

# Cain's story set to rock by Texas pastor: An interview

June 10, 2019

Thomas Estes has been the pastor of Cottonwood Baptist Church in Cross Plains, Texas, for six years. He grew up throughout Texas—Red Oak in the southern suburbs of Dallas, Quitman in the East Texas Piney Woods and Cross Plains in the Big Country.



Thomas Estes, pastor of Cottonwood Baptist Church in Cross Plains

Estes has had a heart for music and ministry for a long time. He earned an Associate Degree in commercial music with an emphasis in guitar performance from South Plains College in Levelland, a Bachelor of Arts degree in religion from Wayland Baptist University in Plainview and a Master of Divinity degree from Logsdon Seminary after also studying at Truett Seminary.

Estes released the EP titled "[Cain](#)"—his solo debut—on June 3, 2019.

## When did you begin playing music?

I started taking guitar lessons at the age of 12—18 years ago. The guitar has remained my first love, but I have picked up other instruments along the way. At first, music served as therapy for an introverted and melancholy young man. Lately, through teaching lessons, releasing original compositions and playing live, music has become a means for me to share one of my great joys with family, friends and neighbors.

## **Why an album about Cain?**

The opening track on my new album “The Choice” was one of the first songs I ever wrote. Back in 2009, I was experimenting with unusual time signatures—it’s in 9/8—and alternate tunings—dropped D—when I came up with a heavy guitar riff.

Around the same time, I was reading John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* and was impressed by the way he plays with the Cain and Abel story. Inspired by Steinbeck, I decided it would make a fitting subject for the musical idea I was exploring.

My first plan was to do a full-length concept album about the opening chapters of Genesis, which have endlessly fascinated me over the years. I wrote six or seven songs for the project but was nowhere near ready to record. To my dismay—and then delight—Gungor beat me to it with their beautiful 2011 release *Ghosts Upon the Earth*.

Fast forward to the summer of 2018. After a five-year hiatus from music during seminary, I started digging through the voice memos on my hard drive and realized I had much more material than I anticipated. Recording an EP seemed like a manageable way to knock off some rust and gain experience before tackling a full-length album.

## **The story of Cain has more depth to it than we normally give it. What do you see in Cain’s story?**

The story of Cain always has struck me as a particularly poignant image of the “inescapable network of mutuality” described by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. On one level, it is a powerful illustration of human estrangement. With the decision to kill his brother, Cain forever altered Abel’s life, his own life, the lives of his parents and all whom he later encountered.

But there is also an ecological motif. In using the field to hide his brother’s

corpse, Cain exploits the soil as an accessory to murder. The blood-soaked ground cries at the injustice. Its God-given fecundity is disrupted (temporarily at least; see Genesis 8, where the “curse” is rescinded).



In Genesis 2, we read that God created humankind from “the dust of the ground”—the same dust which comprises everything else. Therefore, what Adam says of Eve is equally descriptive of humankind’s relationship with all of creation: “This is now ... flesh of my flesh.” In other words, we are all entangled with everything else.

Ours is a much more radical and more profound kinship than many realize. The abundant quality of life Jesus came to give depends on healthy relationships at the human level and between humans and the more-than-human world. Where there is a failure of love, in the biblical world or ours, we create hell-on-earth.

## **The album has a definite classic rock feel. Who are your musical influences?**

It’s true. At the beginning of this project, I reached out to an old friend who is a producer in Los Angeles to see if he would be interested in taking on the album. When things didn’t work out, I decided to try my hand at producing it myself.

Modern music often rests on a bed of electronically programmed synth-pads and digital drums. But my lack of programming experience and old-school sensibilities took us in a different direction. We used traditional analog equipment, a human (read imperfect) rhythm section, and real instruments played live—which is the way they did things in the classic rock era.

Also, on “The Choice,” one of the guitars I played was a decades-old overdriven Les Paul. It’s hard to hear that guitar without immediately thinking of the genre it defined.

As for influences, the most formative was an acoustic band called Nickel Creek. I discovered their music at the impressionable age of 12, right around the time I first picked up a guitar. Another would be Thrice. They have managed to produce consistently good (rock) albums with deeply theological lyrics.

But my dad listened to a lot of classic rock. The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, The Allman Brothers Band, Steely Dan and Pink Floyd certainly made significant contributions to my musical sensibilities. So too did innumerable artists from other genres. I love good music of every kind and hope to highlight different interests in future projects.

## **What does your church think of its pastor being a rock musician?**

Some think it is great, and others aren’t so sure.

I came to realize long ago that the so-called religious/secular divide is inherently problematic. Music is a gift—and God is the source of all goodness, truth and beauty, which is refracted through art in its various forms.

So, I listen widely for inspiration. And I play diversely because it brings me and others joy. Music is a vocation through which I form meaningful relationships with others and practice the way of Jesus.

**“The Choice,” the lead number, is decidedly darker and angrier than the rest. You really reached for the**

## **growl to convey Cain's angst. Where did you go for that growl?**

"Prosody" is a word songwriters use to describe a fitting relationship between all the different elements of music. "The Choice" is dark, both thematically and musically. The minor tonality helps to carry some of the emotional weight, but it calls for an intense vocal to match. Honestly, it was a bit of a stretch for me since I haven't sung much in that style. I'm still working on my voice in general, and my "growl" in particular. I just tried to do justice to the song.

## **Tell us about the instrumentation on "Brother's Keeper."**

"Brother's Keeper" features acoustic guitar, electric guitar, drums, bass, keys, cello and violin. My use of cello and violin in this album is a bit unusual and has been one thing many have noted. The two players were a husband and wife team from the University of Arkansas. But the instruments they used were handmade by his father—a luthier from Texas.

## **This is a loaded set of questions: What's the story behind the songs? What did you bring to the biblical narrative that we can't read in Genesis. What were some of the theological issues you wrestled with in bringing Cain's story to music?**

Biblical stories provide a vocabulary for theological and moral imagination. One of the interesting things about Scripture is all of the narrative gaps. Questions go unanswered and beg for exploration. Since the stories are sacred to many, I tried to handle them with care. Actually, in many places, I stayed very close to the biblical text. But I do exercise a degree of poetic license—which is to say, I risk an interpretation.

### *The Choice*

“The Choice” explores the moment of decision between the good we know we ought to do and the evil we choose to do instead. God’s relationship with Abel is revelatory of some deficit—not explicitly stated—in Cain. For Cain, this realization is so painful that he chooses to murder the one who problematizes his sense of self-worth. Rather than doing the hard work of exploring his own insecurity, he acts out.

### *Mother Cried*

Over and over again, female scholars have taught me to read with greater emotional intelligence. Now, when I read a biblical story, even one where men are ostensibly the main characters, I can’t help but think about the experience of women—in this case, Eve.

Burying a child is tragic for anyone. It is also devastating for those whose children commit a heinous crime. Eve—along with Adam—experiences both simultaneously. She loses not only Abel but also Cain, who is banished. “Mother Cried” is a nod to the unimaginable suffering of this biblical mother.

### *Sojourn*

Many of us, metaphorically speaking, have spent time running from something. In Cain’s wandering, I imagine he was haunted by his past.

It is a kind of grace to live after sinning. It is also grace, though rarer, to experience reconciliation through the spiritual power of forgiveness. It seems to me that Cain knew something of this first kind of grace. God interrupted the cycle of violent retaliation by pardoning him.

But I wonder if Cain paid it forward? Was he able to forgive himself? Did he ever reconcile with his family and find his way “home,” so to speak?

### *Brother’s Keeper*

“Brother’s Keeper” is my most overt theological statement on this album. It

is also typical of the way the biblical text haunts and interrogates my own existence. God's question to Cain becomes God's question to me: "Where did your brother go?"

Are you loving your neighbor? Are you caring for those friends of Jesus—the "least?"

## **What does it take to make an album these days?**

The process hasn't changed nearly as much as the technology. It still starts with the songs. Then, during the pre-production process, decisions are made about instrumentation, parts are composed, arrangements are made and musicians are enlisted. When everyone is rehearsed, performances are captured in a studio by a recording engineer. Next comes mixing. And finally, mastering—where the audio is optimized for playback. With all that said, I would only be half-kidding if I said it takes money!

## **What was the hardest part of the album for you?**

For whatever reason, "The Choice" took me forever to produce. Some songs unfurl themselves so quickly that they feel like ready-made gifts from beyond. Not this one. I made at least 10 distinct demos and countless variations of "The Choice," which I tweaked for months.

## **What was the most satisfying part of the album during production?**

Recording "Mother Cried" was a serendipitous experience. I intended to record four or five harmony parts on that song. But after the session pianist tracked, I realized my vocal arrangement was going to clash. So, I altered the main melody at the last minute and sang a single harmony line. It turned out to be my favorite vocal of the whole project.

At a broader level, it takes a village to get an album off the ground. One of the most fulfilling things has been working with a team of wonderful people

to create something of which we are all proud.

## **The end of “Brother’s Keeper” has a hopeful note—sounded by the piano and tempo. Was this intended?**

Yes. Hope is central to faith as I understand it. The story is so dark and tragic that I wanted to give the album a bit of a lift at the end. Having the drums switch to a 1/16th note groove gave the back half of the track some more energy. I also replaced the strings with brighter electric guitars and crafted a more pop-sounding vocal line.

Unlike Cain’s story, our story is still being written. In every moment, God is the source of possibility, which frees our present from the weight of the past, opening up a future for which we hope, pray and work.

## **What do you hope people take away from Cain—the album and the biblical story?**

I hope people enjoy the music for its own sake. It is my debut as an independent artist, and I am really excited to share this part of my life with others. I also hope they buy enough copies that I can pay this project off and get back into the studio!

If it leads someone to a deeper appreciation of the biblical text, which also is an essential part of my life, that would be a welcome bonus and extension of my pastoral calling.

Wouldn’t it be nice to live in a world where Cain’s story is just a story from our past and not also an ever-present reality?

*“Cain” can be purchased on [iTunes](#), [Amazon](#) and other streaming music services.*