

# Raising Cain

Genesis 4:1-17

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I want to take you back to the very beginning of human history, and we're going to talk about the most fundamental distinction between true and false religion.

Genesis 4. The first two-thirds of this chapter are given to a wretched story of sibling rivalry, jealousy, heartbreak, and tragically ruined lives. It's the story of Cain and Abel. This is literally every parents' worst nightmare—the distilled essence of everything every parent has ever feared—all wrapped up in a single individual, Cain. Here was a wayward child who was not only self-destructive, self-willed, angry, and malicious; but he also deliberately scorned decency and morality; he ruined every relationship he had with anyone in his own family circle; and finally he murdered his own brother and had to be sent into permanent exile.

All that, and we are talking about very first child ever born to the parents of the human race—Cain. He was the first person born by procreation; the first human who wasn't the result of God's direct creation—and (as we are about to see) he became the living epitome of what human depravity is capable of.

So Cain is a tragic and contemptible character. And he's is a key character in the record of the human race, mainly

because of the way he graphically illustrates how disastrous Adam's disobedience was for Adam's offspring.

Cain is mentioned in only four places in all of Scripture. Here in Genesis 4 we have the most detailed account of his life and character. Then he is mentioned three times in the New Testament as well: Hebrews 11:4; 1 John 3:12; and Jude 11. We'll focus mainly on the Genesis account.

We begin here in verse 1 of Genesis 4:

**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.**

**3 In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,**

**4 and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,**

**5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.**

**6 The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?"**

**7 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."**

**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.**

**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.**

This is a fascinating story. I don't know if you have ever paid close attention to it before. Cain made an offering to God that was shunned. How God expressed His displeasure we are not told. But when Cain knew that God had accepted Abel's sacrifice and not his, he was so overcome with jealousy and anger that he committed murder. Now think about this: The first human being ever born becomes a murderer, and his victim is the second person ever born—his own brother. This is not a very auspicious beginning for the human race, is it?

Of the many lessons we might glean from the tragic life of Cain, I want to highlight three this morning. The first one we have already mentioned. It's—

## 1. A LESSON ABOUT HUMAN DEPRAVITY

This is an incredibly tragic episode, so early in human history. You might think that the polluting effects of sin would start slowly and grow worse by degrees. Not so. Sin tore into the human race with a vengeance from the very beginning. Adam's sin, a simple act of disobedience, unleashed into the human race all the full fury of hell.

In the very first generation of human procreation, and right at the outset of the biblical narrative, we find ourselves face to face with the doctrine of original sin. It's appropriate that this truth jumps off the pages of Scripture so early, because it's foundational to everything we believe. From time to time in our teaching, we encounter the doctrine of original sin, and I always try to point it out and explain it, because frankly, it's a doctrine a lot of contemporary evangelicals would like to ignore or sidestep gently, or simply forget. But we can't do that. Everything we believe about human sin, our fallenness, and the way of redemption hinges on this doctrine. It's really the starting point of gospel truth. And in fact, one of the earliest and most persistent heresies that has troubled the church across the ages is Pelagianism—and Pelagianism starts with a denial of the doctrine of original sin.

The Pelagian says Adam's sin has almost nothing to do with human depravity. The problem with Adam's sin is that it

gave us a bad example to follow. But (according to the Pelagian) you and I are free to choose our own way. We can be righteous if we choose to obey God, or unrighteous if we choose not to. Everything is subject to human free will.

Scripture teaches that the whole human race is fallen because of Adam's sin. Romans 5:12: "**Sin came into the world through one man.**"

*OK, the Pelagian says, Adam was the first to sin. He brought sin into the world.*

Read on. Romans 5:15: "**Many died through one man's trespass.**" Verse 17: "**Because of one man's trespass, death reigned.**" Verse 18: "**One trespass led to condemnation for all men.**" Verse 19: "**By the one man's disobedience . . . many were made sinners.**" Scripture expressly is teaching that both the guilt and the pollution of Adam's disobedience are inherited by his offspring. As David acknowledges in Psalm 51:5, we are fallen from the moment of our conception (born with a sinful bent) because of the sin of Adam. Psalm 51:5: "**I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.**" The entire human race, everyone who descended from Adam, is fallen in exactly the same way. In the words of an old Puritan book of ABCs, "*Adam's fall condemned us all.*" That's what we mean by "original sin."

This is one of the most hated doctrines in all of Scripture, but it is impossible to refute. No biblical doctrine I know of

has more empirical evidence to support it. Everywhere you look, you see evidence that the whole human race is infected with the cancer of sin. And nowhere is it more evident than in the life of Cain, the very first of Adam's offspring.

How did sin grow so vile, so fast? In Romans 1 the apostle Paul chronicles the decline of humanity into deeper and deeper wickedness. Paul says that some knowledge of God is innate in the human heart, and the very starting point of human wickedness is a refusal to glorify God as God. Therefore Paul says, the human heart is darkened. He talks about the idolatry of those who reject God and instead worship Gods of their own making. He says God "**God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity,**" (Romans 1:24); God "**God gave them up to dishonorable passions**" (v. 26); and finally, verse 28, "**God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.**" That describes people who are utterly corrupt, literally God-forsaken, completely abandoned by God to the bondage of their sin. This is a frightening, hopeless state to be in.

How long do you think it took the human race to reach that point after Adam's initial disobedience? Fifteen generations? Try *one*. What the apostle Paul describes in Romans 1 is virtually epitomized by Cain.

At the end of that chronicle of decline in Romans 1 Paul gives this catalogue of diabolical character qualities that

represent what depravity looks like when it goes to seed. This is what it looks like, Paul says, when God abandons people, giving them up to an utterly debased mind. (What's scary about this list is how closely it describes popular American culture—our society's entertainment and values.) But notice how closely these words describe what we know about Cain. Romans 1:28-32; Paul says,

**They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.**

Everything there could be said about Cain—except perhaps the part about being a gossip. (But if you're guilty of all that other stuff and manage to avoid gossip, that's not really a moral point in your favor, is it?) Cain was the living embodiment of the full catalogue of human perversions—selfishness, pride, anger, envy, murder, deceit—and every other kind of evil passion. There was no limit to how far he was willing to go in carrying out his own sinful self-will.



Think about what a disappointment Cain must have been to his parents. The moment of his birth was a moment of supreme triumph and joy for Eve in particular. Cain represented her highest hopes.

Remember what happened at the fall when God cursed the serpent? Genesis 3:14-15 says,

**The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.**

***15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."***

That curse on the serpent is often called the *proto-evangelion*, because it contains in prophetic form all the key elements of the gospel message. It predicts that the offspring of the woman would do battle with the serpent and pay the price for it, but the seed of the woman would ultimately crush the serpent's head.

Eve no doubt clung to that prophecy as her great hope. We know in retrospect that this was a prophecy about Christ, a divine Redeemer who was wounded for our transgressions on the cross, but who delivered the death-blow to Satan in His own death and resurrection. There's no way to know how much Eve understood about the prophecy, but it is possible

that she was already looking for a divine redeemer. And she probably assumed that "the seed of the woman" would literally be her own offspring—hopefully, her firstborn.

In fact, look at her words in chapter 4 verse 1: "**I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.**" But a literal translation of those words from the Hebrew would be, "**I have gotten a man, the Lord!**" Even some ancient Jewish sources translated it that way. For example, the Targum of Jonathan renders it, "**I have gotten a man, the angel of the Lord.**" Is it possible that she thought Cain would be the redeemer who would crush the serpent's head?

This much is clear: Adam and Eve had been in the garden with God. They knew better than anyone what their sin had cost the human race. The hope of redemption had to be at the forefront of their thinking, and for the time being, all their hopes lay in this son, whom they named "Cain," which means "*gotten*"—so at the very least his name underscored their conviction that God had given them this child.

There is little doubt that as Eve raised Cain and cared for him, she would have taught him what she knew about God—which was quite a lot, no doubt. She would have reiterated God's promise of redemption. She *must* have tried to bring him up to share in her hope that one day the human family would be delivered from the sin she and Adam had brought on the race.

Abel makes an interesting contrast. His name means "frail." Perhaps he was physically weaker than his brother. Eve's sense of hopeful expectation isn't quite as evident with Abel's birth. It's possible that there was some parental favoritism working here. In any case, Cain would have enjoyed every advantage as firstborn—and he embodied the hopes of his parents.

We're told nothing about the childhood of these two boys. The scene shifts to a later time, when they are basically adults. Cain, a robust, rugged lad, made a living tilling the soil—farming. Abel, the frail one, chose an occupation more suited to his constitution. He became a shepherd.

Verse 3 tells us that in the course of time both Cain and Abel brought offerings to God. Cain brought an offering of fruit; Abel sacrificed a lamb. Now we will come back to look at this more closely in a moment, but for now, notice that the Lord accepted Abel's offering and rejected Cain's. And Cain's immediate response was anger. Verse 5: "**So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.**"

With whom was Cain angry? Evidently, *God* was the original target of his anger, even though Abel wound up bearing the brunt of it. Consider the irony of this situation: Cain is supposedly making an offering to God, performing an act of worship. And *the whole point of worship is to honor and thereby please the One you are worshiping, right?*

We easily forget that in this era of man-centered, "seeker-friendly" worship. We think worship should be designed to please the worshiper, but it isn't authentic worship unless it pleases the One being worshiped.

In other words, if God was not pleased with Cain's offering, Cain should have been ashamed, or repentant, or sorrowful, or otherwise humbled. But to become angry with God only proves that this was never a true act of worship; it was never anything more than a self-willed display of the rankest kind of hypocrisy.

Nevertheless, God graciously appeals to Cain with sweet reasonableness and a patient, gentle entreaty (vv. 6-7): "**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.**" In other words, Why should Cain be angry with God? All the fault here was Cain's. Sin is the adversary, not God. Even if you read this with the sternest possible tone, this was a tender, gracious appeal, and an attempt to instruct Cain—where Cain perhaps *deserved* a lightning bolt between the eyes.

But such is the depravity of a sin-infected heart that we are all too prone to blame God and view *Him* in an adversarial light. That's why (as it says in Romans 8:7) "**the carnal mind is enmity against God.**" Remember, Cain's father,

Adam, showed a hint of this tendency, blaming God and everyone else for Adam's own failure.

God asks, **"Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"**

Adam replies, **"The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."**

Cain was all that on steroids. Sin had so twisted the mind of Cain that he could not think straight. He let his anger and resentment grow, and fester, until it finally led to murder. Verse 8, **"Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him."** Having worked himself into a blind rage over God's refusal of his worship, Cain struck his brother dead. What began as an attitude of jealousy and anger developed into blind rage, and finally culminated in an act whose consequences were irreversible.

This was the first recorded act of murder, and it shows how easily susceptible a sin-infected heart is to the grossest kinds of sin. Cain earned his place in biblical history as a cowardly, embittered, murderous scoundrel—the very epitome of a depraved heart.

We often speak of the doctrine of "total depravity." Scripture teaches that all people are utterly and totally depraved, infected by sin at the very heart of who we are. Romans 3 says, **"None is righteous, no, not one; no one**

**understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."**

But don't get the wrong idea from this expression "*total*" depravity. It doesn't mean we are as evil as it is possible for us to be. It doesn't mean we couldn't be any worse than we are. The word *total* simply means that sin has infected every aspect of our beings: our minds, our wills, and even our physical bodies. Every aspect of our character is tainted with sin, so that we are totally unable to abstain from sin completely or do to do anything good from motives that are entirely pure. Everything we do is tainted with sin—even the things that appear good from a human perspective.

And this is what trips up so many people. I've heard people argue against total depravity by pointing out the good things non-Christians often do. Look at the works of art and humanitarianism that have been done by people who do not know Christ. Look at people like Ghandi, or the Dali Lama, or all the great humanistic philanthropists who supposedly uphold high standards of morality and human virtue. You know the argument: *Sometimes unbelievers seem nicer than believers*. But that is based on a misunderstanding of what "total depravity" means.

And it brings us to lesson number 2 in our study this morning:

## 2. A LESSON ABOUT FALSE RELIGION

Cain was, like us, totally depraved. But he was not entirely without human virtue, was he? He was a hard worker. He founded the first city in human history, and gave birth to a family of men who were skilled in all the arts. More significantly, He was a religious man. It wasn't as if Cain ignored God altogether.

Now I want you to follow this carefully, because it is very important. A lot of people think the remedy for sin is doing good, and that if we just do enough good, we can redeem ourselves from our own fallenness. That is evidently what Cain thought. And that is why God rejected his worship.

Cain's worship represents every false religion. It was a sinful man's attempt to make himself righteous. The Pharisees were experts in this sort of fleshly righteousness. But Scripture sweeps up all the so-called righteous deeds we do for ourselves and it labels them "**filthy rags.**" That's Isaiah 64:6: "**We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.**" He uses a Hebrew term that evokes something vile. In literal terms, the verse is teaching that the very best works of righteousness we can concoct for ourselves are no more meritorious with God than dirty underwear.

Again and again, Scripture teaches that mere human righteousness, done from self-will, and for the purpose of glorifying self, is absolutely unacceptable to God. We call it *self-righteousness*, because it is a righteousness mustered entirely by self-will and in the energy of the flesh. No matter how flawless it may appear by human standards, it falls short of the divine standard—which is absolute perfection. And therefore it is utterly worthless.

Scripture teaches us that if we are going to be saved, it must be by a righteousness that is not our own—the righteousness of God Himself—perfect divine righteousness, merited on our behalf by Christ and imputed to us by faith. We have covered this again and again, but if you want proof texts, see Romans 4:4-5; Romans 10:3; Philippians 3:9.

Now until we ponder our depravity, measured by God's own absolute perfection, and understand what a vast discrepancy there is between those two standards, we can't even begin to grasp what defines a spirit of true worship. It is *not* true worship when we attempt to parade our own pathetic works before God for His approval. That's *always* unacceptable to Him. Instead, true worship begins with the realization that we are utterly unworthy of God's goodness or blessing; we are unable to atone for our own sins; and we are in an absolutely hopeless state unless God Himself makes a way of salvation for us. That sense of inadequacy and



brokenness is the very essence of true worship. (If you want proof of this from the lips of Jesus, study the parable of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18:10-14).

Now, With all of that in mind, let's look again at these two acts of worship—one from Cain, and the other from Abel. And let me read to you what Hebrews 11:4 has to say about this incident: "**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.**" There's a wealth of meaning in that verse. First, notice that Abel's worship is called an act of faith. Now, faith is never without a foundation. Romans 10:17 says, "**Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through *the word of Christ*.**"

Think about this, then: Cain and Abel *must* have had some explicit instructions from God on how worship was to be conducted. This revelation about when and how they were to worship is nowhere recorded for us, but we can safely assume that they had received sufficient revelation, possibly passed on through Adam and Eve, to teach them how to worship properly.

The evidence of this runs all through this account. It seems clear, first of all, that there was a specific time appointed for them to make a sacrifice. Verse 3 in the King James Version says, "**In process of time it came to pass, that**" they made their offerings. The Hebrew phrase literally means

"**at the end of days,**" and the idiom means "at the proper time." This implies that there was *a prescribed time* for this worship to take place.

It also seems clear there was a *place* appointed where this offering was to be made. They brought their offering "**unto the Lord,**"—implying that there was a place fixed for this to occur. Some have suggested that when God set the cherubim and flaming sword at the gateway to Eden, he was creating a sort of mercy seat. That could well be where the offerings were appointed to be made. It is true that when the tabernacle was built, the mercy seat featured cherubim, whose wings met over the mercy seat, and that was the centerpiece of the Tabernacle, which is the place where offerings were appointed to be offered.

So it is possible that Adam and family had made annual pilgrimages back to the gate of Eden to offer sacrifices to the Lord.

Whatever the precise circumstances, I think we can say with a fair amount of certainty that Cain and Abel had some instructions from the Lord regarding the time and place of worship. Certainly they had some knowledge of what constituted an acceptable offering.

One thing is absolutely clear: Since this was a sin offering, a blood sacrifice was essential. The Old Testament permitted certain free-will offerings of grain and produce,

but *sin* offerings always involved the shedding of blood, because "**without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins**" (Hebrews 9:22). That is one of the basic truths of Scripture, and I am absolutely convinced that Adam and Eve knew that much.

Remember when Adam and Eve tried to cover their own nakedness and sowed clothes out of leaves—the fruit of the ground? God graciously provided a better covering by slaughtering an animal to supply garments for them. That graphic lesson at least strongly implied that blood must be shed if an adequate remedy for sin is to be obtained.

Nevertheless, Cain, acting entirely out of self-will, offered "**the fruit of the ground**" as an offering to the Lord (v. 3). Cain ought to have known better than this. Not only was this a bloodless sacrifice, it was also entirely the fruit of his own labor. Furthermore, Cain would have learned from Adam that God had cursed the ground, and to offer the fruit of a cursed ground to God was virtually an insult. This was totally unacceptable to God as a sin offering, and Cain should have realized this.

How did Cain know that God rejected his offering but accepted Abel's? Scripture doesn't tell us. Perhaps fire from heaven consumed the lamb Abel offered. *Something* happened to make it clear that God accepted Abel's offering and rejected Cain's.

Notice that Scripture says Cain became angry "**and his face fell.**" Evidently he was foolishly expecting God to accept this offering entirely on *Cain's* terms. That is precisely how "human goodness" always behaves. We are so pleased with ourselves, so self-righteous. We think our way is right. We think God is bound to accept what is pleasing to us, when we really ought to concern ourselves with what is pleasing to God.

On a human level, Cain's offering might have looked perfectly fine—even superior to Abel's. For example, Cain might have compared his fruit and grain with the bloody carcass of a slain lamb brought by Abel. Certainly clean produce would be more pleasing to look at than a butchered animal.

But again, true worship aims to please God, not the worshiper. And when the offering is an offering for sin, a bloodless sacrifice cannot please God. Scripture makes that perfectly clear. Leviticus 17:11: "**The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.**"

But let's analyze this on a slightly deeper level. Here's a question that occurred to me years ago when I first read this account: Hebrews 10:4 says "**It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.**" And God Himself says in

Isaiah 1:11, **"What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? . . . I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats."** In Matthew 9:13, Jesus says, **"I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."**

So if animal sacrifices were never efficacious anyway, why would God require them in the first place? Why was this such a big deal that God rejected Cain's offering?

Here's what I believe Scripture is teaching us: It's true that animal sacrifices were never efficacious to atone for sin. Nothing less than *Christ's* blood was sufficient to pay the ultimate price that our atonement would cost. Nevertheless, God required that actual blood be shed in all the pre-cross sin-offerings, because the symbolism of these sacrifices was supposed to underscore the horrible cost of our sin. The animal sacrifices served as vivid object lessons for sinners, to remind them in the most graphic possible way of how awful sin is. In the Temple sacrifices, blood was purposely sprinkled everywhere—even on the worshipers—as if God meant to make the offering for sin as bloody as possible. It was meant to say something with the most powerful imagery possible about how God views sin!

There have always been people who don't realize the full truth about sin, and who think sin is something that can be papered over with good deeds and acts of human merit.

That's more or less the normal human assumption, and it's the central dogma of manmade religion: Sin can be atoned for by doing something good to balance our karma.

Evidently that's what Cain thought. He thought a show of goodness would be enough to cover his sin. He thought he could devise his own toned-down, sanitized religion that would suffice. After all, how hard a line can God take on all this? *If God is really good, I should be able to shoehorn Him into my own concept of what's good.*

A lot of people today think the same way. But all human religion is just as futile as Cain's misguided attempt to offer the fruit of his own labors to God. God will not be pleased with our efforts, no matter how pleasing they may appear from a human perspective.

Now there's a third lesson here. And it's—

### **3. A LESSON ABOUT COMMON GRACE**

Notice the gracious way God deals with Cain throughout this account. This is important. There are people who believe God loves the elect, but has nothing but hatred for everyone else.

I don't believe that. Scripture teaches that "**The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.**" (Ps. 145:9). He has "**no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live**" (Ezek. 33:11).

I'm committed to the doctrine of divine election. But let me say as clearly as possible that I *also* believe those who go to hell have no one to blame but themselves. The fact that Cain ultimately lived a life of self-will and sin was in no way God's fault. God constantly dealt graciously with Cain.

Over and over in Scripture we see God graciously and patiently appealing to those who ultimately spurn Him, and Cain is the first example of this. Notice that even God's judgments are tempered by grace. Even when it would be perfectly just for God to destroy Cain, the Lord shows him great mercy.

Cain deserved to die for his act of killing his brother. Genesis 9:6 says, "**Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.**" In other words, capital punishment is a fit penalty for murder. And Cain knew this. As soon as he knew he could not hide his act of murder, he feared that (verse 14) "**I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.**" The Hebrew literally means, "**All who find me will kill me.**" The King James Version translates it this way: "**It shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.**" (I think that's funny. Everyone who finds me shall slay me? Actually, even if that were the whole world's ambition, only the *first* person who found him would get to kill him. After that, Cain wouldn't have to worry about it any more.)

But God was gracious, and He put a mark on Cain so that those who found Him would know that he was under divine protection. We don't know what sort of mark this was. Obviously, this was at a time when the earth's population was still very small. It would have been no big deal for word of this to spread throughout the whole human race, so that everyone knew Cain was under the protective hand of God.

This mark was *not* the mark of a pariah. The mark itself was not God's judgment; it was an act of *mercy*.

What was God's judgment against Cain? Only that He took away Cain's ability to farm. God removed his green thumb. Somehow he made it so that Cain's efforts at tilling the ground could never again be profitable. Cain would become a vagabond and a wanderer. And for the remainder of his life, Cain was known as a vagabond and a wanderer. Verse 16 has a tragic tone: "**Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod** [meaning, "the land of the vagabond"], **east of Eden.**" Imagine spending the entirety of your life out of God's presence and constantly on the move.

But even that judgment was tempered somewhat, and Cain was not merely a nameless vagabond. Verse 17 tells us he became the founder of the first city. He "settled in the land of Nod" Evidently God did not condemn him to endless



wandering for the rest of his life. At least at the end, Cain settled down. Again, God's judgment is seasoned with grace.

Why did God show Cain so much mercy? Why didn't the earth open up and swallow him whole the minute he made an unacceptable offering? After all, this was the first unadulterated act of false worship, the first manifestation of false religion, in the history of mankind. It would have made a great object lesson. It certainly would not have been unrighteous for God to kill him on the spot.

But failing that, why didn't God strike Cain dead the moment he killed his own brother? Why did He guarantee him protection from avengers and mark him with a special mark and allow him to live a long life? There's only one reason: because God is a God of grace and mercy. He was extending to Cain the opportunity to repent. God's words to Cain in verse 7 are an explicit plea for repentance.

But Cain evidently squandered all those opportunities—*a lifetime of opportunities*—for repentance. He fades into the biblical record. His death is not mentioned. And when he is mentioned again in the New Testament, it is always as a negative example. Jude 11 refers to Cain in passing as the prototype of all false religions. First John 3 compares him to the world that hates and murders God's righteous ones. And Hebrews 11:4 contrasts him with Abel; Cain is the

unbeliever whose infidelity makes Abel's faith seem all the more heroic.

In the end, Cain teaches us that human goodness is not enough. Sin cannot be so easily papered over. Man-made religion cannot please God. And the mercy and longsuffering of God are not to be taken as evidence of God's favor. As Paul writes in Romans 2:4, don't despise **"the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience. . . . God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance."**

Cain's story also teaches us that false religion—self-willed worship—is the worst of all sins. It is a far more egregious crime against God than even the murder of Abel. We think of religion as something noble and virtuous—and of course, if it's true religion and undefiled, that's true. But nothing is more full of evil potential than false religion, worship that is designed for the pleasure and comfort of the worshipers than for the honor and glory of God. And let's be honest: in that regard, there's an awful lot of the spirit of Cain in contemporary evangelicalism.

Cain stands as a beacon of warning to people who are halfhearted, superficial, or self-willed in their worship; or lax in their service to Christ; or indifferent about the substance of what they believe. Jesus said the First and Great Commandment is **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."** There

is no way around it: we don't live up to that most basic of all God's laws. Not one of us can claim to be free from the same sin that destroyed Cain.

That's why we need an atonement for our sins. The cost of atonement for our guilt is not a price any of us can afford, but thank God the price has already been paid "**with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.**" And He promises eternal life to all who trust Him alone to redeem us from our sin.

That is the gospel. I hope you recognize the crucial themes of sin, sacrifice, and true worship woven into the tragic tale of Cain. This story begins the careful weaving of several threads of gospel truth that tie all of Scripture together. And ultimately it points us to Christ. May it be an encouragement to you to look to Christ and put your trust in Him as the one true sacrifice for sins, and may it motivate you to worship with a true heart of humble repentance.