

The Offerings of Cain and Abel

Devotional Reading: Luke 20:45–21:4

Background Scripture: Genesis 4:1–25

Today's Scripture: Genesis 4:1–16

I. Two Births Genesis 4:1–2a

¹ Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." ^{2a} **Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.**

1. The Genesis record indicates that this was the first child of the first couple. God commanded the first couple to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28), and Cain is the first evidence of that obedience. The name *Cain* sounds like the Hebrew word for "acquire." Eve praised the Lord, acknowledging that this child was acquired *with the help of the Lord*. The name *Eve* comes from a Hebrew word meaning "living." Adam had given her that name "because she would become the mother of all the living" (3:20). Eve was privileged to experience the fulfillment of that name.

2a. Eve then *gave birth* to *Abel*, though we do not know how much time passed between the births of the two sons. No words of Eve are recorded following Abel's birth. The name *Abel* comes from a Hebrew word meaning "breath" or "vapor." The intentionality of their names should not be lost, as a Hebrew hearer would recognize the lesson of each

of the sons' names. The name "Cain" reminds us that life comes from the Lord, while the name "Abel" would remind the hearer that life is brief, like a vapor.

II. Two Offerings Genesis 4:2b–7

^{2b} **Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.** ³ **In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD.** ⁴ **And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering,** ⁵ **but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.**

⁶ **Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?"** ⁷ **If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."**

2b. The account records the occupation of the two boys: *Abel* became a shepherd, while *Cain* tilled *the soil*. Tilling the ground is what Adam began to do after he and Eve were sent out of Eden.

3–4a. Adam and Eve would have taught their sons how to worship as

they had learned from God while in the garden. While we do not know when the brothers began to offer sacrifice, we do know that they chose to worship through their giving. It is clear from the text that each man gave from the produce of his labors. Cain, already described as someone who “worked the soil,” brought something from *the soil*, most likely a grain or vegetable *offering*. Abel, a keeper of flocks, offered something from *the firstborn of his flock*.

4b-5a. Why did the Lord accept Abel’s *offering* but reject Cain’s? One proposal is that Abel’s offering was a blood sacrifice, while Cain’s was only a grain offering, not costing him much. If so, the hearts or attitudes of the two men were the key factor distinguishing the two offerings.

At this point, the New Testament offers some important insights. Hebrews 11:4 states, “By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous.”

Our text does not indicate precisely how the Lord expressed his acceptance of Abel’s offering and his rejection of Cain’s. Later, the Lord will speak to Cain, so he may have addressed each of the brothers, much as he had earlier spoken to the serpent, Adam, and Eve (Genesis 3:14-19).

5b. *Cain* could have reacted with either remorse or anger. He chose the latter. So great was his bitterness that his facial expression showed his displeasure. As the sacrifices were acts of worship, Cain’s heart posture is obvious.

6. *The Lord* confronted *Cain* about his anger. His questions were designed to make Cain think about his condition, and they prepared him for the counsel the Lord was about to provide. The Lord was as concerned about the offerer as he was about the offering.

7. All was not lost for Cain. He did not have to remain angry. But Cain’s

heart needed to change; though the word *repent* is not used in this passage, Cain needed to do just that and determine to do what was pleasing to the Lord. If he did not take this step, *sin* was ready to exercise even further control over him.

III. Two Outcomes

Genesis 4:8-12

⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

¹⁰ The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”

8. Anger is a powerful emotion that can be a gateway to sinful actions. The words *Let’s go out to the field* are not in the Hebrew text. However, several ancient versions, including the Septuagint (the Greek text of the Old Testament), include these words. At some point, *Cain* persuaded *Abel* to go with him to a field where the older brother took his brother’s life.

First John 3:12 offers insight into what motivated Cain to do the terrible thing he did to his brother. John contrasts the message of loving one another with the actions of Cain, “who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother.” John then raises the question of why Cain killed Abel. The answer? “Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous.”

Rather than heed the Lord's counsel to do what was right, Cain harbored his bitter, envious feelings toward his brother to the point of killing him.

9. *The Lord* knew where Abel was and what Cain had done to him. The question allowed Cain to do something right rather than allow sin to tighten its stranglehold on him. *Cain*, however, denied knowing where Abel was. He even became defiant in his reply: *Am I my brother's keeper?*

10. *The Lord* asked yet another question of Cain—a question that revealed his full awareness of what Cain had *done* to his brother. The Lord's description of how Abel's *blood* was crying to him *from the ground* may indicate that Cain had buried his brother's body in an effort to conceal his deed.

11. Previously, the Lord had cursed the serpent because of its role in deceiving Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:14). Here, Cain was cursed *from the ground*, meaning that the focus of the curse was to be the ground from which Cain made his living.

12. The Lord had already told Adam that the ground would be cursed "because of you;" that is, because of his sin (Genesis 3:17). Working the soil would become a rigorous, demanding task, and the ground would produce thorns and thistles. Here, God told Cain that his labor in the soil would yield nothing in return. Thus what had been the source of productivity and satisfaction for Cain would become a source of frustration and devastation.

IV. Two Epilogues

Genesis 4:13-16

¹³ **Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴ Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."**

¹⁵ **But the LORD said to him, "Not so;**

anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶ So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

13. *Cain* was grieved to hear that his livelihood was being taken from him. While he saw his *punishment* as severe, at a later time, the Lord declared that death was the appropriate punishment for murder (Genesis 9:5-6; Exodus 21:12). Thus, Cain's punishment was less severe than it could have been.

14. At no point did Cain offer any admission of guilt or remorse for his action. Cain saw God as the culprit to be blamed for what lay ahead for him. Cain acknowledged that he could well become the target of revenge for his killing of Abel. Perhaps he was thinking of future family members who would learn of his despicable act.

15. The use of the phrase *seven times over* likely signifies completeness; that is, full *vengeance* will be carried out on *anyone who kills Cain*. It's all too easy to speculate about the composition of the *mark* placed *on Cain* and where it might have been placed on his body; it would have had to be someplace visible, such as his forehead. A primary point not to be overlooked is the Lord's measure of grace by not administering the punishment of the death penalty that Cain, in fact, deserved. But such a penalty isn't announced until Genesis 9:6.

16. We do not read of any expression of gratitude on Cain's part for the Lord's provision of protection from possible vigilante justice. *Cain* simply *went out* and began a new phase of his life *in the land of Nod*. It was certainly a fitting location for someone who had been sentenced to live as a vagabond.

Involvement Learning

The Offerings of Cain and Abel

Into the Lesson

What is the best gift you've ever received?

How did you feel about getting the gift?

How was it the "right" gift?

Today, we will look at the first two gifts recorded in the Bible and explore why one was more acceptable than the other.

Key Verse

The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?"

—Genesis 4:6-7a

Into the Word

Read Genesis 4:1-16. What do the different offerings reveal about the heart of each brother?

What indicators are there to suggest or refute this as being a case of sibling rivalry?

Why did God favor Abel's offering over Cain's?

What do we learn about the character of God from this passage?

Into Life

What makes it easy to give back to God?

Why is it sometimes difficult?

In the space below, write a way you can commit to do right in giving back to God, in both quantity and quality.

Thought to Remember

Make your life an offering to the Lord.