

## 8. Death reigns, but not supreme (2007)

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Date: 18 November 2007

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, do turn up, if you would, the passage that we read there in Genesis chapter 5. Now, after the drama and excitement of Genesis 4 and the story of Cain and Abel, we might easily be tempted to pass over chapter 5, quickly going on to the apparently much more interesting story of Noah and the flood.

After all, it's just a boring old genealogy, a list of names. Seems to be just padding, boring parts of the Old Testament that we don't really need to bother with, and certainly not something we'd ever think about preaching on.

I guess most people probably think like that. Maybe you do. I was tempted to think like that, I can tell you, this week. But then, you see, the problem is that there are rather a lot of these genealogies in the Old Testament.

And if we take the Bible in any way seriously, we have to ask ourselves, well, why? And in fact, if we take the New Testament at all seriously, we've got to ask why it was that these things, as Paul says, were written for us.

That these things were written, as he says, to make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. And actually, we also have to remember that the very first chapter of the New Testament opens with a very long genealogy.

[ 1 : 23 ] Do you remember? Matthew chapter 1. So Matthew obviously didn't think that long genealogies are boring or irrelevant. In fact, he found it essential to show the historical rootedness of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And to show that his coming was the climax of a story of God's salvation that goes right back to the very beginning, to the book of Genesis itself. Luke 2 does exactly the same thing, doesn't he, in Luke chapter 3.

In fact, in his genealogy there, he goes even further back than Matthew, right to Seth, right to Adam, exactly as we have here in Genesis 5. So I can't imagine that either Matthew or Luke would understand why on earth we might want to leave out a chapter like this.

Something that seems so vital for their gospel presentations. So I think we ought to be looking at these verses together. And if we're going to take the gospel as seriously as they did, it's something we have to do.

But first of all, I do want to say just a few words about this genealogy. In fact, genealogies in general, because it is important that if we are going to read them and study them, we do it in the right way and not the wrong way.

[ 2 : 38 ] So four things by way of introduction. First of all, they are selective. I'm sure you notice in verse 3 that the only one of Adam's sons and daughters that's mentioned is Seth.

Now we've had Cain's line back in chapter 4, but now we're on to the main story. And as Derek Kidner says in his commentary, in the history of salvation, the family of Cain is an irrelevance. So here, only the key names are given to us. And that's so with other genealogies as well in the Bible. And that means that there may be very significant gaps in these genealogies.

That means we can't assume that it's a simple chronology. And that also is partly related to the second thing. Not only are these genealogies selective, they're also very carefully shaped.

We're given here ten generations exactly from Adam to Noah. Just as in chapter 11 we get ten generations exactly from Noah to Abraham. It's very tidy, it's very memorable.

[ 3 : 41 ] And I think that's why it's been done that way. Matthew does the same thing in Matthew chapter 1. Three sets of fourteen generations. From Abraham to David, from David to the exile, and from the exile to Christ.

He's doing that to summarize these three great epochs of the history of God's salvation. Now if you delve into the Old Testament history and all the names and kings and chronicles and so on, it's very clear that Matthew has been very selective to shape that genealogy that way.

That's not because he's being dishonest. It's not because the Bible is unreliable. It's just because Bible genealogies don't serve the same function as our electoral roll does.

It's not just there to give every single name and every single generation. And everybody knew that. They're there to show a convenient way of linking the present real people with the past real people. Showing past history in a supremely personal way. And that's exactly what Moses is doing here. He's showing us the passage of time rooted in real history, but with a great economy of words and of detail.

[ 4 : 53 ] So that means I think we have to be careful. We can't just take a list like this and add up all the numbers of the ages that we get and get a chronology that's exact from Adam through to Noah.

Some people have done that in the history of the church, sometimes very dogmatically. But I think we've got to be careful. That's a dangerous thing to do. The Bible itself never ever does that in that way.

Well, if there is a clear selectivity and shaping for a purpose, does that extend also to the numbers that are involved here, the great ages that we see? Are we to take these numbers literally as we understand years of life?

Or perhaps are they also part of the literary device of the genealogy? Well, I don't think it's impossible at all that these are literal. Many have thought so.

And to be honest, I personally can't see a huge issue to believe that. Especially when I was reading just recently in a reputable scientific journal. An article by some scientists who believe that with the advances in genetic engineering and so on, human beings within a century would be able to live to a thousand years old.

[ 6 : 01 ] Perish the thought. Rather reminds me of Groucho Marx's comment. He says, anybody can live to be a hundred. You just have to give up everything that makes life worth living at all. And were you reading that report last week that tells us all the things we can't do if we're going to live?

You can't even have bacon and ham anymore, apparently. It used to just be eggs for breakfast that were banned. Well, I'm a great believer in healthy eggs and bacon and ham for breakfast. Anyway, I don't believe it's impossible that these could be literal ages.

Certainly, it's reasonable to assume that perhaps as time passed, sin's fallout in the world became more rooted and lifespans reduced accordingly. And in chapter 11, the lifespans there after the flood are quite a good deal shorter, the ones that are recorded.

But neither do I think it's impossible that these figures might have another more symbolic significance. Scholars have pointed to other ancient genealogies from the ancient world, such as the Sumerian king lists, for example.

These are names of kings before and after the flood. Some of them are told us they lived for 25,000 years, some 42,000 years. Now, these are not legendary figures.

[ 7 : 14 ] These are figures for whom historical records exist. But it does seem that these huge numbers aren't there to represent literal years of their lives, but perhaps relative greatness and longevity and so on.

So I think we've got to be a bit cautious, perhaps a little agnostic as we read these figures. We just don't know, do we, the language of the numerology of those ancient days.

And it's certainly possible that by being dogmatic we could be quite wrong. I mean, for example, in 4,000 years' time, just supposing somebody dug up a record from 2007 of lists of football players and next to their names they had the number of caps that they had won.

And supposing the game of football had died out and nobody had heard of it for several thousand years, would people reading that list immediately understand exactly what that meant? Well, perhaps not. But probably they'd understand something if you had a man who had 70 caps and a man who had 30 caps.

You'd obviously guess, well, perhaps that one's of more significance than the other. And certainly here there does seem to be some significance in some of the numbers in particular.

[ 8 : 27 ] For example, the two figures that stand out above all the others in this list are Enoch and Lamech. And Enoch, we're told, lives exactly 365 years.

A perfect year of years, you might say. And Lamech lives 777 years. Three times seven, the perfect number. So maybe there is something in that that we're being told.

Maybe it is better, perhaps, to read it that way rather than exact history. After all, Moses himself, who we believe wrote Genesis, Moses himself wrote Psalm 90.

And in that psalm he tells us that the years of a man's life are three score and ten, or perhaps four score. So I'm happy to maintain a little bit of agnosticism here.

But either way, let me say this. However we take these numbers, the message of the passage is not dependent on the nature of those years. But rather the nature and the message of the passage is pointed to in the shape and the selectivity of the account.

[ 9 : 29 ] And in the third thing, the similarity of this account all the way through. You've seen, as we read it, every entry has exactly the same pattern.

A man lived so long, he fathered children, he had years after that, and he died. And that similarity all the way through this account clearly draws our attention to the points where there are differences.

And those two names that stand out by variation, Enoch and Lamech. And obviously that's something that's very, very significant. So when we read this genealogy, if we pay attention to its shape, to the selectivity, to the similarity that runs through it in its form, then we will begin to see its significance.

It's not just a meaningless list. It has a message. And like all the scriptures, it is God's word to us and for us. So what is this chapter and the first few verses of chapter 6, which all belong to this one section, what does it say to us about God and man and about the world?

That's a question that we ask as we come to this as Christian scripture. And the answer is that it's a powerful message that contrasts all the way through the sin and the wickedness of man, and yet the grace and the goodness of God.

[ 10 : 56 ] So we're going to look today at chapter 5. We'll look at the beginning of chapter 6 next week. And my title is this, Death Reigns, But Not Supreme. Because the whole of chapter 5 is a chapter about man's death and yet also about God's purpose.

It's about the inevitable death of man, but despite that, it's about the irrepressible purpose of God for man's life. Life as God meant it to be.

But the first thing that we are faced with, obviously, is this, the painful reign of death. That's so obvious in these verses, isn't it? I'm sure as we read them, you couldn't miss the power and the intensity of that main melody.

It blasts its note again and again and again, all the way through it, with a dark rhythm, with a terrible intensity. And he died, and he died, and he died, and he died.

And here we're faced, aren't we, with the starkness of what Paul tells us in Romans chapter 5, verse 14. Death reigned from Adam to Moses.

[ 12 : 08 ] Even, even here throughout the holy line of Seth, the chosen people of God. Despite the hope that we saw last time, that chapter 4 ends with, with a fledgling church, with a counterculture, with a people who call upon the name of the Lord in the midst of that violent world of Lamech.

Even for them, death reigns. And that tragedy is very real, and we're to sense that. The message of Genesis chapter 5 is a symphony, pathetic, every bit as dark and haunting as Tchaikovsky's 6.

It reminds us of the horror of the curse back in chapter 3. To dust you shall return. It reminds us and drives home the reality that God's word is abundantly true.

And by contrast, the serpent's word is abundantly false. You shall not surely die, he said. But no. Adam lived, but he died.

And Seth, God's appointed seed, lived, but he died. And his son, and his son, and his son, they all died. All the godly line, all of those who called on the name of the Lord, they also must bear the judgment of God on Adam's sin.

[ 13 : 32 ] And this chapter is written to help us get a hold of the reality of that tragedy. It's something we all have to come to terms with, isn't it, in this world?

Yes, even as Christian believers, every one of us cannot expect to be exempt from the curse, from the reign of death over our mortal bodies. All of us shall die.

And more than that, every one of us must inhabit this fallen world. And that means that we're going to suffer along with everybody else all the cause, all the fallout of the curse in this world.

That means even the godly will get sick, will suffer from cancer, from heart disease, from strokes, from accidents. Even those of the household of faith will experience the travail that Lamech speaks

about in verse 29.

The curse of the ground, the painful toil of our hands. That is human life after the fall. And right to the very end of our lives, that's the way it will be.

[ 14 : 39 ] Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, the last enemy to be destroyed is death itself. And only then, at the last, when Christ himself comes to reign.

Now that's something that's terribly hard for us to get a hold of and to accept, isn't it? But you know friends, unless you do get a hold of that, unless you accept that, you'll never be able to explain this world.

You'll never be able to explain your own life and its circumstances. And you'll never be at peace with God. You'll be angry with God. Unless you get a hold of this, you'll be chasing expectations for your life in this world that are never going to be possible ever until the coming of the Lord Jesus. You'll be chasing things in your Christian life that are quite false, quite foolish. And that's why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, that if it's only in this life that we've hoped in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

We are to be pitied more than anybody else. Because this world will not deliver what we hope for. Because this world is the place of the tragic reign of death.

[ 15 : 55 ] Because of man's rebellion against his creator and Lord. Unless we come to terms with the inevitability of decay and death, then we are never going to be able to absorb the real tragedy of the life that we're called to live in.

And that's one reason that this chapter is here. The Bible never hides this truth from us. It points us to the painful reality of death under the curse. But although the main melody of this chapter is the pain of the inevitability of death, there's more than that in the music of this chapter.

There's a quiet counterpoint alongside the main melody, isn't there? There are hints of another tune that's just beginning to take shape that points to something else. Something more.

Something that will grow and develop and enlarge and will at last break out in a whole new movement. Quite a powerfully different motif altogether. Because embedded within this grim chapter about the inevitability of man's death, there are clear and bright hints, aren't there, about the irrepressible purpose of God for man's life.

for life as God meant it to be, not life as marred by sin and death. It's not just the painful reign of death. We mustn't miss that.

[ 17 : 22 ] But neither must we miss the powerful reminder of life that God gives us in this chapter. And again, I'm sure you saw it so obvious, isn't it, when we read?

Because two names stand out so clearly from this whole list by the variation from the pattern that's the same for everybody else. Two names, Enoch and Lamech. And in fact, it's even more obvious when we remember back to chapter 4 and we see that here are two people with identical names to the two names that stuck out in that list.

Cain's son, Enoch, and Lamech, the violent murderer of chapter 4. So the writer's holding it up and shouting to us, look at these guys, look at them and get the message that I'm telling you.

So what about Enoch? Well, look at verses 21 to 24. Enoch, we're told, walked with God. That is, he had an intimate communion with God.

Reminds us, doesn't it, of chapter 3, God walking in the garden to be with the man. Reminds us of everything that was wonderful that's now been lost. And yet, God's purpose is irrepressible.

[ 18 : 33 ] Despite sin and death, Enoch walked with God. We're told it again in verse 24. That was what characterized the life of this man. And then we're told, and he was not, for God took him.

Well, where did God take him? Well, the obvious implication is that God took him from this earth to be with God without undergoing the death in the normal way that everybody else in this chapter underwent.

Hebrews 11, chapter 5 tells us that very plainly. There's only one other character in scripture that we know who avoided death like that. That's Elijah who went up in a chariot of fire.

But right back here with Enoch, the seventh from Adam, we have the hope, don't we, of a life that triumphs even over death itself. Enoch walked with God and he went on so walking with God forever.

Derek Kidna says of Enoch and Elijah, at least twice the gates of Sheol have not prevailed. And remember the context of the other Enoch back in chapter 4 verse 17.

[ 19 : 43 ] Let's call him Enoch McCain. Enoch McCain, we're told, had an enduring remembrance on earth. He had a city named after him.

But Enoch MacSeth, well, he had no enduring city, nor remains at all. He was just taken. He was not. In Hebrews 11 language we could say he was looking forward to the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God.

And God took him there in a unique way. And so even though in this chapter's terms at least his life was only very short, he only barely reached middle age, 365 years.

It's clearly not the length but the quality of his life, the character of his life that mattered. By the way, maybe that in itself is a comfort to some here who have mourned the loss of a godly loved one who seemed to be taken long before their time.

Well, Enoch was taken long before his time but it was because he walked with God. And real life, you see, is all about walking with God. And that's why Enoch's life was perfectly rounded, 365 years, a perfect year of years.

[ 20 : 58 ] You see what Moses' message to us is here. He says, yes, of course, you must face death with a steady eye. We must accept that we're all going to live with the reality of a fallen world in every way.

But there's more. And Enoch is a clear pointer to that. Enoch's story shouts out to us, look up and see that if God can do that for Enoch, however unique that might be, then somehow God is able to overcome the curse of death for his people.

And even if death does reign, it doesn't reign supreme. And there is hope. And moreover, faith calls us to look up and see the life above with God that overcomes death, to see that it is a continuous life that we can have now, walking with God, as Enoch did.

Moses is saying, walk with God and there is hope even to conquer death. And that was Moses' constant refrain to his people, the people who very first heard this story of Enoch.

What does the Lord require of you, Moses says, but to fear the Lord, to walk in his ways, to love him and serve him with all your heart and soul. Walk with God, Moses says, and you are walking the way of life that will conquer death through God's irrepressible purpose for his people.

[ 22 : 25 ] And however, however unique Enoch's personal translation was, that hope remains. And it persists and it grows all the way through the Old Testament. Yes, the Old Testament, not just the New Testament.

Extraordinary ignorance sometimes when people say, oh, there's no hope of life after death in the Old Testament. Well, they can't have read the Old Testament. The Psalms are full of it. Psalm 73, I am continually with you, says the psalmist.

You hold me with your right hand. You guide me with your counsel and afterward you will take me to your glory. Proverbs are full of the same hope. Despite an awareness of the tragic reign of death, there is life.

Proverbs 12, 28, In the path of righteousness is life and in its pathway there is no death. Proverbs 14, 32, the righteous finds refuge in his death.

You see, there's hope. And so Enoch's story shouts to us, look up. Look up in faith. There's more than just this reign of death.

[ 23 : 31 ] There is an intimate life from God and with God that begins now walking with God and continues forever in his presence. And then Lamech, too, shouts out to us, look forward with hope and trust that God's purpose shall come to pass in history to bring an end to the curse just as he promised back to Eve in chapter 3, verse 15.

Again, what a contrast to the Lamech of chapter 4. Lamech McCain. He was a violent killer. He was a proud boaster. I rule, he says. I take revenge.

I am independent of God and all men. But here, Lamech McSeth, what a different character. Verse 29. He's humble, isn't he? He is a man laboring under the burden of sin, the curse of painful toil.

He is a man who knows he can't do anything about it, but he knows he's dependent upon God. And all his hope is on God's promise of a seed.

The seed that God has given. Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed, this one shall bring us comfort from our work and from the painful toil of our hands, from the curse.

[ 24 : 48 ] And he names a son by faith in God's promise of a deliverer to come. He names him Noach who will bring Nacham, comfort, to a cursed world. Both Lamechs in chapter 4 and chapter 5 are remembered for their words, aren't they?

Lamech McCain in chapter 4, words of arrogant assertion of his own autonomy. But Lamech McSeth, well, words of humble yearning for God's promised deliverer to bring comfort to a sin-sick world.

And that hope also was irrepressible down the centuries as God's people looked for the seed for the one who was to come, the Messiah. until at last the angel said, And you will call this one's name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.

And still then there were people of faith waiting on the same promise just as Lamech was. Like Simeon, we're told in Luke chapter 2, waiting for the comfort, the consolation of Israel.

And when he saw Jesus, he said, Now let your servant depart in peace, for I have seen your salvation. He saw with his own eyes what Lamech only saw far off, but their faith was the same.

[ 26 : 09 ] They looked for the one to come, the one through whom God's irrepressible purpose for life would at last come to fruition. And through whom this world would at last find comfort instead of curse, relief in place of the relentless burden of the wages of sin.

You see, their faith said, Yes, death reigns, but not supreme. The curse remains, but not forever. Because God has promise.

And even here, Moses is telling his readers, he's telling us, even here is the pattern of a life that overcomes even the tragic reign of death. It's the life that lives like Enoch.

walking in the presence of God because like Lamech, it's hoping and trusting and waiting for the promise of God in Christ. Do you hear Moses' message, his gospel?

Walking in God's presence and waiting for God's promise. That's the way of life in this veil of death. That's the way of blessing and fullness even in the burdensome life of this fallen world that we all inhabit.

[ 27 : 18 ] it. You see, Enoch and Lamech together bear testimony to the possibility of life in all its fullness and fruitfulness even in the midst of a godless world.

Even in the midst of a mortal existence. Even for God's people. As we live painfully with the reality of the shadow of death. Isn't that a word that Moses' first hearers needed to hear?

They knew all about the reign of death, didn't they? Among God's people they'd seen a whole generation scattering their bones in the desert. They knew all about the painful toil of their hands as they slaved in Egypt and then later as they wandered relentlessly in the wilderness.

But Moses says there is a way of life that conquers even the painful reign of death. There is hope for the life that walks in God's presence that looks up and sees that the real purpose of this life is not longevity not prosperity not having cities named after us or foundations or airports or whatever it is but fellowship with God himself knowing him and loving him and serving him and a life that waits eagerly for God's promise that longs for more and ends to the constraints of the mortality and the sin in this world.

God keeps us in the shadows of what we're meant to be. And Moses' gospel never changed. Read the book of Deuteronomy. He's always saying walk in the presence of God and wait for the promise of God.

[ 28 : 55 ] Love the Lord your God he says walking in his ways and you shall live choose life loving the Lord your God obeying him holding fast to him for he is your life. This is no empty word for you it's your very life.

Walk in God's presence and obey his word of life. That's the way of life says Moses that overcomes sin and death and the curse. And you can do that now says Moses because a day is coming when God has promised he will bring comfort when he himself will gather you and comfort you when he himself will circumcise your hearts and make you truly love him so that you may live you may walk in his presence now because you know that his promise is that he will come.

And that's what it means to have faith according to Moses gospel in Genesis or in Deuteronomy or right through the Old Testament. And of course the New Testament gospel is just the same isn't it? Yes indeed the promised deliverer the seed the Christ has come to bring us comfort at last bearing away the curse and setting us free and he has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel in his resurrection we have seen death conquered at last but still you and I we await our full salvation don't we?

Death is the last enemy to be destroyed and only at his coming will we be truly alive with him we also says Paul we are saved in hope we have the first fruits of the spirit and yet we groan inwardly as we wait for our adoption for the redemption the resurrection of our bodies that's the hope in which we are saved and so we also are called to do the same aren't we?

[ 30 : 53 ] to walk in God's presence even as we wait patiently for his promise in the midst of a world of death just like Enoch and Lamech and all the great ones of faith in the ancient times that's our calling in the gospel but it's so hard to bear isn't it?

especially when we're faced with the death and the bereavement of loved ones or maybe when we're facing our own frailty our own mortality some of us here are in that position this very morning I was speaking to somebody just the other week not in this church but they'd been to the funerals of several of their friends and fellow Christians in that church some of whom had been taken away very prematurely and there was real pain at every funeral she said to me every time I stand here at a funeral I wonder if the next one will be my husband's yes you see death is still a very real and a terrible enemy even for God's people and friends it always will be and you and I will stand weeping together at many graves before our life ends and yet that's the point isn't it that's that's why this chapter can make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ because even in the face of the relentless curse of death that we must all face in our families in our church with our friends and he died and he died and he died and we will face it even in the face of that there is a faith that overcomes even the tragic reign of death death reigns but not supreme for those who have the gospel of Christ one writer says this there's something very striking about these early patriarchs one senses the pathos of the long lists recording life and death and yet at the same time one senses the nobility of a people caught up in and by the promise a people who had hope they had the forward look however dimly and partially they discerned it they looked for a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God and friends it's only that forward look of real faith that can help us live with the real tragedy of death and indeed the struggles of life in a world that is still under the curse that can help us do that without despair but rather in triumph as these men did they waited and walked in God's presence even as they waited for his promise and the book of Hebrews tells us that God was not ashamed to be called their God he prepared for them a city so how much more then should we be able to live triumphantly in the face of frailty and weakness and death itself we who have better promises through the finished work of our Lord

Jesus Christ we have the words of a risen saviour who says I go to prepare a place not just for Enoch but for you and if I go to prepare a place for you says Jesus I will come again and take you to be with myself but where I am you also may be is this a dull genealogy well not for me it isn't and not for you if the shadow of death is heavy upon you in these days in your walk no it's a gospel of hope of a hope that truly conquers death itself yes it is real and terrible in its message it tells us of the painful reality of death under the curse of sin we must face up to that with a steady eye but it's also wonderful because it's a powerful reminder of the life of God's covenant promise of hope for all who like Enoch will walk in the presence of

God now for all who like Lamech will wait for the promise of God in the future this chapter is just the opening movement of a song of triumph a song that reaches its crescendo as Paul tells us when the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised raised incorruptible when death will be swallowed up at last forever in victory when we will say oh death where is your victory oh grave where is your sting this account of Enoch and Lamech is but the overture whose drama reaches its glorious denouement in the words of Revelation 21 when the voice from the throne says behold the dwelling of God is with man and he will dwell with them and they shall be his people and God himself will be with them as their God he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more neither shall there be mourning or crying nor pain anymore for the former things are passed away so my brothers and sisters this morning if from the very beginning death could not reign supreme over those ancient ones who walked with God's presence and waited on his promise how much more shall we walk with a risen saviour and await a sure and certain coming to transform our glorious bodies our lowly bodies into a glorious body like his how much more certain should we be and how much more shall we like Lamech find comfort from the pain and the toil of the curse of death itself in the glorious hope into which

Jesus Christ has already called us for we are a people who can say thanks be to God who gives us the victory even over death itself through our Lord Jesus Christ well let's pray by faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death and he was not found because God had taken him if I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and take you to myself that where I am you may be also we thank you God our father that not even the last enemy of death can separate us from the life that we have found in your son our Lord Jesus Christ so may we be a people who grieve not as others who have no hope but rather who find abiding and solid comfort in your sovereign grace and

love that abounds forever over sin and death and hell itself and so may our souls dwell now and forever on the glories of that gospel song for we ask it through  
[ 38 : 30 ] Jesus Christ our Lord Amen