

## **Cain and Abel – rebellion leads to exile**

Readings: Galatians 3:1-14, Genesis 4:1-16

Today we are looking at the story of Cain and Abel, which includes the first family, the first shepherd and the first recorded offerings being made to God. Unfortunately it also records the first human to human violence, the first murder and the first fratricide. The Fall brought a rift between God and man as we heard last week, the innocence had been shattered. Cain's murder of his brother brought a rift within families, the ripples of sin were spreading outward. The whole sad story is just another stage in the declining spiral from the Fall to Noah, things just went from bad to worse. As one commentator said "rebellion is writ large" in the story of Cain and Abel. The epistle of James has a stark description of sin which illustrates this story so well "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." (James 1:14-15). And yet within this sad story we will find the grace of God.

As I considered the story of Cain and Abel, it seemed to leave so many questions unanswered, for example, how did God speak to people in those days? what special occasion prompted Cain and Abel to bring offerings to God? was there some special place they went to for this? how did they know God accepted Abel's offering but not Cain's? what was the mark that God put in Cain? and one could go on. Nevertheless we have this story in the Bible and I believe we have much to learn from it. The writer chose not to give us the details we seek, so we put those questions aside, and grapple with the facts we do have.

I have said before that in the Bible names matter. Eve was obviously delighted to have produced a son in Cain. She says "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." (Gen. 4:1). Cain is a name which sounds similar to the Hebrew word for 'acquire' or 'gain'. Did she naively think that this was the son of promise, linking back to Genesis 3, her offspring who was going to bruise the serpent's head? If she did, her hopes would be cruelly dashed. Surprisingly she says nothing when Abel, the second son, is born. Abel's name is curious because it means 'breath' or 'vanity', something insignificant. So was Abel, the second child, looked down on by his mother, did she dote on her firstborn Cain? There is certainly something within the story that suggests that the firstborn Cain was rebelliously arrogant, is it too much to surmise that he was the first spoilt brat?

It is also noteworthy that within the Old Testament narrative, God does not always pass on the blessing through the firstborn son. Here we will have Seth rather than Cain, but think also of Isaac rather than Ishmael, Jacob rather than Esau, Ephraim rather than Manasseh, David rather than his older brothers. Was God just being capricious in his choosing, as some suggest? I'm not so sure, for as we delve deeper into those stories, we begin to see that God looks at the heart of the individual, not the order in which they are born, and this is what I believe we have here, as we shall see.

Verse 3 tells us that both brothers brought their offerings to God; Cain brought some “fruits of the soil” whereas Abel brought “fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock”. The wording suggests that Abel brought the best of his flock to God, whereas Cain merely did his duty. Abel went out of his way to please God in his offering, prophetically looking forward to the Mosaic law by bringing the firstborn of his flock. Cain, on the other hand, discharged his duty, his worship was mere tokenism. Worship is far more than an external show, it has everything to do with the attitude of the heart. Are we surprised that God looked with favour on Abel and his offering but not with Cain? Abel’s offering was the best he could give, some suggest the reading should be “the fattest of the firstlings of the flock”. Commentators have debated whether Abel’s offering was accepted over Cain’s, because it involved a blood sacrifice, but the words in Genesis refer to offerings not sacrifices. I think we need to look far more at their motives and the attitudes of their hearts towards God. As Bruce Waltke wrote “Because Cain fails in his theology, he will fail in his ethics.”

We have a helpful New Testament commentary on this story in the book of Hebrews chapter 11 “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.” (Heb. 11:4). In this great chapter of the heroes of faith, the writer begins his list with Abel, the first person to be declared righteous because of his faith. Jesus himself refers to righteous Abel in Matt. 23:35 when he declares that judgement is coming upon Jerusalem, “on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.” John also refers to righteous Abel “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.” (1 John 3:11-12).

Cain was obviously livid that his offering was not accepted by God. He was not just angry but very angry, and his face showed it. He was angry at being humbled before his younger brother Abel. He was angry at God for not accepting his worship and he was probably angry at himself. And that anger boiled over into murder. And yet throughout, God’s treatment of Cain is pure grace. Firstly in verses 6-7 God warns Cain of the danger he is in “The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” Secondly God’s question to Cain in verse 9 “Where is your brother?” is rhetorical because God knows exactly what has gone on, but God is giving Cain the opportunity to confess his guilt. It’s a pattern we saw in God’s questions to Adam and Eve in the Garden in the previous chapter, God was giving them the opportunity to confess their sin. Cain, however, responds with a bare-faced lie – “I don’t know” followed by an angry, impertinent question of his own “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Not only is Cain showing no remorse whatsoever for his crime, but he is unwilling to accept any responsibility for his actions. How very different from the Prodigal son in Jesus’ story who shows real, heart-felt penitence for his actions. In contrast, Cain even seems to be angry at God for asking the question in the first place. And when

God pronounces his punishment, Cain has the effrontery to complain to God about his justice, when he says “My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.” (Gen. 4:13-14). Cain expresses self-pity but not repentance. God again exercises grace towards the undeserving Cain, for He says in reply “Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him.” (Gen. 4:15). God would put his protecting sign over him. Gordon Wenham notes in his commentary that “The nature of Cain’s sign or mark has been the subject of endless inconclusive speculation”, so I am certainly not going to comment further on what Cain’s mark was.

So what can we learn today from this sad, violent story? As I read and re-read the story and mulled it over, I think we can learn at least five lessons today.

First, this is a very human story, warts and all. Let us be grateful that the Bible tells it like it is, it doesn’t sanitize the truth. Many of us know of the dangers of unchecked anger, it can lead easily to words spoken in haste that can never be taken back. But worse, unchecked anger can lead to violence, and to the breakup of families, as we have in this story, as some of you may have suffered. As humans we live with sibling rivalry, family disagreements, hatred and jealousy – the all too obvious evidences of sin within us, the result of the Fall.

Second, sin resulted in being separated from the presence of God. In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve were removed from the Garden of Eden, while in Genesis 4 Cain is further removed from his family and the presence of God. He goes and lives in the land of Nod – the land of wandering. Unfortunately Nod in English means sleep, but in Hebrew, as John Goldingay points out, the word Nod is the word for drifting or wandering but in a more sinister sense. It is a land where no one is at home, a sad commentary on man without God. Throughout Scripture there is this pattern, rebellion leads to exile, classically seen in the exile of the Jews to Babylon at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar. Read the agonizing of Jeremiah over the idolatry of his people as he sees the inevitable exile coming as a result of the people’s rebellion from their covenant keeping God.

Third, God in his mercy and grace, is concerned both for the innocent and for the guilty. God hears the cry of Abel’s innocent blood, as he still hears the cries of the innocent today. As it says in Exodus 22: 22-23 “You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry.” Yet God is also concerned for the perpetrators of the crimes, as we have seen in God’s dealing with Cain. God’s dealing with Paul is another example. Saul, as he was then, went on a rampage against the church of God, yet when he met Jesus on the Damascus road, Jesus said to him “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” (Acts 26:14). God had been pursuing him for some long while, despite his violent behaviour towards the fledgling church.

Fourth, Abel may have had a disturbed upbringing, but he had learned to worship God. His family might have been somewhat dysfunctional, after all they were the first family and there were no manuals to go on, or even knowledge of their own family upbringing to help them. But Abel had found in his God someone totally dependable and worthy of his worship. His faith had given him purpose and identity.

Fifth, Hebrews 12 gives us an insightful comment on the story. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." (Heb. 12:22-24). The blood of Abel cries out for justice for the innocent, while the blood of Jesus cries out for mercy for the rebellious. As David Atkinson said "What Abel did not know was that in God's economy there would be another Lamb whose shed blood cried out to God on behalf of all men. And it is in this other Lamb that God provides his ultimate answer to Cain. .... In him (Christ) the fear can be cast out, the anxiety removed. In him (Christ) the homesick prodigal can hear a welcome back home, and begin again to learn how to love his brother."

To which comment we can all add a heartfelt Amen.