

Civilization and Prosperity

“Jabal was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock . . . Jubal was the father of all who play the harp and flute. . . Tubal-Cain forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron” (Genesis 4:20-22).

After the shock of Cain murdering his brother Abel in Genesis Chapter 4, we find something most people pass over to get into the Flood narratives. But what comes next in Chapter 4 is puzzling yet probably exceedingly significant. The Cainite civilization prospered!! What? Is this justice, that the descendants of a murderer, who are themselves even worse murderers, should enjoy prosperity? This line of people is in rebellion against God, defying Him, and yet they are flourishing! Cities, music, weapons, agricultural tools. Is God in control? What’s going on? This requires some careful thought, because answers aren’t explicitly given in Scripture.

A few possible explanations have been offered. Is it possible that these verses are here to show how God’s human creatures, even from the very outset, are ingenious and capable of doing great things, thus glorifying God? That’s an interesting thought, but not one that derives from the text. Was their civilization God’s blessing on His human creatures, and these verses are there to show God’s grace for humanity in spite of the entry of sin? That idea too totally misses the point. One commentator suggests that all this activity was that rebellious society’s only recourse in a bitter life alienated from God. That godless society needed all these “refinements” to enhance life apart from God. That’s a good possibility! But there’s probably more to it, between the lines.

This is a chapter that’s been very carefully structured. It begins with Eve giving birth and referring the birth to God’s promise in the Garden. It then narrates the story of the murder of righteous Abel and the response of wicked Cain. The narrative then follows the line of Cain with its development of culture, a taunt of ghastly, ungodly vengeance and a bigamous marriage. The chapter concludes with another birth, Eve again referring it to God, and the statement at the very end that people then began to worship God. The author deliberately places all the material in the middle to represent the evil that the people of Cain’s line were doing. And that would include their prosperous civilization!

We should understand that that Cainite society’s flourishing was not – *not* – God’s blessing upon them. Their advanced civilization was in the very same category as sexual sin, wantonly taking human life, and gleefully celebrating murders. It was *all* wickedness. It was not God’s blessing. What then? These verses could have been written here to highlight further the outworking of the sin nature that entered the human race in Genesis 3, In other words, the extent of sin went even beyond the murder of Abel. I think, though, that it was worse: It must have been the deliberate work of the Serpent.

In Genesis 3, the Serpent sneaked into the Garden. Evidently, everywhere outside the Garden is the Serpent’s domain. And alienated humanity has been thrust into it. It’s an exile from God’s presence, and it’s proleptic of more exiles to come in the future. To be exiled from God’s loving and good presence is to be in the presence of, and vulnerable to, the power of the now invisible but exceedingly wicked Serpent. So the Cainite line is not only influenced by that wicked Serpent, but they are under its control and carrying out its program. What’s happening is this, ungodly society, in its rebellion and estrangement from God, is developing what Scripture later will term, “world.” **“Love not the world, nor anything in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world . . . comes not from the Father . . . The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever”** (1 John 2:15-17).

The prosperity and flourishing of ungodly society is not God’s blessing. Rather, it’s the outworking of sin and the schemes of Satan. Why? We can only conjecture, but I offer this: it’s to substitute an enjoyable life for the costly life of serving and worshiping the living God. It’s to place on offer all manner of distractions and fulfillment in life *without* reference to our Creator God. It’s to hide from our awareness the existence of God and His will and our responsibilities to Him. Satan hates humanity. His perpetual strategy is to get us to sin so that God, the righteous One, in perfect justice must judge and condemn us. Satan also understands well the spiritual principle that’s explicit in Deut. 31:20, **“When they eat their fill and thrive, they will turn to other gods and worship them, rejecting me and breaking my covenant.”** Prosperous people, people at ease and in comfort, ignore God and His revealed will.

In this early chapter, introducing the story of the Bible, we already know that there are two seeds: one godly, from which eventually will come redemption of humankind, and another, ungodly seed, alienated from God, defiant of God, and at enmity with the righteous seed. And that the environment for the unfolding of Scripture will be a developed world controlled by the Serpent intended to keep humankind from experiencing God or the redemption He has planned.

As the centuries progressed, the world became somewhat more developed. There were systems of government, systems of law, markets, money, ships, even postal systems and roads. But life was still quite primitive. Societies were necessarily agrarian, slavery was ubiquitous, poverty and disease were widespread, opportunities for education were strictly limited, and wars were ceaseless. Wealth was concentrated in a few; there was no such thing as a "middle class." And thus life persisted for humanity all thru history until the 1500's AD. Christianity (if we can call it that) and certain biblical values had spread within Europe, but the rest of the world was in thick darkness. But even in Europe, superstition and pagan ideals were rife. At this time, the only major developments were the printing press and gunpowder. And the concept of colonization. But then came the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformation changed history as nothing else had. The knowledge of God and His Word now was released to everyone. And missionary outreach began to the nations of the world, taking the Gospel to places where colonies were being established. Yet, societies were still the same: agrarian mostly, serfs, aristocrats, poverty and disease. Ships were sailed by wind. Transportation was still by horse, mule or donkey. Clothing, shoes, cookware, etc, were necessarily hand-made and costly. During their lifetime, most people never strayed more than a few miles from where they were born. Only the clergy and those in the aristocrat class had any kind of education.

Then began the counter-Reformation. That same wicked Serpent inspired his human agents to get to work full-time to oppose the Gospel. It was Genesis 4:17-24 all over again, except on a vastly greater scale. Build a world so enticing, so filled with distractions, comforts and ease that no one would even want to know God or care about the Gospel! Build a civilization so totally apart from God's will that the knowledge of God's existence would be irrelevant if not mocked. Satan was determined to lose no one from his iron grip. And thus was triggered the great period of the Enlightenment, the Industrial age, the whole modern era.

And so, what a period of development the world has seen the past two centuries! Factories; electricity and all that electricity includes, such as lighting and motors; a middle class; systems of finance (banks, insurance, pensions, etc); universal education; constitutionally-guaranteed freedoms; and secular government. A revolution occurred in transportation: automobiles, trains, trucks, steamships, and airplanes. And in communication: telephones, photographs, movies, phonographs, typewriters and recording devices. Engineering reached new heights: building tunnels thru mountains, subways under cities, bridges across rivers and canyons, skyscrapers, and machinery to make everything anyone could ever want. Clothing and shoes are made now by machinery so cheaply almost everyone has a wardrobe. Fertilizers and farm tractors totally revolutionized farming. Medicines and dentistry changed life super-radically. Indoor heating and air conditioning, indoor running water, washing machines, refrigeration and hot water heaters. We live in a world that's prosperous and comfortable unlike anything anyone just a few centuries ago could have imagined.

Why did this explosion of creativity, invention, prosperity and product development occur in the Western world? What was it about the West that made modernity possible? Secular economists would say it's business and manufacturing, a capitalist economy, free markets, property rights (including intellectual property), and a form of limited government that allowed people to freely pursue their interests. And an enlightened human spirit or value system that welcomed novelty, discovery, and improvements in how we live. *But why did it develop in the Western world?* Is it merely coincidence that the Western world is the world of Christianity? *It's not coincidence!* The West is the epicenter of the Reformation, it's from the West that Christianity has been spreading out across the planet. So, there are just two options: (i) It is precisely *because* of Christianity's influence that modernity developed in the West, as if modernity is a gift of God; it's His blessing on us. Or (ii) modernity is a massive distraction, an alternate kind of life intended to *keep* us from God, to keep us from carrying out our God-given mission; it's to *prevent* us from experiencing His blessing.

My argument here is that modernity, indeed the entire world-and-life system we inhabit today, is what Scripture terms the "world." We're immersed in it. It's the very context in which we live. We don't (*can't*) even recognize it as evil. That's why it's so dangerous, so Satanic. It's that same strategy Satan deployed at the outset of human history, keeping us so thrilled with our comfortable, enjoyable, self-indulgent lives that we seek happiness as our main if not our only goal in life. It's a life for those deliberately in rebellion against God; it's also a life to prevent those who claim to be Christians from living as the Word of God says they should. The spiritual revolution that the Reformation began, Satan is very effectively opposing with his "world," and the vast majority of us aren't even aware of it. And probably don't care.

What to do? God doesn't ask us to abandon our world; rather, we're to *not love it*. If we're madly in love with God, and serving Him as He has revealed, we'll keep the world in perspective, use it as necessary, be content with what we need to live godly, and know that the real realm we dwell in, both now and in our resurrected future, is with Christ in heaven.