

THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF SIN

Genesis 4, Hebrews 11.4

As biblical history progresses, we see the devastating impact of sin on humans. Genesis 4 features the first recorded murder, a fratricide.

The narrative centers on a conflict over sacrifice, a way of connecting with God now that true communion was lost (Genesis 3.20-24).

Abel had an acceptable posture of worship

Why does God accept Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's? God sets the terms about how He is to be worshipped. Abel gave the "firstborn of his flock and their fat portions" (Genesis 4.4). This meant that after Abel worked hard, he made a meaningful sacrifice.

Abel did this out of faith (Hebrews 11.4). His faith still speaks to believers throughout the generations. God says we are to come to Him by faith. We are to trust God with our lives.

What was wrong with Cain's sacrifice? Cain knowingly gave God something less than his best. More importantly, Cain came by way of something other than faith. If we do not come by faith, we come by our own merits. In this sense, Cain represents the first false religion coming to God with our works. Centuries later, Jude would describe the godless as following "the way of Cain" (Jude 11).

Coming to God by faith is a matter of the heart.

Sin is a power that seeks to destroy us

There are many false ideas about the problems in the world. Hannah Arendt famously coined the phrase "the banality of evil", meaning that horrible things can be done by normal people who get swept into systems with orders. Others aver that all problems are caused by man-made inequalities in institutions.

Scripture shows sin as an external force that overtakes all goodness. While sin leads to "mistakes", it is better understood as a power that destroys (Genesis 4.7).

Cain lies to God. When God asked Cain where Abel was, he replies "I do not know" (Genesis 4.9). Lying to God has a long progeny. We can fool other people, but we can never fool God.

The word "brother" is used many times in this record. Cain asks rhetorically, "Am I my brother's keeper"? Cain thinks the answer to this is an obvious "no". God says the answer to this is "yes" (Cf. Luke 10.25-37).

Cain, in his self-righteousness, fails to be others minded.

“For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous” (1 John 3.11-12).

Cain’s life is marked by force, deception, wandering, and fear. He blames God for his problems (Genesis 4.14).

A Christ follower is engaged in an ongoing struggle against sin (Romans 8.13).

God responds graciously to sinners

God gives Cain many opportunities to repent. He calls Cain to abandon his anger and to lift-up his face (Genesis 4.6).

As was the case in Genesis 3.9, God’s question to Cain invites a chance to repent (Genesis 4.9).

He protects Cain by marking him (Genesis 4.15). He promises to enact justice on those who would take Cain’s life. Here we see the principle that ultimate justice belongs to God (Genesis 18.25).

God gives Eve another son, Seth (Genesis 4.25).

While we like to think of ourselves as Abel, we are often like Cain, relying on our own efforts and bringing our leftovers to God. This points to our need of a Savior, the Lord Jesus. As Abel’s blood spoke, so also does the blood of Jesus speak to those who trust in His provision (Hebrews 12.24).

Key Idea: The church must have clarity on the doctrine of sin.

Application Questions:

What distinguishes the mindset of Abel from that of Cain? Why is this so serious?

What does this passage teach us about the nature of sin? Why does the church need a robust doctrine of sin?

How does God show grace and mercy to the world’s first murderer?