

## **When Life is Unfair**

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Roots: A Study in the Book of Genesis

Genesis 4:1-7

This past week has been absolutely wild. I mean even veteran political observers who are trying to call this election and said it was tight could never have predicted the razor thin differences of the margins between the two presidential candidates. We are talking about a handful of votes in five or six different states – not just Florida – but a handful of votes in Wisconsin, New Mexico, Iowa, and in Oregon. States are being declared for one person and then going the other direction. And it's not just at the presidential level. The country is just absolutely evenly balanced in the House of Representatives; in the Senate.

Talk about an opportunity for God to reveal the true nature of America's character. I don't know how many of you have been reading the reports of the last several days. And I am not particularly interested in what your political preference is. But it occurred to me a few days ago that inasmuch as God is sovereign, that he according to the Bible in Daniel 2:21, "He sets up kings and deposes them," it occurred to me a few days ago that only God could have engineered this kind of result, and at least in part, I think it is to display to the world the national character of America.

What kind of people are we? What is really in our hearts? How do we act when things don't go our way?

One of the words that has been most often tossed about these last several days is the charge of unfairness. Unfairness. Unfairness. People have said that one of the ballots was unfairly constructed and they couldn't understand it. The Vice President stood up and said, "We have to insure that the process of voting was absolutely fair." Governor Bush's campaign was claiming that now that the electorate had supposedly spoken, it was unfair to overturn the will of the people through litigation. There were charges of unfairness in voting not only in Florida, but in several states.

I listened to a law professor the other night who was excited. She pronounced herself "almost ecstatic" over the prospect of litigation. She said it would engage the American people in the political process as people sought to produce what she called a fair result. She struck me as one of those people who is excited about everything, the kind of person who represents big movie companies during the latest discussion of some pornographic aspect of a movie. There is always some PR person, some shill that goes out front and says, "This is all so healthy. This is all so good that we are able to be even more explicit in the movies because it lifts the veil of hypocrisy and we are now free of our Puritanical

restraints.” This law professor was one of those folks who seemed to think everything was a positive.

But over and over again from both sides of the political aisle, you’ve heard in the last few days the charge of unfairness. We can’t let you take the election from us the way you are attempting to take the election from us. That would be unfair.

Now, this is only a more global illustration of what virtually every human being complains about on a smaller scale. A would-be mother who suffers through several miscarriages holds in her heart this feeling that life or God has been unfair to her. Parents who have a child that is born with a birth defect wonder about the fairness and justice of life and God. A person, who is overlooked for a promotion even though they are obviously more qualified than the person selected, sees unfairness and bias, when the boss picks one of his golfing buddies or a person who has just learned to kiss up better than the more qualified person. Certainly there are many people, and many of you, who have suffered very obvious and blatant acts of discrimination – clear unfairness and bias on the basis of race or sex. Unfairness.

And that’s what the story we are going to read today is about. It is about a charge of unfairness in God’s treatment of one person over against his treatment of another. We are going to read a story about a person who feels they have a legitimate beef regarding the way that life has turned out for them.

Let me set the story of two brothers – Cain and Abel – in the context of what we have been looking at over the last several weeks. Last week I talked with you about the ripple affect of our disobedience to God. I said that we have great freedom regarding whether or not we are going to obey or disobey God. We have a choice. You have a choice whether you are going to pray or not pray. Whether you are going to open your Bible or not open your Bible. Whether you are going to get on-line and search for pornography or shut off your computer and go to bed. You have a choice regarding doing God’s will. Are you going to date outside the faith? Are you going to gossip in your office?

We also learned last week that once we exercised our choice to sin, we have no choice regarding the consequences of our sin. I described it like a man who is standing by the side of a pond with a rock in his hand deciding whether he is going to heave that rock into the pond. Once the man decides to heave the rock, I said, he has no choice regarding how far the ripples are going to go. And the ripple effects of sin go much farther and go in directions we never expected nor imagined.

You see that in your life, don’t you friends? That when you choose to sin you lose your confidence in your relationship with God. You experience a deadness inside. Thousands of you came up last week and wrote down things that you wanted to just lay at the altar and bring to the light and get out of your life. Your

wrote down some things. Isn't it the case that many of the things you wrote down on a scrap of paper, and confessed to God, caused something inside of you to regularly die? There is a deadness inside many of us in terms of our relationship with God and our confidence with God.

We certainly see the ripple effect of all of these things in the next generation. It is the case, all of us know it is the case as parents, that what we are and what we do affects our children. If you aren't a parent, at one point you were a child. And what your parents did absolutely had a ripple effect in your life. I don't know about you, but as a parent, that sends a shudder through me whenever I contemplate that my attitudes, activities, my neglect, who I am and what I do, my words, what I say around the dinner table, how I relate to my wife – all of this stuff impacts my children. The hopeful thing, of course, what I try to hang onto is that the stuff that I do right – the love that I do show, the counsel that I do give, the positive stuff, the many words, the many prayers, all the good stuff gets sown in. I also try to hang onto the truth that God goes beyond anything that I can do or haven't done.

But one of the ripple effects of sin, one of the unintended consequences of sin is that it affects our children. In the story that we are going to read today, we read of the continuing rippling effects of Adam and Eve's sin in the garden. We read some of the ripple effect last week – the spread of sin to another person, the shame that sin causes us, the hiding from each other and from God, the masks we put on, the avoidance, spiritual death. But now the ripple goes further – beyond Adam and Eve – and it affects their children.

Today we are going to read of life outside the Garden of Eden. What life is like outside of paradise. One of the things we are going to note over and over again is that life outside of paradise is often unfair. I have called today's talk, "When Life is Unfair." Let's pray.

*Genesis 4:1-7 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." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Able kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry and his face was downcast. 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."*

What we encounter in Genesis 4 is what life is like outside of paradise. We discover as we read in Genesis 4 that life outside of the garden, life outside of paradise, is not all bad. Life in this world is not life in hell. There are blessings that still remain from God outside of paradise. The blessings of marriage and

having children are in verse 1 – *Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.”* Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. There is the blessing of marriage and of family.

There is the blessing of music in verse 21: *His brother’s name was Jubal; he was the father of all who play the harp and flute.* We see the birth of music. We see the blessing of technology in verse 22, *Zillah also had a son Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron.*

Even outside of the garden and outside of paradise, God in his kindness gives what theologians call “common grace.” Common grace – goodness to all of his creatures. Not because everyone loves him; not because everyone acknowledges him; not because everyone prays to the Lord, but just because God is good. Common grace. The grace of community and family life. The grace of government. The grace of technology, medicine, music and the arts and creativity.

But outside of paradise we also see anger and bitterness in Verse 5: *So Cain was very angry and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said, “Why are you angry?”* Outside of paradise we see sibling rivalry and murder. 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.* We find punishment and vengeance, unforgiveness, polygamy. Verse 19, *Lamech married two women, one named Adah and the other Zillah.*

And in the story that we are going to read, we find outside of paradise there is unfairness. Life is unfair outside of paradise. There is favoritism by parents. There seems to be unequal treatment by God. At the time of this particular story of Adam and Eve there are more, by the way, than four people on the face of the earth. We know that’s the case because in verse 13, after Cain killed his brother Abel, he 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 earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.*

Well, who was going to kill him? Certainly not his parents. There apparently are many more people on the face of the earth. We know there must have been more since Cain in verse 17 has a wife. It appears that Adam and Eve had many, many children and they had children and they had children. The people fulfilled the command of God to be fruitful and multiply. I assume they were not like people today who have one child or two children. But you have dozens of people who are having dozens of children and they live for a long time.

But the focus is not on everyone else in the world who was alive in that day. The focus is upon two brothers – a shepherd named Abel and a farmer named Cain. Verse 2, *Now Abel kept flocks and Cain worked the soil.*

Cain and Abel had the same parents and both of them came before God with an offering, a sacrifice, of the fruit of their profession. As a farmer Cain gave the Lord some of the fruit of his soil. It says, *In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord.* And as a shepherd Abel brings, it says in verse 4, *The fat portions of some of the firstborn of his flock.* It was a way of returning to God some of what God had given them. These two men, brothers, were coming before God and acknowledging that God was the One who made their crops grow and God was the One who multiplied their flocks.

That's what you are doing, by the way, when you tithe or fulfill your building pledge to this church or to another church. What you are saying is "God, I acknowledge that you are the one who gave me my job. You are the one who gave me my income. So here is some of the fruit of my labor. I am not a farmer. I just don't gather crops and offer them to the Lord. I am not a shepherd. I don't have a bunch of goats or sheep. But I do get a paycheck. And so, Lord, as an act of worship, just like Cain and Abel way back in the beginning of time, I want to give you some of what you have given me back. Here is part of the way I say 'thank you' to you, God. I say thank you with my words." And you are saying thank you to God whenever you tithe or give to a church. You are acknowledging that all that you have has been given to you by the Lord and you are dependent upon Him.

But the crucial statement of this whole text, the crux of the matter, is found in verses 4-5 where we read, *The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.* The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. For 2000+ years, since before the time of Jesus, people have speculated on the reason for the difference in God's treatment of Abel and his treatment of Cain.

What accounts for the difference? This seeming unfairness? Why did one brother experience favor and blessing and God's smile, and the other brother experience failure and rejection and God's frown? You can go back to before the time of Christ and find Jewish writers and scholars speculating on the reason for the difference in God's treatment and, at least apparent, unfairness. How he related to Abel and how he related to Cain.

Was it perhaps something about the type of offering given? The nature of the offering? Some people will argue that the difference in God's favor or non favor had to do with the fact that Abel was offering up to God a blood sacrifice. It was the sacrifice that involved the death of an animal. Whereas Cain just sacrificed fruit. Folks will point to many other texts in the Bible that say that sin can only be paid for by the shedding of blood. The Bible does have a very consistent message, friend. That the penalty for our sin, our disobedience to God, our wrong choices, all the stuff that many of you wrote down and put up on the altar

last week when I invited folks to come forward, the penalty for those thousands and thousands of sins that were acknowledged is death. Either our own death or the death of a substitute that stands in our place.

That's what the Bible teaches. That the person who sins must die. But God in grace will often allow a substitute to die in the sinner's place. Leviticus 17:11 states the principle of how a sinner can be accepted by God. Leviticus 17: 11 says, *It's the blood that makes atonement*. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

This is absolutely true not just in the OT bloody tradition of offering up sheep and goats, but it is true in the NT regarding our own salvation. The NT clearly teaches if you want to be accepted by God you can't come before Him based on your sincerity. You can't say to God, "Well, God, please forgive me. I really, really mean it this time. I am really, really sorry. I am so sincere. Please accept me. Please forgive me based on my sincerity." You don't gain acceptance before God by carrying a sacrifice of your sincerity to him.

Nor can you simply say to God, *God, please forgive me. I promise to do better next time. I vow to never do that thing again. I will work hard and I will try to change*. You don't gain acceptance with God by carrying in a sacrifice of your intention to do better.

You don't bring before God a sacrifice of your will to try harder. If you don't carry into God's presence the crucified body of His son, Jesus Christ, if you don't carry into God's presence the blood of Jesus and say, "Father, it is because of your son's blood that I ask your forgiveness and I ask you to accept me," there is no forgiveness and no acceptance. If Christ and Christ crucified is not your entire hope, if Christ and Christ crucified is not the ground of your confidence, if Christ and Christ crucified is not the basis upon which you are praying for forgiveness, then there is no forgiveness and there is no acceptance.

This is what the entire Bible teaches. However, the OT here is not saying that Cain and Abel were seeking forgiveness from God by their offerings. In OT terms the text does not say that they were bringing before God sin offerings to gain acceptance and forgiveness from God. The text doesn't say here that the difference between God's treatment of one and the other was that Abel brought a bloody sacrifice and Cain just brought fruit. It is probable in OT terms that they were offering up thank offerings and not sin offerings. They just wanted to say thank you to God for how kind You have been to me. I want to give You back some of what You have given me. I want to acknowledge You as the giver.

The reason for the difference of treatment was not the nature of the offering. There is nothing in the text to suggest it was. They both gave the fruit of their profession.

Well, perhaps it was the quality of the offering. Maybe Abel gave his best and Cain just gave some of the leftovers. There may be some hint of that in verses 3-4, *In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flocks.* The fat portion in the ancient Near-Eastern world was considered the most valuable part of an animal. And the firstborn was considered to be the best. Maybe it was the quality of the offering. Abel gave God his best. Cain, perhaps, gathered up whatever was handy. Some fruit that had fallen on the ground, bruised vegetables, old grain, rotten grapes – whatever he could grab.

The Bible does teach there is a difference to God whether you give Him your best or you give God your leftovers. In the book of Malachi, the prophetic OT book that is the last book of the OT, Malachi rebukes the people for not honoring the Lord by giving Him their best offering and just giving Him their leftovers. What about you? In your basic orientation and treatment of God, would you say that you regularly give God your best? Or would you say that it would be more true that you regularly give God whatever you have leftover – whatever you can scrounge up at the moment?

I think about this when it comes to our time. Do you give the Lord the fat portion of the firstborn of your time? Before we read the newspaper or get out our daily planner or race off to work or school, because, after all, the most important thing is to get good grades in school, or to get another task done at work. Do we say to God, “No. Before anything else in my life, my relationship with you is most important. You are not just first in my life, Lord, and Lord of my life theoretically, but You are Lord of my life and first in my life practically because I give You my best moments and my best time to kneel down before You and acknowledge You as Lord of my family and Lord of my life. And I give You my best time when I am most alert to open Your Word and to hear what You want to say to me and my home.”? That could be at the beginning of the day; that might be your best time. Or the end of the day might be your best time. Or your lunch hour might be your best time. But does God get your best?

Or does God get your leftovers? **If** you have time after you shop. **If** you have time after you watch this show or after you read an email or after you pay the bills. **If** you have time after you do laundry or after I exercise – *then* if there is any time left I will shoot one up. Maybe in the car on the way to work I will just shoot one up.

And I think of the issues of leftovers when I think about our tithes and our building pledges. Do you open up your wallet and see what you want to grab out of there as the basket goes around or do you plan to give some of the firstborn, some of the first fruits, right off the top of your paycheck? Only God and your own conscience and heart can answer whether you give God your best or your leftovers. But I can tell you that I don't regularly give God my best, and there are

many times and many days in terms of devotions where the Lord gets squeezed into a little part of my life after all of my check lists of activities are done.

But even though the quality of our offering does matter to God, the Bible doesn't say that that was the reason for his favor on Abel and his lack of favor on Cain. It doesn't say Cain gathered up the bruised vegetables and the rotten fruit and Abel gave him a really valuable gift. Perhaps God looked at their hearts. Maybe it was the heart of the offeror. Abel came before God with a pure heart, a loving heart. And Cain was just fulfilling his religious obligations. Well, you know, I had better go to church, tip my hat to God. After all, it can't hurt. A little religion can't hurt. I certainly don't want God against me.

Maybe Abel's heart is just overflowing with gratitude and Cain is just going through the motions of religion. We certainly know there are lots of people who just go through the motions. They go to church week after week after week for years and talk through the service, read the bulletin through the worship, chat with their neighbors, pay their bills – just a little religion.

But maybe, let's consider the possibility, that we don't know why Abel and his sacrifice was favored and Cain and his sacrifice was not. Maybe the Bible doesn't tell us and doesn't want us to know why God made a distinction between Cain and Abel. In fact, the Hebrew of verse 4 does not read the way that the NIV says it reads. The NIV says, "But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn..." There is no "but" in the Hebrew. There is no contrast drawn by the author of Genesis. There is no distinction. The Hebrew says, "He also." It reads, "Cain brought an offering of fruit and Abel also brought an offering." The emphasis is not on the difference between the offering of Able and Cain, but on the similarity. They each brought what they had to give as a thank offering to God.

Well, if there is no difference, then why was Abel favored over Cain? And here we begin to explore one of the great mysteries of life in this world - the different treatment of people for no apparent reason. Maybe all of our speculation about the nature of the offering or even the heart of the offeror – maybe all of that is just empty speculation. Maybe we face here the very heart of the issue of the unseemingly, unfairness of life outside of paradise.

We all know people who are in basically the same situation. They pray the same kinds of prayers. They both go to the same church. They both commit the same sins. Yet one of them always seems to do well and the other always seems to do poorly. One person just on a lark invested in Microsoft in the mid-80's and they made a fortune. The other person doing research and study invests in Wang computers and that goes belly-up and he loses his shirt.

One woman gets married without much thought or premarital preparation. She is not even very much of a pray-er. She prays, but you wouldn't say what's notable



about the woman is that she is a prayer warrior. She is not particularly spiritual or notable in her spirituality, yet she ends up having a great marriage. Her husband is a physician and makes a ton of money. He is real responsible. He loves her and the kids. They go on fantastic vacations. Everything in her life just goes along swimmingly.

And then there is another woman, who you might characterize as a prayer warrior. She prays and prays. She is other-centered. She is mature. She is bright and attractive. She is funny. She would make someone a great wife. If guys had half a brain they would marry her in an instant. And yet, she never seems to meet anyone and she is involuntarily single. Or she marries after years of prayer and her husband ends up having an affair or he turns out to be an addict or he just moves from job to job and he never seems to be able to hold a job consistently and there are always financial problems.

Here we face one of the central mysteries of life. Why do some people seem to do so well with so little effort and others of us have such a hard way to go?

Two mothers have babies. They both are excited. They both are Christians. They both go to church. They both want the very best for their kids. One mom has a daughter who is healthy, who is hardly ever sick. She has a temperament that is absolutely winning. She is popular all through school. She is a great student. There just seems to be favor on this girl's life.

The other mom has a son who has terrible asthma from birth. And this boy has dozens of medical crises. His parents know all of the nurses and doctors and ER workers on a first name basis at their local hospital. To top it off, the son has a learning disability and he always struggles in school. Even when they get the asthma under control, there is continual testing and teacher conferences and they move him from school to school trying to do the best for their son. But mom's heart is broken because her son grows up with a sense of failure or inadequacy, a sense of inferiority. It seems like failure is the banner, the headline, that is written over this boy's life. And as someone who feels inadequate and inferior, he drifts into that pool of people the other classmates call "losers." He is part of the group in school that are losers. He drifts into that group of young men and women who give up trying and who accept failure and who smoke pot.

Do you understand what I am driving at? The unfairness? Why is it that some kids get to be born in the United States with great medical care and suburban houses and pianos and computers, while other kids get born in Bangladesh where even the little bit they have gets swept away by some monsoon?

One of the central mysteries of life, which has been talked about all week long, is the unfairness of it. An unfairness that doesn't seem to be the result of what we do or who we are. Some people just seem to have life handed to them on a

silver platter and others just don't. It is here we confront the biblical teaching of God's freedom and God's grace.

See, the problem that we have is not just that life is unfair, but it is compounded by the fact that God doesn't do what we want Him to do about the unfairness. We don't like the fact that God freely gives as He chooses. We don't like what the writer of Psalms teaches in Psalms 115:3, *Our God is in heaven. He does whatever he pleases.*

Do you know, friends, one of the main differences between the idols of the nations in the OT and the Lord, the God of Israel? One of the main differences is that people control what idols do and no one can control the Lord. You carry your idol in. If you have an idol, you put it on a stand or you put it in a corner and you set up an altar in front of your idol. Idols are things we have control over, at least to some degree. The stuff that thousands of you wrote and brought up here, many of the things are idols that you were confessing to God. They were things you have a measure of control over. Things like our jobs, our workaholicism, our money, our relationships, our shopping, our spending, alcoholism and cigarettes and drugs and sex. Idols are things that you can to some degree manipulate to give you the pleasure you want in the moment, or the comfort you want in the moment or the escape or release that you seek.

The thing that distinguishes the Lord from all the idols on the earth is His utter freedom from our control. Psalm 115:3, *But our God is in heaven. He does whatever he pleases.* The true Lord of the heavens and the earth is the One who is free. We can't make God dance to our tune. We can't turn the table on God so that He marches to our drumbeats. We can't pull the strings on God and make Him move like a puppet or marionette.

The freedom of God is taught everywhere in the Bible. The story of Job is the story of a man who struggled to accept God's freedom to do what God pleased in the face of the seeming unfairness of all of it.

Psalm 73 is all about a man who struggles with God handing out His favor in what looks to the author, at least, as an unfair kind of distribution of benefits. And Jesus tells us a story. Listen, Jesus tells a story of a landowner in Matthew 20. It is the story of a landowner who pays workers who work for an hour the same as he paid workers who work all day. And when the people who work all day come before him and complain and say, "It's not fair," Jesus gives the punch line of the story in Matt. 20:14. He says, *Take your pay and go, the landowner says. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. [here's the punch line] Don't I have the right to do what I want to do with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?*

Don't I have the right to do what I want to do? Am I not free says the Lord? The freedom of God is extremely frustrating to you and me, isn't it? We want to be

able to do something, we want to be able to pray something, to scream something to make God do what we want Him to do when we want Him to do it, how we want Him to do it. Just do this one thing, God, and I will never ask You for anything else again. Just do this one thing. This one healing. This one salvation. This one change in our nation.

God's freedom, of course, teaches us about our limits. This experience of unfairness puts us in our place. It tells us that God is the creator and we are the creature. We don't get to call the tune for God to dance. He calls out the tune for us. We have to march to the beat of His drum. The freedom of God teaches us our limits. He is all wise, all knowing. The freedom of God teaches us that life is about grace, grace that is unearned and unmerited, unconditioned. If grace was ever earned or merited, if it was based on us, it would not be sheer grace.

I need to quickly add a parentheses here. God is not arbitrary. He is not capricious. He doesn't play duck duck goose with the world. But you and I will never be able to plumb the depth of the mystery of God's liberty. We trust in His generosity, we trust in His goodness, but we don't know why favor here and not favor there.

We do know, however, that our experience of unfairness makes us mad. And one of the things that aggravates our experience of unfairness is our sense of entitlement to more. One of the things that Satan, our enemy, uses to rub our feelings of unfairness is to whisper in your ear, "You were owed more. You were entitled. You deserved better treatment. You got the short end of the stick." And I think this is going on in Cain's life. In fact, I think there is a little bit of Cain, angry, bitter, you-owe-me-God-Cain, inside of each of us.

One of the very helpful insights regarding Cain's reaction was suggested by one of my favorite preachers, Helmut Thielecke. He says one of the keys to understanding this text is to look at the two names of these two brothers. Names in the Bible were very significant. They weren't just tags or labels. "I just like the name Colby or Blythe or Winfield." Names in the Bible weren't just labels, they were used to tell us something about the nature of the people and their destinies. The name Cain means "I have gotten a man." Verse 1, *Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man."* I have gotten a man. That's what Cain means. According to his mother's intended destiny, he is to be the embodiment of strength and power and importance. Cain – here is a real man's man; a man in all of his swaggering and all of his pride and self-importance.

On the other hand, Abel means "nothingness." It means frailty. Abel is a nothing. Abel's destiny was to live in the shadow of Cain. Outside of paradise, parents often do play favorites. One child is the family hero, the sibling who can do no wrong – the Cain – the one who lives in the limelight. The other is Abel – the child who can do nothing right, the family scapegoat.

Cain grows up in a world like many firstborns in which he believes that the lion's share of life rightfully ought to be given to him. Of course I should have the best. Of course I should have the most. Of course I should have the biggest. I am the firstborn. This is what I was born for. It's not one for me and one for you, my brother or my sister. It is ten for me and maybe one-half for you.

Have you ever met someone like that? Someone who just expects privilege and position? Of course I should have the starring role in every play. Of course I should have the top billing in everything. Of course I should be the center of attention. Do you know anyone like that? Someone who always grabs the limelight? Someone who believes they are born to win? If you do okay, that's fine, as long as I end up on top. You give a gift, they have to give a bigger gift. If they don't give a bigger gift, they didn't know the rules for this kind of party. If I had known you were going to give something like that, obviously I would have given a bigger gift.

The Cain within us. The thing that expects life to go well for us. Of course, I am entitled. The world does owe me a living.

And so when Cain goes to the altar with his sacrifice, he expects God to confirm what life and his parents have handed him. Of course, before God I will get the same treatment I got from mother and father and everyone else. Of course God will be on my side because after all I do have the biggest office and the better job and the most prestigious title. Since everyone else thinks I am great, I must be great before God.

You can imagine the shock, the horror, the upset when God doesn't give Cain the favor he is used to. It says, *Cain was very angry and his face was downcast*. God, you can't treat me that way. I prayed and did everything you told me to do in your Bible. I put my penny in the slot and the gumball still didn't come out. Stupid machine, unfair rules, unfair system.

Here's the question: when you experience unfairness at work, in your relationships, with your boyfriend or girlfriend, with your ex-spouse, with your kids – when you experience unfairness, where life shakes out against you in the courtroom, in the political process, is it okay to be angry with God? Are you allowed to hold in your heart or confess with your mouth anger and rage at God? Some people have a grin-and-bear-it attitude when life shakes out unfairly for them. There is total denial. No, no, I always live on the mountaintop. Everything is always just great with me and great with my family and great at work. We aren't allowed to say, according to some people, that we hurt, that we have doubts and questions, that we struggle and we can't figure it out and that we are frustrated. We aren't allowed to say any of that and we just grin and bear it.

On the other hand, many counselors will tell you to tell God that you are angry. Vent your upset and your rage at God. It is okay to be angry with God. Don't hide it. Be real. Be transparent. God can handle you yelling at Him. He is, after all, a big boy. Counselors will try to bring their clients to the place of screaming at the Lord. It is this cathartic experience and afterwards the person feels better. They have gotten it all out. But is that right? Is that biblical? Can you rage at God? Can you let Him have it? Can you as a Christian be angry about the way God treated you?

There is a Bible teacher named Kay Arthur who cut to the chase when she said, "You get angry with God because God didn't do what you thought He should do, the way you thought He should do it, or when you thought He should do it."

We don't like what God did. We don't like when He did it. We don't like how he did it. When we get angry with God, basically we are saying to God, "God, You were wrong in the way You treated me or the way You treated this other person. You were wrong. You blew it. I can't accept what You did. I can't accept how You did it. I can't accept your timing. You, in this instance, did not do good. You betrayed me. You were unfaithful. You were unfeeling. You were passive. You had bad motives. You owe me, I am entitled."

Cain was angry with God. Was his anger okay? Unfair treatment. Was his anger okay?

God didn't think so. Verse 6, *The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do right will you not be accepted, but if you don't do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.* He wanted God to show him favor, to accept his sacrifice on his terms. When God chose not to, Cain got angry. And it was anger that resulted in murder. God said sin was seeking an opportunity.

We get angry with God when we say, "I don't see a reason for this illness, for this miscarriage, for this death, for this trial." And then we go further and in our confusion we accuse God of being thoughtless or arbitrary or a tyrant. Nowhere in the Bible do we see God approving of or even accommodating anger towards Himself, whether we are talking about the prophet Jonah, "do you do right to be angry" or regarding Job or David, who was angry with the Lord in 2 Samuel 6.

There is a pastor named Robert Jones, who pointed me to a biblical answer, a way through with God when life is unfair. We never ever accuse God of wrong. We never ever rage at God and suggest to Him that He doesn't know what He is doing. But neither do we stuff our doubts or stuff our struggles or silently bite our lips and suck it up. Pastor Robert Jones said the biblical model for dealing with life's unfairness is the "holy lament." Believers throughout the Bible struggled to reconcile God's promises and what we know of God with what life hands us. Believers constantly deal with the same issues in every age.

"God, I don't get it. This seems inconsistent with me. How do I square Your control and Your goodness with this rape?"

"Or this miscarriage?"

"You promised God, in the Bible, to answer the prayers of Your people. And yet my sister still died."

"You promised to provide and not withhold anything good, and yet I am still involuntarily single."

"You promised to watch over me, to protect me, I am one of your children and yet I still had the door slammed in my face because of discrimination."

Now what the people of God do in the Bible with the seeming inconsistency, the feeling of contradiction of what we read of God, what we know of God and what we experience in life, what they do with all of that is they express a lament. There is a book in the Bible called Lamentations. It is a book of lament. The Psalms are often psalms of lament. You see that in Psalm 13, if you are taking notes. Psalm 73 is a holy lament.

The difference between anger and raging at God and a lament is anger drives you away from God. It is an expression of a lack of trust, a lack of willingness to submit to God's dealing. It is saying to God, "God, I think You are wrong. You were wrong here and You were unfair here." In anger we turn our backs on God. We say, "God, I just don't want to deal with You anymore. You blew it."

In a lament, we move toward God. In a lament we pour out our complaints. We say, "Father, it is precisely because I know that You are loving, because I know that You are powerful, because I know that You are good, because I read Your promises, that I struggle with Your absence when I was growing up. I struggle with Your seeming absence when I went through that particular trauma when You didn't answer that prayer." One of the things that could be so helpful for you, for someone that you care for, is to take one of the Psalms that is a holy lament and compose in writing your own lament before the Lord.

I want to finish with Psalm 73. The psalmist writes:

*Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.*

Down to verse 11: *They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge? This is what the wicked are like – always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning. If I said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed this generation*

*of your children. When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.*

When I come before the Lord I think of a man who was the victim of a homosexual rape when he was a child. And as a result he has struggled for a good deal of his life with all kinds of problems and attractions and things inside of him that he doesn't want. And so in a holy lament, using Psalm 73 as a model, he says, "Surely God is good to Christians. To those who love Him, but as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. Lord, it seemed to me that Jim has gotten off scott free. The man who raped me is still teaching. In fact, now he is a school principal. He has never been caught. He has never been punished."

In a holy lament, we say to God, "God, where were You when this happened to me? I know You saw it. How did You feel when I was abused? How will You respond? Where is Your grace in this? Where is Your justice in all of this unfairness? How should I respond?"

We pour out our complaint. We pour out our lament. And God often leads us to an answer. What's going to happen to that abuser? In verse 16, *When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors.*

You ask Me where is My justice? My child, you are going to see it displayed on the day when I judge that molester and I judge all who harm little children.

We say, "Father, my ex is still doing the things he always did. He is still dragging me to court. The courts are still supporting them. There is no penalty. There is no price. They always seem to get off scott free. I wonder if it makes a difference that I serve you?"

God answers. "People won't always escape. There is a day when people will fall into My hands and we will see justice. You ask Me how I felt when you were abused, when you were molested? As your father, My heart broke. I grieved and wept for you. What will I do for you? I will redeem you. I will rescue you. I will freely love you. I will use even this wicked thing to give you gifts of compassion."

Do you see the difference between Cain's response to what seemed to him to be unfair and the Psalmist's response? Cain's face fell and he turned away from God and decided he was going to take matters into his own hands. The psalmist was tempted. He said, "As for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold." The psalmist who prays the holy lament is tempted to take matters into his own hands. He is tempted to do certain things to sin against God. But he

is resolved in his heart, and you need to resolve when life is unfair to you, you need to resolve there are certain things I will never do under any circumstance. I will never walk away from my marriage. I will never have an affair. There are certain nevers in your life. I will never walk away from God.

The psalmist prays a holy lament to the Lord. He puts his life and the unfairness of life into the hands of God and instead of sinning, he chooses to worship God. *As for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the sovereign God my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.*

Friends, you can choose to worship God no matter what. You can choose in any situation to lift your hands up to God and worship Him saying to Him, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but You are the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

Friends, I don't know what is going to happen to this country. I honestly believe that God is exposing the heart of America not only to ourselves, but to the whole world. This is the character of the United States. This is the character of your leaders. Only God could have orchestrated all of this. And so as a country and as individuals, we are faced with a choice. In all of our experience of unfairness, to act like Cain to become angry and bitter and try to murder our brothers, or to come before God with a psalm of holy lament and trust ourselves and our nation to Him.

Let's pray.

**When Life is Unfair**  
**Rich Nathan**  
**November 11-12, 2000**  
**Roots: A Study in the Book of Genesis**  
**Genesis 4:1-7**

I. Explanations of Unfairness

A. Was It the Nature of the Offering?



B. Was It the Quality of the Offering?

C. Was It the Heart of the Offeror?

1. The Unfairness of Life

2. The Freedom of God (Ps. 115:3)

II. Reactions to Unfairness

A. Entitlement with God

B. Anger at God

C. Lament to God (Ps. 73)