

Cain and Abel

I. INTRODUCTION

*“Having rejected God and his merciful rule, the first man and woman are subjected to the fiendish rule of the one whom they obeyed. As the Gospel says: **“The whole world is in the power of the evil one”** [1 John 5:19].*

Their God-reflecting natures deeply wounded, they fall captive to their sins. Life becomes a living hell, and death relentlessly claims its victims.

Having thrown off the rule of God, the human race now begins to devour itself, man turning against man. Cain kills Abel out of resentment and envy, and the story of human treachery, misery, and evil continues unbroken until the time of Noah” [see Ralph Martin: Is Jesus Coming Soon].

We are now ready to see what happened to Adam and Eve once they left the sanctuary of Eden. We may have many questions.

- What kind of relationship will the dis-graced humans have with God?
- What will they pass along to their offspring?
- What kind of civilization will develop from these people?

II. LIFE OUTSIDE OF EDEN

Once evil had entered the world, it took firm root. Adam and Eve, thrown out of paradise, had two sons, Cain and Abel. And the very next thing we read is the story of how Cain killed Abel. Evil had entered the world to stay.

Genesis Chapter 4 teaches us many important lessons as we see how life unfolds outside Eden. We learn that:

- Man’s revolt against God leads to his revolt against his fellow man.
- The crime of murder confirms the fallen state of man.
- God is just in the punishment of sin, but merciful in its application.
- Sacrifice must be offered in the proper spirit;
- Sin must be, and therefore can be, mastered by man.

The Scripture goes on to show how human life was transmitted, starting with the first human parents, and how, at the same time man’s life on earth continues the bear the mark of evil and sin.

Read: Genesis 4:1-7

[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.

[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 couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

A. Adam Knew His Wife Eve

To refer to sexual intercourse between man and woman, the Bible uses the term “to know” indicating the depth of that relationship, which, although expressed through the body, also involves the whole person, mind and will – soul and body!

- The first child born of the two parents of the human race was a son, Cain, who became a farmer.
- Their second child was Abel, another son, who was a shepherd.

B. First Fruits of the Fall

Eve’s conception and birth of a son is something she recognizes as a gift from God, *"I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD."* The Bible will keep on teaching that children are a gift from God, and that it is God who gives or withholds fertility.

It is clear that although she lost the supernatural grace she was created with, she is still capable of recognizing God and His provision for her life.

This might surprise us. It should encourage us. Although man is weakened by sin, he is not in total darkness. It appears that in Eve, the harsh punishment from God may have had a restorative effect.

Was she humbled by being expelled from the Garden?

Adam and Eve proceed with married life outside Eden, even if they are not the people they once were. Perhaps Eve’s comment about the birth of "a man" reflects her understanding of the promise God made in Gen. 3:15.

C. Cain’s Offering

[3] In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,

Cain’s offering doesn’t seem to be the best of the harvest. It must have represented Cain’s attitude towards God. Perhaps it was given in an indifferent manner. Perhaps it was given grudgingly. Perhaps Cain consciously withheld the best of his harvest for himself and gave some of the less desirous or useful fruit in offering to God.

Anyway, it is not pleasing to God.

D. Cain Becomes Angry

[5] But for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

Cain becomes very angry when God does not accept his offering. For a man to get angry with God because God does not accept his inadequate or inappropriate worship reveals him to be a self-centred and seriously wounded man.

- God is not the centre of his world. Cain is firmly in the grip of intense spiritual blindness.

God gives Cain a choice to worship Him the right way. He opens wide the door to forgiveness and restoration. Nothing will be lost if Cain will simply right the wrong he has done. If, however, Cain chooses not to do the right thing, he faces danger.

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

If he gives in to sin, then he will be weakened to continue giving into sin. Sin will want to master him. Not only will it cause a break in his relationship with God, it will also weaken him so that the next sin is easier to commit.

The Church refers to this as the "double consequence" of sin - one is eternal (a break in communion with God) and one is temporal (a weakened will, making it easier to sin again). See CCC 1472.

Sin is subtle. That was St. Paul’s concern when he wrote to the Christians in Rome. He didn’t want them to make the mistake of taking sin lightly, of underestimating its power to control those who yield to it.

This is precisely the warning God gives Cain, and each one of us!

E. Abel’s Sacrifice

*[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,*

Although both men are aware that offerings to God are important, only Abel gives the best portions of the best animals of his flock to God. His offering must be a reflection of who he believes God to be and what he thinks would be an appropriate offering to Him.

Perhaps the details of the Fall, which Adam and Eve surely would have given to their children, moved Abel to humility. Although he was born with a wounded nature his encounter with the truth about God and man may have converted him.

It is important to recognize that God isn’t arbitrarily picking one offering over another. He sees first the condition of the man’s heart, then his offering. Abel worshipped God appropriately, so God had regard for him and his offering. Something was wrong in Cain, so God rejected his offering.

F. The Mystery of Human Freedom

The difference between Cain and Abel is the mystery of human freedom. Surely both men knew the story of Creation and of the expulsion from a beautiful garden. They both shared Adam and Eve’s inheritance of a sinful nature. They were well aware of God and themselves.

Yet one chose to serve God and one chose to serve himself.

They were free to make their own decisions. This is the freedom God granted man in Eden, so that if man loved God, it would be genuine and not programmed.

Abel chose God; Cain chose himself. This is the freedom God has granted every human being!

III. CAIN IS CURSED

For the first time man is directly cursed. Along with pride, envy was the root cause of Satan’s rebellion [see Wis 2:24]. It is also the source of some of the worst sins, as we see with Cain, who murdered his younger brother out of envy [see 1 John 3:4-12].

Read: Genesis 4:8-16

[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.

[9] Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"

[10] And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.

[11] And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

[12] When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

[13] Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is greater than I can bear.

[14] Behold, thou hast driven me this day away from the ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me."

[15] Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him.

[16] Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

A. Sin Becomes Cain’s Master

Instead of choosing to accept God’s offer to put things right, Cain chooses to plot the murder of his brother.

Rather than putting to death in himself the envy and anger that are raging there, he refuses to suffer that way. Instead, he allows hate to grow into murder. This is what we call "cold-blooded premeditation."

B. In Cold Blood

It’s not that Cain lost his head in a fit of anger. He calmly laid a trap for Abel, inviting him to join him in the field, in the way a brother would, and then murders him in cold blood. No human being had ever died before. A brotherly gesture was the beginning of his betrayal (just as the kiss of a close friend would one day betray Jesus).

This episode reveals to us how hard Cain’s heart had grown. Even though God had made a profound offer of grace to him, he became more resolved to do evil rather than good.

This characteristic of sinful human nature constantly appears throughout the rest of Scripture.

- When God’s grace comes near to some men, their hearts melt and become malleable.
- For others, however, the nearness of God’s grace causes a hardening of the heart like clay in a kiln.
- Such was the case with Cain.

God is giving Cain an opportunity to confess his sin and be accountable for it, just as He had done with Cain’s parents in Eden. A Father’s love always wants to hear an explanation of how things went wrong.

Cain lies to God, and then he becomes sarcastic, *“am I my brother's keeper?”* He disavows any responsibility for his brother’s welfare, throwing off any constraints on his autonomy.

- In his pride, Cain has chosen separation from God and from men.

C. Abel’s Blood Cries Out . . .

9. The blood cries out. It is alive. Although Abel has been murdered, somehow his life has not been completely snuffed out. Throughout the rest of Scripture, blood will have potent meaning for man’s life, both natural and supernatural. It will come to represent the life of man, and, liturgically, the means of atonement for man’s sin:

“The life of the flesh is in the blood. It is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life” (Lev.17:11).

Finally, in the Eucharist, it will become the presence of Christ in man.

D. Justice or Mercy?

It is reasonable to think that Abel’s blood must be crying out for justice. Yet, because Abel was a righteous man who had faith in God, is it possible that he was crying out for mercy as well as justice for his brother.

Heb. 12:24 compares the blood of Abel to the blood of Jesus. The writer of Hebrews says that the blood of the New Covenant speaks "more graciously" than the blood of Abel.

The blood of Jesus speaks "more graciously" because He was a willing victim of murder, whereas Abel was an unwilling victim.

This is an idea worth pondering. If Cain and Abel represent fallen mankind, making their way through life outside of Eden, their story suggests that among the descendants of Adam and Eve, throughout all the ages of human history, there will be some who respond to God and others who don’t.

Those whose lives are touched by God are willing to offer their suffering to obtain mercy for those who harden themselves. Think of Jesus on the Cross:

"Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."

Cain doesn’t show any remorse or even regret. His primary concern is that he will suffer under his punishment and that someone will kill him. In this, he reminds us of Adam and Eve, who also showed no regret in Eden.

E. Cain’s Punishment

And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

Cain will experience from the ground exactly what God experienced from him. The ground will now become as hardened as Cain’s heart was to God. It will be unyielding, just as Cain was in the offer of grace God extended to him.

In addition, his desire to be autonomous and not responsible for his brother will have its fulfillment in his life as a "fugitive and a wanderer on earth." His covenant-breaking act will result in him being away from his home and family, God’s covenant-keeping community.

Cain’s punishment suggests that the worst that can happen to us in life, when we are in rebellion against God, is for Him to give us what we want.

- If we insist on having life on our own terms, God will give it to us.
- We will make our own misery.

F. Cain is Marked

Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him.

Why do you think God marked Cain so no one would kill him?

- Perhaps it was Abel’s blood crying out for mercy for Cain that spared his life.
- Perhaps it was God’s desire that Cain have an opportunity to repent and return to God’s presence.
- It may have been God’s purpose to re-affirm the sacred nature of human life, even when it strays far from God’s design.

No matter what caused it, God’s preservation of Cain’s life is an expression of His goodness and mercy, especially for sinners. Cain and Abel were born to the same parents and presumably had the same upbringing. What do you suppose explains the difference between them?

G. God’s Love and Mercy

After the fall in Eden, we saw signs of God’s continued tender care of His creatures. During this second episode of human rebellion, we see similar signs of God’s love for humans.

In the previous section, we recognized God’s desire for Cain’s life to be spared, even though he was a murderer. In this chapter we have seen many other signs of His love for humans:

- God expects the best from Cain, since giving the best to God is what men were designed and created for; anything less than the best in man’s relationship with God will mean that man is less than fully human. God’s high standard for Cain is a sign of His love for him.
- God extends to Cain a gracious offer to do the right thing and blot out the wrong that had gone before.
- God gives Cain clear warning about the subtle danger of giving in to sin.
- God gives Cain an opportunity to confess his sin and ask for forgiveness.

- To punish Cain, God gives him what he wants; thus Cain will have an opportunity to experience the choices he has made, which ought to prove to him that he has not chosen wisely; this could perhaps lead to repentance and restoration.
- In preserving Cain’s life, God indicates that He has not entirely given up on this rebellious son.

IV. THE EVIL LINE OF CAIN

Read: Genesis 4:17-26

[17] Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch.

[18] To Enoch was born Irad; and Irad was the father of Me-hu'ja-el, and Me-hu'ja-el the father of Me-thu'sha-el, and Me-thu'sha-el the father of Lamech.

[19] And Lamech took two wives; the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah.

[20] Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have cattle.

[21] His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe.

[22] Zillah bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubal-cain was Na'amah.

[23] Lamech said to his wives:

*"Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
you wives of Lamech, hearken to what I say:
I have slain a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.*

*[24] If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold."*

[25] And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, for Cain slew him."

[26] To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time men began to call upon the name of the LORD.

A. Cain Marries

Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch.

Cain departed from the presence of the Lord and began a family.

Note: *Cain must have married a sister of his, as the whole human family derived from Adam and Eve; this practice presumably had to be allowed until it was no longer necessary. Eventually it was prohibited by God.*

Among his descendants, seventh in line from Adam through Cain, was Lamech (a polygamist).

- What type of man does he appear to be?
- What does this suggest about the kind of civilization that developed among people who live "away from the presence of the Lord"?

A. Lamech

Lamech, who is the Bible’s first polygamist, appears to be a violent, arrogant man. He boasts to his wives that even though he has killed a man, anyone who tries to take his life will be avenged "seventy-sevenfold."

He reckons himself to be even greater and more important to God than his forefather, Cain. Something has gone very wrong among these people. They appear to know the details of their family history (how else would Lamech know to compare his deed with that of Cain?), but they have no knowledge of what the details mean.

Because Cain was cut off from his family and the presence of the Lord, his spiritual blindness was not only perpetuated among his descendants, but it intensified.

B. The Sins of the Fathers

The father always teaches the son, either for good or for evil. This is how it is in families. See how Cain’s sin of pride has progressed in Lamech to proud presumption. He presumes upon God’s mercy in saving Cain from death, having no apparent understanding of what God’s mercy was meant to produce humility, repentance, and reconciliation.

Throughout Scripture we see, over and over again, the sinful and destructive traits that develop among men who, for whatever reason, have cut themselves off from the presence of the Lord. This is our first example of it.

V. THE GOOD LINE OF SETH

This is the part of mankind - the line of Seth - which retained its knowledge of the true God, who in due course will reveal himself to Abraham and Moses.

Seth gets his name because God gave him to Eve to take the place of Abel. This will be the line of descendants of Adam and Eve from which will come the chosen people through the calling of Abraham.

And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, for Cain slew him."

To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time men began to call upon the name of the LORD.

Seth, who takes the place of Abel, appears to be a man who, upon learning his family heritage, decides "to call upon the name of the Lord."

Note the important difference here between the two lines of Cain and Seth.

- Cain was trying to make a name for himself by having a son and naming a city after him.
- But when Seth had a son, the son’s work was not for himself but rather for God.

Summary

1. From the very start, the discord Adam and Eve’s sin brought to the world is evident in their children. The internal conflict that now reigns between will and emotion is dramatized in the conflict between Cain and Abel:

Abel gives God his best while Cain gives only his due. Abel’s sacrifice pleased God because it reflected a heart of gratitude for and recognition of God’s provision and a desire to give Him the best. In contrast, the Lord had no regard for Cain’s offering because it reflected his heart’s desire to keep the best for himself, as well as the fundamental disregard for God that becomes evident in the subsequent events.

2. Cain’s jealousy and anger are apparent to God, Who extends an offer to him to set everything right by choosing to live righteously. God warns him that to capitulate to the rage he feels inside will make him subject to sin, like a slave to a master.

3 Cain chooses his way rather than God’s. He murders his brother, tragic evidence of the consequences of the fall of his parents from supernatural grace in Eden. As God approaches him, extending grace to him by making him accountable for his actions, which is the first step to forgiveness and restoration, Cain’s heart hardens. The trap sin has laid for him snaps shut.

4. **God punishes Cain, allowing him to experience in his own life the effects of the choices he has made.** His life will be preserved by God, however, perhaps to make reconciliation possible.

5. Cain leaves the covenant, represented by his becoming a fugitive and wanderer. The civilization that grows from him bears the continuing marks of pride and violence. His descendants become a living picture of human development apart from a humble acknowledgement of God.

6. Seth, the son born to Adam and Eve to replace Abel, is a man who calls on the name of the Lord. Among his descendants are those who live in friendship with God and who patiently wait for deliverance from the curse that rests on man’s life because of disobedience.

7. Noah, whose name means "rest," is a descendant of Seth’s. He is named by his father in the hope that he will be a deliverer of God’s people.

Questions

1. Look at Eve’s comment after the birth of Cain (vs. 1). What do you think prompts her to say it? Why is it a hopeful sign in this new life outside Eden?
2. What is the difference between Abel and Cain as reflected in their offerings? Why do you suppose God had no regard for "Cain and for his offering"?
3. Cain was very angry over God’s response to him and to his offering. What does this suggest to you about the kind of man Cain was?
4. What choice does God give to Cain? If Cain refuses God’s offer, what problem will he face? What does this suggest is the most dangerous consequence of disobeying God’s Word (read also Rom. 6:16)?
5. Cain and Abel were born to the same parents and presumably had the same upbringing. What do you suppose explains the difference between them?
7. Why do you think God asked Cain where Abel was? Didn’t He already know?
8. Read Cain’s answer to God’s question in vs. 9. What becomes increasingly clear about the type of man Cain was?
9. In vs. 10 is the first mention of the word "blood" in Scripture. What power does blood seem to have?
10. What do you suppose Abel’s blood is saying from the ground? Read Heb. 11:4 and 12:22-24 before answering.
11. What is completely lacking in Cain’s response to God? What is his primary concern? In this, who does he remind you of?

Preparation for Week #7

Read:

1. Genesis Chapters 5 - 7 - RSV Catholic Edition;
2. *Come and see Catholic Bible Study – Genesis 5-7*
3. The Navarre Bible: Genesis – Chapters 5-7