

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

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Studies in Power & Purpose: God Unveils the Universe (Genesis 1-11)

Lesson Seven

God Provides a Warning and Punishes Sin

Focal Text

Genesis 4:1-16, 25-26

Background

Genesis 4

Main Idea

Sinful attitudes can lead to horrific acts.

Question to Explore

What is the result of our anger and jealousy?

Quick Read

Cain's anger and jealousy prompted him to kill his brother Abel and distance himself from God.

Introduction

The consensus is that Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein were the greatest collaboration team in Broadway history. They revolutionized the Broadway musical through their seamless storytelling, using the songs not as diversions from the story but as vehicles to move the story along. The lyricist Hammerstein wrote the words, while the composer Rodgers supplied the melody for incredibly successful musicals like *Oklahoma* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), and *The Sound of Music* (1959).

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In 1942 musical producers wanted someone to convert a Western stage play entitled *Green Grow the Lilacs* to the musical stage. Hammerstein's collaborative partner Jerome Kern declined the offer as did Rodgers' partner Lorenz Hart. Hammerstein and Rodgers decided to accept the challenge together. That is how their historic collaboration of eighteen years began.

Hammerstein declared that he would only work with Rodgers on this venture if he could write the words first. (It was customary for the music to be composed before the words.) Rodgers agreed. Hammerstein spent three weeks writing the words to a rousing reprise he called "Oklahoma," and Rodgers composed the tune for those words in ten minutes. The musical was renamed after the reprise. *Oklahoma* opened on Broadway at the St. James Theatre on March 31, 1943, and ran for an unprecedented 2,212 performances until it closed in 1948.

One of the songs in that musical is "The Farmer and the Cowman." It articulates the fierce rivalry between the farmers and the ranchers during the time of the move westward to settle new territory. This conflict was primarily over the building of fences that restricted the free-range movement of cattle, and over the competing use of limited water for animals or for irrigating crops.

Genesis 4 describes two gifts offered to God by two brothers. One was a grain offering, while the other gift came from an animal. These offerings somehow contributed to conflict between a farmer and a shepherd. This conflict had a violent, bloody ending.

Commentary

Genealogical materials open and close this chapter (Genesis 4:1-2a, 17-24, and 25-26). The heart of the chapter is the narrative story about two sons of Adam and Eve (4:2b-16). This chapter records the first story of life outside the Garden of Eden, but life outside the garden was impacted by what had happened inside the garden. This chapter reveals the further development of the sinful disobedience that occurred in the garden and changed everything.

The Birth of Cain and Abel (4:1-2)

Life outside the garden began with the first human couple experiencing the joy of childbirth. The births of two sons was the first fulfillment of the divine blessing and command of Genesis 1:28.

The Hebrew verb rendered as "lay with" (4:1) is one frequently found in the Old Testament. The core meaning of this word *yada`* is "to know." It must be said, however, that this knowledge is not essentially an intellectual activity. It is experiential, emotional, and above all else, relational. This word carries implications of involvement, interaction, loyalty, and obligation. It was used to describe the most intimate of personal relationships, including that between a husband and his wife and between a human being

and God. It was quite frequently used as a euphemism for human sexual intimacy but was never used to describe animal reproduction.

After fulfilling her destiny through pain and delivering new life, the woman is the first human in the biblical text to declare the name Yahweh. She realized she had the privilege of being a partner with God in delivering a child. She acknowledged her joy was the result of a divine-human collaboration. God had created her to be a helper for the man (Gen. 2:18, 20), and God had been her help as well.

The Hebrew word for “brought forth” (4:1) and the name “Cain” sound very similar. The verb *qanah* normally means “to buy, acquire, or purchase something.” In this book, it carries this meaning for the purchase of land (25:10; 33:19). A rare meaning for this word is “to possess something by creating it.” That is what God does as the “Creator of heaven and earth” (Gen. 14:19, 22). This sense of forming or creating is the best option for its meaning here.

Eve called her newborn son “man” (4:1, *ish*). This designation for an infant occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament. The psychologist and bestselling author, Dr. Kevin Leman, has been very helpful in teaching parents how to understand the significance of the birth order of children in terms of their psychological development. Cain was the firstborn son of Adam and Eve, but that birth position does not succeed very well in the Book of Genesis (see also Ishmael and Esau).

The first couple had another son and named him “Abel” (4:2). His name may be related to the word that conveys the idea of a briefly existing vapor or nothingness. He is marginal to the development of this text, speaking no words.

The Anger of Cain (4:3-5)

These verses describe the first human offering made to God. It is not clear whether the reader should understand it to be a sacrifice or an offering, although part of the rationale for a sacrifice was making an offering or gift to God. The motivation for these offerings was undoubtedly the attitude of gratitude.

“In the course of time” (4:3) is an unusually indefinite phrase, but the confident assumption is these offerings were gifted to God at the end of the agricultural year when the grain had been harvested. The offerings Cain and Abel brought to God were in line with their respective vocations, grain from the farmer and an animal from the shepherd (4:3-4).

Why did God favorably receive the offering made by Abel and reject or give no favor to the offering made by Cain? Of course, God has the freedom or right to do whatever he chooses to do without explaining the reasons for his actions to his creation. On the other hand, a significant difference between Israel’s God and the pagan gods of her neighbors was that he acted consistently with his character rather than being arbitrary in his acts.

The difference in God's response to the two offerings may be explained by the presence of two things in the text itself. While Cain's offering was the produce from the ground (grain), Abel's offering was from "the firstborn" of his flock (4:4). The sacrificial system of the Israelites placed value on offerings from the **first** of the harvest and the flock. In addition to that, Abel offered the "fat portions" of the animal (4:4). This terminology described the choicest cut of meat from a lamb or calf. In other words, Abel, in contrast to Cain, did not offer something merely from among his flock; rather, he offered the **choicest** and **best** of his flock.

A former Ministry Leadership Team member with whom I had the privilege to serve here at South Main was the bipolar opposite to someone described as having a "poker face." He always expressed his emotions fully, whether it was delight, sadness, surprise, or frustration. Cain shared that feature with my fellow minister.

The text provides no information about how Cain discovered or knew that God had looked unfavorably on his offering. The text is clear in stating that Cain was extremely angry. "Very angry" (4:5) often resulted in the desire to kill someone, and sometimes the carrying out of that desire (Gen. 34:7; Nehemiah 4:1). Cain may have also been disappointed or depressed about having his offering rejected.

The Murder of Abel (4:6-12)

This passage mirrors Genesis 3:8-19 as God again asked questions, declared a guilty sentence, and pronounced judgment. The two questions in verse six seemingly suggest that Cain was not just "storming mad" but despondent or grieved. He exhibited an angry depression. The questions God asked are like those he had asked Adam. They were posed to give Cain the opportunity to express and resolve his anger before he allowed it to motivate him to do something terrible.

Verse seven is the most difficult verse in this book to interpret with confidence. "Accepted," the verb in the question, is the common word for forgiveness. The one question controls both suppositional statements, or the "if" clauses. The clear sense is that Cain possessed human freedom. He could choose to live faithfully and receive God's favor and forgiveness. On the other hand, Cain faced an enemy to faithful living. This verse contains the first occurrence of the most general word for "sin" in the Old Testament. Sin aggressively seeks to cause Cain to be disobedient against God. "Crouching" conveys the picture of a hungry lion seeking helpless prey (Jeremiah 5:6).

The discussion of the meaning of the rare word "desires" (4:7) was included in the comments on Genesis 3:16 in Lesson Six. The final clause in this verse can be understood as either a promise (**shall** master it); a command (**must** master it); or as an invitation (**may** master it). The pronoun "you" in a position of emphasis suggests that the focus is not upon Cain's depravity but rather upon his free choice to live faithfully or not.

Cain made a bad decision. He is the first example in the Scripture of one who allowed the attitude of anger to propel him to carry out a murderous, sinful deed. Cain's murder of his brother Abel is not sensationalized; instead, it is stated simply. "Killed" (4:8) translates a word that depicted an especially ruthless act of violence by an individual. In the Torah, a crime committed in the field was considered a crime of premeditation (Deuteronomy 22:25-27). The first human death resulted from human anger and hatred, rather than the judgment of God.

Cain responded to God's inquiry by misstating the truth or lying to God, and challenging the question. He suggested he was not his "brother's keeper" (Gen. 4:9) because that was God's job (Numbers 6:24; Psalm 121:7).

The judgment God pronounced upon Cain (Gen. 4:10-12) was more severe than the judgment expressed for Adam. "Blood" (4:10) is plural, and, with rare exceptions, the use of the plural form conveys the thought of bloodshed or bloodguilt. The Israelites believed the life force was contained in the blood (Leviticus 17:11). The spilling of blood, therefore, was especially horrifying as it was the taking of human life that was granted by God. The language about blood crying out from the ground is the language of people who are oppressed or suffering and are crying out to God for justice (Exodus 3:7; 22:21-24).

This is the first instance of a curse from God pronounced upon a human being (Gen. 4:11). It is in essence a death penalty. The first couple was banished from the garden, and now Cain's punishment seemingly sentences him to live farther from the garden which God had made for his human creatures in which to work and enjoy its bounty.

Genesis 4 places the hope in Cain, the firstborn. Abel appears but has no speaking part and disappears through the sinful act of Cain. The story is about Cain's actions and Cain's genealogy. In the New Testament, their roles are reversed as Abel is described as the faithful one (Hebrews 11:4), while Cain is remembered as the evil one (1 John 3:12; Jude 11).

The Mark of Cain (4:13-16)

The text never conveys any confession or contrition on the part of Cain for killing his brother. Cain accepted the verdict of guilty, but he did make an appeal to God, his judge. He asserted that his sentence was too severe. The punishment did not fit the crime. "Punishment" (4:13) is a common word for sin and for the guilt that results from sin.

Cain's appeal was based on four sentiments (4:14). First, he believed God was too severe in driving him from the land and thus leaving him without the necessary **productivity** to support himself. He also charged God with being too severe because the sentence took him away from the **presence** of the Lord. In addition, he did not look forward to living life without a **purpose**. Cain did not want to go through life as a "restless wanderer" (4:14). Finally, he declared it would be too much to live without the **protection** of God.

That would leave him in a circumstance that would make him vulnerable to retaliation. He would be in danger of losing his life.

God reaffirmed the punishment for Cain. He did not reduce the sentence. In spite of upholding the punishment, God revealed to Cain that he still cared for Cain, and would continue his relationship with the sinner.

This continued relationship is declared in God's promise to provide protection for Cain in two ways. If anyone mirrored Cain's act and killed the murderer, that person would "suffer vengeance" (4:15), or experience retaliation. With these words, God promised he would be the one bringing about justice for the murder of Cain (as he did for the murder of Abel). "Seven times over" (4:15) was a phrase that denoted intensity or severity.

The second way in which God protected Cain was to "put a mark" on him (4:15). This important Hebrew word translated "mark" was used for a symbol that suggested something else due to a resemblance or association. It sometimes referred to an event that provided the awakening of knowledge in someone. It also denoted a sign or a visible evidence of God's power (Exod. 4:1-9; 7:3).

The mark placed upon Cain was not a sign of judgment or curse. It was a sign of both guilt and grace. It was evidence that God had promised to protect Cain. The text provides no clear information about whether it was a visible mark on Cain's body, a "marking" in Cain's mind as a reminder, or some form of supernatural protection of Cain from bodily harm by others.

The first human couple had moved out of Eden toward the east (Gen. 3:24), and Cain now moved farther to the east. "Nod" (4:16) comes from the same root as the word "wanderer" (4:12, 14). Cain began his new life and lived it as we live our lives. The two dimensions of life for Jesus followers consist of the possibility of unfaithful actions, and of the promise of God's protective care.

Genesis 4:17-24 confirms the fact that nobody put Cain to death. This genealogical record of Cain includes seven generations. The interesting thing is that it includes brief notes about progress in civilization and cultural advances. The "restless wanderer" in fact built a city (4:17). This is the only other reference, besides Babel, to building a city in Genesis 1-11. In this instance the project was not condemned.

In these verses, we find the first, and one of the few references in the Old Testament to the arts as legitimate and recognized components of human life (4:21). We also find a word about animal herding (4:20) and the industry of working with metal (4:22). In the mythological accounts of creation and civilization growth, the gods and demigods were responsible for these things. Here God's human creation provide their inspiration.

The line of Cain is mentioned here for the last time in the Old Testament. Another son of Adam and Eve continues the story.

The Birth of Seth (4:25-26)

The birth notice that concludes this chapter differs in several respects from the one with which the chapter began. Compare these comments with the ones on Genesis 4:1-2. “Son” (4:25) is the most common word for a male child. Instead of Eve exclaiming that God helped her bring forth new life, she seems to give God more of the credit. The verb underlying “granted” (4:25) meant to put or place something. It is the rationale for the name Seth. God has placed another son or “child” (4:25), with her. This is the word *zerah*, the important word for offspring found in Genesis 3:15.

Abel was murdered. Cain was punished. God would begin to work through the family of Seth and his son Enosh. The name “Enosh” (4:26) is the semantic equivalent to Adam. Both are a generic term for “man/mankind,” but both are a proper name as well.

The last sentence of this chapter presents some formidable challenges in interpretation. “To call on” (4:26) obviously means to offer worship through prayers and sacrifice. The difficulty is the fact that it says as early as the time of the third generation from Adam, people were worshiping the LORD or worshiping by invoking the personal name of Israel’s God, Yahweh.

The issue concerns how to reconcile this statement with Exodus 3:13-15 and 6:2-3. God revealed the name “Yahweh” to Moses during the burning bush experience. God subsequently told Moses that he was not known by the name Yahweh to the patriarchal fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; rather, they knew him as “El Shaddai.” (Personal names that include the name of Yahweh (theophoric names) do not occur until the lifetime of Moses.)

I believe the best explanation is that the statement here clearly articulates that the Israelites knew that the God who had revealed this name to Moses was the same God who had made the promises to the patriarchal fathers. He was the same God who had created the entire universe. He was the same God who was initially worshiped.

Conclusion

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stated the principle most clearly. He declared that sinful actions are a product of sinful attitudes. Control the attitudes, and one controls the actions. Murder does not just happen. It occurs when a heart is filled with uncontrollable rage and anger (Matthew 5:21-22). Adultery does not just happen. It occurs when a heart is filled with uncontrollable lust and desire (Matt. 5:27-30).

One of the sad realities of contemporary American life is the inability to have a discussion or debate of divisive issues without the presence of anger, hatefulness, sarcasm, hostility, incivility, and the deplorable calling of inappropriate names. Only a

few of us ever seriously experience “road rage,” but many of us exhibit tendencies toward anger and hostility in our relationships at home, at work, at church, and in the public sphere.

Be on guard: sinful attitudes lead to sinful actions.

Meet the Writer: Dr. Ron Lyles

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