

Cain and Abel

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Preacher: Keith Knowlton

[0:00] Well, good morning, everyone. Again, my name is Keith Knowlton. It's a pleasure to be with you this morning. If we haven't met, I hope to have the chance to do so after our service this morning.

As James mentioned, we are continuing our series in the book of Genesis, the very first book of the Bible. We've been walking bit by bit through this book. We've already looked at the creation story, the creation of man and woman made in God's image.

They're placed in the garden with a command to rule over creation. They live in fellowship with God. But yet, as we saw last week, they end up rebelling against God.

They are tempted by the serpent, and they eat of the forbidden fruit, and sin enters the world. And though God promises them soon after their sin that he will rescue them, he will send this rescuer sometime in the future to overthrow the evil one, we see the immediate effects of the fall, brokenness and separation from God being banished outside the garden.

And so that's where our passage picks up today in Genesis chapter 4, this familiar story of Cain and Abel. And I wonder if you've ever heard the phrase, someone said it to you perhaps, welcome to the real world.

[1:14] It's one of those phrases that's said with a bit of cynicism, a bit of sarcasm, a sarcasm in your voice. Perhaps there's a student who recently graduates from uni and is looking forward to getting their dream job, and they begin work, but then they recognize there's office politics, and they have a difficult boss and coworkers that are targeting one another.

Someone may say, welcome to the real world. Or maybe you have a young adult who's ready to branch out on their own. They move out of their family's house. They find their own flat. They're excited for the sense of freedom and independence.

And then comes rent and council tax and insurance and utilities. Welcome to the real world. Or maybe it's a newlywed couple that returns from their honeymoon, excited about this life of marital bliss.

And then it's the very next day that they recognize these differing opinions in finances and in family and in their future. Welcome to the real world. We see this, I think, a similar situation in our passage this morning, this welcome to the real world moment, because we recognize that man had been in paradise in the garden, and now they're suddenly confronted with this ongoing effects of sin in life outside of Eden.

And so again, this is a familiar story of Cain and Abel, I would think, to most of us, but I don't want us to characterize it the wrong way, because I think oftentimes we can just look at it as this historical narrative about the first murder in human history.

[2:47] And we can kind of keep it at arm's length to think, well, that doesn't really have anything to do with me and my situation. But what I hope that this narrative portrays for us is the picture of the real world in which you and I still live, in which you and I continue to experience the pervasiveness of sin.

But also in the midst of this brokenness, I hope that we see today that we are not left without the mercy of God. And so let's look at our passage.

This is in page 6 of your church Bible, Genesis chapter 4, starting in verse 1. Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain.

She said, With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man. Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord.

But Abel also brought an offering, fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering, he did not look with favor. [3:53] So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?

But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must rule over it. Now Cain said to his brother Abel, Let's go out to the field.

And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, Where is your brother Abel? I don't know, he replied. Am I my brother's keeper? The Lord said, What have you done?

Listen. Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth. Cain said to the Lord, My punishment is more than I can bear.

[4:53] Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence. I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me. But the Lord said to him, Not so.

Anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over. Then the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the Lord's presence, and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

This is the word of God. Will you pray with me again? Heavenly Father, as we turn now to the preaching of your word, we do ask that you send your spirit among us, that he may prepare our minds to receive your word, to move in our hearts to embrace your truth, and to strengthen our wills, that we may follow in your ways.

We pray this in the name of our Savior Jesus. Amen. Now, as I mentioned, our passage today, we are confronted with this post-fall reality of life after Eden.

This is not a narrative that simply describes the environment thousands of years ago. It describes our environment here and now, the conditions in which we live in. And so I wonder, after Adam and Eve first sinned, how they first thought about sin.

[6:17] Obviously, they recognized the consequences of sin, these external consequences. We know that they felt remorse, but how did they initially think that sin might affect them internally and personally?

I wonder if they might have had this thought, well, yeah, we slipped up, but it's not going to happen again. Or it might happen again, but it's not going to happen all the time. Maybe it'll be kind of more of an occasional dealing that we have to face.

But I think they probably woke up very quickly the next day and recognized a very different setting. Arguments began, selfishness crept in, anger and pride.

It affected their thoughts and their actions and their speech. And they realized, oh wait, sin has affected everything and there's no escaping it.

And we see how quickly sin grows and expands that even in this first chapter that records man's life outside of Eden, we're faced with murder. We only have to go two more chapters in Genesis where it says this about God's people, that the Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on earth and every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.

[7:32] And we think, wow, that escalated quickly, right? I mean, we look though at the Westminster Confession of Faith and it gives a similar description of human condition. We are utterly indisposed, disabled and made opposite to all good and wholly inclined to all evil.

And so that's what I want us to think about today, to think about sin and its seriousness and its pervasiveness. And specifically in this passage, I want us to think about the progression of sin that we see here from conception to confrontation to completion.

And so those will be the three points of this sermon today. Sin conceived, sin confronted, and sin completed. So let's consider that first point of sin conceived. Now we're introduced to Abel, Cain

and Abel right off the start.

Abel, he keeps flocks. Cain, he works the soil and they both bring these offerings to God. Cain brings the fruit of the soil. Abel brings the firstborn of his flock and these fat portions. And I think it's worth noting right off the bat that there's this sameness here.

They're brothers. They're both in this act of worship. And on the surface, it doesn't appear like there's much different. I remember from my childhood, you see these images of Cain and Abel. And Abel is kind of this innocent boyish figure.

[8:49] And you see Cain like this big menacing dark figure. I don't think that's what we see right off the bat here. They're both engaged in this act of worship. And so why is it then that God looks at favor, looks at Abel's offering with favor, but not Cain's.

And I think we get our first clue by just looking at the offering itself. And I don't think it's simply because Cain didn't bring an animal as Abel did. Remember, this is before the Mosaic law where there's instructions about different kinds of offering and different kinds of sacrifices.

We know that Cain was a farmer. He grew crops. This is what he brought to the Lord. But the thing is, what we see here is a missing key word in the Hebrew. It says that he brought fruit, but it doesn't say that he brought his first fruits.

The first fruits are the yield, the first yield of your harvest. And they're supposed to recognize, it's a recognition that all creation belongs to God.

And so we get a sense here of Cain's stinginess perhaps, that he's holding back his first, he's holding back his best. He's making offering to God, but he's wanting to make sure that he has enough for himself.

[10:06] We get a second clue about this offering and God's pleasure with Abel. We see when we go to the New Testament, to the book of Hebrews chapter 11, says this in verse four, by faith, Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did.

By faith, he was commended as righteous when God spoke well of his offering. And so we see here, it's not simply about the gift that's brought, but it's the heart of the giver.

Abel brought his offering out of faith. You may say, well, faith in what? Like they literally just got kicked out of the garden. Well, remember, when God kicked them out, he gave them this promise that through the seed of a woman, a rescuer would come to crush the head of that serpent.

A rescuer is going to come. Abel didn't know when it was gonna happen, how it was gonna happen, but he exhibits faith. On the other hand, we see Cain's offering. He doesn't give this offering in response to this promise of salvation.

In fact, his offering exhibits a lack of faith, a lack of trust. He's holding back his best. And so isn't this how sin often begins in our lives with this little lack of faith?

[11:17] And perhaps it's small, and perhaps it's unnoticeable at first, but implicitly, we start to doubt God's goodness. Can he be trusted?

Is his way best? And we stop resting on him, and we start thinking that our way is better. This is what's described in the book of James in the New Testament when it talks about how sin begins. It says each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desires and enticed. Dragged away from the will of God. And then after this desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. And so we see here, Cain, it's not like he's refusing outright to worship God or to give an offering. It's not that he denies or doesn't believe God exists. We see him interacting and communicating with God in this passage.

He's involved in this religious activity, but it's not done with a pure heart. And so I wonder if we often do the same thing. We come to church, we're involved in a community group, we serve on the welcome team, but where is our heart?

[12:31] We believe that God exists, but do we truly long to be in relationship with him? Or are we simply here out of a sense of duty, just going through the motions? Do we recognize our deep need for him?

Or do we think that religion is just kind of one of those things we add to our life's portfolio? The reality is, is that God sees the condition of our heart.

And he doesn't desire for us just to go through the motions of worship. Listen to God what says through the prophet Hosea, he says, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God

rather than burnt offerings.

Have you ever considered why a lot of church doors are painted red? It's done with a purpose. It symbolizes that we enter into the presence of God through the blood of Jesus.

We don't come to worship based on the fruit of our own labor. We're not trying to come here to prove ourselves to God. We come into his presence.

[13:34] We come to worship as his people, to experience the means of grace, confident that he will forgive our sins and redeem us through the work of Jesus. And so for anyone here who has sinned grievously this week, anyone here who has forgotten God's goodness, anyone who has relied on your own strength, God welcomes you here.

And we're glad that you are. Because we're invited to come in faith recognizing that God freely gives grace to us. The old hymn says, nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling. And that takes us to our second point. Sin confronted. Now some of you know that before coming to Scotland, I practiced law in the States. And law school is a little bit different.

It's set up here. We actually were talking about this in our community group last week, that the teaching is a bit different. It's not just you sitting in class and are lectured. It's a form of what's called the Socratic method. It's this dialogue of the professor asking questions and the student answering those questions.

And so when you go to class, the professor would likely call on one person. You'd have to stand up that student. And then the professor may pepper them, all class, just that one student with questions about the reading, about the case law that they should know.

[14:57] And so maybe he picks on a few people. But the point is, he's asked these questions not because he doesn't know the answer, but he's trying to draw out understanding to cause the student to think critically to come up with the right answers.

And so I think we see something similar here. God comes to Cain and he asks, why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? And God's not asking these questions because he doesn't know the answer.

It's not that God is lacking information here. Instead, he's asking these questions in order to bring Cain to this point of self-reflection and understanding that he may recognize his own sin.

And so I think it's worth noting here first that we see the tenderness of God. So often people outside the church, they want to look at the Christian God and think he's this judgmental God who's looking up, just waiting for us to fail so he can drop the hammer on us.

That's not the picture we get here. We get a picture of God's patience and forbearance. Cain is already in sin. He's demonstrated this lack of faith.

[16:01] He's been jealous toward his brother, but God doesn't seek to immediately punish him. He seeks to bring about restoration. And he does so by this very ominous warning that sin is crouching at your door.

There's another old English version translated this way. I like it. It says sin is lurking at your threshold. This crouching verb in the Hebrew, it describes the way that a predator would leap upon its prey.

It's this readiness to spring. It's a language that's echoed in 1 Peter 5 where Peter says, your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

And so we've all seen those animal documentaries, right, where you have a lion who's hunting down its prey slowly and stealthily moving through the bush, sneaking up on this unassuming prey. And it's only to the last minute that this animal takes notice, but it's too late. And the tiger or the lion has pounced and overpowered its prey. And so do we really view sin this way, that it's crouching at your door?

[17:12] This is the phrase that kept coming up in my study over and over again. It really was haunting me this week because I realized how often I personally fail to acknowledge the opportunity for sin in every aspect of my life.

Sin is always ready to attack. In your interactions with your family, every time you pick up your phone, every time your mind wanders, every time you sit at your desk at work, every interaction you have with coworkers and classmates, every time you're by yourself at home, sin is ready to pounce.

And so how are we encouraged to respond? The New Testament has descriptive words throughout that says, how do we confront our sin? It says we resist, we fight, we flee, we struggle, we put to death.

We cannot address our sin passively. We are engaged in this spiritual combat empowered by the Holy Spirit. And so we do this because of the second part of God's warning that we see in our passage.

It's so important because it says that sin desires to have you. When a lion attacks an antelope, it's not simply looking to tear off one leg and then let it hop away with three.

[18:31] It wants to kill the animal. It wants to consume it whole. Likewise, sin is not looking to affect just part of us. It doesn't want to attack and then retreat.

There's no truce in our battle against sin. It wants to fully overpower us. And so it's not content to allow you to just have a few arguments with your spouse.

It wants to destroy your marriage. It's not content to just interfere with some of your thought life. It wants to ruin it with lust and anger and pride. Sin doesn't want to steal just a few minutes of your day.

It wants to make you destroy your productivity through idle scrolling, through being distracted from anything other than Christ and his kingdom.

And so what we see in this story, though, is that destruction, it doesn't come all at once. It's not like Cain woke up one day and just decided, I'm going to go murder my brother. We see that sin has this gradual effect.

[19:33] So think about maybe how it played out in Cain's life. He's farming after the fall. He has no heavy equipment. He probably has little help. It's hard to even bring enough produce to survive.

And so maybe he's a little disgruntled even from the beginning that God has put him in this situation. And so he brings some of his fruit, his produce to offer to God, but it's not his best. He needs to make sure he has enough for himself to eat. And God's not pleased with this, so he's a little upset that all this hard work is going overlooked by God. And he begins jealous because God is pleased with his brother.

And so maybe he exchanges some words with his brother Abel over time, begins to get angry rather than just jealous, and that anger finally turns to hatred, and this hatred then proceeds to murder.

It's really a wonderful book that creatively illustrates the tactics of the devil. It's the Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis. And in there we have this senior demon Screwtape who's writing these letters to his nephew demon, and he's explaining how to effectively tempt the human that he's responsible for.

[20:44] And he makes a point to say that it's not through dramatic evil events that you tempt someone, but through quiet, gradual manipulation. He says this, he says, the safest road to hell is the gradual one.

The gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turns, without milestones, and without signposts. And so throughout the book, Screwtape is repeatedly encouraging that you make these sinful habits feel normal and harmless.

And so the goal is not dramatic rebellion, it's spiritual numbness that ultimately destroys the whole person. And so this is the process that works in each one of our lives.

It's subtle, it's quiet, and so therefore, often we let our guards down. How often do we address sin in our lives? Oftentimes, we want to justify it. We want to validate our actions based on our circumstances.

Why cheated on the exam? Because everyone else was cheating on the exam. I didn't want to be at a disadvantage. I was holding a grudge because you don't know what that person did to me and they're not even sorry for it.

[21:56] I spoke angry to my kids because they just won't listen to me and they're disobedient all the time. I was rude to my spouse because my spouse was rude to me. I was ruthless at work because that's the only way that I'm ever going to get a promotion.

Similarly, in addition to justifying, oftentimes we try to minimize our faith, right? Think it's not really that big of a deal. Well, it was just a bit of lust. It's not like I cheated on my spouse. It was just a bit of gossip.

I don't do it all the time. I may work more than I should, but look at that other guy. He's with his family far less than I am. I think worst of all, we often try to hide our sin.

We know that it's wrong. We know that it's destroying us, but we try to conceal it. We try to make and deal with it on our own. We don't want to ruin our reputation.

We don't want to have to ask for help or accountability, and so we wallow in the sense of guilt and shame. And when we do that, that often spirals into a cycle of more sin and more shame, and we get to the point of thinking, God would never forgive me for what I've done.

[23:05] But look again about how God responds to Cain here. He gently warns him. He urges him to acknowledge his sin, that he's been minimizing and justifying and concealing.

And we need to recognize that even today, God continues to work in the lives of his people in this way. Through his spirit, he confronts, and he convicts, and he encourages us. And so do we recognize that this is God's mercy toward us, that we feel guilty for our sins.

Not that it leads to self-loathing, but that it leads to repentance, so that we can be enabled, as God encourages Cain here, to rule over our sin rather than it rule over us.

Every Sunday here in our worship together, we try to incorporate a prayer of confession. It's a way of acknowledging corporately that we fall short of God's glory. And hopefully, this is a personal practice for each one of us, that we're willing and ready to confess our known sins, but also to ask God to convict us of hidden sins that we either ignore or overlook in our lives.

That we can pray like the psalmist prays in Psalm 139, Search me, O God, and know my heart, know my thoughts, see if there is any wicked way in me. And so may we let God's kind confrontation lead us to repentance, that we may be vigilant in our fight against sin.

[24:40] And that brings us then to our final point, sin completed. You ever had the opportunity to tell someone, I told you so? Or maybe someone said that to you before? I feel like this is a daily occurrence in the lives of parents when they see their kids fighting or doing something questionable.

Someone's going to get hurt, there's going to be tears. Then within minutes, there are tears and someone's upset. And it says, I told you so. I warned you. We see that with the same thing here. Cain was warned. He didn't listen. It says, I told you so moment for God. We could have predicted something bad was going to happen. It says in verse 6, Now Cain said to his brother Abel, let's go out to the field and while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

And again, God comes to Cain the same way that he came to Adam and Eve after they sinned and he asked them, where's your brother? But instead of confessing his sin like Adam and Eve did, he tries to deny it.

He tries to cover it up. Am I my brother's keeper? And so we see this cycle of unrepentant sin leads to unrepentant sin which leads to unrepentant sin. And so God punishes Cain.

[25:53] No longer will he be able to grow crops. He will be a restless wanderer in perpetual exile. And sadly, even now, we don't see Cain with repentant heart. We don't see any sign of remorse.

He's simply bemoaning the punishment. He's full of self-pity, full of resentment. He thinks this punishment is more than he can bear. In his mind, being cast out of God's presence, being taken away from land, it's a death sentence to him.

But even in the midst of Cain's ongoing rebellion, we see really something incredible here. And it's God's mercy accompanies his justice.

And he places a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. We need to recognize that God would have been fully within his right to strike Cain down.

In fact, in the Mosaic Law that comes later, it prescribes this death penalty for someone who intentionally murders somebody else. But yet, God chooses to show mercy.

[26:58] The late theologian, Meredith Klein, he notes in his commentary on this passage, he says, God's concern for the innocent is matched only by his care for the sinner.

And so if God cares for an unrepentant murderer like Cain, how much more does he care for you and me who come to him in faith and repentance?

We've spoken these last few weeks about how Jesus serves as a second Adam. Adam wasn't able to perfectly fulfill the law, but Jesus came in perfect obedience and did what Adam couldn't.

But we see in this passage that Jesus also came as a second Abel. Because just as this shepherd Abel, his blood was shed by his hypocrite brother who is offering, who is giving these offerings to God in false worship, we too see our good shepherd, Jesus.

His blood was shed on the cross by Jewish religious leaders who Jesus personally called hypocrites, who said they were clean on the outside but full of greed and indulgence on the inside, whose jealousy led to hatred and hatred to murder.

[28:14] And so while Abel's blood cries out for justice, we see something different in the blood of Jesus. In Hebrews 12, 24 it says this, it says, we come to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Abel's blood speaks of judgment. Jesus' blood speaks of grace. And so this should be an incredible word of encouragement and hope and comfort to us because this is the real world in which we live, that there's not an inch of creation that hasn't been affected by the curse of sin, but we have a loving God who fulfilled his promise to send a rescuer through the seed of woman to be the perfect sacrifice, to redeem us from our sins, to restore us into perfect relationship with God.

And so if you're here today and you've never placed your trust in Christ, the invitation is for you to come forward in simple faith just like Abel did because you're not too far from God's mercy.

You don't have to get your life in order and straighten your ways up to think that God will accept you. Come in your sin, come in your shame and heed God's warning that judgment is coming for those who do not repent but his mercy is extended to those who put their faith in Christ.

For those of us who are in Christ, maybe we remember just how formidable of an enemy we face. That sin is ever crouching at your door.

[30:00] And so may we be ever vigilant, not trying to justify or conceal our sin but being welcome to welcome God's gentle confrontation that we may be trusting in him that he's ready to forgive and ready to restore.

Amen.