

## Genesis 4:1-16

By Rev. J. Scott Lindsay

Pastor of South Baton Rouge Presbyterian Church (PCA),  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

In the first three chapters of Genesis, we see: the wonder and power of our Creator God as he spoke the universe into being; the design and order of his good and abundant creation; the place and purpose of human beings within God's plans and purposes; the beauty and significance of human relationships; the corruption of God's perfect world; the personal, interpersonal, and cosmic consequences of sin; and the justice and mercy of God in responding to these things. Ultimately, we will see how the first eleven chapters of Genesis establish the basic plotlines for the story of the Bible and, indeed, of the whole world. At this point, however, we will focus on Genesis 4:1-16, dealing with the familiar story of Cain and Abel. In this account we will see the further downward progression of Adam and Eve's sin as it manifests itself within their own family in decidedly sinister ways.

After they were mercifully banished from the Garden of Eden, and before they could do any more damage, Adam and Eve found themselves residing somewhere to the east of that place, never to return again — at least not on this side of the grave. And, in the course of time, they conceived their first child, whom they named Cain.

Now, the arrival of this first child would have been something of a bittersweet experience for them, to say the least. On the one hand, it must have been a welcome indicator to them that God had not withheld from them the ability to conceive and thus to fulfill the mandate he had previously given them. That mandate was to be fruitful and multiply God's images, and to manage God's creation on his behalf. To be sure, these things had already been reaffirmed to them in the curses of Genesis 3:14-19. But now Adam and Eve saw it coming to fruition in the form of this little child, the first baby ever born or seen on planet earth. And so, again, this must have been some consolation to them that God had not abandoned them or written them off, or worse, written them *out* of his "divine drama."

At the same time, while there was confirmation of their continued place in God's plan and purpose, there would also have been further confirmation of the reality of their fallenness, as Eve would have endured for the first time the physical and mental pains of childbearing. She would have felt in her body the disintegrating effects of sin.

It is also possible that there may have been some question, in Eve's mind at least, as to whether the child now born to her was going to be the promised "seed of the woman" that we saw in Genesis 3:15. Would he crush the serpent's offspring and thus

undo the horrible things that had come about as a consequence of sin? This, in the opinion of some commentators, is the possible significance of Eve's remark at Cain's birth that she had "gotten a man with the help of the Lord" (Gen. 1:4). To be sure, this may simply have been her acknowledgment that God had blessed her with this child. But some scholars feel that the fact that she has referred to the child as a "*man* from the Lord," which is a slightly odd remark otherwise, means that she may have been thinking of some future point at which this child would fulfill the promise/prediction that God had previously made. Whatever the case, she would soon come to realize that such an idea was not only premature, but also terribly, terribly wrong.

After relating the birth of Cain, the passage goes on to say, almost in passing, that a second child is born and is named Abel. After this, we are told that Abel was a keeper of sheep and that Cain was a worker of the ground.

Now, clearly, a lot of time is accounted for in these short verses. How much, we don't know. It could be 15 years, 25 years, 50 years. We just do not know, especially since the ages of human beings in those days were considerably longer than they are today. But the amount of time is not all that significant. What is significant is that during this time these two men became established in their respective fields of labor.

Both of the occupations mentioned here — farming and sheep-tending — were legitimate occupations. Farming was the occupation of Adam and his son Cain, and was instituted directly by God. Sheep-tending was equally valuable. And both of these lines of work, notably, were expressions of the cultural mandate they had been given to manage God's creation on his behalf.

So, up to this point in the story, all is well, or at least it seems to be. Adam and Eve could be forgiven for hoping, if they did, that everything was back on track and that things would be much more stable from this point forward. But it wasn't to be. The problems started to show themselves again when Cain and Abel began bringing offerings to the Lord.

Now, admittedly, this is another of those places in the Bible where we are not given all the details that we might have personally *preferred*, even though we are given every detail that we *need*. We don't know if this was the very first time that Cain and Abel had made offerings to the Lord. We don't know if Adam had been making them for some time, and now the two sons were taking on that responsibility as well. We don't even know why they were making these particular offerings, or how they even knew to make them in the first place. We don't know any of those things with certainty.

Still, we can make some reasonable assumptions based on what we do know from other places in the Bible. One assumption we can make is that these sacrifices — these acts of worship — were not simply the product of Cain and Abel's imagination. When you read through other books in the Old Testament you find God saying all kinds of things about how he wants people to worship him and how he does not want people to worship him. We even have examples of people who attempted to be a little

“creative” or “innovative” in their worship of God, and were killed as a result (Lev. 10:1-2).

In short, the Old Testament paints the picture of a God who has very definite ideas about what he will and will not allow his people to do when they worship him. Since the God who has all those definite ideas is the same God we are dealing with here, it is reasonable to assume that he had, at some unrecorded time before the offerings Cain and Abel brought in Genesis 4, let his people know some things about worshiping him by means of sacrifices.

We know from the Old Testament that the primary sacrifices that were made involved the killing of animals and the shedding of blood. But there were also other offerings, such as grain offerings (cf. Lev. 2:1-3,14-16), that did not require any blood to be shed. God gladly received these from his people as well.

So, as the story describes Cain and Abel coming with their different offerings, we can reasonably assume that they did not come up with this idea on their own. Rather, it had come to them from God. Further, we can assume that we probably should not read much into the fact that one offered the fruit of the ground and the other the firstborn from his flock, as if one were inherently better than the other. There is nothing in the passage, or in the wider context of the Old Testament, that would require that interpretation.

In any case, here come Cain and Abel, with their offerings to God, and we are told that the Lord “had regard” for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. While we do not know exactly what this means, it is not all that important since we can get the general idea: Abel’s sacrifice was accepted or approved, and Cain’s was not. And, whether we know how this was determined or not, the point is that *they* knew it. In particular, Cain knew that God had made a distinction between his offering and his brother’s.

Now, the fact that God made a distinction between their offerings has sent people scrambling all over the place trying to figure out what the difference was, and why one was accepted and the other was not. And some of the things suggested have included this idea we have already discussed — that the blood offering was inherently a better offering than any kind of offering of food. But there is no Biblical mandate for believing that was the dynamic here.

As we have seen on many occasions, the Bible is its own best interpreter. So, one way to solve this dilemma is by keeping a finger here and turning to the other end of the Bible, where we read these words in Hebrews 11:4:

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.

The thing that set apart Abel's sacrifice from Cain's was not so much the sacrifice itself, the person making the sacrifice. Abel's sacrifice was made "by faith" and "through faith," whereas Cain's clearly was not. "Having faith" is one of the main points of the entire chapter of Hebrews 11. So, what happened in Genesis 4 was that Cain was meeting a requirement, whereas Abel was giving the best that he had.

And you see this in the text of Genesis itself, if you look carefully enough. The description of Abel's sacrifice gives us two important details: 1) it was the firstborn of his flock, which was considered the best and most valuable portion; and 2) of that slain firstborn lamb, the fat portions in particular were given. Elsewhere, the Old Testament indicates that these portions of the animal in particular were considered the most valuable and significant parts (e.g., Lev. 9). In other words, Moses is telling us that Abel gave the best of his best to God.

In contrast to that description, we have the very plain statement that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground. There is no description suggesting that Cain brought the "firstfruits" or "finest" portions of his harvest, and this is especially significant since Moses did include additional remarks about Abel's sacrifice.

Abel expressed faith by offering God the best of the best, by giving those things to God rather than keeping them for himself. He showed that he was not worried about losing them because he trusted God to replace them, and more than adequately to make up for his loss. Cain, on the other hand, seems to have made a rather indifferent sort of sacrifice, one that did not cost him as much. And so God accepted Abel's gift and did not accept Cain's. And Cain got angry — *very* angry.

In the curses in Genesis 3:15, God said to the serpent that he would "put" enmity not only between the serpent and the woman, but also between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring. Well, here we see that promise working itself out. Abel was born as sinful as his brother Cain. Yet, here we see him exhibiting faith (which is God's gift) and in a way that his brother does not. And the result is enmity — war — between them, even though it has not yet manifested itself in the story.

And so, as one commentator puts it, the one whose worship was acceptable to God (Abel) ends up being resented and hated by the one whose worship was not acceptable to God (Cain). And even though the true object of Cain's anger is God, the person who receives the brutal force of that anger is Abel. On this whole exchange, Calvin writes quite brilliantly in his commentary on Genesis 4:5 when he says:

In the person of Cain is portrayed to us the likeness of a wicked man, who yet desires to be esteemed [a] just [man]... Such persons truly, by external works, strenuously labor to deserve well at the hands of God; but, retaining a heart inwrapped in deceit, they present him nothing but a mask; so that, in their laborious and anxious religious worship, there is nothing sincere, nothing but mere pretence. When they afterwards see that they gain no advantage, they betray the venom of their minds; for they

not only complain against God, but break forth in manifest fury, so that, if they were able, they would gladly tear him down from his heavenly throne... [T]hey think that God does them great wrong if he does not applaud them; but when he pronounces their offerings frivolous and of no value in his sight, they first begin to murmur, and then to rage... [T]hey wish to bargain with God on their own terms. When this is denied, they burn with furious indignation, which, though conceived against God, they cast forth upon his children.

To put it in more contemporary terms suggested by one writer, the effect of Abel's acceptance on Cain is a lot like the effect that a girl named Cindy had on me in my 12<sup>th</sup> grade Calculus class. I would go to class every day, try to pay attention to this impossible math, go home and struggle through the homework, study for tests, come to class and kill myself to get a B. And Cindy, who was some sort of genius or something, would come to class every day and just sit there reading novels. The teacher never stopped her, never asked her a question, never involved her in the class.

But when the test time came, Cindy would show up, take the test, finish — half an hour ahead of everyone else — and get every answer right every time. It was maddening. And the worst part was that her great grades affected the class average and altered the grade curve — sometimes dramatically — so that she would regularly cost the rest of us at least 5 points or more.

Now, of course, the problem was not with Cindy. The problem was never with Cindy. The problem was with me and my pride and arrogance. The only thing Cindy was guilty of was being brilliant. And I resented her for it, and it spawned within me a deep, sinful dislike for her as a person — even though I hardly knew her.

That same sort of dynamic, in an analogous way, is what is going on here between Cain and Abel. Abel has done nothing against Cain, but the end result is a murderous, jealous, envious, prideful, self-righteous hatred aimed directly at him.

So, Cain responds badly in this situation, yet despite Cain's poor response, God comes to him quite graciously and mercifully, challenging him personally and offering him an opportunity for repentance, for change. You see, while his act of worship on this occasion was not an acceptable thing, it was not, apparently, a fatal sin. God did not appear to be planning to inflict any great punishment upon Cain for what he had done. He wasn't going to drop the hammer on him. Indeed, God told Cain that if he did well in the future, he would be accepted. The phrase "doing well" probably refers to future acts of sacrifice. God clearly offered Cain a chance for repentance, a chance to turn back from his anger before it took hold of him.

This leads to the next remark, at the end of verse 7 — a warning that if Cain does not respond to the opportunity for repentance, if he continues down that track, things will not be good for him. And the reason is because sin is real, and Satan is real, and Cain is in great danger here. He is in a very vulnerable position. Sin's desire is to master and

control him, but he must not acquiesce to that desire by allowing his anger to run its course. He must control it; it must not control him.

In the end, however, and in spite of God's warning, Cain's sin does control him. And in this we see sin's further progression. In Eve's case, she had to be talked into sinning. In Cain's case, he would not be talked out of it. And so, Cain talked to Abel — perhaps he was creating some artificial reason for them to be alone together out in a field. In any event, they went into the field, and then Cain murdered his brother Abel.

Well, now that the deed is done, we see God re-enter the story, just as he did with Adam and Eve, coming once again in search of his sinful and rebellious creatures. And in this encounter we also see, just as we did before, the justice of God, the mercy of God amidst that justice, and the sad, evasive, deceitful response of one of his creatures toward him.

First, notice Cain's response to things. God comes to him, asking a question when he already knows the answer, providing a chance for Cain to come clean and own up to his sin. This is the same thing God had done with Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. And like them, Cain's response to this opportunity is less than encouraging. To God's question, "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain quite disrespectfully replies to God, "I do not know, am I my brother's keeper?" — as if to say, "I don't know why you're asking me these things. I don't recall receiving any instructions to look after Abel."

Just as his parents had done when they were confronted by God, Cain gave an unsatisfactory response, although his was arguably worse than theirs. Adam and Eve eventually admitted to wrongdoing, after they had shifted as much blame as possible. But Cain outright lied to God, and never once admitted that he had done anything wrong. Instead, he engaged in diversionary tactics, trying to play semantic games with God and get him off the subject.

Of course, God would not be swayed or moved by these ridiculous responses on Cain's behalf, and showed once again, as he had shown with Adam and Eve, that nothing can be hidden from him. Even the silent victim of a capital crime has an advocate to speak for him — his own blood.

And so God confronted Cain, asking him what he had done, but knowing all along exactly what had transpired, and very quickly moving from there to pronounce judgment upon Cain for Abel's murder. God was not willing to let this sin pass any more than he was willing to let the sin of Adam and Eve pass. And so, in justice, he responded to what had taken place.

As part of his punishment, Cain received a curse upon himself. This was different from what happened to Adam and Eve. With Adam, in particular, the ground was cursed so that it resisted his efforts to produce good crops, but he himself was not cursed, although he was fallen in nature. Still, even though the cursed ground resisted his efforts, it was possible to see good crops come forth. However, with Cain the situation

was worse, since he himself was cursed, and since he was assured that he would never see any strong, abundant return from working the soil. Instead, his returns would always be small and meager and not very satisfying. In effect, “the ground” itself was called in as a temporary executor of God’s judgment upon Cain. The ground that Cain had poisoned and defiled with his brother’s blood would now “render judgment” by refusing to produce anything worthwhile for its polluter Cain.

Along with this curse, and probably as a natural effect of it, Cain was cursed to be a wanderer and a nomad for the rest of his life. That is, he would not be tied to any one place but would have to move about to find the food he could not grow himself. But there are probably more than just physical reasons that he would be a wanderer. As the passage goes on to show, Cain felt a real sense of unease and nervousness about what might happen to him in the future as more people came along — and all of them blood relations, of course. He would never feel safe anywhere. He would always be watching his back, always wondering if there were something hidden beneath an approaching stranger’s cloak.

The judgment on Cain was severe and permanent. Moreover, he stood in a different relation to things than Adam and Eve because he became a seed of the evil one. He was “outside the camp,” so to speak. But even so, he was not beyond the benefit of God’s mercy. In fact, God displayed mercy toward Cain in a number of ways.

For starters, God came looking for Cain when he might have just struck him down instantly for what he had done. And then God didn’t rush in with indictments right away, but offered a question and an opportunity for Cain to respond, to make some sort of admission of guilt. Third, in response to Cain’s fears about blood vengeance being taken upon him, God did something to preserve Cain’s life.

And please notice, again, that this mercy of God comes in the face of a continued hardness and lack of repentance on Cain’s part. Cain does not say in Genesis 4:13 that his *sin* is too great to bear, but that his *punishment* is too great to bear. And here, as one writer says, is the difference between the repentant and the unrepentant heart, isn’t it? The unrepentant heart sees only that its punishment is great and complains about how unfair it all is. The repentant heart sees that its *sin* is great and that its punishment is *deserved*, and it is surprised and amazed at the grace shown to it. We see none of that here in Cain — and yet God is still merciful to him.

And so God, by that mercy, sets some sort of mark upon Cain that will result in his being set apart, and that will cause others to leave him alone and not harm him. Now, again, we don’t know what that mark was. But because of its purpose and function, we can be sure that it wasn’t any sort of racial distinction. Rather, it was unique and specific to the person of Cain himself. More importantly, it was an example of God’s mercy toward the unjust and undeserving — a mercy that continues to be shown every single moment of every single day.

In the account of Cain and Abel we see the beginnings of two great lines of humanity: the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. We see the promised conflict of Genesis 3:15 coming into being. Genesis 3:15 points to an eventual resolution of this conflict, to a time when the woman's seed and the serpent's are concentrated into particular persons in a particular conflict. But even though that resolution is also promised, we see no hint of that yet. Cain, the seed of the serpent, has seen to that by making a first and pre-emptive strike against the seed of the woman, his brother Abel.

And that is the pattern right through most of the Bible: the promised conflict is continually manifested, but with no sign of the promised resolution on the horizon. And this tension between the two keeps the storyline moving forward. We see this demonstrated in the story of Noah and his sons. We find it is in the account of Ishmael and Isaac, and in the account of Jacob and Esau, etc.

And as the storyline of the Old Testament develops, with Israel becoming a nation, we see this conflict between the two humanities demonstrated not only within Israel itself, but also between Israel and the other nations around her. We see it between Israel and Egypt, and between Israel and the various Canaanite nations.

Indeed, this is one of the significances of this account for the people of God in Moses' day. It showed them both the source of their own ongoing internal struggles and conflicts as a nation, and at the same time warned them of the coming struggles they faced in the Promised Land that lay before them. Just as Cain in his unacceptable religiosity resented Abel, who worshiped God acceptably and truly, so too could the nation of Israel expect that the surrounding nations in the Promised Land would similarly resent and hate them. Those who truly worship God have always provoked the anger of those who did not. And Israel needed to be prepared for that.

As we trace this plotline into the New Testament, we see it played out most significantly in the life of Christ. In the Gospels we see Jesus, for whom the Lord showed great regard, regularly provoking the anger and jealousy and fury of the religious leaders of his day, for whom the Lord had no regard. The scribes and Pharisees resented Jesus as surely as Cain resented Abel, and they conspired together to "rise up and kill him." And yet they did not accomplish what they thought they accomplished in doing that.

Abel's blood spoke of sin and judgment and darkness and doom, but Jesus shed blood spoke "a better word" (Heb. 12:24) — forgiveness and cleansing and mercy and peace — the promised resolution of the promised conflict. Through his life and death, Christ decisively defeated the seed of the serpent at the cross and assured the battle's ultimate outcome.

And yet there are remaining skirmishes to be fought as the fruit of Christ's victory is being brought to bear in the here and now, as the kingdom he established and inaugurated is being worked out and made manifest in the world. The church is the

“beachhead” of God’s kingdom, and so we, as that church, experience both of these realities: ultimate victory and ongoing skirmishes, within and without.

Was not this ongoing conflict the ultimate source of so many of the struggles and problems that Paul faced in the churches he planted in the New Testament? False teachers and wolves in sheep’s clothing were running around all over the place, creating all kinds of difficulties for him. Is this not the source of those same struggles in the church in every age?

Further, we see the reality of the Cain-Abel conflict not only between and amongst ourselves, but also in our stance as the church in contrast with the watching world. It is an external as well as an internal challenge for us, too. Either we follow in the footsteps of Cain, or we reverse that response and choose a better way:

For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. *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. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death (1 John 3:11-14, emphasis added).

Do you see what this passage is saying? It is the church’s job, as the true worshipers of God, to reverse the action of Cain, to show that we really are the seed of the woman and not the seed of the serpent. And we do this by loving one another. That’s the proof. That’s the mark that will show which of the two humanities we belong to. That is the reality that will be the stench of death for unbelievers within and outside the church, and that will provoke their wrath. And it is the reality that will be, at the same time, the fragrance of life that will compellingly draw God’s true worshipers to him, both those who have come and those who are yet to come.