

Tell Me The Story: *Grace Outside the Garden* - week 8

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Oct. 17, 2021

Read Genesis 4 NIV

Like Genesis 3, Genesis 4 is a sad story. In fact, it is more than sad. It is a dark story. The avalanche of sin is speeding up, rushing into ever deeper darkness. The avalanche is heading into death, literally so. The first child born to the first humans murders his brother.

But as is the case with Genesis 3, so it is with Genesis 4. Although a very sad story, Genesis 3 is full of grace. And although it is a sad, dark story, Genesis 4 is also full of grace, full of light.

Genesis shows us grace in the Garden; and Genesis reveals grace outside the Garden. Over Genesis 3 we can speak the New Testament claim, **“Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more [super-abounded]”** (Rom 5:20); over Genesis 4 we can speak the New Testament claim, **“the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it”** (John 1:5).

Notice that the story is bracketed by miracles. The sad, dark chapter begins and ends with the conception and birth of a child. **“Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain”** (v. 1). **“Adam had relations with his wife again; and she gave birth to a son, and named him Seth”** (v. 25). In a world falling apart, in a world

coming under the power of death, God graces the first human couple with children. Conception and birth are always a miracle. Outside the Garden, God is extending amazing grace.

What is said at the birth of each child opens up the meaning of Genesis 4. Of Cain, Eve says, **"I have gotten a man child with the help of the LORD."** Of Seth, Eve says **"God has appointed me another offspring [literally "seed"] in place of Abel, for Cain killed him."** God has given Eve children.

The sad and dark story of Genesis 4 is full of grace and light – as are all sad, dark stories in which the God of grace and light chooses to intervene. There's so much in this chapter that helps us make sense of our own stories.

The most significant way Genesis 4 helps us make sense of our stories is in the way God relates to Cain. In the opening scene of the story, we find God contending for Cain's soul, as he does for our souls. It is on this grace that I invite you to focus with me.

The two brothers bring their offerings to God. **"The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering; but for Cain and his offering, He had no regard. So Cain become very angry and his countenance fell"** (vv. 4-5). Why did Cain become angry?

To understand, we need to consider why God was pleased with Abel and his offering, but not with Cain and his offering?

The emphasis the story gives is on the person presenting the gift; not the gift presented. So there was something about Abel that pleased God and something about Cain that displeased God. What was it?

In the New Testament, Hebrews 11, "the faith chapter," we have a clue. **"By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain"** (Hebrews 11:4). Abel's offering wasn't better than Cain's gift, but Abel's attitude was. Abel offers his gift by faith: acknowledging that God is God, that God has first place in all things.

So what was Cain's attitude? Probably a faulty one. As the first ever first-born-son, Cain likely assumes his gift is acceptable, because of what? Because he is first born. Kind of a puffed up attitude. So he might have said, **"I'm the first born, watch this Abel. I'll show you how this is done."** Then his gift is given not out of faith, but of what? Works. It seems he comes before God not by faith, but by works; appealing to himself, to his human status as the first ever first-born-son. His name, even means **"I have gotten"** or **"gotten one,"** which fits with Eve's exclamation at his birth, **"I have gotten a man as the LORD."** Genesis 4:1 is commonly translated, **"I have gotten a man child with the help of the LORD,"** yet by saying **"I have gotten"** with the emphasis on *her doing, her getting*, it is almost as if she is saying, *"As the Lord creates, so I have created. As the Lord created Adam, so I have created a man, an Adam."*

It makes sense then that what Cain is so angry about is that God does not receive his gift based on the status he was raised with, "***The first first-born-son ever.***" God does not honor Cain's view of himself and does not operate on Cain's value system of being first.

When you think of it, when did God ever operate on a "*the first shall be first*" value system? First born status makes no difference to God, as we see in the rest of Genesis. Faith is what God responds too.

In the moment that God does not show regard for Cain and his offering, Cain's self-centered world is threatened. Indeed, it is leveled. And he becomes very angry. God is not playing by Cain's rules.

What makes matters worse for Cain is that God does not accept Cain's view of Abel either. All his life Cain has expected Abel, the second born son, to play by first born rules. Cain has come to see himself as the center of the universe and therefore, sees Abel as one of his orbiting planets. Cain looks at Abel as either someone useful for his own well-being or someone who is an obstacle to his own well-being. God's regard for Abel changes the playing field.

The fact is, Cain has never really seen Abel as a brother. He calls Abel "brother," but in his heart, Abel has never been on the same level, never an equal. For Cain to truly

to embrace Abel as a brother, Cain would have to move out of the center.

In our fallen state, we want to be the center of our worlds - and of everyone else's world. As long as we keep living with that faulty view of ourselves, no one around us is a brother or a sister. They are either a means to an end or an obstacle in the way. Or worse yet, we do not even notice them.

But God... God does not want Cain to suffer from his fit faulty view of himself, so in grace God appeals to him to do well, **"If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?"** (v. 7).

"Sin is crouching at the door" (v. 7) and God's warning is grace. God portrays sin as a violent animal, ready to pounce on its victim. *"Go for it,"* says sin. *"Be the center. Be number one. You deserve the very best."* Cain's sin is crouching at the door, **"It's desire is for you"** (v. 7). To paraphrase, God says, ***"Do well, Cain. Think straight. You are not the center. You do not have first place. The Creator is the center. You and Abel are equals on the circumference."***

But Cain will not give up his infantile self-perception, and as a result he **"envies God's pleasure in his brother"** and becomes angry with God. God warned him, as he warns us, ***"Deal with your faulty view of yourself, or your fault view of yourself will consume you."***

God was contending for Cain's soul, and God contends for our souls. God, in grace, exposes the Cain in us. God helps us see that when we think we are the center, brothers and sisters around us are reduced to objects to be used, discarded, or neglected.

“Where is your brother?”

Genesis 4 especially wants us to see that how we view ourselves and others is a symptom of how we view God. Most of the conflict in our world, be it between individuals or nations, is rooted in the Cain-like bent in us all. This is the reason for the gracious question, **“Where is your brother?”** (v. 9). In Genesis 3, grace came through **“Where are you?”** Now, in Genesis 4, it comes through **“Where is your brother?”** **“Where is your sister?”**

This is God's call to realize that we are not the center of our worlds. “Me first” is the language of the nursery. “I,” “me,” “mine,” “myself” are the pronouns of Cain, who is stuck in infancy. Jesus comes into our world and calls us into adulthood. “You, Jesus, you are first” is the language of maturity, the language of the soul set free.

God's question **“Where is your brother?”** also reminds us that people are in our lives because they are gifts from God. Abel was a gift from the hand of God. Abel came from Eve's womb, but ultimately he came from God. But because Cain did not see God at the center, he did not see Abel as a gift. We can overlook the people in our

lives, we can hurry past them, we can use them, or we can run into the arms of God who gives them as gifts.

In Cain's story, we also recognize that God meets us in our brother or sister. **"What have you done?"** (v. 10) God asks as though Cain's done it to Him. To disregard the brother or sister - even the "nobody" brother or sister - is to disregard the God who created them, the God in whom they **"live and move and have [their] being"** (Acts 17:28). Is this not what Jesus says in the parable in Matthew 25:40, **"Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me."** Violate a brother or sister, a gift from God, and you violate God Himself.

Jesus identifies with all the Abels of the world, all the "nothings." He is telling us what he wanted Cain to understand: we meet him in the Abels - in the powerless, in the "nobodies." If we see ourselves as Cain did, as having the right to first place, we will not see Jesus in those he calls "brothers and sisters."

C.S. Lewis in "The Weight of Glory" says, "Where is your brother?" is another way for God to ask, *"Where am I? Where do you think I am? What you do with your brother or sister you do with me."*

Sadly, Cain did not overcome the sin crouching at the door. He could not give up his infantile view of himself. He even built his city around this infantile view. We will

talk about “God and the city” when we get to Genesis 11 and the very relevant story of the Tower of Babel.

But God. God does a new work of grace outside the Garden. He works in Eve’s body, causing her to conceive again, and he works in Eve’s soul, resulting in a change in her speech. When Cain was born the speech was “**I have gotten a man child**” (4:1). But when Seth is born, the speech is “**God has appointed me another offspring.**” Light has broken into her darkness.

The mother of all living regains perspective and throws herself on the promise God made in the Garden that one day a **seed of the woman** would come and crush the serpent. Clearly, and sadly, Cain is not that seed, but God has not given up. He starts over. Seth is given: the promise keeps going.

And miracle of miracles! “**Then man [humans] began to call upon the name of the LORD**” (v. 26). Outside the garden, in the heart of the city, people “**began to call on the name of the LORD.**” We can end this sermon with “*Hurray!*” as the people begin to call on the name of the LORD! They’re receiving God’s grace and life.

(Drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson’s book *The Story of All Stories.*)