

Genesis – Lesson 5

Cain and Abel

Read Genesis 4:1-8.

1. What may Eve have believed *about* Cain when she spoke of him in 4:1? Why is this significant in light of Cain's *choice* of sacrifice in 4:3?

Eve may have believed that she was bearing the “seed” promised to her in Genesis 3:15; she may have believed that God had now given to her the descendent that would crush the serpent who was responsible for the temptation that led to the pain she now experienced in childbirth. This is significant in regards to Cain's choice of sacrifice in this way: because Cain was thought by Eve to *be* this child, she may have raised Cain to believe it. When Cain chose to bring a sacrifice, he brought one from *his* particular occupation (i.e. a farmer), believing that a grain and/or fruit offering was good enough. After all, wasn't he the *promised* one, and wouldn't his toil be sufficient before the Creator? Would not his offering to God be perfectly acceptable given his *position* as the promised child, even though the *clear precedent* of a blood sacrifice had already been made? This may explain (as we shall see) why Cain was so upset that God had accepted *Abel's* offering and not his own.

2. (a) List three reasons why *Abel's* sacrifice was pleasing to God, but *Cain's* was rejected?

It would appear that Abel's sacrifice was accepted because: 1) it was a blood offering, in keeping with God's precedent in 3:21, 2) it was the *firstborn* of his flock, indicating a true sacrifice of something valuable, and 3) it was offered with a motive of thanksgiving, implied by God's response and Cain's despondency in 4:8ff. Cain's offering, then, was rejected because 1) it was an offering from the ground, rather an offering of life, 2) because it was not a living offering, no mention can be made of its relative *value*, and 3) Cain clearly did not offer it under the assumption that God required something *specific*; his motivation and attitude *failed*.

- (b) How do you know that God was not rejecting *Cain*, but only his sacrifice?

In verse 7, God gives Cain the opportunity to do what is “*well*” (or “*right*”); God gives Cain another chance to bring a properly acceptable offering in the right attitude and motivation. However, even though God does offer Cain a second chance, in reality, the *offering* and the *one offering it* are (in many ways) indistinguishable in the economy of God. It is a true statement to say that God *is* rejecting Cain because Cain has not brought what is right; the offering is *reflective* of the nature of the one bringing it. Cain is considered by God to be unacceptable, as is reflected in the offering he brings. To be accepted, Cain must bring what is right; the two go hand-in-hand. This is particularly true in all matters of right-standing with God: attempting to bring to God what is *unacceptable* to him implies that we *ourselves* are unacceptable to God! Our sacrifice is indicative of our relationship to God. Thus, we must bring a *perfect* sacrifice in order to be considered *perfect* in our standing before God. It is *here* that the gospel of Jesus Christ is found: the only perfect sacrifice we can possibly bring to God is the very blood of Jesus himself, the perfect lamb of God which reflects our desire to be perfect in the sight of God. To bring *anything* else is to say to God that we do *not* desire to be perfect in his sight, thus we will be rejected.

(c) What does it mean in 4:7 that sin was “*crouching at the door?*” How was Cain to “*rule over it?*”

God had given Cain an opportunity to *repent* (see 3b below), to change his mind about his relative importance before God (and the importance of his offering), to go to Abel and seek a *proper* offering, and then to humbly bring it to God and be forgiven and restored. However, Cain was *incensed* that his younger brother was more pleasing to God than him. After all, wasn't Cain the promised child (see 1a above)? The sin was *arrogance* and *pride*, and it was about to consume him and destroy him. Cain was to “*master*” it by admitting that *he* was not at the center of the universe, and to humble himself before God. Unfortunately, this sin *did* consume him and he killed his brother (see 2d below).

(d) What was Cain *supposed* to do? Why did he kill Abel *instead*? How is this *illustrative* of the reaction of the religious leadership to Jesus in John 5?

Cain was *supposed* to go to Abel and seek from his brother an animal to be used as an offering. Instead, he lured Abel into the field (see the textual variant in 4:8) and killed him. It is reasonable to assume that Cain killed his brother because he perceived that he was *better* than him (i.e. as the promised child), and that God's “*passing over*” of Cain to accept Abel was more than he could bear. After all, this “*passing over*” cast serious doubts on whether Cain was anybody special *at all!* His murderous intent was born out of his rabid *jealousy* of God's perceived *preference* of Abel over himself, and Cain decided to eliminate this threat to his position by killing the one who *personified* it. This is *exactly* what the religious leadership did to Jesus: they perceived him as a threat to their *privileged* position before God, and they sought to murder him to eliminate this threat.

Read Genesis 4:9-16.

3. (a) How did Cain *respond* to God's condemnation of him for killing his brother?

Cain responding by *complaining* that God's righteous judgment was “*greater than [he could] bear.*” He complained that God's punishment upon him *was greater than the sin that had been committed*, and argued that such a punishment would leave him *vulnerable* to attack himself. Instead of recognizing that he *deserved* such a punishment, he argued that God was lumping upon him more than he was worthy of. How similar this is to those who argue that their sin, as egregious as it is before a holy God, does *not* deserve an eternal punishment, but only a slap-on-the-wrist and a quick wink by God!

(b) Define the term *repentance*. Why is repentance an *essential* element to forgiveness (see Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38, 3:19).

Repentance is 1) a change of mind and heart regarding a particular set of behaviors, followed by 2) a change of behavior consistent with that change of mind and heart. Cain was given *two* (2) distinct opportunities to repent: once when his offering was rejected and once when God judged him for his sin. However, Cain *failed* to repent in either case, acting in violence against his brother on the first occasion and whining on the second. Repentance is an *essential* element to forgiveness because forgiveness is *only* granted when genuine repentance is offered. God does not *wink* at sin; sin will be judged and punished. But, to receive genuine forgiveness, the kind that comes through the salvific work of Christ, we must be willing to *turn away* from the way that we think about our sin and to *actively* seek to change our behaviors. Not that the *success* of that turning determines our forgiveness, but our willingness to *seek* repentance before God in a genuine change of heart and mind.

(c) Compare Cain to David in 2 Samuel 12 and Psalm 51. What was *different* in David's response?

Both Cain and David were murderers: Cain killed his brother, and David killed the husband of Bathsheba to cover his adulterous affair with her. Both were confronted with their sin, both were *judged* for their sin (Cain was cursed to wander the earth, David was judged in the death of the child born from the adulterous relationship), and both were given an opportunity (under that judgment) to repent and be restored. Cain refused, but David recognized that he had sinned and was *worthy* of judgment. David threw himself upon the mercy of the Lord and was restored; Cain walked away angry and condemned.

(d) What *judgments* were pronounced on Cain? How are they *different* from those given to Adam?

Cain was judged in these ways: 1) the ground would no longer yield food for him as a farmer, 2) he would now be a wanderer (searching for food from whomever would provide it), and 3) (by implication from v. 14c) someone who would be rejected by others as a "*fugitive*" and deemed a *threat* to them. The difference of Cain's judgment to Adam's is in *degree*: while both men were farmers before their sin, Adam would continue to receive food from the soil, while Cain would not. In terms of relationship with other people, Adam would continue to have friendship with others, but Cain would not. And, in terms of a relationship with God, Adam would still enjoy a broken and distant one, but Cain would have none at all, driven away from God entirely to wander the earth.

Read Genesis 4:17-24

4. (a) How did Cain *rebel* against God in these verses?

Cain settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. This, in itself, was a violation of God's decree that he would be a wanderer. He then built a city, and named it after his son Enoch, in the *vain* hope of having some stability in the earth. Both of these are *rebellious* actions because God had cursed Cain to wandering his days upon the earth with no stability or a place to call his own.

(b) What was the *result* of Cain's rebellion on his descendants?

Cain's rebellion against God was completed in his distant relative Lamech: this man was the first *polygamist* who bragged about the fact that he had *purposely* killed a man and taken revenge like Cain did. In other words, Cain's sin festered in his descendents in a downward spiral of anarchy until (eventually) that sin reared its ugly head *again*. This is *precisely* what Paul argues in Romans 1 as the reality of the human race: when we reject God, we begin a downward spiral of immorality and depravity that (ultimately) ends in our belief that we are God and able to even take life with impunity.

5. What do you learn from the story of Cain and Abel about the *redemptive plan* of God in Jesus Christ?

The simple (or popular) answer to this question lies in the fact that God required from Cain and Abel a blood sacrifice in keeping with his precedent of clothing Adam and Eve with animal skins. And, certainly this is true: Cain *should* have brought such an offering to God and the rest would have been avoided. But, the *deeper* truth from this passage is the reality that the offering and the one offering it are indistinguishable, and only those who bring to God the *perfect* sacrifice will be right with him. To make the assumption that Cain did, to believe that we are deserving of some "latitude" with God because of our *sincerity* or our *position*, is to fall far short of what it will *really* take to have *any* acceptance before a holy God. The redemptive message is that we must *abandon* all sense of pretense before God and offer him *what he himself has made available for us*, even if that means swallowing our pride and admitting our complete inadequacy before him. Christ's work is the *only* work that can make redemption for us, and God will accept *nothing less*, no matter how sincere we are in offering it. Failure to do so *will* result in dire consequences.