

Genesis 4

AREC 26 September 2021

I remember a long time ago hearing something that really shocked, even upset me. I was in the supermarket and I overheard this child, who probably wasn't even old enough to go to school, scream at his mother, "I could kill you!" Now kids often overreact but they also have this habit of repeating what they hear. Had he picked this up from one of his parents or an older sister or brother? Who knows.

Hate comes so naturally to us. Cain famously kills his brother Abel. But that's not the end of the story. Nor is it the start. You see, it wasn't an accident. It wasn't manslaughter. It was pure premeditated murder. Anger burned inside him, and we all know that feeling. So is there any good news here for us, if like Cain we've allowed anger to get the better of us? Yes. But first we need to understand what's going on here.

Cain is Abel's older brother, and from experience I can say that one thing older siblings don't like is when the younger ones do better. The Bible isn't a psychology textbook, but I think it makes them feel threatened. Anyway, we see it again and again in Genesis - Isaac & Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his crew. Notice how it's the younger one who keeps getting top billing. Maybe the only reason it's the other way round with Cain and Abel is that the latter gets snuffed out before he really gets going.

Cain and Abel take different farming professions. Cain follows in his father's footsteps. Remember last week God banished Adam and Eve from the garden "to cultivate the ground from which they were made" (3.23). And this is exactly what Cain does. Abel becomes a shepherd instead. In the "course of time" it was harvest, and both brothers appear to want to honour God by way of an offering. God accepts, or looks favourably on Abel's lambs, but not Cain's grain.

The question is why. Firstly, let's remember that there is no system of offerings yet like there would be later for Israel. It is a totally voluntary gift. There is nothing here to suggest it is to pay for past sins. Abel's murder is yet to take place. Secondly, there is a difference in the quality of the gift - just some grain vs the best portions of the first lambs. If you've got guests coming, do you serve them roast dinner or porridge? But is that Cain's fault, if he's not a shepherd?

Thirdly, notice that the LORD accepts the person before the gift. The fact He does not accept Cain must grate; so perhaps it's not about the gift itself. Hebrews 11.4 in the NT praises Abel's faith, because without faith it's impossible to please God. It was not faith that God existed - they still seem to converse freely with God. Was his faith then the risk he took to offer the life of a creature? Either way, "Abel's offering

gave evidence that he was a righteous man". Faith is not belief in God; it is belief in pleasing God by living right.

The only other thing to note is God's promise to Cain that "you will (still) be accepted if you do what is right". He seems to know what Cain is about to do. OT prophet Hosea 6.6 says that God desires mercy not sacrifices - to actually know Him and His ways, not go through the motions of religion. Jesus quotes this twice in Matthew's gospel to reinforce the point. God does not advise Cain to try another sacrifice once he's taken up shepherding too. The gift itself is not important.

God says sin is crouching at his door (or lying by his tent flap, really). It is less an image of a lion ready to pounce and more like a prostitute touting for business. It reminds me of what Proverbs says about Folly (READ 9.13-18). My commentary asks if we are to think of a snake like Genesis 3, waiting to strike or squeeze us to death in our sleep. Cain's sin will be a failure to contain his anger and the misguided idea that he can resolve his dejection by taking his brother's life.

Does that ring any bells with you? It does me. Sin for me is rarely an unconscious thing. And I know that when I am angry or depressed, I am more likely to sin. I mistakenly think it will make me feel better to get even or indulge myself. So just like Cain I fail to heed God's warning, and just like Cain my instinct would be to try and cover up my crimes. But God knows. He always knows. He gives us the chance to come

clean, but we don't. And then the truth comes out, and with it the consequences of our actions.

Cain is set to become the world's most unsuccessful farmer - worse even than my attempts to grow my own. Instead he is going to be a homeless wanderer (v12), a drifter, an outcast. And for Cain this is terrible. His waywardness results in being truly wayward. He simply doesn't belong anywhere. He has been banished literally from the face of the ground and the face of God. And he is scared someone will kill him - whether we are to take it that there are other people on the earth too or if it's a subsequent relative maybe taking revenge.

He misses God's mercy toward him. Despite His despair at his punishment, he doesn't cry for forgiveness. And yet too the simple principle that his own blood should be shed in return for his brother's is not followed - no eye for eye or tooth for tooth. In fact God demonstrates His grace by announcing it would be Cain's death not Abel's that will be avenged in this way - and that by God. The mark God places on him would serve as a warning - whatever it was.

And so Cain settles in the land of Nod. Contrary to popular usage this doesn't mean having a nap! Nod means drifting - and is directly linked to his fate. And I guess for us that is where we find ourselves in the world - drifting, outside of God's presence, our only comfort that justice might still be ours should someone lay into us. Cain comes to represent

the opposite of brotherly love (1 John 3.12) and the epitome of doing what our sinful instincts tell us (Jude 11).

It is therefore ironic that our hope lies in the shedding of more blood. But listen to this verse from the letter to the Hebrews, shortly after the writer praised Abel for his faith (12.24 NASB): “But you have come... to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.” He is talking about the blood of Christ shed at the cross. When we come to Him, we discover His blood speaks of forgiveness rather than crying out for vengeance like Abel’s - which is great news for us.

Let me put it like this: the punishment which is too great for Cain and for us to bear for our sin - namely banishment from God’s presence - is borne by Jesus. The Apostle Paul says that Jesus who never sinned became sin itself for our sake. And even though like Abel he was unjustly killed because he had done no wrong, his blood brings about forgiveness not more condemnation for those who believe. God was pleased with His gift - a perfect life laid down, the very best offering - because it can bring weary wanderers like you and me home.

The only issue that remains then is whether you want this. But the road that drifting wanderers need to walk is hard. Unlike Cain you need to admit your sinfulness. Unlike Cain you need to ask for forgiveness. And unlike Cain you are called to offer your own life as a living sacrifice and live by

faith to the pleasure of God. But to do all this you must do what God says to Cain: subdue the sin that keeps you away.