

Grace Outside The Garden Contending For Our Souls

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Date: 31 October 2010

Preacher: Darrell Johnson

[0 : 00] Living God, we believe that you inspired the writing of this text. And in your mercy and grace, will you now help us understand why you did?

What is it that you want your people to know and do in light of this text? We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. The story that makes sense of our stories.

That is the title I'm giving to this current series of sermons in the opening chapters of the Bible. In Genesis 1 to 11, we have this story that makes sense of our stories.

Like the previous chapter of the story, Genesis 3, the chapter before us today, Genesis 4, is also a sad story. More than sad, it is a dark story.

The avalanche of sin is speeding up, rushing into ever deeper darkness. The avalanche is heading into death, literally so.

[1 : 11] The first child born to the first humans murders his brother. But as is the case with Genesis 3, so it is with Genesis 4.

As we saw last Sunday, although a very sad story, Genesis 3 is full of grace. Although a sad, dark story, Genesis 4 is also full of grace.

Indeed, it is full of light. Genesis 3, grace in the garden. Genesis 4, grace outside the garden.

Over Genesis 3, we spoke the New Testament claim, where sin increased, grace superabounded. Over Genesis 4, we can speak the New Testament claim, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

Notice how the story is bracketed. The story begins and ends in miracle. The sad, dark chapter begins and ends with the conception and birth of a child.

[2 : 23] Genesis 4, 1. Adam had relations with his wife. She became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. Genesis 4, 2. Genesis 4, 2. Genesis 4, 2. Genesis 4, 2. Genesis 4, 2. Genesis 4, 2. Adam had relations with his wife again, gave birth to a son, and named him Seth.

In a world falling apart, in a world that is increasingly coming under the power of death, God graces the first couple with children. Any couple who has had to wrestle with infertility can tell you that the conception and birth of a child is a miracle.

Outside the garden, God is extending amazing grace. And as we will see, what is said at the birth of each of these child's opens up the meaning of Genesis 4.

Of Cain, Eve says, with the help of the Lord, I have gotten a man. I have gotten.

I, a man. Of Seth, Eve says, God has granted me another child, a seed, in place of Abel, whom Cain killed.

[3 : 36] God has granted me. God, a seed. The sad and dark story of Genesis 4 is full of grace and light, as are all sad and dark stories, where the God of grace and light chooses to intervene.

Now, where should we focus today? There's so much in Genesis 4. I should have planned three or four sermons in Genesis 4.

There's so much that helps us make sense, that makes sense of our lives. So, where should we focus? We could focus on the totally unexpected grace given to Cain the murderer.

After God confronts the first person born to first humans, for murdering the second person born to the first humans, and after spelling out the judgment, curse it are you from the ground, Cain cries out, verse 13, my punishment is too great for me.

Too great? Too great? Too great? Too great to bear? No punishment is too great for you, Cain. Cain, you took a life.

[4 : 53] You lured an innocent man into the field, and you killed him. Too great to bear? Banish from the ground that sustains life? You took life.

Now you are suffering the natural consequences. You are cut off from what sustains life. Too great to bear? But what is God's response?

Totally unexpected. Verse 15. So the Lord said to Cain, Therefore, whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.

And the Lord appointed a sign for Cain, lest anyone finding him should slay him. God protects the killer from those who want to kill him.

Yes, Cain has to leave the ground and carve out an existence east of Eden, in the desert, in the land of Nod. Nod means wandering.

[5 : 50] But he gets grace. Unexpected, unmerited, and scandalous grace. God protects the murderer from other murderers.

We are not told what this sign of Cain is. Was it a protective tattoo that says, hands off, or you're going to have to deal with God?

We don't know. All we know is that somehow, God himself protects Cain, the killer, from other Cains who want to kill him. Incomprehensibly, God bestows grace on Cain.

The tragedy of the story is, however, that Cain's family would soon forget this scandalous grace. By the seventh generation, revenge would be the name of the game.

Lamech, Cain's great, great, great, great, great grandson, will boast of killing a human being. Verses 23 to 24, Lamech says to his two wives, Ada and Zillah, listen to my voice, you wives of Lamech, give heed to my speech, for I have killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me.

[6 : 58] If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech's 77-fold. A little boy merely wounds Lamech, and Lamech kills him. Lamech's not even satisfied with eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

He takes life for eye, and life for tooth. In fact, that's not even enough. Lamech wants 77-fold revenge. Where in the rest of the story, where in the rest of the Bible, do we meet these numbers 7 and 70?

It's when Jesus steps in to stop the avalanche of revenge. Remember that his disciple Peter asked, How many times shall my brother sin against me, and I shall forgive him?

Up to seven times? Peter thinks he's being magnanimous. Jesus replies, I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to 70 times seven. Jesus is going to stop this revenge.

Or, we could focus on what Genesis 4 reveals about cities, about human cities. Cain, driven from the ground and from the face of God, as he puts it in verse 14, although that's not true.

[8 : 08] He's not driven from the face of God. It's just that he will think he's away from the face of God. God is going to see him all the time. Cain, driven from the ground and driven from the face of God, builds a city.

And he names the city after his firstborn son, Enoch. He builds a city for protection, and he builds a city to sustain human life outside the garden.

Cain moves out of this posture of creature before creator and builds a city. Cain leaves the true center of life, the living God, and puts himself in the center and builds the city.

The first human city is built without any orientation toward the creator to live in total independence from the creator. And is this not the genesis of many of our cities?

Built without any reference from God to live independent of God? It might interest you to know that New York City was founded by those who were running from religion, and there were no churches or synagogues in New York City for the first 15 years of its existence.

[9 : 21] Following the lead of the first city, designed for life without God. Yet there's grace. In Genesis 4, there's grace for the city.

God enables these God-less humans to make the city work. As David Aikman observes, civilization begins to grow outside the garden. Even in the land of restlessness, there is culture, there is art.

Surprisingly, it is through Cain the fugitive, Cain the prodigal, that God's commissioned to his people to work and subdue creation begins to be established. The text speaks of those who play the lyre and the pipe.

The text speaks of those who forge implements of bronze and iron. This is grace. Any city that works is a sign of grace. Even when a city does not want God, God gives it grace to work.

God gives creative genius even to those who do not want him. Now the sad fact of the story is, as Derek Kierner points out, that although the family of Lamech could handle its environment and build a city, it could not handle itself.

[10 : 30] We'll pick up this theme of God and the city when we get to Genesis 11 and look at the Tower of Babel. And there we will see how this story points to an even greater grace, how God is building a city, a city that outdazzles every city of the world.

Now the most significant way that Genesis 4 helps us make sense of our stories is in the way that God relates to Cain before he builds the city.

In the opening scenes of this story, we have a number of speeches between God and Cain. And in those speeches, we find God contending for Cain's soul.

as he contends for ours. And it is on this grace that I invite you to focus with me. The two brothers go to worship. The two brothers bring their offering to God.

And the text says, verse 4, the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering, God had no regard. And the text says, verse 5, so Cain became very angry and his countenance fell.

[11 : 44] His face fell. Why angry? We can understand why God's regard for Abel and his gift and not for Cain and his would make Cain sad. And we can understand how God's regard for Abel and his gift would make Cain jealous.

But why angry? So much so, it affects his body. His countenance falls. Why is he angry? Well, at whom is he angry? At Abel?

I suppose to some degree, but mostly at God. Cain is angry at God. God's regard for Abel and his offering and God's disregard for Cain and his offering makes Cain very angry at God.

Now, why is he angry at God? In order to answer that question, we have to ask another. One that I'm sure many of you have asked. Why was God pleased with Abel and his offering and not with Cain and his offering?

Throughout the centuries, the people of God have tried to discover some basis for God's different response to these two brothers. So, for example, Philo, the philosopher of Alexandria, argued, Abel's offering was living, Cain's was lifeless.

[13 : 02] Josephus, the Jewish historian, argued that Cain brought the fruits of the cultivated ground while Abel brought milk and the firstlings of his flock.

Josephus says, this latter offering gave greater pleasure to God who is honored by those things which grow spontaneously in accordance with nature and not by those things that are forcibly produced by the ingenuity of covetous man.

Biblical scholar F.F. Bruce rightly calls that interpretation far-fetched. Another school of thought sees a distinction in the fact that Abel's offering involves the shedding of blood.

Although not espousing this view, William Barclay writes, in the Hebrew mind, the only offering which a person can bring to God is an offering of the most precious thing that life supplies. Now the most precious thing that life supplies is life itself and to the Hebrews, blood always stands for life.

Abel's sacrifice was a sacrifice of blood, of a living creature. Cain's was not and therefore, Cain's was more acceptable. But we need to note that nowhere in the story is it suggested that these brothers are bringing sin offerings.

[14 : 16] Both brothers are bringing offerings suitable for their vocation. Cain is a tiller of the ground and he brings what tillers can bring. Abel is a shepherd and he brings what shepherds can bring.

Cain brings the first of the ground and Abel brings the first of his flock. Then what is the basis of God's regard for Abel and his offering and disregard sorry, you got that wrong, didn't I?

What is God, yes, what is the basis for God's regard for Abel and his offering and the disregard for Cain and his? The text seems to point to something in Cain's attitude that was not pleasing to God.

Note how the author puts it. Look at verses 4 and 5 again. The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering but not for Cain and his offering. The emphasis is on the person giving the gift. I don't think the focus is on the gift itself but on the person giving the gift and there was something about Abel that pleased God something about Cain that did not please God.

What was it? The writer of the New Testament document we call Hebrews says Hebrews 11 verse 4 by faith Abel offered a better sacrifice.

[15 : 31] By faith. Abel's offering was no more inherently better than Cain's offering but Abel's attitude his orientation was Abel offers the gift by faith.

Abel offers his gift acknowledging that God is God that God is Master and that God is worthy of first place. Okay so what was Cain's attitude? Martin Luther and I have to quote from Martin Luther this being Reformation Sunday Martin Luther pointed out Cain could properly and truthfully take pride in his very high nobility for he was the first to be born of humans.

And Luther suggests that it is possible that Eve Cain's mother fostered this pride of first place. Any of you who were first born know what this is like.

When Cain was born Eve even seems to brag look at verse 1 and listen to her speech. I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.

Those words can also be translated I have gotten a man as the Lord. As the Lord has created so I have created as the Lord created Adam so I have created a man an Adam.

[17 : 02] I have gotten a man. She doesn't use the word child but man an Adam. I have gotten an Adam like Lord God and Adam.

it's even possible that Eve's words can be translated I have gotten a man the Lord. Did Eve then regularly remind her son of his status Cain my son my man my Adam you are the first human born of the womb of a woman.

The name Cain likely means I have gotten or gotten one. The name Abel is related to the word which means nothingness or frailty. This is the word used in the book of Ecclesiastes vanity vanity all is vanity.

Thus from day one Cain thinks of himself as first and as occupying first place and apparently he came to expect others to think of him as first.

Apparently he even thinks God is to think of him as first. Therefore as Luther suggests when Cain offers his gift to God he is puffed up.

[18 : 23] Luther like that word puffed up. Cain expects God to treat him special because of his first born status. Of course God is going to have regard for me because I'm Cain I'm number one.

He comes before God therefore not by faith but by works trusting in something in himself trusting his human status.

Abel however has no such status. There's nothing that he can boast in. He has nothing by which to obligate God. His only choice is to stand before God by mercy and grace.

He comes by faith. I think you can see then that Cain's basic problem was a faulty view of himself. Just as Cain assumed that he had first place in Adam and Eve's life so he assumed he has first place in God's life.

And what makes Cain so angry is that God does not operate according to Cain's value system. God does not honor Cain's own view of himself.

[19 : 31] Cain is first born. So what? That determines nothing in God's kingdom. Read the rest of Genesis and you see the first born aren't the ones that are chosen.

That doesn't matter to God. What matters to God is faith. And in that moment when God would not take regard for Cain and his offering Cain's self centered world was threatened.

Indeed it was level and he was very angry because God was not playing the game by Cain's rules. Now what made matters worse for Cain is that God did not accept Cain's view of Abel either.

All his life Cain expected Abel the second born to play to the first born's tomb. Cain had come to see himself as the center of the universe and therefore saw Abel as one of the orbiting planets.

Cain looked at Abel either as someone useful for his own well-being or as someone who was in the way of his well-being and God's regard for Abel threatened Cain's universe.

[20 : 46] The fact of the matter is Cain never really saw Abel as a brother. He calls him a brother but in his heart Abel was never on the same level. He was never an equal.

For Cain to embrace Abel as a brother would mean for Cain to move out of the center. In our fallen state we want to be the center of our worlds and the center of other people's worlds and as long as we keep alive with that faulty view of ourselves no one around us will really be a brother or sister.

They are either means to our ends or they're in obstacles in the way of our end or worse yet we don't even notice them. But here's the grace in the story. God does not want Cain to live with this faulty view of himself.

So in grace God appeals to Cain. Verse 7 If you do well will not your countenance be lifted up? Sin is crouching at the door.

God is warning Cain. Sin is crouching at the door. God portrays sin as this violent animal ready to pounce on someone. Go for it says sin be the center be number one.

[22 : 02] You deserve the very best. Cain sin is crouching at the door. You need to master it. Do well says God. Think straight.

You are not the center. You don't have first place. The creator is the center and you and Abel are equals on the circumference. Get it straight Cain.

But Cain would not give up his infantile self perception. And as a result he ended God's pleasure in his brother and became very angry.

God warned him. That was grace as he warns us. Deal with your faulty view of yourself or your faulty view of yourself will consume you. God was contending for Cain's soul as he contends for our soul.

God in grace exposes this Cain in us and helps us see that if we keep thinking that we are the center around us as brothers and sisters.

[23 : 06] And here I think is what Genesis 4 especially wants us to get. How we view ourselves and others is a symptom of how we view God.

Our attitude toward ourselves and others is a symptom of our attitude toward God. Most of the conflict in the world between individuals or nations is rooted in this canine nature within us.

Thus grace. The grace in the question where is your brother? In Genesis 3 grace comes with the question where are you?

In Genesis 4 it comes where is your brother? Where is your sister? Where is your brother? I think is God's way to call us to realize that we are not the center of the world.

Me first is the language of the nursery. I me mine myself are the pronouns of Cain stuck in infancy.

[24 : 11] Jesus comes into the world and calls us out of that infancy into adulthood. You Jesus you are the center that's the language of maturity you you Jesus you're the center this is the language of the soul set free.

God's question where's your brother is also God's call to see the person next to us as from the hand of God. Abel came from Eve's womb yes but ultimately he came from God it was God who made Abel happen it was God who put Abel in Cain's life it was God who gave Abel to Cain as an equal but because Cain did not see God at the center he does not realize that Abel is a gift God's question where is your brother reminds us that the people in our lives are there because God has put them there and we can overlook them we can hurry past them we can use them or as Helmut Tilica expresses it we can run straight into the arms of the God who gives them to us and God's question where is your brother is God's call to realize that the invisible one the holy other comes to us in the brother or the sister we cannot see

God but in the mystery of things God comes to us in the brother or the sister I think this is why God cries out to Cain what have you done what have you done Helmut Tilica again Cain not only laid violent hands on a human being he also violated the property of God himself what have you done to my property that's why God takes up this cry of Abel's blood and that's why God is going to protect Cain from others to disregard the brother or the sister even the nobody brother or sister is to disregard the God who created them to disregard the God in whom they live and move and have their being and is this not what Jesus is teaching us in his famous parable of the sheep and the goats Jesus says the son of man will come in his glory and the angels with him and he will sit on his glorious throne and all the nations will be gathered before him he will separate them from one another as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats and he will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left and then the king will say to those on his right come you who are blessed of my father inherit the kingdoms prepared for you from the foundation of the world for

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat I was thirsty you gave me a drink I was a stranger you invited me in naked and you clothed me I was in prison and you came to me then the righteous will answer him saying Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink when did we see you a stranger and invite you in or naked and clothe you when did we see you sick or in prison and come to you and then the king will answer and say truly I say to you to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine to the least of them you did it to me Jesus identifies with all the ables of the world all the nobodies he is telling us what he wanted Cain to understand that he comes to us in the powerless and in the nobodies Genesis 4 if we see ourselves as Cain did as having the right to be first we will never see we will never see

Jesus as he comes to us in those whom he calls brothers and sisters in his famous sermon entitled The Weight of Glory C.S.

[28 : 00] Lewis articulates this mystery next to the blessed sacrament he says your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses if he or she is your Christian neighbor he or she is holy in almost the same way for in him or her Christ also the glorifier and glorified glory himself is truly hidden I think you can see then that God's question where is your brother is another way for God to ask where am I where am I your God what you do with the brother or the sister you do with me sadly Cain did not overcome this sin crouching at the door he could not give up his infantile view of himself and so he built a city built on this infantile view of self and it all culminates in

Lamech's infantile celebration of violence in the city but God but God would not give up God does a new work of grace outside the garden in Eve's body he enables her to conceive again and in Eve's soul her speeches change when Cain was born the speech was I I have gotten a man like the Lord I have gotten an Adam but when Seth was born her speech was God God has granted me a seed a seed the light broke into the darkness and the mother of all living regained perspective and threw herself on the promise

God made in the garden that one day a seed of the woman would come and crush the serpent's head clearly and sadly Cain is not this seed but God did not give up he starts over Seth is born the promise keeps going and then miracle of miracle verse 26 then humans began to call on the name of the Lord in the city outside the garden in the very heart of the city humans began to call on the name of the Lord we'll pick it up there next Sunday let us pray through your word oh Lord you not only reveal yourself but you reveal us we see ourselves in this story and we give you thanks that you are contending for our souls and so we call upon your name to remove the cane that is stuck in us in your mercy and grace free us from this faulty view of the self and make us like able people who live by faith this we pray in the name of him who comes to make all things new in Jesus name amen