



A TALE OF TWO SONS

Genesis 4:1-8

Adam and Eve's son Cain was determined to do things his way, not God's way. The result was tragic—disappointment, envy, anger, and murder. Cain's life warns us of the consequences of sin; the experience of his brother, Abel, reminds us of the cost of godliness.

We now arrive in our Wisdom Journey at Genesis chapter 4, where the descendants of Adam and Eve are beginning to make their way onto the pages of human history. And I have to tell you, it isn't going to be a pretty sight.

As we noted last time, Genesis 4 opens well enough in the delivery room. Verse 1 reads, "Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.'"

And it isn't long before Eve is back in the delivery room. Verse 2, says, "And again, she bore his brother Abel."

This verse goes on to tell us these two boys grew up and chose different occupations. Cain became a farmer, and Abel became a rancher. Both of these are wonderful occupations. Indeed, none of us would survive if it weren't for ranchers and farmers.

Now keep in mind, these boys grew up outside the garden, fully aware of their parents' history and fully aware of God's system of atoning sacrifice.

We know that because of what verse 3 tells us:

In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of [produce], and Abel also

brought of the firstborn of his flock [of sheep].

The phrase "in the course of time" literally means "at the end of days." This refers to the end of the year, meaning this sacrifice was an annual event.¹

God had taught them the way to approach Him through this annual sacrifice of atonement. Now we're not given Cain and Abel's homeschool curriculum, but they didn't come up with this idea on their own—piling stones on top of each other, killing some innocent animal, and burning it on the altar.

This was God's idea. This was God's plan. This annual sacrifice was mankind's statement of faith in God's plan of redemption through a sacrifice; it was their declaration of faith in a coming Redeemer.



Cain and Abel plaque from the 11th century a.d.



So here come Cain and Abel, no doubt along with their parents, Adam and Eve, showing up to make this annual sacrifice.

We're not told, but I believe this altar had been set up decades earlier on the eastern side of the garden of Eden, in the presence of those cherubim who were still standing there with the flaming sword, reminding them of their exile and the need for atonement.

But this year something different happens. When the family arrives, Cain does something terribly and defiantly wrong. He offers a non-bloody sacrifice of fruit and vegetables from his own labor on the farm. Abel, however, offers a lamb as God had prescribed—an innocent sacrifice, dying for the guilty sinner.

And God doesn't waste any time responding: "The LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard" (verses 4-5). As a result, "Cain was very angry, and his face fell."

Now most people believe Cain wasn't treated fairly by God. I mean, how unlucky was he to go into farming while his brother got into livestock, and—wouldn't you know it—God preferred animal offerings over vegetables.

But that's not the issue here. If you study the details recorded in the first five chapters of Genesis regarding the age of Adam and his sons, you will find that Cain is around 120 years old when this event occurs.

Before the flood, our forefathers lived in these early years of a pristine, newly created earth for hundreds of years. In fact, Genesis 5:5 tells us Adam lived 930 years. That's a lot of candles on your birthday cake! So, Cain and Abel are relatively young men, even though here they are in their early hundreds.

I point this out because it indicates that Cain and Abel have offered this annual sacrifice perhaps a hundred times already. But this time Cain says to himself, "You know, I'm tired of getting animals from my brother. My work is just as significant to God, and I'm working just as hard as he is. This year I'm going to do this my way."

Let me tell you, the serpent hadn't gone on vacation for the past hundred years. He's going to use the same strategy he used on Cain's mother.

"Did God really say that? C'mon, this is right for you. You've done it a hundred times God's way; now it's time to do it your way. God will appreciate the fact that you came this year to sacrifice from the hard work of your hands. God isn't closed-minded!"

But Moses writes, "The LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard" (verses 4-5).

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God *regarded* Abel's sacrifice. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way: "God [was] commending him by accepting his gifts" (Hebrews 11:4). This can be translated, "God testified over his gifts."

In other words, God did something annually to demonstrate His acceptance of these offerings. We're not told specifically how God expressed His acceptance, but other passages fill in the blank.

Throughout the Old Testament, God demonstrated visibly His acceptance of the sacrifice and the worshiper with fire from heaven.

- When God accepted Aaron's sacrifice in Leviticus 9, He sent fire from heaven and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering.
- God accepted Gideon's sacrifice in Judges 6 by sending fire down to consume it.



- When Elijah and the priests of Baal put their faith on trial, the false god Baal didn't respond, but God did. He testified to His servant Elijah by sending fire from heaven to consume his offering (1 Kings 18).
- When King David offered a sacrifice to God in 1 Chronicles 21, God answered him by sending fire from heaven upon the altar.
- When Solomon later dedicated the temple in 2 Chronicles 7, the Bible says that fire came down from heaven and consumed every sacrifice.

Fire from heaven was God's testimony of accepting the offering.

Year after year as Adam and Eve came to the edge of the garden, along with their sons, and gave their offerings on that altar, the Lord testified His approval by sending fire from heaven, consuming their offerings.

This year, however, Cain's offering remains untouched. No fire falls. This is total humiliation and public embarrassment. That old serpent probably whispered in Cain's heart, "God is playing favorites. You're just as good as Abel."

And with that, the envy in Cain's heart begins to burn to the point that before that year was out, Cain murdered his younger brother, Abel. And Abel became the first follower of God to be martyred for his faith.

And to this day, beloved, the world can be divided, like these two brothers, between those who follow their own way and those who follow God's way.

Over in the New Testament letter of Jude, false religion is categorically referred to as "the way of Cain" (Jude 11). It says, "I'm going to come to God my own way, and I'm going to avoid all this talk about sin and guilt and sacrifice and the need for a Savior. I will bring to

¹Thomas Manton, *By Faith: Sermons on Hebrews 11* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 115.

God what I've done with my own hands."

The problem is, you can't get to God *your* way. In fact, the door to God's house is locked, and there's only one key that will open it.

That key is in the shape of a cross—the cross of Christ, who became the final sacrifice for sin. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

When you place your faith in Christ alone, that doorway into heaven is unlocked, and you're able to enter into a personal relationship with God through Christ, as a forgiven child of God, on your way to heaven forever.

Cain's initial sin involved the nature of his worship. What do you need to examine in your heart with regard to your worship of the Lord?

What aspects of Cain's character do you see in your own life? What qualities of Abel do you find in your life? How can you nurture the latter?



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