

“Cain and Abel,” Genesis 4:1-16 (Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost, October 22, 2017)

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.”<sup>2</sup> And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.<sup>3</sup> In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground,<sup>4</sup> and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering,<sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.<sup>6</sup> The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?<sup>7</sup> If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.”

<sup>8</sup> Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.<sup>9</sup> Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?”<sup>10</sup> And the Lord said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.<sup>11</sup> And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.<sup>12</sup> When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”<sup>13</sup> Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is greater than I can bear.<sup>14</sup> Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”<sup>15</sup> Then the Lord said to him, “Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him.<sup>16</sup> Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

## PRAY

We are working our way through the early chapters of the book of Genesis this fall. This morning we come to chapter four, the story of two brothers: Cain and Abel. This is the story of the first murder in human history.

A lot of ministers, when they teach on Genesis 4, approach it through the lens of sin. There’s nothing wrong with that. Certainly this passage has much to teach us about sin, and I’ve taught it that way before. But as we’ve focused on sin closely the past two weeks and will probably again next week, I wanted to go in a different direction today.

I think this passage teaches us about something even more fundamental than sin. I think this passage teaches us why we ever sin at all. Two things I want us to see from this text: first, what God wants from us (hint: he doesn’t only want, or even mainly want, us just not to sin). Second, what God gives.

First, what God wants. “Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.<sup>3</sup> In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground,<sup>4</sup> and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering,<sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.” Genesis 4:2b-5a.

One of the main questions that has surrounded this text for centuries is: why was Abel's offering accepted and Cain's rejected? Some scholars have said that Abel's offering was acceptable because it was a blood offering, it involved killing an animal, whereas Cain's offering merely consisted of part of his crops. However, there is nothing in the text itself that indicates there was anything wrong with a grain offering, and we know that later during the period of the temple those offerings were accepted by God.

The New Testament, however, does point us in the direction of a reason: "We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous." 1 John 3:12. Cain's deeds before he murdered Abel, John says, were evil. But we don't read about any of those evil deeds in Genesis 4. So that verse by itself isn't all that helpful.

But when you tie that verse together with Hebrews 11:4, we get closer: "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts."

Abel offered his sacrifice by faith in God, because he trusted in God, while Cain did not. *And that was the difference.* Romans 14:23 says, "Everything that does not come from faith is sin." Abel's offering came from faith, so it was good. God accepted it. Cain's offering did not, so it was sin.

How did this work? The key is to look at Cain and Abel's names. In biblical times, they named children differently than we do now. When we name a child, we might name her after someone we admire. More likely, we use a name because we like it sounds. Often in the South, we'll take some family name or the mother's maiden name and turn it into a first name.

But in antiquity, the name given a child reflected something the parents saw in or hoped for their child. It certainly was true with Cain and Abel. Cain was the firstborn of the family – the firstborn child in human history. And the word "Cain" means something like "acquire, possess, create." Cain was the golden child of the family. Eve is the one who named Cain, and she saw in him all the hopes for the future of humanity. And I don't see any reason to doubt this identity took root inside of Cain as he grew up. His family saw him as the golden child, so he thought of himself as the golden child, as a cut above everyone else.

Especially above his brother, Abel. Abel's birth seems almost an afterthought in the narrative. "Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.'" <sup>2</sup> And again, she bore his brother Abel.' " Genesis 4:1-2a. The word "Abel" means "meaningless," or "nothing," or "vain." It's the same Hebrew word used over and over in Ecclesiastes, where Solomon says, "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Ecclesiastes 1:2.

Cain and Abel's names tell us about the brothers themselves. Cain must have thought highly of himself and been impressed by himself. So when he offered his sacrifice he said, "God's going to be happy to get this sacrifice. I mean, after all, who wouldn't be thrilled to get something from me?" He's the golden boy. His faith, his trust, was in himself.

Abel, however, knew he was a nobody. He'd always been compared unfavorably to his big brother. He had no faith in himself, he was under no illusions that God would be excited to get his gift. His only hope was to trust in the character of God himself. Only if God was good, kind, and loving would he ever accept Abel's sacrifice. And in that hope Abel offered his gift. "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain . . ." Therefore, Abel's gift was accepted, and Cain's was rejected.

So in light of this, what can we learn that God wants from us? He wants, more than anything else, for us to trust him. God is not interested in what we can do for him. He does not need anything from us. He doesn't need our offerings. Psalm 50:10-12: "For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. <sup>11</sup> I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine."

Everything we could possibly give to God came first from him anyway. We read in 1 Chronicles 29 that King David collected offerings from the people of Israel to build a temple for God. And he says, "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you." 1 Chronicles 29:14.

All God really wants from us is to trust him. He doesn't care about anything else. He doesn't need anything from us. He just wants us to trust him. But how exactly do we trust God? What does that even mean? Does it mean we just trust that God exists in some general way or by being willing to identify as Christians?

No, not really. We can be sure we trust God when we *believe his promises and obey his commands, especially when the circumstances around us are screaming at us not too.* What are God's promises? There are hundreds, so we can't cover them all. Psalm 34:18: "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." When hard times come, when suffering comes, it's easy to believe that the Lord is not near. It's easy to believe that he does not see our suffering, that he does not really care about us, or that he is unable to do anything about our pain.

But trusting God means believing, in spite of what's going on, that the Lord is near to you. He does love you. He is working through all these circumstances, and he will deliver you. You say to yourself, "It doesn't feel like God is near, it feels like he's so far away, but I refuse to succumb to my feelings. I'm going to trust he's working in all this." It means believing Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

We can be sure we trust God when we believe his promises **and** obey his commands. Like with the promises of God, there are many commands, but here's one example. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 says, "And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all." I struggle with this one. When I encounter someone whom I consider to be idle, my instinct is not to be patient with them. Rather, I feel like I need to say, "Straighten up! Toughen up! Life's hard, it's not easy, so you might as well get your behind in gear and get whatever needs doing done!" But when I do that I am not trusting God. Instead, I'm trusting

myself and in my ability to motivate people, to shame people, to guilt people so they change and do what I need them or want them to do. Or so they'll just quit bothering me.

God, though, says to be patient with them. He says in Romans 15 to bear with the failings of the weak. When you're doing that when everything in you is crying out to do the opposite, you can be sure you're trusting God.

*And just to be clear*, trusting God means we are to obey God's commands even when we don't understand why he gives them. Last month in *Christianity Today* there was an article by Rachel Gilson. She is now on staff with *Cru*, what used to be called Campus Crusade for Christ, but she grew up in a completely non-religious environment, never exposed to the Bible. On top of that she had a very difficult home life. At age 15 she began to experience strong same-sex attraction. She lived like this throughout high school and until she went off to college at Yale where, second semester of her freshman year, she met for the first time a group of Christians and was converted. And this is what she wrote in her article: "I followed these [Christian] students around like a duckling, observing everything they did and said. But [this] didn't answer all my questions. In particular, how would I deal with my natural, unshakable attraction to women? I knew the Bible was clear: What I wanted was off-limits. But I didn't understand why. How could love, intimacy, and companionship be forbidden by this loving, intimate, companion-seeking God?"

"Thus I had to learn my first lesson of the Christian life: how to obey before I understood. My whole life had taught me to master a concept before I could assent to it. How could I possibly agree to something so costly without grasping the reason? In the end, it came down to trust . . ."

Now, trusting God when you don't understand the reason behind the command doesn't mean you can't ask questions about your faith or about the Bible. It doesn't mean it's wrong to have doubts or wonder what God is up to. *But trusting God does mean God does not owe you an explanation. He is God, you are not. And trusting him means being willing to be okay with that.*

Trusting God is hard. Why did he set it up this way? Why not make it easier? And the answer is *nothing glorifies God more than for his people to trust in him*. If we refuse to trust God and obey his commands, what we're really doing is saying we trust ourselves more than him. We trust our ability to figure things out more than him (because we don't need God's commands to guide us), or we're trusting in our judgment about certain people in our lives more than his (because we think they will give us happiness he can't), or we're trusting in our money more than him (because he says to give it away in radical proportions but we want to spend it on or save it for ourselves).

But when we live in such a way so that we trust the promises of God (especially when we have no idea how he's going to fulfill those promises) and when we obey the commands of God (especially when it's hard to do so and we don't understand why he gives them to us in the first place), it displays the glory of God. *In other words, it makes God look good*. It shows the people around us that we, as God's people, must really think our God is something wonderful if we would consistently live in a way that really no sense from a worldly point of view. 1 Peter

2:12: “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”

Here’s a silly analogy of what it looks like to glorify God: a family goes swimming at the local pool, and it’s a Saturday afternoon – the pool deck is packed with people. The father gets in the deep end and starts treading water right under the diving board. His little girl is four years old, is standing on the diving board, and doesn’t yet know how to swim. Then the dad says, “Jump. I’ll catch you. *I promise.*” Now, the little girl is scared. She doesn’t know how to swim. But how can that little girl make her dad look good at that moment? She can obey him and jump. She can trust her father. And when she does jump, all the other dads on the pool deck smile because they know how good that feels and all the moms look and say, “Awwww.”

That starts to get across what we mean when we say, “Nothing glorifies God more than his people trusting in him.” Abel did that – Abel was nothing, he didn’t know how to swim, but he trusted in God, so his offering brought glory to God. It displayed God’s goodness in way that Cain’s offering never could, because Cain trusted in himself.

Second, what God gives to those who trust him. Genesis 4:5b-7: “So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. <sup>6</sup>The Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?’ <sup>7</sup>If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.’ ”

When God rejects Cain’s offering, Cain gets angry with God. But what I’d never really noticed before I studied this last week is that God doesn’t get angry in return. He doesn’t say, “Cain, you little twerp. How dare you get angry at me and question how I receive offerings! I am the Lord God omnipotent, and I will bless those whom I choose to bless, and I will reject those whom I choose to reject!”

God doesn’t say any of that. Instead, he’s tender. He’s gentle. He sees Cain is upset, and instead of taking offense God asks Cain questions. “Why are you angry, Cain? Why has your face fallen?”

What’s going on? God’s counseling Cain. He wants Cain to overcome his issues. God does say to Cain, “You can’t keep living like this. Sin is crouching at the door. You must master it.” God does give Cain commands, *but he doesn’t only give Cain commands.* God loves Cain. He wants to help Cain understand what’s going on in Cain’s heart. He’s patient with Cain. God commands us to be patient with difficult people, and God always practices what he preaches.

Then we read in verse 8 that Cain kills Abel. This is the first murder in the Scriptures; it’s the first murder in the history of the world. You can understand why so often the theme of sermons off this text is sin. But then we read this: “Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel your brother?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’ <sup>10</sup> And the Lord said, ‘What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. <sup>11</sup> And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. <sup>12</sup> When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.’ ” Genesis 4:9-12.

God is angry at what Cain has done, and he wouldn't be much of a God if he weren't angry. Of course, the appropriate response to murder is anger. But note that God does not strike Cain down in anger, even though Cain struck down Abel down in anger. Also note that God *doesn't give Cain justice*. Because justice for taking someone's life is what? Taking the killer's life! Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. Yet is that what God does? No. God exiles Cain, God curses the relationship between Cain and the ground, so he's farming won't be productive, but he doesn't give Cain justice.

Cain was an unrepentant murderer who was ungrateful for everything God had given him. And more than that. In verse 13, after God confronts Cain about the murder of Abel and tells him his punishment, Cain still isn't sorry for killing Abel. What does he say? He says, "My punishment is greater than I can bear." Cain still isn't sorry he killed his brother; he's just sorry he got caught. Cain's a psychopath.

But Derek Kidner, in his wonderful little commentary on Genesis, writes this: "God's concern for the innocent is matched only by His care for the sinner." In verse 15, we read about the mark of Cain. Kidner says that mark is "not a stigma but a safe-conduct – is almost a covenant, making [God] Cain's ... protector ... *It is the utmost that mercy can do for the unrepentant.*"

**God did not give even Cain justice; instead, he gave even Cain grace.** The God who calls you to trust him is the God who loves to give his people grace.

So many people refuse to trust God because they are afraid God is out to get them. Our hearts basically tell us that we can't take Christianity seriously by trusting God and obeying his commands because our lives will be ruined if we do that. We basically think to ourselves, "If I really start trusting God, I won't have any money, because real Christians are poor. If I really start trusting God, what in the world would he do with my sex life? There's no way my life could ever be enjoyable, because real Christians don't have fun. I'd probably wind up being shipped off as a missionary to Africa, and I don't want that." We are terrified of where it might lead if we give our lives over to God.

However, no story in the Bible proves how false those thoughts are more than the story of Cain and Abel. Cain deserved so much worse from God than he got. He deserved judgement, he deserved death, yet even as God pronounced sentence on Cain he gave him grace.

Friends, God is not out to get you! He doesn't want to ruin your life – he wants to give you life. Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." John 10:10.

How do we know that? Look at what God did for Cain, and look at what Jesus, God in the flesh, did for you.

You know, all the sin Cain had in his heart we have in ours. Yes, Cain murdered, and I'm guessing no one in the room has done that. But you know what Jesus said about murder, right? "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders

will be liable to judgment.’ “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment . . .” Matthew 5:21-22. What’s that mean? It means when you get angry, you’re murdering people in your heart. According to Matthew 5, I killed about twenty people last week. Some of them more than once.

It means I’m guilty, and so are you, because our hearts are full of all the sinful junk that filled Cain’s heart. We deserve judgment from God.

But rather than give us judgment, God gave us Jesus. Jesus lived a perfect life without any sin, so when he died on the cross he wasn’t dying for his sins – *he died for ours*. And now Jesus lives to give us grace and show us mercy. Hebrews 4:16: “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Because of Jesus Christ, we can be sure that God is not out to get us, nor is he not waiting for the chance to smite us. If God were cruel, if God were out to get us, we wouldn’t wonder about it, *we’d know it*. He’s God – if he wanted to make us miserable, he could surely do a better job of it than he is. But he doesn’t want to crush us. Instead, he’s ready to show grace.

So trust him. Turn your life over to him by believing his promises and obeying his commands. He’ll give you the grace you need. ***He will give you life.*** And if you don’t trust him, you’re just trusting in yourself and in your ability to figure things out. *And, really, is that wise?* Haven’t you lived long enough to realize your judgment about how to make it through life is pretty bad and you shouldn’t rely on it? Haven’t you blown it enough on your own yet? Friends, trusting in yourself is a dead end that will only lead to you wandering through life.

That’s Genesis 4:16. “Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.” “Nod” in Hebrew means “wandering.” Cain refused to trust God, so he was doomed to a life of wandering.

Edith Eva Eger is a Holocaust survivor; she had her 17<sup>th</sup> birthday in Auschwitz. She survived, though her parents didn’t. She married after World War II and moved to the United States, where she raised a family, took a job in a factory, and eventually went to college. At 42 she got her bachelor’s degree in psychology, then went on to get a Ph.D and became a clinical psychologist. At age 90, she still practices. She also serves as a consultant for the Army and the Navy on the treatment of PTSD and she advises the Navy Seal program in particular on resiliency training. Given her experience in a Nazi concentration camp I’d say she’s qualified to do that.

She’s seen everything. When it comes to suffering, she’s seen it all. Now she’s not a Christian, but earlier this year wrote a book called *The Choice* and in it she nailed the human condition on the head. She wrote, “If you asked me for the most common diagnosis among the people I treat, I wouldn’t say depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, although these conditions are all too common among those I’ve known [and] loved . . . No, I would say hunger. We are hungry. We are hungry for approval, attention, affection. We are hungry for the freedom to embrace life and to really know and be ourselves.” Dr. Edith Eva Eger, *The Choice* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 7.

Friends, we're all hungry. We're all looking to something to satisfy. Maybe you're looking to money, or professional success, or sex, or seeing your kids do well in life. We're all hungry, but if you look only to those things and refuse to trust God you will starve. You will wander hopelessly through your life like Cain. Only God can satisfy you, and he pleads with you to come to him so he can do it. In Isaiah 55:1-3b God cries out to his people and says: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. <sup>2</sup> Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. <sup>3</sup> Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. [And] I will make an everlasting covenant with you ..." God wants to protect and provide for you, he wants to satisfy you. Will you trust him? AMEN