

JUSTICE, VENGEANCE, AND MERCY

DEVOTIONAL READING: Genesis 4:1-13

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Genesis 4

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Genesis 4:1-15

I. Sibling Rivalry

Genesis 4:1-7

1 And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD.

2 And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.

3 And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD.

4 And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering:

5 But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wrath, and his countenance fell.

6 And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wrath? and why is thy countenance fallen?

7 If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

1a. The conception and birth of the first human offspring follow what people through the generations have known as the ordinary course of events. Unlike *Adam* and *Eve*, *Cain* was a child born through ordinary human sexual reproduction. Cain's name is a play on words.

First, it has some of the same Hebrew consonants as the word *Eve* used to describe how she had *gotten a man*. Second, *Eve* specified that *the Lord* helped her beget her first son. She did not mention *Adam*.

God acknowledged that the woman would have desire for her man. This likely means in part that she would want the power she experienced her husband exercising over her. Thus in taking the initiative to name their son, in stating that she has named a "man," and in emphasizing her direct relationship to God in this process, *Eve* may be asserting her own authority in response to the authority that *Adam* exercised when he named her.

2a. There is no fanfare in learning *Abel's* name. Nor is its meaning very grand, given that the Hebrew word can refer to something that is vain, something of little substance that disperses quickly into the air. The name *Abel* proves to be tragically apt for *Eve's* second son.

2b. We should not draw too fine a distinction between *Abel* and *Cain* in their work. Though the former specialized in keeping flocks of *sheep* and the latter on working *the ground*, modern subsistence-level farming suggests that they were working together to keep the ground productive and the animals healthy.

Even so, a distinction certainly was

made between shepherds and farmers in the ancient Near East. For instance, the Egyptians looked down on the Hebrews for being shepherds, a profession they disdained (Genesis 46:34). But that was several centuries later; it's hard to tell for sure what distinction was really made between Cain's and Abel's work.

3-4a. Perhaps Adam taught *Cain* to offer a portion of *the fruits of the ground* to *the Lord*. Nowhere are we told that God explicitly asked this of the first family. But even before being codified into Israel's laws, righteous men offered gifts to God. *Abel* apparently followed either his father's or his older brother's lead.

4b-5a. God's accepting Abel's *offering* and not Cain's has led to all sorts of speculation. Most propose that Cain didn't actually do anything wrong. Some have theorized that God preferred shepherds to farmers, in contrast to the Egyptians who despised shepherds. In short, the theory is that God preferred the offering of Abel because of what it signified in that time and place.

Instead, we understand that Abel brought the best of his flock as later required in Israel's laws, and Cain did not. This is an early introduction to a series of events in which God preferred a younger son to the firstborn in the face of cultural convention. While God had reason other than Abel's birth order to prefer the man's sacrifice, this account does pave the way for this theme to be pursued throughout the book.

5b-6. It is little wonder *Cain* felt snubbed. God recognized this and initiated a conversation with him by asking questions. This echoes His approach to Adam and Eve after they sinned. God was not ignorant of their deeds and thoughts.

This tactful approach from the powerful Creator emphasizes God's loving desire for relationship. Though He was not

pleased with Cain's sacrifice, God still actively sought out a relationship with the man. From the very beginning, then, we see *the Lord* seeking to save the lost.

7. God's question here implies what the writer of Hebrews asserted: that Cain was not accepted because he did not do well (Hebrews 11:4). Failure to do what one knows to be right opens the door to *sin*. God's warning contains a heartbreaking echo of the antagonistic relationship between Adam and Eve.

This is God's first instruction about sin, and it rings as true for us today. Ruling over sin isn't a matter of obsessing about it; it is about busying ourselves with doing the right thing. The first step to inviting sin into our lives is to neglect doing what we ought to be doing. It is the vacuum created by inactivity in righteousness that sucks wickedness into our lives.

II. Divine Mercy

Genesis 4:8-15

8 And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

9 And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?

10 And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.

11 And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;

12 When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

13 And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

14 Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and

from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.

15 And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.

8. Rather than heed God's warning, *Cain* committed the first murder, probably even the first premeditated murder. Cain did not slay *Abel* at home, but instead led him into *the field*.

Cain is an example of the extreme opposite of what a Christian ought to be. He did wrong instead of right. But instead of repenting, Cain went wild with jealousy.

9a. *The Lord* again confronted *Cain* with a question. Cain's lie indicated that he thought he could play dumb and God would be none the wiser. This lack of both respect and holy fear was reflected in Cain's inferior sacrifice.

9b. Here is another play on words. Abel was earlier introduced as a "keeper" of flocks (Genesis 4:2). In essence Cain asked God, "Am I the keeper of the keeper?"

10. This time the Lord's question is rhetorical. There's no need for Cain to say anything, because Abel's *blood* was crying out loudly. God will later declare the shedding of innocent blood to be a pollution on the land (Numbers 35:33).

11. Genesis 3-9 emphasizes that the estrangement between humans and God resulted not only in consequences for people but also for nonhuman creation. God still cares for His creation. For this reason, salvation is an all-out, multidimensional solution to the global sin catastrophe.

12. If Cain could not be trusted with his brother's life, he could not be trusted with God's land. The land itself would resist all of Cain's efforts to wrest sustenance

from it. And Cain could not simply run away from this problem. He could not find greener pastures elsewhere and resume his farming profession. No piece of land anywhere would cooperate with the first person who defiled the soil with human blood. He was therefore consigned to a life of roaming without a homeland.

13. The word translated *punishment* here has three senses: (1) It can refer to the wicked deed Cain committed. (2) The word could refer to the guilt Cain bore or felt because of what he did. And finally, (3) it could refer to the sentence that he has received, the most natural English understanding. This final sense is preferable because Cain did not ask for forgiveness.

14a. When Cain's parents were forced out of the garden, God's presence remained with them, even though they might have believed that God would abandon them. His faithfulness to them was evident.

14b. Cain's concern regarded his own family's desire for vengeance for Abel. He was convinced that his guilt would be known in any case and that, while God did not kill him outright now, He was effectively sentencing Cain to death.

15. Quite in character, God responded with mercy. He recognized the truth in Cain's concern. People are inclined toward evil from birth, and the desire for revenge is often a powerful motivator to act with evil, violent intent. Vengeful people do not trust God or leave vengeance to Him; they take it upon themselves to repay evil.

The text provides no clue as to what Cain's *mark* might have been. Cain would have to live with the consequences of his sin, but he would live nonetheless. We often experience the same. While our sins come with consequences, we know that through Christ we are spared death that is the natural consequence of sin.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

JUSTICE, VENGEANCE, AND MERCY

Into the Lesson

How does your approach to decision-making differ regarding daily and life-changing decisions?

Every decision and action has consequences—sometimes these are very predictable and sometimes they aren't. Today we will explore which should have been which as we consider one man's actions and God's reactions.

Into the Word

Read Genesis 4:1-8. How might things turned out differently if Cain's heart had been different?

Compare and contrast Genesis 4:9-15 with Genesis 3:9-24 by answering the following questions:

In what ways are these accounts similar and in what ways are they different?

How do these passages portray the justice, vengeance, and mercy of God?

Into Life

Do you use memory devices (like mnemonics) to remember important things? Develop a way to help remember how to respond to your own sinful expressions of anger (based on God's counsel to Cain in Genesis 4:6-7).

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God calls all people to turn to Him and live.