



WEEK FIVE: Genesis 4:1-17

Sermon Outline:

The disruption that was introduced into the Lord's good creation in the foolish disobedience of the first couple escalates quickly in the chapters that follow. The second recorded sin is fratricide! The narrative of Cain and Abel prepares us for the amplification of sin that results in the flood, but it also prepares us for the action that begins in Genesis 12 with the call of Abram. The most noticeable theme that is introduced is the conflict between brothers and the preference for the younger son: Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers (who also seek to kill him), and Manasseh and Ephraim.

The main character in the story, however, is the Lord and we learn quite a bit about him in this account. [If you haven't read the story, now would be a good time to do so since we will be working through the text backwards.]

By the end of the story we have learned, first of all, that the Lord responds to sin with judgment infused with grace. Cain, under the protection of the Lord's mark on him, has found a wife and a community within which he has taken leadership; building and naming a city after his son. This doesn't sound like a man under the judgment of God!

The protective mark is given after Cain has protested that his punishment is too heavy for him to bear. It should be noted that the punishment that would have fit the crime, according to the Law, was death (See Numbers 35:16-21)! The Lord's gracious protection (and promise to avenge Cain if he is murdered!) is on top of this first act of grace. Both of these are all the more remarkable given Cain's non-repentant attitude. He never acknowledges what he has done nor does he seek atonement or forgiveness. In fact, he even overstates (and, by so doing, misrepresents) the Lord's judgment and grace – claiming it is too heavy for him and adding that he will be hidden from the Lord's presence and that he will be killed by all who find him – neither of which the Lord said in his judgment.

And of course, Cain's outright lie when asked (another question from the Lord to the perpetrator!) by the Lord where his brother was and his churlish rhetorical question about whether his was meant to be his brother's keeper (a corruption of the same word used to describe the task of Adam and Eve in the garden – to care and keep it!).

The pivot in the story is the murder, but this is not where the tension begins.

Just prior to the murder the Lord speaks to Cain, warning him that sin is crouching at his door. It's desire is for him, but Cain must rule over it. There are several parallels to the garden scene. Another description of a "wild animal" that foreshadows the sin that is to come and another combination of "desire" and "rule" (See Genesis 3:16). It is important to note that there is both the possibility and the expectation that Cain can and will do right!

It is the first part of the interaction that draws our attention to the central issue: The Lord's questions to Cain. "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?"

For all the questions we have about this text (e.g., What is the mark of Cain? Where did the people come from?) we have an answer to this one. Cain is angry and downcast because the Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering and not on Cain or his offering.

The rest of Scripture provides us with some potential reasons for this acceptance. Hebrews 11:4 tells us that Abel brought a better sacrifice by faith. The prophets frequently called out the Israelites for their ritualistic approach, disconnected from a heart response (See 1 Samuel 15:22; Jeremiah 7:9-11; Amos 5:21-24) and a blemished offering would not be accepted either (Lev. 22:20; Mal. 1:6c-8). However, none of these are present in Genesis 4. Nothing in the story prepares us for the Lord's choice – shepherds aren't better than farmers, meat offerings aren't better than grain or fruit offerings, Cain appears to be the initiator of the offerings (and Abel also brought something).

The problem is God's inscrutable choice of Abel over Cain. This is why Cain is angry and crestfallen.

This is not the first time we will read about God's inscrutable choices or actions – and the biblical characters are not the only ones to experience this. It is part of our own story too!

Genesis 32:22-28 narrates the story of Jacob's night-time wrestle with God (again in the context of brotherly conflict) in which he receives a new name: Israel, "for you have wrestled with God and with humans and have overcome". The very name of God's people reflects this wrestle we have with the God who is free to act as he sees fit.

This is where the end of the story comes to our aid. The Lord is not some capricious god whose actions are always unpredictable. He may very well make choices that we do not understand, but against the backdrop of a character that is "the same yesterday, today, and forever". Grace in judgment, provision, protection, goodness, a commitment to his plans and purposes, and a continual invitation to trust him.

We can trust the inscrutable God because of his revealed character – but this is not always an easy thing to do! Cain is a negative example in that he neither trusts, nor resists the dangerous choice to give in to violence. We are invited to trust the gracious God even when we don't understand what he is doing!

Questions to Ask

NOTE: The questions below are arranged into two sets. The first three are very open, allowing for wide exploration and discussion. The second set are more specifically tied to the sermon. Use one, both, or a mix of the two depending on your group.

1. What stood out to you in this sermon?
2. What questions do you have about this text? [If you meet prior to Wednesday, you can access the Big III question portal and ask some of these questions there.]
3. What might the Holy Spirit be inviting you to do in response?

4. Think of a time when the Lord has acted in a way that you do not understand. What were the temptations that accompanied this circumstance?
5. Jacob's name is changed to Israel in Genesis 32 to reflect his struggle with God. How have you struggled with God?
6. In the first two instances of sin, God's judgment is infused with grace. What does this combination tell us about God, sin, and us?
7. When Jesus speaks about murder in Matthew 5:21-26 he links it strongly with reconciliation between people ("brothers or sisters"). How might that teaching help interpret or commentate on Genesis 4:1-17?
8. The Lord is not capricious in his actions, but is sometimes inscrutable. How does his never-changing character help us trust him in the mystery?

A Prayer to Pray

Pray that for a trusting attitude in the face of God's sometimes inscrutable actions in our lives and thanks for the consistency of his character that allows us to trust him in the mystery.

A Practice to Try

Cain chose to murder his brother rather than to be reconciled to him (and to God). Practice reconciliation this week.

Readings to Read This Week

The following readings are the next five in the annotated list of readings to discover the big picture of the Bible. You can find the annotated part in the Life Group Resources page on our website.

- Joshua 23:1-16
- Judges 2:6-22
- 2 Samuel 7:1-17
- 1 Kings 9:1-9
- 1 Kings 12:1-14

A Mission Commitment to Reflect on

One of our strategic priorities is Community Engagement. This has a number of broad focuses, but one of them is evangelism. This series in Genesis is a broad introduction to the story that leads to Jesus. Is there someone in your life who you might invite to listen to these sermons, attend a service with you, or who might even join your Life Group?

A GBC Initiative to Promote/Celebrate

Each week we will provide you with a key aspect of our community news that we would encourage you to remind your Life Group about.

1. Sunday, August 31 we will be holding our third Soundings event from 11:30-1:00. This is an opportunity to make your voice heard and to contribute to our discernment process as we begin to look towards 2026. Our focus will be on Spiritual Journey and we'll be asking participants to discuss a few questions to help us think this strategic priority through.