

Cain and the Sin of Envy

God had warned Adam and Eve that if they ate of the forbidden fruit they would die. As a result of their disobedience, they were barred from the Tree of Life; that was the tree whose fruit gave eternal life to those who ate from it. Adam was told **“to dust you will return.”** In a sense, that was when the prospect of old age opened up, and it is a prospect that is there for us all. In a sense, old age is a tragedy that we have to act out. So death came into the world through sin. But the first death we read of in the Bible is not a death that results as a consequence of old age, and neither was it due to natural causes. The very first death is the death of a young person. The first death is a murder. Adam and Eve had two sons. Although the relationship between the human race and God had been spoilt, yet there still was a relationship there. God still cared for wayward mankind. He provided garments for Adam and Eve when they left Eden.

One thing we must always keep in mind when studying the *Book of Genesis* or any Old Testament Scripture is that though it is a historical account, these events are used by God to point us to His plan and the redemption of sin through Christ. Jesus is the central theme of the Bible – in both the Old and the New Testaments. If you lose sight of this, you will miss the big picture and overlook the lessons God has provided for us throughout Scripture. With this in mind, I want to take a deeper look at the story of Cain and Abel. But before we do that, let us ponder the words of the Apostle John who wrote in 1 John 3:11-12 [RSV], **11. For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, 12. and 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.**

Just like a good prosecutor delivering his closing argument in a murder trial, John gives us the motive for Cain's heinous deed: He murdered his brother because he envied his brother.

Jude, the Lord's brother, warned against those who would even infiltrate the church, men who were filled with envy and all manner of unrighteousness, telling us in verses 11-13 [RSV], **11. Woe to them! For they walk in the way of Cain, and abandon themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error, and perish in Korah's rebellion. 12. These are blemishes on your love feasts, as they boldly carouse together, looking after themselves; waterless clouds, carried along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; 13. wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved forever.**

This is not the only time Balaam's error is mentioned in the New Testament. It is actually mentioned on three separate occasions, always as a warning, and yet

we as Christians are basically clueless as to what we are being warned about! Peter writes in 2 Peter 2:14-16 [RSV], **14. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! 15. Forsaking the right way they have gone astray; they have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, 16. but was rebuked for his own transgression; a dumb donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.** And finally from John in Revelation we have, **“But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality”** (Revelation 2:14 [RSV]).

Balaam, whose story can be found in Numbers 22-24, is another Old Testament character who is mentioned repeatedly in the New Testament as a warning for the people of God. In fact, he serves as a double warning, for Balaam's error can refer both to the error the prophet himself made and the error he led others into. It is thus a warning to avoid becoming like him, and also to avoid those who would lead us down his path.

Balaam is a curious character. He was a pagan soothsayer who heard from God. He is described as both a prophet and a false prophet, a man of contradictions. He came to curse the people of God, yet restrained himself to only speak the words of blessing that the Lord gave him. Yet it was his lack of restraint that was his undoing. For he thought that he could be obedient to the Lord and persist in the rebellion of his own heart. The Lord resisted his path in many ways, even causing a donkey to speak, yet he persisted to the end. Even after he had seen the blessing that was on the people of God, he sought to destroy them by leading them into immorality and unfaithfulness to God.

The error of Balaam thus represents the folly of those who know the Lord and know that the course that they are on is unrighteous in His eyes, yet for the love of money and lure of sinful pleasure they persist in it anyway!

It also represents the cunning schemes of our enemy. For he knows that he cannot defeat us by direct attack. Even his worst curse (if he has any power to curse at all, rather than manipulating the righteous curse of God for his own twisted means) cannot touch those whom the Lord has blessed. Failing to destroy us himself, he will seek to get us to destroy ourselves instead with the subtle lure of temptation into compromise. He is not called the tempter for nothing!

Just as with Cain, the stark contrast to the clear way of God may cause us to dismiss Balaam as irrelevant to our walk. But before we do, perhaps we should ask ourselves a few questions:

Are we more devoted than David? Are we wiser than Solomon? Are we stronger than Sampson?

All these three men, despite the call of God on their lives, despite their clear gifts, fell into temptation and succumbed to Balaam's error at one time or other in their lives. The only enemy that could defeat them was their own unfaithfulness in pursuing a path of sinful indulgence.

Let us heed the warning and avoid that path. A remarkable calling or gift is no guarantee of automatic continuance in the will of God. Balaam's error was that his life was in stark contrast to his prophetic gift, and he failed to bring any adjustment.

Korah was the leader of 250 men who rose up in rebellion against Moses and Aaron and, because of their rebellion, God destroyed them by fire. When the people murmured about the death of those men, the next day God sent a plague that destroyed 14,700 more people. So when we read these warnings invoking the names of Balaam and Korah we need to take them seriously. Envy was at the heart of these sins, just as it was with Cain. We would all be wise to heed the counsel of the Apostle Paul, too, who writes, ***“But fornication and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints”*** (Ephesians 5:3 [RSV]).

We first encounter Cain in Genesis 4. ***1. Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.” 2. And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.*** (Genesis 4:1-2 [RSV]) The name Cain itself means, “something produced,” “spear” or “smith”, which is telling for what would later transpire. Cain slew his brother as “spear”, and it was Cain who was the builder of the first city. Cain as builder and his offspring as creators of the oldest civilizations are how the name Cain was a foreshadow of “smith.” We are told in Genesis 4:21-22 that Cain’s descendants were Jubal, who was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe, and Tubal-cain, who was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron, or weapons of war.

Some old Hebrew rabbis advocate that Cain and Abel were twins. This is not at all suggested by the English text, but according to *Strong’s Concordance*, a literal translation of Genesis 4:1-2 is, ***“And the man experienced Eve his wife. And she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and said, ‘I have gotten a human being [with the help] of Yahweh!’ And she continued giving birth to his brother, Abel. And became Abel a shepherd of flocks, and Cain became a tiller of the ground.”*** There are many Biblical scholars as well who also believe that Cain and Abel were twins. (Some also believe that Cain and Abel were not twins of each other, but that they each had twin sisters.) And there is nothing in the Hebrew that would deny the possibility that they were twins, and as we have seen, it is actually quite likely they were. Whatever the case may be, it is quite

an interesting insight if Cain and Abel were twins, since our doctrines teach that those two personalities correspond to the dual part of our human nature: good versus evil, the shepherd and the grower, the inner, affectionate part and the outer, more intellectual part.

Their work illustrates this duality quite well. The shepherd's work is a daily routine. Livestock must be fed and watered every day, cared for as well as protected. Hence, the affectionate, loving character which takes no holidays from its daily routine. We can see why the Lord called Himself the Good Shepherd. Love never ceases to care. It is like our heart – the organ we associate with love. It beats unceasingly from the very early moments of the fetus, as yet unrecognizable as a human being, but as we have already seen, a human being, nonetheless.

The man who is a sower and harvester has long periods of rest, and so an opportunity to do other things. He especially has time to think. It is clear that humanity could not have evolved higher civilization until the shepherd or herdsman turned turn into an agriculturist; until he had time to think, to plan, to invent, to build, and kept on improving and adopting new ideas.

Continuing in Genesis 4 Moses writes, **3. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4. and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, 5. but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.**

6. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 7. If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." (Genesis 4:3-7 [RSV])

Agriculture led to higher civilization, and so to wealth, power, pride, jealousy, dominion, conquest, and warfare. Cain represents the stage in human history when these things started to develop. He was rejected because God found fault with his offering, but also because of his inner state: Cain was smoldering with resentment.

Why did God prefer Abel's offering and reject Cain's? It seems arbitrary. Yet if we read more carefully, we realize that there was already something unsound in Cain's heart. Some evil, like a nasty worm inside an apple, was gnawing inside him. Was it jealousy? Hatred? Impatience? At the first provocation (when his offering was not accepted), it flared up. Now it was out in the open!

Our God is a loving God, and because He is, He sought through His counseling of Cain, to ward off Cain's eventual sin. If there was anyone in history who was given a chance, it was Cain.

Think about that for a moment. Which one of us would not love to have God tap us on the shoulder just as temptation is creeping into our hearts and say, "You might not want to go down that road, son! That is really not a very good idea! You might wish to reconsider!" But that *is* what God did with Cain. He spoke to Cain and told him that he was in grave danger of sin taking over his life. God loved Cain, He tried to help Cain, but Cain refused to listen. He let pride take over his heart, and envy over his brother grew into hatred which led to murder.

Had Cain been humble at heart, he would not have taken it out on his brother, Abel, who clearly had done him no harm. He would have turned to God and asked, "Where have I done wrong? Why was my offering not acceptable to you? What can I do to put matters right?" That would have been the right thing to do.

Instead, he blamed Abel, and even made plans to kill him. It was not done in a flare-up of blind passion (one could perhaps see that as an extenuating circumstance), but through a subterfuge. It was as if it had been on his mind for some time, and he was just waiting for some excuse. Genesis 4:8 [RSV] says, **8. Cain said to Abel his brother, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.** After all the loving warning Cain was given, his hardened heart chose to go the route of sin. "Let's go for a walk into the fields!" he said to his brother. And once there, he rose up and killed him in pre-meditated fashion. He had thought it all out before he committed the crime.

What were the wicked works Cain committed to which the Apostle John referred? They began with his sacrifice to God and continued through until he murdered his brother. God is not impressed with our works. All good works come from God and it is faith that God honors and blesses. Hebrews 11:6 [RSV] says, **"And without faith it is impossible to please Him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him."** Cain's works were the works of his own hands. He tilled the soil, offered to God his best works and God rejected his works. Abel's sacrifice was not of his own works, but of the blessing God produced. Both the sacrifices of Cain and Abel required work, but the focus was entirely different. God blessed Abel and Abel gave back to God what God had given him. It was an act of love founded on faith. A righteous sacrifice is giving back to God what He has given. This is an acknowledgment of gratitude for what God has done. Honorable sacrifice and good works is always acknowledging and laying hold of what God is doing. It is not something we are doing, but finding the will of God. This message has not changed since the beginning. It is blessing of God that produces good works. We do not do good works to earn salvation, we do good works because we are saved, we love the Lord, and we want to do all we can within our power to please Him. When we walk in faith, God produces righteousness and good works in our lives. Look at Titus 3:4-7 [RSV]: **4. but when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5. He saved us, not because of**

deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, 6. Which He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7. so that we might be justified by His grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.

Paul expounds upon this concept further in Romans 4:3-5 [RSV], saying, **3. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." 4. Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. 5. And to one who does not work but trusts Him Who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.** It is God's righteousness that makes us righteous, and we receive His righteousness when we come to Him through obedient, saving faith on His terms, and the work of Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross is imputed, meaning it is credited, to us, just as if we had done it ourselves. It is God's blessing that produces good works. Cain became angry because he did not get the honor he desired. He targeted his brother in retaliation against God. When our focus is on ourselves, we will react against anyone who threatens our motives and self-interest. A godly man or woman will seek to honor God but someone with sinful motives will seek to gain their own honor. False religions flourish because people are naturally self-seeking. By nature, we want to work for our own glory. We want to stand before God and expectantly show off our works so God can call us good. Cain worked hard to make his own way and presented his works before God. When God did not honor Cain's works, he showed what was really in his heart. Instead of submitting to God and rising above his selfish desires, he decided to bring Abel down below his level. When we are self-seeking, our tendency is to stamp out anyone who threatens us or becoming angry when we do not get the recognition or honor we feel we deserve. Instead of acknowledging our need to change, we find it easier to get rid of those who remind us of our shortcomings. Cain ignored God's warning that sin would rule over him if he submitted to it. Sin never takes a back seat. If we choose to pursue a sinful lifestyle, it will always become the master. In the beginning, it will seem like we are in control, but unless we surrender and allow God to control us, sin will always get the upper hand in time.

What are the lessons for us today? Sin is still crouching at the door of people's hearts, wanting to control people's lives by hatred, jealousy and envy. Murder and genocide are the results that we see today in the world around us. But we also see it to some degree in the attitude of those who would never lift a finger in physical violence. Jesus taught that to have hatred in our hearts makes us every bit as guilty in God's eyes as a murderer: **20. And He said, "What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. 21. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, 22. coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man."** (Matthew 15:20-23 [RSV])