BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in The Book of Genesis: People Relating to God

Lesson Two

Cain and Abel: Who Cares?

Focal Text
Genesis 4:1-16

Background
Genesis 4

Main Idea
People who wish to have a right relationship with God must also have a caring relationship with other people.

Question to Explore
In what ways are we causing to harm to our fellow human beings rather than extending care to them?

Quick Read
The way we treat others indicates our true relationship with God.

Commentary
The story is told of a man who stopped attending his church’s worship services. After a few weeks, his pastor came to see him. He found the man at home alone, sitting in front of a roaring fire. The man welcomed his pastor into his home and led him to a second chair before the fireplace. The pastor sat, but said nothing. The two stared into the fire for a long while.
Then the pastor rose from his chair, took fire tongs, and picked up a burning coal from the fire. He placed it to the side of the hearth and then returned to his chair. The ember’s flame diminished until it finally went out. The coal turned black and cold. The pastor again rose from his chair and used the tongs to replace the ember in the fire. It burst forth immediately in a bright blaze.

As the pastor turned to leave, his host said, “Thank you for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I will be back in worship next Sunday.”

There are no solos in the Book of Revelation. Every image of the church in the New Testament is collective—a body with many branches or body with many members. How we love the children of God reveals our true love for their Father. You cannot say that you love me and hurt my sons.

The two Great Commandments are to love God and to love our neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40). The vertical and horizontal are intimately connected. This week we will learn that we must be in a right relationship with each other to be in a right relationship with God.

Jesus taught us, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24). Before you can worship God this Sunday, is there someone with whom you need to be reconciled this week?

**How should we read our text?**

We all know that Eve ate the apple in the Garden of Eden, so that the Fall is entirely her fault. Except that Genesis nowhere states that the forbidden fruit was an apple. In fact, unless climatic conditions were much different then in that region, apples would likely not have grown in the area. And Adam was with Eve in the Garden, and ate the fruit as well. What else do we know that we don’t? How should we read the stories that form the text of these lessons in Genesis?

*Were they symbols?*

Some people, anxious to bridge the perceived chasm between science and faith, are quick to suggest that Adam and Eve were not real people at all. Perhaps they were mythical figures, symbols for humanity in general, we’re told. When Robert Frost wrote of two roads diverging in “a yellow wood,”1 I don’t need to know where the wood is located, because I understand that he’s using poetic language. Some suggest that the same is true with the first humans.
The Hebrew word *adam* simply means *man*. Nowhere does Genesis say that God or anyone else gave him the proper name *Adam*; you can translate the Hebrew as *man* everywhere *Adam* appears and be correct. The New International Version follows most translations in rendering Genesis 2:20, “for Adam no suitable helper was found.” But there’s no change in the Hebrew from earlier references to him as “the man” (see Genesis 1:27; 2:7, 15, 18).

Similarly, “Eve” doesn’t make her appearance by name in the NIV until Genesis 3:20; previously she is “woman” (see 2:22, 23). Her name probably means *living*, pointing to her status as the first mother of humanity. So perhaps “Adam” and “Eve” are symbols for *man* and life, some say.

This wouldn’t be the last time Scripture uses symbolic language to make its point. Jesus called himself the “true vine” and his Father the “gardener” (John 15:1), but no one thinks he was describing botanical truth. Earlier, when Jesus described himself as “the gate for the sheep” (John 10:7), his disciples knew he was not speaking as a carpenter.

Could it be that the writer of Genesis used *man* and *life* to make larger symbolic statements about humanity? Perhaps their temptation narrative is meant to describe such experience as we all face it. Perhaps this week’s study of Cain and Abel is meant to be understood as an archetype for human pride and relational sin. In this view, the later narratives that describe the Noah’s flood (Gen. 6—9) and the tower of Babel (Gen. 11), also troubling to some who wish to reconcile Genesis with current scientific knowledge, are equally symbolic in nature.

*How does the rest of the Bible see them?*

The first question to ask in interpreting any piece of literature is to ask what its author intended to say. If the text is clearly poetic or symbolic in nature, we can know that the writer wants us to avoid literalistic interpretation. If the text is clearly historical and narrative in nature, giving places and dates and events, we can know that the writer wants us to treat the literature as factual rather than symbolic.

There is poetry to be found in the Genesis records of Adam and Eve. Note the man’s ecstatic reaction to the creation of woman (2:23), and God’s condemnation of the snake’s deception and the couple’s sin (3:14-19). But the rest of the text is written in straightforward, historical narrative. Nothing here causes us to believe that the writer intended us to view his writing as mythical or symbolic.

Now let’s consider how Adam is regarded in the New Testament. In Romans 5, Paul wishes to explain how sin entered the human race. He begins: “sin entered the world through the one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all have sinned” (Romans 5:12). As a result, “death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses” (Rom. 5:14). Then he compared the “trespass of the one
man” to the life given “through the one man, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17). Clearly Paul treated Adam and his sin as factual events in history.

In 1 Corinthians Paul expanded the argument: “since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:21-22). He treated Christ and Adam in equivalent ways—either they are both historical figures, or neither is. Later the Apostle reminded Timothy, “Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Timothy 2:13).

It seems clear that Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, considered Adam and Eve to be real figures of history. For that reason, I see them the same way.

Why does our question matter? For two reasons.

First, we should interpret Scripture as it interprets itself. If Paul saw Adam and Eve as historical, his inspired opinion should guide mine. We are not free to treat the Bible as a work of modern art, projecting our own thoughts onto its canvas. Those who believe that Adam and Eve were symbols should give us biblical reasons for their position.

Second, we should interpret science through Scripture, not the reverse. Current opinion regarding the age and origin of man must not determine how we read the Bible.

Here’s one more reason I think Adam was real: I see him in me. I have his eyes for forbidden fruit, his ability to blame others for my sins. Does he live in your mirror as well?

**Give God your best (4:1-5)**

Our text begins: “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’” (Gen. 4:1). “Cain” means *a thing gained*—in this case, from God.

Eve’s response can be interpreted as gratitude for God’s grace in providing her a child despite her sin (the NIV rendering). However, it can also be rendered something like, *I have created a man equally with God*, perhaps a boastful sentiment. Her later statement regarding Seth, “God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him” (4:25), is not so ambiguous; there she clearly indicates that God gave this child by his initiative and grace. Perhaps this was her spirit in the birth of her first sons; or perhaps she came to repentance and humility after one killed the other.

After Cain was born, “later she gave birth to his brother Abel” (4:2a). “Abel” means *breath*, perhaps a reference to the *breath of life* by which all life is created and animated.
(see 2:7: “the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being”).

The narrative quickly fast-forwards to their lives as adults: “Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil” (4:2b). As God “made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them” (3:21), presumably from sheep. Abel now “kept flocks” of such sheep. Meanwhile, his brother “worked the soil,” reminding us of the “painful toil” and “sweat of your brow” by which man would bring food from the ground as a result of the Fall (3:17-19). In seeking motives for Cain’s future sin against God and his brother, it is possible to link Abel’s livelihood with God’s sacrificial action, while connecting Cain’s work with man’s curse as a result of his sin. However, it is likely that such parallels go further than the text intends.

From the beginning of human history, worship was common to our nature, while sacrifice was common to worship: “In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD” (4:3). Abel joined him: “But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock” (4:4a). Nowhere does the text suggest that God demanded such offerings; they were the natural response of these brothers to him.

With this result: “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” (4:4b-5). What was the difference between the two?

Interpreters often point to the distinction between Abel’s blood offering and Cain’s offering of grain, the former more costly (certainly to the animal sacrificed). Hebrews 9:22 tells us that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” However, this statement refers to the covenant Moses ratified with the people and is not a rejection of all other offerings. Grain offerings are common in Scripture, and as valid as blood offerings (see Leviticus 2).

The Hebrew speaks of both brothers’ gifts as “offerings” (minhah), not sacrifices (zebah). Both were firstfruits, as required later by God:

> When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, take some of the firstfruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name and say to the priest in office at the time, “I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us.” The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God (Deuteronomy 26:1-4).
There is nothing in the text to suggest that offerings from flocks rather than harvest were inherently more acceptable to God. Hebrews 11:4 is usually cited in this connection: "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead." But this text, while calling Abel’s offering “a better sacrifice” than Cain’s, doesn’t explain why it was so.

The difference was not what they gave but why they gave it. Hebrews calls Abel “a righteous man.” By contrast, God told Cain, “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?” (Gen. 4:7), indicating that what he gave was not “right.” The point of the text is not Cain’s offering, but his heart, as subsequent events will tragically show.

God calls us to bring him our offerings and sacrifices in a spirit of love for God and justice for others:

I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
    I cannot stand your assemblies.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
    I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
    I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
    I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,

With what shall I come before the LORD
    and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
    with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
    with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
    the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He has showed you, O man, what is good.
    And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
    and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:6-8).

God sees our hearts, the attitudes and motives behind our service for him: “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). Our internal condition matters more.
to God than our external actions: “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

Why will you teach your class this Sunday? Why do you give the Lord your finances and service? Actions cannot compensate for attitudes. God expects us to be committed and submitted to him in all things as our King.

Oswald Chambers’ life motto became the title of his classic devotional guide: “My Utmost for His Highest.”\(^2\) Does God deserve any less from us?

**Give others your best (4:6-9)**

Our Lord is omniscient. Matthew says of Jesus’ interaction with his enemies, “knowing their thoughts, Jesus said . . .” (Matt. 9:4); and also “Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them . . .” (Matt. 12:25). The psalmist testified,

> From heaven the LORD looks down  
> and sees all mankind;  
> from his dwelling place he watches  
> all who live on earth—  
> he who forms the hearts of all,  

Here is the first of many times that God had to expose the human heart: “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’” (Gen. 4:6-7). There is a significant theology of sin in this text.

First, sin breaks our relationship with God and others. Cain’s response to God’s response to his offering was to become “angry” so that his face was “downcast” in God’s presence (4:5). Rather than facing God with gratitude and joy, he sulked before him with a bitter spirit. Dwight Moody wrote in the flyleaf of a Bible he gave to a backslidden friend, “Either this book will separate you from your sins, or your sins will separate you from this book.”

Second, sin is a choice: “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted” by God (4:7)? There is no sin we must commit: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Cor. 10:13). We can always choose to refuse sin, with the help of God.
Third, sin leads to sin: “if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it” (4:7). Peter warned us that “your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). It wants to affect us, then to “have” or possess us. We must “master” or control it before it controls us.

Tragically, Cain refused God’s admonition to repentance. John used his example to warn us: “Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous” (1 John 3:12). Jude would describe men who “speak abusively against whatever they do not understand; and what things they do understand by instinct, like unreasoning animals—these are the very things that destroy them” (Jude 10). In such rebellion “they have taken the way of Cain” (Jude 11).

Cain’s sin against God soon became his sin against his brother: “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” (Gen. 4:8). Cain clearly knew that his actions were wrong, and so he sought to hide what he was doing from his parents by going “out to the field.” While Cain and Abel were “in the field,” Cain was able to attack and kill his brother. Another explanation for his retreat to the field is that he used the field implements with which he farmed, such as the hoe or rake, to murder Abel.

Although Cain fled from God’s presence and into mortal sin, God would not give up on Cain: “Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ ‘I don’t know,’ he replied. ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ (4:9). At first reading, Cain’s response to God seems flippant in the extreme. But “keeper” can convey positive sentiment as well, as the word is often used to describe a person’s care for animals or prisoners.

Cain is typically treated as a type for sinful, fallen man. Augustine alleged that “Cain was the first-born, and he belonged to the city of men; after him was born Abel, who belonged to the city of God.” But perhaps Cain’s response was more remorseful than at first it appears, a possibility we will explore in our next section.

For now, know that God calls us to give others our best, mastering sin when it tempts us to their hurt. We are called to “resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Murder is condemned by the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13); the hatred which leads to murder is condemned by Jesus (Matt. 5:21-26).

It is never easier to resist temptation than it is right now. If we do not reject the sin that rejects others, the results will be tragic: “after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (James 1:15).

Are you angry with your brother today? Or are you his “keeper”?”
Trust grace for guilt (4:10-16)

God always knows our sin, even when we have successfully hidden it from others: “The LORD said, ‘What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground’” (Gen. 4:10). Isaiah warned us:

The LORD is coming out of his dwelling
to punish the people of the earth for their sins.
The earth will disclose the blood shed upon her;
she will conceal her slain no longer (Isaiah 26:21).

When God sees sin, he must judge: “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” (Gen. 4:11-12).

This was not the last time God was forced to punish his sinful people in this way. Moses would later warn Israel:

If you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket and your kneading trough will be cursed. The fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks. You will be cursed when you come in and cursed when you go out (Deuteronomy 28:15-19).

Cain’s response revealed his heart: “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, and whoever finds me will kill me’” (Gen. 4:13-14).

Our interpretation of Cain’s reaction hinges on our understanding of “punishment” in verse 13. The Hebrew word in question (woni) can be rendered either iniquity or “punishment.” If we read it in the former sense, Cain says to God, “My iniquity is too great to forgive.” Here we see in Cain a spirit of humility and repentance. In this view, Cain’s response to God’s punishment is not a complaint that it is too severe, but a description of the just consequences for his actions.

While we cannot be dogmatic about this issue, I favor this approach to the text in light of God’s next action: “But the LORD said to him, ‘Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over.’ Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him” (4:15). If Cain had remained unrepentant about his murder of
his brother, it would not seem that God could have offered such grace. The Law, while given later, expresses the consequences of such sin:

If a man hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him, assaults and kills him, and then flees to one of these cities [of refuge], the elders of his town shall send for him, bring him back from the city, and hand him over to the avenger of blood to die. Show him no pity. You must purge from Israel the guilt of shedding innocent blood, so that it may go well with you (Deut. 19:11-13).

But if Cain was sincerely repentant, God could extend grace and mercy to him: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). One ancient rabbinic tradition taught a similar approach to our text:

He was nevertheless sincere in his repentance when he said, “Too great is my sin [A. V., “punishment”] to bear” (Gen. iv. 13). and so the mark the Lord set upon him was a token of forgiveness. Like a man who had slain another without premeditation, he was sent into exile to atone for his sin (Sanh. 37b).5

What was the “mark” of Cain that God set on him to protect him? It may have been a physical sign of divine protection, similar to this description in Ezekiel:

Then the LORD called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him, “Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it.” As I listened, he said to the others, “Follow him through the city and kill, without showing pity or compassion. Slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark. Begin at my sanctuary.” So they began with the elders who were in front of the temple (Ezekiel 9:3-6).

Or it may be that this “mark” was spiritual in presence or blessing. Cain’s next action may be connected with this divine decision: “So Cain went out from the LORD’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Gen. 4:16; “Nod” means wandering). Here he built a city he named after his son Enoch (4:17), the first such settlement described in Scripture.

However we understand God’s actions with Cain, we can know that our Lord stands ready today to forgive every sin we confess to him. What’s more, he will “hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19), for he “remembers your sins no more” (Isaiah 43:25)

Where do you need God’s grace for your guilt today?
Excursus: where did Cain get his wife?
In teaching Genesis 4, it may be that some in your class will ask the age-old question, Where did Cain get his wife? The text simply states, “Cain lay with his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch” (Gen. 4:17). No females are mentioned in the Genesis narrative to this point, except Eve. She clearly could not be her son’s “wife,” and so where did the woman come from who bore Enoch?

For that matter, where did Enoch get his wife? His great-great-grandson Lamech “married two women, one named Adah and the other Zillah” (4:19). Where did they come from? We have two options to consider. Each has an up side and a down side.

Did Cain marry his sister?
Option one: Adam and Eve bore daughters in addition to their sons, one of whom became Cain’s wife. Nowhere does Genesis say that they bore only Cain and Abel before later creating Seth (Gen. 4:25-26).

It was customary in Jewish genealogical records to list only the men, unless a woman’s name was unusually important to the story (as with Lamech’s bigamy). While this part of the Genesis record precedes Abraham and Judaism by many generations, the book was written and preserved by Jewish scholars and scribes. Thus their bias against including women in birth records would not be surprising here.

Here’s the down side: Cain married his physical sister. In this view, his descendants married their sisters or cousins as well. While such relationships would of course be problematic later, they were a necessity at this early point in human history. And so God protected mankind from the genetic problems such inbreeding can cause today. Nothing in the Genesis record makes this option impossible or even unlikely.

Did God create Cain’s wife?
Option two: God made more people after he made Adam and Eve. Either he made Cain’s wife as he made Adam’s, or he made her parents or ancestors. Nowhere does Genesis or the rest of Scripture state that God made only Adam and Eve.

In defense of this thesis, note Cain’s protest when judged by God for murdering his brother: “I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me” (Gen 4:14). In response, “The LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him” (4:15). If Cain and his parents were the only humans alive on the planet at this time, why was he so afraid of others?

Perhaps Cain’s fear indicates the existence of large numbers of other people (or, alternately, he was afraid of future consequences when humankind grew more populous).
If many people were living at the time, perhaps they were the offspring of another parental couple or couples (or, alternately, perhaps they were more of Adam and Eve’s unnamed children).

Here’s the down side: in this view, God made people besides Adam and Eve whose stories are left out of the biblical record. Where did they live after the expulsion from Eden? Did they commit their own original sin, since they were not descended from Adam? Why does the Bible nowhere mention them?

The down side of option #2 makes it unlikely to me, and so I prefer the first option. With this additional note of relevance: Jesus’ birth and life were exceptionally inclusive of all humanity. While Genesis records no women by name in the early line of human history, Jesus’ genealogy lists four notorious exceptions to this rule: Tamar the temptress, Rahab the prostitute, Ruth the foreigner, and the adulterous mother of Solomon (see Matt. 1:1-18). Women may not have been named in the creation of humanity, but they are included in the story of its redemption.

When people write the history of this generation, it is possible that no one will include your name or mine. But don’t worry—the Lord of the universe knows who you are. And his record is the only one that matters.

Conclusion

Our study has taken us from the origins of sin to its redemption. We have learned to give God and others our best, refusing the temptation to treat our Lord with perfunctory service and others with bitter hate. When we fail our Father and his children, we can return to him with sincere repentance and claim his forgiving grace. There will be consequences of our sin, to be sure, but our Father will restore any prodigal who chooses to come home to him.

Charles Spurgeon, the nineteenth-century British preacher, told of meeting a farmer whose weathervane arrow was welded atop the rotating words, “God is love.” Spurgeon was troubled and asked the man, “Do you mean to say that God’s love is as uncertain as the wind?” The farmer smiled and replied, “Not at all. I want all who see my farm to know that wherever the wind blows, God is love.”

Why is that fact good news for your soul this week?

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