
The Brothers: The Escalation of Sin

Genesis 4

We have seen it in the news with criminals. I have seen with teenagers in my years in education. We see it sometimes in counseling. I have seen with teenagers in juvenile detention. The person has broken the law, disobeyed a rule, rebelled against an authority. But the convicted person, the accused, the sinner plays the victim. They have been wronged. People are against them. People don't understand them. People don't have all the facts. They are falsely accused. While the facts are clear, the perpetrator is posing as the victim.

As Christians, this sort of attitude and behavior should not surprise us. Perpetrators of crime have posed as victims of the legal process since time began. We recognize that in the account before us today.

The story here is intended to simply continue what has begun in chapter 3. The enmity between the seed, the expulsion out into the cursed earth, the guarded gate where men may meet God, but not enter the Garden are the backdrop for this chapter. Here, sin will escalate from the disobedience in the Garden to murder, rebellion, polygamy and prideful boasting.

The story intends to show how the dazzling wonders of culture began. For Israel leaving Egypt and entering Canaan, for Christians in the 21st Century, it is instructive for us to see the providence of God in the development of culture and yet the pervasive rebellion that energized much of it. This helps all of God's people in all ages to have a godly and righteous interaction with the culture around them.

The story also will show how hope comes through the promised seed. In grand contrast to the times of the son of wicked Cain, in the times of the son of godly Seth will men begin to call on the name of the Lord. The opening and closing verses form the outer, level A of the parallelism.

At the heart of this story is unbelief. The text will unfold how unbelief manifests itself, individually and corporately. God's people must learn how important faith, believing God in an obeying way, is and how dangerous unbelief is. As Israel would be approaching the Promised Land, and as we live in the midst of a sinful and wayward generation, we must not fail to believe God, trust Him and enter every day in all kinds of practical living ways, into His rest.

Prolog – The Anticipation through Sons

Moses now shifts the focus from the sad account of the fall of Adam and Eve to their two sons.

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.”² And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.

The Aspiration in the Brothers

(v.1-2a)

God blesses the “be fruitful and multiply” obedience of Adam and Eve with two sons. These are not their only children as is mentioned in Genesis 5, but these two are critical to the redemptive story line of the Bible.

The Association of the Brothers

(v.2b)

Through their respective occupations, Moses associates them with the past. Cain is associated with the curse as a worker of the ground. Abel is associated with the dominion responsibility of man as a keeper of the sheep.

There may also be a setup for what is about to happen.

The Sacrifice of Cain

(v.3-7)

Here come the two brothers to worship, to bring their offerings to God.

³In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. ⁶The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? ⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.”

Their Gifts

There is a time and place for the bringing of sacrifice. Some commentators see in this phrase, *in the course of time* and in the word *brought*, revelation and invitation from God to come to Him in a certain time and to a certain place. The immediate audience of Israelites would have heard and associated this appointed time with the Law’s establishment of the Sabbath and the Temple. If so, then here are Cain and Able, coming to worship God.

Each of them brings of the bounty of his own vocation. Cain brings produce. Abel brings a sheep. Now, we need to be careful about jumping to the conclusion that Cain is wrong to bring a gift from his harvest. When the Law is given, there are several categories of acceptable sacrifices that are grain offerings (Leviticus 2:12; Numbers 18:12). Further, we are *to honor the Lord with the firstfruits of all our increase* (Proverbs 3:9). But Cain may have been rejected because he was supposed to bring a lamb. If so, part of what unfolds will be jolted pride and the necessity for humility to obtain an acceptable offering from his brother.

The emphasis in the text is on the difference in the attitude with which it is brought. Notice the difference in how these offerings are described. Cain’s is simply the fruit of

the ground. Nothing is said about its quality and quantity. Abel's offering is referred to as being the firstborn of the flock and the fat portions. These two descriptions point to a gladness and fullness in what is brought. To an Israelite hearing this, they understand that Abel has brought an offering that serves as his sacrifice for sin and his delight in fellowship with God. Cain has come assuming access without blood and expecting fellowship without acknowledgment of his sinful state before God.

Hebrews 11:4 interprets these verses for us, giving us the essence of what is going on here. *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.* [ESV] Clearly, the key difference according to the author of Hebrews is faith. Quite simply, Cain comes in unbelief and Abel comes in faith. Unbelief will expect and possibly even demand God's attention, blessings and approval while rejecting God's way. Faith comes humbly and happily, confessing sin and entering into communion with God.

God's Rejection

(v.4b-5a)

God responds to the offering and the offeror. He has regard for Abel and disregard for Cain. Hebrews 11 tells us that this regard is a matter of acceptance by God. God has regard, has a relationship with those whom he accepts. Sacrifice is necessary to be accepted by God. And we have been accepted in the Beloved. It is a matter of commendation from God. God commends Abel for his faith, his believing God in an obeying way. Not only is he received, but he is publicly approved.

Now Proverbs 21:27 tell us that *the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; how much more when he brings it with evil intent.* [ESV] Cain does not become wicked by offering an unbelieving and improper sacrifice, then committing murder. These actions are the work of unbelief, of being a wicked man. God will not accept and will not commend his sacrifice.

Cain illustrates the kind of coming to God that is merely duty. It is obedience without the accompanying belief and desires. This way of Cain will unfold all through the Bible where true worship is substituted with religion, with the error that external performance of even required ritual will be pleasing to God. Cain's is religion, duty, outward obedience without reality, delight and heart obedience.

God's Warning

(v.5b-7)

Where Cain's heart is in this offering is exposed in his response to God's rejection and warning. Cain is very angry that Abel has been accepted and he has been rejected. He may well have been angry with God; but that is futile and foolish. Dust eaters and ground diggers have no right to be angry with the One who wields the flaming sword and is accompanied by the Cherubim.

Cain's body language reflects his heart thoughts. His face falls. There is almost a sense of pouting. His lips are set, his teeth are grinding, and his eyes are looking down because his heart is churning with angry words. He is angry because he believed God would accept him without repentance. He wanted God's approval without meeting God's standard. He is disappointed and frustrated, not only by the disapproval of God, but by the evident pleasure of God in his brother.

God's questions confront this sin and anger in three ways:

A Question over Responses

This is the kind of question that says, "Look at yourself. Can't you see that something is wrong?" It looks beyond the outward symptoms to the heart causes. It asks "why" in a way that points Cain's ears to his heart words.

A Call to Repentance

The call to repent is filled with gracious promise. "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" If Cain will believe God and desire what God demands, then he will do well. When people do well out of faith, then they are accepted and commended by God.

A Warning against Danger

God warns him of the great danger he is in. Sin is like a crouching animal, predator, a leopard or demon, waiting just outside the door. If Cain does not change his heart, then he will be dominated and mastered by sin. But he must rule over it, master sin itself.

Unbelief is evident when people try to approach and be accepted by God in any way except through faith, through believing God in an obeying way.

The Sin of Cain

(v.8-16)

The anger and jealousy in Cain's heart now cause him to hate his brother.

⁸ Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. ⁹ Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" ¹⁰ And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. ¹¹ And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." ¹³ Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ Then the Lord said to him, "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. ¹⁶ Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

In his Commission

(v.8)

He begins with plotting and planning. Many good manuscripts add to, "He spoke to his brother" the words, "Let us go out into the field." This makes it clearer that what follows is premeditated. He invited his brother to join him in his fields where in secret away from the eyes of others, he could kill him. Then, Cain rises up against his brother and murders him. When Cain strikes out at Abel, he is striking out at the image of God being manifested by the approved and commended righteousness of Abel. As we will find out later with Noah, all murder of people ends up being a striking out against God.

This is why this theme of violence and murder is going to be an important one running through Genesis.

So, Cain becomes the first in a long line of wicked unbelievers who will express the enmity against believers. Sometimes that hatred will be restrained. Sometimes it will be only in words. But other times it will be in deeds, in abuse, in slander, in plotting, in persecution, in killing. It culminated in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. Finally, as the Psalmist predicts and Peter preaches, the nations will unite themselves to make war on the Prince of Peace and He will strike them with the rod of iron, the sword of the Word of God.

In his Confrontation

(v.9-12)

The Lord confronts Cain with his sin. Once again, we see the powerful use of questions to expose. What a wonderful question, "Cain, where is your brother?" Jesus used a question like this with Samaritan woman at the well, "Go get your husband." The question both probes the conscience and provides an opportunity to confess and repent.

Whereas Adam and Eve attempt to conceal their sin and move away from God, Cain's response is challenging and aggressive moving towards God. His anger is now directed against God. In his response to God, he challenges a fundamental design by God. People, all people, are to live together in community. Believers are supposed to model what that is like. Love God and love neighbor is fleshed out in family and church community first. But Cain denies this. He denies he is responsible for his brother. He denies that he is responsible for his well-being. He implicitly denies that he is accountable for his death.

In his Consequences

(v.11-12)

The first consequence is in the cry that rises up for justice. This is not just the vengeance of getting even, but the demand that justice take place. When innocent blood is shed, then punishment ought to follow. The punishment for murder is death. The wages of sin is dying. Abel's blood cries out. But Jesus' blood speaks of better things (Hebrews 12:18-24) – that justice has been settled.

The second is that mercy tempers justice. God could have summarily executed Cain. But He does not. Out of sheer mercy, God metes out a punishment that is basically a life sentence. He is punished in his wandering and in his working. He will not be able to settle down to grow and prosper. The land will also resist his efforts at his own vocation, farming. This is a severe mercy; it is a terrible punishment, but it is not an execution. Sinners today experience this mercy – we live in God's world sinning against him all the time and yet He gives us rain and food, providing our needs.

In his Complaint

(v.13-15)

Listen to the self-pity, irreverence and unrepentance of Cain. Here is his pride masquerading as pity. He is a whiner. He is rejecting the wisdom, mercy and righteous decisions of his Creator. He is poised to see life as too big, too difficult, too hard. He mockingly echoes the expulsion from the garden. He is expelled from the ground. He is preparing in his own mind the justification for what he would build later.

His unbelieving irreverence is shown in His wrong interpretation of the nature of his punishment. While he may be banished from the presence of God, he is not invisible to the knowledge of God. There is no place that even the righteous punishment by God can put you away from the all-seeing eye of God. Sinners living under judgment and in contempt of God are still living before the face of God.

His unrepentance causes him to fear from others what he has done to Cain. He well knows that the just punishment is execution. He knows that he can justly be hunted down and executed as the murderer he is. It seems to me that he is almost accusing God of letting people do what He, God, will not do Himself.

Marvel then at the mercy and purpose of God. He marks Cain (and we have NO idea what that mark was and it doesn't matter) in such a way that announces to people that this being punished one is under the protection of God. How stunning. How amazing. How deeply wicked is the corrupt and calculating heart that sees in God's severe mercies, unbearable circumstances.

(For those who are interested, Cain's complaint follows the formulae of the Lament Psalms. The lament Psalms reflect perplexity and a movement towards God. Here, Cain's lament is self-pity and a movement at God.)

In his Contempt

(v.16)

He moves away from the presence of God and settles down in Nod, or *Wandering*. Here is sheer contempt for God, His presence and His punishment. Cain does not live as a repentant nomad near the Garden where the Presence of God is. He moves to a place away from that presence of God in which he settles down and eventually builds a walled city. He either chooses or names the place that he lives in so that he can say, he lives in *wandering* and is therefore a *wanderer*.

Unbelief is evident when people do not love their brothers and reject the consequences of sin.

The Sons of Cain

(v.17-24)

This paragraph unfolds the development of progress and perversion.

¹⁷ Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch. ¹⁸ To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad fathered Mehujael, and Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech. ¹⁹ And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. ²⁰ Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. ²¹ His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. ²² Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.

²³ Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:

I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.

²⁴ If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold."

Rejection of a Just Punishment

(v.17)

In rejecting his just punishment, Cain builds a city as an act of rebellion against God. He refuses to be a nomad. And since he cannot be near the Garden of God, he will build his own substitute, the city of man. He will call it the name of his own son. The enmity in the curse travels down through history in stories of the wars between the city of God and the city of man. This does not make cities evil in themselves. It does imply what is often observed that they are centers for the rapid spread and downward spiral of sin and its corruption.

Introduction of Polygamous Marriage

(v.18-19)

The first son of Cain, Lamech, expands his power and his perversion through the introduction of polygamy. He marries two women. This is not an act in ignorance of righteousness but an innovation of evil. The point here is plain for Israel and all God's people. The practice of having more than one wife at a time begins in rebellion and continues as a wicked, but common practice.

Initiation of a Diverse Culture

(v.20-22)

In the midst of this wickedness, great natural human wisdom and skill emerges. The dominion mandate is being carried out as a natural function of the way God made people. Each Lamech's sons becomes the founder or father, the inventor of an area or sphere of cultural and vocational development. Jabal was skilled in husbandry and livestock. Jubal was skilled in music and the making of musical instruments. Tubal-cain was the inventor and developer of skilled machine and tool making.

Once again, the mercy of God allows advancement and progress to occur, even in the wicked. It also shows us that just because the originator of something was wicked, does not make that wicked itself. It is the use to which farming, ranching, music and technology are put to which is determined by the heart.

One final observation. The pre-flood world was not primitive. These are not cave-men. There is some emerging evidence now, both through the pre-flood legends and the archeological dig at pre-flood levels, that there was an amazing amount of knowledge, skill and technology.

Assertion of an Arrogant Impunity

(v.23-24)

This song is a celebration of arrogance and autonomy. This is the "tough-guy" boasting. He is untouchable. He can murder as he wishes without regard to being held in account. Lamech is the first mobster, the first tough-guy, the first wise-guy. Some young man wounded him, probably with words and he struck back by murdering him. And if Cain was untouchable, then he is even more untouchable.

I believe that this unwillingness to forgive and arrogant unrepentance is what Jesus is referring to when he tells Peter to forgive, "not just seven times, but seventy times seven." Who do you want to be? Do you want to be like Lamech? Isn't unforgiveness a breach of community unity? Doesn't unforgiveness lead to anger, arrogance and abuse? Doesn't unforgiveness often shape murderous intent?

Unbelief is evident in the rejection of God's standards for purity in the culture.

Epilog – The Appointment of a Son

(v.25-26)

Once again, we are returned to the original pair. This short paragraph bookends this chapter. What began with the wonderful promise in sons developed into hatred, violence and corruption. Now we find that God has appointed a son.

God Provides a Son

(v.25)

This is what Seth means. It means that God has provided an appointed one. The faith that heard and believed with hope what God said, now points through this appointed son to another appointed and approved Son. While Seth cannot take away the sins of the world, his descendent will.

Man Calls on God

(v.26)

In contrast to the wicked son of Cain, Lamech, Seth's son is godly Enosh. When we look at the genealogies, we find they are contemporaries. Even while wickedness is spreading and spiraling, there are those during the days of Enosh who call on the Name of the Lord. Abel's blood cries out. Now men call out. Abel's blood calls out for vengeance. Men begin to call out for mercy.

Reflect and Respond

There is so much here to summarize and apply. Let us consider just these:

WATCH THE PATTERN IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF UNBELIEF. It begins in worship. It spreads outward to the immediate community of family and neighbor. It then spreads like contagion in the culture until its deadly poison infects everything. This spread is expounded in and explained in Romans 1. There is a great exchange taking place. There is a growing rebellion with steps of judgment and deeper sin. Be careful, brothers and sisters. When your worship of God is mere ritual and no longer real, you are on the edge of a deep and dark precipice.

APPROACH GOD WITH TRUE FAITH THAT IS APPROVED AND COMMENDED. Cain's way of ritual and religion, of dutiful obedience only, made him terribly vulnerable to sin's mastery. How you come to gathered, public worship is a reflection of how you walk with God. If you walk with God in faith through the week, you will worship God in faith on the Lord's Day. But there are some of you I am sure who are here like Cain – you do not believe these things and thus do not sense their great reality.

BE ON ALERT FOR THE SYMPTOMS OF UNBELIEF. (Adapted from *Creation and Blessing*, Ross)

Unbelief produces anger and jealousy as God approves the more faithful (v.1-5).

Unbelief disregards the warnings against sin (v.6-8).

Unbelief refuses to accept responsibility for sin (v.9).

Unbelief protests the punishment for sin, often in expressions of self-pity (v.10-14).

Unbelief may continue even under Divine mercy provision and protection (v.15-16)

Unbelief rejects the limitations of the consequences or punishment for sin (v.16-17).

Unbelief is contagious for our children and for our culture (v.18-22).

Unbelief charges and challenges God (v.23-24)

WE SHOULD NOT BE SURPRISED BY THE ENMITY AND HATRED OF THE WORLD. All through the Bible, God's people have suffered at the hands of the world. We should be alarmed when the church is at peace with the world and moves into friendship with it.

BE WARNED OF THE DANGERS OF ANGER, JEALOUSY, GRUDGES AND UNFORGIVENESS. Humble yourself. Put off your pride. Seek the transforming grace of God to love Him and love neighbor. Meditate much on Ephesians 4:17-5:21. Consider the meekness and gentleness, the spiritual strength and stamina of the Lord Jesus.

WE NEED TO THINK DEEPLY ABOUT THE GROWING EXPOSURE OF OUR YOUNG PEOPLE TO VIOLENCE. Vicarious violence is just as wicked as vicarious sex. The Bible commends to us the strength and gentleness of meekness. We must do all we can to foster that, in ourselves and in our children.

WE MUST BELIEVE AND TREASURE THE PRIVILEGE AND RESPONSIBILITY TO LIVE IN COMMUNITY, TO CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD. Consider the practical exhortations from 1 John 3:11-18 where we have a New Covenant application of the Genesis 4 account.

¹¹ For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ¹² 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. ¹³ Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

GOD HAS APPOINTED AND APPROVED HIS OWN SON AS OUR REDEEMER AND RULER. Do not challenge His counsel. Do not treat His mercies with irreverence and arrogance. Believe and bow to Him. Be one among the number who in our own day, begin to call on the Name of the Lord.