

## Genesis 4:1 – 16

<sup>1</sup> Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, 'I have gotten a manchild with the help of the LORD.' <sup>2</sup> Again, she gave birth to his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. <sup>3</sup> So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. <sup>4</sup> Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; <sup>5</sup> but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? <sup>7</sup> If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.' <sup>8</sup> Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. <sup>9</sup> Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is Abel your brother?' And he said, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?' <sup>10</sup> He said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground. <sup>11</sup> Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. <sup>12</sup> When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth.' <sup>13</sup> Cain said to the LORD, 'My punishment is too great to bear! <sup>14</sup> Behold, You have driven me this day from the face of the ground; and from Your face I will be hidden, and I will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.' <sup>15</sup> So the LORD said to him, 'Therefore whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold.' And the LORD appointed a sign for Cain, so that no one finding him would slay him. <sup>16</sup> Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

### Historical and Cultural Background

- *Temptation:* With Adam and Eve, the serpent tempted them; they had an *external* voice to covet something that was not theirs. Cain did not need an *external* voice to covet something that was not his (God's regard for Abel). The coveting is now *internal* to his human nature (Gen.4:5b, 7).
- *The Sacrifices of Cain and Abel:* Opinions vary about why God accepted Abel's gift but not Cain's.
  - Perhaps God saw both men's internal heart posture (sincerity vs. tokenism); as God received both animal sacrifices and grain sacrifices later in the life of Israel (Lev.1 – 7).
  - My belief, however, is that God had set a pattern for animal sacrifice in Genesis 3:21. Animal life, which was innocent, in some sense 'covered' human life, which was corrupted. Abel separated the 'fat portions' (Gen.4:4) from the animal, and fat is the part of the body which houses the toxins. That separation became institutionalized in Israel: God alone consumed the fat by fire, and it 'soothed' Him (Lev.3:17; 7:22 – 25; 8:16, 25; 9:10, 19 – 20, 24; 10:15). God separated things (Gen.1:1 – 2:3; 2:21 – 22), so Abel was imitating God by separating the toxins from the organism. Cain, by contrast, was offering grain, and the land was affected by humanity's sin (Gen.3:17 – 19). While God received grain offerings (Lev.2), he never commanded them. He did, however, require
- *Hebrew Names:* Names are often significant as characterizations of people/places, or people's relation to God

Cain: 'gotten/acquired'

Abel: 'breath'

Nod: 'wandering'

Enoch: 'consecrated'

## Questions

1. Does the fall continue?
  - a. How do human choices affect human nature?
  - b. How do human choices affect human relationships?
2. What are Cain's choices?
  - a. Adam blamed Eve; Cain blames Abel. But Adam repented and Cain doesn't.
  - b. Cain's connection to the ground is worsened further than Adam's connection to the ground
  - c. All his choices shape his family line!
3. Why do you think God accepted Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's? What evidence is there for either theory?
  - a. The attitude theory (sincerity vs. tokenism):
    - i. Each brought what he worked with: Cain with the fruit of the ground and Abel with the firstlings of his flock
    - ii. Abel brought 'firstlings' but Cain is not said to bring the 'firstfruits' of his harvest.
    - iii. Grain sacrifices were accepted by God later in the life of Israel (Lev.1 – 7), which suggests that grain sacrifices were in principle okay here.
    - iv. But there might have been something between this point and that point in time which made grain offerings acceptable, such as the new antagonism between humans and animals after the flood (Gen.9:2). If animals were less easily raised, tamed, and offered, then perhaps grain offerings became more necessary.
  - b. The innocent animal blood theory:
    - i. The ground had been cursed by Adam and Eve because they became unable to produce life in the fullest way God intended, so God pronounced it cursed (Gen.3:17 – 19). So giving back something to God that was implicated by this curse was not as honoring to God.
    - ii. The animals had not been cursed; they still represented something uncorrupted.
    - iii. Furthermore, God had shed innocent animal blood to make animal skin clothes for Adam and Eve (3:21). They were covered by God, and later the Hebrew word *kippur* – to cover – was the root and idea behind the word 'atonement.'
    - iv. And this very story of Abel's blood cursing the land for Cain (Gen.4:10) tends to reinforce this idea that innocent blood helps corrupted blood continue to live on the land, while blood that is corrupted even more (because Cain spilled the blood of Abel who shares his blood) cannot bear fruit on the land at all.
    - v. God wanted Cain to sacrifice an animal *for Cain's own good*, both in the immediate sense (so the land could still be fruitful) and in the long term sense (as a prophetic foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Jesus, not just for God's 'pleasure.'
4. Why does the narrator tell us about the 'fat portions' of the animal that Abel separated (Gen.4:4)?
  - a. Fat is probably the stuff around the liver and kidneys and digestive tract, which stores up the toxins of the body.
  - b. Did the Israelites understand fat as a negative substance? And the answer to that question needs to be pursued from multiple angles.
    - i. Curiously, 'fat' is used as a positive idiom for the best of agriculture: 'You shall eat the fat portions of the land' (Gen.45:18; Num.18:12; Dt.32:14; Ps.81:16; 147:47). And the Hebrew word *heleb* on that occasion is the same for the internal 'fat' that accumulates around the liver and kidneys, what is sometimes translated the 'suet' or 'caul.' The 'fat' marbled in the muscle, which was edible, is denoted by a different Hebrew word, *shumen*.<sup>1</sup> Given this usage, would it not be more natural to view 'fat' as a delicacy, and God's claim on the 'fat' as His claim on the best of Israel's offering and livelihood? However, a similar literary idiom is used with the motif of 'blood.' God sharply distinguished the substance of blood from other parts of the animal (Gen.9:4), and He strictly forbade the Israelites from consuming it (Lev.3:17; 7:26). Yet, Scripture uses 'blood' as a metaphor for the juice of grapes, which Israel would consume (Gen.49:11; Dt.32:14). So Scripture is comfortable prohibiting fat and blood from animals, and also using those words idiomatically as a positive metaphor for agriculture. Fat and blood

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<sup>1</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book 5, *The Book of Holiness, Sefer Kedushah*; Treatise 2 on *Forbidden Foods, Ma'achalot Assurot*; Chapter 7, sec 7 (pages 352M 187-188Y)

- seems to be associated with the category of ‘gift.’ As human beings render gifts to God, God returns something similar as gift.
- ii. The level of toxicity in the human body has been a concern since ancient times. Ancient Egyptians made associations between toxicity and stool, and ancient Greeks believed that bodily fluids like bile, phlegm, and blood carried toxins.<sup>2</sup> Animal-borne diseases were a concern for all people, and continues to be. Anyone partitioning an animal carcass and studying its anatomy would quickly become aware of the role of the kidneys and liver in expelling urine. And urine and excrement were certainly understood by the Israelites to be unclean, not just by biblical imagery and commandment (Dt.23:12 – 13), which it was, but by aesthetic and sanitary reasons as well.
  - iii. Additionally, the Levitical laws governing clean and unclean animals assume that the Israelites observe the physical appearance and behavior of animals (Lev.11; Dt.14), and make associations from there to life and death. Animals like pigs and lobsters were associated with death and uncleanness because they ate dead things; they were scavengers. An animal which has divided hoofs and chews cud was clean. That particular combination seems to reflect a respect for creational demarcations established by Genesis 1, which of course remind the Israelites of life. The Bible relates the physical appearance, behavior, and condition of the animals to earlier literary precedents in the biblical story. So physical health is a natural and reasonable association, and is connected to biblical theology in Leviticus itself when the book speaks of human skin diseases, mold in homes, and other concerns (Lev.13) with the overall concern for the clean-unclean imagery. In which case, we need to observe both the history of human knowledge (as above), and those earlier literary patterns in Scripture.
- c. If Abel is separating fat-toxins from the animal, how is he acting like the pattern God used in Genesis 1 to separate one thing from another, or in Genesis 2 when He separated Eve from Adam? God separated good things from good things. But now, Abel and really all human beings need to separate corrupted things (the corruption of sin) from good things.
5. What strikes you about Cain’s response in v.5? Why does Cain become very angry? Why does his countenance fall in v.5?
    - a. Coveting and jealousy
      - i. Cain is jealous of what his brother received from God: approval. We’re not even sure if that approval had a concrete form!
      - ii. Notice that jealousy of what one doesn’t have is now internalized in Cain. He doesn’t need an outside voice like the serpent to make him feel jealous. It is now within him.
      - iii. This is probably why God gave the tenth commandment, ‘Do not covet.’ This is the commandment that the apostle Paul said he failed before he came to Jesus: ‘For I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind...’ (Rom.7:7 – 8). Perhaps coveting is seen in Scripture as the foremost moral problem, and the first symptom of sin-sickness.
    - b. Moral relativism
      - i. Notice also that Cain wants to call evil good and good evil. He is showing that the desire to define good and evil for one’s self has truly become internal to human beings.
      - ii. Illus: ‘Because it seemed clear that wars were not made by generations and their special stupidities, but wars were made instead by something ignorant in the human heart’ (John Knowles, *A Separate Peace*, paperback edition, p.193).
      - iii. Illus: Renowned German theologian and psychotherapist Eugen Drewermann argues that when humans kill, we do so ultimately in an attempt to regain the lost absolute recognition from God. Drewermann’s key ideas were first developed in his monumental analysis of Gen. 2 – 11, on the relationship between aggression and the desperate search for God in the Bible.
      - iv. Discuss: Do you think there is any other explanation for why human beings do evil?

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<sup>2</sup> Chen TS, Chen PS. ‘Intestinal Autointoxication: A Medical Leitmotif,’ *Journal of Clinical Gastroenterology*. 1989;11(4):434–441; cited in David R. Seaman, ‘Toxins, Toxicity, and Endotoxemia: A Historical and Clinical Perspective for Chiropractors,’ *Journal of Chiropr Humanit*. 2016 Dec; 23(1):68–76.

1. If you say that it's because of external reasons that we do evil, then why haven't we fixed those external reasons yet?
  2. If you say that there is no good and evil, and only our opinions – really, there is no good and evil?
  - c. This is why the fall narrative is a *narrative*. Something that started externally to humanity has now become internal to humanity: jealousy and the desire to define good and evil for one's self, even over and against God's definition.
  - d. How else could Cain have responded? With humility, repentance. He could hand the definition of good and evil back over to God.
6. What strikes you about God's response in v.6?
- a. He once again approaches sinful humanity with questions
  - b. Notice that the structure is chiasmatic:

<sup>6</sup> Why are you *angry*?

And why has your *countenance* fallen?

<sup>7</sup> If you do well, will not your *countenance* be lifted up?

And if you do not do well, does not *sin* crouch at the door?

And its desire is for you, but you must master it.'

- c. God asks questions. The last statement is translated 'Sin is crouching at your door, but you must master it.' Meaning, God wanted Cain to recognize that sin was in him and was trying to master him. God wanted to help Cain master it. But the first phrase might be translated as, 'Does not sin crouch at the door?' Making it a question aligns it with the pattern of God asking questions, and also aligns the phrase with the earlier question, 'Why are you angry?'
  - d. Jealousy leads to anger, which leads to wrongful blame. Who blamed someone wrongfully? Adam blamed Eve wrongfully. Now Cain does the same thing. And he will strike out at Abel.
  - e. Application: Do you think you can handle your own sin by yourself, without Jesus, who is the only human being to have mastered sin? Why or why not?
7. But unlike Adam and Eve, who answered God's questions, and stepped back into relationship with God, Cain does not respond to God.
- a. Instead, he 'tells Abel his brother' (v.9). What does he tell him? Apparently, what God told him.
  - b. But then, Cain kills Abel. He does not repent of the root cause of his jealousy and anger, so he eliminates the *occasion* of his jealousy: his brother.
  - c. The ironic poetry of the situation is that Cain kills 'breath' (the meaning of Abel's name). Perhaps Abel symbolizes the breath of God, the word of God, to Cain. Cain is trying to strike out and kill God by killing Abel.
8. What strikes you about God's response to Cain's murder?
- a. God starts with a question *again!* He is still trying to get Cain to repent and step back into relationship.
  - b. But Cain doesn't. He retorts with another question, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' That's become a famous question.
  - c. What happens to Cain now?
    - i. Abel's blood cries out to God. His life calls out still, even though his body is dead.
    - ii. The ground is cursed further for Cain. It seems that it's not for anyone else, but Cain in particular. The curse seems to follow him around wherever he goes.
    - iii. Which really means that Cain has further cursed himself, and further corrupted his own human nature. Adam and Eve already cursed human nature to some degree, but they turned back to God in hope and trust. Cain took it further. This is a major point of the narrative of Genesis.
      1. Illus: In the *Harry Potter* stories, when someone cast the killing curse, that person tore their own soul. Other-harm always results in self-harm.
      2. Illus: Wendell Berry wrote in *The Hidden Wound*, 'No man will ever be whole and dignified and free except in the knowledge that the men around him are whole and dignified and free... If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself. As the master, or as a member of the

dominant race, he has felt little compulsion to acknowledge or speak of it; the more painful it has grown the more deeply he has hidden it within himself. But the wound is there, and is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as it is in his society.’

3. All sin involves self-harm. It may also involve other-harm. But even consensual sin results in self-harm. Self-harm is always involved because you are damaging your own human nature (Prov.8:36; 1 Cor.6:18; etc.)
  4. Illus: Neuroscience tells us that if you watch porn, take crack, or watch excessive video games, the same neural pathways in your brain are stimulated and strengthened. That means that these escapist, fantasy activities become that much more enticing the next time. All sin involves self-harm.
  5. Later in Genesis, God will say that the violence of human beings has reached such a point that everyone’s heart (besides Noah and his family) has become totally corrupt (Gen.6:5 – 6; 8:21). God now has to bring about the healing of human nature. He’ll do that in and through Jesus.
- iv. Cain has to wander. He has to be dependent on God in the way of a vagrant and wanderer. He hates that feeling of insecurity. He also has to depend on God for protection and security from his own family.
  - v. Cain blames God. ‘You have driven me this day from the face of the ground, and from Your face I will be hidden’ (v.13). But is that true? Hasn’t Cain just driven himself from the face of the ground? And isn’t he trying to hide himself from God’s face?
    1. Notice the equation of the face of God with the face of the land. This tends to confirm my connection between receiving God’s blessing through the fruitfulness of the land.
    2. Notice the irony. Cain settles, but in Nod, the land of ‘wandering.’ No matter where he tries to settle physically, from God’s point of view, Cain is wandering around.
    3. Notice that Cain blames *God*. Adam had blamed Eve, but then implicitly repented. Cain blames God, and does not repent. Then, he builds a city, and encloses himself in it. He names it after his son Enoch, which means that he is trying to control his son, making his son and his family do the farming, defending, and so on. He wants to defy God and still keep God out. *This is the beginning of hell on earth, in a relational sense. Hell in a relational sense is locking yourself in and trying to keep God out. Then, everything God does in His constant goodness to call you out of hiding sounds like torment and threat.*
  - vi. What sign does God appoint for Cain? We don’t know. It’s not discussed further. But the next time God appoints a sign for anyone, it’s a rainbow with Noah and circumcision for Abraham. Those signs represent God’s restraint and cleansing. Perhaps whatever the sign is on Cain, God is saying He is exercising restraint and cleansing.
9. What’s the point of this story? Why tell the story of the two sons of Adam and Eve?
- a. To show how human nature has become corrupted, and can become corrupted even further with our choices.
  - b. To show how jealousy had been external, but is now internal to humanity. So is the desire to define good and evil for one’s self.
  - c. To show how sin affects relationships of all sorts (human to human, human to land), and progresses from jealousy to anger to murder.
  - d. To help us understand from Adam and Eve’s point of view the great pain and disappointment of watching their children be affected by sin. They must now hope for faithfulness and deliverance from another line. We’ll see that in 4:16 – 26.
  - e. To prepare us for God’s diagnosis in Gen.6:5 – 6 that the human heart has become corrupt and corruptible further
  - f. To help us understand how Jesus must solve the human nature problem. It’s not that he takes the wrath of God so that God can be satisfied with how bad we are. He has to heal human nature and make a new humanity.