

Navigating Family Conflict

Session 1

October 13, 2024

Cain and Abel: Family Responsibility

The Point: God expects us to look after our family members.

Session Passages: Genesis 4:1-12

Genesis 4:1-2

Connection to the Point. As Adam and Eve raised their sons, the sons took on different interests and skills.

Genesis the book. The lengthy book of Genesis is a book of beginnings. The first eleven chapters focus on the earliest beginnings of the universe. Chapters 1 and 2 record God's creation of the heavens and the earth. Sin entered the world as Adam and Eve fell to the serpent's temptation in the garden of Eden in chapter 3. Chapters 4 through 11 reveal the spread and increase of sin in the world until in chapter 11 the whole of society rebelled against God by building the Tower of Babel. The remainder of the book deals with patriarchal history. God made a new beginning by calling Abram to leave his past and set out on an extensive journey. He promised Abram a new land, a multitude of descendants, and a great name (12:1-4). As Abram obeyed, the Lord continued to fulfill His promises.

The Setting. After Adam and Eve sinned, the Lord expelled them from the garden. After their expulsion, Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel.

The man Adam (v. 1). The Hebrew word translated *man* is transliterated (written substituting equivalent English letters for the Hebrew letters) as *Adam*. The Hebrew word is literally *the man*. *Adam* is its transliteration (written substituting equivalent English letters for the Hebrew letters). This generic term can also be rendered "mankind" or "humankind." The designation may be related to a Hebrew word meaning "red" because of people's ruddy complexion. It also has been associated with a similar Hebrew word for "ground" because the Lord formed Adam out of the dust of the ground (2:7). God created man in His own image as the crowning point of His creation.

Was intimate with Made love to Knew (v. 1). In the original language, this phrase renders the Hebrew verb "knew." This verb is often recognized as a relationship term and can express the most intimate of relationships. The related noun typically identifies knowledge gained by experience. It also can designate the contemplative perception of the wise individual (Prov. 1:4; 2:6).

Eve (v. 1). *Eve* means "life" or "living." Adam named his wife Eve "because she was the mother of all the living because she would become the mother of all the living" (3:20). She was the first woman created and the first to face the serpent's temptation (v. 1).

Conceived Became pregnant and gave birth Conceived, and bare (v. 1). These two verbs relate to the physical birth process. The successive births of Cain, Abel, and Seth set forth the hope of personal redemption through God's grace. This pair of verbs also occurs in a figurative sense. David described the wicked individual not only as pregnant with evil but also as conceiving trouble and giving birth to deceit (Ps. 7:14).

Cain (v. 1). The name means "acquisition." Eve apparently connected the name with a Hebrew verb meaning "to get" or "to acquire." Cain became a farmer in contrast to his brother Abel who became a shepherd. Cain became a restless wanderer or vagabond. The New Testament associates the way of Cain with the way of evil (1 John 3:12).

Male child A man (v. 1). In many ancient cultures, parents especially rejoiced in the birth of a son. Children were viewed as a gift, a heritage, and a reward from the Lord (Gen. 33:5; Ps. 127:3). Sons provided for the continuance of the family line. Parents passed down their ancient traditions through their children (Deut. 4:9; 6:4-7).

With the Lord's help With the help of the Lord From the Lord (v. 1). The Hebrew literally reads “with the Lord.” The addition of the word *help* clarifies the phrase's meaning. The Lord helped Adam and Eve produce a child. Eve's comment on Cain's birth reflects her dependence on the Lord. This first recorded birth in the Scripture attributes conception and life to God's work and evidence of His blessing.

Abel (v. 2). *Abel* means “breath.” The concept may be that of “vapor” or “nothingness.” It may allude to the shortness of life. By connecting the name with the concept of “breath” or “vapor,” Abel's significance appears to be dismissed while Cain is celebrated as a gift of the Lord and an embodiment of vitality. By the time of the New Testament, however, their positions have reversed. Abel is recognized as a man of faith (Heb. 11:4), while Cain is rejected as an example of evil doing (Jude 1:11).

Became Kept Was (v. 2). This Hebrew verb, appearing over thirty-five hundred times in the Old Testament, can be translated variously. Its meanings include “to be, become, exist” or “to happen.” Unlike Cain, who followed Adam's vocation, Abel *became was* a shepherd *kept* sheep.

Shepherd Flocks Sheep (v. 2). Shepherding functioned as an important occupation throughout the biblical period. It was the chief occupation of the Israelites during the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses was shepherding his father-in-law's flock when the Lord called him to shepherd His people in their exodus from Egypt and journey to the promised land (Ex. 3:1-10). Shepherds were among the first to visit Jesus as His birth (Luke 2:8-16). The title *shepherd* became a designation for Israel's kings as well as other leaders (2 Sam. 5:1-2; Jer. 23:1-4). In Psalm 23 David referred to the Lord as his Shepherd. Jesus designated Himself as “the good shepherd” (John 10:11-18).

Worked Was a tiller of the ground soil (v. 2). This describes Cain's occupation in contrast to Abel's. It began with Adam's tending the garden of Eden (2:15). The primary crops among the later Israelites included olives, grains, and grapes. Their religious calendars were built partly around the agricultural year as they observed such festivals as the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, marking the grain harvest (Ex. 34:22), and Tabernacles or Booths, which included the grape harvest (Lev. 23:39-43).

Genesis 4:3-7

Connection to the Point. In whatever we do, we are to give our best to God as an act of worship.

Some of the land's produce Some of the fruits of the soil Of the fruit of the ground (v. 3). This identifies Cain's offering, which appropriately represented his vocation as a tiller of the soil. Why was Cain's gift rejected while Abel's was accepted? One idea is that blood sacrifices were preferred over grain offerings. However, the laws of the sacrificial system would come later under Moses. Part of the answer apparently lies in the fact that Cain's offering is not identified as the best of his produce. In contrast Abel brought some of the firstborn animals as well as their fat portions—the best of the flock (see v. 4).

Presented Brought . . . an offering (v. 3). The same word for *offering* is used of both Cain's and Abel's gifts (vv. 3-4). The Hebrew can refer to any kind of gift, including that given among brothers (32:13) or to a king (1 Sam. 10:27). It also functions as a technical term for the grain offering (Lev. 2:1-7). Both men felt the need for worship long before the Lord introduced the sacrificial system in the time of Moses. Perhaps they learned the practice from Adam.

Firstborn Firstlings (v. 4). God's people realized the Lord required not only the best but also the first share of all their produce. Thus the firstfruits of plants, animals, and human beings belonged to Him. In Exodus, the tenth plague on Egypt, the death of the firstborn, reflective of the fact that the firstborn belonged to the Lord, not to the gods of Egypt (Ex. 11:1-7). Nevertheless, with regard to the firstborn, Hebrew practice differed sharply from that of pagan religions. While pagan worshipers literally sacrificed children to their gods, the Old Testament makes clear a loathing for child

sacrifice (see Jer. 32:35). The Lord selected the tribe of Levi to serve Him in place of the firstborn Israelite sons (Num. 3:11-13). The number of firstborn sons beyond the number of Levites was redeemed at five shekels each (vv. 46-51). This redemption by means of substitution foreshadows Christ's substitutionary atonement.

Flock (v. 4). The Hebrew word is a generic term for small cattle. However, it typically referred to sheep and goats, particularly sheep. Flocks provided milk and meat, as well wool for clothing. Their hides served many functions, including tent coverings. The firstborn males of the flock belonged to the Lord (Ex. 13:12). The Israelites also presented the tithe or tenth of the flock to Him (Lev. 27:32). Sheep and shepherds became an analogy of the Israelites and their leaders (Num. 27:15-17). In the Old Testament the Lord is portrayed as the good Shepherd (Ps. 23:1-6). In the New Testament Jesus identified Himself as the good Shepherd (John 10:14-15).

Fat portions thereof (v. 4). Like the blood, the fat portions were not to be eaten (Lev. 3:16-17; 7:23-27). The offering of fat, the tastiest part of the animal, symbolized the worshiper's desire to offer God the best. However, the Lord stated that the ritual offering of even the fat could not substitute for obedience to Him (1 Sam. 15:22).

The Lord had regard for looked with favor on had respect unto Abel and to his offering (v. 4). The Hebrew verb basically conveys the idea of looking at someone or something with interest. It never indicates a casual or disinterested glance. In Genesis 4:4 the verb means to look at with approval. Abel's offering was acceptable because Abel was acceptable. The difference in the two men's hearts or attitudes made the difference in the acceptability of their offerings. The difference in the Lord's response to Cain's and Abel's offerings lies in the integrity of the giver. The writer of Hebrews noted that the Lord accepted Abel's offering because he offered it in faith (Heb. 11:4).

Furious Angry Wroth (vv. 5,6). The Hebrew verb basically means "to be hot" or "to burn." It is almost always used in reference to anger. The term emphasizes the kindling of anger like the kindling of a fire, or the heat of anger, once it is kindled.

He looked despondentHis face was downcastHis countenance fell (v. 5). Literally, "his face fell." Cain's anger displayed his true attitude, which resulted in despondency. His downcast face indicated his saddened disposition. Cain was unwilling to accept the Lord's judgment in the matter.

What is right Doest well (v. 7). This verb basically means "to be good." The Old Testament reveals that God does good to His obedient people. He treats them well or causes them to prosper (Ex. 1:20; Deut. 5:29). He also expects them to do that which is good or pleasing to Him (Isa. 1:17; Jer. 7:23).

Sin is crouching at they our door Sin lieth at the door (v. 7). This term for sin means "missing the mark." The Lord compared sin with an animal lurking at the door, a reference to the animal's resting place or den. Like such an animal, sin is ready to stir if incited. Thus the picture is that of sin, temporarily at bay and subject to its master, but ready to pounce on Cain if he opens the door of opportunity.

Its desire is for you It desires to have you Unto thee shall be his desire (v. 7). The language alludes to the judgment on Eve (3:16). It may have reminded Cain of the consequences of sin for his mother. Sin has a pervasive power that seizes opportunities to enslave its victims (Rom. 7:15-24). The Hebrew term translated *desires* derives from a root meaning "to stretch out after."

You must rule over it Thou shalt rule over him (v. 7). Sin possesses the power to enslave and destroy. The Lord encouraged Cain to repent lest sin consume him. In his wrestling with sin, Paul concluded that Christ's power alone could set him free (Rom. 7:14-25). Because Cain refused to deal rightly with his sin, his anger festered into murder.

Genesis 4:8-12

Connection to the Point. There are serious consequences when we do not act as our “brother’s keeper.”

Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him (v. 8). The Hebrew phrase rendered *attacked* literally means “rose up against.” It *rose up against* frequently refers to preparation for, engagement in, and victory in war or other struggles. The verb translated *killed slew* includes the concepts of murder and judicial execution. It seldom refers to killing animals for food. Usually it depicts killing people, frequently in contexts of violent killing in war or intrigue. Cain murdered his brother prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments with their prohibition against murder, yet Cain apparently knew his act was wrong. Paul pointed out that all people are without excuse for sin because God’s divine nature can be understood through what He has created (Rom. 1:18-20).

The Lord (v. 9). This title, typically printed in both large and small capital letters, distinguishes the Hebrew word often written in English as *Yahweh* from another Hebrew word that means “Lord.” God revealed the significance of this title to Moses at the burning bush when He responded to Moses’s request to know God’s name with the expression, “I AM WHO I AM I am who I am I Am That I Am” (Ex. 3:14). The designation comes from the Hebrew verb “to be” and denotes God as the self-existent, covenant God who acts independently of outside influences.

Where is your brother Abel thy brother? (v. 9). Of course, the omniscient or all-knowing Lord knew Cain had murdered his brother. In asking this question, the Lord sought to elicit not information, but confession from Cain. The Lord’s question echoes His previous question to Adam after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit: “Where are you and your brother?” (3:9).

Am I my brother’s guardian keeper? (v. 9). Cain attempted to elude the Lord’s question and to absolve himself of responsibility. Later Mosaic law clearly answered Cain’s question in the affirmative (Lev. 19:18). Like his parents had done in the garden, Cain tried to avoid admitting guilt. This account of Cain and Abel points out that we cannot separate relationships with fellow human beings from our relationship with God. They are inseparably bound together (see 1 John 4:21).

What have you and your brother done? (v. 10). This second question the Lord addressed to Cain echoes the one He asked Eve (3:13). Again, the Lord sought to elicit confession from Cain.

Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground! The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground (v. 10). The Lord’s words depict Abel’s postmortem call for vindication. The Hebrew text more literally reads: “The voice (sound) of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.” In Genesis 3:8 Adam and Eve had heard the “sound voice” (same Hebrew word) of the Lord walking in Eden. In both cases this sound or voice represented a call to accountability for their actions. In the Scripture blood represents life (Lev. 17:11,14). To remove the blood is to end physical life. Thus this passage underscores the sanctity of human life.

Cursed Under a curse (v. 11). Hebrew contains a variety of words for curse. The particular verb here occurs over sixty times in the Old Testament. Recall that Cain’s vocation was that of a tiller of the soil. The Lord’s judgment on him banned him from enjoying the soil’s productivity. This curse reveals the gravity of his sin against God and creation. Most of the curse sayings with the particular term used in verse 11 fall into one of three general groups: (1) declaring punishments, (2) uttering threats, and (3) proclaiming laws. Such curses or condemnations result from a person violating God’s law. For example, Deuteronomy 27:15-26 stipulates curses for violations including idolatry, disrespect for parents, sexual sins, and bribery

Alienated Driven from the ground From the earth (v. 11). Sin alienates. Cain was separated from the ground because he had polluted it with Abel’s innocent blood. This judgment calls to mind Adam and Eve’s separation from the garden of Eden because of their disobedience (3:24). Thus the farmer Cain no longer could enjoy the fruit of the ground. The

ground from which human beings had been taken and over which they were to rule was affected by their sins. For a farmer to be alienated from the ground posed a major threat to his continuing existence.

Restless wanderer Fugitive and a vagabond (v. 12). Because Cain would experience difficulty making a living from the ground, he would become a nomad. Cain migrated to the land of Nod, located “east of Eden” (v. 16). Nod means “wandering.” The emphasis falls not primarily on the physical location of Nod but rather on the “lostness” of the wanderer. Nevertheless, God tempered His judgment with mercy. He placed His mark on Cain in order to preserve his life (v. 15). Past failure need not permanently isolate individuals from God’s grace.