

Brother's blood

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Date: 17 November 2024

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[0 : 00] A while ago I read an article about a woman called Kerry Cosgrove who works as a funerals officer. The article explains, let me just read a touch, a funerals officer is the person appointed by a local authority to act as family for the rising number of people who die without anybody bothered enough to bury them.

One half of her job is investigator, conducting painstaking searches of their homes to track down anyone who loved the departed. The other is professional mourner. If necessary, it is she who arranges and is the only attender at the funeral.

Quote Kerry Cosgrove. I think it is bad enough that no one noticed these people when they were alive, but that no one noticed they've gone either. I want to notice.

She goes on. I suppose I do this job also to comfort myself. No one wants to feel that they will end up like that, but we all could. There is no guarantee.

Forgive me for reading this last bit. I think it's important. Her job can be grisly. Often the person is so isolated it is months before anyone realise he or she has died.

[1 : 14] The bodies are then badly decayed and, although removed before she starts her search, the house smells. In the past, it used to be the utility companies that would finally sound the alarm when the customer ceased to pay bills.

But with the advent of direct debit, it takes a lot longer for anyone to notice as debts are paid, even when you are rotting into your carpet alone in modern Britain.

Something has gone very, very wrong, has it not? In our advanced 21st century society, when family and community has decayed so much that you can actually end life like that, alone.

And a council officer has to act as family for you. That is twisted. It's not right. But it is the world and the society that we live in. Something should be done about that.

But what? We just read from Genesis 4. Genesis chapters 2 to 4, as we've been following along, is the account of the heavens and the earth.

[2 : 25] Here in Genesis, ancient true words which powerfully explain our world to us. Many of us who've been here, we remember what's going on. We have a Lord God, the creator of all things, who lovingly forms us, breathes life into us, places the first humans in his garden, provides for them lavishly and commands them rightly.

Because as human beings, we're created to live with him and for him, our good God and king. And yet life has turned sour. In Genesis chapter 3, tempted by the devil snake, humanity thrusts God aside.

As they eat the fruit, I won't listen to you. I don't trust you. I won't have you as my God. And disobeying our maker brings guilt and shame into our lives.

But not just that, because in the second half of chapter 3, the Lord God rightly curses his rebellious creatures and thrusts Adam and Eve out of the garden and away from him.

And into the world that we know and experience today. A world of pain and sweat and decay and death. These first chapters of Genesis say to us, this is the heavens and the earth that we're a part of.

[3 : 39] Created and good. And yet at the same time now fallen. And in broken relationship with our creator. Well, we come now this morning to chapter 4 and the very first steps outside the garden.

The scene is domestic. The focus is the family, the first family. And the community which spreads from Adam and Eve. And yet again, I think this is so striking about the Bible.

This ancient, tightly told story we've just had read to us is spot on and so up to date. As it lifts the lid on the so often desperate reality of family and community life in a fallen world.

Let's get into it together. Would you notice some things in the text with me? Notice firstly, we live in a world of ongoing grace. This is our world.

With Adam and Eve having disobeyed their creator. The Lord God could very rightly have ended things for them straight away. As he could with us. But he doesn't. Verse 1.

[4 : 50] Adam made love to his wife Eve. And she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. And she said, with the help of the Lord I brought forth a man. It's a song of joy. Because God has acted mysteriously and graciously in their lives.

It's his doing, with his help, this miracle of new life. A man, Cain, it sounds like brought forth. But not just him. There's a double blessing. Because later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

So the God who clothed Adam and Eve provides a family for them. As then so today. With our God who shows ongoingly caring, providing grace for his creatures for us.

But now the story turns. Because we live in a world, secondly, of half-hearted worship. So in the story, Adam and Eve move off stage now.

And now the focus is on Cain and his brother Abel. No one knows what their childhoods were like or their teenage years. These two brothers, their lives entwined together. But they're grown up now.

[5 : 59] Verse 2. And do you see? Now Abel kept flocks. He's a shepherd. And Cain worked the soil. He's a farmer. Different career paths flowing from them. And in the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord.

You think that's good? To worship the Lord who gives you everything. But Abel also brought an offering. Fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.

And now here's what happens. The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering. He smiled. He accepted Abel's gift. But on Cain and his offering, he did not look with favour.

So what's gone wrong here between God and Cain? The hint is in verse 4, I think. Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.

He brings his very best to God. Unlike Cain. In the New Testament, Hebrews 11 verse 4, it says, By faith, Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did.

[7 : 05] 1 John chapter 3 goes further. Quote, Cain's own actions were evil and his brothers were righteous. See, to offer your best to God and hold nothing back.

To love him with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. To offer your body as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to him. That's true. That's righteous. That's how it should be. But Cain is not like that.

Seems he's a half-hearted worshipper. Holding back. Giving to a limit. But no more. I'll control this relationship. Thing is, you shouldn't.

You can't do that with the one who made you and owns you. And so on Cain and his offering, the Lord did not look with favour.

Cain's been caught out. He's been shown up. He doesn't like it. Verse 5. So Cain was very angry. Intensely angry with God.

[8 : 09] Like a fire inside him. And his face was downcast. Can you imagine him? Do you ever see children or adults like that? Head down, tight-lipped, belligerent, offended.

How dare you assert your authority, God, and say that my way is not right? That is very 21st century. Half-hearted worship on my terms, if any worship at all.

Thirdly, we live in a world of crouching sin. That's verses 6 and 7. Then, in his grace and patience, 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? He's saying, Cain, I'm your God. I'm for you.

It's not too late. You can be accepted. The word is forgiven or lifted up. But if you do not do what is right, if you carry on like this, sin is crouching at your door.

[9 : 19] It desires to have you, but you must rule over it. In this God-given warning comes the very first use in the Bible of the word sin. It should send shivers up our spine.

In today's world, sin doesn't carry much meaning, really, whatsoever. If you want to use the word at all, it's something you do, something that's theoretically a bit naughty, but carries no weight.

But that's about it. Not so here. Sin is a kind of monster. A dangerous animal.

You can't see it. It's hidden. And yet it's crouching at your door, ready to spring on you and sink its teeth into you further.

In fact, in these verses, sin desires to have you and control you. Do you know something of what this is talking about?

[10:21] In our nature, we thrust God aside. And the truth is, sin grips onto us, not just outside us at our door, but inside us now, in our thoughts and desires.

And sin would master us and drag us further down into disobedience to our God. C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *Surprised by Joy*, and he talks about how just before he became a Christian, he began to see himself truly.

Quote, For the first time, I examined myself properly, and what I found inside appalled me. A zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, fondled hatreds inside.

I wonder if you know something of that. Cain, the half-hearted worshipper, and his God kindly warning him, Sin wants you, but don't give in.

And yet he does. Because the story spirals down now into hatred and murder. In his anger with God, Cain's eyes turn and land on Abel, the one God favoured.

[11:45] And he makes his move, verse 8. Now Cain said to his brother Abel, Let's go out to the field. That is to a place where no one can hear.

It's premeditated, this. And now told so simply and chillingly, While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

It's Abel. His brother. His brother. And with extreme violence, he murders him brutally. This is Genesis chapter 4.

We're a very, very long way from the Garden of Eden now, are we not? You think to yourself, what's going on in Cain's heart, that he would do something like that?

John chapter 3, verse 12, does help us, I think. I've put it on the sheet, it's up here as well. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother.

[12:51] And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brothers were righteous. I think there's something very deeply unpleasant here about human nature.

The reason Cain kills Abel is because his own actions are evil and his brothers are righteous. That is, Cain knows himself. He knows he's not devoted to God.

He knows he's not favoured by God. And as he looks at his God-favoured brother, I think he sees in front of him everything he should be, but isn't. And he hates that.

Maybe he hates the living reminder of what he could be. And so he resents Abel. And he decides to bring him down. This is extreme.

But it is human nature. A bubbling resentment towards people close to us who are better or do better than us.

[13:52] Think of it in a family. Maybe your brother or sister all the way through childhood. A touch better than you in some way or favoured in some way. Getting the smiles and the congratulations. And you feel slighted.

You struggle to be pleased for them. And in here there's a little ball of anger and self-pity that falls. Not fair. That's Cain, I think, in seed form.

Or in a church you see someone whose life feels much more sorted than you. They're so much more obviously committed to serving God than you. And at one level you don't like that.

Shows you up. And when you hear that they have fallen in some way, secretly you're a little bit glad. Because they've been brought down. That is Cain in miniature.

Now this resentment and hatred towards others. It's why universities and companies and schools are rife with bruised egos and poisonous gossip and backstabbing.

[14:52] It's why when you hear about the beautiful and the rich and the famous falling into some kind of scandal, it tastes good secretly. And it's just a small step from being pleased at someone else's downfall to engineering their downfall.

A little lie about someone. A harsh word. Spiralling and spiralling. And eventually, at the end of the line, violence. Or murder even.

A brother done away with. I don't know what you think about this. I think so much of the killing and murder of human history grows from this kind of thing.

Maybe you didn't want to hear this this morning. My guess is Cain is not that far from each of us. In reality, feeling slighted. Envy those close to us. It's not fair.

I won't have it. And hatred in my heart. Sometimes. Sometimes. Next in Genesis 4, the deed done.

[15 : 56] Notice this. Notice the crying out blood. Just like in chapter 3, after the sin of Adam and Eve, the Lord comes calling.

So here in verse 9, Then the Lord said to Cain, Where is your brother Abel? And like any of us children and adults, Cain's first thought when caught is denial.

I don't know. He replied. Am I my brother's keeper? But God can't be fobbed off. The Lord said, What have you done?

Listen. Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. That is, there is no hiding. Because he sees and knows.

This verse here says that the blood of an innocent cannot be hidden from the living God. And you cannot actually get away with murder.

[16 : 55] And from one angle, we should thank God that life is like this. We must thank him. Think of the blood of unheard of Christian martyrs.

Think of the blood of the victims of church abuse. Think of the blood of the deliberately killed unborn in Britain today. Their blood cries out from the ground to God.

It is a stain that he sees and hears. And the living God will bring justice. Thank him. And yet at the same time, a verse like this, I'd have thought, should bring us up short.

Because it says to people like you and me that we cannot hide our guilt from him. As much as we try to deny what we've done, wipe away blood, run away, lie, cover up bruises, delete our browser histories.

We humans leave the marks of objective and real guilt that cry out to the living God. That is the truth of the world we live in.

[18 : 05] Which leads finally to point six, unbearable curse. For in verse 11 now, the Lord pronounces his sentence. Look at this with me.

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, Cain, it will no longer yield its crops for you.

Somehow polluted by the ground, by his brother's murder, the ground will be cursed. And more, end of verse 12, you'll be a restless wanderer on the earth.

Cain said to the Lord, my punishment is more than I can bear. He's right. Today you're driving me from the land and I'll be hidden from your presence. I'll be a restless wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will kill me.

It's a wretched picture of life under the just judgment of God. Just as God drove Adam out of the garden, so now Cain, driven from the land and away from his family and away from God's presence.

[19 : 11] He'll be alone, wandering aimlessly through life, vulnerable to attack, almost utterly beyond the care of God. Almost hell. This guiltily, restless, cursed, loneliness.

Except, verse 15, the Lord said to him, not so. Anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over. And then the Lord put a mark on Cain.

Some extraordinary sign of protective grace. So that no one who found him would kill him. And so Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, a very, very long way now east of Eden.

That is Genesis 4, verses 1 to 16. Which, I think it refuses to sugarcoat life for us.

I guess you've got that. As in this story we've spiralled down and down through Cain and Abel and the reality of life in a fallen world painted for us.

[20 : 23] Ongoing grace to us in our lives today. And yet, do we also not recognise ourselves? Half-hearted worship. Refusing to love him as we should. Crouching sin.

Which attacks us and grips onto us, inside us. Do we not also as well know sometimes, often hidden away, anger, envy, bitterness towards those close to us, which threatens to spill over?

I would have thought many of us will be able to pinpoint precise ways in which we've sinned against those we're meant to love. And we can't hide that from the living God.

But, he knows. He sees guilt. He hears cries for justice. And he is able and right to drive people from his blessing presence.

And what is true for us as individuals is true for our community and our nation as a whole. Refusing to love him. In the grip of sin. Families tearing themselves apart.

[21 : 28] Around here. A guilt that cries out. A restless aimlessness. And one result of all that, in part, isolated individuals in a broken society, rotting into their carpets with no one noticing.

We should look at Genesis 4. We should look at our world today and say, that's twisted. It's not right. Though it is the world we live in. Something should be done.

Desperately. But what? Do you know this?

That the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is not a kind of fluffy, feel-good pick-me-up for spiritual people. That's not what we're here for.

It's not going to help us at all. The glory of the Christian gospel is that the Lord God has really and actually done something to deal with the horrendous reality of dark hearts and murder and blood guilt.

[22 : 37] He has done something. The Lord Jesus Christ was sent into our world in all its darkness. And he lived an innocent life. And as Cain hated Abel, so people hated him for his righteous deeds.

And they took Jesus out to a hill, not a field. And full of envy and hatred, they killed him. And like Abel, his blood was shed and dripped from the cross.

The astonishing thing is that it is through this bloody, sacrificial death and blood that the stain of real guilt can be dealt with for people like us and our world.

I want to show you one verse from the New Testament. In Hebrews chapter 12. And the writer says this. The writer says this to people who have come to Jesus Christ and placed their faith in him.

Because that is what God calls all of us to do. He writes to Christian believers. You have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

[23 : 45] And to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. You see that here? The blood of Jesus Christ speaks a better word to God.

Because if Abel's blood shouts guilty, and if the wrongs that we have done shout guilty, the blood of Jesus is able to speak a better word about us to the judge of all.

And that is because on the cross, the Lord Jesus Christ died for the guilty. For people like you and me. At the cross of Jesus, all of the wretched sin and blood guilt of many were placed on him.

The Lord Jesus Christ died a sacrificial death in our place, bearing the punishment we deserve for our guilty sins. He died for the guilty to save us.

So that we, through his blood, might have our sins removed and our consciences cleansed and our guilt dealt with.

[24 : 57] So that people like us might receive real blood-bought forgiveness from our God. The sacrificial death of Jesus, his blood, speaks a better word to God.

Because to those who have run to Jesus Christ for mercy, whatever we have done, however awful, his blood, which covers us, now declares to God, that we are not guilty of Christ for mercy.

That we are not guilty. That we are not guilty. That is the glory of the gospel. That my guilt can be removed.

That is what I desperately need. That is what you need. That is what this country needs. And do you know this?

There is no other religion able to deal with our hatred and bloodshed and guilt and restore us to the living God. Only the shed blood of Jesus can do that for us.

[26 : 02] And, final thing to say this morning, not just deal with our guilt. Because it is through and only through the blood of Jesus Christ that we will experience not only the removal of sin's guilt, but also the breaking of sin's power.

Do you know this, under God? That the church, a family of people who are certain of his love and cleansed by his blood, is the God-given place where the Lord God starts to change people.

And families. By the power of the Holy Spirit weaning us off envy and bitterness and hatred. And growing in us together a genuine love for others.

The kind of patient God-love that reconciles brothers and puts families back together. And makes couples stick together.

And brothers and sisters care for one another. And generations serve one another. That is what the Lord Jesus Christ can do in and amongst people who have come to him. He is able to grow in us a practical, hands-on, brotherly love.

[27 : 19] That will change us. Can ultimately change a local community. And indeed can change a nation. And all of this, all of this is only through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And his blood that deals with guilt and sin. And speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. You must come to Jesus. And find in him the forgiveness and the cleansing. That you and I so desperately need. Thank you.