

Sin and Grace

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] more than just a case study of murder. It is in fact a case study of what to expect in life outside of the garden of Eden. Genesis 4 exposes three realities which are ever present in everyday life, in every part of life outside of the garden.

There are always three things that are operating in life, three things in a world destroyed by rejection of God and that is sin, grace and the ever-present possibility of salvation and that's the outline for this morning, secret sin. The first place in the Bible where the word sin is used is in verse 7 of chapter 4. The point that I want to make here is though that sin had its beginning before the actual action of sin, of murder. Sin was existing before the actual commitment of murder here. There is a run-up action if you like to murder and we see it in the difference between Abel and Cain. Both of them are respectable human beings working hard, both of them believe in God, both of them are worshipping God, both bring an offering to God.

There's no difference on the surface between these two. So why is it then that Abel's offering was accepted but Cain's offering was rejected? Some have thought that it's, well, it's because that God prefers animal sacrifices rather than grain sacrifices. That's his preference. But you read the rest of the Old Testament, that's not the case at all. Both harvest sacrifices, you know, the offering of grain and the offering of blood sacrifices, both honoured by God and both instituted in the sacrificial system, in Leviticus. So what's the difference? The clue is in verses 3 and 4 where it says, Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil but Abel brought an offering, fat portions, from some of the firstborn of his flock. The words fat there, fat portions and firstborn mean that Abel gave to God the pick, the best, if you like, the very best. And this is in contrast to Cain's indifference difference to what he brought to God, some of the grain. That is, what we see there subtly in verses 3 and 4 is a heart difference between the two. A heart difference, an attitude of the heart. Cain's heart is exposed in verse 7. If you do not do what is right, this is God speaking to Cain, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you but you must rule over it. What a metaphor that is right there. Sin is hiding itself. It's crouching down, trying not to be noticed with the intention that it is going to pounce on you. We've got this kitten in our home at the moment and it does it all the time. Hides behind a door and next thing you know you walk past and pounces on your feet.

Or it sits there like just with the ears popping up, peeking at you over the top of the stairs, waiting for you to come down the stairs so it can pounce on you. That's the description here of sin.

Right here. On the surface, these two brothers look exactly the same but there's something wrong with Cain's heart. It is subtle. In fact, it's so subtle that not even Cain notices it.

[4 : 25] Sin does not want to be noticed. Sin, in fact, is so subtle it will even present itself as a virtue or as a non-issue or as a small issue. Sin will try everything in order to stay hidden or present us with something else until it has us and then it comes out of the shadows.

See, in the early stages of pride or prejudice or addictions of anger, we tend to think that we have it all under control. We think it's not a problem. I can manage this. It's not a problem.

And when sin comes out of the shadows, it becomes a power in our life that it controls us.

Verse 7 says, sin desires to have you, control you, master you.

You see, before long, it takes over, takes control. You see, if we do sin, sin will ultimately do us.

[5 : 39] There is no stronger controlling power in our life than a power that is invisible to us.

Gossips will find themselves gossiped about. Haters will hate. Cowards will be deserted.

Those who will do anything in order to be popular will be cancelled. Sin is not just a choice we make. It is a power in our lives that controls.

And so, I suppose, do you know what your crouching sins are in your life? Our weak points are the things we don't think are that bad right now.

The things that we think we're controlling, things that we think we have a power over. In fact, our weakest point is often the place where we are, in our own perception, the strongest.

And I managed to recently, in the middle of the year, drag my family along to a military museum in Singapore. And I used the word drag intentionally.

[6 : 47] They were there under US, for sure. The fall of Singapore in 1942 to Japanese forces was, in fact, by Churchill's regard, the greatest military defeat in the British Empire's history.

The island's defences for the entire time up to that point were designed to protect the naval base at Changi from sea attacks.

But it left the northern shore of Singapore vulnerable. That is, Singapore's defences were facing south out to the sea.

For decades, the assumption was that Singapore's weakest spot was a seaborne invasion. That's its weakest.

It was considered for decades that the jungle from Malaysia through to Singapore was impenetrable for a large army, and certainly by a mechanised army, until the 8th of February, 1942, when the Japanese army arrived on Singapore shores.

[8 : 08] Where we think we are strong, where we think we are okay, where we think we are safe, is often where sin is crouching ready to pass.

So I ask you again, what are your crouching sins in life? What sin are you currently turning into a virtue? I'm not greedy, I'm just frugal.

I'm not angry and bitter, I, in fact, am just simply expressing righteous moral outrage. I'm not a workaholic, I'm productive and I'm diligent.

I'm not gossiping, I'm just sharing prayer points. Sin is always crouching down, but in the end, it will have you.

Now, against this narrative of devastating sin and murder, we encounter a God of gentle grace. My second point. Genesis 4, in fact, none of Genesis at all, but even in Genesis 4, it does not present us with a God who is a cosmic policeman, but instead a God who refuses to choose between justice and mercy.

[9 : 29] A God who's not just angry and smite, but neither a God who just, oh, we'll let bygones be bygones and we just embrace and sing kumbaya.

He does not choose between justice and mercy. We saw in chapter 3, and so again, God graciously initiates here in chapter 4.

God does not turn up after the murder of Abel. He turns up as soon as he sees sin crouching.

Before sin has become a power over Cain.

Notice verse 5. So Cain was very angry and his face was downcast. The original language, the word downcast means his face fell.

What that means is Cain could have taken God's communication to him about his offering as a rebuke, as a correction, and he could have in that moment sought God's forgiveness.

[10 : 58] Instead, he starts to spiral down. And it's only then we read in verse 6, 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 the door. It desires to have you, but you must rule over it.

Cain did not call out to God in any way. But God came to Cain. God is always there. God always initiates.

He always steps in. And notice the other thing here that God graciously and gently affirms. God comes not as a policeman, nor even as a teacher, but as a counsellor.

He doesn't show up angry. He doesn't push back at Cain. How dare you get mad with me? How dare you, Cain? Don't you know who I am?

[12 : 01] I'm the creator of the universe. Let me just sit down and I... Verse 7, he comes to Cain and says he wants him to master sin.

God is encouraging him to master sin and make the right choice. You see, grace always initiates. It always affirms and it always exposes.

See, there in verse 6 is where God really is the counsellor exposing. Why are you angry? Why are you angry, Cain?

That's a good question, isn't it? Why is Cain angry with God? Why is he angry? You see, he looked on favour with Abel's offering, but not on Cain's.

So why does this infuriate Cain? I mean, he could have gone and got another one, another offering, had another crack.

[13:12] Could have said sorry, moved on. Why is he so infuriated? Well, the clue is in their name. The name Cain means things like productive, fruitful, successful.

Abel means breath, vapour, mist, meaningless, nobody. That's the clue.

Unfortunate name for sure. And you see it actually hinted at it in the text, in the narrative. You know, Eve was so excited when Cain came along, but there's nothing with Abel.

Have a look. Verses 1 and 2. With the help of the Lord, I have brought forth a man. Speaking of Cain, later she gave birth to Abel. You see, in the text here, in their names, we see Cain's the winner, Abel's the loser.

Cain gets angry when God's favour landed on the loser, on the spare. That's not his life at all.

[14:30] The nobody was regarded as a somebody, and the somebody was disregarded. That's Cain's problem.

Cain's identity was constructed from his relationship to his brother. He was great because he was better than Abel.

And when God turns up and favours Abel, Cain can... He either had to readjust his sense of self, or he had to eliminate Abel.

You see, when God is confronted with God's... Sorry, when Cain is confronted with God's measure of what truly matters, and what is truly great, he has no choice in the end, or this was the choice that he had, was either have a new sense of identity in God, or he has to exclude both God and Abel.

You see, the premise of Cain's life goes something like this. If Abel is who God regards him to be, then I am not who I understand myself to be.

[15:58] And the essence of sin in the Bible is to build an identity outside of the identity given to us by our Creator God.

That's the essence of sin. It's to say, what makes me cool, what makes me okay, what makes me significant, is I'm living up to what my parents say I am.

I'm living up... I'm a success in life. I've accumulated these vast resources. I have all of these experiences.

I am this. I am that. And that means I am a somebody. And anyone who doesn't have what I have is a nobody. And when God shows up, he has an entirely different value system.

And Cain goes berserk. His whole life has been defined as him being the number one son, the better brother.

[17:14] And he can't handle it. You see, an identity built outside of our Creator God is so fragile.

fragile. And every time someone kicks the golden calf that is my identity at the core of my being, there is one emotional response linked to a challenge to my deepest value.

You know what it is? Psychologists will tell you this. Anger. Anger. Anger. And every single one of us has built a life outside of our Creator God and our identities are fragile.

There are some things that we will do anything to keep because losing it means we lose ourselves. And so God graciously, gently comes after Cain, probing him and convicting him to see if he knows why he is angry.

What is it that's been attacked in your sense of self in this moment? In every single issue of life, sin is a factor and God's grace is a factor.

[18:39] At every point, God is pushing us to examine the very foundations of our lives. to take a look at what it is that we build our lives on and how fragile it is.

Every single problem in life, everything that makes our face downcast, in God's grace, is an opportunity to reflect, to identify, to search, and to grow.

And he does it in life for us consistently because it is only in our creator, God's approval, his love, his grace, his forgiveness that we can have a completely unchanging and secure and sure identity and a sense of ourself.

So that means that in every moment of life, not just sin and grace operate, but in every moment of life is a possibility for salvation for each of us.

And we get a glimpse of the possibility of salvation in these verses where there's an opportunity to cooperate with God's initiating grace and to escape sin.

[19 : 58] None of us has to end up like Cain, destroying ourselves and others in order to protect the fragile self. And to see that, I want to just quickly jump to the New Testament and how it understands Genesis 4.

Hebrews 11 verse 4 says this, by faith, Abel brought to God a better offering than Cain did. Now, when it says there by faith, that's not saying that Abel believed in God's existence and Cain didn't believe in God's existence, you know, why on earth would Cain be bringing an offering to God if he didn't believe God existed?

And I'm pretty sure God speaking to him, asking why he was angry, would allow him any confusion as to whether God existed. It's not faith in God's existence.

It is what we said in Genesis chapter 3, it is faith in the goodness of God, in the grace of God.

That is, Abel brought his offering to God completely confident and trusting in and leaning in to a gracious and merciful God. You see, Abel, just like Cain, would have heard from his parents fresh out of the Garden of Eden about the promised head crusher from chapter 3, verse 15, who would defeat the lie of Satan, who would reverse the effects of sin, the lie of Satan which says, God is not good, he is not for you.

[21 : 39] They would have heard that from, you know, these boys' age, you know, like right through. Would have heard it again and again and again. Abel made his offering in response to who God is.

It was an offering out of gratitude for God's grace and his mercy. Cain's offering was not a belief in the goodness of God and it was an attempt to secure God's favour.

That's Cain's offering. That's why God was not pleased. Cain's offering was an offering of religion, not an offering of faith.

Religion, as I've often said from here, religion is an activity. It's an activity like turning up to church. It's an activity like serving and reading the Bible and preaching and giving away money and praying and getting baptised and taking communion and being a moral, upright, good person in the hope and the expectation that when God shows up he will find me acceptable.

When we pursue religion, we have all the marks of Cain. we have the attitude in the heart of Cain.

[23 : 07] Cain is mad at God because God isn't affirming his sense of self. God is not giving him what he expects God to give him.

You see, if we think that God owes us a particular kind of life because of who we are or because of what we've achieved or because of what we've done in his name, we are Cain.

We are not able. We might even believe that God exists but our confidence is in ourselves and not that we are saved by his grace and his mercy.

So how do we turn? Where do we look in order to go from Cain to become an Abel? And the answer is just a little bit further on in Hebrews chapter 12.

You have come to God the judge of all, the one who brings justice to all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

[24 : 25] You see, many, many centuries after Abel came a greater Abel, Jesus Christ. And like the first Abel, the greater Abel was murdered.

murdered. Not killed by the outcast, the bad people of society, not by the prostitutes, the pimps, the thieves, and the whatever else's, but murdered by the good people, the religious people.

Why was he murdered by the religious people? Because he turned up and he said outrageous things in a sermon much better than this one, Matthew chapter 5, in fact, the greatest sermon of all priests, the Sermon on the Mount.

He turns up and he confronts the religious people with attitude of the heart. He said, you know, you've heard it said, do not commit murder. I want to say to you, if you've been angry with your brother, you've committed murder in your heart, even if you haven't stabbed them with a knife. Your problem is an attitude of the heart. He said things like that to the religious people and they were furious with him because he exposes the attitude of the heart.

[25 : 46] And they're nailed into a cross. But it was God's plan of mercy and grace, Jesus' death on the cross, God's plan of mercy and grace in order to secure justice.

Jesus' blood was the just payment for crimes against all of humanity, all of the Cains who followed on from Cain, every human being.

Genesis 4, verse 10, God says to Cain, what have you done? Listen, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.

Although Abel's body was covered by dirt, it could not be hidden. Sin would not be hidden. His blood cried out for justice.

According to the Old Testament, blood and life belong to God alone. murder is a direct assault on creators, on our created God's right of possession of another human being.

[26 : 59] Spilled blood will never be covered. It cries out directly to the Lord of life looking for justice for a life that's been taken. And Hebrews 12 tells us that Jesus' blood cries out for justice too.

but it cries out for justice differently. It's better than the blood of Abel. 1 John 1, verse 8 tells us why. If we confess our sin, he is faithful. He is good. He is merciful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful, he is good and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

You see, what that says there is that God does not just, he's not just the great eternal grandfather sitting on a throne just, you know, wanting everyone, just hugging everyone and just bearing with all the failures and the faults of the world.

[28 : 16] He's not just sitting up there waving a wand, cancelling debt, just loving everyone, just forgive, peace man.

He actually absorbs our debt. That's how he deals with the issue of justice. He absorbs our debt. It is because he absorbs the debt that we owe him for being murderers in our hearts for our sin against him.

It's because he absorbs the debt. He is therefore able to forgive. You see, what 1 John 1 tells us is because he's not just gracious but he's just and deals with the debt himself, our debt against him himself, it tells us exactly how secure we actually are in the salvation he offers.

How secure we are in his love and his mercy and his forgiveness. You see, too many Christians live each day thinking in the back of their minds that if they commit the wrong sin or if they commit too many sins then God is just going to be like the God of the Simpsons and just go Flanders again. Just fed up with us. I've had enough of this and no way. Jesus' blood speaks a better word than Abel's.

[30 : 00] When we come to Jesus, when we confess our rebellion against him, our attitude of the heart, our religion and trust in him, our sin is forgiven forever.

The slate is wiped clean forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Forever. Jesus paid the complete just payment for all of our sin which means according to 1 John 1 if he was to not forgive us for our sin right now if you're a believer in Jesus it would be an act of injustice because a double payment can never be extracted for a debt paid.

He willingly shed his blood on the cross to bring us this kind of forgiveness this kind of love this kind of hope this kind of certainty forever it's the justice of Jesus Christ that will ultimately transform us from being a cane to an able and that's the possibility of every day of every moment in every circumstance it's the possibility of salvation in Jesus in verse nine back to Genesis four God comes to Cain and asks him where's Abel and Cain says I don't know am I my brother's keeper and then we have the only time in the Bible where a human being is cursed God curses

Cain and sent out from that moment as a wanderer of the earth his name means as Eve said I have created a man and from that moment every being wanders the earth looking for their home for their place looking for hope and when God does that to Cain Cain absolutely falls to pieces not because he felt compassion for his brother dead or for his parents he felt no remorse over his sin against God at all his cry out in this moment was a cry of terror and self pity and then we have this strange statement in verse 15 then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him what is the mark of

Cain lots of speculation some reckon it was a dog not sure how they got to that point you can actually go to a tattoo artist nowadays and ask them can I please get a tattoo the mark of Cain it's a particular kind of I'm pretty sure it wasn't that but so while it's not clear it reveals something very significant it's what it reveals it reveals something about the character of God it reveals a God whose commitment to justice for the innocent is matched by his care for the sinner a God who is faithful and just and even Cain's appeal in verse 13 and 14 sorry Cain's prayer to God in verse 13 and 14 contains a hint of an appeal to God God's answer to Cain together with his mark on Cain is

not a stigma but a promise of self-safe conduct in other words in this moment

[34 : 16] God has become Cain's protector how is it possible that God can be merciful to the unrepentant sinner how can he be so merciful to someone who won't even budge it's because on the cross of Jesus God's mercy and justice meet and the blood of Jesus shouts forgiveness to all who come to him as we wander the earth like Cain protected by God until we die in the hope that in the circumstances of life where we see sin and grace that we would pursue salvation that we would not be like Cain but that we would pursue salvation God has brought you to this day protected you in all of life in all the experiences of sin he's revealing his grace all the time so that you might come to him for salvation he's protecting you for salvation the blood of Jesus washes away all of our hidden sin his blood washes away all of our public sin no sin is beyond his grace no sin and so that is the possibility of salvation that he offers you today whether you're tuning in online you're gathered here right now that is the possibility of salvation that he offers you today choose Abel not Cain choose the way of Abel not the way of Cain don't dig your heels in and fall to the sin that is pouncing and ready to destroy your life by his grace and his mercy he's protected you to this point that you might take up his offer of salvation take it up today