

The Healing of Our Relationships

Rich Nathan

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Roots: A Study in the Book of Genesis

Genesis 4:8-26

Well, we still haven't completely settled who it is that will be president. Like you, I have been amazed at the divisions in this country and how different groups voted very differently in this election. Large cities went for Gore; rural areas went for Bush; singles went for Gore; marrieds went for Bush; women went for Gore; men went for Bush; African Americans went for Gore; Caucasians went for Bush; non-churched people went for Gore; church people by and large went for Bush (and that's across all churches except the Roman Catholic Church and independent Black churches). The country is so divided.

One of the things I love about the Bible is its realistic portrayal of life. A lot of people who have never read the Bible expect to find in it a book of philosophy, but when you become familiar with the Bible, you see that it doesn't contain a lot of abstract propositions or ivory tower theorizing. It's mostly stories – very concrete, down to earth – stories that are a real slice of life. There is philosophy in the Bible. There is ethics in the Bible – some of the best that's ever been written. But it is not just a book of philosophy.

It's not just a religious book. A lot of people expect to find in the Bible a book of religion – a book related to rituals and altars and ceremonies and mystical experiences. There is material in the Bible about rituals and ceremonies and mystical experiences. But, again, it is most a slice of real life, not just religious life.

The Bible isn't a book of philosophy mainly. It is not a book of religion mainly. It's not a history book mainly. A lot of folks, when they are unfamiliar with the Bible, think that they are just going to read stories of people who lived thousands and thousands of years ago. Well, the Bible does contain very accurate history. In fact, archeologists have for centuries used the Bible as a virtual road map for digging up various biblical sites. It is the best source material for our knowledge of the ancient Near Eastern world.

But it is not just a history book. Or a book about people who lived several thousand years ago. The Bible is our story. It is a book about our lives.

I sometimes hear from people after they listen to one of my messages and they say, "You were speaking right to me today. You were really addressing something in my life." Well, the reason that happens in large part is because the source of my material is the Bible, which is about real life, about down-to-earth life, about our lives.

And one of the things that the Bible talks about a great deal is our broken relationships and our divisions. Not just divisions on a national level as we just saw in the elections, but on a personal level, at a family level, at a friendship level. The story that we are going to read about today – the story of Cain and Abel – we find a story of two brothers who were rivals, and their rivalry resulted in one brother murdering the other. Cain killed Abel.

You might say, “Well, that’s hardly a slice of real life, Rich. In real life siblings don’t kill each other.”

The FBI reports that the least reported form of family violence is sibling abuse in which one sibling causes serious bodily injury to another by using a weapon or by kicking or choking or beating or seriously assaulting their own flesh and blood sibling. There was an article in the paper not too long ago. The headline read, “Slain Teen was Sibling Rivalry Victim.” A girl conspired with her boyfriend to strangle her brother. While murder is very rare, sibling abuse is common. And sibling rivalry is one of the most universal phenomena of family life. I have never met a family where there wasn’t some degree of rivalry and teasing and fighting among the kids, especially, if they are school-aged kids.

I remember when our kids were much younger and we were driving down to Florida one summer. It was about 95° out. It was one of those pleasant 20-hour trips with your kids piled in the backseat with a bunch of luggage. My daughter began complaining that my son was deliberately looking out her window. You know how kids can fight about just anything? “He’s breathing my air.” “She’s putting her toes in my bedroom.” So my daughter accused my son of deliberately looking out her window, which is worthy at least of a severe fine, if not a felony conviction. The amazing thing was that my daughter was right. He was deliberately looking out her window, just to annoy her.

And this sort of thing just doesn’t remain in childhood. How many of you as adults continue to experience fractured relationships with one of your siblings – where there is still a perception of parental favoritism, or a problem over money and finances, a struggle over the division of an estate, wounds that haven’t been healed from childhood? I read a story recently about a political campaign that just finished up between two candidates for a Seattle city council seat. It was an unusual battle between these two candidates because they happened to be brother and sister. They live right next door to each other. But they had a very heated political feud, which divided the family.

Just as an aside – if you are struggling with sibling rivalry in your home, let me offer you just a few bits of advice. First, you cannot avoid sibling rivalry; you aren’t failing if your kids fight. Second, set clear ground rules; never allow physical fighting or real verbal abuse – never! Just don’t tolerate it. Third, be fair and impartial; don’t always side with the younger/weaker child. That can create a real resentment (especially if the younger child has learned to provoke and then

run from the older). Fourth, let your kids do things alone; don't require them to play together.

Some of you know that America's most famous advice columnists, Dear Abby and Ann Landers, are identical twins, who while dispensing advice to millions of people for the last 40 or so years in the newspapers, didn't speak to one another for several decades.

Today we are going to talk about why it is that our relationships with each other break down. Why there are so many divisions and, in part, how relationships are healed. Let's ask the Lord's presence.

I am looking at Genesis 4:8-12.

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. 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, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

We read in verse 8: *Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.* Now, where does an attack on another come from? How can one person be violent with another person? How does a family member abuse another member of their family? Curse another member of their family? Punch, kick, pull the hair, sexually abuse another member of their family? How do things break down between people so that we go to war and stop speaking, writing one another off? How do relationships really break down?

Well, you know, last week I mentioned that there may be something to the meanings of the names Cain and Abel. As I said, in the Bible, names are more than labels. They are more than tags on people, given to them by parents who just happen to like the name Blake or Colby or Winfield. In the Bible, names communicate something about a person's inner nature or the destiny their parent's painted for them.

We see the meaning of Cain in verse 1 where it says: *Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man."* I have gained a man. The name Cain is a take off on the word to bring forth, to acquire. It may have connoted a destiny predicted by Eve for her son in which Cain was to be an important man, a man's man, someone who was destined to live in the lime light, to dominate, to rule.

The name Abel literally means nothingness. It means frailty. Perhaps, certainly, at least a part of the family violence between Cain and Abel is that Cain regarded Abel as a nothing, as a zero.

Here is one of the secrets of how one human being can perpetrate violence against another. That other human being is not seen as a person. They are seen as a nothing. They aren't equals. This person that I reject, this person that I abuse, this person that I step over on the street is not my equal. They aren't someone like me with my feelings and my concerns. I don't see myself in their face and in their eyes. Here is the heart of relational breakdown. You look at someone else as nothing, as a lesser being, as someone to be avoided, stepped over, or stepped around, or stepped on.

People ask how something like the Holocaust could have ever taken place. How do people get to the place of loading up other human beings in boxcars and shipping them off to extermination camps? How does that happen? How can we be so cruel to one another?

The Nazis deliberately dehumanized their victims. They used to have cartoons of Jewish people as being portrayed as vermin, as little rats. In Nazi cartoons Jews were portrayed as little rats. They need to be exterminated. They would shave the heads of men and women. They would strip them down and tear away their dignity. They would destroy their appearance.

That's what we always do with an enemy. We try to tear away their personhood, their humanity, so that we don't see our own reflections in their faces. We see something less than ourselves. In Vietnam they used to call the North Vietnamese "gooks." In WWII it was "japs." The enemy is always called terrorists or guerillas or Zionist imperialists. Think of all the pejorative words that one race uses of another race in America. Think of all the ways we dehumanize those with whom we disagree. All of those people are heartless, loveless, stupid, animalistic. They are faggots, queers.

Do you understand how this process works? To the Cain within us, other people are Abels – nothing. Zeros. That's how a mother commits violence to a baby growing within her womb. The culture convinces mother that the baby is a nothing. It is a fetus, or even more, fetal tissue, or just some cells in your body. Once someone becomes a nothing to you, you owe them nothing – no compassion, no forgiveness, no justice, no concern.

To our media-driven, entertainment-driven youth culture, elderly people are nothings. They don't deserve clothes made for them. Even middle-aged people don't really deserve to be clothed. We might take a little bit of your money, but we sure aren't going to give you clothes that fit you. Those of us who are in our 40's are on the way to becoming nothing. We will receive the treatment that we

have given out. You don't have to write TV scripts or movies for the elderly. They don't have to be portrayed in realistic terms in movies.

I am writing a book for a Christian publisher that I am calling "Who Is My Enemy?" In the book I go through a list of groups who are viewed as nothing to Christians – feminists, gay people, New Agers, liberals. It is OK to shut our hearts to such people, to shut our ears to their complaints, to shut our minds to their arguments.

Let me ask you a personal question: Is there anyone who has become a nothing to you? An ex-spouse, perhaps? Your in-laws? Your current spouse's ex-spouse? Parents? Siblings? Is there anyone who you say, "I don't owe them any responsibility at all. I am allowed to shut my heart to them. I am allowed to shut my ears to their concerns." Is there anyone about whom you say, "I don't have to pray for him or her? I don't have to feel anything anymore. I don't have any duty to this non-human."

It is easy to get into the mindset that someone is a nothing. Business people, leaders, those of you who have position in society, in your attention to the big and the important, do you see the worker at McDonald's who takes two minutes to get you your food while you are tapping the counter complaining. Do you see the maintenance worker who forgot to empty your trashcan again. The receptionist who messed up one of your calls. The trash guy who has actually dropped some of your milk containers in your driveway. What if you prayed that God would allow you to see people whom you overlook as people? To see your face in their faces?

Another way to dehumanize another person, and so to be divided from them and to break relationship, is to just view a person in terms of their externals. Cain looked at his brother Abel and the only thing he can see is favor on Abel's sacrifice. He didn't see another person. All he can see is that he had favor on the sacrifice that was being offered.

That's the way we view folks. We don't see them. We see something about them. Something external about them, some area that they are succeeding in that we are not. The heart of envy is seeing something about a person rather than seeing them. Maybe when you look at your neighbor, what you see is their car. It is newer than yours. It is more expensive. It is a better model. They have a better CD player. Or maybe you see their house or their kitchen stove or their clothes or their bathroom or their computer. To focus on something about a person is a step toward dehumanizing them.

So you focus upon your coworker's larger office or the size of their desk or the fact that they were mentioned by the boss in a company newsletter, or they were mentioned to you in an annual review. It is amazing how trivial we can get. Politicians will literally count the lines given to one of their opponents in the

newspaper. We look at someone else's build, their clothes, their weight, their marital status, their kitchens, their jewelry, their books, their ministry opportunities or position. Kids will envy other kids because of their sneakers, their skateboards.

I remember friends who used to buy more expensive rubber balls that we bought. They bought the kind that cost 35 cents. We were only allowed to buy the kind that cost 15 cents. I remember one of my friends had a really expensive leather football. It was a Duke football – the very best, top of the line. Girls who get imitation Barbies just envy their friends who play with the real plastic, molded head Barbies made in Indonesia – you know, the real thing.

When we pay attention to something that is just external about another, we lose an individual's humanity and the Cain within us treats them like Abel. They are no longer my neighbor to be prayed for, taken care of, loved, listened to.

The last major way that we treat someone as a non-person is to view them just in terms of their function, their utility, their usefulness. "How does this individual fit the grand plan of my interests? Do they help me get what I want or do they get in the way? That person in the company is great so long as they are selling, but if they have a down month, if there are problems at home, if there is an illness and they miss some days at work, if they have a sick kid, if they have a dying mother – we don't want to hear about it. We have a job to do here. We have quotas to meet. There are people to sell to. Are you helping me get what I want?" Have you ever treated someone just in terms of their function, their usefulness to you?

Of course you have. So have I. How often do you pay attention to who makes your clothes? Do we care if our clothes are made by an adult or a child? Whether the person who makes our clothes gets a living wage or whether they are literally slaves, as in some countries like China where they use slave labor? Who cares? We don't want to hear about it from some bleeding-heart liberal or a self-interested American union worker. As long as I can buy my clothes as cheaply as possible. So long as the price is held down on the toys I am buying for my kids at Christmas. So long as those folks who live in Asia serve my financial interest, I will have a little more money for vacation or for my IRA. I don't need to concern myself with them. They serve a useful function in my life.

People as things to be used. To a guy in a fraternity, a girl who shows up at a frat party is not a person. That is just something you have sex with. That is just a piece of meat that you don't even talk to the next day. To a guy who is hooked on pornography, the women in pornography are not people. They are not someone's daughter. They aren't someone's sister, or mother. It is not a person made by Creator God. A Christian man, a church-going man who stares at pornography is engaged in the worst kind of offense against our Creator. That's the Cain within us.

Churches can view people in terms of their usefulness. We really don't want to build a relationship with you. We aren't really interested if we have community with each other, if we pray with each other, if we pray for one another, if we help each other. Do you fit into the programming? Who can argue with the programming? Every once in a while someone wants to wave a flag and say, "Hey, am I more than my usefulness to you? Am I more than my function? Is there any place where someone will relate to me just as a person, even if I am not all that useful for the moment because I am depressed, because I have four kids and can't produce a lot, because I am taking care of a sick husband.

The Cain within us is all about using others. To meet some need of ours, some grand scheme of ours, some plan of ours – to use others. We even try to use God. How often do you find yourself in a situation with the Lord where at bottom you really aren't interested in deepening your relationship with him? You just want to use him. Give me the goodies of life. Give me the good stuff of life – health, prosperity, peace. Give me an easy time in my home. Let me hook your power onto my plans.

Friends, I will tell you that everyone of us has been in the position of being used. Sometimes you have been used for your money or for your position or someone has wanted to use your body. People in this church have used my name often when they want to add weight to what they are saying. I have had folks use my name to club someone else into submission. The sad thing is not the fact that we're used, it is that we turn around and become users.

When people are nothing. When we just see the externals. When we use them. When we treat them like Abels. The New Testament says that when you don't love another person, when someone becomes a non-person to you, you are like Cain, the murderer of his brother. 1 John 3:12.

So what does God do? God gets our attention. It says in verse 9: *Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother?"* Lots of people want to confine their relationship with God to the religious sphere of their lives. Lots of folks want to compartmentalize. The feeling is that once I have dealt with God in church, in the religious sphere, I don't have to worry about him in the rest of my life. And it is interesting that here in the opening pages of the Bible, how we relate to other people is considered by God to be a religious question. When you view someone as a nothing, when you close your heart off to another human being, when you write off a person, however badly they have treated you, you shut your heart and say, "I don't need to pray for them. I don't need to listen to them. I don't have to see them as real people." God treats that as a spiritual question. See, we want to have a nice divide between our religious life and the rest of our lives.

I think of Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan. There is a priest and Levite going down the road and they see this poor guy dying in the street. What do they do? They take a wide way around him. Maybe they were on their way to the Temple to pray. Maybe they were preparing a Bible study. Maybe they were heading off to kinship or a women's group. They were busy on their way to ministry.

Where is your brother Abel? God just doesn't ask us religious questions. The Word of God doesn't come thundering into our consciences merely asking us questions about our Bible study or our devotional lives. The Word of God descends and cuts into our consciences and begins to ask questions about how you are treating other people. Start with your own family. How do you relate to your literal brother or sister? Anything between you? Anything that you can clean up?

There is always a tendency to divide life up. To assign to God the religious realm, the church realm, worship songs, choir practice, Sunday School, witnessing. We do this all the time. We do our church thing and then Monday morning, business is business. How I do business, what I think about business has nothing to do with Christianity. Work is by the law of supply and demand – this is simple economics. It is a matter of a financial market and the current interest rate and market shares. I believe in Christ. I prayed to receive Christ. But that doesn't have anything to do with the reality of what I am dealing with in my business.

Is there nowhere in there where God would interrupt and ask you the arresting question: Where is Abel your brother? How in all of your business and business philosophy do you relate to other people? Can you say to God, "Look, when it comes to politics, when it comes to the way we treat the democrats or the republicans, all bets are off. When it comes to that other party, just batter each other into submission. No holds barred. Bring out the bigger legal guns. Do it to them before they do it to you."

When God says "Where is your brother?" he is saying "I am interested in the entirety of your life in all of its detail – not just your religious life, not just your inner attitudes, where your spiritual life dwells. I am interested in how you date and who you date. I am interested in what you do on your dates. I am interested in your child raising – not just whether you tell you kids Bible stories, but I am interested in your kids' education. I am not only interested in healing prayer, I am interested in what goes on at St. Ann's Hospital and Riverside Hospital in the operating rooms and what therapists do and the medical technicians and nurses and how they relate to patients and whether patients become nothings, Abels." See, God would speak to anyone who is in the medical profession and say, "The way you relate to patients – are they people or are they spleens in room 202?"

And look at where God gets Cain's attention. It says: *Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain*

attacked his brother and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" They are out in the fields. Remember, Cain was a farmer and God begins speaking to Cain in his workplace. God doesn't speak to him just by the altar where they are offering sacrifices. He speaks to Cain out in the field, the place where Cain murdered his brother. The place where we take off our religious masks – the work world. The world of our family and our neighborhood. The Lord is Lord of heaven and earth, not just heaven. God will often speak to you, friend, not just in church, but as you operate in your particular sphere of life, in your workplace, in class, in the library, in your home. Cain is a farmer and so God speaks to him out in the field.

And notice what God does. He not only speaks to Cain out in the field, but in verse 12, he curses the field: *When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.* Have you ever seen that God can get through to you really quickly when he withdraws his blessing from your work life. When he begins to curse the field so that it doesn't yield its crops in your sphere of occupation? When he withdraws his hand of blessing from your family or from your studies? In other words when God disciplines a person, when he rebukes and disciplines a person, he doesn't just discipline us in the religious realm of life by the altar. It is not just when God disciplines us that he makes our prayers dry and that the heavens feel like brass and everything is reflected back to us when we pray. It is not just that it becomes difficult to read God's Word. For a lot of us, if the discipline only came in the spiritual side of our lives, we would say to God, "Well, thank you very much. My devotions have been a little hard, but my life is still great."

Have you noticed God really gets your attention when God begins to touch the places where you really live, when he curses your field, your money, your appliances, your car, when his finger touches your health. When you lose a key client. When you get yelled at at work. When your real life starts breaking down, then like Cain we become awakened to the presence of God – that God sees us; that God is calling us to account. The Lord said to Cain: *"Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know...am I my brother's keeper?"* Am I responsible for him? Cain didn't know he was asking a rhetorical question. There is only one answer to "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer is "Yes. You are responsible to your brother. You are accountable not just for your life, but for what you do to the Abels of this world, the nothings, the frail people." The people who no longer serve a useful function. Wives, husbands, girlfriends, and boyfriends whom we may have dumped for someone else.

The Lord said: *"What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground."* Abel's blood cried out. You know, we are never finally done with another person. We can never just wipe our hands of them and be done with them already. The Abels of the world, those people who trouble us, we never can quite get rid of them. You can't just throw them in a hole and say, "Well, now at least, they won't be able to bother me anymore." Even from the

hole they can make their appeal to God. Because of people's eternal nature, not even death finally gets rid of a person – at least not to God.

Friend, it doesn't matter how many lawyers you have. It doesn't matter what the courts say in your favor. Or what kind of zinger you use with your razor sharp tongue. How much you close your heart or your ears or your mind to another person. You never ultimately get rid of another human being. Even from the ground they cry out.

And to say, "They are crazy. They are lunatics. I can forget about them forever after that last episode and just toss them in the garbage to be taken out with all the rest of the trash." If the only contact I have with a person is on my knees before God in prayer, there I still must hold up my Abel before the Lord.

Some of you are Abels – you have been beaten up by a Cain, a person more powerful, with more weapons and more money, more position. God hears the cries of the Abels of the world. What message do you think the blood of Abel cried out before God? What message? God, I want justice. God, I want vengeance. What message did the blood of Abel cry out? Maybe, "Lord, I have been treated as a non-person, as a nothing, as a zero by this other. They sought to crush me, to get rid of me."

Let me ask you a question: are there any Abels in your life? Is there anyone whose groan, whose complaint could be crying out to God against you? An inconvenient relative, perhaps? An elderly aunt or grandparent who is in a nursing home, but who you have a million excuses for not visiting? Some incessant talker that you always try to avoid? A sister or a brother, an in-law whom you shut your heart to years ago? Is there anyone who at your simple neglect could be crying out to God from the ground against you? Have you been treated like an Abel by anyone?

The Lord says *you will be a restless wanderer on the earth. Cain said to the Lord: My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth.* America is filled right now with restless, wandering Cains. With people for whom no place is home. Restless, searching, looking – folks who have no community, just desperately reaching out for a relationship but always ending up with a relationship of using and being used. Restless, wandering Cains who treat others in terms of function and someone else is treated as a nothing. America is filled with wandering, homeless, lost people. People moving from experience to experience, easily bored, easily drawn to the latest fad, the newest fashion, this season's hottest color. The worst thing you can be is yesterday's news. The curse of Cain is certainly on America.

The text closes with a word of redemption in verse 25: *Adam lay with his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, "God has*

granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him.” God’s provision of Seth was a word of redemption, a word of healing, a word of hope that all is not lost to the Cain within us.

I want to close with a verse from Hebrews 12:24. The writer of Hebrews in 12:24 says: *You have come to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant*, [now listen to these words – here is the word of redemption] *and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*. The blood of Abel cried out for vengeance. The blood of Abel cried out to God and said, “God, this one has treated me as a non-person. The blood of Abel points a finger at us and says, “You treated me as a nothing, as someone to be used, as someone to be abused.” But Hebrew 12 says the blood of Jesus speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. What is the better word than the blood of Abel?

The blood of Jesus cries out and says to us that people are important. People are a religious question. People are a spiritual question. People are more important than things. People are more important than meetings. People are more important than money. People are more important than your time. People are more important than your right to hold a grudge or your right to shut your heart. The blood of Jesus cries out and says, “Look at what I have done. Look at how valuable people are.” What does the blood of Jesus cry out? What better word? The blood of Jesus cries out and says, “Be humble in my presence. Look at what God had to do to save us. Look at the cross. Look at what it cost God to save us.” The blood of Christ cries out, “Be humble.”

The better word that the blood of Jesus speaks is a word today of invitation. Come to me. All of you have a Cain within, a way of relating to people as nothings, as functions, as externals. Those of you who are used like Abel and those of you are users like Cain, the blood of Christ says come. Come to God. Receive grace. Receive forgiveness. You who fail. You who are hopeless. You who have blown it. Come. You who need to be healed. Come receive grace. Let’s pray.

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Genesis 4:8-26

I. The Cause of Divisions

A. We See Others

1. Nothings

2. Externals

3. Functions

B. God Sees Us

C. God Speaks to Us

II. The Consequence and Healing of Divisions

A. Abel's Blood Cries Out

B. Christ's Blood Cries Out (Hebrews 12:24)