

East of Eden

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] Thank you Paul. If you think there are some tricky names or odd names in that passage, wait till next week. May I like to keep open Genesis 4 in front of you and for those who are visiting or haven't been here for a while, we're preaching in the evening services through the first chapters of the Bible from Genesis chapters 1 to 12, starting a few weeks ago and going through until late in November.

Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. Words we may know well and that is the opening verse of Psalm 133.

Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. But how often that is not the case. How often we find sibling rivalry.

How often we find sibling hostility. Those of you who have got brothers and sisters, no matter what age, I bet almost for all of you you can think of a time when you fought with your brother or your sister.

I know I did. Many times. And one of the common causes of that is parental favoritism. One of the things that intrigues me when I take funerals and go and visit the family before the funeral to find out about the person who's died and to find out about the family who'll be there is how often there is sibling rivalry of some sort, if not hostility, between the brothers and sisters, usually the children of the person who's died.

[1 : 36] And very often the cause of it seems to be some sort of parental favoritism. Oh, my elder sister, she was the favorite one. She got all the good things and I didn't. Or my younger brother, he was the one who was treated so well.

And I was the oldest and I had it tough. Etc. And the Bible has stories like that as well. Indeed, in Genesis, in virtually every family situation we find in the book of Genesis, we find sibling rivalry or hostility.

So Abraham has two sons, Ishmael the eldest and Isaac. And there is some rivalry between them and their respective mothers. And then, of course, you know the story probably of Isaac who had twin sons, Jacob and Esau.

Esau was the eldest. And the fighting and hostility that went on between them. But if you don't know that story, then you probably have certainly heard of the story of Joseph and his 11 brothers, the 12 sons of Jacob.

Joseph made famous by Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, *The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and so on. And probably you know that Joseph was so hated by his brothers because he was the favorite of his father that they actually sold him off to traders and he was taken off to be a slave in Egypt.

[2 : 52] Indeed, the book of Genesis seems to have as one of its themes the rivalry between brothers. And the first account of that is the story we have tonight in Genesis 4, the story of Cain and Abel.

Indeed, the story of the first two brothers of all. Because they're the first sons of Adam and Eve, the first people of all. So the chapter begins now, the man, that's Adam, knew his wife Eve.

That means has sexual relations with. To know doesn't always mean that, by the way. Don't get too confused. And she conceived and bore Cain, saying, I've produced a man with the help of the Lord. Her expression about Cain is a sort of play on the word Cain, which sounds like the word to get or attain or produce. Then next she bore his brother Abel.

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep and Cain a tiller of the ground. So far, so good. But the problem between Cain and Abel, at one level, is a case of favoritism.

[4 : 00] And we see that, perhaps, in the next few verses. In the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground. And Abel, he also came to bring an offering, for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock their fat portions.

Now they are fairly appropriate offerings to make. Cain, being a crop farmer, would bring crops. Abel, being a herdsman, would bring animals from his herd.

That is, they are bringing the produce of their labors to God as an offering. And so it seems to be a fair thing to do, an appropriate offering to make to God. But the end of verse 4 says something different.

And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering, he had no regard. Well, that seems to be a bit unfair, doesn't it?

So unfair does it seem that many people have tried to answer, what's the problem here? And some think that it's because Cain wasn't making an animal offering that God is upset, as though God only wants animal sacrifices.

[5 : 13] Now we know that most of the sacrifices that Israel offered during the course of the rest of the Old Testament were animal sacrifices, but not all of them. Indeed, there are specific rules and regulations allowing for cereal or crop sacrifices.

So the issue here is certainly not the fact that Abel offered an animal and Cain didn't. It's something different. Possibly a hint of the problem is in the expression of what Abel offered.

He didn't just offer some of his animals as a sacrifice, but he offered the firstlings, they are in effect the prime or best, and of their fat portions, that is the best part of them, Abel offered.

Now it doesn't say that Cain didn't offer the best, but also by implication it suggests that perhaps he didn't. Perhaps he didn't offer the best.

But again we have to be careful not to read too much into the passage. It doesn't actually say what was wrong with Cain's offering. It seems to be a case of, if not parental favoritism, divine favoritism.

[6 : 22] God, for some reason we're not told, thinks Abel's offering is acceptable, but Cain's isn't. It seems unfair.

It seems as though God's a bit capricious or arbitrary in his decision here. And surely therefore Cain is justified in getting very angry at God for having disregard for his offering.

It's a picture of what for many of us is often what life's about. It seems to be unfair. Some people seem to get away with things and we never do. Some people seem to have the wealth or the luck in their job or their fortunes, but we don't.

And so at one level we can perhaps identify with Cain's anger. It seems to him that he's done the right thing and God's got angry with him and it's not fair because his brother's done pretty much the same sort of thing and he's got away with it and found God's favor.

So at the end of verse 4, end of verse 5 we find that Cain was very angry and his countenance fell. Extremely angry is the connotation of that.

[7 : 29] Full of rage at God. God responds to him with a question. The Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry and why has your countenance fallen?

But God doesn't wait for an answer to his question. He goes right on to offer Cain now two possibilities as courses of action. Verse 7, If you do well, will you not be accepted?

That's the first possibility. Do well and you'll find acceptance. Literally the word acceptance is to be lifted up. So his countenance has fallen and if he does well he'll be lifted up and be happy, I suppose, in God's sight.

But the other possibility is that if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door. Its desire is for you. But you must master it.

So if you do well, you'll be lifted up. But if you do not, then here is the warning. Sin is lurking at the door. Crouching at the door, some translations have.

[8 : 40] As though sin is like a wild animal that is ready to pounce. It's there poised. You see, sin is not just something that we do or don't do. It's not just something almost impersonal or inanimate.

But sin here is personified. It's living. It's active. But more than that, it's lethal and dangerous. Lurking ready to pounce like a wild lion.

That's the sort of picture of what sin is about here. So Cain is being cautioned to avoid this wild lion of sin that's ready at the doorway to pounce.

Sin, you see, is powerful. Sin is serious. Sin is dangerous. We're not dealing here with something that's just impersonal or able to be controlled easily.

But rather almost a personal force that is very powerful indeed. Its desire will be for you. That is like a lion that is wanting you to tear you apart as its next meal.

[9 : 49] That's what sin's desire for Cain is about here. And the very end of the verse, sin is lurking at the door, its desire is for you, but you must master it.

Now that's a very odd, ambiguous really, expression. The Hebrew word is a word, timshell.

And it's ambiguous because it could mean a number of different things, nuances, of mastering sin.

It could be, as it's here, in our translation, a command or a challenge.

You must master it. Almost ordering Cain to master sin or challenging him to master it. But the same word, a Hebrew verb, can have a slightly different nuance.

It can have the nuance of choice. You may master it. Offering the choice or the possibility. Go on, master it. It's your choice.

[10 : 57] But a third possibility about the idea is that it's a promise. not so much you must master it or you may master it, but rather you will master it.

Not in the sense of a command, you will do this, but rather a promise. You will master it. Now how do we understand this expression?

What's God saying here to Cain? What's the right nuance of this expression? Cain. Some of you may have been in church in the morning a few weeks ago when I mentioned that one of my favorite authors is John Steinbeck.

And in the course of that sermon on Amos I mentioned I think his greatest book, The Grapes of Wrath. But one of his other great books is a book called East of Eden. Some of you may have seen the film if not read the book.

It's a story of a family, of brothers, of one brother who has sons who fight. So the first generation of brothers fight, the next generation of brothers fight.

[12 : 01] It's a story of three generations of American brothers earlier this century in effect. And the murder and so on that goes on between them all. And the whole book, this novel, a big novel, East of Eden is about this word in Genesis 4 verse 7.

You think, gosh, really? Yes it is. Steinbeck makes it very obvious. He has discussions about the verb in his book. And according to John Steinbeck who is not a Christian, it is offering a choice.

Human beings, he says, have a free choice and ability corresponding to that to master sin if they so wish. And indeed, the book ends by quoting this Hebrew word Timshel as the dying father says to his son who has been plagued by his past, come on, you can do it.

But I don't think Steinbeck's got it right. I don't think he's understood the right nuance of the word here. God is not really offering a choice. Certainly if he is, Cain fails to take it very quickly.

I think it's more of a command that Cain is given. But if it's a command, Cain fails. He doesn't keep it.

[13 : 14] The next words make that very clear. If it's a promise, it's a promise that's certainly not fulfilled here as we'll see in the verses that follow. So the very next expression is that Cain said to his brother Abel, let us go out to the field.

An invitation to a family picnic. Well, no, not quite. Maybe Abel had high hopes of a family picnic but rather it was going to be his death because the invitation is fairly deceitful.

But the invitation also shows that what Cain is about here is premeditated murder. Not a spontaneous rage but rather something that's thought out. Let's go out to the field, Abel.

Maybe he's saying let's take a picnic. But the idea of going out into the field is to get away from other people. No witnesses you see in a field. And Cain goes to the field with his brother and kills him.

Downright defiance of God. Downright ignoring the warning that God had given him in the preceding verse. And when they were in the field Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

[14 : 27] What we find here is that one sin leads to another. How often is that the case? How often do you do something wrong and then find yourself having to cover up, lie about it, be deceitful about it, do something else wrong in order to protect the thing that you've done wrong?

That's what happens to Cain. God asks him another question. The Lord said to Cain, where is your brother Abel? What does Cain say? Oh, he's dead over there, I killed him?

No, not at all. I don't know. Well, of course he knows, he's just killed him. Abel's not going to get up and move. He knows where the body is. Indeed, it may even be right next to him.

Where is your brother Abel? Cain said, I do not know. Murder leads to a lie. Am I my brother's keeper? Striking that as God approached Adam and Eve after they'd eaten the fruit in the preceding chapter, he opens the conversation with a question.

Where are you? The same with Cain. He opens the conversation with a question. Where is your brother Abel? Both questions can be interpreted as God giving the opportunity for confession.

[15 : 46] Where are you? I'm here because I've failed, I've eaten the fruit. Where is your brother Abel? He's dead in the field, I confess what I have done wrong. But both times the opportunity is ignored.

They hide their sin. In a silly act, really, because God knows exactly what they've done, as we'll see. Am I my brother's keeper, he says? The implication of the story is that yes, he is.

There's no law, though, regarding brother's keeper. God doesn't even answer Cain's question and say, yes, you are, my brother's keeper, your brother's keeper, or no, you're not. But the implication is yes, you are.

That is, we have responsibility for each other. Not just within a family, but within humanity as well. We have responsibility, a mutual responsibility for each other's care.

And it's there right at the beginning of the Bible. Well, what we find, you see, is that Cain has been mastered by sin, not vice versa. Didn't take very long, did it, for Cain to fail to keep the command, you must master sin.

[16 : 55] And he doesn't. It's the reverse. Sin masters Cain. One of the best Christian videos for children I've seen is a little video I saw years ago called Jimmy and the White Lie.

We used to show it on beach missions when I led beach mission teams. Jimmy and the White Lie was a cartoon. And Jimmy was playing baseball. And he hit the ball through the window of his neighbour who was a fairly ogre-ish type man, old man.

And Jimmy was scared because it smashed the window. And he went inside and put all his things away. And of course, sooner or later, the old man next door came knock, knock, knock on the door, asks Jimmy's mother, did Jimmy smash my window with his baseball?

Jimmy's called downstairs to answer the man's question, no I didn't. He goes up to his room. And in the cartoon a little blob appears in him there.

The blob in effect is sin. And what happens is that that lie has to get covered up with another lie.

Where were you to this afternoon? Oh, and he lies about that.

[18 : 05] And were you playing baseball? No. Lie builds upon lie. And what happens is that the blob grows. And it grows and you can see it growing in the cartoon so that it really overtakes this poor little boy Jimmy.

That is, sin masters him. Its desire is for him and it conquers him. It swallows him up in effect. And you see this picture of this blob inflating Jimmy so that he can't even get out of his room.

He's sort of inflated like a great big balloon. Now it's not quite the idea of a lion pouncing but it's the same sort of idea of sin just growing and growing and taking hold of and in effect strangling the life out of poor little Jimmy.

In the cartoon when he confesses his sin the blob just withers and dies. It's very powerful in a way because it goes beyond what's happening here to Cain.

But for Cain what's happened is that sin has mastered him, taken control of him. One sin leads to another. He began with envy. His envy led to anger. His anger led to deceit.

[19 : 07] Come, let's go and have a family picnic in the field. Deceit led to murder and murder led to lying. And a sequence would have continued on ad infinitum, no doubt. Cain's failed to keep the command.

Well God responds now to Cain with another question. How patient God is. Although this time he doesn't give an opportunity for the question to be answered. So in verse 10 he says, what have you done?

Now maybe he gave a pause there to allow Cain to respond but maybe he didn't. There's no response. God carries on with what he's saying. You see God knows what he's done. This is not a question to find out the answers or put together clues like Inspector Frost or somebody else, another detective on television.

God knows. What have you done? He says to Cain. His question, rhetorical though it is, is in effect of course an accusation for Cain's sin.

What have you done? Listen. Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground. God, metaphorically perhaps, hears the blood of Abel who's dead, crying out from the ground to God. [20 : 29] It's a hymn that says Abel's blood for vengeance reaches to the skies. Cain, you see, has failed the challenge. He's failed to keep the command.

Sins mastered him, not the other way round. And indeed, God's warning in verse 7 to Cain is the challenge or the command of the Bible, you must master sin.

But no one does. There is no one in the Bible who masters sin, of course, apart from Jesus. All falls short of mastering it.

And we too are in that category. The Bible makes that clear. But you see, God is a God who gives what he commands.

And he gives the mastery over sin as a gift, even though he commands it. For you see, the command in verse 7 is also a promise.

[21 : 28] It's both. You must master sin, but it's also the promise you will master it. And we master it through Jesus Christ. For sin is conquered in Jesus' death on the cross in the last part of the Bible.

The writer to the Hebrews speaks of Abel's blood, but Jesus' blood, which speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. It's more powerful, the blood of Jesus, than the blood of Abel.

Because it conquers sin. It masters sin. It does what the challenge to Cain urges Cain to do, but he can't. The mastery over sin is accomplished in Jesus' death on the cross.

But more than that, in Jesus we also master sin. For as that hymn I quoted goes on to say, Abel's blood for vengeance reaches to the skies, but the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries.

And when we're forgiven, sin loses its grip, and loses its sting, and loses its power. And in Jesus, not only are we forgiven, what the Bible says justified, but we are sanctified and one day glorified as well, free entirely from the threat, let alone the power of sin.

[22 : 52] So you see, the solution to Cain's problem in the end is Jesus Christ, the one who masters sin. The one who does what the challenge to Cain urged him to do.

But more than that as well, the solution to brotherly enmity is found in Jesus Christ as well. the problem of Cain and Abel is resolved again in Jesus Christ.

These words come from later in the New Testament, from 1 John 3. We must not be like Cain, who was from 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 astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another.

Whoever does not love abides in death. We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

[23 : 59] You see, the reversal of the enmity of Cain and Abel comes to us in Jesus Christ as well. We come back to the question, well, what makes Abel's sacrifice right with God?

Is God unfair? But again, the New Testament tells us the answer. It's not because it was a blood sacrifice, not because just of the firstlings and the fat portions, the best bits, but it's because Abel's sacrifice or offering was made in faith.

Writer to the Hebrews says, by faith, Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to God, but Cain's was not. It's not because Abel's sacrifice was better than Cain's, but because it was offered by faith.

Abel himself could not stand righteous before God or acceptable before God, but only by faith, which the New Testament comes to explain as faith in Jesus Christ.

God goes on to issue his punishment against Cain in verses 11 and 12.

[25 : 17] And now you are cursed from the ground which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength. You'll be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.

Whereas Adam found the ground cursed, Cain himself is cursed. And where Adam was kicked out of the garden, Cain is kicked even further away from the garden.

As we find out later on, it's literally to the land of nod, not meaning nodding off to sleep, but a land of wandering, a land of restlessness, a land of being a nomad without being settled at all in this world.

Cain complains. What a cheek. Really, he is a murderer and he's complaining to God that he's kicking him out of the land and sending him off further. His punishment deserves death. But God in his mercy hasn't given him death.

Nonetheless, Cain complains. My punishment is greater than I can bear. Today you've driven me away from the soil and I shall be hidden from your face. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth and anyone who meets me may kill me.

[26 : 26] The irony is that Cain fears his own death. And yet he's just gone and killed his brother. But it's even more ironic because who are the people who Cain might meet?

The way the Bible story is written, Adam and Eve are the only people who've lived. Therefore any other people Cain meets must be his brothers or sisters. So what an even greater irony. He's just killed his brother but he's terrified of his own other brothers and sisters whom he may meet who may in vengeance kill him. Yes, his punishment is too great to bear.

But it's certainly not the punishment that he deserved. He deserved death. God in his mercy preserved his life. But his question is right.

My punishment is too great to bear. And so is ours. Another reason why Jesus came. To bear our punishment on the cross.

[27 : 27] God's judgment you see is accompanied by grace. God gives a mark on Cain. Not so he says to Cain. Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.

And the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod east of Eden. The mark on Cain is a mark of guilt.

But it's also a mark of grace. A mark to protect Cain and preserve him. And keep him alive from those who may seek to bring revenge upon him.

Banned but nonetheless blessed. Leaving God's presence but not leaving his protection. Genesis 4.

The passage we've looked at is very similar to Genesis 3. In both there is a sin. In both God goes to search out the sinner who is hiding. In both God opens with questions to the person who's committed the sin.

[28 : 32] In both there is a sense of trial. A dialogue of questions and answers. And in both there is God's judgment and in both there is a curse. And in both there is banishment from the place where the sin is committed.

And also in both there is an act of God's grace. He clothes Adam and Eve with fig leaves and he puts a mark of protection upon Cain's forehead. In many respects the passages have parallels with each other.

And I think that's deliberate. But it's important also to realize that there is a significant difference between the two as well. They're not just parallel stories of sin and failure and God's dealing with it. Where Eve had to be talked into sin, Cain couldn't be talked out of it. He was further down the track of wrongdoing than Eve ever was. Eve had an external tempter to draw her into sin.

But for Cain it came from deep within his own heart. In the story of Adam and Eve the ground is cursed but here it's Cain, a more serious punishment. In chapter 3 Adam and Eve have good relations with each other which are broken.

[29 : 43] Chapter 4 begins with broken relationships, Cain and Abel getting worse. In chapter 3 they're banished from the garden. In chapter 4 they're even banished from being outside the garden further off to the east.

See Genesis 4 is not just another story about sin. It's the story of a downward spiral from Genesis 3 heading on into the later chapters of Genesis and indeed all through the Bible.

And the last list of names that Paul read for us earlier on, the list of the generations that followed Cain show us this downward spiral taking further steps. It's not just telling us who Cain's son and grandson and great grandson and great great grandson etc.

were but it's making a very significant point. In verse 19 we find that about his great great great grandson is Lamech who took two wives. Something we know from Genesis 1 and 2 is something that's prohibited really by God.

We're told then the names of them and their children. But then we come to verse 23. Very significant boast of this man Lamech. Lamech said to his wives Ada and Zillah, Hear my voice.

[30 : 53] You wives of Lamech, listen to what I say. Here he is, he's exulting and he's boasting in his own murder of what he's killed, a person he's killed.

I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. Not he's killed two people, it's the one person, it's a poem, so it's saying the same thing twice.

The idea is that this old, this man, this adult man Lamech has killed a young boy who's perhaps hit him, hardly wounded him seriously.

It's hardly the right response to a young boy that's hit him. And he kills him. But he doesn't only kill him, he boasts and exalts and glories in it.

This is worse than Cain's murder. For this is boastfulness and exaltation in the sin. You see the downward spiral? How bad it's getting?

[31 : 50] Wait for a few weeks till we get to Genesis 6 before the flood. And we find there that sin means that every person's heart is evil in its every thought. Mastering sin is the challenge before us all.

It's the challenge of the Bible. And like Cain, we fail to meet it. In our own strength we cannot do it. In our own ability or determination we cannot do or keep the command to master sin.

You try it. Tomorrow morning when you get out of bed say, Today I will be perfect. And when you get into bed tomorrow night, if you are honest and careful, you will have to acknowledge before God that you have failed.

Somewhere you will have failed to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself all the time. None of us in our own strength can master sin.

None of us can meet the challenge that Cain was given. But in Christ we can. And only in Christ we can.

[33 : 05] Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man Jesus Christ abounded for the many.

And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation. But the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.

If because of the one man's trespass death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life.

Through the one man Jesus Christ. That complicated reading is saying in effect that we can have righteousness and exercise dominion in this life in Jesus Christ.

[34 : 16] To him be the praise and glory. Amen. For the difference, God be the CD■■■.org.