Genesis 4: EAST OF EDEN

In Genesis 4, we are introduced to the world’s first dysfunctional family. In the previous chapter, Adam and Eve had fallen into sin by disobeying God, and as a consequence, God had driven them out of the Garden of Eden where the Tree of Life had enabled them to live forever. Now, in a state of sinfulness, God knew it was not in their best interest to live perpetually as sinners. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:50 that “flesh and blood can’t inherit the kingdom of God”, so man must have a spiritual body (thus the necessity of the resurrection). Therefore it was best for man to eventually die physically to be resurrected eternally. In the first prophecy of the victory over sin by Christ on the cross, given in Genesis 3:15, there would be a continuing conflict between the believing descendants of Eve and her unbelieving descendants that followed the serpent (Satan). Adam and Eve were soon going to experience the reality of this conflict through the events of their two sons. Cain and Abel were the first of the age-old conflict of the two “seeds” of Genesis 3:15.

Throughout history, theologians and philosophers have struggled to understand the story of Cain and Abel, especially since Genesis gives so few details about the conflict, and why God accepted and blessed Abel’s offering, but rejected Cain’s offering. This story is one of those Bible stories that everyone knows even if they have never owned a Bible. It strikes at the heart of humanity as to the struggle between good and evil, sibling rivalry, the struggle for love and acceptance, and our capacity for self-destruction. It always amazes me that so much of literature, philosophy, and humanism seems to have assumptions about these events. After the fall of man in the previous chapter, God made gracious provision for man to approach God through blood sacrifice, even after mankind became sinners. By humbly confessing their own guilt, and offering innocent blood as a covering for sin, they could worship God. Hebrews 11:4 says that “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony of God that he was righteous.” From the Mosaic Law, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we know that God only declares people righteous based on vicarious blood sacrifices, therefore Abel was faithfully obedient in his offering according to God’s provision. 1 John 3:12 says that “Cain was the evil one, and slew his brother, and why? Because Cain’s works were evil, and his brother’s were righteous”. What works are in view in the story in Genesis 4:1-8? The righteous work of Abel was a faithfully obedient offering, and the evil work of Cain was to offer the grain

The Real East of Eden Story

We are beneficiaries of four New Testament passages, which help us understand the Cain and Abel story. The Genesis 4:1-8 account gives us few details and no explanations as to why the boys made different offerings to God, and why God had regard for Abel’s offering and no regard for Cain’s offering. With the help of the New Testament passages we can make several assumptions about these events. After the fall of man in the previous chapter, God made gracious provision for man to approach God through blood sacrifice, even after mankind became sinners. By humbly confessing their own guilt, and offering innocent blood as a covering for sin, they could worship God. Hebrews 11:4 says that “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony of God that he was righteous.” From the Mosaic Law, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we know that God only declares people righteous based on vicarious blood sacrifices, therefore Abel was faithfully obedient in his offering according to God’s provision. 1 John 3:12 says that “Cain was the evil one, and slew his brother, and why? Because Cain’s works were evil, and his brother’s were righteous”. What works are in view in the story in Genesis 4:1-8? The righteous work of Abel was a faithfully obedient offering, and the evil work of Cain was to offer the grain
offering of his own. Why was Cain’s regarded as evil? Because Cain pridefully approached God on his own terms with his own offering. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with a grain offering, in fact there are instructions in the Mosaic Law to do so, but the story is set against the sin of the previous chapter and we are told in Matthew 23:35 by Jesus that only Abel’s sacrifice was righteous. In Jude 11, the author is condemning false teachers and says, “Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain” meaning they have rejected God’s truth and come up with their own alternate truth.

In Genesis 4:1-2, Adam and Eve were very elated that Eve gave birth to Cain. No doubt they had great hope that Cain would be the spiritual seed God had promised. They did not yet know that the little baby would begin the tragic side of the history of violence in the human race. The first two sons of Adam and Eve would illustrate the division of humanity between believers in God and unbelievers. 1 John 3 tells us that “Cain was of the evil one”, Satan, while Abel was righteous in God’s eyes. We are told in Genesis 4:2 that they had different occupations—Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a farmer. These are both honorable occupations, but it sets the stage for each making an offering to God from their own flock and land. I take it that there is nothing wrong with Cain’s offering except it was not in accordance with God’s instructions. Since we don’t have a record in Genesis 4 of God’s exact instructions, many theologians say the problem was that Cain’s offering was not in faith, or you could say God knew his heart wasn’t right. I have no problem with that, for only God knows what was in Cain’s heart and why his offering was unacceptable, but God determines what is righteous and unrighteous, and Cain’s was unrighteous.

I believe that God provided a time and place at which they could approach Him for a blessing. We can assume that God had given Adam and Eve instruction, and they had instructed their sons on the proper way to approach God for forgiveness. Throughout the Bible, beginning with Moses, God gave the necessity of substitutionary sacrifice as a prerequisite to approaching God. Since Cain had great pride in his vocation of farming, he resented the command, and in his pride decided to offer a sacrifice of his own choosing. He brought the fruit of his own efforts. Therefore it was not in faith, and his heart was not right before the Lord, and God rejected his offering, as Gen.4 says “for Cain and his offering God had no regard”.

Knowing the humanistic view of the story offered in Steinbeck’s novel EAST OF EDEN, I investigated what some of the more liberal theologians had written about it. They were adamant that there was nothing wrong with Cain’s offering, and seem to infer that God was arbitrary and unfair. I think many people are troubled that God accepted Abel’s but rejected Cain’s, because it seems unfair. I think everyone who feels like their parents liked their siblings best, or in some way feel deprived of love and acceptance can empathize with Cain. The human race has a long history of sibling rivalry, and blaming their parents for their own shortcomings. Reading novels like EAST OF EDEN or seeing the multitude of movies in which people are victimized tugs at our heart as we feel sorry for those poor tragic characters.

Cain’s Vengeance

In Genesis 4:5, Cain’s immediate response was great anger and “his countenance fell”. Literally it says his look on his face fell into an angry glare of resentment and jealousy. They all know how dangerous it is to carry grudges and harbor bitterness within, because sooner or later it will blow up. Aware of this, God graciously approached Cain asking diagnostic questions and giving a powerful warning in v.6-7. God told him if he did the right thing, he would be accepted, but if he continued in disobedience “sin is lurking and has its desire to dominate you”. I immediately thought of James 1:14-15 where James explained that sin is not God’s fault, “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust conceives it gives birth to sin.” In Genesis 4:8, Cain talked to his brother, and they went out into the field where Cain murdered Abel. Pride, envy, and hatred blinded and dominated Cain just as God had predicted. 1 John 3:12 gives two reasons why Cain did it—his own guilt over his evil, and his envy and anger over Abel’s righteousness. The irony is that Cain didn’t murder an enemy or a stranger, but he murdered his own brother whom you would expect he would care for and respect. We the students learn in many Bible passages like Psalm 51:4 that even though Cain murdered Abel, ultimately it was an act against God.

The Way of Cain

In Genesis 4:9-16, we read the immediate consequences of the first murder. Jude 11 talks about a lifestyle and a way of thinking the author calls “the way of Cain”. The way of Cain involves selfish human reasoning with pride controlling instead of humility, hatred instead of love, excuses and lies instead of repentance, and wandering instead of seeking the Lord. Once again in verse 9, God had to seek out the sinner as He asked Cain, “Where is Abel?” Cain’s sinful response was a lie and then a challenge to God for even asking the question. By saying “Am I my brother’s keeper?”, he was saying it’s every man for himself, and only the strong survive. Without Cain’s confession and repentance, God could only speak in judgment. Because
Cain had such pride in his vocation of farming, God fixed it so he could no longer farm, and he must leave his farm to travel even further away from the Lord as a “vagrant and wanderer”. Cain was only then remorseful, not about his crime, but about his punishment. Cain said it was too much to bear, and he feared retribution from people seeking revenge. Cain felt self-pity, but no remorse. My first thought was to wonder why God did not execute capital punishment. It seems that in God’s mercy and wisdom, He chose to let him live so he could wander around and be a perpetual reminder of judgment on sinners. Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and lived east of Eden. I can’t help but think that even today all unredeemed sinners continue to live “east of Eden” where they are alienated from God.

The Grace of God to Those East of Eden

In Hebrews 12:24, the implication is a reference to Genesis 4:10 where God told Cain that “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to Me from the ground”. God was saying that Abel’s shed blood rightly called for justice and righteous vengeance. The author of Hebrews 12:24 is saying that God cannot overlook sin, and there must be justice. But Jesus is the author of a new system of justice, and Jesus' shed blood on the cross shouts forgiveness to all who believe in Him. The sacrificial blood of Jesus speaks louder and better and overcomes the blood of Abel. The blood of Abel cries out, but the blood of Jesus atones for all the sin of all who respond to God with faith.

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