

BaptistWay Bible Series for April 18: Cain and Abel: Who cares?

April 6, 2010

Sin grows when our relationship with God is not right

Why does God look “with favor” on Abel’s gift but not on Cain’s? This early example of the expression of the sovereignty of God in choosing one over the other is not arbitrary. Cain brings “some of” what he has grown to God (v. 3), but Abel brings his best, the “fat portions” from “the firstborn of his flock” (v. 4). God tells Cain he too could have received the favor of God had he chosen to “do what is right” (v. 7).

The principle of bringing our firstfruits, and not our leftovers, to God is consistent throughout Scripture (Exodus 23:16,19; Leviticus 3:16; Proverbs 3:9). Jesus commended the widow’s offering because she gave of her best, not her leftovers (Luke 21:3-4).

Abel understands this principle, which is not just a mechanical, legalistic requirement. It is a demonstration of faith (Hebrews 11.4). When Cain fails to act in faith but rather brings a gift of less than his best—perhaps even as an afterthought—his gift does not meet with God’s favor. Predictably, Cain reacts with anger. Instead of directing his anger toward the guilty party—himself—Cain is angry with God.

It is at this point the plan is hatched. One does not have to read much into the narrative to understand Abel’s demise is sealed at the moment Cain becomes angry with God. “Sin is crouching at [Cain’s] door” (v. 7), and Cain cannot master it when he lets his own failure interfere with his

relationship with God.

One sin begets another. Cain has not done “what is right” (v. 7). The crouching, prowling lion (1 Peter 5:8) is waiting for the opening Cain’s warped relationship with God allows. Alone, Cain cannot resist, cannot master. Alone, Cain is swept to more horrific sin.

Sin destroys our ability to understand our relationships with each other

Scripture is consistent that we have a loving responsibility to one another (Matthew 5:23; Romans 14:19-21; James 2:15-16). Jesus sums this duty up in the Golden Rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

As Adam and Eve avoided God walking in the garden (Genesis 3:8), Cain avoids God’s question when God asks Cain where Abel is. Cain tries to play games with God: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (v. 9). Cain’s implication is that he has no responsibility toward his brother.

We live and thrive in an economic and political system built on capitalistic individualism; but to jump from individualism to “I am not my brother’s keeper” is a jump Scripture does not make. We also must understand that we are all created in the image of God, and we have a responsibility to each other. Cain’s sin hides that perspective from him, and he loses sight of his responsibility for his brother.

As always, sin produces heartbreak

Just as it had for his parents, sin creates for Cain a panoply of ills. Because of Cain’s sin, his life is met with curse (v. 11), the inability to succeed at his work (v. 12), and restless wandering (v. 11).

This is a story about Cain, but we cannot forget the impact of Cain’s sin on others. Abel, the innocent one who acts in faith and pleases God, loses his

very life. Adam and Eve lose not one son but two—one to death and one to a life far from home, in the land of Nod.

As always, grace is present for the sinner who is in relationship with God

In last week's lesson, we saw that while sin produced shameful nakedness for Adam and Eve, God responded by making them clothes. That story is repeated for Cain, whose punishment is accompanied by grace. To his credit (and there is precious little else in this passage for which Cain should receive credit), Cain, the sinner whose selfishness has hindered his relationship with the Creator and led to even more heinous sin, finally cries out to the Lord.

True, his prayer is neither one of remorse nor one of supplication; it is essentially a cry of self-pity. Still, he calls to the Lord, who answers forcefully and immediately with a mark of protection. Cain's sin has its consequence—alienation will define him—but grace is there as well. Even the murderer maintains the mark of God, the protection from those who would kill him (v. 15).

It is in the mark of Cain, as with the clothing of Adam and Eve, where we see the earliest foreshadowing of the coming of Christ. God's children—you and I—find countless ways not to “do what is right” and thus bring upon ourselves curses and isolation. In the midst of those catastrophic results, God constantly is at work to find a way to extend grace to us. Our sin will find us out, but God's mark is upon us.