiply on the earth.

1. Earth's view (6:1-4)
   a. The sons of God (2)
      i. see that…good
      ii. take
   b. The LORD speaks (3)
   c. The Nephilim (4)

2. Heaven's view (6:5-8)
   a. The LORD (5-6)
      i. sees that…evil
      ii. regrets
   b. The LORD speaks (7)
   c. Noah (8)

This structure highlights two major contrasts: between how the sons of God see and how the Lord sees, and between the Nephilim and Noah. It was only when I discerned this structure that I finally began to make sense of the passage, after years of feeling like Tevye.

I. The View from Earth (6:1-4)

Hitherto I've used TNIV for this series. But unfortunately, in its quest for readability and inclusive language the TNIV has lost some of the nuances of this passage, so here I'll switch to ESV.

> **When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years." The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. (Gen 6:1-4 ESV)**

Setting (1)

Verse 1 gives the setting for the passage: "When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them." Genesis is a book of beginnings. It begins "In the beginning." Five times the verb "begin" is used in these opening chapters (Gen 1-11); this is its second instance. Man began to multiply upon the face of the land, *adam* upon the *adamah* (here *adam* means man as a species, man as humanity). This multiplication was good; this was as God intended it to be. In the beginning, when God created man as male and female, he blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (1:28). The beginning of the account of Adam reiterated this:

> **When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. (5:1b-2)**

This blessing was divine enablement to fulfill the command, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." So the multiplication of humanity upon the land, of *adam* upon the *adamah*, as detailed in the genealogy and in 6:1, was a good thing, a sign of God's blessing.

1. The sons of God see (2)

The narrative proper begins in verse 2: "the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive." This wasn't just a curious gaze. As the sons of God looked upon these young women they made an evaluation: these were "attractive" (ESV), "beautiful" (NASB, TNIV), "fair" (NRSV)—they were "good," for this is the same adjective we've heard 15 times already in Genesis. The sons of God then acted on their evaluation: "they took as their wives any they chose." This might seem harmless enough: "they took wives for themselves" is the normal Hebrew idiom for marriage. We use a similar idiom in English. Next Saturday, when I conduct a wedding, I will ask the man, "Do you take this woman to be your wife?" But here the phrase has sinister connotations, especially when it is the response to seeing that something is good.

In the garden Eve saw that the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was good and she took. Now the sons of God see that the daughters of man are good and they take. This is not a good echo we hear. Seven times in chapter 1 the Lord looked upon what he had made; seven times he saw that it was good, even very good. As creator God can make that evaluation of his creation. But was Eve qualified to make that evaluation of the fruit? The Lord had told the man what was good. When Eve made her own evaluation, she ceased living by faith and started living merely by sight—her own sight. The echoes of Eve are unmistakable in the behavior of these sons of God. They acted in autonomy from God when they made their own evaluation that these daughters were good and then took.

Who are these sons of God and daughters of man? There are three major interpretations of the sons of God: that they are angels, or kings, or the descendants of Seth. All three interpretations are ancient; all are held by evangelicals.

Probably the most common Christian interpretation is that the sons of God are the male descendants of Seth. They are the sons born to the line of Seth in the preceding genealogy (ch. 5). They are the sons of the covenant, the seed of the woman, the men in relationship to God. Support for this interpretation is found in the father-son language that God later uses for his covenant people. The daughters of man are then understood to be the descendants of Cain, whose genealogy is given in chapter 4. The Sethite men sin by intermarrying with the ungodly line of Cain. They fail to keep the covenant line pure. A major problem with this interpretation is that the context requires that the daughters of man include the daughters born to the line of Seth in chapter 5. It also fails to explain the contrast between "God" and "man" in the two groups: the sons of *God* and the daughters of *man*.

A second interpretation is that the sons of God are kings, since this is how ancient peoples often regarded their rulers. Later, God would use father-son language to refer to the king who ruled over his covenant people. Most consider these kings to be tyrant rulers, even demonic-possessed tyrants. In this view the daughters of man are ordinary women. The rulers are a law unto themselves, doing whatever they want, taking as many wives as they want, behaving in the style of Lamech at the end of chapter 4.

The third major interpretation is that the sons of God are heavenly beings. This makes best sense of the contrast between the sons of *God* and the daughters of *man*. Elsewhere in the OT "the sons of God" are the heavenly beings gathered around God's throne; they are his heavenly court (e.g., Job 1-2). Their sin lies in mixing heaven and earth. This view also makes best sense of some statements in the NT. Peter says of Jesus and his resurrection,

> **Christ [was] put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah. (1 Pet 3:18-20)**

That passage will also be found in any book about Bible difficulties! Describing God's judgment upon those who did not believe, Jude says,

> **And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day—just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. (Jude 6-7)**

These two passages suggest that angels engaged in sexual immorality. Genesis 6 suggests the nature of this perversion: unnatural liaisons with human women.

Critics of this view point out that Jesus said that angels don't marry (Matt 22:30), but these were rebellious angels. Critics also object that it seems unfair for God to punish humanity for the sin of heavenly beings. But there were two separate judgments, one on humanity and a separate one on these rebellious angels: God threw them out of heaven into "prison" to await their final judgment.

This is the interpretation I take: that the sons of God were angelic beings who intermingled with human women, for which sin they were thrown out of heaven.

2. The Lord speaks (3)

The second section is the Lord's speech: "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years." Here be several more dragons! What shall the Lord's Spirit no longer do? How is man flesh? And to what do the "120 years" refer?

a. The verb here translated "abide" is used only this once in the Hebrew Bible. Since no one knows what it means, scholars resort to slight modifications of the Hebrew text. Some modify it to "remain," which is the Septuagint reading. Others modify it to "strive." Among English versions, perhaps slightly more adopt "remain."

b. Does the Lord say that man is "flesh" because he is mortal (TNIV) or because he is corrupt (HCSB)?

c. Are the 120 years the new lifespan of man or is it the period of time before God exercises judgment?

The Lord's Spirit is his life-giving power. When the Lord breathed the breath of life into the man (*adam*) he had formed from the dust of the ground (*adamah*), he became a living being (2:7). The Lord here announces at least a reduction in this life-giving presence inside humanity. The ten generations of Adam's genealogy (ch. 5) had all lived long lives. Henceforth the reduced presence of the Lord's Spirit would limit lifespans to 120 years. The post-Flood genealogies do show a steady reduction in lifespan. The offspring of this intermingling of heaven and earth are neither immortal nor divine; they are mortal and will die. God's Spirit will not remain in them. They will not be under blessing, invigorated by God's life-giving Spirit. God will frustrate this quest for immortality. Life does not lie in this direction.

3. The Nephilim (4)

Finally we come to the Nephilim. These are presumably the offspring of the sons of God and the daughters of man. The narrator provides two further clues to the identity of these Nephalim, referring to them as "the mighty men of old, men of renown." I think that some Greek mythology can help us here. The Septuagint translated both Nephalim and "mighty men" (*gibborim*) with *gigantes*, "giants." In Greek mythology the *gigantes*, the giants, resulted from the union of heaven and earth; they were semi-divine beings, sharing divine and human parentage. Likewise the heroes of old. Our word "hero" derives from the Greek "*herōs*." The hero was also often of mixed divine and human ancestry, giving him great strength and ability. The most famous Greek heroes were Heracles, Achilles and Perseus. These mighty men of old were celebrated and venerated. These were men of renown.

Societies of the Ancient Near East also told stories of semi-divine ancestors. The semi-legendary founders of the Mesopotamian city-states were considered to be semi-divine rulers. This well fits the context of Genesis. When Cain went into self-imposed exile from God he fathered a son who was the first city-builder (4:17). His line led to Lamech, a mighty tyrant. The next person described as a "mighty man" (*gibbor*) is Nimrod, the first empire-builder (10:8-11). Understanding these Nephalim as the semi-divine heroes of old fits both the Biblical text and the ancient societal context.

So, I'm now willing to stick my neck out and identify the sons of God, the daughters of man and the Nephilim. The sons of God were angels who intermingled with human society, and specifically with the daughters born to human society. From these illicit unions came the Nephilim, the semi-divine founders of ancient society. These were the great men, the men of renown, the men to whom human society looked with admiration and awe. But God announced he would withhold his life-giving Spirit from these. He would not bless these unions. What does the Lord make of all this? We're told in the next four verses.

II. The View from Heaven (6:5-8)

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. (6:5-8)

1. The Lord sees (5-6)

The first panel began with the sons of God making an evaluation; the second panel opens with the Lord making an evaluation. But his evaluation is the polar opposite. The sons of God saw good. But the Lord sees evil: "the wickedness (evil) of man was great on the earth." God intended a multiplication of people on the earth, but what this brought was a multiplication of evil. This evil is comprehensive: *every* intention, *only* evil, *all* the time. Evil had permeated every part of man's being: his intentions, his thoughts, his heart. The rebellious heavenly beings saw good, but God, the Lord whom they rejected, saw only evil.

Just as the sons of God acted on their evaluation, so the Lord responded to his evaluation: he "was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." Whoa!! Did I read that right? "The Lord was *sorry* that he had made man on the earth." Let's try other translations: "The Lord *regretted*." Elsewhere the verb is translated "repent" or "change one's mind." Can the Lord do that? Can he be sorry or regretful that he has done something? Can he repent or change his mind? Here be more dragons! This is such a big topic that I'm going to punt and deal with it next week, devoting the whole message to this one topic: can God change his mind?

2. The Lord speaks (7)

Next, just as in the first panel, the Lord speaks: "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." The structure of the two panels suggests that we should read the Lord's two statements together. Removing his life-giving Spirit from man, the Lord will blot him off the earth. Just a few verses ago man/*adam* had been multiplying on the land/*adamah*, as the Lord intended. But now, because human multiplication was accompanied by multiplication of human evil, God determines to wipe man/*adam* off the face of the land/*adamah*. And he would extend this blotting-out operation to the animals and the creeping things and the birds. At this stage the Lord does not specify how he intends to do this; we'll be told this in the next section.

3. Noah (8)

Finally Noah is described very briefly: "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord." We're not told why Noah found favor in the Lord's eyes; we'll be told this also in the next section. We hear echoes of Abel. Both Cain and Abel brought an offering to the Lord, but it was only on Abel and his offering that the Lord looked with favor? Why? Because it was only Abel who presented himself to the Lord together with his offering. Abel lived his life with reference to the Lord; Cain did not. Similarly, that Noah found favor with the Lord suggests that he, too, was living his life with reference to the Lord. We sense that he was the only one in his generation to do so.

The structure of the passage places Noah in contrast to the Nephilim. Note the very disparate lengths of the two verses. The Nephilim receive a lengthy verse; Noah a verse of just five Hebrew words. Much is said of the Nephilim: they were the mighty men of old, the men of renown. Little is said of Noah: only that he found favor in the eyes of the Lord. That's all that needs be said at this point. The Nephilim found favor in the eyes of society, but Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. The Nephilim were the world's heroes, but Noah was God's hero. Enough said!

This narrative features five sets of characters. Everyone wants to know about three of them: the sons of God, the daughters of man, and the Nephilim. But it's the other two characters who are the most important: the Lord and Noah. The precise identification of the sons of God, the daughters of man and the Nephilim is not the most important thing about this passage. More important is observing the two sets of contrasts: between how the sons of God and the Lord see, and between the Nephilim and Noah.

These two contrasts are again brought together in the crossing fates of Saul and David, the first two kings of Israel. As Samuel grew old, Israel worried about its future leadership and asked for a king "that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Sam 8:20). They wanted a Nephilim-style of ruler: a mighty man to fight their battles. Though it displeased the Lord, he gave them what they wanted: Saul, a man head and shoulders taller than anyone else (9:2)—just the man for the job! But Saul had no faith; he did what was right in his

own eyes, until the Lord "regretted" or "was sorry" that he had appointed him king (1 Sam 15:35). The Lord then sent Samuel to Jesse's house to anoint a new king. But even Samuel was deceived; even he failed to see as the Lord saw. Samuel was confident that the Lord had chosen Jesse's eldest son, presumably a strapping fellow like Saul. But the Lord said to Samuel,

> **"Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (1 Sam 16:7)**

Whom did the Lord see? David, the runt of the family whom Jesse had not even bothered to present to Samuel. But David was a man after God's own heart, a man of faith, a man who lived his life in relationship to the Lord.

This passage raises three big sets of questions, none of which concerns the identity of the sons of God, the daughters of man and the Nephilim.

1. Do we see as the Lord sees? Or do we see good where he sees evil? Do we look on outward appearances or on the heart?
2. Whom do we look to as our heroes, as the mighty men of old, the men of renown?
3. Whose favor are we seeking?

In boarding school in England we used to sing a particular hymn each year on Remembrance Sunday:

> Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us,
> Such as did bear rule in their kingdoms, men renowned for their power;
> Leaders of the people by their counsels, and by their knowledge.
> Such as found out musical tunes, and recited verses in writing:
> All these were honored in their generations, and were the glory of their times.
> And some there be, which have no memorial;
> Who are perished as though they had never been.
> Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name liveth for evermore.

The movie *Chariots of Fire* opens with some of these lines as Lord Lindsay offers a eulogy, saying, "We're here today to give thanks for Harold Abrahams, to honor the legend."

Let us now praise famous men was written by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1923), using a text drawn almost verbatim from the Apocrypha, from chapter 44 of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus. Who are these famous men being praised? Ben-Sira goes on to list them: Enoch, Noah, Abraham and so on. The godly men of Israel's history: these are the famous men whom he holds up for praise. He was being counter-cultural in doing so. He was giving Israel a different view of the men of renown. These are not the heroic men looked to by the Greeks, or by the Hellenizers of his day, or later by the Romans. The author of Hebrews does a similar thing in his hall of faith (Heb 11), filled with many of the same names, beginning with Abel, Enoch and Noah.

The ancient world had its heroes, its men of renown. But the Lord's hero was Noah. Halls of Fame proliferate for every imaginable sport and activity. But the Lord looks on people differently and so should we. In his hall of fame are men and women of faith, many of them nobodies in the world's eyes, but who find favor in his eyes.

At their head is the Lord Jesus Christ. Where the sons of God abandoned their station in heaven in pursuit of lustful desires, this true son of God voluntarily gave up his station, making himself of no reputation (Phil 2:7 KJV). Rejected by man but faithful to his Father to the end, he went down to apparent defeat at the hands of the strong men, the mighty men. But he emerged the victor and proclaimed his victory to those fallen angels held in prison for eternal judgment, proclaiming to them that theirs was not the way to join heaven and earth, theirs was not the way to bring eternal life to earth. It is Jesus who joins together heaven and earth in the right way. And now God pours out his Spirit into the lives of those who follow this champion. That Spirit which he withheld in the days of Noah he now pours out on all those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ, giving us eternal life. Therefore, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Heb 12:2).

> *Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)*

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DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?

Catalog No. 1586
Genesis 6:6-7
24th Message
Bernard Bell
August 8, 2010

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Yesterday I had the great pleasure of conducting a wedding here at PBCC. It was with great confidence in the couple's suitability for marriage to one another that I performed the ceremony. Nevertheless, twice during the service I gave them the opportunity to change their minds. Twice I asked them, "Will you take this woman to be your wedded wife? Will you take this man to be your wedded husband?" I asked it first immediately before asking "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" I asked it again immediately before the exchange of vows, just in case my wedding sermon on "living together" had given them second thoughts. On either occasion they could have said, "No, I've made a terrible mistake." Up until a certain point there was still time for them to back out. There would have been much awkwardness; many people would have been bewildered, disappointed, upset. But there came a certain point in the ceremony when this was no longer possible. When the couple exchanged vows and rings they became bound together by covenant. When I pronounced them husband and wife, I solemnly declared, "Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder." They were now one in God's sight. It was an irrevocable step: married in the sight of both God and the state. Unfortunately the state no longer considers such vows irrevocable. It has become increasingly easy for married couples to change their mind.

We've recently seen some high profile changes of mind. A few years ago Britney Spears took just a few hours to realize she had made a terrible mistake after getting married the first time. At the other end of the spectrum, a couple married for forty years have announced that they have changed their minds: Al and Tipper Gore who ten years ago shared such a passionate kiss at the Democratic National Convention in 2000, a warm embrace watched by just a few million people. Even more recently we've had the saga of Bristol Palin and Levi Johnston and their on-again, off-again engagement.

In yesterday's wedding, after the exchange of vows and rings, James sang *Great is Thy faithfulness*, expressing the couple's gratitude for God's faithfulness to them. Today we have just sung that same song as the conclusion of a song set that was carefully put together. We started by singing *Father, Long Before Creation*: "Though the world may change its fashion, yet our God is e'er the same." Then we sang *Forever*: "his love endures forever…forever God is faithful." Finally we came to this hymn we all know and love so well:

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not;
As Thou has been Thou forever wilt be.

But now we come to the verses for today's sermon and they seem to throw that verse out of the window. Twice in two verses we read that God was sorry that he had done something. Regretting that he had made man on the earth he announced that he would remove man from the earth. To us, being sorry and deciding to undo what you have done implies more than a mere shadow of turning. It's a 180-degree turn, a complete reversal. How can we then sing, "There is no shadow of turning with Thee; Thou changest not…As Thou has been Thou forever wilt be"?

If you were here last week, you will recall that last week's text was so full of problems, so beset with dragons, that I punted on one of them: this problem of God being sorry and changing his mind. Today I'm catching the punt and I'll attempt to run with it. Can God change his mind? Does God change his mind?

We saw that Gen 6:1-8 comprises two parallel panels of identical three-part structure.

1. Earth's view (6:1-4)
   a. The sons of God (2)
      i. see that…good
      ii. take
   b. The LORD speaks (3)
   c. The Nephilim (4)

2. Heaven's view (6:5-8)
   a. The LORD (5-6)
      i. sees that…evil
      ii. regrets
   b. The LORD speaks (7)
   c. Noah (8)

In each panel someone sees and acts, then the Lord speaks, and finally a person or group of people is described. In the first panel (6:1-4) the sons of God see that the daughters of man are good (beautiful) and they take them. In the second panel (6:5-8) the Lord sees that man's evil is great, and he is sorry that he has made man. The first panel presents the Nephilim, the second presents Noah. We saw that this structure highlights two contrasts: how the sons of God see versus how the Lord sees, and the Nephilim versus Noah. Today we focus our attention on the second panel, and especially on the Lord's regret.

> **The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (Gen 6:5-8 ESV)**

The Lord's evaluation is the polar opposite of that of the sons of God. They saw good, specifically that the daughters of man were good (beautiful). The Lord saw evil, specifically the evil of mankind. He intended the multiplication of man on the earth, enabled by his blessing and in fulfillment of his command, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." This indeed happened but it brought with it a multiplication of evil. The evil was comprehensive: *every* intention, *only* evil, *all* the time. Evil had permeated every part of man's being: his intentions, his thoughts, his heart.

The sons of God responded to their evaluation of good by taking whomever they chose. The Lord responded to his evaluation of evil with pained sorrow: he was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. In case we missed the point, it is reiterated in the Lord's speech: "I am sorry that I have made them."

What sense can we make of this response of the Lord's, both here and elsewhere in the Bible? First, a few general comments.

Firstly, the narrator intends us to hear this word loud and clear. Repeating a statement near-verbatim, first in narrative then in dialog, or vice versa, is one of the ways Hebrew narrative expresses emphasis. So, we can't just brush this under the carpet. It's front and center. However we translate the verb, God did it, he was conscious that he did it, and the narrator wants us to know that he did it.

Secondly, we can't make the problem go away by translating the verb in a gentler way. It is a very difficult verb to translate into English. We don't have any English word that comes close to corresponding to the Hebrew. Here the English versions offer several different translations: the Lord *was sorry* (NASB, NRSV, ESV), he *regretted* (TNIV, HCSB, JPS, NET), he *was grieved* (NIV), that he had made man on the earth. KJV uses the quaint and now unintelligible "it *repented* the Lord." Elsewhere the verb is translated as "repent," "relent," "change one's mind," or "have pity." No matter how we translate the verb we have a problem. There is no gentler way to translate this verb.

Thirdly, this is not a new problem. These verses about the Lord changing his mind have been in the Hebrew scriptures since they were put together. On the one hand, the Hebrew Bible says very clearly that the Lord does not change his mind. For example, Balaam said to Balak, the king of Moab who hired him to prophesy against Israel,

> **"God is not man, that he should lie,**
> **or a son of man, that he should *change his mind*.**
> **Has he said, and will he not do it?**
> **Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Num 23:19)**

Samuel said to Saul, when announcing that the Lord was going to remove him as king over Israel,

> **"And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or *have regret*** (change his mind)**, for he is not a man, that he should *have regret*** (change his mind)**." (1 Sam 15:29)**

And yet elsewhere the Hebrew Bible says very clearly that the Lord did change his mind, using exactly the same verb. This seeming contradiction is especially striking in the case of Samuel's interaction with Saul, because twice in that same chapter we're told that the Lord did change his mind, that he was sorry that he had made Saul king (1 Sam 15:11, 35). Again we're told twice for emphasis, this time the other way around: first in dialog (v 11) then in narrative (v 35). The compilers of the Hebrew Bible evidently had no problem with these seemingly contradictory statements being cheek by jowl. Such statements are an integral part of the message of sacred Scripture. They evidently were less of a problem to the ancient compilers of the text than they are to some modern readers.

Can God change his mind? Does God change his mind? There have been several approaches to try to resolve this problem.

One approach is to say that this is simply an anthropomorphic way of speaking. It is certainly true that we are limited to speaking anthropomorphically about God. We are limited to human concepts and language in our attempt to comprehend God and to say anything about him. Theologians have found that it is often easier to say what God is not than to say what he is: at the core of all these negative statements lies the same statement made by Balaam and Samuel: God is not a man. We are like the pot trying to understand the potter and what he is doing. Yet God has revealed something of himself to us, he has made us capable of receiving that revelation, and he has given us his Spirit to give us understanding. Part of this self-revelation that God wants us to know is that he doesn't change his mind yet he does change his mind. So, despite our limitation of being pots not the potter we need to press ahead and try to comprehend this behavior of God.

A second approach is to distinguish between different levels of commitment on God's part, differentiating between his decrees and his announcements. Some have proposed that when he decrees that he will do something he will not change his mind, but when he merely announces that he will do something he can change his mind. I don't find this very satisfying. It's as if God has his fingers crossed behind his back when making an announcement and not when making a decree.

A third approach, one that has gained popularity in recent years, leads to what is called "open theism." Open theism wrestles with the tension between divine sovereignty and human free will. Where classical orthodoxy believes that God knows the future, indeed has determined the future, open theism states that God does not know the future; the future has not yet been determined. Instead, his behavior is contingent upon the response of humans. Wrestling with divine sovereignty and human free will is an age-old problem. Both are clearly stated in Scripture. But I am uncomfortable with open theism because it seems to make God less than God.

I find that none of these three approaches really helps us understand what is going on here. They are too abstract, too philosophical. It is too easy to debate these three approaches in a cold classroom setting, intellectually engaged by not existentially engaged, treating this as a matter for the mind with no engagement by the heart. I find it most helpful to approach the problem from a different direction, to think of it in terms of what God is up to in the world, of what the potter is doing with the pot. Why did God make the world and why did he make humans? What does he intend the world to be and what does he intend humans to be? It's within these questions that we have to ask the question of God changing his mind.

God had no need to create either the world or humans. He dwelt in eternal glory, completely fulfilled within the community of the Godhead. Yet he chose, for his good pleasure, to create a cosmos, the heavens and the earth, which he then filled with life. What was his purpose for the earth? What was his purpose for humanity? In the short-term the earth is a home for the various forms of life, and especially for the human. In the short-term the human is God's visible representative on earth, the image in his temple. God displays his glory in the heavens, but he did not make his presence directly visible in the world; instead he made it indirectly visible through the human whom he placed in the world as his representative. This is the story of creation, a story that we'll find is not yet complete. God has further purposes in mind.

Within the story of creation there is now a second story, the story of redemption as God acts to reverse the Fall and curse arising from human disobedience. He announced an ongoing conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent that would result in a final showdown. God moves this story along. We have to read his seeming changes of heart within the context of this unfolding drama of redemption.

God intended humanity to multiply on the earth; he wanted to fill the earth with his representatives. But this brought with it a multiplication of human evil on the earth. Humanity was no longer serving the purpose for which God had created it. The seed of the

serpent had multiplied until God would tolerate it no longer. I don't really have a good explanation for why God allows evil in the world. The Bible gives us very little explanation of that. Instead what the Bible focuses on is what God is doing about evil, what he is doing to remove evil from the world. Several times in these early chapters of Genesis we see that God acts to restrain evil: there is a limit beyond which he will not allow evil to progress. Here in Gen 6:5-7 human evil had reached that limit. So God said, "Enough!" He determined to wipe the slate clean, wiping humanity off the earth. Yet God's purposes for the world and for humanity remained the same. Therefore he preserved Noah and a sampling of life so as to start a new creation on a renewed earth. After the Flood he commissioned Noah to be a new Adam, to go forth under his blessing and "be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." Did this wiping clean and starting over with Noah solve the problem? No. God knew that human sin was as much of a problem after the Flood as before (compare 6:5 and 8:21), but God bound himself to keep creation going while he continued to pursue his unchanging purposes for the world and for humanity.

The next really significant change of mind is when the Israelites were at Mt Sinai after their exodus from Egypt. Just forty days after promising to obey all God's commandments, the Israelites were worshiping the golden calf, while Moses was on top of the mountain receiving detailed instructions about the tabernacle so God could dwell with his people (Exod 32). Provoked to anger, the Lord said to Moses, "Stand aside while I wipe them out, then I'll begin again with you." Moses had the audacity to plead with God, urging him to remember his purposes, his promises to Abraham, urging him to change his mind and relent from this disaster. The Lord did change his mind. Moses made another request, "teach me your ways so I may know you…show me your glory." And God did: he revealed himself to Moses, proclaiming,

> **"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." (Exod 34:6-7)**

That's who the Lord is. His love abounds, not because of his people's faithfulness but because of his faithfulness. He forgives sin. This is why he changes his mind. It's fundamental to his character. I think this blew Moses away: he "bowed to the ground at once and worshiped" (34:8). This self-revelation of God's character now became central to Israel's understanding of the Lord. Less than a year later Israel again rebelled against the Lord after ten of the twelve spies brought back a negative report of the land (Num 14). Again the Lord told Moses to stand aside so he could wipe the people out then begin again with him. Again Moses urged him to forgive, to change his mind. Moses now had an extra argument: he reminded the Lord that he himself had revealed that this was his character, to forgive sin, to change his mind. Why did God change his mind on these two occasions? Because his purposes for Israel had not changed! He changed his mind because his purposes were changeless.

Why did God change his mind when he rejected Saul as king? Again, because his purposes had not changed. It was never God's intention that his people have a king like Saul. The people wanted a king like all the other nations, a king like Saul, head and shoulders taller than anyone else. God allowed them to have such a king. But after tolerating Saul's faithless disobedience for a while God said "Enough!" He changed his mind and removed Saul as king. Why? Because he had made a mistake? No, because he had a purpose in mind for the king and that purpose remained unchanging. Saul never fulfilled that purpose. He never could because he was the people's choice, not God's choice, a king after the people's heart, not God's heart. So God's change of mind was really an expression of his faithfulness to his intentions for the king.

My final example of God's change of mind is the book of Jonah, where the verb occurs three times. When Jonah, God's reluctant prophet, pronounced divine judgment upon Nineveh for its evil, the king of Nineveh called for nation-wide fasting and repentance:

> **"Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up** (turn from) **their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet *relent*** (change his mind) **and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." (Jon 3:9b-10)**

God heard this cry:

> **When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he *relented*** (changed his mind) **and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. (3:11)**

This change of mind made Jonah mad. In an angry sulk he told God why he had tried to run away: he knew that this was what God would do. He knew that this was God's character, that he would change his mind.

> **"I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who *relents*** (changes his mind) **from sending calamity." (Jon 4:2)**

Jonah had an orthodox theology but it hadn't impacted him experientially. In his head he knew that this is who God is, but it hadn't reached his heart. This understanding of God as a God who changes his mind had not transformed him.

Jonah is a fascinating book. For me, the really big question is "Why is Jonah in the Bible?" It's really a very odd book. The pagan sailors cried out to God and were saved. The people of Nineveh cried out to God and turned from their evil; they repented. They found that God turned from his evil, the calamity he intended to bring upon them; he changed his mind. How much more, then, should God's own people Israel turn from their evil ways and find that God would change his mind! They would find God ready to forgive, because it's in his nature to forgive. Jonah found this nature objectionable. But all the other prophets realized that Israel's only hope lay in having a God like this. For example, Joel urged the people,

> **"Even now," declares the Lord,**
> **"return to me with all your heart,**
> **with fasting and weeping and mourning."**
> **Rend your heart**
> **and not your garments.**
> **Return to the Lord your God,**
> **for he is gracious and compassionate,**
> **slow to anger and abounding in love,**
> **and he *relents*** (changes his mind) **from sending calamity.**
> **Who knows? He may turn and *relent*** (change his mind)
> **and leave behind a blessing. (Joel 2:12-14)**

Micah concludes with these words, read as our call to worship:

> **Who is a God like you,**
> **who pardons sin and forgives the transgression**
> **of the remnant of his inheritance?**
> **You do not stay angry forever**
> **but delight to show mercy.**
> **You will again have compassion on us;**
> **you will tread our sins underfoot**

and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.
You will be faithful to Jacob,
and show love to Abraham,
as you pledged on oath to our ancestors
in days long ago. (Mic 7:18-20)

At the end of a book full of denouncing Israel and Judah for a litany of sins, warning of impending judgment, Micah ends by saying that Israel's great hope, her only hope, is to have a God who changes his mind. And so he bursts into praise, "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy." Notice how he ties in this forgiving nature of God to his faithfulness to Abraham and Jacob. God had purposes for his people that he had expressed in his promises to Abraham (Gen 12:2-3). Because God was faithful to his purposes he would change his mind and forgive his people's sin. Forgiveness implies changing one's mind. Faithfulness implies not changing one's mind. Micah saw no contradiction here. Quite the opposite! He saw that this was Israel's only hope. God would change his mind because he is faithful. This faithfulness to his purposes we call his righteousness. He will fulfill his purposes for creation, for humanity, for his people.

When I see that this is the emphasis of the prophets—of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Joel, and others; when I see that all of the prophets hung onto this character of God's—all except Jonah who found it offensive—it gives me a completely different way of looking at God changing his mind. Now I place myself into that story. I trace it on from how God behaved to Israel in the Old Testament to how he behaves in the New Testament age. I see that this is what God has done to me: he has changed his mind.

The penalty for sin is death, but God has changed his mind. He no longer looks on us as our sins deserve. He looks on us through the Lord Jesus Christ, and he gives us life. Why does he do this? Not because of anything in me, but because of his faithfulness to his purposes, to what he is doing with the world and with humanity. He has created this world for a particular purpose. He has created humanity for a particular purpose. The sinfulness of humanity will not stand in the way of him fulfilling his purposes. This requires him to change his mind. My very life depends upon it.

Yes, God changes his mind. He changes his mind because his purposes are changeless. I don't know how to formulate that in a robust philosophical package. But this is not a debate to have in the cold confines of a classroom. What I know is that my life depends on God being this way. I can find it offensive, like Jonah, or my only hope, like Micah. I take comfort in the faithfulness of God, in his righteousness: that he created the world for a purpose and he created humans for a purpose. Israel could simultaneously say that the Lord is not a man that he should change his mind, but then hold on to the fact that the Lord does change his mind! I do the same thing.

I am a pot, the Lord is the potter. When the pot ruins itself, at a certain point the Lord says "Enough!"—he changes his mind and ruins it. But when the ruined pot knows it's ruined and cries out to the potter, the potter again changes his mind: he sets to work to rebuild the pot into a beautiful vessel filled with his glory. God does this to complete the story of redemption, and beyond that to complete the story of creation: to make this world a fit place to fill with his glory, and to make us his people to dwell in his presence bathed in his everlasting glory.

It is because God changes his mind that I can sing of his mercy and grace, both of which require him doing just that. Mercy: he doesn't give me what I deserve. Grace: he gives me what I don't deserve. Like Moses I respond in worship: "Dissolved by thy goodness I fall to the ground and weep to the praise of the mercy I've found." Any debate about God changing his mind is to be conducted not in a dry classroom but on one's knees in worship. God changes his mind because he doesn't change his mind!

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NOAH AND HIS ARK

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Genesis 6:9-22
25th Message
Bernard Bell
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SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

One of the most popular images drawn from the Bible is that of Noah and his ark. It is a popular motif in society, both Christian and secular, and is used for a wide range of activities:

1. Noah's ark is a favorite image for children. It's a common name for pre-schools and day care. We have our own Noah's Place, the day care for our women's Bible studies on Wednesday mornings. Most kids, somewhere along the way, learn the *Arky Arky Song*: "the animals, the animals, they come in by twosies, twosies…the elephants and the kangaroosies, roosies."

2. Noah's Ark is a common name for many animal rescue shelters, both for household pets such as cats and dogs, and for more exotic animals such as lions and tigers and bears, oh my.

3. The Millennium Seed Bank operated by Kew Gardens, London, and the Svalbard Global Seed Vault on the Norwegian island of Spitzbergen are each referred to as a Noah's Ark for seeds, a place for keeping alive the planet's biodiversity in the midst of ever-increasing destruction.

4. The motif is used for water sports in general. In Colorado there's a white water rafting outfit called Noah's Ark. Noah's Ark Waterpark in Wisconsin is America's largest.

Some people think that Noah's ark still exists. Expeditions are regularly mounted to Mount Ararat in Turkey, close to the border with Armenia and Iran. Periodically there are reports that the ark has been found in the ice high up on the mountain. But they're looking in the wrong place: we know that the ark is here in the Santa Cruz Mountains, just over the hill at Redwood Christian Park!

The image of Noah's Ark captures the public imagination. In our journey through the early chapters of Genesis, our story of origins, we come to the original account which has generated this imagery.

This is the account of Noah and his family. (Gen 6:9a TNIV)

This is the third of the five accounts of Genesis 1–11. It runs through the end of chapter 9. Noah's account comprises two stories: the Flood Narrative (6:9-9:17) and Noah the vintner (9:18-27). The story of the Flood is covered in great detail: more than three chapters spanning only a year.

Introduction (6:9-12)

The narrative begins with some background information about Noah.

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. (6:9b-10)

To understand the subsequent narrative there are two things we need to know about Noah: his character and that he had three sons. The previous section (6:1-8) had contrasted the Nephilim and Noah. The Nephilim were the mighty men, the men of renown, the heroes to whom the ancient world looked. But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. Now we are told three things about Noah: he was a righteous man, he was blameless in his generations, and he walked with God.

Noah was a righteous man: this means that he behaved rightly, appropriately in his relationships. He was a blameless man: this doesn't mean he never did anything wrong, but that he acted with integrity, with wholeness. The addition of "in his generations" suggests that he was the only one to do so, not only in his generation, but going further back. Finally, he walked with God. The Hebrew text is quite emphatic here: it was with God that he walked. This suggests that it was not with God that everyone else was walking. Noah was just like Enoch, his great grandfather, who walked with God in both life and death (5:22-24).

How did Noah know to live life this way? Presumably the same way that Abel knew to bring an offering to the Lord, that Shem and his line knew to call on the name of the Lord, that Enoch knew to walk with the Lord. Such behavior is built into the structure of the universe. This is the way humans, created in the image of God, should relate to their God. Any failure to do so is a refusal to acknowledge one's creator and to live life accordingly. Were these people trying to earn their standing with God? No, their behavior flowed out of recognizing their standing. Since it was the appropriate behavior for that relationship it was considered righteous behavior. This is why the Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, why he took Enoch, and why Noah found favor in his eyes.

But not everyone was behaving this way, living his life with reference to God. In his generation Noah was alone. The rest of the world had been living a completely different way, as we're told in the next two verses:

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. (6:11-12)

The verb "corrupt" is used three times in these two verses. The earth was ruined because humanity had ruined itself. God looked out on the world that he had made, which he had seven times pronounced good, and now he saw a ruined earth. He had told the humans, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth" (1:28), but what they had filled the earth with was violence: self-centered behavior motivated by greed, lust, thirst for power; behavior devoid of ethics, of integrity, of righteousness. Humanity had ruined itself and as a result the earth was ruined too.

In our Scripture reading last week (Jer 18:1-10), the Lord told Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house. Here he saw that the pot which the potter was making was ruined—the same word as here. Humanity had ruined itself and the earth. They no longer served the purpose for which God had created them. Therefore God changed his mind about humanity on the earth, as we saw last week. He

would no longer allow the earth and humanity to frustrate the purposes for which he had made them. What will God do?

God's Plan (6:13-21)

Remarkably, God takes Noah into his confidence. In a lengthy speech he unfolds to Noah his plan, alternating twice between what he will do and what Noah is to do:

a1: God's general plan: destroy the earth and humanity (13)
b1: Command to Noah: make an ark (14-16)
a2: God's specific plan: send the Flood, but establish his covenant with Noah (17-20)
b2: Command to Noah: provision the ark with food (21)

Firstly, God tells Noah his general plan:

So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth." (6:13)

God informs Noah that he will destroy both the earth and humanity because of human sin. His justice is fair: the word translated "destroy" is the same as "corrupt" in vv 11-12. Because humanity has ruined itself and the earth, God will ruin them both.

This is not the only story of divine judgment back in the mists of time. The Mesopotamians had their own flood stories, the most famous being the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, whose ancestor Utnapishtim survived the flood. There are many similarities between these stories and the Biblical account, but also very profound differences. Just as for the creation stories, these differences are far more important than the similarities. In the Mesopotamian stories the gods send a flood because there are too many humans and they are too noisy—like a frat party downstairs that's gotten out of control. The gods' intent is to wipe out all humans, but one of the gods breaks rank and tips off one man, advising him to build a boat. The survival of this one man is thus not the will of the gods. How different is the Genesis account. There is only one God. The problem he finds on earth is not overpopulation nor excessive noise; it is human sin. He tells his plans to Noah, because he looks upon Noah with favor; Noah is in relationship with him, and so he takes Noah into his confidence. Read against the background of the Mesopotamian stories, that simple statement, "So God said to Noah," speaks volumes.

In light of his general plan, God issues a command to Noah:

"So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high. Make a roof for it, leaving below the roof an opening one cubit high all around. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle and upper decks." (6:14-16)

God tells Noah, "Build yourself an ark." What's an ark? Who can forget Bill Cosby's monologue about God and Noah, which became one of his signature routines! God gives Noah a few directions, but this is not a detailed blueprint; we're not told enough to know exactly what the ark looked like. We're further hampered by the fact that several of the words are rare, even unique to these verses; we don't know what some of them mean. No one had built an ark before; no one has built a real one since.

Noah is first given general directions. He is to make for himself an ark of gopher wood. TNIV translates it as cypress, but no one really knows what gopher wood is. "Gopher" is simply a transliteration of the Hebrew word, which is used only this once. Noah is to make "rooms" in the ark. The word is usually understood as the plural of a word that elsewhere is used only in the singular and always means a bird's nest. Here it is taken to refer to compartments or rooms for the animals, like ancient condominiums. I find it rather comical to picture a hippo sitting on a bird's nest. Furthermore, this doesn't fit the context, sandwiched between two building materials: wood and pitch. So some interpret the word as meaning reeds (the consonants are the same), which fits the context much better. Finally, Noah is to coat the inside and outside with pitch, making a waterproof seal.

Next Noah is given some specific directions: "This is how you are to make it." He is given the dimensions of the ark: 300 cubits long by 50 wide by 30 high. That's 450 feet by 75 by 45. That's huge! 450 feet is the distance from the door of the Fellowship Hall to the back of the parking lot.

Noah is next given four specific directives, but again our understanding is hindered by the obscurity of some words or phrases. He is to make a *zohar* for the ark, but what's a *zohar*? This is another unique word, used only this once. The translations assume either a roof on the one hand, or a window, skylight or hatch on the other. But this word is not used for subsequent references to the window or the roof. Later Noah will open the window to send forth the raven (8:6). He will remove the "covering," which seems to be a roof, so he can look out upon the dried up earth (8:13). Neither of these seems to be the *zohar*. We don't really know what it is. Next Noah is to finish "it" to a cubit, but what is "it"? Is it the roof/window or is it the ark? And how is it to be finished to a cubit? No one really knows, but most assume that Noah is to leave a gap of a cubit (18 inches) below the roof. Thirdly, he is to make a door in the side of the ark. Finally, he is to make the ark with three decks. Why is Noah given these details? Not so we can understand the subsequent narrative: of the four specific features only the doorway seems to be important; the entrance into the ark is a major theme.

Many preachers have made much ado about these features, interpreting them typologically as pointing forward to Christ. The ark is of gopher wood because something living has to die, and because it points forward to another tree. The ark has rooms, places of security and rest, pointing to Jesus who bids all come to him and find rest. The ark is sealed with pitch; the root word for both verb and noun means "cover" and is later used for atonement, as in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when Israel's sins were covered. So, the ark is made waterproof with atonement, pointing to Christ's atonement through which we are "waterproofed" against God's judgment. Augustine noted that the dimensions are those of a man, that is, their proportions are those of an adult man; this points forward to Jesus the second Man, who is our ark of safety. The ark has a skylight, so Noah could only look upwards to God, just as Jesus looked upwards to his Father, whose will he delighted to do. The ark has only one door, pointing to Jesus the Door, who is the only one way of salvation. The three decks suggest the humanity of Jesus: body, soul and spirit. I kid you not! This is a popular line of interpretation, but it's all fanciful. The ark does point forward to Christ, as we'll see next week, but not these individual features.

Artists have used these details to portray the ark; they all assume it's a large boat. Others have gone further, building replicas. Since 1974 a pastor in Maryland has been trying to build a full-size ark to house his church. A full-size ark has been built in Hong Kong. A man in the Netherlands has built a small-scale ark and is now at

work building a full-scale replica. Like the artists, these reconstructions assume that the ark is like a boat.

But there are certain things that the ark lacks. It has neither sail nor rudder. It lacks any means of propulsion and any means of steering. Contrary to modern reconstructions and artists' depictions, the ark is not a boat. It is merely a box. Our English word "ark" is from the Latin *arca*, used in the Vulgate; it means a chest or coffer, a box in which things are kept safe. That Latin word is also used for the ark of the covenant, though it represents a different Hebrew word. In fact, the Hebrew word *tebah* is used for only two things: Noah's ark and Moses's basket. That basket was also made of reeds sealed with pitch (Exod 2:3). Though these two objects are vastly different in size, they are similar in function. Both lack propulsion and steering: they are cast adrift at the mercy of God. Both are watertight containers in which the occupant is preserved alive amidst waters of destruction. Both occupants emerge from their containers to lead people into a new beginning: Noah for all humanity, Moses for God's people Israel.

Here is another contrast with the Mesopotamian flood stories. Utnapishtim built a boat and he hired an oarsman to both propel and steer the boat. But Noah can neither propel nor steer his ark.

Noah has not yet been told why he needs to build such an enormous box for himself. God now tells him his specific plan:

> **"I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive." (6:17-20)**

God will do two things. He is about to bring the Flood. This will be no ordinary flood: a unique Hebrew word is used for this. Because no other like event has occurred before or since, it is further described as "waters over the earth." The Septuagint (Greek) translates this as *kataklysmos*, a cataclysm; the Vulgate (Latin) as *diluvium*, from which we get our word deluge. Both words mean a washing away, and hence a massive flood. This Deluge will be the means by which God destroys both the earth and humanity, as he announced in v 13. Again this word "destroy" (6:17, cf. 6:13) is the same as "corrupt" used three times in 6:11-12. The earth and humanity have ruined themselves, so God will ruin them using the waters of the Flood. Now has come the time to destroy the destroyers of the earth. The same judgment is announced in Revelation (11:18). We'll look more closely at the Flood next week.

But what about God's unchanging purposes for the world and for humanity? Those purposes remain, and they will be continued through Noah. The second part of God's plan is that he will establish his covenant with Noah. This doesn't mean that God is going to make a new covenant: a different verb is used for that. No, God is going to continue an existing covenant through Noah. In the beginning he blessed humanity, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth" (1:28), implying a covenant relationship. He will now continue this relationship through Noah, implying that he must keep Noah alive through the waters of destruction.

Now Noah finds out why he is to build the ark. His part in this covenant is simply to enter the ark, together with his family and representatives of all living creatures, two of each kind, male and female. Though Noah is to bring the animals into the ark, he doesn't have to go out to catch them; they will come to him. They will come and he is to bring them in "to be kept alive," stated twice. This is the purpose of the ark: it is a box in which God's creatures, both humans and animals, are kept alive amidst the waters of judgment.

In light of this, God gives Noah a second command:

> **"You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them." (6:21)**

Noah is to provision the ark with enough food for himself, his family and the animals. That's a lot of food!

Noah's Obedience (6:22)

Finally, we're told Noah's response:

> **Noah did everything just as God commanded him. (6:22)**

In the entire Flood Narrative Noah never speaks a word. He simply acts. Specifically, he does everything God commands him to do. It is surely not accidental that the verb "do" or "make" is used exactly seven times in this passage: five times in God's directions to Noah, and twice in Noah's response. What a vast amount of activity is covered by that statement, "Noah did everything"! We want to know how he did it. But that's not important. What is important is that he "did everything just as God commanded him." This is why we were given details about the ark: so that it could said, "Noah did everything just as God commanded him." He made the ark of wood, reeds and pitch. He made its *zohar* and door, he made its three levels, and he minded the gap.

This obedience will be reinforced three times in the next chapter, that Noah did just as the Lord commanded him (7:5, 9, 16). Such obedience is a vivid illustration of Noah's walk with God. Did he do all this to earn his standing with God? No, he did all this because he was already in relationship with God. It was with God that he walked. He lived his life differently from the rest of the world. While they were sinking into violence he did everything God commanded him.

There is a striking parallel between Noah and Moses. In the Torah (Pentateuch) the tabernacle is the only other structure whose specifications, including dimensions, are given. When he erected the tabernacle, "Moses did everything just as the Lord commanded him" (Exod 40:16). Then he set up the furniture "as the Lord commanded him"—exactly seven times (40:19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 32). Both Noah and Moses lived their lives in faithful obedience to the Lord. They were men of faith.

Our Scripture reading was drawn from the opening verses of the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11.

> **Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.**
>
> **By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. (Heb 11:1-3)**

What is faith? It is not some vague, uncertain feeling about something that may or may not be true. It is not wishful thinking. Faith means being sure and certain of things. There are two realms: the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible, the "here and now" and the transcendent, the beyond. One realm we see with our eyes, the other we can see only with the eyes of faith. It is relatively easy to

live in the realm of the visible, the realm of the seen. There is no need for faith; one lives merely by sight. What you see is what you get. But that's not the ultimate reality. There is a realm beyond, behind: the realm of the not seen. In the beginning God didn't make the visible world out of visible stuff. There was a time when there was no visible stuff. How do we know this? We understand it by faith, faith in God's word and character. Noah lived his life by faith, paying attention to things not yet seen:

> **By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. (Heb 11:7)**

Noah was warned about things not yet seen. No one had ever heard of a Flood, let alone seen one. Could anyone imagine the removal of all life from earth? I'm sure all Noah's contemporaries thought that the world would continue on just as ever. They would carry on living life as they had always done. But Noah responded differently. He responded in faith, taking God seriously when he told him of things he had never yet seen. He responded in holy fear: not in abject terror but in reverence. He was reverent because it was with God he was walking. And so he built an ark, even though all his contemporaries must have thought him completely crazy. But he wasn't paying attention to his contemporaries; he was paying attention to God. By his faith he condemned the world. He showed that it was possible to live life differently, to live life in such a way that the Lord looked on him with favor, just as he had looked favorably on Abel. Therefore all his contemporaries were without excuse.

Several times the New Testament uses this contrast between Noah and his contemporaries to warn of the dangers of ignoring the things not yet seen. In his Olivet Discourse, Jesus noted that in the days of Noah people were busy eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, unawares of impending disaster; he warned that the same thing will happen at his return (Matt 24:36-39). All except Noah were busy getting on with their lives in the seen world, paying no attention to the things not yet seen. Peter described Noah as a preacher or herald of righteousness (2 Pet 2:5). His whole lifestyle proclaimed that there was a different way of living life.

I find that many preachers highlight this theme of Noah as a preacher of righteousness, condemning the world. Christians, they say, are to live life differently so as to leave the world without excuse. Our behavior is to be a rebuke to the world. But I am uncomfortable with this emphasis. God does call us to live life differently, to walk with him, to walk to the beat of a different drum. Yes, such behavior will ultimately condemn the world. But in the meantime God has another purpose in our behavior. He wants us to be attractive to the world. Paul writes,

> **But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? (2 Cor 2:14-16)**

Who is equal to such a task? Certainly not us. But Paul goes on to show that our sufficiency is in God (4:7). In Christ we are a new creation (5:17), living life as the new humanity. We are ambassadors for Christ (5:20). Ambassadors are to be attractive. Our lives are to be attractive. How do we be attractive to the world? Not by being like the world, but by being different, radically different. As we walk to the beat of a different drum, like Noah, like Enoch, like Abel, God is at work. People are watching us. Some ignore our behavior, some find it offensive, some find it foolish, but others find it attractive as God opens their eyes.

The major point about this piece of the story of Noah is not to give us detailed information about the ark, but to highlight the lifestyle of Noah. This section opens by noting that Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generations and it was with God that he walked. It closes by showing what that looked like: Noah did everything just as God commanded him. Noah lived life in a completely different manner in his generation, because he walked with God, paying attention to God.

God has called us to himself in Christ and has put his Spirit in us to enable us to live life differently. Such a lifestyle will eventually condemn the world, but in the meantime God will use our behavior to draw the world to himself. May we live in such a way that our lives are a fragrant aroma and that we are attractive ambassadors of Christ.

May the mind of Christ, my Savior,
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.

May His beauty rest upon me,
As I seek the lost to win,
And may they forget the channel,
Seeing only Him.

— Kate B. Wilkinson, 1925

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SUPPORTED ON THE WHELMING FLOOD

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26th Message
Bernard Bell
August 22, 2010

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Every day we're getting fresh reports of the flooding in Pakistan and the devastation along the Indus River. Now there are reports of further flooding in China—it seems that every few months we hear of yet more flooding in China. On Friday there was dramatic footage of railway carriages being swept into a swollen river near Chengdu. This country has also experienced devastating floods in recent years. In May the Cumberland River flooded Nashville. In 1997 the Red River flooded Grand Forks, North Dakota. In 1993 there was extensive flooding along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. In all these cases the floodplains were doing what floodplains are supposed to do: they were flooding! That's what a floodplain is! The periodic flooding of a river used to be seen as a great blessing. It deposited fresh alluvial silt over the floodplain, enriching the soil for the following year's crops. The Egyptians celebrated the annual flooding of the Nile for rejuvenating their land. But now the flooding of floodplains is inconvenient.

Periodic flooding was part of my childhood. For almost forty years my parents served in Thailand as missionaries. For almost all that time they lived in the floodplain of the country's main river, the Chao Phraya. Every November the river would overflow its banks after heavy rains in the northern mountains. People lived in such a way as to accommodate these annual inundations. Houses were built on stilts, ten feet above the ground. For most of my childhood I was away at boarding school during the floods, but would receive full reports about them in weekly letters from my parents. I recall in my mid-teens when my mother was confined to the house for several weeks. My father would wade through the front yard, with the water up to his chin and his clothes in a bag on top of his head, out to the road, which was built on an embankment. There he would dress and go about his daily activities. This went on for several weeks. That was just 35 years ago. Nowadays that would be considered intolerable; within a day we would want something to be done. I think it was just the next year that it was decided that the flooding was no longer convenient. The mission fought the flood, bringing in hundreds of truck loads of dirt to build up the riverbank. Each week I would read my father's vivid report of working on the riverbank, of how they were just able to keep ahead of the rising waters. The success of this project generated much goodwill in the community.

Floods are a periodic part of life in many parts of the world. Until the nineteenth century it was generally believed that long ago there was a flood far more devastating than any of these floods. The Biblical account of a catastrophic world-wide flood was accepted at face value. But in the nineteenth century this Biblical account was attacked from several directions. I'll highlight three of them because they are still influential.

The Genesis flood account was attacked as being scientifically impossible, thanks in large part to the work of two Scottish geologists: James Hutton in the period 1785-95, followed by Charles Lyell in his influential book *Principles of Geology* (1830). They argued that the processes we see operating today are those which have always operated and are sufficient to explain all geology. There is no room here for a catastrophic flood as described in Genesis.

A second avenue of attack came from the discovery of Mesopotamian flood stories. The first of these was found in 1872 in the British Museum among tablets excavated twenty years earlier in Nineveh from the library of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria. This turned out to be part of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Subsequent excavations in Nineveh unearthed more accounts. As a result of these finds it became widely accepted that the Biblical flood story was merely a later copy of older Mesopotamian stories.

A third avenue of attack was opened by those who argued that the Genesis flood story was a somewhat careless interweaving of different accounts, written much later by people with different ideologies. First proposed in 1753 by Jean Astruc, this idea reached its definitive form in 1876 when the German Old Testament scholar Julius Wellhausen gave formal shape to the documentary hypothesis. He proposed that the Pentateuch is a combination of four sources, JEDP (Jahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly), written in 950, 850, 620 and 500 BC respectively, with competing ideologies, competing views of God and of Israel, and finally put together by Ezra around 450. This view dominated Biblical studies in the twentieth century. Anyone who has taken any religion class at college will have encountered it. The crown jewel of the documentary hypothesis is the flood narrative, the unraveling of which into its J and P strands is a monument to critical scholarship.

The Genesis flood account was attacked from all sides: from science, from archaeology and from biblical scholarship. In the academic world the story of Noah and the Flood had no credibility. It was dismissed as mere fiction, and poor fiction at that due to the perceived inconsistencies of the different documentary strands. It was viewed as a late copy of Mesopotamian stories, which themselves reflected just the local flooding that regularly inundated the Mesopotamian floodplain.

But scholars have struck back in recent decades, countering each of these arguments. The documentary hypothesis, long seen as a great monument to Biblical scholarship, especially liberal German scholarship, has come under attack from literary scholars. They argue that the flood narrative, long viewed as the crown jewel of the documentary hypothesis, is a unity of great artistry and skill. The first solid defense of the literary integrity of Genesis 1–11 that I read was by two professors at UC Berkeley of all places!!—*Before Abraham Was* (1985) by Isaac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, who taught Near Eastern Studies and Rhetoric, respectively. Many now accept that in the flood narrative we have a literary masterpiece.

While it is accepted that there are similarities with the Mesopotamian accounts, there are also significant differences. As I have argued throughout this series, these differences are far more significant than the similarities. The Genesis creation and flood accounts can be read

as polemics against, as deconstructions of, the accounts of the Mesopotamians and other surrounding cultures.

The principle of uniformity has come under attack. It's to be expected that creation scientists assume a catastrophic flood. In 1961 John Whitcomb and Henry Morris presented a comprehensive flood geology in their 500-page book *The Genesis Flood*, which I first read in college when I was studying geography. But even those who reject a world-wide flood accept that there have been catastrophic events in earth's past such as asteroid impacts that wiped out the dinosaurs. Within just the past decade or so it has been widely accepted that around 5600 BC the Black Sea, then a fresh-water lake, was flooded and turned into a salt-water sea by a breach of the Bosphorus. Some argue that this was a catastrophic event, certainly far more devastating and memorable than the annual flooding of Mesopotamia.

As a result of these counter-attacks, the flood narrative is taken more seriously than it used to be. This narrative covers 6:9–9:17. Today we'll look at chapter 7 in which the Flood arrives and reaches its peak. In chapter 6 God had told Noah to build an ark, describing the ark in some detail. But we didn't get to see Noah actually build the ark. We want to know how he did it, but the Bible covers all that in the short but profound statement, "Noah did everything just as God commanded him" (6:22).

Chapter 7 now describes two events: the entrance into the ark (7:1-16) and the first half of the Flood, from its arrival to its peak (7:17-24). Notice the great disparity in the relating of the various events. The building of the ark must have taken a long time, but it's covered in just a few summary words: "Noah did everything just as God commanded him." The entrance into the ark would have been much quicker, but the narrative pace slows way down, devoting 16 verses to this embarkation.

Embarkation (7:1-16)

The embarkation into the ark is given in three sections, each ending with the refrain, "just as God commanded Noah" or similar (7:5, 9, 16). In each section the embarkation is described in ever-increasing detail. Finally, when we're absolutely sure that everyone is aboard who should be aboard, we're given the climactic statement, "Then the Lord shut him in."

The first section is God's command:

> **The Lord then said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and one pair of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate, and also seven pairs of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth. Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made."**
>
> **And Noah did all that the Lord commanded him. (Gen 7:1-5 TNIV)**

The Lord gives Noah two commands, each backed up by an explanatory clause. The first command concerns Noah and his family: he is to enter the ark with them. From the KJV translation, "Come into the ark," many preachers have assumed that the Lord is already in the ark and is inviting Noah to come and join him. But the Hebrew verb just denotes entrance: Noah, who is outside the ark, is to enter into it. The verb implies nothing about the Lord's whereabouts.

The Lord gives a reason for his command: "you I have seen, righteous before me in this generation." The flood narrative was introduced with the statement, "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generations, and it was with God he walked" (6:9). He was righteous because he behaved rightly in his relationships, notably his relationship with God. He showed this by his prompt obedience, as we'll be reminded three times in this chapter. As we saw last week, the focus of 6:9-22 is not the ark but Noah, showing why he should be invited to enter the ark.

The Lord's second command concerns the animals: Noah is to take them. The animals are divided into two categories, clean and unclean. Clean animals are those fit for sacrifice; after the Flood Noah will offer them up as the first burnt offerings recorded in Scripture. He is to take seven pairs of each of the clean animals and also of the birds, and one pair of each of the unclean. The purpose is to keep their seed alive upon the earth; twice in chapter 6 we were told that the purpose of the animals entering the ark was to keep them alive (6:19, 20).

For this command also a reason is given, though TNIV omits the conjunction. Seven days hence the Lord will cause it to rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and thus wipe away every living thing he has made.

Noah's response to these two commands is simple and by now expected: "Noah did all that the Lord commanded him." The narrator allowed the building of the ark to pass by with only a similar comment, but he will not allow the entrance into the ark to pass by so simply. No, he devotes the next 11 verses to a detailed portrayal of the entrance of Noah's family and the animals into the ark, a detailed portrayal of the fulfillment of this command. The entrance into the ark is far more important than the building of it, though it's the building of the ark that we usually want to know about.

Verses 6-9 show the fulfillment of God's command:

> **Noah was six hundred years old when the floodwaters came on the earth. And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives entered the ark to escape the waters of the flood. Pairs of clean and unclean animals, of birds and of all creatures that move along the ground, male and female, came to Noah and entered the ark, as God had commanded Noah. (7:6-9)**

The section begins with a time marker: when Noah was 600 the Flood happened. The next three verses contain three verbs: "come" or "enter" is used twice, once for Noah's family and once for the animals. Noah and his family entered the ark. The animals came to Noah into the ark, two by two. The third verb is in the refrain: "as God had commanded Noah." We have a straightforward fulfillment of God's command. He commanded Noah to enter the ark with his family and to take the animals. He and his family entered the ark and the animals came to him into the ark. But the narrator isn't content to leave it at that. He now gives an even closer view of this embarkation:

> **And after the seven days the floodwaters came on the earth.**
>
> **In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month—on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.**

On that very day Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, together with his wife and the wives of his three sons, entered the ark. They had with them every wild animal according to its kind, all livestock according to their kinds, every creature that moves along the ground according to its kind and every bird according to its kind, everything with wings. Pairs of all creatures that have the breath of life in them came to Noah and entered the ark. The animals going in were male and female of every living thing, as God had commanded Noah. Then the Lord shut him in. (7:10-16)

The seven days of waiting are over, and the waters of the Flood come upon the earth. Again we're given a time-marker for the onset of the Flood; this time it's more precise, to the very day. On this day two things happen. "On this day" the Flood started. Here we have a line of poetry, though few English translations render it as such:

Split apart were all the springs of the great deep,
and the windows of heaven were opened.

Both verbs are passive; God is the unseen actor who opens the sluice gates above and below. The boundaries which God had made to divide and give shape to the formless world now collapse. He had divided the waters above from the waters below; now they reunite. The result is forty days and night of rain.

But on this same day something else happened, something even more important as indicated by the addition of the little word "very." "On this *very* day" Noah, his family and the animals entered the ark. Again the verb "enter" is used twice, once for Noah's family and once for the animals. A roll call is taken of those entering: they (Noah's family), and the wild animals, and the domesticated animals, and the creepy-crawlies, and the birds, each according to their kind. This is the language of Genesis 1 with its three categories of land animals each according to their kind.

Verse 16 concludes the passage with three important statements. The verb "enter" is used twice more: "the entering ones, male and female from all flesh, entered." Next we have the third and final refrain: "as God had commanded Noah." Only when all are aboard do we get the final statement that concludes the entire section: the Lord shut the door. Here we have another major contrast with the Mesopotamian stories. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* it is Utnapishtim, builder of the boat and hero of the flood story, who shuts the door.

Why are we given this extraordinary amount of detail about the embarkation? For one thing, it allows the narrator to use the verb "enter" exactly seven times. Is this intentional? Sometimes after sermons people ask me if I was being intentional in some of the things I said. We can't ask the narrator, but the way in which the verb "enter" is used seems very deliberate: once in the Lord's command (1), then fulfilled in three pairs: Noah and his family entered and the animals came to Noah to the ark (7-9, and again in 13-15). Then, in case we missed the point, he says that the entering ones entered (16). This is all rather redundant. But the narrator is making a point: everyone who was supposed to enter entered the ark, and only then did the Lord shut the door. This is a beautiful piece of writing, though it's difficult to capture in English. This is why you learn Hebrew!

When everyone is aboard the ark the Lord shuts the door and the Flood begins.

The Flood (7:17-24)

For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased they lifted the ark high above the earth. The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the water. They rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered. The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than fifteen cubits. Every living thing that moved on the earth perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and the entire human race. Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; human beings and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days. (7:17-24)

This section has a rhythm though it can be obscured in English translations. We should feel the Flood flowing, increasing in intensity as it progressively covers the earth. In the first few verses the view alternates between the waters and the ark; the rising waters are described by alternating between the verbs "multiply" and "prevail" though TNIV does not preserve this.

- the waters *increased* and lifted the ark and it was raised above the earth,
- the waters *prevailed* and *increased* greatly upon the earth and the ark moved on the surface of the waters,
- the waters had *prevailed* greatly greatly upon the earth and all the mountains were covered,
- 15 cubits the waters had *prevailed* and the mountains were covered.

In the battle between the rising waters and the earth the waters prevailed so mightily that they covered the mountains to a depth of 15 cubits, half the height of the ark, so that the ark could move freely across the waters. But remember that the ark has no sail or rudder; it is at the mercy of God.

The result of these prevailing waters is presented from two perspectives: life died (21-22) and God wiped clean (23a). All flesh moving upon the earth died. Again we hear a roll call: the birds, the three categories of land animals, and humans (21). For emphasis this is restated in the next verse (22) using a synonymous verb: everything perished…they all died. From a different perspective God wiped away all life. Again we hear the roll call, this time in the reverse order: mankind, livestock, creepy-crawlies and birds. And again this is repeated, this time with the verb in the passive: he wiped them all away…they were all wiped away.

But not quite all: there is something left; there is a remnant. Noah and those with him in the ark are left. And so it remained for 150 days during which the waters prevailed over the earth. God has undone creation, reverting it to the unformed water-covered state of Genesis 1:2. He has wiped the earth clean, blotting out the life which had ruined it. But there is a very important difference from Genesis 1:2. Atop the waters floats the ark containing Noah, his family and the animals, preserved as a remnant, kept alive to form a new beginning.

Chapter seven has presented us with two powerful images. The first image is of the grand procession of Noah, his family and the ani-

mals into the ark. We see this entrance again and again. Only when they have all entered does the Lord close the door. The second image is of the waters rising to completely cover the earth, but with the ark and its occupants floating atop it, supported on the whelming flood. To capture the full effect I'm going to leave the ark supported on the whelming flood for nearly 150 days until I pick up the story in early January.

In the meantime I want to explore some of the significance of the Flood which simultaneously wiped the earth clean and supported the ark. In our Scripture reading (1 Pet 3:18-22), Peter observes that the waters of the Flood, through which Noah was saved, prefigure baptism.

> **In [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 3:20-21)**

It is often thought that baptism is the New Testament counterpart of Old Testament circumcision. But nowhere does the New Testament draw this parallel. But Peter does explicitly draw a parallel between baptism and Noah's flood. Noah was saved by being passed through the waters of the Flood. Similarly, Christians are saved by being passed through the waters of baptism. It is not that baptism itself saves, but what baptism represents.

This is not the only connection between baptism and the Old Testament. The Flood was a baptism which washed the earth clean, preparing it for service as a new creation with a new humanity. When Israel was constituted as God's people, his new humanity, Moses was commanded to make for the tabernacle a bronze basin to stand in the courtyard. As part of their ordination into the priesthood Moses was to bathe Aaron and his sons with water then clothe them in their priestly garments. This washing and clothing was an essential part of their consecration to priestly service. Subsequently, each time they entered the tent or approached the altar they were to wash their hands and feet in the basin. On the Day of Atonement the high priest was to bathe his body in water before putting on his sacred garments. After the day's service he was to put off his vestments and bathe again. Anyone who was unclean was to wash his clothes and bathe his body in water. This bathing in water marked the transition between levels of sanctity and purity: between unclean and clean, between profane and sacred, between sacred and more sacred.

When the temple was built as a permanent replacement for the portable tabernacle, the bronze basin was replaced by a much larger basin, larger because it no longer needed to be portable. It was 5 cubits (7½ ft) deep and 10 cubits (15 ft) across with a capacity of 12000 gallons. The purpose of this basin, called the Sea, was the same: for the priests to bathe prior to their priestly service (2 Chr 4:6).

This is surely the background for New Testament baptism. John the Baptist summoned Israel to a baptism of repentance, a washing that prepared them for God's kingdom. Jesus' ministry began with his baptism. He had no uncleanness that needed to be washed away, but he did need to be ordained into priestly, kingly and prophetic ministry. As he came up out of the waters God's Spirit came upon him, just as the Spirit-wind hovered over the waters at the earth's first baptism (Gen 1:2) and its second baptism (Gen 8:1).

What happens in our baptism? We are baptized into Christ, baptized into his death, symbolized by the waters that bring destruction. But then we pass through the waters and rise with Christ into new life (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:12). When we're baptized into Christ we put on Christ as if putting on a new garment (Gal 3:27). The waters of baptism are both destructive and renewing. Our sinful nature is destroyed but we are washed clean and ordained into service as priests. God's Spirit comes upon us to begin the work of new creation. The waters of baptism are just water, but what they symbolize is powerful indeed. Our sins are wiped away, our old self is destroyed, and we pass through the waters into new life, ordained as priests to God and renewed by God's Spirit.

Peter draws a further connection with the Flood, warning of scoffers in the last days:

> **They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. (2 Pet 3:4-7)**

In Noah's day the earth was baptized by the Flood that wiped away evil. At the end of this age the world will again be baptized, and here Peter switches the metaphor from water to fire which is equally destructive and purifying. But the purpose is the same: to wipe away evil and cleanse the earth to be a renewed earth, fit for God's service. But just as God waited for all those entering the ark to enter the ark before sending the Flood, so God is waiting for all to come into Christ before he sends final judgment. He bids all come and enter into Christ, being baptized into him now before he finally shuts the door, to experience destruction and renewal now before it is only destruction that is experienced. The door is still open and God bids people, "Come!" This is why missionaries can go out to the ends of the earth with the gospel, God's invitation to come and enter into the ark that is Christ, to be baptized into him in death and in resurrection, being ordained into ministry in God's new creation as a renewed humanity. Come!

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, into whom we are baptized, sharing in his death and resurrection, the love of God who holds the door open, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit who makes us a new creation, be with us all now and evermore. Amen.

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DOES GOD REMEMBER ME?

Catalog No. 1589
Genesis 8:1
27th Message
Bernard Bell
January 9, 2011

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

After a break of twenty weeks we return to the Flood Narrative, to the story of Noah and the Flood. We left Noah and those with him in the ark "supported on the 'whelming flood." The waters have completely overwhelmed the earth, destroying all life that is not in the ark. But these same waters are also supporting the ark in which life is preserved. The Flood is an instrument of both destruction and preservation. These two are set side-by-side in Genesis 7. But twice as much space is devoted to the entrance into the ark (7:1-16) as to the prevailing flood waters (7:17-24). It was only after everything that was entering the ark, both humans and animals, had entered that the Lord shut the door and the Flood broke upon the earth. Chapter 7 ends by noting that the waters prevailed upon the earth for 150 days, for five months.

You may have forgotten that we've left Noah and those with him in the ark floating on these prevailing waters for the past 140 days. Much has happened in your lives since August 22. You've had many other things to think about, so you could be excused for forgetting about Noah. But the big question is, Has God forgotten about Noah? Or does he still think on him and remember him?

We have all felt the anguish of wondering whether someone has forgotten about us. People feel this when they're falling in love. Does she remember me? Does he even know my name? Is she thinking of me? Mothers feel this way when a son goes off to college. They generally don't have to remind the daughters to call home, but sons are another matter, unless they need money or their laundry done.

The first song in *The Phantom of the Opera* is "Think of Me," sung first by Carlotta and then by Christine:

Think of me, think of me fondly, when we've said goodbye.
Remember me once in a while, please promise me you'll try.

Who has not felt that same way? We feel this way towards other people. But we also feel this way towards God. Does he remember me? Or has he forgotten? Does he even see me? We know that we're supposed to have faith that he sees us, but sometimes it can be hard to get our heart to feel and our mind to think that.

Our service today is shaped around this idea of remembering and forgetting. Often worship does not allow such expressions. But wondering whether God sees us is an undeniable part of the Christian life, and in the past God's people *have* given expression to such feelings.

Our prelude was a song called *Remember Me*. Although the arrangement was new, the song itself dates from 1791. It's a hymn in seven stanzas by Thomas Haweis. The first stanza runs,

O Thou, from whom all goodness flows
I lift my heart to Thee;
In all my sorrows, conflicts, woes,
Dear Lord, remember me.

Haweis felt the tension between what he knew about God and what he felt in his heart. He knew that God is the source of all goodness, but in his heart he felt sorrows, conflicts and woes. Out of that anguish he cried, "Dear Lord, remember me." Each of the seven stanzas ends on that cry, "Remember me!" Who has not felt the same way?

We sang *Lord Jesus, think on me*. This is a nineteenth century translation of a fourth-century Greek poem. The original begins, "Remember, O Christ." In his rather free translation of what is a very terse poem, Allen Chatfield turned that cry into the opening line of each of nine stanzas, "Lord Jesus, think on me." Does Jesus think on me? Is God mindful of me?

This question goes further back still, back to the Bible itself. The oldest song in our service today is from 3000 years ago, a psalm of David. Our Scripture reading was Psalm 13, in which David cries out,

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?…
Look on me and answer, LORD my God. (Ps 13:1-3 TNIV)

An adaptation of this psalm was then sung as our offertory:

How long O Lord, will you forget
An answer to my prayer?
No tokens of your love I see
Your face is turned away from me,
I wrestle with despair.

We have the psalmist's permission to ask that question: How long, O Lord, will you forget me? The counterpart is to call on God to remember. I count 28 times in the Old Testament that people call on God, "Remember." They call on him to remember various things, but often it's simply, "Remember me!" The very first word of Psalm 132 is the cry "Remember":

Remember, O LORD, in David's favor,
all the hardships he endured. (Ps 132:1 ESV)

In the Latin of the Vulgate this begins with the vivid phrase *Memento Domine*, which has become the title of the psalm. *Memento Domine*: Remember, O Lord. We think of a memento as a small souvenir, a little trinket, but originally it was an appeal, "Remember." In the Bible and in Christian poetry and hymnody that appeal is usually to God: Remember me, O Lord. *Memento!*

Let's go back and give some thought to Noah's situation. For 150 days he has been in the ark. The ark has no sail, no oar, no rudder. It has neither locomotion nor steering. It's simply a very large box. Noah has no control over the ark. He can't do anything to propel it; he can't do anything to steer it. He is simply a passenger along with his seven family members and a lot of animals. For forty days it had

rained day and night, but the waters had continued to prevail for a total of 150 days. If Noah had looked out of the window he wouldn't have seen anything other than water, because the waters covered the mountains to a depth of fifteen cubits. There were no distinguishing features. There was nothing to tell him if the water was increasing or decreasing. Everything was blank.

What was going through Noah's mind? We can imagine various scenarios, placing ourselves in Noah's situation. Novelists and artists have done the same. Did Noah think that he was forgotten? Did he doubt God? The Lord had told him there would be rain for forty days and forty nights, but still the waters prevailed. For another forty days, and another, and nearly another! He had no road map for this. The Lord had not told him how long the Flood would last. As the forty days passed into another and another, did he cry out, "Remember me!"? The Bible doesn't tell us. One of the striking things about the Flood Narrative is that Noah never speaks. He simply does, he acts.

More importantly the Bible tells us what God did:

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded. (Gen 8:1 TNIV)

God did two things: he remembered and he sent his Spirit-wind over the earth.

God remembered

The Flood Narrative is a very carefully constructed account. It is an elaborate chiasm reaching 16 levels of indentation. At the "X," the turning point, lies this statement that God remembered Noah and sent his Spirit-wind upon the earth. The rising and falling waters of a flood have an inherent chiastic structure. But at the center of this account lies not nature nor the passage of time, but God himself. The flood doesn't recede because nature takes its course. It doesn't recede because enough time has passed. The waters recede because God remembered.

Usually we remember something that we had formerly forgotten. We search the crevices of our mind to recall something that we know is in there somewhere. Often the lost piece of information pops back into our mind when we are no longer actively looking for it. Not so with God. He doesn't rack his brain trying to remember our name or our situation. When he remembers it means that he is about to focus his action on the object of his remembrance. Noah's name doesn't suddenly come floating back into God's mind, bidden or unbidden. Noah has been in God's thoughts all along. But when God remembers Noah it means that he now engages in action specifically directed at Noah.

What did Noah have to do to get God to pay attention to him, to act on his behalf? Nothing! There was nothing that Noah could do. Here we have a major difference from the religion of the surrounding peoples, from their conception of how gods remember. For them, their gods really did forget and they had competing interests. It was up to humans to try to get the gods to pay attention to them. They could do this by offering the right sacrifices, even to the extent of offering their first-born sons. Or they could search for just the right formula in prayer or incantation. Whether by sacrifice or by word they were seeking to manipulate the gods to pay attention to them and act for their benefit.

Sadly, many Christians approach the matter the same way. How can I get God to pay attention to me? Perhaps if I make a big enough sacrifice. Perhaps if I keep all the rules. Perhaps if I pray the right prayer. But this also is manipulation, seeking to put God in your debt. But God is no man's debtor. Are you trying to find the right formula to get God to pay attention to you?

God's memory does not work in response to our attempts to prod it. It works in accordance with his own character and purposes. God remembers because he is faithful to his purposes. He remembered Noah because of his purposes for Noah, purposes which he had expressed to him. God had told Noah that he would bring the Flood to destroy all life, but also commanded him to build an ark for the preservation of life. God told Noah that he would make a covenant with him, and that his part in the covenant was simply to enter into the ark with his family and to bring in with him representatives of all the animals. God's remembering of Noah was therefore an expression of his faithfulness to this covenant promise to Noah. God wanted Noah to live. He didn't have to be coerced into keeping him alive.

What did Noah have to do? He simply had to be faithful. Firstly, he had to be obedient. And so he built the ark and entered into it with his family and the animals. We never hear Noah speak. But we do see him act, and each time he acts he does so according to the word of the Lord. The undoubtedly long process of building the ark is covered with the statement, "Then Noah did; according to all which God commanded him, so Noah did" (6:22). His response to the Lord's command to enter the ark is summarized in a similar way: "Then Noah did according to all which the LORD commanded him" (7:5). This is elaborated with a lengthy description of the entrance into the ark in which we're told twice that Noah acted "as God had commanded him" (7:9, 16). That's the first step: Noah was obedient, doing exactly what God told him to do.

Secondly, Noah had to be patient. God had told him that the rain would last for forty days and forty nights, but he hadn't told him how long the Flood would last. Now, though the rains have stopped, the waters have continued to prevail. Noah couldn't do anything useful. He couldn't propel the ark, nor could he steer it. He couldn't do anything to extricate himself. He simply had to be patient and wait. The only thing he had to rely on was God's promise. He couldn't manipulate God in any way. He simply had to rest upon God's word and rely upon God's character: that he would be faithful to his promise.

This is not an easy thing to do. Such waiting might seem a recipe for passivity, but coming to a place of patient rest requires a lot of inner action, wrestling with our hearts which are often in a state of agitated tumult. It is easier to do something, to engage in external action. Then we feel that we have some control over the situation, that we are contributing something, that we're getting somewhere. But God calls us to trust in him, in his character, in his faithfulness to his promises and purposes.

We see this in the psalms. For example, in Psalm 13 David, who had lamented the Lord's apparent forgetfulness, brings his heart to a state of confidence in God, ending his psalm on a positive note:

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me. (Ps 13:5-6)

This required a deliberate choice to allow his heart and mind to be governed by what he knew of God's purposes rather than by ap-

parent circumstances. Why could David be so sure? The Lord had chosen him as king and Samuel had anointed him as such. Therefore whenever he was chased around by Saul he had the memory of that declaration by God to fall back on. Later, when he became king, God entered into covenant with him. Therefore when he was chased out of Jerusalem by his son Absalom and again lived the life of a fugitive, he had that covenant to fall back on. Wrestling to a place of patient trust in the Lord was predicated upon his remembering God's promises and purposes. The psalter contains about fifty lament psalms. All but one of them end this way, with an expression of trust in God's purposes.

God's greatest act of remembering concerned his Son. The Father did not intervene to prevent the Son's death. Did the death of Jesus imply that God had forgotten, that he had failed to remember him? No. Jesus knew that his death was taking place under the watchful gaze of his Father. He knew that his Father saw and knew. Therefore from the cross he could address his Father, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Even though he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), his final cry was "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

What would the Father do? Jesus had been faithfully obedient to his Father in his life and ministry on earth. He had faithfully committed himself into his Father's hands in his death. Would God remember? Through the closing hours of Friday the heavens waited. Throughout Saturday, the seventh day and hence a day of rest, the earth was still. Then on the Sunday morning, at the birth of a new week, God gave his answer. He had remembered! The resurrection is the greatest of all God's acts of remembrance. How could he forget his Son?

And now this Son is at the Father's side, remembering us to him. He does think on us. He knows our name, as we sang, "My name is graven on his hands, My name is written on his heart."[1] So now when we sing, "Lord Jesus, think on me," we know that he does think on us and remembers us to his Father.

God remembered Noah and all the animals that were with him in the ark. It was his purpose that they be in the ark. He had commanded Noah that he build the ark so they be kept alive. Noah had been faithful to God and God had been faithful to his promises. What did God do when he remembered Noah?

God Sent His Spirit

God caused his *ruah* to pass over the earth. All English versions translate this as "wind," though HCSB alone offers "spirit" as a marginal alternative. But this is the same *ruah* that was hovering over the waters at the beginning prior to the first creation (1:2). In that case all English versions render the word as "Spirit" because it's the *ruah-elohim*, the Spirit of God. With the Flood God has undone creation, restoring the earth to a blank state covered by water. The only difference is that now there is a box filled with life floating on the waters, supported by the 'whelming flood. Just as God sent his *ruah* Spirit-wind to accomplish the first creation, so now he sends his *ruah* Spirit-wind to accomplish a new creation. The result is that the waters recede. They recede not because nature is running its course, nor because enough time has passed. They recede specifically because God causes his Spirit-wind to pass over the waters. And that happens because God remembers, because he is faithful to his covenant promises to Noah.

Centuries later the people of Israel found themselves in harsh servitude in Egypt.

> **The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them. (Exod 2:23-25)**

God remembered, and what he remembered was his covenant with Abraham. He had purposes for Abraham's descendants. So when he remembered his covenant, he acted to further those purposes: that they be his people, that he be their God, and that he dwell with them. The final verse can be translated "God saw…and God knew" (ESV). God sees and God knows. What comfort we should find in those words. But Israel did not find comfort. In the short run their situation got worse, and so they grumbled. Even after Pharaoh finally let the people go their situation got worse: they were backed up against the sea with Pharaoh and his armies pressing down on them. And so they grumbled again. There was nothing they could do to help their situation. Moses called them to simply watch and wait to see what God would do:

> **"Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still." (Exod 14:13-14)**

Easier said than done! With Pharaoh and his armies closing in, how easy to think that God has forgotten. How difficult to be still and watch. But having remembered his covenant, God wasn't going to forget his people. He again sent his spirit-wind. Acting in obedience to God's command,

> **Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. (Exod 14:21)**

Now for the third time God's spirit-wind blew across the waters to drive back the watery chaos.

God called Israel to a life of faith. A life of faithful obedience to his word. And a life of faithful patient reliance on his promises, trusting that he would remember. He gave them memorials to assist their memory: Passover to remember the exodus from Egypt, memorial stones from the Jordan to remember the entrance into the land. But Israel kept forgetting who the Lord was and what he had done. Israel had no memory of God's memory!

We, too, are called to a life of faith. This calls for faithful obedience to the Lord. And it calls for patient watching when we don't understand what is going on. In those time we still our hearts by remembering who God is, what he has done, and what he is up to. We rely not on the strength of our faith, but on the faithfulness of God.

Just as God saw the Israelites and knew, so he sees us and knows. We are to take comfort in that fact. Twenty years ago I was greatly encouraged by this passage, written by Philip Doddridge in his book, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745):

> Can you, even when your natural spirits are weak and low, and you are not in any frame of mind for the ardors and ecstasies of devotion, nevertheless find a pleasing rest, a calm repose of heart, in the thought that God is near you? That He sees the secret feelings of your soul while you are, as it were, laboring up the hill,

and casting a longing eye toward Him, though you cannot say you enjoy any tangible communications from Him?[2]

It struck me so much at the time because I knew what it was like to labor up the hill, wondering whether God was remembering me. That turned out to be a formative time in my life, wrestling with my heart, and coming to a greater understanding of what God is really trying to do in the lives of his people.

God does remember us because he remembers his covenant purposes. So that begs the question of what those purposes are. What is God really up to? What has he promised to do? He has not promised to give us an easy life, to give us health, wealth and prosperity. He has not promised to give us a life free from pain and suffering. So if you're looking for those things as evidence that God remembers you, you're looking for the wrong things. What are God's purposes to which he will be faithful? His purposes remain the same as they were for Israel: to take us as his people, to be our God, and to dwell with us. His purposes are to remake us as human beings, fit for his eternal presence, bathed in his glory. His purposes are to remake us into his image in Christ Jesus. He has promised to be with us, whether we are sensible of that presence or not.

Does God remember me? Yes, he does. But do I remember that God remembers me? That's another matter. We waver in our unbelief, driven too often by our senses, by our felt experiences of the presence or absence of God, looking for evidences which God has never promised.

The words "But God remembered" are among the most important words in the Bible. He remembered as Noah floated atop the waters of the Flood, sending his spirit-wind to work a new creation. He remembered as Israel languished in slavery, sending his spirit-wind to bring them through the waters into freedom. He remembered David as he wrestled his heart to a state of quiet confidence in God's covenant purposes. He remembered Jesus as he lay in the grave, bringing him through death into new life. And he remembers us. Baptism represents this: he remembered us as we passed through the waters of death into new life, enlivened by his Spirit. Communion is a memorial, wherein we remember that God remembered. And at the end of our lives as we face physical death God will again remember, bringing us through death into new life, because that's his purpose for us.

There is nothing that we can do to get God to pay more attention to us. He remembers us not because we make the right sacrifices or offer the right prayers. He remembers us because he remembers his purposes. He has placed us into Christ. He has caused his Spirit to pass over us, giving us life. He has made us his children. How can a father forget his children? God remembers us. Let us remember that God remembers.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, who remembers our name before his Father; the love of God, who remembers his covenant; and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, whom God has sent into us to accomplish his purposes, be with us now and forevermore. Amen.

1. Charitie Bancroft, *Before the Throne of God Above* (1863).

2. Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745), quoted in David Lyle Jeffrey, *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 183.

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THE RAVEN AND THE DOVE

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Genesis 8:2-19
28th Message
Bernard Bell
January 16, 2011

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

This past week we have seen the juxtaposition of life and death. Last weekend we were shocked by the killings in Tucson. For several days death was the dominant motif, but on Wednesday we watched as the president led the nation both in commemorating the dead and in celebrating the living. A corner was turned: he, and many others afterwards, expressed hope that new life would emerge from this death-filled tragedy. How jarring that the youngest killed was born on September 11, 2001. In herself she had embodied that hope of new life from death, yet now she too was dead. We wait to see how much good will come from this great tragedy, how much life will come the other side of death.

Even more recently we've seen a transition from death to life in Tunisia. The suicide of a frustrated young man just a month ago culminated in the flight on Friday of the corrupt, autocratic president. Out of the ashes of that young man's death has arisen hope for the suppressed people of the whole nation. It is reminiscent of events in Eastern Europe twenty years ago.

This morning, as we continue in the story of Noah, we will see a transition from death to life. In this case the transition is represented by two birds: not a phoenix rising from the ashes, but a raven and a dove.

We saw last week that the turning point of the flood narrative is God's remembrance of Noah and those with him in the ark:

> **But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded. (Gen 8:1 TNIV)**

The next eighteen verses describe these receding waters, culminating in the disembarkation from the ark of Noah, his family and the animals. In these verses we find the reversal of the arrival of the Flood that was described in chapter 7; most of the elements of that chapter find their counterpart in reverse in chapter 8. The text is in three main sections. It begins with the receding waters (2-5) and ends with the disembarkation (15-19)—counterparts to the embarkation and the prevailing waters of chapter 7. In between is a section with no counterpart: the lengthy central section about the raven and the dove (6-14).

The Waters Recede (8:2-5)

> **Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed, and the rain had stopped falling from the sky. The water receded steadily from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the water had gone down, and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to recede until the tenth month, and on the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains became visible. (8:2-5)**

The waters of the Flood had broken upon the earth when the springs of the deep were burst asunder and the floodgates of the heavens were opened (7:11). The result was rain upon the earth for forty days and forty nights (7:12). Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens were closed, and the rain from the heavens was stopped. In both the opening and the closing of the sluice gates above and below the verbs are passive. We're not told who did the opening and the closing, but it was clearly God, who has sovereign power over his creation. It was he who had collapsed the boundaries that he had imposed at creation between the waters above and the waters below. He had covered the whole earth with water, returning it to its primeval state before the first creation, before he had spoken order into the chaos. Now he restored the boundaries, and the rain was withheld. But still the waters prevailed upon the earth for another 110 days. The Lord kept Noah waiting in the ark. The Flood had brought death to all that was not in the safety of the ark. Outside the ark death was still triumphant. Inside the ark Noah must wait patiently. For 110 days the waters gradually receded, returning to their places in the reservoirs above and below.

Finally Noah and those with him felt the bump of the ark hitting the mountains. Formerly there had been fifteen cubits of clearance above the highest mountains. Now there was no longer sufficient clearance, and the ark ran aground. On the 17th day of the seventh month, 150 days after the Flood came upon the earth on the 17th day of the second month (7:10), the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. Ararat is the name of a region, not the name of a specific mountain. It is the region now known as the Armenian highlands, at the intersection of Iran, Turkey and Armenia. Much later, roughly coterminous with the kingdom of Judah, the kingdom of Urartu flourished here. The ark rested somewhere in these mountains. Subsequent tradition has narrowed the site down to one particular mountain, the highest in the region at 5,000 m (17,000 ft). This is Mount Ararat. This is where all the expeditions search for the remains of Noah's ark. But the Bible does not say the ark grounded on this particular mountain.

Since the day when the rising waters lifted up the ark, it had drifted over the surface of the earth. Noah had had no ability to steer it, since the ark lacked a rudder. The ark was at the mercy of the waters, or rather at the mercy of God who controlled the waters. But God wanted Noah and those with him to live, so he had been safe. The ark's wanderings were now over and it came to rest (*nuah*), a play on Noah's name.

But still Noah must be patient. For another two months and fourteen days the waters continued to diminish, until, on the first day of the tenth month, the mountain tops were again visible, reversing their prior covering (7:19-20).

The Raven and the Dove (8:6-14)

The second section details Noah's sending of two birds. A remarkable amount of space is given to these birds—seven verses. First we read about the raven:

After forty days Noah opened a window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. (8:6-7)

After forty days Noah opened a window which he had made in the ark. We didn't read about this window when the Lord gave Noah careful instructions about how he was to build the ark, unless it's the *zohar* he was told to make. Out of this window Noah sent a raven. The raven is the largest member of the crow family. These birds are opportunistic scavengers. They are not picky about what they eat; they eat whatever they can find, be it roadkill or a discarded bag of french fries or chips. We provide plenty of such food which is why we're suffering an infestation of crows. As their taste for roadkill shows, the crow family are carrion birds, feasting on dead animals.

Ravens are a popular tourist attraction today at the Tower of London, since Charles II issued a royal decree that there always be six of them at the Tower, lest the legend be fulfilled that the absence of the ravens spell the end of both the tower and the kingdom. But for Israel the raven was not a positive bird. The raven was an unclean bird because it feeds on carrion, on death. In the food laws of the Torah, the raven was included in the list of birds that Israel was forbidden to eat. These birds are described as detestable (Lev 11:13-19).

The raven must have had a great time flying back and forth. There was plenty of carrion on which to feed, plenty of dead bodies, both human and animal. There were plenty of eyeballs to pick out. The raven here is symbolic of death. Many artistic representations of the flood story depict the raven perched on a carcass on which it is feasting. The raven's presence here signifies that death still reigned upon the earth—except for in the ark, the one sanctuary of life amidst the death and destruction.

Next Noah sent out a second bird, a dove:

Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. (8:8-9)

Where the raven was so unclean that it was detestable, the dove was so clean that it was suitable for offering to God in sacrifice. Noah sent out this bird as his spy, to see if the waters had dried up from the surface of the ground. As the dove flew to and fro over the waters she found nowhere to perch. The raven had had no such problem; he was happy perching on the dead bodies. But the dove would not contaminate herself with death. And so the dove returned to Noah, to the ark. Here the narrative slows down to give us a close view of the dove's return. As if in slow motion, Noah reached out his hand, took her, and brought her in to himself, into the ark. It's a moment of great tenderness. Here we have another wordplay on Noah's name, though TNIV unfortunately obscures it: the dove found no resting place (*manoah*) for the sole of her foot, so she returned to Noah, whose name means rest. Where the raven represents death, the dove represents life. Outside the ark death and destruction still reigned. The ark had found its resting place on the mountains of Ararat, but there was not yet any resting place outside the ark for living creatures. Life was still confined to the ark.

Seven days later Noah sent the dove out a second time:

He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. (8:10-11)

That evening, after a day spent flying around, the dove returned to Noah, to the ark. But this time there was a momentous difference. Look, a freshly plucked olive leaf was in its mouth. Noah now knew that the waters had receded from the earth. The spy had accomplished its mission. What joy there must have been in the ark. The olive leaf itself was small, but what it represented was of great significance. Life had returned to the devastated earth outside the ark. Vegetation, which forms part of the structure of the earth, had returned. The earth was once again habitable, ready for life. Ever since, the olive branch has been symbolic of life and peace.

After another seven days Noah sent the dove out a third time:

He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him. (8:12)

This time the dove did not return. She must have found a resting place for the sole of her foot. Now she had the privilege of leading the way in the recolonization of earth, an earth that had been scrubbed clean. We hear no more of the raven; its duty was done. The herald of death had been replaced by the herald of life.

Meanwhile the waters continued to subside:

By the first day of the first month of Noah's six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry. (8:13-14)

Noah had sent out the dove to see, to be his eyes upon the earth. Now Noah removed the covering from the ark and he saw for himself. He looked and behold, the surface of the ground was dry. The date was the 27th day of the second month, six months and ten days after the ark had come to rest on the mountains of Ararat, one year and ten days after the start of the Flood. Both the earth and the face of the ground were dry. The Flood was over. Death was over. Now it was time for life.

Disembarkation (8:15-19)

Then God said to Noah, "Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. Bring out every kind of living creature that is with you—the birds, the animals, and all the creatures that move along the ground—so they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number on it."

So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives. All the animals and all the creatures that move along the ground and all the birds—everything that moves on the earth—came out of the ark, one kind after another. (8:15-19)

The Lord commanded Noah to disembark. Just as he had commanded Noah to enter the ark and to bring the animals in with him (7:1-4), so now he commanded him to exit the ark and to bring the animals out with him. And again Noah was obedient. Just as he had entered the ark with his family, and the animals had entered (7:7-9), so now he exited from the ark with his family, and all the animals exited the ark. In both cases, embarkation and disembarkation, Noah waited for the Lord's command before acting. We never hear Noah speak in this story, but time and again we see him act. Always he acts according to the word of the Lord. Throughout the flood narrative he is a model of faithful obedience. Here we have a man who is righteous, blameless in his generation, and walks with God.

The ark had now served its purpose. It had kept life alive through the destructive waters of the Flood. Those same destructive waters had both brought death to all outside the ark and held up the ark in which life was preserved. Life was now ready to re-colonize the earth, led by the dove which had a sizable head-start. Noah was to bring the animals out of the ark so that they could swarm over the earth and be fruitful and multiply. This again is the language of the first creation account, where God had commanded the waters to swarm with living creatures. He had blessed these creatures, commanding them to be fruitful, multiply and fill the waters (1:20-22).

The Dove's Search for Rest

The story of the raven and the dove invites symbolic interpretation, and many have been given. Both Jews and Christians have seen the dove's first failed sortie as symbolic of the weary soul, unable to find rest until it comes into the ark. The ark is symbolic of the place of rest for the weary soul, but as to the nature of that place of rest there is considerable variety of interpretation.

Jewish tradition understands the ark as symbolic of the sabbath day. The seven day intervals between the successive missions of the dove have invited speculation that these sorties took place on the sabbath. The weary dove returned not just to the ark, but to the sabbath day where it found rest. This is expressed in a Jewish liturgical song: *Yom Shabbaton*, one of the *zemirot* songs sung after sabbath service. My rough translation of the first verse is:

The sabbath day—there is no forgetting,
  Its remembrance is like a fragrant aroma;
Yonah (the dove) found in it rest,
  and there those whose strength is exhausted will rest.

In Hebrew it's much more pithy, with a careful rhyming scheme. The last two lines of this verse form the refrain, sung after each subsequent verse. The sabbath day was a refuge for Yonah the dove, and it remains a refuge for all whose strength has expired.

Christians have also understood the dove as symbolic of the weary soul, but the ark in which she finds rest is symbolic of God's salvation, or Christ. William Muhlenberg's hymn "Like Noah's weary dove" (1827) understands the ark as God's salvation:

Like Noah's weary dove
  That soared the earth around,
But not a resting place above
  The cheerless waters found.

Oh, cease, my wandering soul,
  On restless wing to roam…

Behold the ark of God,
  Behold the open door…

The famous commentator Matthew Henry described the dove in similar manner, as "an emblem of a gracious soul, which, finding no rest for its foot, no solid place or satisfaction in this world, this deluged defiling world, returns to Christ as to its ark, as to its Noah."

There is certainly truth here. God has provided a place of rest for his weary people, a refuge for the weary soul. I can't read the refrain of *Yom Shabbaton* without thinking of Jesus' invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28).

The ark is clearly a place of refuge. But it was not so much a refuge for the weary soul as it was a refuge for life amidst death. God's purpose for the ark was as a refuge for the preservation of life, as he had instructed Noah. To read the dove as symbolic of the restless soul seeking rest in the ark of God's salvation misses the point. That's not what the dove is doing here.

From Death to Life

On her first sortie outside the ark the dove was unable to find a resting place, so she returned to her rest inside the ark. But on her third sortie she did not return; she *had* found a resting place outside the ark. On her second sortie she brought back a token of life: the freshly plucked olive leaf. On her first sortie all life and rest was contained within the ark, but by her third sortie both life and rest were available outside the ark.

The raven is symbolic of death, the dove of life. These two birds are different in every way. The raven is big and black; it is detestable; it feeds on death. The dove is small and white; it is pure; and it heralds life. The sortie of the raven showed that death was still triumphant upon the earth. Life was confined to the ark, the chest which God had Noah build for the preservation of life. God's purpose was not simply that life be kept alive in this chest, but that after the Flood was over the earth be recolonized, that life exit from the safety of the ark and swarm upon the whole earth. The three sorties of the dove document the return of life to the earth, the triumph of life over death.

God does invite the weary soul to come and find rest in him, in his salvation, in Christ. As Augustine famously said, our hearts are restless till they find their rest in God. But God is about more than just giving us rest. He is engaged in turning death into life. Yes, the Flood brought destruction and death to the earth, but God's purpose was to wipe the earth clean so he could repopulate it with life.

The New Testament draws a parallel between the Flood and baptism. Noah was saved in the ark in which he was brought safely through the waters that brought death. Similarly, in baptism we are brought safely through the destructive waters that bring death. The Flood brought death and life. Baptism represents death and life. Our Scripture reading was Romans 6:1-14. Paul is emphatic that the Christian life is not about simply coming to Christ then carrying on living our lives the same old way. In baptism we die and rise to new life. When we are baptized into Christ Jesus we are baptized into his death, buried with him, then raised with him into new life. Yes, we are kept safe in the refuge of Christ, but there is something that lies beyond that refuge: new life. God has saved us not simply so that we might have a refuge in Christ, but so that we might have new life. We have died to the old nature, and risen to new life. God is now recolonizing the earth with people who have been brought through death into new life.

The raven represented death; all around us are the signs of death. But we have been given life; that's what our baptism represents. God now sends us out to recolonize the world, to colonize his kingdom as he spreads it across the world. He wants us to swarm upon the earth, to be fruitful and multiply and fill it. May this message of the raven and the dove fill us not just with comfort that we can come to Christ for rest and refuge, but with the hope and the excitement that he has turned our death into life and now sends us out into the world as bearers of life, seeking to bring life out of death wherever we go.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, into whose death and resurrection we have been baptized; the love of God, who loves us enough to turn our death into life; and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who is God's invigorating, life-giving power at work in us, be with us all now and forevermore. Amen.

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A FRAGRANT AROMA

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Bernard Bell
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SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

A firestorm has raged this past week over the topic of parenting. Two weeks ago *The Wall Street Journal* published an essay by Yale law professor Amy Chua under the title, "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior." The essay was excerpted from her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, published three days later. To be fair to her, the *WSJ* title was not of her own choosing nor to her liking. The essay and the book have generated passionate responses, both for and against. When I last looked on Friday evening, the essay had generated over 7000 comments on the *WSJ* website, and the book already had 165 reviews on Amazon. The book generated so much attention that *Time* magazine devoted its current cover story to it. Amy Chua has had a very busy week, appearing on talk shows. On Thursday morning, for example, she was on KQED's *Forum* in our own back yard.

How should parents set expectations for their children, and how should they respond when their children fail to meet these expectations? Tiger moms set high expectations and don't accept failure. If their children fail to meet these expectations they make them repeat again and again and again—as long as it takes to get it right. Chua argues that too many American parents are focused on their children's self-esteem. They lower their expectations and praise every accomplishment. They are unwilling to call failure failure, with the result that their children fail to achieve much success. At the heart of the matter is how to combine discipline and grace. Can these ever be reconciled? Can judgment and mercy live together?

Before I get into trouble here on the topic of tiger moms, let me turn attention away from Amy Chua and turn the question towards God. How does God view the children he has made? He created people for a high calling: to be his image-bearers on earth. This is why today, on Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, we pause to affirm the sanctity of human life. We're not just a bunch of chemicals. We're not just animals. We're in the image of God. We have dignity. We are created for purpose. God has high expectations of us. But as we work through the early chapters of Genesis we see that within just a few generations humanity has failed spectacularly, so spectacularly that God has wiped out most of humanity in the Flood. What will his expectations be now that the Flood is over? Will he maintain his high expectations and make humanity try again until it gets it right? Or will he lower his expectations until humanity is able to meet them? Can God reconcile the opposing needs for discipline and for grace?

The Flood was precipitated by the Lord's evaluation of humanity:

> **The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, "I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them." But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. (Gen 6:5-8 TNIV)**

The human race had blown it. It had multiplied upon the earth, as God intended, but this had only brought a multiplication of evil upon the earth. The Lord gave the human race an F-grade on every count: every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. You can't get more comprehensive than that! Humanity was so bad that the Lord regretted, was sorry, repented that he had made them. Such language causes us discomfort, but it's there in the text. Last summer I devoted a whole sermon to that thorny topic: does God change his mind? It was time for discipline of the harshest sort: removal from the earth. But God did this out of a pained heart.

But then there was Noah: he found favor in the Lord's sight. He was a righteous man, blameless in his generation, and it was with God that he walked (6:9). So the Lord determined to save him and his family while destroying everyone else. Throughout the flood narrative we've seen that Noah never speaks; he simply does. He does everything just as the Lord commanded. He's the perfect son. With him as the new progenitor of the human race and as the model, perhaps humanity will do better the second time around. The Lord has wiped the earth clean; it's a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate. The people who didn't do it right have gone. The one who is left is Noah, who has done it right. Today we see what Noah does when he emerges from the ark onto this clean slate.

Noah's Offering (8:20)

> **Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. (Gen 8:20)**

The first thing that Noah did was to build an altar to the Lord and sacrifice burnt offerings on it. This was not the first offering in Scripture. Cain and Abel had brought offerings to the Lord (4:3-4). Their offerings were tribute (*minhah*) offerings. They were paying homage to their Creator, recognizing that God is God and they were not, recognizing that the appropriate thing to do with their produce, whether of the field or the flock, was to offer it to God. But only one of them was really honoring God. Both presented offerings to the Lord, but only one presented himself to the Lord.

Noah's offering was not the same as those of Cain and Abel. His offering first required that he build an altar of sacrifice, the first sacrificial altar in Scripture. Next Noah took representatives from each of the clean animals and clean birds. We now find out why the Lord had told Noah to take onboard seven pairs of each of these clean animals and birds: so that he would have clean animals for sacrifice. Many people ask how Noah knew which animals and birds were clean and which were not. The Bible does not tell us; it's an irrelevant question; it's not the point. More importantly, Israel for whom Genesis was written, would know which animals were clean and which were not,

for the Lord gave them detailed instructions. Everything was divided into clean and unclean. This was not a matter of hygiene or physical cleanliness; it was a matter of ceremonial purity. Only clean or pure animals and birds were suitable for sacrifice as offerings to the Lord. Noah knew this because he was a man who walked with God.

Noah offered up these animals and birds as burnt offerings, the first burnt offerings in Scripture. A burnt offering is different than the tribute offerings which Cain and Abel had brought. The Hebrew term (*'olah*) means something that goes up (*'alah*): the entirety of the sacrifice goes up to the Lord. The Greek term is *holocaust*, something that is completely burnt. Why did Noah offer up burnt offerings? Certainly he did so out of gratitude, but a tribute offering would have been sufficient for that. Why did it have to be burnt offerings? Noah recognized that something had to die in his place, and that it had to be wholly given over to the Lord. Noah's burnt offerings here are yet another illustration of him as a righteous man.

Noah's immediate impulse on coming out of the ark was to build an altar to the Lord. We see similar impulses in Abraham. As soon as he arrived in the land he built an altar to the Lord at Shechem (Gen 12:7). He moved on to Bethel and there also built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord (12:8). But then he went down to Egypt where, out of fear, he passed off his wife as his sister. On his return from this failure in Egypt he went back to the altar at Bethel, where he had formerly called on the name of the Lord, and he again called on the name of the Lord (13:4). The altar was like a reset button with God, setting himself right with God.

As soon as Noah came out of the ark he did the right thing. Still we don't hear him speak, we just see him act. As he has done all along he does the right thing, acting in a manner befitting his characterization as a righteous man, blameless in his generation, who walked with God. He's the good son.

The Lord's Response (8:21-22)

The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done." (8:21)

The Lord's response to Noah's burnt offerings was two-fold: he smelled and he spoke to himself.

1. A Pleasing Aroma

The Lord smelled the sacrifice that ascended. Smell is probably the most powerful of our five senses. One whiff of something can fill us with intense pleasure or make us gag. Smells can evoke powerful memories from childhood. Huge amounts of money are spent on developing scents and aromas. But smell is a rather individual matter; we respond differently and with different intensity.

The Lord smelled Noah's sacrifice as a pleasing aroma. This was a choice: he could have interpreted the aroma as a stench, but chose to accept it as soothing. Literally, it was a smell that puts at rest. Here we have another wordplay on Noah's name: Noah's sacrifice put the Lord at rest (*nuah*). The Lord chose to accept it as an aroma that put him at rest. He didn't accept the sacrifice grudgingly. Noah didn't have to twist his arm or manipulate him. In accepting the sacrifice as a pleasing aroma, God was also accepting the one making the sacrifice. He was pleased with both. He surely looked on Noah with beaming pleasure.

2. Never Again

God's second response was to make an inner determination: he spoke to his heart. His inner dialog was predicated upon the sacrifice he had just accepted as soothing, as propitiatory. He said to himself, "Never again." So resolved was he that he said it not once but twice. These two statements form a classic piece of Hebrew poetry, though no English version sets it out as poetry:

> **"Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings,**
> **And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done."**

The first line seems to imply that the Lord lifted the curse upon the ground, but that's not quite right. The first line should read, "I will not curse the ground any further." The Lord was promising not to intensify the curse. This curse on the ground (*adamah*) because of the man (*adam*) has been a theme running through these early chapters of Genesis since chapter 3. The parallel line explains this limitation that God was placing upon himself with respect to the curse: he will never again destroy all life. The text is starkly honest here. The destruction of life was because of human sin, but was accomplished by God. Neither of these is a popular concept today. It is politically incorrect to talk of human sin, and it is offensive to talk of God destroying life. But the Bible clearly sets out both, and both were at work in the Flood. God brought the Flood in response to human sin, and with the Flood he destroyed life. But now God said, "Never again." Why? Because he had accepted both Noah's sacrifice and Noah himself. He had allowed himself to be propitiated by Noah's sacrifice. Now the one faithful human had emerged from the ark and was ready to start over. Surely God's promise expressed his confidence that humanity would do better this time around with Noah at the helm.

God solemnized his promise with a poem:

> **"As long as the earth endures,**
> **seedtime and harvest,**
> **cold and heat,**
> **summer and winter,**
> **day and night**
> **will never cease." (8:22)**

The Lord promises to keep the world running, to never again disrupt its functioning as he did with the Flood. He will shortly confirm this promise to Noah in the form of a covenant, placing his rainbow in the sky as the sign of the covenant. All seems well.

But into the middle of this pair of "never again" statements is inserted another clause, one that doesn't seem to fit:

> **"…even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood…"**

This conveys a very different message. Any confidence in the ability of humanity is misplaced, even if that human is Noah. Noah is indeed a role model, but he is not the answer to humanity's problems. In the short term the answer is in God's gracious acceptance of Noah's sacrifice. But that leaves unresolved the root problem of human sin. The Flood has changed everything. It has wiped the earth clean, making it ready for a fresh start. It has destroyed all the wicked, leaving only the righteous man Noah and his family.

But the Flood has changed nothing. The condition of humanity after the Flood is no different than before the Flood. Before the Flood "every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time" (6:5). After the Flood "every inclination of the

human heart is evil from childhood." Some do try to interpret the second statement as milder than the first, but that seems unfounded and changes the interpretation in a big way. If you read the second statement as a milder form of the first then humanity after the Flood is a little better than it was before the Flood. There is hope that humans will get their act together. If they try enough times they might actually get it right.

But if you read the statements as similar, there is no such hope. Humanity after the Flood is as evil as it was before the Flood. This means that God's "never again" promise is not the reward for Noah's good behavior, but an act of mercy. It is sheer grace. Something *has* changed: the Lord has been put at rest, and so he promises "never again." Before the Flood, the evil human heart was the grounds for God's judgment. After the Flood that same evil human heart is grounds for God's mercy. God exercised judgment because humans were sinners. God now shows mercy because humans are still sinners.

The problem of the evil human heart is here addressed not in the heart of man but in the heart of God. He allowed his heart to be put at rest not by wiping out all those who did wrong, nor by Noah's good behavior, but by the fragrant aroma of Noah's sacrifices. He chose to accept Noah's burnt offerings as a pleasing aroma, one that put him at rest. Noah's father Lamech had named him Noah, meaning "rest," because he was looking for comfort from the pain resulting from a cursed ground (5:29). Noah did indeed provide rest, but not in the way we were expecting. It was God who was put at rest. He allowed himself to be put at rest by Noah's offering.

The problem of the evil human heart is still there, but God won't address it with periodic floods. He will find another way to deal with human sin and to enable humanity to live up to his purposes. In the meantime, these dual issues of judgment and mercy meet together in the burnt offerings of Noah.

A Fragrant Aroma

Noah was not the solution to the problem of human sin. Nevertheless he was a role model, notably for Israel, whose story of origins this document is. God had high expectations for Israel, that they be holy as he is holy, that they be his chosen people, that they be a light to the nations. But they struggled with human sin. God provided them with a system of sacrifices, whereby their sins could be expiated and he propitiated. Their sins were taken away and his favor was restored, not by Israel's obedience, for it was never perfect, but by his grace in accepting their sacrifices. Repeatedly (38 times in Exodus–Leviticus) the Lord says that he will accept these as a pleasing aroma, just as he accepted Noah's burnt offerings.

Just weeks after entering into covenant with the Lord, promising to worship him alone, Israel broke covenant by bowing down to the golden calf, while Moses was on top of Mount Sinai with God.

> **"I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff–necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." (Exod 32:9-10)**

Moses interceded, urging God to change his mind, to repent, and to remember his purposes for Israel as expressed in his covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Lord listened to Moses and he did change his mind. Moses then asked the Lord to show him his glory. The Lord hid Moses in a cleft in the rock,

> **And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."**
>
> **Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. "Lord," he said, "if I have found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance." (Exod 34:7-9)**

Israel's nature as a stiff-necked people was grounds for God's judgment. But Moses called on God for it be grounds also for his mercy. This is the same principle as in the Flood. God exercises judgment because of human sin; God exercises mercy because of human sin. Each time Israel offered up burnt offerings judgment and mercy met. Judgment: it was clear that Israel had sinned; a sacrificial animal had to die. Mercy: God accepted the sacrifices as a pleasing aroma and he spared his people.

There wasn't anything magical about the sacrifices that Israel offered up. They didn't automatically set God at rest. It was God's gracious acceptance of these that set himself at rest. He accepted them as a pleasing aroma, showing mercy, withholding judgment. But he didn't always accept Israel's sacrifices. When Israel forgot the interconnection between judgment and mercy, when they took the sacrifices for granted, the Lord smelled their offerings as a stench. In the days of Isaiah he told Israel that he had no pleasure in their meaningless offerings, that their incense was an abomination, and that he hated their religious ceremonies (Isa 1:11-15). Nothing had changed in the offerings themselves. Physically, the same smell was ascending to heaven, but God now smelled it as a stench not as a pleasing aroma. Israel had forgotten the connection between judgment and mercy that met in their burnt offerings. Far from setting him at rest the smell aroused his wrath. Just like Cain before, Israel was presenting its offerings but not itself. Nevertheless, the Lord immediately said,

> **"Come now, let us reason together…**
> **Though your sins are like scarlet,**
> **they shall be as white as snow;**
> **though they are red as crimson,**
> **they shall be like wool." (Isa 1:18)**

The Lord has lofty purposes for humanity, yet humanity is chronically unable to meet these purposes. How does God solve this parenting conundrum? He does not lessen his purposes, nor does he whitewash over human failure, calling it success in order to give a passing grade. God solves this in two stages, both of which involve a fragrant aroma. Firstly, he has accepted another sacrifice as a fragrant aroma:

> **Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. (Eph 5:2 NASB)**

God has accepted his Son's sacrifice of himself. He allowed it to put him at rest in a far deeper way than Noah's burnt offerings or Israel's burnt offerings could ever do. It put him at rest once and for all, no further sacrifice needed. Jesus didn't have to twist God's arm, didn't have to try to manipulate him. God was pleased to accept him and his offering. God beams with pleasure upon his son, just as he beamed with pleasure upon him when he was on earth: "This is my

son, whom I love, in whom I am well pleased." In Jesus God's judgment and God's mercy meet.

God has allowed himself to be set at ease by the fragrant aroma of his Son's sacrifice. But this still doesn't change the problem of human sin. The second stage is that God causes the fragrant aroma of Christ to flow through us, so that we become to him the pleasing aroma of Christ. Paul uses this imagery of the fragrant aroma to describe our life:

> **But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. (2 Cor 2:14-16)**

There is something shocking here. Paul uses the imagery of a Roman triumphal procession. After a great victory, the Roman Senate would award the victorious general a triumph, a procession through the streets of Rome to wide acclaim. With him would be both his victorious troops and the conquered foe. Many used to assume that Paul is numbering himself among Christ's victorious troops. But it is increasingly recognized that Paul numbers himself among the conquered foe. This is reflected in the change from "thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ" (NIV) to "thanks be to God, who always leads us *as captives* in Christ's triumphal procession" (TNIV).

We were not on the side of the conquering hero. When we take our place among the conquered foe we acknowledge that we were Christ's enemies not his friends. We were worthy of judgment and in us God has exercised judgment. But he has also exercised mercy because of our sin. Judgment and mercy meet in our baptism: dying to the old in judgment, rising to the new in mercy. Then and only then do we ourselves become to God the pleasing aroma of Christ. The aroma that we are is the aroma of the knowledge of God that is spreading everywhere through Christ. God makes himself known through Christ in whom judgment and mercy meet. It is this aroma of the knowledge of God in Christ that brings life. It is when we've been captured by Christ that God can deliver us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light and life. In that kingdom of life Christ lives out his life through us and God empowers us through his Spirit. As we become more and more like Christ, we become people who are more and more deeply pleasing to God. Not because we do or say the right things or offer the right sacrifices, but because we become increasingly like the Lord Jesus Christ, who has set the pattern for what it means to be truly human, who has shown what God wants us to be.

God doesn't lower his expectations of what he wants us to be: his purpose is still that we be his image-bearers. He wants us to be nothing less than fully human after the pattern of Jesus. And he doesn't lower his standards: he's not afraid to call sin sin, to call failure failure.

In Christ his judgment and his mercy perfectly meet. They did so in the Flood, they did so in Israel, they do so supremely in Christ, and they do so in us when we take our place among the conquered foe in the triumphal procession.

People usually look at the Flood as being a story of great judgment. There is judgment, but at the end it's a story of great mercy. God showed mercy because humanity after the Flood was as sinful as before the Flood; he accepted Noah's burnt offerings as a fragrant aroma. He showed mercy to Israel because they were as stiff-necked after the golden calf as before it; he accepted their burnt offerings as a fragrant aroma. He shows us mercy because we desperately need it, because we are sinful people. Thanks be to God that he accepted Christ's self-offering as a fragrant aroma. Now through us he spreads abroad the aroma of Christ, which is the knowledge of God.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom judgment and mercy meet; the love of God, who was pleased to accept his Son's self-sacrifice as a pleasing aroma; and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who is God's power at work in us to make us the people who meet his expectations, be with us all now and forevermore. Amen.

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POWER IN THE BLOOD

Catalog No. 1592
Genesis 9:1-4
30th Message
Bernard Bell
January 30, 2011

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

One of the benefits of listening to the radio while driving around is being exposed to new pieces of music. One of the more unusual pieces I first encountered this way is entitled *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* by the British minimalist composer Gavin Bryars. The core of this work is a 25-second snippet of song sung by a homeless tramp on the streets of London:

Jesus' blood never failed me yet, never failed me yet,
Jesus' blood never failed me yet;
This one thing I know, for he loves me so.

Bryars turned this recording into a loop, behind which he developed an orchestral backing. He was limited by technology: his first version, for LP, was 25 minutes. Cassette tape allowed him to extend it to 60 minutes, and CD to 75 minutes. Fortunately, perhaps, he stopped there, not writing a version for Blu-ray. In the CD version the loop must go around at least 150 times. Some people find this tedious, an example of the weakness of minimalist composition. But others find it a profoundly moving experience and are reduced to tears. It must have made an impact on the Christian band Jars of Clay because they included a short version on their album *Who We Are Instead* (2003).

The tramp on the streets of London was holding on to this simple truth: Jesus' blood never failed me yet. What is it about blood, especially the blood of Jesus? We sang this morning, "There is power, power, wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb." Most of our songs made reference to the blood of Jesus. Our call to worship (Rev 5:9-10, 12) exalted the Lamb as worthy of praise because of what his blood has accomplished. Today we will explore the power of the blood.

Our text is Genesis 9:1-7 in which the Lord speaks to Noah just after he has received his burnt offerings:

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

"But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being.

"Whoever sheds human blood,
by human beings shall their blood be shed;
for in the image of God
has God made humankind.

As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it." (Gen 9:1-7 TNIV)

God has just wiped out nearly all life in the Flood. We might therefore think that he takes a low view of both life and the earth if he can treat them in this cavalier way. Not so: this passage reaffirms in several ways the high value which God places upon the earth and upon life.

God blessed Noah and his family, and said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." This is a verbatim repetition of his original blessing upon the humans when he first created them (1:28). He repeats this command at the end of the passage (9:7). In the Mesopotamian flood stories, the gods sent a flood upon the earth because of overpopulation: there were too many people and they were too noisy. Furthermore, the Mesopotamian creation accounts show that humans were created as an afterthought, in response to the complaints of the lesser gods that they were getting tired of their work. Humans were created to take over this grunt work. Such stories give a low view of human life. Humans have no dignity, except for the king who is special. Humans are little better than slave labor.

The Biblical creation and flood stories present a very different picture. The earth was deliberately and intentionally created by God as a dwelling place for life, both animal life and human life. Therefore, when God created the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, he saw that it was good: he wanted life. He blessed this life, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth" (1:22 ESV). When he made the land animals, he saw that it was good: he wanted life. When he created the humans he blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (1:28). At the end of the six days, he looked at all that he had made and it was very good: the sea, the sky and the land each filled with living creatures whom he commanded to be fruitful, to multiply and to fill their realms under his blessing.

The reason for the Flood was not overpopulation, not an excess of life upon earth. God wanted an earth filled with life. Humanity had multiplied upon the earth (6:1), as God intended. The problem was that this brought a multiplication of human evil upon the earth (6:5). God sent the Flood not because he had a low view of the earth and humanity, but because he had a high view of them. God had created the earth to be filled with life, especially with human life. But humanity had frustrated the purposes for which he had made it. He sent the Flood to wipe the earth clean, making it ready for a fresh start. He had Noah build an ark specifically in order to keep living creatures alive (6:20).

After the Flood God commanded Noah to bring out all the living creatures, the birds, the animals, and the creeping things, so that they could swarm over the earth and be fruitful and multiply (8:17). Now he expressed the same intentions for humans: "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." God intended that the earth be restocked with life. That's what he created the earth for, to be full of life.

The Genesis accounts may have some superficial similarities to the Mesopotamian ones, but the underlying values are fundamen-

tally different. The Genesis accounts of creation and the Flood show that God values life not trivializes it. All life is precious in his sight. We should have a similar attitude to both the earth and all living creatures.

The Flood might have wiped the earth clean, ready for a fresh start, but postdiluvian conditions are not quite the same as antediluvian. When God first blessed the humans, he told them to subdue the earth, and "Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (1:29). This rule is to be understood as a beneficial rule, acting as God's steward over his creation. But this command is not repeated after the Flood. Instead, there is a changed relationship between humans and animals. The animals are described in four categories, each in their respective realms: the beasts of the earth, the birds of the sky, the things which creep on the ground, and the fish of the sea. God had created humans to rule over these creatures, but now the fear and terror of humans will be upon these living creatures. This terror must be understood as related to God's giving of them all into human hands. What does it mean for the animals to be given into human hands? This is explained in the next verse: henceforth, every living moving creature will be food for mankind. Just as God originally gave humans vegetation for food (1:29), so now he allows them to eat animals from all four categories. It seems clear that we are to understand humans as being vegetarians prior to the Flood.

Though God now allowed humans to eat animals, it does not mean that the animals are without dignity. They are not to be trivialized. God added a strong exception clause: "But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it" (9:4). The word here translated "but" is strongly emphatic, here expressing a restriction to the previous sentence. The verb "you must not eat" is a strong form of prohibition. So the clause is doubly emphatic. This is immediately followed by a second strong exception clause, beginning with the same emphatic adverb which TNIV tries to capture with "surely": "And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting" (9:5).

God places these two strong restrictions back-to-back, one for animal lifeblood, the other for human lifeblood. For animals: meat with its lifeblood in it you must not eat. For humans: your lifeblood I will seek an accounting for. These two clauses about lifeblood form the hinge of the passage. Both draw a close connection between blood and life, whether for animals and for humans. Most English translations try to maintain this connection with the single word "lifeblood."

I originally intended to cover both animal lifeblood and human lifeblood together, but the more I worked at this the more I realized that these are too big to condense into one message, so I'll spread them over two. This week we'll look at the value of animal lifeblood, next week at the value of human lifeblood.

Noah and his family were given permission to eat any animal, but were strongly forbidden from eating its blood. What's the deal about the food and the blood? As always, we have to ask, "Why are we told this?"

Noah and his descendants are here given permission to eat any living creature, be it an animal on the earth, a bird in the sky, something that creeps along the ground, or a creature in the sea. But for Israel, for whom this document forms their story of origins, this universality was taken away by the Lord. Considerable attention is given in Israel's law code, the Torah, to dietary laws: what Israel was allowed to eat and not allowed to eat. The rules are most fully set out in Leviticus 11. Land animals were permissible for food only if they both have a cloven hoof and chew the cud. The camel chews the cud but doesn't have a cloven hoof; the pig has a cloven hoof but doesn't chew the cud. So neither was permissible as food. These non-permitted animals were unclean to Israel. Next, sea creatures were permissible for food only if they have both fins and scales. Carrion birds which feed on dead animals were forbidden. Winged insects were permissible only if they have jointed legs that enable them to hop, such as locusts, crickets and grasshoppers. Critters that swarm close to the ground, such as the mouse and the gecko, were all forbidden. The forbidden sea creatures, birds, insects and ground-huggers were not simply unclean to Israel; they were detestable. Elsewhere they are described as an abomination.

The list concludes,

> **"These are the regulations (*torah*) concerning animals, birds, every living thing that moves in the water and every creature that moves about on the ground. You must distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten." (Lev 11:46-47)**

The list is repeated in Deuteronomy 14 for the second generation as they are about to enter the land. This second list concludes with the command,

> **"Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk." (Deut 14:21; cf. Exod 23:19; 34:26)**

Why did the Lord restrict Israel's diet? It wasn't because God was a spoil-sport about food. When it came to the meat of clean animals, God allowed his people to enjoy themselves.

> **"Nevertheless, you may slaughter your animals in any of your towns and eat as much of the meat as you want…according to the blessing the LORD your God gives you… When the LORD your God has enlarged your territory as he promised you, and you crave meat and say, "I would like some meat," then you may eat as much of it as you want. If the place where the LORD your God chooses to put his Name is too far away from you, you may slaughter animals from the herds and flocks the LORD has given you, as I have commanded you, and in your own towns you may eat as much of them as you want." (Deut 12:15, 20-21)**

The availability of meat due to bountiful herds was a blessing from the Lord. Three times it is stated the Israelites could eat as much meat as they wanted, provided they had the herds and flocks. There is one reservation: they must not eat the blood.

> **"But you must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water… But be sure you do not eat the blood, because the blood is the life, and you must not eat the life with the meat. You must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water. Do not eat it, so that it may go well with you and your children after you, because you will be doing what is right in the eyes of the LORD." (Deut 12:16, 23-25)**

This prohibition on eating the blood is stated four times here, and reiterated in several other places in the Torah. So, again, what's the big deal about the blood and about the classification of food into what may and may not be eaten?

Many Jews continue to follow these laws. They have developed a great body of regulations, the laws of *kashrut*, which determine whether something is kosher, meaning "fit" for eating. Creatures are ruled to be legitimate or illegitimate as food based upon the laws of the Torah. Animals that are permissible must be slaughtered by

a ritual butcher, the *shochet*, to ensure that, among other things, all the blood is drained out. A particularly large body of *kashrut* law has developed around the prohibition on cooking a goat kid in its mother's milk. This has grown into a prohibition on eating meat and dairy products together. Kosher households must maintain two sets of plates, of cutlery, of pots and pans, one for meat, the other for dairy. They must not be mixed in the same dishwasher load, lest they mutually contaminate each other.

On one of the trips I led to Israel we were staying in a hotel in the Galilee, and had our dinners at the hotel. We were puzzled that some nights coffee was served with dinner, but other nights it was not. One evening when coffee was not available, one of our party went downstairs to the bar, bought a cup of coffee and brought it back to the dining room. No sooner had he sat down than one of the wait staff rushed up to him in a state of considerable agitation and told him that he couldn't bring his cup into the dining room. We were even more puzzled until the situation was explained. We had had meat for dinner, but his coffee cup belonged to the set of dairy dishes. If the cup went through the dishwashing process with the plates and cutlery used for meat they would contaminate each other. The dining room staff was so alarmed because such contamination would cost the hotel its kosher license and hurt its business.

Why were these rules given to Israel? Do they still apply today? Some have argued they were given for reasons of hygiene. But, if so, why was Noah allowed to eat everything? And what does this mean to me, as someone who has been grafted into Israel? Am I bound by these dietary laws? Am I allowed to eat pork or blood sausage?

God explained to Israel why he was imposing these regulations upon them: the separation of food into what may be eaten and what may not be eaten, and the prohibition on eating blood. The separation of food into permissible and non-permissible made Israel a distinct society, different from all other nations. The Lord explained,

> **"Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. But I said to you, "You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey." I am the Lord your God, who has set you apart from the nations.**
>
> **"You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground—those which I have set apart as unclean for you. You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own." (Lev 20:22-26)**

The distinction between clean and unclean animals was solely to set Israel apart. They were to keep themselves distinct from the Canaanites by not offering child sacrifices to the Canaanite god Molech (20:1-5), by their sexual ethics (10-21), and by their diet (25).

In the days of Jesus the Pharisees took these food laws very seriously. They ate only with people like themselves whom they knew would keep the laws and maintain purity. They were scandalized by the company that Jesus kept at the dinner table.

Some years later Peter was on the rooftop of his house in Joppa, praying, when he received a vision. He saw a blanket descend from heaven:

> **It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."**
>
> **"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."**
>
> **The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."**
>
> **This happened three times. (Acts 10:12-16)**

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of this vision, men sent by Cornelius the centurion arrived, asking that he come to their master's house. On arrival at Cornelius' house, Peter said,

> **"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles or visit them. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean…I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right." (Acts 10:28, 34-35)**

After Peter proclaimed the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Spirit came upon them and many were baptized. He stayed with them a few days, presumably sharing their meals. When Peter went up to Jerusalem the leaders criticized him, not that Gentiles had come to faith, but that he had eaten with them. Peter explained his vision and his visit to Cornelius.

> **When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life." (Acts 11:18)**

With that, 1400 years of Jewish dietary laws became irrelevant. They had served their purpose, distinguishing Israel from the other nations. This distinction had been only a temporary measure, pending the time when God would bring Jews and Gentiles together. But old ways died hard. Later Peter was in Antioch, the first Jewish-Gentile church. When representatives from the church in Jerusalem came to see what was happening, Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles out of fear (Gal 2:11); it seems that even Barnabas joined him.

The question of how Gentiles and Jews fit together in the church was not quickly resolved. There was so much dissension that the apostles met for a council in Jerusalem. Following the lead of James, they issued a letter to all the Gentile Christians,

> **It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. (Acts 15:28-29)**

The Gentiles were not under Jewish law, not under Torah. They did not have to become Jews now that they were followers of Jesus. Most particularly, the men did not have to be circumcised. Nevertheless, the apostles asked them to refrain from four things. This was probably a temporary measure to avoid offending the Jewish Christians.

The eating together of Jews and Gentiles was a powerful symbol of what God had done, bringing Jew and Gentile together into one body. Nowhere was this stronger than in sharing together the Lord's Supper.

The dietary laws concerning permissible and impermissible food were a temporary measure to keep Israel distinct until the time came for God to break down that distinction. Perhaps Israel should have known from the permission given to Noah that the ideal was the permissibility of all food.

But what about the blood? Here, too, God gave Israel an explanation:

> **"I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood, and I will cut them off from their people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." (Lev 17:10-11)**

The Israelites were to abstain from eating blood, because the blood was so powerful, powerful enough to make atonement. Blood was used to seal the covenant between God and his people. At Mt Sinai Moses wrote all the Lord's words in the Book of the Covenant. Burnt offerings and peace offerings were sacrificed to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood from those animals and threw it against the altar. Then he read the Book. When the people expressed their commitment to obey, he threw the other half of the blood over the people and proclaimed,

> **"This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words." (Exod 24:6)**

The blood had the power to seal the covenant. It also had the power to cleanse and to make atonement. As Hebrews states,

> **[T]he law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (Heb 9:22)**

Israel's sacrifices were a very bloody business. The blood of every animal offering was thrown against the altar or poured out at its base: burnt offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings. Moses consecrated Aaron and his sons as priests by putting blood from a sacrificial ram on the lobes of their right ears, on their right thumbs, and on their right big toes; he consecrated their garments by sprinkling with blood (Exod 29; Lev 8). Blood was used for the cleansing of those with leprous skin diseases (Lev 14:14, 25), and of a mildewed house (Lev 14:51). On the Day of Atonement the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies and there sprinkle blood on the mercy seat, the cover over the ark of the covenant (Lev 16:14) to make atonement for the Holy Place, then he would sprinkle blood on the altar in the courtyard to make atonement for it (16:18-19).

Blood, blood, blood. Israel's tabernacle and later its temple were awash with blood. All because Israel was a sinful people which needed both cleansing and forgiveness. Blood had the power to accomplish both because God was pleased to accept the blood of an animal in place of human life. The blood of the animal was vicarious or substitutionary; it served in place of human life. Every time Israel offered an animal sacrifice the shed blood made it very clear that an animal had died in the place of humans. Every year at Passover Israel remembered that they had been protected from the angel of death in Egypt by the blood of the lamb.

Blood was part of the fabric of everyday life for Israel. Blood was powerful. Israel was not to misuse this power by eating the blood of animals. There was power in the blood, but the power was limited. The blood had to be offered again and again and again. Its fundamental weakness was that it lacked permanent efficacy. But now God has been pleased to accept the blood of one single sacrificial lamb, shed one single time, as permanently efficacious in providing cleansing and forgiveness. The book of Hebrews goes to considerable lengths to develop the immeasurably greater efficacy of the blood of Christ. For example,

> **Christ entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own… But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself… Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many. (Heb 9:24-28)**

There is indeed power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb. It can accomplish what no blood of animals could ever accomplish. Jesus' blood never failed me yet; this one thing I know, for he loves me so.

Now that the one fully-efficacious sacrifice has been offered and accepted there is no need for any further animal sacrifices, no need for any further pouring out of blood. The reservation of blood as an instrument of purification and atonement has been fulfilled. Therefore the prohibition on the consumption of blood no longer applies. The withholding of blood has served its purpose. You are free to eat black pudding and blood sausage.

Here in Genesis 9, Noah was given freedom to eat any animal, but with the emphatic restriction on not eating the blood. He had just offered up burnt offerings. Blood had been shed. The Lord had been pleased to accept the offerings as a fragrant aroma that put him at rest. The way was being prepared for a theology of the blood. Blood was precious; it was not to be belittled. Blood had power to accomplish great wonders. For Israel it temporarily atoned for their sin. How much greater power has the blood of the Lamb which permanently atones for our sin. Thanks be to God for the power he invests in the blood of the Lamb.

> *Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)*

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BLOODGUILT

Catalog No. 1593
Genesis 9:5-6
31st Message
Bernard Bell
February 6, 2011

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

It has been four weeks since Gabrielle Giffords and others were shot in Tucson. These shootings prompted a debate about the breakdown of civility in public discourse, and whether the language and imagery used by politicians and talk shows hosts, especially those on the right, might have contributed to the tragedy. Particular concern was expressed over Sarah Palin's use of cross-hairs to target Giffords and others in the 2010 election. Palin responded, "journalists and pundits should not manufacture a blood libel that serves only to incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn." Her use of the term "blood libel" sparked off a storm of controversy. She used the phrase deliberately and knowingly, subsequently defending herself, saying, "Blood libel obviously means being falsely accused of having blood on your hands."

Nevertheless, her choice of words was unfortunate. The term "blood libel" has a long and sorry history. It is the charge that Jews kidnap Christian children to use their blood in their rituals. This false accusation has been used to whip up much anti-Jewish sentiment, overflowing into violence. The charge of blood libel is often accompanied by one of deicide, the killing of God: charging Jews with bloodguilt as Christ-killers. These twin charges of blood libel and Christ-killing were responsible for much of the extensive anti-Semitic violence in Europe throughout the Middle Ages. Both charges involve bloodguilt, the guilt arising from the shedding of innocent human lifeblood.

Last week we saw that lifeblood, both animal and human, is at the heart of God's first speech to Noah after the Flood. He expanded the human diet to include animals, but with the emphatic restriction that meat not be eaten with its lifeblood still in it. Because of the close association between life and blood, there is power in the blood. Noah had just availed himself of this power, offering up burnt offerings which the Lord had accepted as a fragrant aroma that put him at rest. The Lord had been pleased to accept the shed blood of an animal as an adequate substitution; he had been pleased to invest the blood with power.

The strong statement about animal lifeblood is immediately followed by a strong statement about human lifeblood.

"And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being.

"Whoever sheds human blood,
by human beings shall their blood be shed;
for in the image of God
has God made humankind." (Gen 9:5-6 TNIV)

These two verses about human lifeblood inevitably raise the issue of capital punishment. Over the past ten years I have preached on several difficult and controversial topics: Armageddon, the millennium, the six days of Creation. But they seem easy in comparison with this topic. I am filled with greater apprehension over this message. It's not that I don't know what to say: I have thought the issue through. It's not just that there are lots of toes to step on; I trod on plenty in those other topics. It's not just that Christians are divided on the matter; they are divided on those other topics as well. I'm apprehensive because in talking about human lifeblood we are talking about very solemn, sobering issues of life and death, of justice and mercy. This is not a matter to be taken lightly.

The text itself is clear enough. Verse 5 contains three clauses, in each of which God states that he will demand an accounting. The Hebrew verb used here has a wide semantic range centered on the idea of seeking. What God seeks is lifeblood because lifeblood has been shed. The first clause lays out the principle: your blood for your life I will seek. The remaining two clauses elaborate: whether it is an animal or a human, God will seek lifeblood. TNIV seeks to clarify the principle with its translation, "demand an accounting." If an animal kills a human, God will demand an accounting of the animal, namely its lifeblood. If a human kills a human, he will also demand an accounting, namely his lifeblood. The case of a human killing another human is particularly egregious, because he is shedding the blood of someone like himself. Hebrew uses the word "brother" which TNIV expands into "another human being."

Verse 6 specifies how God will demand an accounting for human lifeblood. The verse is in poetry, which is regularly used in these early chapters of Genesis for climactic statements. The first half of the verse is very terse, just six Hebrew words. It is chiastic; the first three words are repeated in the reverse order: shed–blood–man man–blood–shed. English requires a lot more words: "whoever sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed." This emphasizes the correspondence between the crime and the punishment. The punishment is one of retribution, exactly equal to the crime.

The second line gives the rationale: for in the image of God he made the human. There is a two-fold rationale here. Firstly, the shedding of human lifeblood is so serious because humans are made in the image of God. To kill a human being is to kill God's representative on earth. Secondly, it is humans who are to exercise judgment, shedding the blood of humans, because they are in the image of God. They are God's representatives on earth, to whom he delegates his rule on earth. These twin aspects of God's image meet over the shed human lifeblood. Both the one whose blood has been shed and the one who must shed further blood are in God's image. There is gravity on both sides.

Here after the Flood God is re-emphasizing several features of human life upon earth. Firstly, he is emphasizing the sanctity and dignity of human life; the shedding of any human lifeblood is serious because every human is in God's image, is God's representative on earth. Even the most seemingly insignificant human life is in the image of God. Two weeks ago we observed Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, affirming that unborn children are in the image of God, af-

firming our opposition to shedding their lifeblood in abortion. Their little lives *do* matter. Dostoevsky used the form of a novel to send this message of the value of even the most seemingly insignificant human life. In his novel *Crime and Punishment*, the main character Rasholnikov kills an old woman, thinking that her death will have no repercussions whatsoever, that her life matters not one iota. But he found that the death of even this most insignificant of people sent out shock-waves that reverberated through him. Dostoevsky was sending a powerful message to late nineteenth century Russia of the dignity of every single human being.

Secondly, God is emphasizing the unity of the human race. When a human kills another human, it is his own kinsman that he is killing. The use of the word "brother" in verse 5 means we have to read this against the story of Cain and Abel. Cain killed his brother then denied that he had any responsibility for him. "Am I my brother's keeper?" he asked. The answer that should be shouted back loud and clear by every subsequent reader is "Yes, you are!" Some opponents of the death penalty argue that God's placing of a protective mark for Cain instead of killing him shows his opposition to capital punishment. But you can't get away with that argument here in chapter 9. It is precisely the human who kills his fellow human, his brother, whose blood God seeks.

Thirdly, God is reiterating the status of humans as his vice-regal representatives on earth, ruling his kingdom on his behalf. It is God who seeks justice for shed human blood, but here he delegates the execution of that justice to humans, his vice-regents. So when humans act in that capacity they are acting on behalf of God, in his stead.

The meaning of these two verses is clear. Human life matters; God seeks an accounting for all shed human blood; and he delegates justice to humans. These verses provide the basis for capital punishment. There is no wiggle room. Yet there is a huge debate over capital punishment among both Christians and non-Christians. At question is not the meaning of these verses, which cannot be in doubt, but their applicability today. So how do we go about thinking through this difficult topic? I'm more interested in helping you think than in leading you to a particular conclusion.

These verses lay down the death penalty for the shedding of human lifeblood. The Torah, Israel's law code, both intensified and moderated the death penalty.

God intensified the penalty by increasing the number of offenses for which the penalty was capital punishment. These offenses included sins against others such as killing another human, striking or cursing a parent, kidnapping another person and selling him; sexual sins of adultery, homosexuality and bestiality; religious sins of sacrificing to other gods, especially offering children in sacrifice, of blasphemy, and of desecrating the sabbath (e.g., Exod 21:12-17; Lev 20:2-16). For all these offenses the penalty was death, and the Torah is very emphatic: the offender "shall *surely* be put to death" (NASB). In most of these cases the offense did not produce bloodguilt, but was nevertheless punishable by bloodshed. At stake was the holiness of Israel; removal of the sinner was necessary to maintain holiness. Yet it is clear that the execution of the penalty, which did shed human lifeblood, neither produced bloodguilt upon Israel nor tarnished her holiness, because that execution was carried out on behalf of God.

But in other ways God moderated the death penalty for Israel. The sixth commandment is "You shall not murder," but not all killing was classified as murder. Killing in war did not cause bloodguilt, nor did judicial killing; in both cases the shed blood was not innocent blood. The one who accidentally killed another person did have bloodguilt on his hands but God provided a refuge for his safety. Throughout the land of Israel six cities of refuge were set aside to which the killer could flee (Num 35:9-34; Deut 19:1-13; Josh 20:1-9). Here he sought refuge from the avenger of blood, the kinsman of the slain man, whose shed blood was crying out for justice. It was the avenger who had the God-given responsibility to act as his delegate in demanding an accounting. But if the people determined that the killing was not from hatred, they were to deliver the killer from the avenger of blood. He was safe in the city, until the high priest died, whereupon he was free to go home. This was a provision of mercy on God's part. The bloodguilt was there, but God provided a means of mercy for dealing with the bloodguilt short of taking the killer's life. In the short term that provision was the city of refuge; in the longer term it was the death of the high priest as a substitutionary death in his place.

There are those who want to apply Old Testament law today to civil society. These are the reconstructionists who espouse theonomy (God's law). The more extreme of them want to resurrect the death penalty for all the offenses for which it is applied in the Torah. Perhaps most controversial today is the aim of some to bring back the death penalty for homosexuality. This very proposal is currently before the government in Uganda, following the visit of some conservative evangelical leaders from this country. But the Torah was given for Israel alone. With the death and resurrection of Christ it has run its course. It does not apply to society today, be it Christian society or non-Christian society. There is much that can be learnt from the Torah about life in community, but its use as a contemporary law code is invalid. The presence of the death penalty in the Torah cannot be used to justify its use today. What troubles me more is that those who advocate theonomy tend to have no room for mercy in their views. This shows a deep misunderstanding of God's character.

God is a God of justice whose wrath is kindled by sin. But he is also a God of great mercy. He doesn't show mercy begrudgingly; he delights to show mercy. He revealed himself as this sort of God to Moses:

> **"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." (Exod 34:6-7)**

King David was the beneficiary of this mercy in a most dramatic way. After he slept with Bathsheba and arranged the death of her husband Uriah, the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to him. Nathan came and told him a story about a rich man with abundant flocks taking the one lamb of a poor man. David's anger was kindled and he said, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die!" Whereupon Nathan said, "You are the man!" (2 Sam 12:1-7). In that instant David's world unraveled. He was undone. What he had done in secret had been found out. He had not a leg to stand on. Ready to impose the death penalty on someone else, he instantly realized it should fall upon his own head. Was there any refuge for him? To his credit he immediately confessed, "I have sinned against the LORD." He had bloodguilt on his hands. Was there any way for it to be dealt with short of the death penalty?

In a strange way we are the beneficiaries of David's sin, because he has given us a model for how to deal with sin. After Nathan had

exposed his sin, David wrote Psalm 51 as his confession. In this psalm he made a daring request:

Deliver me from bloodguilt, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. (Ps 51:14)

David knew he had bloodguilt on his hands. This was deeply ironic for him. He had bloodguilt on his hands because he had taken another man's wife. Yet he already had a wife who had kept him from bloodguilt. When Abigail restrained him from killing her husband Nabal, he praised her "for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands" (1 Sam 25:33, cf. v. 26). When Nabal had died under God's direct hand, David took Abigail as his wife. She was a living rebuke to the danger of taking matters into one's own hands. But now David had done just that. He had committed adultery and murder, both subject to the death penalty. He had blood on his hands—bloodguilt.

He knew this bloodguilt was inexcusable. He could not flee to a city of refuge for it offered no refuge for a murderer. The people could not deliver him from the avenger of blood, the one with the God-given responsibility of shedding his blood. Was there anywhere he could flee for refuge? Amazingly, he fled to God's righteousness. Surely this was the last place to find refuge. Surely God's righteousness required that he be put to death. But David knew that he could find refuge there. This seems the clear implication of David's statement that if God delivered him from bloodguilt he would sing of his righteousness. How could he appeal to this righteousness? God's righteousness is supremely his faithfulness to his character and purposes. His purposes for David were that he be king and birth a son who would be in a father-son relationship with God and who would build God's temple.

David should have been dashed against the rock of God's justice, but God landed him gently on the shore of his mercy. Again and again and again as we read the Bible we encounter these twin themes of justice and mercy, of sin and grace. They are seemingly incompatible, but both are true and absolutely necessary.

As we saw two weeks ago, the evil human heart was grounds for God's judgment in the Flood and also for his mercy after the Flood (Gen 6:5; 8:21). In the same way Israel's nature as a stiff-necked people was both the grounds for God's judgment at the episode of the golden calf and the reason why Moses appealed to God to show mercy in forgiveness (Exod 32:9; 34:9).

Now David cast himself upon the grace and mercy of God with his opening cry:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love. (Ps 51:1)

Appealing to God's mercy, he was not compromising God's righteousness but allowing it to be manifest.

God has displayed his righteousness in dealing with bloodguilt even more remarkably in his response to the murder of his Son. He invites the murderers to come to him and find forgiveness. We see this very clearly in the preaching of the apostles from the start. In his early sermons, Peter confronted people with their sin. For example, on the Day of Pentecost, "This Jesus, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up" (Acts 2:23-24). But then he issued an invitation, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (2:36). Peter repeated this message again and again. This is the scandal of the gospel: we are guilty, but God extends forgiveness. We deserve judgment but God extends mercy and grace.

God provided Israel with cities of refuge to which the killer could flee for mercy. Now he has provided Christ as a refuge to whom we flee. Christ is both the one whose lifeblood was shed, and the one to whom we flee for refuge from bloodguilt.

This dual message of judgment and grace applies to capital punishment. There is one penalty for the shedding of human lifeblood: death. Genesis 9 makes no exceptions, no allowances, no extenuating circumstances. There is one reason not to apply the death penalty for bloodguilt: mercy. Even the exceptions, the allowances for extenuating circumstances, the cities of refuge, are all of mercy. God is pleased to show mercy.

Capital punishment is a highly controversial topic today. Of the developed countries the U.S. stands alone with those of East Asia in allowing the death penalty. The European Union prohibits it, and prevents extradition of detainees where the death penalty is a possibility. Here in this country 36 states currently have the death penalty. Last year 46 people were executed. California has 697 on death row. Texas tops the table of executions with over 450 since the death penalty was restored in 1976. The death penalty represents a significant chasm between the US and Europe. Who is right? Is the EU soft on crime and guilty of moral relativism? Or is the US barbaric?

Christians are to be found on both sides of the debate, often quite vocally. Advocates and opponents of capital punishment offer a variety of reasons for and against the practice. Sometimes the same reason is offered by both sides. I find that most reasons do not stand up against Scripture. The Biblical standard is that there is one reason for capital punishment: the shedding of human lifeblood. And there is one reason for withholding capital punishment: mercy.

Both sides claim that the other cheapens human life. Genesis 9 calls for the death penalty because of the high value of human life. But mercy also values life.

Both sides appeal to human rights. Proponents claim that the death penalty honors the rights of victims, by which is usually meant surviving relatives, and that it provides closure for such. Opponents claim the death penalty violates the human right to life and the right of the criminal to rehabilitation. But the one who sheds human blood has no right to life; his only hope for life is mercy, even if the killing is accidental. The only victim is the dead person, whose shed innocent blood cries out for justice. Under Israel's Torah the avenger of blood was not pursuing his own rights, but those of the dead person's blood.

Proponents of capital punishment advocate its value as a deterrent; opponents claim it is ineffective as a deterrent. But the potential deterrent value is not a Biblical reason for the death penalty.

Both sides appeal to the Constitution. Opponents claim capital punishment is unconstitutional as "cruel and unusual punishment" (Eighth Amendment). Proponents claim it is constitutional provided there is "due process of law," because the Constitution and its Amendments explicitly include the death penalty (Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments). But the US Constitution does not make something right.

Some of the opponents' arguments are more about the implementation of the penalty than the penalty itself: the risk of killing innocent people, the danger of discrimination, the use of the death penalty as a tool of political oppression or of revenge. These are un-

deniable and we should be concerned for justice in these areas. But these objections do not invalidate the death penalty itself.

Some of the proponents' arguments are specious. To advocate the death penalty because it provides a bargaining tool for prosecutors to offer in plea bargaining is a misuse of a solemn penalty. To prevent repeat offenders is never a Biblical reason. The one strong valid reason that the advocates put forward is the principle of retribution, in which the penalty matches the crime. This seems the unavoidable intent of Genesis 9:6. The shedding of human lifeblood forfeits the lifeblood of the shedder.

It seems to me undeniable that in Genesis 9:5-6 the Bible specifies capital punishment as the penalty for shedding human lifeblood. But does the Bible obligate capital punishment? To this I say, "No."

Tragic public events such as the Tucson killings often lead to renewed calls for the death penalty. Eighteen months ago there was great anger here when Scotland released the Lockerbie bomber al-Megrahi on compassionate grounds. He had prostate cancer, and doctors thought that he might have just three months to live, though he is still alive in Libya. We may never know what machinations there might have been behind the scenes. Were the Scottish authorities duplicitous or naive or genuinely sincere? At the time Kenny MacAskill, the Scottish Justice Secretary, said, "Our justice system demands that judgment be imposed but compassion available. Our beliefs dictate that justice be served but mercy be shown." You may find that deeply distasteful in the case of al-Megrahi; certainly a lot of people here in America reacted angrily to his release. It's hard to imagine any American judge or judicial authority saying what MacAskill said. But there is something deeply Biblical to it, though we will never appreciate that until we realize that mercy and compassion have been shown to us. We cannot begin to find any balance between justice and mercy until we appreciate how much mercy God has shown to us. Such mercy is scandalous, and deeply offensive to those pressing for justice. If it weren't scandalous it wouldn't be mercy.

Mercy is a sign not of weakness but of strength. In an episode similar to that of the golden calf, when Israel had again rebelled against the Lord after listening to the report of the spies, Moses asked God to magnify his power by being "slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion" (Num 14:17-18).

Advocates of capital punishment usually promote punitive justice such as that followed by the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials after World War II. The alternative is restorative justice, most boldly attempted in post-apartheid South Africa. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the chairmanship of Desmond Tutu invited both victims and perpetrators of injustice to come forward and tell the truth. Critics fault punitive justice for being vindictive, restorative justice for being idealistic and too merciful.

God exercises restorative justice pending the day when he will exercise punitive justice. He invites all to come to him, confessing their sins, and find forgiveness. He invites those guilty of sin to flee to Christ for refuge from his wrath. But the invitation will not always be open. The day is coming when he will exercise punitive justice, retributive justice.

In the end I am ambivalent about the death penalty. I care less about the position than how the position is reached. I don't care if an individual supports the death penalty or opposes it provided they have wrestled with these twin issues of justice and mercy, both on the national level and in their own person. Too many who oppose the death penalty do so for the wrong reason, belittling the sanctity of human life. But, on the other side, too many of those who advocate the penalty also do so for the wrong reason, belittling humanity's desperate need for mercy. The shedding of human lifeblood is a very serious matter, because humans are in the image of God. Any bloodshed is an attack on God's representative. And as God's representatives it is humans who are to be his agents discharging justice. Today God has entrusted the civil magistrates with that responsibility. In seeking to maintain order and security in society they must wrestle with the demand for justice but also with the need for mercy. If a society chooses to abolish the death penalty for the sake of being a merciful society, then I have no problem with that. But if it chooses to abolish it because it is seen as barbaric or as violating a right to life, then that society has trivialized the seriousness of the offense.

God is a God of justice, but he also reveals himself as a God of mercy. Were it not so Israel would have had no hope, nor David, nor me. Only when we existentially place ourselves where David was, conscious of both our own guilt and of God's great mercy, can we hope to find some sort of balance in wrestling with this very difficult issue of capital punishment.

In both his justice and his mercy God reveals his righteousness. It is because God has shown me his mercy that I can sing of his righteousness. As David immediately says,

O Lord, open thou my lips;
and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. (Ps 51:15 KJV)

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UNDER THE RAINBOW

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Genesis 9:8-17
32nd Message
Bernard Bell
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SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Genesis is a book of beginnings, a story of origins. It begins with God—not the beginning of God, but God himself. In the beginning he is already there, uncreated and the creator of everything else. He created the heavens and the earth, fashioning a world with both form and content. He filled this world with life, creating living creatures to fill the sky, the sea and the land. He blessed them, commanding them, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth" (1:22). Finally he created a special form of life: human beings to be his image-bearers in the world and to rule and steward his creation on his behalf. These, too, he blessed and commanded, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth" (1:28). At the end of six days he looked over all that he had made, and, behold, it was all very good; it was exactly what he intended it to be.

Genesis 1 gives us the beginning of the biblical narrative. The story begins with creation, with the creation of life. But the story is not complete with only a beginning: it needs a middle and an end. But barely has the story got going than it suffers a train wreck, or rather a series of train wrecks. These get worse and worse until after only ten generations God the Creator announces the end: "I am going to put an end to all life" (6:13). This announcement is emphatic, beginning with the phrase "The end of all life." Imagine you're watching this as a movie. You've settled in, expecting a three-hour show. Two opening scenes about the creation of life set up the story. Then come some brief tumultuous scenes: expulsion from the garden, murder of a brother. Then God appears on camera for a speech. The first words out of his mouth: "The End!" The end of all life! How can the story end so soon? It's barely gotten going! What went wrong? You want your money back.

Humanity began to multiply upon the earth, as God intended, but this brought a multiplication of human wickedness upon the earth (6:1, 5). God looked and instead of seeing that it was all very good, he saw that the earth was ruined (6:12). So he decided to wipe the earth clean with the waters of the Flood. No ordinary flood this, but a unique Flood, one triumphant enough to overwhelm the earth, covering the highest mountains and returning the earth to its original blank state. But not quite: atop the waters, supported on this 'whelming Flood, floated a box filled with life.

Prior to sending the Flood, God had taken Noah into his confidence, revealing his plan and giving Noah a part to play. First in general terms: "I am surely going to destroy both them [all flesh] and the earth. So make yourself an ark" (6:13-14). Then more specifically, "I am going to bring floodwaters upon the earth to destroy all life… But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark" (6:17-18). Noah's part was to first build the ark and then enter into it together with a sample of the living creatures to keep them alive. In this ark God kept Noah and the animals with him alive while he wiped the earth clean, while he undid creation.

Did this solve the problem of human wickedness? No! Human wickedness remained unchanged. Before the Flood, "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time" (6:5). This human evil was grounds for divine judgment. After the Flood, he pronounced that "every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood" (8:21). This time human evil was grounds for divine mercy, as God promised, "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans." And we must place ourselves into that analysis. The evil inclination of our human hearts is grounds for both judgment and mercy.

Nevertheless, despite this ongoing human wickedness, when Noah emerged from the ark, God commissioned him to be the new Adam. Just as he had blessed Adam, so he blessed Noah, commanding him, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth," repeating the command a few verses later, "As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it" (9:1, 7). Here is a new beginning. But what hope does Noah have that this beginning will move on into a middle and an end? What hope do we have, as those watching the movie, that the story will end successfully? After all, the root cause of the abrupt first end has not been resolved.

Noah's hope, and our hope also, rests in a promise which God makes. After he came out of the ark, Noah built an altar on which he offered burnt offerings to the Lord. We read the Lord's response.

> **The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done." (8:21)**

The pleasing aroma was literally an "aroma that put at rest." The Lord was put at rest not by destroying sinful life, which he had done, nor by resolving human evil, which he had not done, but by graciously accepting a sacrifice, which Noah had done. That's pure grace. And then he made a determination in his own heart: Never again! "Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings…And never again will I destroy all living creatures." He backed this up with a promise to himself to keep creation working:

> **"As long as the earth endures,**
> **seedtime and harvest,**
> **cold and heat,**
> **summer and winter,**
> **day and night**
> **will never cease." (8:22)**

These resolutions were made in the privacy of God's own heart. Now, in the final episode of the flood narrative, he expresses this inner resolve to Noah. He solemnly declares to Noah the promise which he had made in his own heart. Our story-teller has broken this declaration into three separate speeches (9:8-11, 12-16, 17).

God's Covenant with Noah (9:8-11)

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." (Gen 9:8-11 TNIV)

This speech picks up much of the language of God's speech to Noah before the Flood (6:13-21). Prior to the Flood God had announced to Noah, "I will establish my covenant with you (singular)" (6:18). Now he establishes that covenant, but in a more comprehensive manner. It will be not only with Noah but with "you" (plural), signifying his sons as well; with "your descendants after you," that is, with all humanity; indeed, "with every living creature." This is stated most emphatically: the word "all" or "every" is used twelve times in verses 8-17 to indicate the totality of animal life that is included under this covenant.

This is the first of many covenants in Scripture. Some of these covenants are between two human partners: for example, Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:27), the Gibeonites with Joshua (Josh 9:6-16), Jonathan and David (1 Sam 18:3), Solomon and Hiram, the king of Tyre (1 Kgs 5:21). Most of these covenants are between two equal parties; they are mutual agreements. Such covenants are essentially treaties; indeed, NIV usually translates the term as "make a treaty." The term is still used today in a similar manner. On Friday I participated in a wedding. The bride and groom, as equal parties, made vows, promises to each other. They are now bound together in the covenant of marriage in the eyes of both God and state.

But there is another set of covenants, in which God is a partner. These covenants are manifestly not between two equal partners, for who can be an equal partner with God in any negotiations? These covenants are not founded on any negotiations. Instead, they are solemn declarations of God's plans, in which he binds himself to a particular course of action. They are solemnizations of his promises; the making or the establishment of the covenant begins the actualization of promises which have already been made. These covenants are usually unilateral, initiated and enacted by one side, God's side, though to the great benefit of the other side. Since the primary recipient of this first covenant is Noah, it is often labeled the Noahic covenant. But we see that it is with far more than simply Noah; it is with all life. God has already made the promise in his own heart. Now begins the actualization of that promise.

This first covenant contains two promises. Both are in the negative: not what God will do, but what he will not do. A double "never again" to match the double "never again" of his inner resolve. Both reverse decisions which he made before the Flood. Prior to the Flood, God said "I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life" (6:17). Now he promises, "Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood." Additional weight is added by the second promise: "Never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." Now it is evident that there have been plenty of floods since then, and that these floods have caused tremendous loss of life, largely because people now live in floodplains as if they were not floodplains. God is not promising that there will be no more floods, but no more Flood—the word used for "Flood" is unique to this one event.

These promises are totally one-sided. God does not ask Noah to do anything; he lays no obligation upon him. The validity of these promises does not depend upon any human cooperation. God will keep these promises no matter what, ongoing human sin notwithstanding. Never again will he undo creation and start over. But is God's word enough? Can we rely on that word? In his second speech he backs up his word with a sign.

The Sign of the Covenant (9:12-16)

And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." (9:12-16)

Why is a sign necessary? Promises are words, and words are invisible; they can be forgotten. A sign is something visible. It is not itself the promise, but it points to the promise. In Friday's wedding the bride and groom exchanged rings immediately after their vows. The rings are signs. They point to something else: to the vows. When the couple look at their rings they are to remember their covenant vows, their promises to one another.

The sign that God chooses for his covenant with Noah is a rainbow in the clouds. We now understand how the rainbow works, that it's produced by the refraction of light through water droplets. White light is refracted into a full spectrum, though we still follow Newton's convention of recognizing seven colors. But our understanding of the physics hasn't reduced the rainbow to the ordinary. The ancient world must have marveled at the appearance of the rainbow after a storm. And we still find rainbows magical; we stop and reach for our cameras. Though the laws of physics are involved, it is clear that God is still sovereign over creation: he is the one who beclouds the earth with clouds. He has arranged physics so that light is refracted into a spectrum, so that a rainbow is seen against the dark storm clouds.

But the rainbow isn't primarily for us. It's for God to see, not us! When he sees the rainbow he will remember his covenant with all life, his covenant with his creation. Of course it works as a sign for us as well, reminding us that God remembers. God will be true to his promise, which he restates: "Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life." He will allow the storms to come only so far, and then no further.

Finally God gives a third short speech, briefly summarizing both the covenant and its sign.

So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth." (9:17)

At the beginning of his first speech God announced, "I am about to establish my covenant." Now, by the third speech, it is clear that the covenant has been established, not just with Noah or his sons or his descendants after him, but with all life on the earth.

This proclamation of the covenant has been a long-winded affair. We could have adequately summarized it much more briefly. But would that have been adequate? Certain things are emphasized

by this long-windedness. This lengthy set of three speeches allows God to use the word "covenant" exactly seven times. Can that be accidental? Great emphasis is attached to the universality of the beneficiaries: that twelve-fold use of "all" to emphasize the totality of life. Furthermore, the parties to the covenant are expressed in five different ways: "between me and you and every living creature with you," "between me and the earth," "between me and you and all living creatures of every kind," "between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth," "between me and all life on the earth" (9:12-17). This further emphasizes the totality of life that is covered under the covenant.

Since this is the final episode of the flood narrative, let me expand this point to cover the whole narrative. If we were telling the story, we would not place the emphasis in the same places. If we were the director of the movie, we would have shot it differently. The narrative begins and ends with a lengthy monologue from God to Noah, both rather repetitious. At the beginning God takes Noah into his confidence (6:13-21). He tells Noah his plan, and commands him to build an ark and enter into it, using the verb "enter" three times. We would then devote much attention to the building of the ark, but that no-doubt lengthy event is covered with the simple statement, "Noah did everything just as God commanded him" (6:22). Next, much attention is given to the entrance into the ark (7:1-16), an event we would consider of lesser importance. The narrative is again repetitious, so repetitious that the verb "enter" is used another seven times for a total of ten.

Yes, we call this the flood narrative, but it's really a story about God and Noah. Yet through it all Noah never says a word; he simply acts in obedience to God. He is saved by God's grace, and life is saved with him. He is the primary beneficiary of God's covenant, but all life is a beneficiary with him.

Why is this first covenant so important? It is important because it guarantees that there will be a middle to the story. It doesn't specify what the middle will be, still less what the end will be. But it guarantees that there will be a stage on which the middle can be played out. Twice God specifies the time horizon of this covenant: it is "a covenant for all generations to come" (9:12), and it is "the eternal covenant" (9:16). Both expressions use the Hebrew word *olam*, meaning time that's on the distant horizon, whether distant past or distant future. This covenant ensures that the middle will continue until the end is reached.

The broad outline of the story that plays out in this middle is given by a series of other covenants made by God. There are four of these further covenants.

The first is God's covenant with Abraham. He promised to bless him by giving him a seed and a land (Gen 12:2, 7), and then solemnized this promise with a covenant enacted in two stages (chapters 15, 17). In the first Abraham was an inactive partner, put into a deep sleep by God. In the second he was given a role: circumcision, which would be the sign of the covenant. At the heart of the covenant lay a promise to be Abraham's God:

> **"I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you." (17:7)**

The second covenant is God's covenant with Israel. After delivering them from slavery in Egypt, the Lord brought the Israelites to Mount Sinai to meet with him. Here he declared his purpose:

> **"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exod 19:4-6)**

After giving them his commandments, the Book of the Covenant, God entered into covenant with Israel, a covenant sealed by blood (Exod 24:1-8). Israel had a role in this covenant: obedience to God's commands. Moses read them the book of the covenant, and the people agreed, "Everything the Lord has said we will do" (Exod 24:3). But at the heart of this covenant lay a promise very similar to the one God made to Abraham: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." This covenant goes by various names. Because it was enacted through Moses it is called the Mosaic covenant; because it was enacted at Sinai it is called the Sinaitic covenant. It, too, had a sign: the Sabbath (Exod 31:17).

The third covenant was God's covenant with David, promising him a son to be king after him.

> **"I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son." (2 Sam 7:12-14)**

There is a coherence to these covenants. God would take a people for himself: he would be their God, they would be his people, and he would dwell with them. He would provide them with a king who would lead them in righteousness and justice, and who would build a temple for his dwelling place.

In all three of these covenants, God bound himself to a course of action. But Israel repeatedly broke covenant, ending up expelled from the land God had promised and given. David's descendants did not do what was right, as David had done, so God removed them and dissolved the kingdom. Nevertheless, over all of these acts of covenant infidelity arched the rainbow of God's covenant fidelity. Israel hung on to the Lord's covenant fidelity. It adopted as a confession this statement which began and ended our call to worship (Ps 118:1-4, 28-29):"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever." "Love" here is *hesed*, love that is loyal to covenant. This loyal love endures "forever," to the *olam*, to the end of the story. Out of his loyal love, the Lord promised a new covenant:

> **"I will put my law in their minds**
> **and write it on their hearts.**
> **I will be their God,**
> **and they will be my people." (Jer 31:33)**

The focal point of all these covenants is Christ Jesus. He is the son of Abraham, faithful Israel, the son of David, and the one in whose blood the new covenant is sealed, a covenant for the forgiveness of sins. Yet he is also the focal point of human rebellion against God, as Jew and Gentile conspired together to kill God's son. Yet the rainbow arched even over the cross. Still God remembered his covenant with life. Still he kept his creation going. Rather than destroying the world in death, he destroyed death itself, raising his Son to new life. This Son, already firstborn over creation, he made firstborn from the dead, firstborn of a new creation. And he extends forgiveness to rebels, inviting them to follow Christ, entering into a new creation. This is the scandal of the cross, the gospel proclaimed by Peter and the other apostles: "You killed the author of life, but God raised him

from the dead. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out" (Acts 3:19).

In Christ, God incorporates us into his covenants. We become the children of Abraham. We are the people of God, not trying to follow a written law code, but with God's spirit in us. And we live under the rule of Christ our king. In Christ, the end has already arrived in the middle. When we are in Christ, God places us into the life of the age to come; that's what eternal life means.

What lies at the end of the story? The covenant and the sign endure until the *olam*, until the end, the age to come. What happens to the world when the end arrives? Our Scripture reading (Rom 8:18-30) stated that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." What is its groaning? Is it groaning in hope of destruction? No! It has a twin hope: "the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed." And it has hope "that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." When the end comes, the earth is not destroyed. God cares for this world he has made, and he is faithful to it. Rather than being destroyed, this world is renewed and joined to heaven as "a new heaven and a new earth" in which God says, "It is done… Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children" (Rev 21:7).

When I designed our window, I specified a rainbow arching over all the panels. Above it are only the two symbols for God. Even the cross lies under the rainbow. But then Pat Haeger, the artist, executed my design in a wonderful way. She designed the rainbow to pour into the final panel, the new creation, with the new Jerusalem and the river of life. That's a great expression of the faithfulness of God to his purposes expressed in his covenants.

Last December I attended the monthly meeting of our Visual Arts Fellowship. After sharing the Noah story and some of the ways in which it has been depicted in art over the centuries, I asked if anyone would like to try their own artistic rendering. Marilyn deKleer took up my challenge. She has combined several elements of the Biblical story in an insightful way. In the foreground is Noah's altar, for it is the sacrifice offered on this altar that God graciously accepted to put him at rest, which led immediately to his promise to keep creation going. Over all arches the rainbow. Underneath, on a hill, stands the cross, with the rainbow arching over it. But the rainbow does double duty. Marilyn has made it also form a pearl which is one of the twelve gates into the New Jerusalem, the new creation. The rainbow not only keeps the middle going but forms the portal into the end.

God has a purpose for this world, for life, and most particularly for human life. He is loyally committed to life; he is determined that life triumph. It does not matter if that life chooses death. Still God's purposes will triumph for he is faithful to his covenants. He has shown this through the Lord Jesus Christ, who lies at the heart of his covenant purposes. He has shown it by destroying death and raising his Son back to life. He has shown it by extending life to those who will enter into the new covenant, a covenant sealed with the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, which God graciously accepts as putting himself at rest. Today we celebrate that God is a covenant-making and keeping God. And so we say, as did Israel:

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

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BEHAVING BADLY, LIVING DIFFERENTLY

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33rd Message
Bernard Bell
July 10, 2011

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

The news is full of people behaving badly: men behaving badly, women behaving badly, parents behaving badly. Society is titillated by this behavior, sustaining an entire industry reporting on their misdeeds. But this last week it was one such newspaper devoted to reporting the bad behavior of the rich and famous which itself admitted to behaving badly. So today London's *News of the World* ceased publication.

The Bible, too, has plenty of stories of people behaving badly. We've had several already in the early chapters of Genesis. Today we come to another one. It is not always easy to see why these stories are included. Today's story is particularly problematic. As with all these stories we have to pay close attention to the context and manner in which this story is presented.

God's covenant with Noah and all life marked the end of the flood narrative (6:9–9:17), but we're not yet done with Noah. There is one more story about him before his death. This story is bracketed by a pair of genealogical notices (9:18-19, 28-29). The story is introduced by a notice about Noah's sons:

> **The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) These were the three sons of Noah, and from them came the people who were scattered over the whole earth. (Gen 9:18-19 TNIV)**

With this introduction, attention moves on a generation from Noah to his three sons. These three sons are the ancestors of the entire human race. From these three sons all the peoples of the earth spread out. This dispersion of the peoples throughout the whole world is the major theme of the next two chapters, including the Table of Nations (10) and the Tower of Babel (11:1-9), as well as the story we encounter today.

This dispersion is in fulfillment of God's purposes for humanity. When God created the first two humans, male and female, he blessed them and commanded them, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth" (1:28). But in multiplying upon the earth humanity had filled the earth with evil (6:1, 5). When Noah and his three sons emerged from the ark, God blessed them also and commanded them, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth" (9:1, 7). The scattering of peoples throughout the earth is in fulfillment of this divine mandate. These next chapters provide Israel with a framework for understanding how the peoples are distributed across the world. Israel is also given another piece of information to help understand this distribution: Ham was the father of Canaan.

Noah's final story ends with a brief notice about his death:

> **After the flood Noah lived 350 years. Noah lived a total of 950 years, and then he died. (9:28-29)**

Noah is a transitional figure. His death marks the end of an era, for it forms the end of the genealogy given in chapter 5, the genealogy of the first ten generations on earth, starting with Adam. But his life also marks a new beginning. For each of the other nine generations, the second period of their life is marked by the birth of their firstborn, but for Noah it is the Flood. The Flood is a new beginning, marking a new start in the calendar.

Between these two notices, after the end of the Flood, but before the spreading out of the descendants of Noah's three sons, comes our story. It is in two parts: a narrative in which Noah and his three sons are all actors (9:20-24), followed by a pair of speeches by Noah (9:25-27). Though it comprises only eight verses, this story is so problematic that I'll take two weeks on it: we'll look at the narrative today and the speeches next week.

Here, then, is the first part of our final story about Noah:

> **Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father's nakedness. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father's nakedness.**
>
> **When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him… (9:20-24)**

Everyone agrees that someone here was behaving badly. But who was behaving badly, and what was the bad behavior? On these two questions there is much disagreement. What is going on here, and why is this little story in the Bible at this point? I am glad that our kids are not in the services today, glad that Sunday School has resumed after a three-week break. There is more to this story than initially meets the eye; it is more than a little racy.

The story moves from Noah (20-21) to Ham (22) to Shem and Japheth (23), and back to Noah (24).

Noah (20-21)

Noah's actions are covered very quickly: he planted a vineyard, drank some of its wine, got drunk and uncovered himself in his tent. At this point I'm supposed to give you a sermon about the evils of drink. There are plenty such sermons available; if you want one, you can find it on the Internet. Noah shouldn't have planted a vineyard in the first place, and he certainly shouldn't have drunk its wine. The wine went to his head, he drank too much and he got drunk. When he retired for the night he was hot, flushed from his wine, so he took off his robe before passing out. He spent the night in his tent, sprawled out and unconscious: a sorry sight. All four actions represent a rapid fall from grace: the vineyard, the wine, the drunkenness, and the uncovering. Sometimes an attempt is made to excuse Noah's bad behavior: since he was the first vintner in history he didn't know the effect that wine would have upon him. This is a very standard interpretation of Noah's actions. But is this an adequate interpretation? Or is it, rather, an interpretation influenced by teetotalism and

prohibition? Might there be a better way of understanding the text, one that fits the context of the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East rather than contemporary opposition to alcohol? Furthermore, we're here in California, not in some dry county in Texas. Let me offer a different reading of Noah's behavior.

This story marks a new beginning. The first word of the story is actually "he began" ("proceeded" TNIV). This new beginning is a positive development. The Flood is over. The earth has been wiped clean. God has commissioned Noah to be a new Adam, blessing him and his sons: "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." He has made a covenant promising never again to destroy all life. Humanity is ready for a new start, ready to spread over the earth.

Noah is described as "a man of the soil," a man of the *adamah*. The previous chapters have shown a complex and changing relationship between man and the ground (*adamah*). God formed man (*adam*) from the dust of the ground (*adamah*). The *adamah* was his origin, but it was not his destiny. God did not create him to work the *adamah*. Instead he planted a garden where he placed the man; there he provided the man with everything necessary for life. It was only after the Fall, when God expelled the man from the garden, that he had to work the ground (*adamah*) for his livelihood. Cain was such a worker of the *adamah*, but, for his sin in murdering his brother, God expelled him even from the *adamah* to live the life of a wanderer in exile from God. But all that has been wiped away. Now there is a new beginning, with Noah as a man of the *adamah*. Will his relationship to the *adamah* be blessed or cursed? Our expectation is that it will be blessed since this is a new beginning under God's blessing and promise.

What does Noah, as the man of the *adamah*, do in this new beginning? He plants a vineyard. There is nothing negative about this. Quite the opposite. The gift of wine was celebrated in the ancient world. Most societies attributed it to a deity: the Greek god Dionysus, the Roman god Bacchus, for example. But here wine is not attributed to the gods, but to humans. It is Noah, a man, who plants the first vineyard. Again, Genesis demythologizes the stories of the surrounding cultures. There is not a multitude of deities to whom are attributed all the gifts of civilization. There is a single God who has endowed his human stewards with creative ability.

This is the second planting of the Bible. After the first creation God planted a garden. Now, after re-creation, it is Noah who plants. Noah is acting in the place of God, serving as his steward on earth. This is a positive role. What he plants is a vineyard, and there is nothing wrong with this. God would later use the vine as a symbol for Israel, describing it as his vineyard which he had planted and nurtured (Isa 5:1-7). Jesus picked up the imagery, applying it both to himself and to his followers: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener [vinedresser]; …you are the branches" (John 15:1, 5). This is why a vine runs through our window, in both the Israel and the church panels.

Next Noah drank some wine. Did he behave badly here? It takes about four years for grape vines to yield a good harvest. Once you have a harvest, wine happens! It happens quickly. Extensive experiments in my kitchen have shown it takes only a week for grape juice to turn into wine. It happens naturally. The people of the ancient world must have quickly learnt what happens to grape juice when you leave it for even a short time. They celebrated the result and so does the Bible. Wine gladdens human hearts (Ps 104:15; cf. Judg 9:13). When the Lord spreads his Messianic banquet it will include the finest of aged wine (Isa 25:6). You have to interfere to prevent wine from happening. It wasn't until Thomas Welch invented a method for pasteurizing grape juice in 1869 that fermentation could be reliably stopped. He did it to ensure a regular supply of non-alcoholic wine for communion, something that my European friends have never been able to understand.

There is nothing wrong with Noah drinking his wine. I'm sure he knew the effect the wine would have on him. But how much wine did Noah drink? Did he drink so much that he lost control of himself in a drunken stupor? That's the standard interpretation. Or was it only the right amount so that he felt appropriately good? The Hebrew verb can be translated "to be drunk," but it is also capable of a more positive interpretation. After Joseph revealed his true identity to his brothers, he served them a sumptuous banquet. "And they drank and were merry with him" (Gen 43:34 ESV). Joseph's intent was not to get his brothers drunk, but to make them satiated with both food and wine. When David summoned Uriah home from the battle field, he invited him to eat and drink in his presence (2 Sam 11:13). All English translations say that David made Uriah drunk. But that wasn't David's purpose. He didn't want Uriah to stumble home and collapse drunk on the couch. He wanted Uriah to go home with a merry heart and make love to his wife Bathsheba. Uriah was obviously not drunk, because he was still thinking clearly enough to not go home at all, sleeping instead on a mat with David's servants.

I think that Noah drank enough wine to make his heart merry, but not so much that he got drunk. Then, in the privacy of his own tent, he uncovered himself. What did he uncover? The subsequent actions of his sons show that what he uncovered was his nakedness. Was he simply hot, flushed from the wine, so that he undressed and fell asleep naked? I think that's an insufficient explanation. There are two different Hebrew words for nakedness. One denotes simple nudity; that's the nakedness of Adam and Eve in the garden (2:25). The other denotes the most intimate, vulnerable part of a woman's body. Noah was hot alright: he was hot for Mrs Noah! God had said, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth," and Noah was going to play his part, despite being already 600 years old at the Flood. I'll leave the rest to your imagination. But there's a problem: the text has already told us that the earth will be populated from Noah's three sons, not from Noah himself.

Ham (22)

Next, our attention turns to Ham. We are immediately reminded that he is the father of Canaan. We were already told this in verse 18, so why are we told it again? This fact must have some bearing on the story. Ham saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside. So, obviously, Ham had gone into the tent. Why did he do that? He shouldn't have been there in the first place. Perhaps he went in to ask his father something, and saw him sprawled out on the floor, drunk and naked: a pitiful sight. That's the usual interpretation, the moral being that parents shouldn't allow their kids to see them naked. But is that really what happened? Why did Ham go into his father's tent? And what did he see?

Elsewhere, to see the nakedness of someone, especially in conjunction with uncovering their nakedness, means to have sex with them. Does this imply that Ham had sex with his father, that this is a case of paternal incest? Some take that view, but I think it's even worse. The metaphor "uncover someone's nakedness" is always used for heterosexual sex. Furthermore, the nakedness of a woman and

that of her husband are closely related. In the Torah God gave Israel a detailed list of people they were not to have sex with:

> **"None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the Lord. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness." (Lev 18:6-8 ESV)**

So, uncovering a man's nakedness is the same as uncovering his wife's nakedness, and vice versa (cf. Lev 20:11, 20-21). Both imply sexual intercourse with the woman. Noah had uncovered his own nakedness, implying that he had uncovered his wife's nakedness. For Mr and Mrs Noah that was appropriate in the privacy of their own tent. But Ham, having entered the tent, saw his father's nakedness, suggesting that he pushed his father aside and assaulted Mrs Noah. This was how Ham was going to fulfill the Lord's mandate, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." By reminding us that Ham is the father of Canaan, is the biblical author telling us that Canaan is the offspring of this incest?

After this evil deed, Ham went outside and told his brothers. This simple statement also hides a more sinister reality. Ham was boasting that he had usurped his father. This is clear from three subsequent Biblical stories. Jacob's eldest son Reuben slept with his father's concubine, for which bad behavior Jacob stripped him of his leadership of the sons of Israel (Gen 35:22; 49:4). When Absalom proclaimed himself king, he lay with his father's concubines in the full view of all Israel, so as to strengthen his position (2 Sam 16:21-22). When David died, Adonijah asked for Abishag, the beautiful young woman who had kept David warm in his old age, to be his wife. But Solomon interpreted this request as treason and ordered him killed (1 Kgs 2:13-25). All three of these are sordid stories of sexual politics, to which we must add the story of Ham. Like the other three men, Ham used sex to advance his own purposes, to grasp after power. Ham usurped his father's position and notified his brothers that he was now in charge.

Shem and Japheth (23)

The narrative now turns to these two brothers. After Ham had told them what he had done, Shem and Japheth acted honorably. The pace of the narrative slows down to focus on their actions, which are careful and deliberate. They took a garment. This wasn't simply any garment, it was *the* garment. Presumably it's the cloak that Ham brought out as evidence of his evil deed. Shem and Japheth will now use the same cloak to cover the shame. They took the garment, draped it across their shoulders, walked backwards into the tent, and covered their father's nakedness, meaning, I imagine, that they covered both father and mother. Both had been shamed, both had been violated. These two sons acted with care, grace and nobility to restore to their parents what honor they could. The text adds that their faces were turned backwards, away from their parents' shame, and that their father's nakedness they did not see.

Noah (24)

The narrative ends back on Noah. Some time later he awoke from his wine. He knew what his youngest son, presumably Ham, had done to him. We're not told how Noah knew this. Was he told? Did he have to find it out? In whatever way, he knew what his youngest son had done to him. Ham's doing of something to Noah implies something worse than simply seeing his father disrobed.

I've struggled long and hard to make sense of this story. This interpretation makes best sense of the metaphors used. It makes best sense of the context: the near context of the dispersion of nations, the mid-range context of Noah and the Flood, the far context of Israel.

The flood narrative (6:9-9:17) is an elaborate chiasm, turning on the center-line: "God remembered Noah" (8:1). The narrative is preceded and followed by stories which also feature Noah. Before the Flood, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were good and they took them for wives; from them resulted the Nephilim (6:1-8). After the Flood, Ham saw his father's nakedness. If the result of this was Canaan, then these two stories match well, extending the chiasm to the whole of Noah's life. The Nephilim before the Flood and Canaan after the Flood are the result of men behaving badly.

Such bad behavior requires a response. Before the Flood it was God who spoke in response, determining to wipe the earth clean. After the Flood it will be Noah who responds. The fact that Noah has the authority to do so, both cursing and blessing, reinforces the interpretation that Noah himself has not behaved badly. It is clear that in cursing and blessing he has divine authority to pronounce the destinies of Canaan, Shem and Japheth.

Living Differently

In the larger context, why is this story here in the book of origins? Why was Israel told this? What was Israel to learn? What are we to learn? The usual interpretation is that this shows the Fall of Noah: just as the first Adam sinned immediately, so now Noah, the new Adam, sinned immediately. But I don't think that Noah behaved badly. Ham is the one who behaved badly, and the result of that bad behavior was Canaan.

We have to read this story in the context of blessing, in the call to fill the earth. This is presumably what Noah was trying to do, and what Ham was trying to do. Noah was trying to do it the right way, but it was not his role. Responsibility for populating the earth had passed to his sons. Ham was trying to do so, but in a very wrong way. He behaved badly and from him would come nations who also behaved badly, as we'll see when we look at the Table of Nations (chapter 10). Israel was supposed to learn a very important lesson from this.

God brought his people up out of Egypt in order to bring them into Canaan, the land he had promised Abraham. At Mount Sinai, midway between Egypt, their former home, and Canaan, their future home, he gave them his Torah, his instructions for how to live life.

> **The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the Lord your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for whoever obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord.' " (Lev 18:1-5)**

God told his people not to live according to the practices of either their former home or their future home. They were not to live like the Egyptians nor like the Canaanites. Both Egypt and Canaan were

sons of Ham (Gen 10:6). Their descendants behaved the same way as Ham: they behaved badly. Both societies lived depraved lives. But the Lord had given Israel a different pattern of behavior, one that led to life not death.

It is striking that this call to live differently, not participating in the behavior of the Egyptians or the Canaanites, forms the introduction to the list of prohibited sexual relationships, the list of those whose nakedness one is not to uncover.

Why did the Egyptians and the Canaanites behave this way? In both cases they used sexual politics to further their own ends. In Egypt it was customary for the pharaoh to marry his sister. The pharaohs did so to preserve the purity of their bloodline, to preserve the myth that they were divine. The Canaanites incorporated depraved sexual practices into their worship: sacred prostitution, both male and female, bestiality, child sacrifice, all of them condemned in Leviticus 18. Why did the Canaanites do these things? They were trying to make life work, trying to attain blessing. They engaged in fertility practices to get the fertility gods and goddesses to give them fertility. The Israelites should not adopt this approach to life; life does not work this way. God concluded his list of detestable relations with a solemn warning to his people:

> **"Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the foreigners residing among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you." (Lev 18:24-28)**

Because of their detestable behavior the Canaanites had forfeited their right to the land. Israel must be careful to not follow in their detestable behavior lest it, too, forfeit its right to the land.

God called Israel to a completely different way of life, a life of ethical monotheism. Monotheism: there is only one god, not a multiplicity of gods. There is only one God to please, only one God to seek blessing from. You don't have to sacrifice to a multiplicity of gods, trying to coerce them. This is why God repeatedly couches his instructions in the reminder, "I am the Lord your God." Ethical: this one God cares how his people behave. He calls them to live transformed lives, different from both the lives of their past and those of their neighbors. Blessing would come not from trying to coerce the gods, but from living life the way God intended. If they did so, he would send the rain at the right time, would cause their crops to grow, would give them plenty. But if they behaved badly, he would cause the rains to dry up, the sky to turn to bronze, the crops to fail, and famine to fall on the land.

Similarly, as God's people in Christ, we are called to leave behind the practices of our past and the practices of surrounding society, as we read in our Scripture reading:

> **Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above… Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God… Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry… You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips… since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Col 3:1-10)**

We used to behave badly, but we are called to leave bad behavior behind. We are called to live a life of good behavior, not to earn favor with God, but because that's what life looks like when renewed in knowledge in the image of our Creator. Sadly it seems that there are many Christians who don't think it important how we behave, that being a Christian is simply about what we believe: do we believe in the virgin birth, in the resurrection? The New Testament repeatedly shows that our behavior matters. God has called us out of a life and an environment of bad behavior in order to live life well, to live life with a transformed character. He empowers us with his Spirit to enable us to do so.

This is why this little story about Ham was given to the Israelites. It was not to show them that Noah failed. It was to show them how detestable was the behavior of Ham, so that they avoid walking in the lifestyle of those descended from Ham. God redeemed Israel out of the midst of nations of detestable behavior in order to live life in a completely different manner. He has called us to live in the midst of an environment of people behaving badly, but to live life in a completely different way, and he wants the world to see that transformed behavior. He has redeemed us in Christ to live life differently, to live life well.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thess 5:23-24)

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PEOPLES AND THEIR DESTINIES

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34th Message
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SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

In the nineteenth century the idea of Manifest Destiny propelled the United States to expand westwards until it reached "from sea to shining sea." Many believed that this country was divinely favored, that it was entrusted with a mission to extend its benevolent civilizing influence across the entire continent. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, it's clear that this was a racist doctrine. The civilizers were the white people whose duty was to better the world—what Rudyard Kipling would later call "the white man's burden." The native peoples were expected to yield to the civilized supremacy of the whites, while the African-American people continued in their subjugation. Indeed, many Southerners believed that slavery was the God-ordained destiny of these people of African descent.

Does God still ordain different destinies for different peoples? Long ago he did when Noah foretold different destinies for those who would descend from his three sons as they spread out over the earth, repopulating it after the Flood. These three sons had behaved very differently towards their father after he had planted a vineyard, drunk its wine, and gone into the privacy of his own tent. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what had happened, he spoke of his sons:

he said,

"Cursed be Canaan!
The lowest of slaves
will he be to his brothers."

He also said,

"Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem!
May Canaan be the slave of Shem.
May God extend Japheth's territory;
may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,
and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth." (Gen 9:25-27 TNIV)

These are the only words recorded for Noah. Throughout the flood narrative he had been silent; he had simply acted, always in full compliance with the Lord's instructions. But now he speaks. His speech is prompted by knowing what Ham had done to him. Ham had behaved badly. Worse than that: what Ham did to Noah was an abomination, a detestable act. Such an act required a response. This act, coming immediately after the Flood, was the counterpart to an equally-heinous act immediately before the Flood: the sons of God begetting offspring of the daughters of men. Both acts required responses. After the first act, it was the Lord who responded, pronouncing judgment in the form of the Flood. Prior to the second act, the Lord had made a covenant, promising never again to send a Flood. Yet here again, so soon after the new beginning, we have a sin so despicable that a response is again required. But God has limited his ability to respond: he can't resort to a Flood again. This time it is Noah who speaks. Noah does not speak solely on his own initiative. We must assume that he speaks with divine authority. The destinies he pronounces are God-ordained destinies. As with the planting, God seems to be entrusting certain operations to humans after he has reset the world in the Flood. After the original creation it was God who planted: he planted a garden. After the re-creation it was Noah who planted: he planted a vineyard. Prior to the Flood it was God who spoke in judgment. Now, after the Flood, it is Noah who speaks. In both cases I assume Noah acted with divine approval. This poses a problem for those who interpret the narrative of the vineyard and wine as being about the fall of Noah, reading it as a counterpart to the fall of Adam. No, it is not about the sin of Noah, but about the sin of Ham, and this sin is a counterpart to the sin of the sons of God with the daughters of men. Noah himself had not sinned, else how could he pronounce cursing and blessing?

This only speech of Noah is his last recorded action. Afterwards he died. So, as far as the narrative is concerned, this is his last will and testament. Similarly, at the end of their lives, Jacob would pronounce the destinies of his twelve sons (Gen 49) and Moses would pronounce the destinies of the tribes of Israel (Deut 33). All three spoke prophetically. These were divinely-ordained destinies.

Canaan

"Cursed be Canaan!
The lowest of slaves
will he be to his brothers." (9:25)

Since Noah's speech is in response to knowing what Ham had done to him, he first pronounces the destiny of Ham. Except it's not Ham whose destiny he pronounces, but Canaan. This has long troubled readers and interpreters. If it's Ham who did the despicable act, why is the judgment borne by his son, not by the perpetrator himself? Many different explanations have been offered. Since Ham was Noah's youngest son, he is punished in his youngest son. The sins of the fathers are visited on the sons to the third and fourth generations. Ham has already been blessed, so he can't now be cursed. Noah knows that Canaan will behave just like Ham and so be equally worthy of judgment. These are just some of the suggestions. The explanation I advocated last week is that Canaan was the result of Ham's despicable act. What Ham did was an abomination, and the result was an abomination. God would not allow such an abomination to prosper, and so Noah cursed the offspring, Canaan.

This is the fourth time that something is pronounced cursed. After the Fall, the Lord God pronounced the serpent cursed (3:14) and the ground cursed (3:17). After Cain murdered his brother Abel, the Lord pronounced Cain cursed (4:11). "Curse" is a jarring word to hear in Genesis because this ought to be a book about blessing. God created the world for blessing: he blessed the first living creatures, the first humans, and the seventh day. But quickly blessing had turned to cursing: the serpent, the ground, and Cain. God recreated the world for blessing: he blessed Noah and his three sons. But now, just as quickly, blessing has again turned to cursing.

Blessing and cursing are opposites. To bless means to endow with fruitful life. God's blessing of the first living creatures, the first humans, and Noah and his sons is accompanied by the command, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." God's blessing enables fulfillment of that command. I liken blessing to an arrow signifying a forward-moving trajectory in life. By blessing them God enabled his creatures to fulfill his purposes which are for the expansion of life.

Since curse is the opposite of bless, it means to deprive of fruitful life. If "bless" is a forward-moving arrow, "curse" is a line leading to a dead-end. When God curses something he frustrates it, rendering it futile. He may allow it to continue, but only for a while. "Curse" is a harsh word, but it carries a silver lining. A curse is God's pronouncement that he will not allow forces opposed to life to ultimately triumph. He would not allow the serpent's deceptions to triumph. He would not allow Cain's way to triumph. And now he will not allow Ham's abomination to triumph. The ways of the serpent, of Cain, and of Ham lead to death. By cursing such evil God reaffirms his commitment to life.

Noah proclaims a life of servitude for Canaan. Canaan will be a slave to his brothers, a destiny reaffirmed in Noah's oracles about Shem and Japheth. Worse than that, Canaan will be in abject servitude, a slave of slaves, meaning the lowest of slaves. There were times in the Old Testament when the Canaanites were subjugated in slavery to the descendants of Shem. But "curse" implies a worse fate than even servitude.

Noah, speaking for God, placed a dead-end across the trajectory of the life of Ham's seed Canaan. That dead-end was not immediate. God allowed Canaan's line to continue for many generations. As Noah's descendants spread out across the earth, Canaan settled in a land whose boundaries are specified in the Table of Nations (10:19). Two chapters later God promised to give Abraham this same piece of land, as the narrator notes: "At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (12:6-7). This established a tension: God had promised the land to Abraham and his descendants but the Canaanites were in the land. God would give the land to Abraham's descendants, but not yet, "for the sin of the Amorites has not reached its full measure" (15:16), the Amorites being one of the peoples of the land.

Hundreds of years after this promise to Abraham, the line of Canaan met its dead-end, the dead-end that had been hanging over it ever since Noah pronounced Canaan cursed. The Canaanites had forfeited their right to the land. Their vile behavior, mirroring the behavior of their ancestor Ham, had defiled the land, and so the Lord caused the land to vomit out its inhabitants (Lev 18:24-25), as one vomits out a food that has made one sick. As the Israelites prepared to enter the land, the Lord instructed them through Moses to completely destroy the Canaanites. The technical term for this is the Hebrew word *herem*, meaning to devote to complete destruction. This is one of the less savory episodes of the Old Testament, but the Old Testament is full of things we would consider less than savory, as we found out last week. God's command to his people to completely destroy the Canaanites is hard for people to swallow, and is one of the topics about which I'm most frequently asked.

This *herem*, this complete destruction of the Canaanites, was the fulfillment of the curse on Canaan. This end had been hanging over the Canaanites ever since Noah's pronouncement. This was genocide; there's no getting around that. It was specifically targeted at removing an entire people. It was ethnic cleansing. Because of their behavior the Canaanites had forfeited their right to the land. This is not a pleasant topic, but it's in the Bible so we have to deal with it. Even evangelicals who take a high view of God and Scripture struggle to make sense of it. A volume in Zondervan's Counterpoints series is dedicated to this: *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide* (2003). Four evangelical scholars struggle to make sense of the issue. The first scholar argues that Noah, Moses and Joshua misunderstood God. When Noah pronounced the curse, when Moses commanded total destruction, and when Joshua executed it, they were not following God's purposes, but only their faulty understanding thereof.[1] I have great trouble with that interpretation. It seems clear that Noah's pronouncement, Moses's command and Joshua's execution were in accord with God's purposes. Why would God command this genocide? There are three very important things to remember in thinking through this issue.

Firstly, God did not allow Israel to do this to any people it pleased. It was specifically the Canaanites or the Amorites whom Israel was to destroy. It was the inhabitants of the land God had promised Abraham, into which he was bringing his people. God would tolerate the sins of the Canaanites no longer. The concept of *herem* could not be used by Israel indiscriminately.

Secondly, God provided a way of escape, as illustrated in the back-to-back stories of Rahab and Achan. Rahab was a resident of Jericho, the city that blocked the entrance of God's people into the land, and therefore the first city that needed to be destroyed. Rahab had heard about the Lord, Israel's God: what he had done in Egypt and what Israel had done to the two Amorite kings east of the Jordan. Our Scripture reading (Josh 2:8-14) related how she responded in faith and asked for mercy:

> **"I know that the Lord has given this land to you…the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you." (Josh 2:9-12)**

She asked the two Israelite spies to show her *hesed*, covenant loyalty, as she had shown to them in hiding them. When Jericho was captured, the city and its people were completely destroyed, except for Rahab and her family (Josh 6). She responded in faith to the Lord, was saved, was incorporated into Israel, and was even grafted into the lineage of the Messiah, appearing in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5). A Canaanite prostitute, on the eve of the execution of the curse that had been hanging over the Canaanites for centuries, in faith responded to what she had heard about what God had done for his people, and she was saved. But in the very next chapter of Joshua (7) we read of Achan the Israelite. He took some of the things from Jericho which should have been completely destroyed, keeping them for himself. When discovered, he and his family were completely destroyed. Rahab and Achan traded places. On what basis? On the basis of Rahab's faith and Achan's disobedience. And so Rahab the Canaanite prostitute is included in the Hall of Faith:

> **By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. (Heb 11:31)**

The third thing in order to understand the Canaanite genocide is that it is a forerunner of final judgment, of what God will do at the end of time. All evil, wickedness and sin is unbearable to God. In the short term he does forbear it, allowing humanity to go its way. But the day is coming when God will declare an end, just as he declared an end to the abominations of the Canaanites. Why does the Lord delay the inevitable? So that people might be saved, just as Rahab the

prostitute. So that people might cry out to God for mercy and find him to be a merciful God.

Ham's despicable behavior has brought down a curse on the result of that behavior: Canaan. God will not allow Ham's way to flourish. Noah says nothing about the rest of Ham's descendants, his other three sons. Their spreading out over the earth is described in the Table of Nations (Gen 10), and several of the descendant peoples will loom large in Israel's history, never for the better.

Next Noah turns to Shem and Japheth, his two sons who had acted honorably. Noah's words about them are given as a separate speech to emphasize that their destinies are different from Ham's. But their destinies are also different one from the other. Both are given positive destinies, but in different ways.

Shem

"Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem!
May Canaan be the slave of Shem." (9:26)

Noah does not bless Shem directly. Rather, he blesses the Lord, Yahweh: "Blessed be the LORD." Hitherto it has always been the Lord who has blessed: the living creatures, the first humans, the seventh day, Noah and his sons. Now, for the first time, blessing is on the lips of a mere mortal, of Noah. Furthermore, it is the Lord whom he proclaims to be blessed. It is understandable that God blesses humans, but how can a human bless God, for how can we endow God with fruitful life? Instead, when we bless the Lord or pronounce him blessed, we acknowledge that he is the source of blessing. It is essentially an expression of thanksgiving and praise; hence the TNIV rendering, "Praise be to the LORD."

Noah praises the Lord because he has identified himself as the God of Shem. Both Shem and Japheth acted honorably. Why then is Shem favored over Japheth in receiving this honor? Nothing so far has distinguished Shem from Japheth, so this must be pure grace, God's free sovereign choice.

Shem's great distinction is to be chosen by God. Out of the peoples of the world God chose to identify himself particularly with the descendants of Shem. The rest of Genesis shows how God continues to narrow his selection: from Shem to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob. With Jacob the selection process is complete as God identifies himself with all of Jacob's sons, from whom come the twelve tribes of Israel. God will bless Israel in many ways, but its greatest blessing is in having God be its God. As our call to worship began:

Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people he chose for his inheritance. (Ps 33:12)

After delivering his people from Egypt, the Lord brought them to Mt Sinai to meet with him. There he revealed his purposes:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exod 19:5-6)

All the nations belong to the Lord, since he has made them. But God took Israel to belong especially to him, calling it his treasured possession. The Hebrew word is *segullah*, denoting a king's personal treasure. Open up God's treasure chest and what do you find? Not silver or gold but people. We often talk about God's blessings, but we usually define those blessings as material benefits. God's greatest blessing is the gift of himself, to undertake to be our God and to take us to be his people. This lies at the heart of his purposes, expressed to Abraham and to Israel: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you."

Japheth

"May God extend Japheth's territory;
may Japheth live in the tents of Shem,
and may Canaan be the slave of Japheth." (9:27)

Japheth is given a double destiny. His first destiny is that God will extend him, that is, his territory. Here is a wordplay on Japheth's name which is nearly identical with the expression "may he extend." This expansive territory is described, in part, in the Table of Nations (Gen 10), which shows Japheth expanding northwards and westwards into Anatolia and Europe.

But Japheth has a second destiny beyond mere territorial expansion: that he dwell in the tents of Shem. Japheth had acted in concert with Shem in honoring their father. Their destinies will also be intertwined. Though Japheth expand far and wide he will find his home not in his expansive territory but in the tents of Shem.

Noah's Death

After Noah pronounced these three destinies, it remains only for him to die:

After the flood Noah lived 350 years. Noah lived a total of 950 years, and then he died. (9:28-29)

Noah's death ends an era. This death notice terminates the genealogy of chapter 5 which was interrupted by the account of the Flood. That pre-Flood genealogy ran for ten generations from Adam to Noah. But he is also the first of the post-Flood genealogy which will run another ten generations from Noah to Terah, the father of Abraham (11:10-26). Noah is the hinge of these two genealogies; he is the bridge from pre-Flood to post-Flood. Now his work is done. It is his three sons who will spread out over the earth as peoples, following the destinies he has proclaimed.

Peoples and Destinies Today

Noah lived a very long time ago. Are these three destinies still valid today? Linguists and ethnographers have employed the terms Hamitic and Semitic to refer to people groups and languages. More importantly, does this three-fold division of the sons of Noah have any ongoing validity for understanding God's purposes with respect to the peoples of the world? There are many who still try to use this three-fold division as a grid for explaining the world. Most disturbingly, the curse upon Canaan has been used as justification for slavery. Proponents argue that the curse on Canaan was upon all of Ham's descendants, and that their curse lay in being black, which they say is the meaning of Ham's name. Noah pronounced them condemned to a life of servitude, which advocates of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw as still in effect. Others seek to understand the rebirth of the modern state of Israel in terms of Shem and Japheth. The involvement of Europe and America in a reborn Israel is Japheth seeking entrance into the tents of Shem. The settler movement in Israel wishes to reenact the curse upon Canaan, repeating Joshua's conquest of the land by driving out the local Palestinian population. Opponents of such Zionist expansion accuse Israel of ethnic cleansing.

But is it right to still view the world through the lens of Noah's oracle? Is one people still under a curse? Does God still uniquely

identify himself as the God of one particular people? Is there a people still trying to get into the tents of Shem?

Firstly, the curse upon Canaan. God fulfilled the curse on Canaan by giving Israel possession of the land of Canaan. He clearly told Israel that Canaan had forfeited its right to the land because of its depravity. He warned Israel not to indulge in any of the abominations of the Canaanites, lest Israel, too, forfeit its right to the land (Lev 18:26-28). He set before Israel blessings and curses: obedience would bring his blessing, but disobedience would bring curses (Deut 27-28). If Israel walked in the ways of Ham, repeating the sins of the Canaanites, it would suffer the same fate as the Canaanites. Sadly, this is exactly what happened. Israel repeated the abominations of the Canaanites, and so the curses came true: the land did vomit Israel out, as God expelled his people into exile. Israel brought upon itself the same destiny as Canaan.

What then of God's promise to be the God of his people, descended from Shem? God remained faithful to his people Israel, maintaining their existence until Israel birthed the Messiah, the one who came in fulfillment of all the promises of the Old Testament, going all the way back to the promise given in the garden, that the seed of the woman would do battle with the seed of the serpent.

Jesus was born into the line of Shem, into the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When he came to Israel he looked for faith. Where was faith to be found? One time he journeyed outside Israel to the region of Tyre and Sidon, where a woman with a demon-possessed daughter found him. Mark describes her as a Syrophoenician Gentile (Mark 7:26), Matthew as a Canaanite (Matt 15:22). She cried out, "*Kyrie eleison*; Lord, have mercy." And the Lord had mercy, marveling at her faith, because he couldn't find such faith in Israel. Just like Rahab, she responded in faith, cried out for mercy, and found mercy. Even though she was a Canaanite!

I said that we need to understand the Canaanite genocide as a forerunner of God's impending judgment at the end of time. But in the middle of time, God executed judgment on his own Son, Jesus the Messiah, making him who knew no sin to be sin. Jesus bore the curses of Israel. With the death and resurrection of his Son, God has defeated sin, death and Satan, the forces that oppose his purposes of life. Now he extends himself to all peoples, be they descended from Shem, Ham or Japheth. He invites all to come and know him as their God, to find their dwelling place in the tent, the tabernacle, which Christ, the Shemite, has erected as a dwelling place for God and his people. He has knocked down the dividing wall of partition between Jew and Gentile, making the two into one.

This three-fold division of the human race into Shem, Ham/Canaan and Japheth had great relevance for Israel in the Old Testament. Descended from Shem, Israel had the great blessing to have the Lord be its God. Israel occupied the land because cursed Canaan had forfeited its right to it; but Israel was on notice to not repeat the practices of the Canaanites lest it too forfeit the land. Finally, on the horizon in their expansive territory, were the Japhethites, who would find their true destiny in the tents of Shem, there joining Israel.

But after the death and resurrection of Christ this three-fold division has no validity. There is now a two-fold division which has nothing to do with race, ethnicity, or people group. There are two peoples: those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ. There are two destinies. For one it is entrance into the promised land of the new heavens and the new earth, there to hear it said,

> **"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 21:3**)

For the other it is a dead-end: final judgment of which judgment on the Canaanites was a precursor. God is still delaying that judgment as he invites all to come and know him as their God, to respond in faith to what he has done—just like Rahab the Canaanite prostitute, just like the Canaanite woman in Matthew's gospel.

Yes, God has purposes for the peoples of this world, but there are only two peoples and only two destinies. The crucial difference is how we respond to the Lord Jesus Christ. Do we recognize him as the one who deals with our sin so that we might know God as our God? Or do we continue in our sinful behavior, rejecting God? In which case, there will come a time when he says "Enough! Your sins are complete," and brings judgment. In the meantime, though, he bids all come to Christ and find mercy because he is a merciful God.

In the Book of Revelation, John sees the heavenly beings acclaim the Lamb in song because he has assembled a people for God from all the peoples of the earth:

> **"You are worthy to take the scroll**
> **and to open its seals,**
> **because you were slain,**
> **and with your blood you purchased for God**
> **members of every tribe and language and people and nation.**
> **You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,**
> **and they will reign on the earth."** (**Rev 5:9-10**)

1. C. S. Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," in C. S. Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

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MAPPING THE NATIONS

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Genesis 10:1-32
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Bernard Bell
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SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

The 2011 finals of the National Geographic World Championship were held on Wednesday. It was fitting that they should be held here at Google, for it is to Google that most of us now turn if we want a map. But I still like physical maps that I can hold and peruse at leisure. My love of maps is reflected in my first two degrees, in geography and in surveying. I have lots of maps and lots of atlases. Whether we have physical maps or not, all of us carry in our heads mental maps which can vary widely in their correspondence to reality on the ground. Most men think they have good mental maps, so they never ask for directions. But our mental maps can be pretty sketchy: few of us have all fifty states correctly located in our mind, let alone the countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

Sometimes these mental maps are rendered explicit in physical form. Early maps often depicted Jerusalem at the center, surrounded by the three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. This was not intended to depict geographical reality; it was spiritual reality. Some maps portrayed these three continents as the homelands of Shem, Ham and Japheth respectively. This allocation of Noah's three sons to the three continents is based upon Genesis 10, our text for today.

This chapter is usually called "The Table of Nations." It is just that, a table or listing of many nations or peoples. It's a listing that would tax any biblical geographer in a quiz. Some of the peoples are well known, others are obscure. Often commentators and preachers focus on identifying these peoples and places as if on a physical map. But I'll spare you that, because this doesn't really help understand why Israel was given this list. With a few exceptions, the precise location of the peoples is of marginal importance. The purpose of this table is not to give Israel a detailed gazetteer or atlas of the world, but to give it a general sense of how the peoples of the world are distributed with respect to Israel—despite the fact that Israel is not even mentioned. So, I find it more helpful to think of this table as a mental map not a geographical one.

The Table of Nations begins with a heading:

This is the account of Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's sons, who themselves had sons after the flood. (Gen 10:1 TNIV)

The Table of Nations starts a new account. Genesis contains ten accounts (*toledot*), of which the first five form the primeval history (2:4–11:26) that is the material for this preaching series. The third account was that of Noah (6:9–9:29). Now the fourth account is of Noah's sons. It comprises two parts: the Table of Nations (10:1-32) and the Tower of Babel (11:1-9). As for all ten accounts, this is not the story of the ones listed in the title, but of their generations, of what proceeds from them. We were told the story of the three sons, or all that we need to know of it, at the end of Noah's account.

The Flood marked a change of eras. After the Flood, God blessed Noah and his sons, saying, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." From these three sons the whole earth was scattered (9:19). It was scattered under God's blessing, and also under the pronouncements of Noah. Because of the behavior of his sons, Noah had cursed Canaan, but pronounced positive destinies for Shem and Japheth (9:25-27). God would bless them both but in different ways. Shem would have the great privilege of the Lord identifying himself with Shem as his God. God would extend Japheth, but beyond that Japheth would dwell in the tents of Shem. So, under these dual pronouncements of God and Noah, sons were born to them after the Flood.

Few readers pay attention to this chapter; most skip on to the Tower of Babel. There are several things to note about this table that will help us read it with understanding.

1. Noah's three sons are always listed as Shem, Ham and Japheth, but the Table covers them in the reverse order. We might assume that the usual order indicates their birth order, but this is not necessarily so. It seems that Ham is actually the youngest (9:24), and it is ambiguous whether Shem or Japheth is the oldest (10:21). Nor does it matter. What does matter is the order in which the Table enumerates the three sons: Japheth, Ham and Shem.

2. Though the Table contains many names, it is not an exhaustive list. It is selective, even highly so. It is selective in how far it drills into each line of sons. It is selective in how many sons and grandsons it lists, showing a preference for sets of seven. Even for the names listed, the Table is selective in its level of interest, using two different formulae: "the sons of…" formula for the less important lines and the "begat" or "fathered" formula for the more important lines.

3. Several times the listing of peoples is interrupted by a narrative portion. We should pay particular attention to these insertions.

4. Each of the three lines ends with a similar formula, noting that each of the three sets of sons is according to their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. This refrain is a reminder that this Table is all about the filling of the earth.

Japheth (2-5)

The sons of Japheth:
Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshek and Tiras.
The sons of Gomer:
Ashkenaz, Riphath and Togarmah.
The sons of Javan:
Elishah, Tarshish, the Kittites and the Rodanites. (From these the maritime peoples spread out into their territories by their clans within their nations, each with its own language.) (10:2-5)

Japheth's line is listed first and most briefly. His list contains seven sons and seven grandsons for a total of fourteen peoples. Sons are listed for only two of Japheth's seven sons, an example of the selectivity which here produces a double "seven." The sons of Japheth and Gomer inhabit Anatolia and the areas around the Black Sea. Javan is the Ionian Greeks, whose sons spread out into the islands of the eastern Mediterranean. From these the maritime peoples spread out, the peoples of the distant coastlands and islands, the thin sliver of land

seen on the far horizon by a sailor. The Table is not very interested in any of these peoples, using the "sons of" formula throughout. The Japhethites inhabit the lands on the far horizon of Israel's world. They will interact but little with Israel, so they are covered briefly.

Ham (6-20)

The sons of Ham:
Cush, Egypt, Put and Canaan.
The sons of Cush:
Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah and Sabteka.
The sons of Raamah:
Sheba and Dedan. (10:6-7)

Ham's section begins with his four sons: Cush, Egypt, Put and Canaan. Cush is south of Egypt, in ancient Nubia, modern Sudan. Put is Libya to the immediate west of Egypt. Cush, in turn, has five sons and two grandsons, for another total of seven. These descendants of Cush are spread across either side of the south end of the Red Sea. But the Table is not interested in any of these, using the "sons of" formula for all three sets.

But Cush has another son in whom the Table is interested, as indicated in two ways: by a change of expression from "the sons of Cush" to "Cush was the father of…," and by a lengthy narrative insertion.

Cush was the father of Nimrod, who became a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; that is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord." 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. (10:8-12)

Who is Nimrod? His name is much more familiar in the UK than here in the USA. It was the name of Shackleton's ship for his first Antarctic expedition. It is the name of the British equivalent of the P-3 Orion marine surveillance aircraft that used to be a familiar sight here when it flew out of Moffett Field. Most famously, Nimrod is the name of the beloved ninth variation of Edward Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. But what does the name evoke here in the USA? Only a derogatory term: to be called a "nimrod" is not a compliment!

So, who was Nimrod? The Table of Nations gives him far more attention than any other character. Nimrod had two characteristics: he was a mighty hunter and he was an empire builder. In both respects he marked a new beginning for humanity. Here, in this book of beginnings, we have another beginning: Nimrod began to be, or was the first to become, a mighty man (Heb. *gibbor*). There's an ominous echo here of the Nephilim who were mighty men (Heb. *gibborim*) from of old (6:4). His skill as a mighty man was especially evident in the hunt. Indeed, his prowess as a hunter of game was proverbial, so that it was said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the Lord."

Nimrod was also an empire-builder. Cain or his son was the first city-builder in human history (4:17). Condemned to a life of wandering in self-exile from God, he built a city so he could be secure and so he could be king. Nimrod went a stage further: he built not just one city, but multiple cities. More than that, he built two sets of cities, two empires. He wasn't content to rule over his own city; he wanted to rule over other cities as well. That's the difference between a kingdom and an empire: a king rules over his own people, an emperor has dominion over other peoples as well. The first center was in Shinar, that is southern Mesopotamia. Here he built four cities: Babylon, Uruk, Akkad and Kalneh. Then he moved north and built a second empire in northern Mesopotamia, in Assyria. Here, too, he built four cities: Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen. Ominously this is described as the great city. Under Nimrod we have the first mention of the great city that will become an important motif in Scripture. The great city is the city of man, built by man where he can live in autonomy from God. Its antithesis is the holy city, built by God, where people can dwell in God's presence.

Who was this Nimrod? Attempts have been made to identify him with a historical figure, usually Sargon or his grandson Naram-Sin. Around 2350 BC Sargon founded the kingdom of Akkad and established a strong dynasty. His chronicle said of him that he "had neither rival nor opponent. He spread his terror-inspiring glamor over all the countries." But no single historical figure founded these four cities of Shinar and four cities of Assyria. Yet from an ideological point of view these cities and empires did share a common founder. His name is Nimrod, which means "we rebel." The founders of the cities and empires of southern and northern Mesopotamia were mighty men, famed as warriors, hunters and city-builders. This was long the Mesopotamian ideal of the king. Perhaps some of you have seen the reliefs in the British Museum of the Assyrian kings as lion hunters. But these kings are dismissed as rebels. Furthermore, though Nimrod was a mighty hunter, he was so "before the Lord." Nimrod thought that he was sovereign, but he was still "before the Lord." There was a sovereign higher than himself: the Lord.

But why is Nimrod of Mesopotamia listed under Cush a thousand miles away in Nubia? A frequent explanation is that the author confused Cush with the Mesopotamian Kish, where kingship was re-established after the flood. The Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BC) did confuse the two. But I think the compiler of the Table of Nations knew exactly what he was doing. Here it helps to think of this Table as a mental map. The Assyrian and Babylonian peoples of Mesopotamia were actually Shemites; indeed, Ashur is listed as a son of Shem. But the Table places Nimrod, and hence the empires of Babylonia and Assyria, under the Hamites. Why? Because all of Israel's enemies are among the Hamites. Ham behaved badly toward Noah, the new Adam, whom God blessed; his descendants will continue to oppose those whom God blesses, namely Israel.

These enemies include also two other sons of Ham: Egypt and Canaan. The Table signifies their importance by continuing the "begat" formula:

Egypt was the father of
the Ludites, Anamites, Lehabites, Naphtuhites, Pathrusites, Kasluhites (from whom the Philistines came) and Caphtorites.
Canaan was the father of
Sidon his firstborn, and of the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarites and Hamathites.
Later the Canaanite clans scattered and the borders of Canaan reached from Sidon toward Gerar as far as Gaza, and then toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboyim, as far as Lasha. (10:13-19)

Egypt fathered seven sons. The sixth of these peoples, the Kasluhites, are credited with being the progenitors of the Philistines. Here is another instance of the Table tinkering with reality. The Philistines were one of the Sea Peoples who moved southwards from the Aegean. Properly they should be Japhethites, but they're listed under

Ham because they were another of the enemy peoples. The Philistines moved into the coastal region of Canaan around the same time that Israel was trying to take possession of the land. For centuries they would oppose Israel until King David finally defeated them.

Canaan fathered eleven sons, best read as one plus ten. The one is his firstborn Sidon, chief of the Phoenician cities strung along the eastern Mediterranean coast. The other ten will occupy the interior of the land of Canaan. Many of these names will be repeated again and again in listings of the native inhabitants of the land. These are the people whom Israel must later dispossess. Their significance is indicated by another narrative insertion, this one detailing the borders of Canaan. The reason for this insertion is obvious: this is the territory that will be promised to Abraham for his descendants.

These are the sons of Ham by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. (10:20)

In all, the sons of Ham number thirty. Here we find all the enemies of Israel: Shinar (Babylonia), Assyria, Egypt, the Philistines, and the Canaanites. Some are not ethnically Hamites: the Mesopotamians are Shemite, the Philistines are Japhethite. But they are all Hamites: they all oppose God's purposes and God's people. Israel will interact much with these people, but it will always be negative, always confrontational.

Shem (21-31)

Finally the Table turns to Shem.

Sons were also born to Shem, whose older brother was Japheth; Shem was the ancestor of all the sons of Eber.

The sons of Shem:
Elam, Ashur, Arphaxad, Lud and Aram.
The sons of Aram:
Uz, Hul, Gether and Meshek. (10:21-23)

The Table's interest in Shem's line is indicated by the special introduction. To Shem also sons were born. We are reminded that he is the brother of Japheth. It is ambiguous which is the elder brother: Shem (most English versions) or Japheth (NIV uniquely). Nor is it clear why it matters who is the older. What does matter is that Ham is not listed as a brother. Shem and Japheth were brothers in their response to Ham's sin, and in their reception of Noah's blessing. They will be brothers again when Japheth finds a home inside the tents of Shem. But Ham is not a brother.

Shem was the father of all the sons of Eber. This is important because Eber gave his name to the Hebrews (Heb. *'ivri*, the gentilic form of Eber's name).

Shem's five sons and his four grandsons through Aram are listed briefly using the "sons of" formula.

Arphaxad was the father of Shelah,
and Shelah the father of Eber.
Two sons were born to Eber:
One was named Peleg, because in his time the earth was divided; his brother was named Joktan.
Joktan was the father of
Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah and Jobab. All these were sons of Joktan.
The region where they lived stretched from Mesha toward Sephar, in the eastern hill country.
These are the sons of Shem by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. (10:24-31)

The formula switches to "father of" to give the linear genealogy of Shem through his third son Arphaxad, running to the fourth generation, Eber himself, to whom two sons were born. These two are of such significance that the linear genealogy, tracing only one son per generation, is halted and broadened to two sons. The significance is really Peleg's, for in his day the earth was divided. This is a wordplay on Peleg's name which means "division."

What does it mean that in Peleg's day the earth was divided? Long ago, when I was into Biblical creationism and reading the Bible as a science book, I accepted the position that the division of the earth in the days of Peleg was the physical separation of the continents. The theory of continental drift was proposed in 1912 by the German scientist Alfred Wegener, but not accepted until the 1950s. Once it was accepted, Biblical creationists had to find some place in the Bible to put it. Here is where they put it: in the days of Peleg when the earth was divided. Thirty years ago I accepted that. Biblical creationists today still advance this explanation. But I have long since ceased to think that is what this verse is about.

The text itself makes it clear what the division is. The division is between the brothers Peleg and Joktan and their respective descendants. Although Peleg is the first-named son, his descendants are not listed here; they will be listed later. Instead, Joktan and his thirteen sons are listed for a total of fourteen Joktanites. The line of Peleg will not be given until after the Tower of Babel, where the account of Shem is a ten-generation linear genealogy leading from Shem through Peleg to Abraham (11:10-26). The Table of Nations is immediately followed by the story of the Tower of Babel. From the point of view of the narrative, Joktan leads to the Tower of Babel, but Peleg leads beyond the Tower of Babel. That's the division of the earth in the days of Peleg: a line that leads to Babel and a line that leads to Abraham, God's answer to Babel.

The Clans of Noah's Sons (32)

The prologue (10:1) is matched by an epilogue:

These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood. (10:32)

From the sons of Noah the nations spread out over the earth. The Table has been selective: 14 sons for Japheth, 30 for Ham, and 26 for Shem, for a total of 70. This is surely a symbolic number: seven multiplied by ten, both themselves symbolic numbers. Seventy represents the fullness of this spreading out over the earth. It was out of this fullness of the nations that God would call Abraham to birth a new nation. To Abraham he would promise the territory of the Canaanites to be the land for this new people. At the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob and his family go down to Egypt; their number is given: "seventy in all" (46:27; Exod 1:5). Israel has become as numerous as the nations. Israel has become the new nation.

Israel and the Nations

The Table of Nations gave Israel a mental map for understanding its relationship to the other nations. On the far horizon were the Japhethites, too far away to have much interaction with Israel. Closer were the Hamites, from whom came all Israel's enemies. Related to Israel were the Shemites. You can plot these nations on a

geographically-accurate map. But it's more helpful to draw a mental map, such as the map showing Jerusalem at the center.

Israel was unique, Israel was different. Starting with just one, Abraham, called from out of the seventy nations, God built a new people, numbering seventy. Israel was in the center, surrounded by these other nations. What was Israel to think of these other nations? The Lord warned Israel not to think that it was any better than the other nations. The Lord had chosen her not because she was better, but because of his great love. The Lord chose Israel from the nations but also for the nations. The Lord also warned Israel not to behave like the Egyptians or the Canaanites, but it did just that.

As Israel sank deeper into sin, becoming increasingly indistinguishable from the surrounding nations, God sent his prophets to warn of impending judgment: expulsion from the land just like the Canaanites, reversing Abraham's journey out of Mesopotamia. But through these same prophets God also announced a remarkable vision for the nations, for the descendants of Japheth and even Ham.

The Japhethites inhabited the distant coastlands, the land on the far horizon of Israel's world. Isaiah frequently told of the Lord's purposes for these distant coastlands; for example, in the last chapter:

"And I…am about to come and gather the people of all nations and languages, and they will come and see my glory.

"I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. And they will bring all your people, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the Lord." (Isa 66:18-20)

Tarshish, Tubal, Greece, the distant islands: these are all Japhethites. The Lord will bring them to Zion to worship.

Isaiah proclaimed a similar vision for the Hamites:

In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt, and a monument to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and witness to the Lord Almighty in the land of Egypt. When they cry out to the Lord because of their oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and he will rescue them. So the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the Lord…

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance." (Isa 19:19-21, 23-25)

Egypt and Assyria: Israel's two great enemies, one on either side. But the Lord will make himself known even to them. Not all of Israel liked this vision. Jonah got very upset, angry enough to die, when God heard the cry of the Ninevites and saved them.

Earlier in the service we read part of Psalm 87:

Glorious things are said of you,
city of God:
"I will record Rahab and Babylon
among those who acknowledge me—
Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—
and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.'"
Indeed, of Zion it will be said,
"This one and that one were born in her,
and the Most High himself will establish her."
The Lord will write in the register of the peoples:
"This one was born in Zion." (Ps 87:3-6)

Who are these? Rahab (Egypt), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre (sister city of Sidon), Cush. These are all Hamites! But the Lord will change their birth certificates. He will write in the register of the peoples, "This one was born in Zion!" "This one belongs to me. He is mine. I am his father." Place of birth is very important. It is listed in our passport. Citizenship can depend upon it. Here the Lord changes the birthplace of these peoples to declare that they are his.

The Old Testament prophets depict Zion as the center of world pilgrimage for all peoples: Shemites, Japhethites, even Hamites. All the nations that God has made will come and worship before him.

The Church and the Nations

What is your mental map of the nations? The Jews at the time of Jesus accepted that foreigners could be incorporated into God's people, but they had to become Jews. The early church maintained this same belief. But then the church in Jerusalem was scattered (Acts 8:1). On the road to Gaza, Philip encountered an Ethiopian eunuch; he was from the region of Cush, so he was a Hamite. He believed in Christ and was baptized. A little later Peter was summoned to Caesarea to the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and therefore a Japhethite. He, too, believed and was baptized. The church eventually concluded that the Gentiles did not have to become Jews to be incorporated into God's family. They realized the gospel of Christ was for all nations. God had demolished the divisions between peoples. So Paul could declare to the Areopagus in Athens:

From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands…In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. (Acts 17:26, 30)

Do you share that vision for the nations? That God wants to reconcile people of all nations to himself through the Lord Jesus Christ. That he extends the gospel of grace even to enemies. Paul calls this the mystery of Christ, "that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph 3:6).

This is why missionaries go out to the far ends of the earth, confident that the gospel is for all nations, confident that God wants to write in the register of the peoples, "This one was born in Zion." This should be our mental map: Zion at the center with the peoples all around. Not Zion as a physical city anymore, but Zion still as the people of God; Zion as the place where God and his people dwell together: Zion as the church. We've a story to tell to the nations, to call them to come and know the Lord, to come and worship him.

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SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

In 1415 the English, led by Henry V, defeated a much larger French army in the Battle of Agincourt. This battle is perhaps most famous from Shakespeare's play *King Henry V*. On the eve of the battle Shakespeare has Henry deliver his famous St Crispin's Day Speech: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers" (4.3). After the miraculous victory, Henry says, "Let there be sung *Non nobis* and *Te Deum*" (4.8). *Non nobis* refers to the opening line of Psalm 115 (Vg 113:9) in the Latin Vulgate: *Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam*, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory." Kenneth Branagh's film (1989) has a beautiful rendition of this text set to song by Patrick Doyle who wrote the soundtrack.

These words are easily said but difficult to practice. We want to take glory for ourselves and exalt our own name. We hunger for significance. We want to be noticed and given credit. This is true in secular society. How much of the financial turmoil of the past few years was caused by senior executives seeking to make a name for themselves? How often are wars caused by rulers seeking greater power? Fundraisers play upon this desire for monuments to self, promising naming rights to signature donors. But it is true also in Christian ministry. Though we might say, "To God be the glory," we want to be noticed, to be appreciated, to be needed, to be important, to be necessary. Sadly, there are too many in Christian ministry trying to make names for self, building kingdoms and empires.

This is not a modern problem. Throughout history humans have sought to make a name for themselves. We find this in our text for today, the story of the Tower of Babel. This is the final story of the primeval history, Israel's pre-history. It is the final backdrop to God's call of Abraham which marks the birth of Israel. The story is short, just nine verses. It is a masterpiece, full of wordplays. It is a text with much texture. The story has two halves: human action and divine response. In the first half, humanity in general is the subject and God is completely absent. In the second half, the Lord is the subject and humanity has nothing to say, nothing to do but stop.

Human Action (11:1-4)

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (Gen 11:1-4 TNIV)

The Tower of Babel follows on the heels of the Table of Nations as the second half of the account of the sons of Noah (10:1–11:9). It is clear that these two halves are not chronologically arranged. The story of Babel begins when the whole world had one language and one vocabulary. Yet the Table had noted that each of the lines of Shem, Ham and Japheth had spread out as nations with their own languages (10:5, 20, 31). This story of the Tower of Babel gives us a second perspective on the dispersion of the nations. But there are links between the two sections: Nimrod is the mastermind of the empires of Shinar and Assyria. In the days of Peleg the earth was divided, with Joktan's line leading to Babel, but Peleg's line leading around and beyond it. Perhaps we are to read the story of Babel as taking place around the time of Nimrod and Joktan.

In those days when humanity was unified under one language they moved ever-eastwards. This is the wrong direction. Adam and Eve had been expelled out the east side of the garden (3:24). "Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod (wandering), east of Eden" (4:16). Migrating east is symbolic of moving further and further away from the Lord. Cain had settled in the land of wandering, an oxymoron. Here after the Flood humanity was still wandering: the verb "moved" implies a nomadic existence, repeatedly breaking camp and moving on. Humanity was looking for a place to settle down, but it was wandering in the wrong direction. It did find a place to settle: in a plain in the land of Shinar. This is southern Mesopotamia, the area in which the kingdoms of Sumer and Akkad would develop. This was Nimrod's first center of power before expanding northwards into Assyria. Archaeology agrees that this was the earliest center of urban life. But the Bible isn't interested in mere concordance with archaeology; it adds a theological spin. This was east, far east, of Eden. Humanity settled far from God.

Having settled there, the people became architects and builders. Conferring together, they agreed on a two-part plan, indicated by the two-fold, "Come, let us…" They had a grand building project in mind, but first they needed some new technology. This technology was a two-stage process: they made bricks and they baked them. Bricks had long been made out of mud or clay, packing the material tightly in a wooden form then leaving it to dry in the sun. Such sun-dried bricks were easy to make and adequate for smaller buildings. But they had limited durability and strength. Somewhere around 3000 BC there was a technological breakthrough in the Ancient Near East: the use of fire to bake bricks which were much stronger and more durable. Such firing was an expensive technology, so the fired bricks were used only for the most important buildings. But the use of these bricks allowed bigger and grander buildings.

The Israelites for whom this story was written neither knew nor needed this technology, so the narrator adds a note to explain Mesopotamian building practices. In the rocky hills of Canaan the Israelites had all the building material they needed right at hand: rocks. If you've been to Israel you know that it is very rocky indeed. All construction was with stones. If mortar was used it was clay. But Mesopotamia is an alluvial flood plain without many rocks. What it does have in abundance is mud and clay. So instead of stone the Mesopotamians used brick, first sun-dried bricks and then fired bricks. For sun-dried bricks clay was used as mortar, but fired bricks used bitu-

men or asphalt from naturally-occurring pits—an early indication of the extensive oil fields that underlie Mesopotamia.

Ancient Mesopotamian sources heralded the making of these fired bricks. The bricks were often stamped with the name of the king or the deity, preserving his name in perpetuity. (The same was true of Egypt: one of the remarkable items in the British Museum is a mud brick stamped with the name of Ramesses, possibly the pharaoh at the time of Moses.)

With baked bricks and bitumen in hand the people embarked on their building project: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens." The Table of Nations has already credited Nimrod with four cities in Shinar: Babel, Erech (Uruk), Akkad (Agade) and Calneh. Many more cities were built in the land. At the center of each of these cities was a tower, the ziggurat. The Hebrew word for "tower" means something that is big; the Akkadian word "ziggurat" means something that is high. At the center of each city was a monumental building. Since this was the most important building in the city, fired brick was used. The interior was made of sun-dried bricks with an exterior facing of fired brick. The earliest ziggurats were built around 3000 BC; they were still being built when Israel was exiled to Babylonia in 587 BC.

The remains of about thirty of these ziggurats are known. Probably the most famous ziggurat remaining is that of Ur, built ca. 2100 BC. Leonard Woolley excavated it in the 1920s, together with the spectacular royal tombs; many of his findings are now in the British Museum. It was partially restored under Saddam Hussein. But in the ancient world the most famous ziggurat was that of Babylon.

A ziggurat was a high, stepped pyramid. The Greek historian Herodotus reported that the ziggurat in Babylon had seven tiers. It was conventional to say that the top of the ziggurat reached to the heavens. On top was a temple, the temple of the deity of that city. Once a year the king mounted the ziggurat to meet the god in his temple.

The people had two reasons for building the city and its tower: "so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." In both respects they were acting against God's purposes. How could they do otherwise, since they had wandered east, far from Eden and from God? Their quest to make a name for themselves mirrored the Nephilim, the mighty men of old who were men of renown (lit. "men of the name," 6:4). They were the heroes to whom the world looked, but it is clear that the Lord did not look on them with favor. Now the people of Shinar sought to follow in the footsteps of the Nephilim, exalting themselves as famous men, men whom the world would acclaim. They feared insignificance; they feared that they would not be remembered. They also feared lest they be scattered, yet it was God's intention that the peoples of the earth spread out over the earth. We see that humanity after the Flood is no better than humanity before the Flood. How would the Lord react to this presumptive behavior, this frustration of his purposes? The second half of the story shows us.

Divine Response (11:5-9)

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that they were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth. (11:5-9)

What deep irony! What sarcasm! No matter how tall the tower, no matter that the builders considered its top to be in the heavens, the Lord had to come down to see it and the city which it dominated. Today even the remains of the ziggurats are impressive, but back then the fully-built ones were puny in the Lord's sight. The city and tower were built by "the sons of man/Adam," mere earthlings. How could such earthlings hope to build something that reached to heaven? But the Lord took the threat of human capability seriously, observing that this enterprise was only the beginning of what they could do with the unity provided by a common language. Their success as architects and builders, in developing technology and using that for grand construction, showed that they could succeed in whatever they turned their mind to: "nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them." This sounds straight out of Silicon Valley, where we are used to ever-advancing technology. There's nothing that our engineers cannot do. If they can't do it yet, they soon will be able to do so. But it is clear that the Lord did not look on this human capability and purpose as a good development. Therefore, he, too, announced a plan: "Come, let us…" He purposed to confuse the one language so that the people could not understand one another and so unite in one purpose.

The Lord scattered them from there, that is from this city in Shinar, whose name we still do not know. He scattered them over the face of the whole earth, the one thing that they had been trying to avoid, yet the very thing which he had commanded Noah and his sons to do: "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." Prior to the Flood, the multiplication of humanity upon the earth had produced a multiplication of evil. Now, after the Flood, the Lord intervenes to limit the agglomeration of evil. Scattered from Shinar across the earth, the people ceased building the city. They were forced to stop. Still it is "the city," a city as yet without a name. Which city is this?

Only in the final verse do we at last learn the name of the city: Babel, which we know as Babylon. The people called their city Babilli, meaning "the gate of the gods." Their ziggurat they called Etemenanki, "the temple of the foundation of heaven and earth." Both names reflected their ideology, their understanding of their city's place in the world. They considered this man-made mountain to be the axis of the world, the meeting point between heaven and earth: not from heaven to earth, but from earth to heaven. But the Biblical verdict on Babylon is that it is not the gate of the gods; it is the place of confusion. The verb used for what the Lord did with the universal language is an unusual one. Elsewhere it is used of cooking: of mixing flour with oil in the preparation of offerings. It is as if the Lord put the language in a blender and scrambled all the letters—a forerunner of the "Will it blend?" campaign!

The story of the Tower of Babel is a rejection of everything that Mesopotamian society, and notably Babylon, held dear. Three times these early chapters of Genesis have rejected the city-builders. Cain (or his son Enoch) was the first city-builder (4:17). He built the first city when he went into voluntary self-exile from God, departing from God's presence to wander east of Eden. He built a city for security and for significance, naming it after his son. Nimrod was the next city-builder, building the empires of southern and northern Mesopotamia (10:8-12). But he was a rebel; his name means "we

rebel." Now the third city-builder is humanity gathered together to make a name for itself. The Bible takes a dim view of all three city-builders. Yet Mesopotamian society exalted these city-builders. They were their heroes of old: the mighty men who built cities and empires. These were the men recorded in their ancient chronicles. Genesis dismisses them all.

God the Builder and Architect

But God is not against cities per se, nor is he against the making of a name. But in both cases he wants to be the architect and builder. Since he is the potter not the clay, that's a role he can best play. Problems arise when it's the clay that tries to be the architect and builder. The tower of Babel forms the final backdrop to the call of Abraham. In the next chapter God will call Abraham to leave the cities of Mesopotamia behind. Abraham will leave the splendor of Ur with its mighty ziggurat and sophisticated urban society to journey to a land he does not know. The city-builders of Mesopotamia sought to make a name for themselves, but God will promise Abraham that he will make his name great (12:2). Notice the architect and builder of this great name: it is not Abraham who will make his own name great, but God. Abraham never did get to live in another city. He lived in tents as a nomad, but he was content doing so because his eyes were on the future:

> **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. (Heb 11:8-10)**

Abraham had the faith to see beyond the man-made cities of this world, the monuments to human sufficiency, pride and fear, to see a city built by God, a city whose foundations would be far firmer than even the most highly fired clay bricks.

God is a city planner and builder. His first city was the earthly Jerusalem. Several psalms sing the praises of this city, including Psalm 48 from which our call to worship was drawn. Jerusalem was simultaneously the city of David and the city of God, the city of the king and the city of the great king. Here is where heaven met earth, in the temple where God put his presence. Note the direction: this was not earth trying to reach heaven, but God in heaven putting his presence on earth, filling the temple with his glory, his *shekinah* indwelling. This was heaven intruding onto earth.

The Bible closes with a vision of the New Jerusalem. Why is a New Jerusalem necessary? Because the earthly Jerusalem became indistinguishable from Babylon. It became a city opposed to God's purposes, opposed to his prophets. It became a city of rebels. Jesus wept over it, as had the prophets before him, and he died there in the place of rebels. New Jerusalem is the city which comes down from heaven. It is a vast city, larger than any humans could ever build. It is a cube, implying it is the holy of holies. The holy of holies fills the entire city, which fills the entire cosmos. The whole cosmos will be holy, infused with God's glory, with his presence. Heaven and earth will be joined together, not because earth has invaded heaven, but because heaven has invaded earth.

This is what God is up to: invading earth with heaven. The garden of Eden was an intrusion of heaven onto earth. The land of Israel with the city Jerusalem, the temple and the holy of holies at its very heart was an intrusion of heaven onto earth. Jesus was an intrusion of heaven onto earth, as the disciples beheld his glory tabernacling among them. Where is the heavenly city now? Where is heaven on earth now? It is the church, Zion, where God's people are gathered around the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the meeting place of heaven and earth. The church is not an earthly organization. It is a colony of heaven on earth. It operates completely differently than an earthly institution. It is not motivated by a quest for significance, nor by fear. It is infused with the Spirit of God. It is God who is at work in the church as its architect and builder. He supplies the gifts for the church to function as the body of Christ. He is the architect of the work which he wants us to do. He is building his people into a fit dwelling place for himself.

We get it very wrong when we try to do things the other way around, when we try to be the architect and builder, when we try to reach from earth to heaven. Psalm 115 continues:

> **Why do the nations say,**
> **"Where is their God?"**
> **Our God is in heaven;**
> **he does whatever pleases him.**
>
> **But their idols are silver and gold,**
> **made by human hands.**
> **They have mouths, but cannot speak,**
> **eyes, but cannot see.**
> **They have ears, but cannot hear,**
> **noses, but cannot smell.**
> **They have hands, but cannot feel,**
> **feet, but cannot walk,**
> **nor can they utter a sound with their throats.**
> **Those who make them will be like them,**
> **and so will all who trust in them. (Ps 115:2-8)**

This is what happens when earth tries to invade heaven. This is what happens when people are the architects and builders. People make gods in their own image. Idols and statues that have mouths, eyes, ears and noses, but none of them work. People take a piece of wood; half of it they make into a statue to worship and the other half they burn to keep warm (Isa 44:15-17). In the beginning God made humans in his image, and people have been returning the compliment ever since. On top of each of the ziggurats in Mesopotamia was a temple in which was a lifeless statue, lifeless because it was man-made. But in the holy of holies in the Jerusalem temple there was no statue at all, because God cannot be reduced to a man-made image. In 63 BC, when the Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem, he strode into the holy of holies and was astounded to find nothing there. He couldn't understand: how could a temple not have a statue in it?

Sadly, too often we try to live in the church according to the principles of Babylon. We seek to make a name for ourselves, seeking to be significant, to be remembered, to be important, to be necessary. We seek to make monuments. But when we do this we make God in our image. We try to make God fit into our plans, rather than seeing how we are caught up into God's great plan. We co-opt him as the God of our cause. As "God of my comfort" we treat him as the Great Therapist who is obliged to make us happy. As "God of my success" we treat him as our Personal Trainer who will coach us to prosperity. As "God of my nation" we treat him as Guardian of Christian America. In these and many more ways we trivialize God.[1]

This is a tragedy because God is up to things far grander than my comfort, my success, my nation. He invites me into his love, the love which he shared with his Son since before the beginning, and which his Son brought to earth. When I am secure in that love which comes from heaven down to earth, I don't have to try to make a name for myself on earth, I don't have to act out of fear. I can play my part as a citizen of heaven on earth. I can leave the success and the making of names to God. I can leave the architecture and the building to God himself. I can allow God to receive all the glory rather than seeking it for myself.

1. Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God: The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995).

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THE GOD OF ABRAHAM PRAISE

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Genesis 11:10–12:7
37th Message
Bernard Bell
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SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

The God of Abraham praise! Thomas Olivers wrote this hymn after visiting the Great Synagogue of London where he heard the Yigdal. Sung every day in synagogues this is a doxology, beginning *yigdal elohim chai*: Magnified be the living God! Olivers was so taken by the hymn that he wrote a Christian text to the same tune. It is full of references to the Old Testament as befits a hymn inspired by the synagogue: it is a hymn of praise to the God of Abraham. But since this is a Christian hymn it is full also of New Testament imagery: it is a hymn of praise to the God of all nations. And so in the last verse Olivers wrote, "Hail Abraham's God and *mine*!"

Our call to worship was from Psalm 72, a royal psalm entitled "For Solomon." The psalmist asks that God bless the king, making his rule universal so that it be a blessing to all. Christians recognize this as a messianic psalm, which finds its fulfillment in Christ. Isaac Watts, the father of English hymnody, wrote Christian versions of this and most other psalms, publishing them as *Psalms of David imitated in the language of the New Testament* (1719). We sang his setting of Psalm 72: "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun."

So, we've had two examples of Christian texts inspired by Jewish ones. Some might even say that these Jewish texts were expropriated for Christian purposes. Is this valid? What is the relationship between Jews and Christians, between Israel and the Church, between Old and New Testaments, between promise and fulfillment? What allows me, a Gentile, to sing "Hail Abraham's God and mine!"?

Today we finish our series on Genesis 1-11, the primeval history. The section closes with another genealogy, the account of Shem.

Shem's Genealogy (11:10-26)

This is the account of Shem's family line.

Two years after the flood, when Shem was 100 years old, he became the father of Arphaxad. And after he became the father of Arphaxad, Shem lived 500 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Arphaxad had lived 35 years, he became the father of Shelah. And after he became the father of Shelah, Arphaxad lived 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Shelah had lived 30 years, he became the father of Eber. And after he became the father of Eber, Shelah lived 403 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Eber had lived 34 years, he became the father of Peleg. And after he became the father of Peleg, Eber lived 430 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Peleg had lived 30 years, he became the father of Reu. And after he became the father of Reu, Peleg lived 209 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Reu had lived 32 years, he became the father of Serug. And after he became the father of Serug, Reu lived 207 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Serug had lived 30 years, he became the father of Nahor. And after he became the father of Nahor, Serug lived 200 years and had other sons and daughters.

When Nahor had lived 29 years, he became the father of Terah. And after he became the father of Terah, Nahor lived 119 years and had other sons and daughters.

After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. (Gen 11:10-26 TNIV)

This is the last of the five accounts (*toledot*) of the primeval history. It is similar to the genealogy of chapter 5, the account of Adam's line. That one ran for ten generations from Adam to Noah and his three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. This one runs for another ten generations from Shem to Terah and his three sons: Abram, Nahor and Haran. The major difference between the two is the rapidly declining life spans in the second. The major similarity is ten generations ending with three sons, both times indicating a terminus.

These two genealogies divide the primeval history into two epochs: from Adam to Noah and his sons, and from Noah to Terah and his sons. And they highlight three pivotal men: Adam in the first generation, Noah in the tenth, and Abram in the twentieth. Both epochs commenced with the Lord blessing humanity, "Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth" (1:28; 9:1). After the first ten generations humanity had multiplied on the earth, but this brought a multiplication of human evil upon the earth (6:1, 5). The Lord responded to this corruption of his purposes by wiping the earth clean with the Flood and starting over again with Noah. The second epoch was no better: it produced a concentration of human evil in Babel. This time the Lord responded by mixing up human language and scattering humanity upon the earth.

In both epochs one message is very clear: left to its own devices the natural direction of humanity is downwards not upwards. Humanity does not find its way back to God. Instead it heads away from God, wandering further and further east. But there is hope. There is a line that leads beyond Babel: the line of Shem through Peleg. The earth was divided in the days of Eber's two sons Peleg and Joktan (10:25). Joktan's genealogy led to Babel, but Peleg's genealogy leads beyond Babel to Terah and his three sons. A terminus has again been reached. How will God now act? After the first terminus he responded with the Flood, but he has bound himself not to do that again. So how will he respond? His response begins Israel's history.

The Account of Terah (11:27-32)

This is the account of Terah's family line.

Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. While his father Terah was still

alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milkah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milkah and Iskah. Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there.

Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Harran. (11:27-32)

A new account begins here, the account of Terah. But this beginning is more than just a new account. This is the beginning of Israel's history. The pre-history is finished, now the history proper begins. The rest of the book of Genesis comprises the patriarchal history, focusing on the lives of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Just as there were five accounts in the primeval history, so will there be five accounts in the patriarchal history. But they are very different. Three long accounts: the generations of Terah (11:26-25:11), of Isaac (25:19-35:29), and of Jacob (37:2-50:26), are divided by two short genealogical accounts: of Ishmael (25:12-18) and of Esau (36:1-37:1).

The opening paragraph of Terah's account is arranged as a chiasm. The outer bracket is marked by death: the death of Haran in Ur and the death of Terah in Harran. The inner bracket is marked by taking: the taking by Abram and Nahor of wives matched by Terah's taking of Abram and Lot to journey from Ur to Harran bound for Canaan. This structure focuses attention on the center-line, verse 30. It is very brief, and in these few words the same thing is stated twice, first positively, then negatively: Sarah was barren, she had no children. This establishes a tension that will run through the next ten chapters.

By the end of this first paragraph of Terah's account, Terah himself is dead. But this account is not about Terah himself; it is about his generations, his family line. It is primarily about his son Abram, to whom attention turns in the next paragraph.

The Call of Abraham (12:1-3)

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you." (12:1-3)

The Lord called Abram to leave everything that was familiar: his country, his people, his family. He was to leave Ur, a sophisticated city in Mesopotamia, and go to another land. He was to leave the land of pre-history and go to the land of history. He didn't know this land, he didn't even know which land: it was the land the Lord would show him. Abram had to accept that on faith.

The Lord laid out his purposes in a seven-fold statement. The word "bless" is prominent, used five times. God had created the world for blessing, but humanity had frustrated that purpose. God is determined to bless his world, so this is what he started to do with Abram. The Lord's purpose statement is a rejection of humanity's purpose statement at Babel (11:4). Humanity gathered to build a great tower for itself, but God will do the building for Abram, making him into a great nation. Humanity gathered to make a name for itself, but God will do that for Abram, making his name great.

What had Abram done to deserve such blessing? Nothing! Abram and his family served other gods (Josh 24:2). He was a pagan idolater, just like everyone else in Mesopotamia. But God chose him. Many people dislike the concept of election, saying that it is unfair. Yes, it is unfair; it is not what people deserve. But that's the whole point! The pre-history has shown time and again that humanity heads away from God. If there is to be any hope, then God has to intervene, God has to take the initiative. This is what he does with Abram, electing him to be the *recipient* of his blessing. But God also elects Abram to be the *instrument* of his blessing. Not only will God bless Abram, but he will make Abram a blessing to others so that ultimately all peoples on earth will be blessed through him.

The call of Abraham is the beginning of the rest of the story. The rest of the Bible is the story of the fulfillment of this purpose statement: the restoration of blessing to the world both in and through Abram. Blessing *in* Abram by making him into a great nation; blessing *through* Abram by using him to bless all other nations. God called Abram *from* the nations, but he called him also *for* the nations.

Abram Heads West (12:4-7)

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. (12:4-7)

Taking God at his word, Abram set out in obedience. He journeyed west, reversing the direction in which humanity had been wandering since Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden. When he arrived in the land of Canaan the Lord promised it to him: "To your offspring I will give this land." To the promise of a seed (offspring) was added the promise of a land. Henceforth this land of Canaan would be the Promised Land. But there were impediments to both the seed and the land: Sarai was barren and the Canaanites were in the land. God would overcome both impediments in his own time. Meanwhile Abram had to live by faith: he "believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6). Later God made a covenant with Abram, solemnizing his promises of the land and the seed (15:18-21; 17:4-8). He gave him a new name, changing it from Abram (exalted father) to Abraham (father of a multitude), "for I have made you a father of many nations" (17:5). Abraham had a part in this covenant: he was to circumcise himself and all other males. But what really identified Abraham was not circumcision; it was faith. Faith came first.

God kept Abraham waiting 24 years for the promised son to show that nothing is too hard or wonderful for the Lord (18:14). He subsequently overcame the barrenness of Rebekah and Rachel, to make it clear that the enlargement of Abraham's seed was the Lord's doing. Along the way he continued the process of election, choosing Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau. By the end of Genesis the seed that went

down to Egypt numbered seventy, equal to the number of nations in the Table of Nations. In Egypt, despite the efforts of Pharaoh to oppress the Hebrews, God multiplied them greatly (Exod 1:12, 20). He kept Abraham's descendants waiting 400 years for the promised land, until he judged the sins of the Amorites (Canaanites) to be complete. Only then did he bring Israel into their land. Later he gave Israel a king whose son built a temple where God could dwell in the midst of his people. So far, so good. By midway through the reign of Solomon it looked like all God's promises had come true. The Lord had made Israel into a great nation, given it the land, and under Solomon Israel was a blessing to other nations (1 Kgs 4:20-34).

But then everything fell apart. Rather than live differently, Israel copied the other nations. It repeated the sins of the Canaanites until it too suffered their fate, being vomited out of the land. God had fulfilled his promises, but Israel had broken covenant. So Israel was expelled from the land back to Mesopotamia, back to the east.

But the prophets said that God remained faithful to his covenant promises to Abraham and to David. What has happened to those promises? In particular, what has happened to the promise of a seed and a land? Who are the children of Abraham today? And what is the Promised Land? These are thorny questions. I am very aware that here I am venturing out into another minefield!

We begin with Jesus and a discussion he had with the Jewish leaders about the identity of the children of Abraham. He said to them,

> **"I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father."**
>
> **"Abraham is our father," they answered.**
>
> **"If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the works of your own father."**
>
> **"We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself."**
>
> **Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning." (John 8:37-44)**

The Jewish leaders' response to Jesus showed that they were not true children of Abraham. Though physically descended from him, they did not share his core identity. Abraham was a man of faith who responded to God in faith. But these leaders rejected God and his servant Jesus; they responded in unbelief. The leaders took great offense at Jesus, picking up stones to stone him. They were not able to kill him on that occasion, but later they did, as they had killed other prophets whom God had sent.

After the resurrection and immediately prior to his ascension, Jesus told his disciples, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). This did not happen the way the disciples were expecting. Their spreading out from Jerusalem was the result of persecution, so that the church in Jerusalem was scattered (Acts 8:1). As the believers scattered they spoke about Jesus, and people believed: first Jews, then Samaritan half-breeds, then God-fearing Gentiles, and finally pagan Gentiles. It is clear this is not what the church was expecting, but it came to realize that this was in fulfillment of Old Testament promise. In the Old Testament scattering was divine judgment, but now God scattered his people to bring blessing to the world, blessing not just to Jews but to all nations. The apostles realized that the children of Abraham were not those who shared his physical DNA but those who shared his spiritual DNA of faith. Observing that Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised, Paul wrote to the Romans,

> **And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Rom 4:11-12)**

Abraham is the father of all who believe, whether circumcised or not, whether Jew or Gentile. For the Jews circumcision is not enough: Abraham is their father only if they also follow in his footsteps of faith. Paul wrote a similar thing to the Galatians:

> **Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (Gal 3:7-9)**

Again it is clear that the children of Abraham are those who have the faith of Abraham, be they Jew or Gentile.

I am often accused of replacement theology, that the Church has replaced Israel. I prefer not to use that term. There is and always has been only one people of God. In the Old Testament it was primarily ethnic Israel, though Gentiles could be incorporated and Israelites excluded, as we saw a few weeks ago in the exchanging of places by Rahab the Canaanite prostitute and Achan the disobedient Israelite. Rahab was included because of her faith; Achan was excluded for his unbelief. In the New Testament age it is Jew and Gentile together as the one people of God. The defining characteristic of God's people in both Old and New Testaments is faith: the faith of Abraham, the man of faith. This is no replacement. Rather, it is an expansion of God's people to include all nations, as God had envisioned when he called Abraham in the first place. The church is not a replacement of God's promises to Abraham, but the fulfillment of them. God called Abraham *from* the nations, but also *for* the nations. It is in the church that God joins all nations together as the children of Abraham.

Take a good look at the verse on the cover of the bulletin:

> **If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:29)**

The immediately preceding verse is:

> **There is neither Jew nor Gentile…for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)**

What does this mean for the Jews and for the land today? Many Christians became very excited over the establishment of the state of Israel in part of Palestine in 1948, seeing it as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. But if I take these verses seriously then the establishment of the current state of Israel has nothing to do with Biblical prophecy. Neither the seed nor the land are the same any more.

Here it is important to understand the concept of the two ages: this age and the age to come. This division of time into two ages was part of the framework of Jewish self-understanding in the first century. In "this age" things were not right: God's promises were unfulfilled, his enemies were ascendant and were oppressing his people. But in "the age to come" all would be right: God's promises would be fulfilled. The transition from one age to the other would occur on the Day of the Lord when three significant things would happen: judgment on God's enemies, salvation of God's people, and vindication of God's righteousness.

At the time of Jesus the Jews saw the problem as Roman oppression. Israel needed to be free and independent in her own land again. But Jesus saw the problem as much deeper: sin and unbelief. The apostles realized that the age to come had arrived in the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and in the gift of the Spirit. In Christ we enter into the age to come. God has defeated the enemy: sin and death; he has brought salvation for his people; and he has vindicated his righteousness, being faithful to his covenant promises. He has done all this in Christ. Here, in Christ, we have eternal life, the life of the age to come. Here we live in the age to come, in the church as a colony of heaven on earth, while those around us who are not in Christ live in this age. For them the Day of the Lord has not yet arrived. Return to the land, rebuilding the temple, restoring sacrifices does not bring the Jews into the age to come. There is only way: through faith in Christ, by belonging to Christ.

What about Romans 9-11? Though Paul called himself the apostle to the Gentiles, he maintained a strong passion for the Jews. He used the analogy of an olive tree. Unfruitful branches were broken off because of unbelief: that's the Jews. Wild shoots were grafted in: that's the Gentiles. Speaking to the Gentiles about the Jews he said,

> **they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith… And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. (Rom 11:20, 23)**

Again it is clear: the Jews are excluded because of unbelief, while Gentiles are included because of faith. But if the Jews turn from their unbelief they, too, can be included, they can be grafted back in. Paul longed that the coming of salvation to the Gentiles would make the Jews jealous so that they would cease their unbelief and turn to Christ in faith. We are privileged to have here at PBCC some Jews who have done just that.

What about Israel today? The great majority of Israelis are secular; they are not religious Jews. Those that are religious find their identity in the keeping of law, following the prescripts of Talmud which is a codification of and commentary upon the oral law which Jesus dismissed as the traditions of men, the traditions of the elders. But membership in God's family is not by keeping law; it is by faith in Christ. The great majority of Jews reject the Messiah whom God has sent to his people. They continue in their unbelief.

Who are God's people in the land? They are those who belong to Christ. Most are Palestinian. This comes as a shock to many, who assume that all Palestinians are Moslem, and have never considered the possibility of Palestinian Christians. But there have been Gentile Christians in the land since the first century, since long before the rise and spread of Islam. Some Palestinian Christians are merely nominal, but others have a vibrant faith. There are also Jewish followers of Jesus, who have left their unbelief and turned to Christ in faith. Both Jewish and Palestinian believers face hostility.

What of the land? Many Israeli Jews want to occupy the whole land, arguing that God promised it to Abraham, and gave possession of it to Israel under Joshua; therefore it belongs to the Jews in perpetuity. For over a hundred years, under the banner of Zionism, Jews have been moving into the land, steadily dispossessing the Palestinians, among whom are many Christians, of the land on which their families have lived for many generations. Especially since 1948, many evangelical Christians have given them strong support, thinking that such Christian Zionism is helping to fulfill Biblical prophecy. But I find this very troubling: that evangelical Christians support unbelieving Jews in dispossessing our Christian brothers of their land, and doing so in the name of God.

The land was where God brought his people to dwell in rest, the land he prepared for them to belong in. Today that is not a physical place, it is not a country. Today that is Christ. There is no physical holy land. We may call the modern state of Israel the Holy Land when we go there on pilgrimage, but it is no more holy than any other place on earth. The place where God puts us to be at rest is Christ himself. When we come to Christ, we come home; we belong. God no longer localizes his presence to a piece of real estate. Wherever God's people are, anywhere in the world, if they are in Christ then they can be at rest.

I don't say this to be anti-semitic. We should have a heart for the Jews. We should yearn for them as did Paul. We don't show true love for the Jews by supporting Christian Zionism. There are other good reasons to support the state of Israel, but not for the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. We show true love for the Jews by longing and praying that they turn from their unbelief and turn in faith to Jesus the Messiah, that they be provoked to jealousy, even that they be provoked to jealousy by Palestinian Christians—not so as to take their land but to join them in Christ.

This year I have led two trips to Israel. On the second one we had the privilege of meeting with a Jewish follower of Jesus, and also with some Palestinian evangelical Christians in Nazareth and Bethlehem. For me this was the highlight of our trip. These are our brothers. They are also brothers one to the other, Jews and Gentiles together in Christ who has broken down the middle wall of partition.

It is important that we understand that Jesus was Jewish, very Jewish, that he was the son of Abraham, the son of David. Indeed, Jesus was true Israel, faithful Israel narrowed down to a single man. He is the Messiah whom God sent to Israel to save his people. But he is the savior not only of Jews but also of Gentiles. That salvation is appropriated by faith, the faith of Abraham. When we turn to Christ in faith then Abraham is our father and we become heirs to, and recipients of, the blessing promised to Abraham. To focus instead on trying to restore Israel to the land and rebuild the temple is to deny the centrality of Christ. He is the turning point of history, the hinge in the middle, the one in whom we are the people of God.

Those who belong to Christ, be they Jew or Gentile, are the children of Abraham and heirs according to the promises. The God of Abraham praise. Yes, "Hail Abraham's God and *mine*!"

This message from Scripture was preached at Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino on Sunday, August 14th, 2011. PBCC is located at 10601 N Blaney Ave, Cupertino, CA 95014. Tel (408) 366 6690. Website: www.pbcc.org.