

Sin Goes Viral

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[0:00] I don't know if you've heard about the virus that seems to be ravaging parts of Nigeria and Africa. It's a deadly virus. It's called Ebola.

I don't know who comes up with names for these things, but that sounds like a pretty nasty name for a virus, doesn't it? And it is nasty. It's already killed over 1,500 people in Nigeria alone.

And I guess with travel so easy nowadays, there are fears that this virus can spread around the world just like that. See, just one person carrying this virus can infect the whole country.

There's been fears of a repeat of the 1918 flu pandemic. Does anyone here remember that? Mark? No? Andrew, no.

So, just to let you know, the 1918 flu pandemic infected 500 million people worldwide. And it killed up to 50, between 50 and 100 million.

[1:04] Pretty serious stuff, eh? The last time we were in Genesis, a while ago now, was back before Food for Soul, if you remember that far. We saw another virus infect the world.

Sin. Sin. And this is the nastiest virus of them all. Because this virus has a 100% mortality rate. It started with just two people. Adam and Eve.

And this week we'll see how sin goes viral, as it were, and spreads to their children. Sin escalates and goes from bad to worse. And the result is disaster.

Sin. It distorts our worship of God and our relationships with one another. But as with chapter 3, if you can remember that far back, there is actually some hope there too.

As God's grace is mingled with his judgment. So let's start by examining how sin distorts our worship of God. Our passage begins with two brothers.

[2:06] By the way, we're back in Genesis 4, so if you're there, that's great. Our passage begins with two brothers worshiping God. And look with me at verses 3 to 5. Here, each of the brothers brings an offering.

to the Lord in accordance with their occupations. This was the religious norm in the ancient Near East. But this is where things begin to unravel. You see, in verses 4 and 5, we're told that the Lord looked with favor on Abel's offerings, but not on Cain's.

But why? Could it be that God prefers meat over veggies? And finally that verse to show all my vegetarian friends out there that meat's the way to go. It's funny how we can use scripture to justify anything, isn't it?

Could it be that God prefers shepherds over gardeners? Some have suggested that God preferred Abel's offering over Cain's because it was a blood sacrifice.

But is this the case? Well, firstly, it's foolish to contend that God prefers meat offerings to grain offerings, as the later Mosaic laws allow for both.

[3:44] And what about the contention that God likes shepherds more than gardeners? Well, this contradicts the earlier Genesis narrative, as agriculture was God's given assignment to Adam.

We're not told in the passage why God favored Abel's offering over Cain's. It is interesting, though, that this begins a trend in Genesis, where we see that the younger brother seems to be preferred to the older.

But we're really not told in the passage why God favored Abel's offering over Cain's. But I actually think we're given some pretty good hints.

And I think these are hints that the ancient readers, especially the readers in the time of Moses, would have picked up on. And I think we too can pick up on them, these are big few words, if we have our biblical theology tuned in, as it were.

See, the passage goes out of its way to show that the quality of the offerings reflects the attitude of the heart. And we begin to see how sin affects Cain's heart in relation to his worshipping of God.

[4 : 51] You see, Cain, we're told in verse 3, simply offered some of the fruits of the soil. While Abel, we're told in verse 4, offered fat portions and some of the firstborn of his flock.

Why are we given that extra information about Abel's offerings? Well, the mention of fat portions emphasizes the quality of Abel's offering.

Fat portions were considered the best part of the animal and the firstborn animals were the most prized. Abel's offering resembled the later firstfruits offering.

I think Moses' readers would have picked up on this. Where the firstfruits of animals, agriculture, were given to God in religious ritual. This acknowledged that God's ownership over the whole world, upon which we as humans are mere tenants.

And such an offering appeals to God's blessing on the rest of the produce. But such an offering would have been a test of faith at times. As you give God your first or the best of your crops, or your herd, it would have been a test of faith.

[6 : 00] And this is certainly how the writer of Hebrews saw it. As he says in Hebrews chapter 11 verse 4, that by faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain.

Abel's offering showed that he trusted that God, who's the giver of all good things, will continue to provide, even when he gives God his first or his best. While in Cain, on the other hand, we see a lack of trust in God.

And we begin to see sin and selfishness creeping into his heart and showing itself in his worship. See, the offerings reflect the brother's view of God.

Abel, it seems, has a high view of God. While Cain, on the other hand, shows little regard for God. And it shows in his offering. He just scrapes by and just does what he has to.

What's your view of God? And how does it show itself in your life? Do you have a high view of God?

[7 : 02] And does that show itself in how you live your life to him, your whole life as a life of worship to God? And yet there's hope for Cain.

See, God hasn't given up on him yet. But he graciously corrects Cain and warns him of the sin that's developing in Cain's life. Look with me at verses 6 and 7. 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 master it. You must rule over it. Cain almost seems like that little child in the supermarket that didn't get their wish when they were trying to put chocolate in the basket.

His face is downcast, and it's plain to see. But see, here it seems that Cain knew what the right thing to do was. But like all of us, and when we want to do what's right, even in our worship of God, sin is right there with us, isn't it?

[8:11] Now there's an inner conflict going on in all of us. And God explains this to Cain in the most graphic of ways. He describes sin as crouching at Cain's door, almost like a lion or a wild animal ready to pounce.

It desires like a hungry lion to have you and to devour you. But God says to Cain that you must rule it, you must master it. Here the Lord's given us an insight into what Cain is going through.

I think all of us can relate to it, can't we? How often do we feel sin crouching at our door trying to master us? Perhaps it's as you wrestle with that one click on the computer that goes too far.

Or perhaps it's at that moment when you know that you shouldn't cross a certain line but the struggle's there as everything in you seems to want to cross that line. Cain, it seems, knows what the right thing to do is.

And yet he's compromised in his offering to the Lord and this seemingly small compromise, to us at least, seems to open the door to even more sin which desires to fully have him if he doesn't master it.

[9:34] And that's what sin's like, isn't it? One compromise opens the door and sin, like a snowball, can start out seemingly small till it grows and grows into being an unstoppable snowball in which you end up doing things that at first you thought was impossible and it leaves a path of destruction in its wake.

I'm sure at this point Cain had no idea that this would lead to him killing his own brother in what seems to be a rage or jealousy. And so we've seen that sin affects our worship of God.

And throughout the Old Testament and even the New Testament times, God laments over the fact that his people are doing the external things of worship when their hearts are not right. So we too must be careful that our worship of God isn't just an outward show.

Even though through Christ's sacrifice we're already acceptable to God, sin can still corrupt our worship. How often does our selfishness keep us from giving God the praise and honour that he's due?

Or even keep us from being generous with what he's given us? How often is our worship tainted by a desire to look good before others? And even though we don't do offerings in this way anymore, I can relate to this test of faith to trust God when we worship him.

[11:07] Every year I do a budget for my funding at college and every year I set aside a certain amount to give to the work of the Lord. Now this is an act of worship. I want to be careful here. We call it the collection because we don't want to get confused that it's an offering of some sort similar to the one that we're reading about in Genesis 4.

But in giving a piece of my income to the Lord, it is an act of worship. So giving to the work of the Lord has similar principles to that of the first fruit offerings. It shows that I recognise that everything I have is given to me by the Lord.

And in giving a portion of what he's given me shows that I want to trust him to continue to provide. But every year I seem to have the same battle. As soon as I receive that lump sum payment for the year at college, I should give what I decided to give to the work of the Lord.

But in the back of my mind I say to myself, oh Jim, you know, maybe I should hold off on giving that money. And what if something happens and I need it?

An emergency. Or what if I need to go home? Or what, you know, maybe I should just hold off. And sometimes I even fail to give that money. Now this is totally irrational.

[12:23] As I know that the Lord will provide, he's provided in the past and he'll continue to provide. Now perhaps for you it's a different test of faith as you live a life of worship.

I guess we all struggle in many different ways in our trust of God. Perhaps it's a struggle to worship God and to honour God with your body while you struggle with loneliness.

Perhaps you're so weary of the struggle that you justify not trusting God in a certain area of your life. The Cain had probably justified not bringing his first fruits as it may have been a low harvest.

Maybe I should just give God some but not the first lot, not the best. And a seemingly small compromise in our eyes leads to Cain ignoring God's correction and ends in Cain killing his own brother in verses 8 and 9.

You see, a small regard for God also leads to a small regard for others who are made in God's image. Well, we've seen how sin distorts our worship of God and we'll see that sin has drastic consequences for our lives, our relationship with others and our relationship with God.

[13:43] So let's go through the remainder of the narrative and see how these consequences play out. As in the case of Adam and Eve in the garden, God arrives shortly after the sinful act in verse 9.

And in our passage in chapter 4, we see a lot of similarities with chapter 3. See, in both cases, God asks a question after the deed. Here in verse 9, God asks Cain, where is your brother Abel?

See, there's no fooling God. As God's question cuts straight to the heart of the matter, Cain has acted in secret thinking that no one knows what he's done. But God knows.

And we too need to remember this as we can, again, justify sin in our lives and tell ourselves that no one will know. But God knows.

And sin has its consequences. When God asks Cain where his brother is, Cain flat out lies and replies, I don't know.

[14:43] Am I my brother's keeper? Remember, this arrogant response from Cain shows us more of Cain's sinful attitude. He shows contempt for God and an utter indifference to the life of his brother and to the crime he's just committed.

See, in Cain's mind, animals need keepers, not humans. But again, there's no fooling God as God shows his horror at what Cain has done in verses 10 to 12.

Look with me there, verse 10. The Lord said, What have you done? Listen, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you're 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'll be a restless wanderer on the earth. God pronounces his judgment.

And this is the first time in the scriptures we see that a human being is actually cursed. And it's here that we see that Cain's sin has drastic consequences. Whereas the ground was cursed following Adam and Eve's sin causing them to work harder.

[15:57] Here Cain himself is cursed and driven from the ground and the ground will no longer produce crops for him. Cain's been stripped of his livelihood and he'll be forced to be a restless wanderer on the face of the earth.

The curse struck at the heart of Cain's self-identity as a worker of the soil. Kind of reminds me of the Lance Armstrong story. Lance Armstrong was a seven-time tour de France who was banned for life after he was found to be cheating.

His life was wrapped up in competitive cycling. It was how he made his living. It was his life. But the penalty had taken all of that away. And it was a major blow.

And this also was a major blow to Cain. And this brings us to another consequence of Cain's sin. As Cain's sin like Adam and Eve's has relational consequences.

Look with me at verses 13 and 14. Cain said to the Lord, my punishment is more than I can bear. Today you're driving me from the land and I'll be hidden from your presence.

[17:11] I will be a restless wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will kill me. Whereas Adam and Eve took their punishment without complaining, here Cain complains that his punishment is too hard to bear.

Again, showing no remorse for his crime, not even to God. Rather, we see Cain being completely self-absorbed, as he fails to understand the seriousness of his crime in the eyes of God.

Cain's concern seems to be relational at heart. Cain would be forced to be a restless wanderer on the earth. He'd be driven from the land and as a vagrant, he'd be forced to live away from his family.

He laments that he'd be hidden from God's presence, highlighting again that sin destroys our relationship with God. And he fears that as a restless wanderer someone might kill him, possibly out of vengeance for Abel's murder.

You see, sin affects every relationship. It has consequences for how we relate to God and one another. The legacy of sin and the history of the human race bears these relational consequences.

[18:31] each of us are born naturally estranged from God. In fact, the New Testament says that we are by nature enemies of God. And of course, we don't have to look too far in history or even in the news today or even just outside these doors or even inside these doors to see the consequences for sin and how we relate to one another.

See, right now, even as I'm speaking, human beings are killing one another, lying to one another, abusing one another, taking advantage of one another.

I could probably stand here all night and the list goes on and on, doesn't it? And you know, it's easy to point out there and accuse people out there of these things. But if we look at ourselves, we see that we too are guilty of these very things.

Bearing in mind that Jesus said even if you're angry with a person, it's as though you've committed murder in your heart. In Genesis 4, we see the spread of sin and the escalation of sin as Cain murders his brother Abel.

And towards the end of chapter 4, we see that sin continues to escalate as things only seem to get worse. We see Cain's great-grandson Lamech shamefully boasting in verses 23 and 24 that he's killed a man for merely wounding him.

[19:56] And whereas Cain sought the Lord's protection, and the irony was that the Lord ended up being Cain's keeper, Lamech boldly states arrogantly that if Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech is 77 times.

This dude's hardcore, isn't he? But, and thankfully, there's hope in our passage. As is in the case of Genesis chapter three, we see God showing grace to Cain, protecting him by putting a mark on him.

Towards the end of the chapter, we also see God's grace as we see civilization growing. Cain builds cities. We see the beginning of music, culture.

I guess that can be attributed to parts of God's grace. Cain and the rest of the human race can continue to move on. But our passage also ends in great hope with the birth of Seth in verses 25 and 26.

You see, in contrast to Cain's genealogy, which culminates in the brutal Lamech, as Seth's genealogy begins in verse 26, it declares that people began to call on the name of the Lord.

[21:15] And it's no accident that this is placed here, right at the beginning of Seth's line, that continues in chapter 5. You see, Seth's family line would produce Noah, Abraham and Israel, as God begins to create a people of his very own.

And finally through this people would come the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who would deal with sin and its consequences once and for all. He's the remedy.

Allowing us to no longer be enemies with God through faith in him. Restoring our relationship to God and one another, as in Christ there's no longer a barrier between us and God, or a barrier between one another, as there's no longer Jew or Gentile in Christ.

And that passage from Hebrews chapter 12 that we read out before, it speaks of coming to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Abel's blood rightfully cried out for justice and vindication, but Christ's blood speaks of mercy and reconciliation for all those who come to him in faith.

[22:37] Through Christ's sacrifice, we're acceptable to God. And now, as Paul says in Romans 12, 1, view of his mercy, we offer ourselves to him as living sacrifices to God, honouring God in every area of our life, knowing that every aspect of our life is an opportunity to worship God by how we love him, how we serve him, and how we serve one another.

But as always, we need God's help in this. So let's pray and ask him to help us in this. Dear Heavenly Father, we come to you humbled tonight knowing that so often we have a low view of you, so often we don't live a life of worship, so often we fall short.

And yet, Lord, as people who have been brought to you through Jesus Christ, we know that we're acceptable to you in every way. And now in view of this, Lord, we want to live for you, we want to worship you in every way, through how we speak, through how we serve others, through how we live our lives for you.

Lord, we confess that on our own we are weak and so we need your help. Please, by your spirit, enable us to live a life of worship to you out of thanks for all that you've done for us in Christ Jesus.

Thank you that through him the virus of sin has been remedied. What an awesome God you are and what a great hope that we have. We thank you for this in Jesus' name.

[24:13] Amen.