

Progress...?

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Preacher: Chris Lowe

[0 : 00] With Genesis 4 open in front of us, here's this morning's question. How can this world that we live in be such a mixed up place? Why is it so mixed up?

That is, at the same time there is beauty and goodness and community and life and blessing all twisted up in our world with violence and greed and tragedy and despair.

How do you make sense of the world in which we live? Your own experience, what you read on the news. Is there any hope that this world and our lives could change for the better?

This reading, end of Genesis 4, it's our final morning in the early chapters of Genesis. We've spent a long time in these passages over the past three months or so. So, Genesis 2 to 4 is the account of the heavens and the earth.

We've said this every week. Ancient, true words so powerfully and truly explaining our world to us. Do you agree? We live in God's created world. He, the uncreated, eternal one, has made this good creation in us.

[1 : 12] We belong to him. We're creatures made in his image. In chapter 2, in the Garden of Eden, the Lord God provides for humanity lavishly and commands us rightly and gives us purpose.

That is good. That's what our world is like. And yet, at the same time, we live today in a fallen world. For in chapter 3, sin entered the world as Adam and Eve thrust God aside.

We won't listen to you. We don't trust you. We won't have you as our God. And flowing from that first act of disobedience, which we all own, the guilt and shame and blame that we know.

As, at the same time, the Lord God rightly cursed his creatures, second half of chapter 3, and cast us out of the garden, out of paradise, and into this world of pain and sweat and decay and death. Spiralling downwards in chapter 4, Cain and Abel, the first brothers, the first murder, and family breakdown writ large.

[2 : 19] We live in a God-given, good created reality, which is at the same time terribly sin-scarred and fallen.

This morning now, in these final verses of chapter 4, with many names, as history moves forward, we're confronted yet again with more reality, which I think is so sharply up to date.

Why is the world like this? Is there any hope of any change? Let's see what happens in these verses, chapter 4, verse 17 onwards. In verse 17, we're back with Cain, the brother-killing son of Adam and Eve.

Do you see, in verse 16, he's been driven away from the Lord's presence. He's living in the land of Nod, a long way east of Eden. And it's there, in this unpromising situation, that you see firstly, surprisingly maybe, what I've called flowering civilisation.

Look at what happens. In verse 17, Cain made love to his wife. We don't know where she comes from in the Bible narrative, but that's okay. And she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch.

[3 : 35] Just a little ray of blessing, as God provides a son, from whom civilisation blossoms. In verse 17, Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch.

Like, not skyscrapers and dual carriageways quite yet, but a settlement with a wall. He's the first town planner, an architect, a builder. Next, the human family spreads and grows.

To Enoch was born Erad. Erad was the father of Mahujael. Mahujael, the father of Methusial. And Methusial was the father of Lamech. And now, verse 19, Lamech married two women, which is not what God said about marriage in Genesis 2, but he marries two, one named Arda and the other Zillah.

And these two women have sons, and they're the focus. Arda gave birth to Jabal. What does he do? He was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock.

So Jabal discovers he can make a tent covering and transport his tent. And he can raise cows and sheep and horses and camels and drive them before him and travel and camp and trade.

[4 : 43] He's the father. He's the first one of all nomadic farmers. Verse 21, his brother's name was Jubal. Try not to mix up Jabal and Jubal.

But Jubal was the father of all who play stringed instruments and pipes. See, while his brother is off with his livestock, Jubal makes a lyre and learns to pluck it and produce music for the first time. I think that must have been quite a moment. A wind instrument, too. He's the first musician of many. Not to be outdone, verse 22, Zillah also had a son, Tubalcain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron.

Tubalcain's sister was Nama. So Tubalcain is the very first metal worker, the design tech guru, shaping and forging tools able to cut and shape and create.

What's going on here? The first extraordinary flowering of human civilization. Do you see this?

[5 : 48] Just in these few verses, flowing from Cain and his spreading family, farming, trade, music, arts, world-changing technology, all sprouting up here in the ancient Middle East, just as archaeology shows us.

In Genesis 1, do you remember this? Humans are created in the image of God. We're like him. With the ability to imagine and invent and commanded to fill and subdue the earth, given a mandate to bear children, and then tame and develop animals and wood and iron and develop civilization.

We're not naked apes. God has granted us as humans such ability. And what starts here in Genesis 4 has progressed and exploded into the highly advanced civilization we're now a part of.

This is a bit outdated now, but we live in a world of flight. It's no surprise anymore. And supermarkets and the internet. You should say it is just stunning, really, to see what we humans have developed over the millennia.

In city building, not a walled compound anymore, think of the Shard in London. It's a decade old now, dominating part of the London skyline. Drive down the M11 and you see it 300 metres high of glass and steel and concrete, and then 50 metre piles deep into the ground, and the building flexing slightly in the wind.

[7 : 24] It has to, or it would blow over. Like the understanding of materials and the engineering and the imagination to do that. The sheer beauty of it is what we're capable of.

Creatures made in his image. In music, from Jubal and his pipe, comes what? Every type of instrument and orchestra and symphonies and a Mozart concerto and opera.

Like such complexity and order and beauty. Come forward to the 20th and the 21st century and Ed Sheeran, if you want, as the pinnacle of music, if you think that.

From Tubal Kane and his iron tool, now what? Keyhole surgical instruments, laser drills, mobile phones. We placed a spaceship in orbit around Jupiter a few years ago.

And at the Olympic Games, every four years, new world records are set as we push the limits of human physical capability. We've got no idea what our children will live to see.

[8 : 29] This is our world. And what humanity is able to do. Flowering, progressing civilization.

Here in Genesis 4, like the very beginnings of it, from Kane's family. A family that shows no obvious interest in the living God. And yet they flourish.

That is until Lamech steps in. Because do you see in these verses, alongside flowering civilization, at the very time, secondly, deep-rooted sin.

Look at this next bit. In verse 23, Lamech calls his wives together. And he's been working on a bit of poetry. He's pretty pleased with himself. Now it's time to share what he's come up with.

Ada 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 Kane is avenged seven times, then Lamech 77 times.

[9 : 43] You'd imagine, I, Ada and Zillah listen with horror, do you not? To what really is a vicious boast. Like who the man was, we don't know.

Was the man wounding Lamech an accident? Was it an attack? We don't know. But make no mistake, Lamech took revenge. As Kane killed Abel, so now with extreme violence, Lamech murders someone made in God's image.

I have killed a man. He's not ashamed, by the way. Sin has really taken a hold. He revels in it. He announces to his wives, if Kane is avenged seven times, then Lamech 77 times.

If anyone touches Lamech, they'll get it dealt back to them 77 times over. Vengeance and payback will come to you. Because advanced Lamech is the man, I guess.

He's Mr. Big. He will not have anybody mess with him. And right here, expressed in the most shocking way, vengeance 77 times and boasting.

[10:55] Deep-rooted, brutal sin. Which should not surprise us. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve gave in to temptation.

They took the forbidden fruit. They thrust God aside. They stepped into a world where they set the rules from now on. I will run life as I want. And unstoppably, from that moment, sin spreads and takes root in human nature.

In chapter 4, Kane knows sin crouching at his door, gripping onto his thoughts and desires, clawing at him. I remember that last week. Turning to his favoured brother, envy and hatred bubble up inside him.

He succumbs, does away with him. Down and down we spiral to Lamech. Who inherits the traits of his ancestors.

Yet he is even more deeply entangled now. No shame. But rather boasting in what he has done and standing tall. Flowering civilisation.

[12:03] See where that leads to today? Lamech. Like his actions are extreme. But Lamech isn't really that far from our advanced world.

Or even us, is he? When someone cuts you up on the road and you're driving and anger wells up inside you. If you are someone who is tempted to drive close and let them know you're there and give them something to think about.

What is that? That reaction. That's Lamech. In seed form. When you think someone has insulted you or put you down or overlooked you and you start to think what can you do to pay them back. That is Lamech. In miniature. When someone close to you hurts you and you decide I'm fighting back. I'll shout loudly.

I'll give them the cold shoulder. In a relationship you're slighted in some way. You're injured. And so you teach them a lesson. You withhold affection. That is Lamech-like.

[13:11] I will show him. That will teach her. We do have that in us. Do we not? Part and parcel of our wretched self-centred nature.

Instead of naturally forgiving. You're like, well I don't naturally forgive people. I want to pay them back. That is the reason why many, that's one of the reasons why families fall apart.

And rock bands bust up and neighbours spit at each other. And political allies become enemies overnight. A vicious, often cruelty really. You see, Cain's descendants in this passage are so talented.

They are making such progress. And yet at the same time, this deep-rooted poison. And the story of Cain's family really, it is the story of the world and world history.

Just think of this. In the past 100 years, alongside stunning progress in science and medicine and engineering and so on. What have we also seen in the past 100 years?

[14:25] Wind back 100 years. 1914. Triggered by an assassination. And festering political and territorial and economic disputes break out into open warfare.

And one million are wounded or dead in the Battle of the Somme alone. Like fast forward through 100 years. And all those images that we've seen of aggression and revenge and payback and cycles of violence that seem unstoppable in Rwanda and South Africa and Yugoslavia and the Middle East and Northern Ireland.

Tribes and families locked into payback. I remember last year jogging along the busway early Saturday morning and a teenager on a scooter felt that I'd looked at him wrongly.

And he turned around and he chased me. And he got in front of me. And in my face, the threat of violence. You better watch out for how you look at people. Like he was half my size.

I didn't know what he had hidden under his jacket. Laws imposed and social pressure applied can sometimes restrain vengeance.

[15:36] But the truth is every human being, even today, given a chance, will not hold back. Human progress and yet such deep-rooted sin.

I lived in London, it's a long time ago now, I lived in London on September the 11th, 2001, 9-11.

And at the time that it happened, I was in a large church building with thick stone walls.

I heard nothing, we knew nothing. And I came out in the city of London. I walked into a mobile phone shop at four in the afternoon. And I saw the image for the first time on the TV, repeated over and over again, as terrorists flew planes into the World Trade Center in New York.

In that one image, human flowering and progress, like a man-made jet airliner, an enormous skyscraper. And at the same time, human brutality, as planes loaded with passengers were deliberately flown into buildings full of people.

And this mixed-upness, it is Genesis 4.17 on. And it is the reality of our world today.

[16:51] One writer put it like this. Cain's family is a microcosm, a sort of little example. Its patterns of technical prowess and moral failure is that of humanity.

Or another, a bit more starkly. There have been thousands of years of progress in all areas, and not an inch of movement in human nature.

And looking into our hearts and looking around the world, we know that is true. I can master many things. A musical instrument, my phone, special skills for my job.

But I cannot master and change myself. And the truth is, nothing and no one else can either. You know this if you're a certain age.

In our advancing society, at every election, politicians dangle in front of us the promise of change and a better world. And 27 years ago, Tony Blair came into government in the UK to the tune of Things Can Only Get Better by D. Ream.

[18:02] 2008, Barack Obama arrived on the scene, having written The Audacity of Hope. And yet here we are in 2024. The promise of a better world, it doesn't arrive.

And that is because better education and better laws and more money and better science and technology cannot fix us. And that is because the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

Bent against God. From Adam all the way down to today. We are not as bad as we could be. In our behaviour and our lives.

And yet how the New Testament describes us as human beings, it's not wrong. Says Paul in the New Testament, Titus 3 verse 3. At one time we were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures.

We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. That's Lamech. So what can you do?

[19:14] Genesis 4. Genesis 4. A strange little passage does describe so truly, seems to me, our mixed up world as it really is. Flowering civilisation and progress through creatures made in his image.

At the same time, deep rooted, self-centred sin within us all. And if the story of the world ended there, I guess you shrug your shoulders and just try to get on with things.

We'll never change. There is no hope. Except what we have said this morning from Genesis 4 is not the end. Because even in this little slab of Genesis, do you see this?

Finally, wonderfully, we are pointed to our only hope. In verse 25, we leave the line of Cain and we return to Adam and Eve.

And what's described here is very simple but so significant. 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.

[20:26] Seth also had a son and he named him Enosh. And then this final verse in this section. At that time, people began to call on the name of the Lord.

Do you see this? Mentioned for the very first time now in this passage, him. Put it like this. What do you do and where do you turn when you realise you can't change yourself?

What can you do? People began to call on the name of the Lord. In Genesis 1, we hear of him, our unstoppably powerful good creator.

In Genesis 2, we meet him, forming and caring for humanity. To be with him, to know him, is the only place of human flourishing. In Genesis 3, we turn away from him in disobedient sin.

In Genesis 3 and 4, we experience life cast away from him. Shame, guilt, decaying, dying, controlled by sin, family and community life falling apart.

[21:37] And there is nothing that we can do to sort things out and make things right in ourselves and with others and with him. Here in verse 26 is the only thing that we and our society can do and must do.

Call on the name of the Lord. And that is because this is what Genesis 4 and the whole of salvation history will show us. Only the living God, the creator of the heavens and the earth, is able to one, save us and two, change us.

Today in the 21st century, to call on the name of the Lord means to call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

To cry out to him and trust him and entrust your life to him. Because this Lord Jesus Christ is the one to whom Genesis 4 points.

The family line of Adam and Seth and Enos ends eventually hundreds of years later with Jesus himself. Jesus, the fully God Lord and the fully man offspring of Eve who comes to save our world.

[22 : 52] In his public ministry, Jesus both preaches and lives out not revenge, but forgiveness. Seventy-seven times forgiveness, he says.

Overturning the words of Lamech. And more than just speaking of forgiveness, the Lord Jesus goes to the cross to enable forgiveness for people like us.

Dying on the cross, he bore our sins on his shoulders. He was buried in history and then made alive again as the risen Lord of all.

And 50 days after his resurrection, in Acts chapter 2, the apostle Peter stood up in Jerusalem and declared in a loud voice, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

And again, Acts 2 verse 38, repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[23 : 58] That is where Genesis 4 points us to and drives us to. And this promise is for everyone. And is what we in our society so desperately need.

When today a person turns from their deep-rooted sin and turns to Jesus Christ, I cry out to you, I trust you, I entrust my life to you, you receive two things.

One, forgiveness. All your wrongdoing and guilt and revenge-taking and shame, taken away and dealt with, and you brought back to friendship with God.

Things are put right with him. Restored fellowship with your creator. And then secondly too, do you see this? You receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That is the life of God inside you. The power to start to change you. To start to do in you and your relationships, what education and more money and better laws can never do.

[25 : 04] Because having been forgiven by God, you receive his power to begin to be able to forgive others around you.

As I drive the car, as I'm insulted, as someone very close to me injures me, instead of lashing out like Lamech with payback, by the power of the Holy Spirit, I've become more able, God-given able, to let go.

I've been forgiven. I'm utterly loved and I'm utterly safe. And enveloped by his forgiveness for me, I will not and I cannot pay others back.

And it is that God-given attitude through Jesus Christ that only and ultimately has the power, like the real power, to change families, to change teenagers on scooters, and to change communities and nations and ultimately the world.

This is the gospel. Flowering civilization. Deep-rooted sin. And our only hope and your only hope and this world's only hope, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 32] Will we call on his name? Will we run nowhere else? Will we fall on our knees in prayer and call out to the Lord, save us and help us, for you personally, for your family, for your school, for the guy on the scooter, and for the whole world.

Save us and change us, we pray. We call on your name. I'm going to pray.

Let me lead us in a prayer. And then we're going to sing together. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Our Father, few, if any of us, will know exactly the experience of Lamech. And yet we do know the reality of sin within and a desire or a move to pay others back.

We see around us the reality of a fallen world. We live at the end of a century of payback and violence and brutality and left to ourselves.

[28 : 02] Well, we can't change ourselves. We praise and thank you, our Lord, for the gift of your Son. And we pray as we sing now and we share the Lord's Supper, we would fix our eyes on him and feed on him and know more deeply the salvation he brings.

And so go out from here today and forgive others as you have forgiven us. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.