

Genesis 4:1-16

Last week we concluded our look at the opening three chapters of the first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis. In those three chapters we saw a number of significant things - the wonder and power of our Creator God as he spoke the universe into being, the design and order of his good and abundant creation, the place and purpose of human beings within God's plans and purposes, the beauty and significance of human relationships, the corruption of God's perfect world, the personal, interpersonal, and cosmic consequences of sin, and the justice and mercy of God in responding to these things. And, while our goal is to see how the first eleven chapters of Genesis establish the basic plotlines for the story of the Bible and, indeed, of the whole world - a significant part of that goal has already been accomplished with just these opening three chapters.

However, there is more to be said. Some important pieces still need to be put into place. And so we are continuing this morning with our study, picking up at verse 1 of chapter 4, and working through to verse 16, dealing with the familiar story of Cain and Abel. In this account we will see the further, and downward, progression of Adam and Eve's sin, as it manifests itself within their own family, and in decidedly more sinister ways. That's our subject for this morning, before we go any further, let's pray.

(Pray and Read the passage - Genesis 4:1-16)

Well, after being mercifully banished from the Garden of Eden, and before they could do any more damage, Adam and Eve find themselves residing somewhere to the east of that place, never to return again - at least not on this side of the grave. And, in the course of time, they conceived their first child, whom they named *Cain*.

Now, the arrival of this first child would have been something of a bittersweet experience for them, to say the least. On the one hand, it must have been a welcome indicator to them that, indeed, God had not withheld from them the ability to conceive and thus fulfill the mandate he had previously given them. That mandate, you may recall, was to be fruitful and multiply God's images, and to manage God's creation on His behalf. To be sure, these things had been re-affirmed to them - in the context of the curses of Genesis 3:14-19. But now they see it coming to fruition - in the form of this little child - the first baby ever born or seen on planet earth. And so, again, this must have been some consolation to them that God had not abandoned them or written them off, or worse, written them *out* of His "divine drama".

At the same time, while there was confirmation of their continued place in God's plan and purpose, there would also have been further confirmation of the reality of their fallenness as Eve would have endured for the first time the *pains* of childbearing - physically and mentally - and so would have felt *in her body* the disintegrating effects of sin.

It is also possible that, in amongst all these other feelings, there may have been some question, in Eve's mind at least, as to whether the child now born to her was going to be the promised "seed of the woman" that we saw in Genesis 3:15, and which would crush the serpent's offspring and thus undo the horrible things that had come about as a consequence of sin.

This, in the opinion of some commentators at least, is the possible significance of Eve's remark, at the birth of Cain, that she had "gotten a man with the help of the Lord". To be sure, this may simply be her acknowledging that God has blessed her with this child. But some scholars feel that the fact that she has referred to the child as a "*man* from the Lord", which is a slightly odd remark otherwise, means that she may possibly have been thinking of some future point at which this child would be grown up - and would then be the one to fulfill the promise/prediction that God had previously made. Whatever the case, she will soon come to realize that such an idea would not only be very pre-mature but also terribly, terribly *wrong*.

Well, after relating the birth of Cain, the passage goes on to say, almost in passing, that a second child is born and is named *Abel*. After this, we are told that Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a worker of the ground.

Now, clearly, a lot of time is accounted for in these short verses. How much, we don't know. It could be 15 years, 25, years, 50 years. We just do not know, especially since the ages of human beings in those days were considerably longer than they are today. But the amount of time is not all that significant, only that during that time these two men became established in their respective fields of labor.

And it should be said that both of the occupations mentioned here - farming and sheep-tending - were legitimate occupations. Farming was the occupation of Adam- and his son Cain - and was instituted directly by God. Sheep-tending was equally valuable. And both of these lines of work, notably, are expressions of the cultural mandate they had been given to *manage God's creation* on His behalf.

So, up to this point in the story, all is well, or at least it seems to be. Adam and Eve could be forgiven for hoping, if they did, that everything was back on track and things would be much more stable from this point forward. But of course it wasn't to be. The problems started to show themselves again when Cain and Abel began bringing offerings to the Lord.

Now, admittedly, this is another of those places in the Bible where we are not given all the details that we might have personally preferred, although we *are* given every detail that we need. But there certainly are things we don't know for sure. We don't know if this was the very first time that Cain and Abel had made offerings to the Lord. We don't know if perhaps Adam had been making them for some time and now the two sons are taking on that responsibility as well. We don't even know *why* they are making these particular offerings or how they even knew to make them in the first place. We don't know any of those things with absolute certainty.

So, there are a lot of things we don't know, but we can make some reasonable assumptions based on what we do know from other places in the Bible. One assumption we can make is that making of these sacrifices - these acts of worship - are not simply the product of Cain and Abel's imagination. When you read through other books in the Old Testament you find God saying all kinds of things about how he wants people to worship Him and how He does NOT want people to worship Him. And we have examples of people who attempted to be a little "creative" or "innovative" in their worship of God - and were killed as a result.

In short, the picture that the OT paints is of a God who has very definite ideas about what

He will and will not allow His people to do when they worship Him. Since the God who has all those definite ideas is the same God we are dealing with here - it is reasonable to assume that He has, at some un-recorded time before the events of Genesis 4, let his people know some things about worshiping him by means of *sacrifices*.

Another thing we know from later on in the Old Testament is that, while the primary sacrifices that were made were ones which involved the killing of animals and the shedding of blood, there were also other offerings - grain offerings (See Leviticus 2:1-3; 14-16) - that were instituted and which God gladly received from his people - and that, obviously, did not require any blood to be shed.

And so, as the story describes Cain and Abel coming with their different offerings, we can reasonably assume that they have not come up with this idea on their own - it has come to them from God. Further, we can assume that we probably should not read much into the fact that one offered the fruit of the ground and the other the firstborn from his flock - as if one were inherently better than the other. There is nothing in the passage, or in the wider context of the OT, that would require that interpretation.

And so, here come Cain and Abel, with their offerings to God, and we are told that the Lord "had regard" for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. And, while we do not know exactly what this means, it is not all that important since we can get the general idea: Abel's sacrifice was accepted or approved, and Cain's was not. And, whether *we* know how this was determined or not, the point is, *they knew it* and, in particular, *Cain* knew that God had made a distinction between his offering and his brother's.

Now the fact that God made a distinction between their offerings has sent people scrambling all over the place trying to figure out what the difference was and why one was accepted and the other was not. And some of the things suggested have included this idea we have already discussed - that the blood offering was inherently a better offering than any kind of offering of food, even though there is no Biblical mandate for believing that was the dynamic here.

However, as we have seen on many occasions, since the Bible is its own best interpreter, we can solve this dilemma by keeping a finger here and turning to the other end of the Bible - to Hebrews 11:4, where we read these words,

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks....

The thing that set apart Abel's sacrifice from Cain's was not so much the sacrifice itself, but had more to do with *the person making the sacrifice*. Abel's sacrifice was made "by faith" and "through faith", whereas Cain's clearly was not. "Having Faith" is one of the main points of this entire Hebrews chapter. So, what happened in Genesis 4 was that Cain was meeting a requirement while Abel was giving the best that he had.

And you see this in the text of Genesis itself, if you look carefully enough. The

description of Abel's sacrifice gives us two important details: 1) It was the firstborn of his flock, which was considered the best and most valuable portion. 2) And of that slain firstborn lamb, the *fat portions* in particular were given. Now, without any other knowledge of the OT, this might not seem all that important but, if I can put it simply - other places in the OT indicate that these portions of the animal in particular were considered the most valuable and significant parts. In other words, Moses is telling us that Abel gave his best and - more than that - he gave the best of his best, to God.

In contrast to that description - admittedly spare - we have the very plain statement that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground. The *absence* of any qualifying statements such as the "firstfruits" of his harvest, or the "finest" portion of his harvest is significant by its omission, especially since it seems that Moses DID include additional remarks about Abel's sacrifice.

And these actions by Abel, you see - giving the best of the best - being willing to let go of those things rather than hang on to them - those were an expression of faith and trust on Abel's part. They showed that he was not worried about losing them because he trusted God to replace them and to more than adequately make up for his loss. Cain, on the other hand, seems to have made a rather indifferent sort of sacrifice, one that did not cost him as much. And so God accepts Abel's gift and does not accept Cain's. And Cain gets *angry*. He gets *very* angry.

You may remember last week where, in looking at the curses pronounced by God, we see in Genesis 3:15 where God says to the serpent that he will "put" enmity between the serpent and the woman - which we looked at, but then He goes on to say that he will also put that same enmity between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring. Well, here we see that promise working itself out as Abel - who was born as sinful as his brother Cain - and yet we see him here exhibiting faith (which is God's gift) and in a way that his brother does not - and the result is enmity - war - between them, even though it has not yet manifested itself in the story.

And so, as one commentator puts it, the one whose worship was acceptable to God - Abel - ends up being resented and hated by the one whose worship was not acceptable to God - Cain. And even though the one whom Cain is angry with is in truth God Himself, the person who receives the brutal force of that anger is his brother. On this whole exchange, Calvin writes quite brilliantly when he says:

In the person of Cain is portrayed to us the likeness of a wicked man, who yet desires to be esteemed [a] just [man]. Such persons, by external works.....labor to deserve well at the hands of God; but, retaining a heart inwrapped in deceit, they present Him nothing but a mask; so that, in their labors and in their anxious religious worship, there is nothing sincere, nothing but mere pretence. When they afterwards see that they gain no advantage, they betray the venom of their minds; for they not only complain against God, but break forth in manifest fury, so that, if they were able, they would gladly tear him down from his heavenly throne....they think that God does them great wrong if he does not applaud them;
but when he pronounces their offerings frivolous and of no value in his sight, they first begin to murmur, and then to rage.....they wish to bargain with God on their own terms

[but] when this is denied, they burn with furious indignation which, though conceived against God, they cast forth upon His children.....

To put it in more contemporary terms suggested by one writer, the effect of Abel's acceptance on Cain is a lot like the effect that a girl named Cindy had on me in my 12th grade Calculus class. I would go to class every day, try to pay attention to this impossible math, go home and struggle through the homework, study for tests, come to class and kill myself to get a B. And Cindy - who was some sort of genius or something - would come to class every day, and just sit there, reading novels. The teacher never stopped her, never asked her a question, never involved her in the class.

But when the test time came, Cindy would show up, take the test, finish, half an hour ahead of everyone else, and make a 100 on it every time. It was maddening. And the worst part was, her great grades affected the class average and altered the grade curve - sometimes dramatically - and she would regularly cost the rest of us at least 5 points or more.

Now, of course, the problem was not with Cindy. The problem was never with Cindy. The problem was with me and my pride and arrogance. The only thing Cindy was guilty of was being brilliant. And I resented her for it, and it spawned within me a deep, sinful, dis-like for her as a person - even though I hardly knew.

That same sort of dynamic, in an analogous way, is what is going on here between Cain and Abel. Abel has done nothing against Cain, but the end result is a murderous, jealous, envious, prideful, self-righteous hatred aimed directly at him.

So, Cain responds badly in this situation and yet, in spite of Cain's poor response, God comes to him quite graciously and mercifully, challenging him personally and offering him an opportunity for repentance - for change. You see, while his act of worship on this occasion was not an acceptable thing, it was not, apparently, a fatal sin. God did not appear to be planning to inflict any great punishment upon Cain for what he had done. He wasn't going to drop the hammer on him. Indeed, what God does tell Cain is that, if he does well in the future, he will be accepted - this "doing well" probably being a reference to future acts of sacrifice. But there is clearly on offer here a chance for repentance - to turn back from his anger before it gets a hold of him.

Which then leads to the next remark, at the end of verse 7 - a warning - that if Cain does not respond to the opportunity for repentance - if he continues down that track, things will not be good for him. And the reason is because sin is real, and Satan is real, and Cain is in great danger here. He is in a very vulnerable position. Sin's desire is to master and control him, but he must not acquiesce to that desire by allowing his anger to run its course. He must control it, it must not control him.

In the end, however, and in spite of God's warning, it does control him - God's warnings falling on deaf ears. And in this we see sin's further progression - whereas in Eve's case, she had to be talked *into* sinning, in Cain's case, he would not be talked out of it. And so, after talking

with his brother - about what we do not know for sure - but most likely he was creating some artificial reason for them to be alone together out in a field. They then go out to the field and Cain at that point murders his brother.

Well, now that the deed is done, we see God re-enter the story, just as He did with Adam and Eve, coming once again in search of his sinful and rebellious creatures. And in this encounter we also see, just as we did before, the justice of God, the mercy of God amidst that justice, and the sad, evasive, deceitful - just plain sinful - response of one of His creatures toward him.

Firstly, notice Cain's response to things. God comes to him, asking a question he already knows the answer to, but in so doing providing a chance for Cain to come clean and own up to some things - just as God did with Adam and Eve. And like them, Cain's response to this opportunity is less than encouraging - shall we say. To God's question, "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain quite dis-respectfully replies to God, "I do not know, am I my brother's keeper?" - as if to say, "I don't know why you're asking me these things - I don't recall receiving any specific instructions to look after Abel."

Just as his parents did when they were confronted by God, so does Cain give an unsatisfactory response - although his is arguably worse than theirs. This is because while Adam and Eve did, *eventually*, admit to wrongdoing - after they had shifted as much blame as possible - Cain on the other hand outright lies to God and never once admits that he did anything wrong. Instead, he engages in diversionary tactics, trying to play semantic games with God and get Him off the subject.

Of course, God will not be swayed or moved by these ridiculous responses on Cain's behalf and once again shows - as He did with Adam and Eve - that nothing can be hidden from Him, and that even the silent victim of a capital crime has an advocate to speak for him - his own blood - which is polluting and defiling God's creation as a result of this great tragedy.

And so God confronts Cain, asking him what he has done - knowing all along *exactly* what he has done, and very quickly moving from there to pronouncing sentence and judgement upon Cain for the terrible thing that has happened. God is not willing to let this sin pass, any more than he was willing to let the sin of Adam and Even pass - and so, in justice responds to what has taken place.

As part of his punishment, God pronounces a curse upon Cain himself - which is different from what happened to Adam and Eve. With Adam, in particular, the *ground* itself was cursed so that it resisted his efforts to produce good crops, but he himself was not cursed - although he was fallen in nature. Still, even though the cursed ground resisted his efforts, it would still be possible to see good crops come forth - with a lot of sweat and sacrifice and hardship. However, with Cain, the situation is progressively worse since he *himself* is cursed and is assured that he will never be able to see any sort of strong abundant return from working the soil.

Instead, his returns would always be small and meager and not very satisfying. In effect, you see, what is happening here is that "the ground" itself is being called in as a temporary

executor of God's judgment upon Cain. In other words, the ground that Cain has poisoned and defiled with his brother's blood will now "render judgment" upon him by refusing to produce anything worthwhile for its polluter....Cain.

Along with this curse, and probably as a natural effect of it, Cain will be a wanderer and a nomad the rest of his life - that is, he will not be tied to any one place but will have to move about to find food since he will not be able to grow it himself. But there are probably more than just physical reasons that he will be a wanderer. As the passage goes on to show - Cain feels a real sense of un-ease and nervousness about what may happen to him in the future as more people come along - and all of them blood relations of course. He will never feel safe anywhere, always watching his back, always wondering if there is something hidden beneath an approaching stranger's cloak.

And so the judgement on Cain is severe and permanent. And yet, even amidst this, and even though Cain stands in a different relation to things than Adam and Eve - as we saw last week - he is "of the evil one". Nevertheless, even though he is in this position "outside the camp" - so to speak, does not mean that he is beyond the benefit of God's mercy, which we see displayed toward Cain in a number of ways.

For starters, God comes *looking* for Cain when he might have just struck him down instantly for what he had done. And then God, as we have seen, doesn't rush in with indictments right away but offers a question and an opportunity for Cain to respond - to make some sort of admission of guilt. Thirdly, and in response to Cain's fears about blood vengeance being taken upon him, God says he will do something about that to prevent it from happening.

And please notice, again, that this mercy of God comes in the face of continued un-repentance and hardness on Cain's part. Cain does not say, in verse 13, that his SIN is too great to bear, he says that his *punishment* is too great to bear. And here, as one writer says, is the difference between the repentant and the unrepentant heart, isn't it? The un-repentant heart sees only that its punishment is great and complains about how unfair it all is. The repentant heart sees that its *sin* is great and its punishment *deserved* and is, accordingly, surprised and amazed at the grace shown to it. We see none of that here in Cain - and yet God *is* merciful to him still.

And so God, by that mercy, sets some sort of mark upon Cain that will result in his being set apart and which will cause others to leave him alone and not harm him. Now, again, we don't know what that mark was - but because of its purpose and function, we can be sure that it wasn't any sort of racial distinction but was unique and specific to the person of Cain himself. More importantly, it was an example of God's mercy, even toward the unjust and un-deserving - a mercy that continues to be shown every single moment of every single day.

And so, in the end, what we see here is the beginnings of two great lines of humanity - the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent - focusing so far on the development of the one line in Cain. We see here the promised conflict of Genesis 3:15 coming into being.

And even though Genesis 3:15 also points to an eventual resolution of that conflict - when the war between the woman's seed and the serpent's becomes concentrated into particular persons in a particular conflict - even though that resolution is also promised - we see no hint of

that yet - it's certainly not to be found in Cain and Abel. The seed of the serpent has seen to that by making a first and pre-emptive strike.

And that will be the pattern right through most of the rest of the Bible - the ongoing exhibition of the promised conflict, but with no sign of the promised resolution on the horizon. And this tension between the two keeps the story line moving forward. We will soon see this demonstrated in the story of Noah and his sons. Later on in Genesis you see it in the account of Ishmael and Isaac, or in the account of Jacob and Esau, etc.

And as the story line of the OT develops, with Israel becoming a nation, we see this conflict between the two humanities demonstrated not only *within* Israel itself, but also *between* Israel - as a nation - and the other nations around her. We see it between Israel and Egypt, and between Israel and the various Canaanite nations.

Indeed, this is one of the significances of this account for the people of God in Moses' day. It showed them both the source of their own on-going internal struggles and conflicts as a nation and, at the same time, warned them of the coming struggles they faced in the promised land which lay before them. Just as Cain in his unacceptable religiosity resented Abel, who worshiped God acceptably and truly - so too could the nation of Israel expect that the surrounding nations in the promised land would similarly resent and hate them. Those who truly worship God have always provoked the anger of those who did not. And Israel needed to be prepared for that.

And as we trace this plotline into the NT we see it played out most significantly in the life of Christ. In the Gospels we see Jesus, for whom the Lord showed great regard, regularly provoking the anger and jealousy and fury of the religious leaders of his day - for whom the Lord had no regard. The Scribes and Pharisees resent Jesus as surely as Cain did Abel, and they conspire together to "rise up and kill him". And yet they do not accomplish what they think they accomplish in doing that. As the writer of Hebrews says, in Chapter 12,

(Read Hebrews 12:18-24)

Abel's blood spoke of sin and judgment and darkness and doom, but Jesus shed blood spoke "a better word" - forgiveness and cleansing and mercy and peace - the promised resolution of the promised conflict. Christ has through his life and death decisively defeated the seed of the Serpent at the Cross and has assured the battle's ultimate outcome.

And yet there *are* remaining skirmishes to be fought as the fruit of Christ's victory are being brought to bear in the here and now, as the kingdom which he established and *inaugurated* is being worked out and made manifest in the world through the "beachhead" of God's kingdom, which is the *Church*. And so we, *as that Church*, experience both of those realities of ultimate victory and on-going skirmishes - within and without.

Is not this on-going conflict the ultimate source of so many of the struggles and problems that Paul was constantly facing in the churches that he planted in the New Testament with false teachers and wolves in sheeps clothing running around all over the place, creating all kinds of

difficulties for him? Is this not the source of those same struggles in the church in every age?

Further, we see the reality of the Cain-Abel conflict not only between and amongst ourselves, but we are challenged by this reality in our stance as the *Church* over against a watching world. It is an external as well as an internal challenge for us too - the challenge to not follow in the footsteps of Cain, but to reverse that response and choose a better way. Listen to these words from 1 John 3,

For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.....

Do you see what the writer of 1 John is saying? He is saying that the church's job - as the true worshipers of God - is to reverse the action of Cain - to show that we really are the seed of the woman and not the seed of the serpent - by the way that we love one another. That's the proof. That's the mark that will show which of the two humanities we belong to. That is the reality that will be the stench of death for unbelievers within and outside of the church - and will provoke their wrath. And it is the reality that will be, at the same time, the fragrance of life and will compellingly draw God's true worshipers to Himself - both those who have come and those who are yet to come.