

“Sin’s Children”
 Genesis 4
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Genesis 4:1-16

“Adam lay with 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.”² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD.⁴ But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering,⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?⁷ 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 master it.”⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”¹⁰ The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”¹³ Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is more than I can bear.¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ But the LORD said to him, “Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him.⁶ So Cain went out from the LORD’S presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”

Like the “Prodigal Son” and the “Good Samaritan”, the story in Genesis 4 is a classic. It’s the story known almost universally as “Cain and Abel” It is **dramatic** (envy, murder, vengeance), **pithy** (large concepts in few words), and even **mysterious** in ways (begging for answers it doesn’t give) – and **it teaches fundamental truths** about our fallen humanness as we experience it everyday. It’s one of those stories that, mirror-like, reflects us. It is simple and complex at the same time. It is focused (one man and one incident) AND at the same time it is universal (every person’s story). It is psychological (the motives of one man) and at the same time it is

theological (historical and universal forces of good and evil). It is one of the stories that **should** be known by every human being – because it is our story.

Before looking at the story more closely there are three contexts I wish for you to think about. Genesis 4 was not written in a vacuum, it has a **literary** context, an **historical** context and a **theological** context.

First of all think about **its literary context**: As in any piece of literature, whether it is a book, a poem or a letter, we usually can't understand a specific portion of the book without having some understanding of the whole book. We know that we may misunderstand a book if we opened it and read only one paragraph or even only one chapter; so it with the story of Cain and Abel. This story is set between two other stories - The story in chapter three about Adam's and Eve's sin and God's judgment on that sin AND the story of the flood, beginning in chapter 6. Therefore this story builds on what happened in chapter 3 and it leads up to what happens in chapters 5 and 6.

There is not only a literary context there is also **an historical context**. By whom and to whom was it written? Moses wrote it to the people of Israel just before they entered the Promised Land of Canaan and it was written hundreds if not thousands of years after the events recorded in Genesis. These were people who were on the brink of a whole new way of life – they had been fairly isolated for 40 years – living on the move. Now they would be settling into towns and villages and living among people who did not believe in the same virtues and hold the same values. The people of Israel had a decision to make: which would they follow – God or their own instincts?

But there is also a **theological** context. The large issue of the impact of Adam's sin on all humanity is now played out in a particular man's life – Cain. The issue of trust in God versus human self-sufficiency is now played out in a particular situation. Some of the great themes of theology are addressed in this story.

It is those contexts, along with the story itself that make me realize this story has a very definite purpose. Through it God is giving a message to the Israelites and to all of us. And what is that message? **Sin is a supernaturally powerful enemy that must be resisted by faith in God's grace.**

What is the sin that Cain commits? The immediately obvious answer is "murder". But even a casual inspection of the text teaches us that Cain's sin was more involved than murder alone. Listen to the story again.

Adam and Eve had two sons – the older named Cain, the younger named Abel. The author highlights the fact that they are brothers – already tipping his hand that what will happen will affect what ought to be a close and trusted, blood relationship. Both men had occupations – one a farmer who worked the soil and the other a rancher who worked flocks of sheep. Quite obviously from their parents they had learned about the necessity and privilege of worshipping God. And each man brings an offering to the Lord from the fruit of his labor. The farmer brings produce and the rancher brings a lamb.

Verses 4 and 5 tell us that God looked with favor on Abel's offering but not on Cain's. I want to come back in a minute to why this happened but for now I want you to see how Cain responded. We are told that Cain was very angry and it showed on his face.

There is no reason to think that this whole episode took place in a matter of minutes but rather there is more reason to think it took place over a matter of days maybe even longer. Cain was very angry and it was so obvious that anyone around him would have known it. But what they wouldn't have known is what was going on in his heart. While you would expect that Cain would be angry with God he diverts his anger to Abel – it's called envy. And that envy smolders and produces hatred of his brother.

Several years ago in Iowa two very pretty young women found themselves vying for the same young man. Sonya and Cindy had grown up together and went to the same school. Cindy had become the county's Miss Harvest Princess and within weeks Sonya had

become homecoming queen at their high school. The problem was that both of them loved the same young man, Jim. He was not only handsome but he was every mother's dream for her daughter. But as much as Jim might have wished polygamy was legal, he lived in Iowa and he had to select one of them. He quit dating Cindy and chose Sonja and soon announced their engagement. Cindy couldn't bear it. While it was bad enough to lose Jim, what really galled her was that Cindy got him. She couldn't tolerate the thought of Cindy's happiness. One September night she took a leather belt and strangled Cindy.

Covetousness wants what someone else has. Envy just desperately doesn't want someone else to have it. For example: Coveting can result in theft while envy results in vandalism. Cain's envy meant that he didn't just want what Abel had; he didn't want Abel to have it. Have you ever felt it?

Cain's sin started with envy and it turned to hatred – a bitter smoldering hatred just waiting to burn his brother. But his sin doesn't end with envy and hatred. Cain adds hypocrisy and deceit to his sin. He approaches his brother and says, "Let's go to the field". He concocts some pretense for getting his brother alone. Do you think for a minute that his brother would have gone with him if he had any inkling of what Cain was up to? Cain thoroughly hoodwinked him. With smoothness and sincerity Cain led Abel to believe all was well between them. Have you ever done it? When he got his brother alone in the field he attacked and killed him. Have you ever felt it?

Sometime after Cain returns from the field God asks, "Where is your brother Abel?" I can't help but think that must have been Adam's and Eve's question as well - "Where's Abel?" Wasn't he with you? It's late; do you suppose something has happened to him? To his envy, hatred, hypocrisy and murder Cain adds lying – "I don't know."

No, Cain's sin is not only murder – it is a whole pack of sins – each one feeding off the other. Who of us has not experienced one sin leading to another – almost as if we were powerless to stop it once it got going?

I. But what is the root of this sin?

How does Cain get started down this path of envy, hatred and deceit?

This is the part that ought to frighten and humble us. The root of Cain's sin was in his heart from birth. Back in chapter 3 we are told that when Adam and Eve sinned, it forever changed humanity. From that day forward sin would war against human beings. From that day forward spiritual death, symbolized by physical death, would be every person's experience. When Cain was born, already embedded in his heart was the seed of his sinfulness. It only took time for that sin to express itself. We know this to be the case because Paul in Romans 5:12 & 18 writes: "Therefore just as sin entered the world through one man (Adam), and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men ... just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men... just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners..."

I want you to see from the story that **the root of Cain's sin was not in what he did but in something else**. Verses 3-5 show this. There was something wrong with Cain's offering but it wasn't in what he brought as much as what was in his heart. The author notes that Abel's offering was "some of the fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flocks." Now the people of Israel to whom Moses was writing would have known exactly what that meant. God had said that worship is not just a duty to perform but an experience of gratitude and dependence. When people came to worship they should bring the first portion of all that God has given them as an expression of their continued dependence on God. Abel does that. In Hebrews 11:4 we are told that Abel brought his offering expressing trust in God. By implication Cain did **not**. Even here in Genesis 4 there is no indication that Cain brought the first of his produce he just brought something – maybe what was left over. Proud Cain doesn't need to worship God's way. Proud Cain doesn't believe that acceptance with God is by grace through faith – Cain will bring his own offering in his own way. That's the root of Cain's sin – it is his own corrupted heart as evidenced by his attitude and actions.

My sin and yours is not just a matter of what we do – as if we can change our actions any time we want to. Our actions are fed by the very instincts of our hearts and our hearts are infected with the same pride and unbelief that infected Cain. Without grace that won't change.

II. But I want you not only to see sin's root I want you to see its power. When Cain brought his offering in proud unbelief, God rejected it. When Cain saw that Abel's offering was accepted he had a choice to make. Surely Cain knew the difference between Abel's attitude and his own. Right then he had an opportunity to confess his sin, his need for God's forgiveness, and his dependence on God by bringing the right offering. But he didn't – His pride was strong enough to reject the opportunity. Instead he became angry.

But again God gave him opportunity – God came to him and said, "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 master it." In the middle of Cain's sin of envy and anger God spoke to him – God reached out to him offering a way out of his sin. God came to him and said – Watch out! This sin you are nurturing in your heart and mind is like a wild animal crouching at your door – it is just waiting to destroy you. You must master it. Come on, Cain, confess your need of my help, believe that you live only by my grace – trust me and I will enable you to overcome this sin.

God has spoken – the almighty has offered a way out. Surely Cain will take it! But what happens? He rejects the offer, he rejects God, - the power of his hatred, his sin is so great that it drowns out the plea of God. Have you had it happen to you?

Even after the murder, God came again and yet another opportunity was afforded to Cain – not once but twice: "Where is your brother Abel?" Cain had the opportunity – "Oh God, forgive me, he's dead." But the sin has built such a wall in his heart that instead he lies to God and even responds to the Almighty in a sarcastic way - "Am I my brother's keeper?" But yet again God extends mercy – "What have you done?" Cain had the opportunity – "Oh God, forgive me, in my envy and anger I killed my own brother." But his sin is so powerful, so entrenched, that Cain doesn't respond to grace.

To every person God says that life is found in saying "God have thine own way." To the person who refuses to do that eventually God says, "Then you have your own way." Sin is so powerful that it can spiritually blind a person even to his grave. James said it this way:

“Each one is tempted when by his own evil desires (that’s the initial heart problem inherited from Adam) he is dragged away and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”

I earlier said this story of Cain should humble us and frighten us. The root and power of sin is why. Sin is embedded in our hearts and it is so powerful that unless we accept the mercy and grace of God we will be bound in its clutches. Is it possible to reject God’s Spirit until there is no going back? Is it possible to miss the day of opportunity?

III. The third thing I want you see this morning is the consequence of sin. In Cain’s situation there were four consequences:

First, God said that from that day forward life would be even harder for Cain than it had been – he was to be driven from his occupation.

Secondly, he would live with the guilt of his sin the rest of his life – a mark of some kind would indicate that Cain was the man who committed the murder but he shouldn’t be killed.

Thirdly, he was to be driven from the presence of the Lord. Had Cain, like Pharaoh later, hardened his heart so it was now impenetrable? The presence of the Lord was taken from him. “Ichabod” was written on his life – the Lord has departed.

But there is a **fourth** consequence of Cain’s stubborn sin – He passes his hardness of heart on to his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

What follows the story of Cain and Abel in chapter 4 is the story of Cain’s descendants. Told ever so briefly he leads his son Enoch into the same sin of unbelief, pride and independence from God that characterized Cain. And then in few words we are told of seven generations in all culminating in polygamy, murder and proud defiance of God’s law. It is one thing to take oneself to hell in defiance of God – it is quite another thing to lead one’s children there. Yet that is often the consequence of sin.

IV. As bleak as the story of Cain is, there is light – there is hope – there is grace. In verses 25 and 26 in the midst of this downward spiral of humanity from Adam through Cain to generations that followed – there are these words: “Adam lay with 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. At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord.”

God was not about to let his creation end in Cain’s obstinate rebellion. God gave another child to Adam and Eve – another child through whom would come the offspring – the Messiah - who would set his people free from their sins. Through Seth’s descendants would come Noah and through Noah’s descendants would come Abraham then eventually David and then in the fullness of time the Messiah-Jesus.

And the difference between Cain and Seth was the same as between Cain and Abel – Seth and Abel trusted in the Lord God instead of themselves. Abel had brought his offering in faith – obediently trusting God’s provision for life. Of Seth it is said he called on the name of the Lord – he trusted in God’s provision – reached out for the mercy and grace of God.

The only way for the root, the power and the consequences of sin to be overcome is by living in absolute dependence on God.

- Trusting him when sin tempts.
- Reaching out for his mercy when we fail.
- Appropriating his grace every moment of every day.
- Knowing and acting out our dependence on him.

When Moses wrote Genesis he also wrote the other four books of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). The people of Israel would have had all of it to read. I want you to see in all Moses wrote, some of his final words to the people. And I want you to think about Moses story of Cain from Genesis 4 when hear his final words:

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways and to keep his commands, then you will live... This day I call heaven and 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... For the Lord is your life.”

What do you think Moses wanted Israel to learn from Cain’s story? What do you think God wants us to learn from Cain’s story? “Sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it.” Only by God’s grace can you master the deeply rooted and powerful force called sin – will you ask for his forgiveness, receive his mercy and trust in his grace to enable you?