

# **In the Beginning**

Message 6

## ***The Beginning of Death***

Genesis 4:1-26; Psalm 49:1-20

### ***Birth of the Seed***

Adam and Eve deserved to die. Their guilt was not in doubt, the verdict was not in doubt, and the justice of their sentence was not in doubt. But just as they waited for their lives to be snuffed out by an angry God, the impossible happened. Instead of killing them, God gave them a promise. He would destroy their enemy, the serpent who led them into sin. And He would let them live long enough to bear a child who would save them from death. I'm sure Adam and Eve were stunned. They couldn't believe their ears! Perhaps they were indeed dead and this was a cruel hallucination. But no, God was clearly there, and they were still breathing. It was true! God was planning to save them from the miserable death they deserved. So Adam, as soon as he recovered from the shock of realizing he was still alive, acted on God's word. He named his wife Eve, the Mother of the Living, because Adam trusted God to do what He promised. He believed God, that He would delay death until they had a child who would save them.

Everyone loves a baby. Just take a baby for a walk or into a store and everyone smiles, and some come over to admire the little bundle of joy. Adam and Eve had never seen a baby before, so imagine their wonder when Cain was born. Sure, Eve had to suffer horrible pain, pain the like of which she had never imagined. But now she had a beautiful, amazing baby. But for Adam and Eve the joy was double, for this was the seed God had promised. This baby would grow up to become the man who would crush the serpent's head and set them free from the curse. This is why Eve named him Cain, which means "acquire". She said, "I have acquired a man, Yahweh." The Hebrew text does not have the preposition "from". Before "LORD" it has "eth", a particle which signals the object of the verb. This same particle is in front of Cain earlier in the verse, showing that Cain is the object of the verb "bore". So a better translation of Eve's statement is, "I have acquired a man, Yahweh." Eve was not so naive to think she had given birth to God Himself. She meant that he was the man of God who would crush the serpent's head.

Adam and Eve must have struggled to be patient while Cain grew up, and in the meantime they had another wonderful baby, whom they named Abel. But as the boys grew up, trouble developed in the household, as anyone in a family with boys can imagine. There is much we do not know about this early society. I wish I knew how old the boys were when they began farming and herding. I wish I knew how they knew to offer sacrifices. We can guess that God instructed them. Many scholars think that the cherubim at the entrance to the Garden of Eden not only kept people out, but also marked the location for sacrifice. But we are not informed of these things. What we *can* see is that man knew to offer sacrifices to God, and he knew how they were to be offered. It seems that God's first sacrifice was an example for them. God killed an animal and clothed them with its skins. So they learned that the death of a substitute was an essential part of worship. The blood of an animal would replace the blood of man which God required for man's sin.

As Cain grew into manhood, Adam and Eve must have been increasingly dismayed at him. The text tells us that Cain refused to worship the right way and that he had a temper. Such a person was undoubtedly rebellious and angry about other things as well. Cain was what today we call a "problem child". Perhaps today we would shoot him up with Ritalin to keep him sedated in school. But do you see the connection between Cain and his parents? It was Adam who rebelled against God and then tried to blame his wife. Cain is simply expressing the effect of sin as it matures in society. Sin becomes increasingly corrupt from one generation to another.

### ***The Sin of Cain***

The sin of Cain can be hard for people today to understand. I don't mean his murder. That's easy

enough for anyone to grasp. I mean the sin which led to murder. There was another sin which set into motion the events that led to murder. Cain's core sin was a refusal to worship God the way He required. We aren't told exactly what God said about worship, but it is clear from context that God had specified that the offerings should be animals who had been killed. As we noted, this would fit with God's action in the garden. Abel was willing to kill his best lamb and offer it to God, but Cain insisted on offering some fruit from his garden. No doubt part of Cain's stubbornness had to do with the fact that fruit is what he produced. Perhaps Cain thought it ridiculous that he should get a lamb from Abel when he had perfectly good fruit. Perhaps he thought God valued his work less than Abel's and felt insulted. But the root issue is that Cain knew God required a blood sacrifice, and He refused to bring one.

Here's another thing I wish I knew: how did God show His acceptance of the offerings? Some scholars think God may have sent fire from heaven upon the altar, as He did when Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. However He did it, the text is clear that God unambiguously communicated that Abel's sacrifice was acceptable, and Cain's was not. A man like Cain would not take an insult like that lightly, and I am sure he was enraged at God's impertinence. God was out of reach, but Abel was right at hand. And Abel represented the goodness and righteousness of the God Cain had grown to hate. So rebellion led to anger which led to hatred and finally to murder.

Before we continue the story of Cain, let's pause to apply this passage to ourselves. All people will agree that murder is wrong, and most will agree that hatred is wrong – but how many will see that anger and rebellion lie behind hatred and murder? The lesson of Cain is that sin, all sin, begins with a rebellious attitude toward worship. Cain didn't refuse to worship God, he refused to worship God the *right way* – and this is the root of sin which led eventually to murder. We Americans tend to be careless about how we worship. We champion the freedom to worship as we please – which is a good and important civil policy – but we fail to see that in the church God has declared the specific way He wants to be worshiped. Too many Christians rejoice when people claim to worship God, without pausing to notice *how* they are worshipping Him.

Throughout the Bible some of the worst sins are not just worshipping other gods, but worshipping the true God the wrong way. The most vivid example is the incident of the golden calf as the Israelites were on their way from Egypt to Canaan. When Aaron displayed the calf, he said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" (Exodus 32:4) Meanwhile up on the mountain, God was giving Moses the ten commandments. The second commandment said, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them." (Exodus 20:4-5a) God does not welcome just any worship. He requires worship in the way He has directed.

This is not the place for a lecture on worship, but we shall note in passing that the Bible spells out certain elements of proper worship. These include reading the scripture, preaching the gospel, praying, singing, and correct participation in the sacraments under the authority of elders appointed to rule the church. The first step of obedience to God is to worship Him as He has specified. It is great to gather here tonight to sing and praise and learn about God. Our faith is nourished by ministries such as RUF, InterVarsity, and FCA. But on the Lord's Day, worshipping with other students on campus is not right. Sunday morning you belong in a church worshipping as God has directed. This does not mean we are all locked into the same denomination or worship style. At Lehigh you can get a ride with me to the Presbyterian church, or with Rick Noecker to the Evangelical Free Church, and there are other good churches around. The first application of this passage is to make it your practice to go to a biblically faithful church every Sunday morning.

Refusal to worship correctly was the root of Cain's sin, and that sin led to the sin of anger. How

often do we tolerate a little anger among Christians? There *is* such a thing as godly anger, when we are upset that God's name is slandered or His laws are broken. But most of our anger is ungodly anger. Most anger arises because *our* name is slandered, or we are inconvenienced, or our pride is wounded. This is ungodly anger, and it is wrong. Paul said, "Do not let the sun go down on your wrath," (Eph 4:26) and "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you..." (Eph 4:31) James said, "The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God." (James 1:20) We ought to learn from Cain and be warned not to allow anger to reside in our hearts. For when anger matures, it produces hatred, and hatred is the root of murder.

Jesus connected anger to murder in the Sermon on the Mount.

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.

Matthew 5:21-22

Cain was not a nice guy who murdered his brother by accident. Cain rebelled against God and nursed his anger over a lifetime. It was just a matter of time until he would be ready to kill. This is what is behind Jesus' warning not to allow yourself to remain angry with people. If you go through life angry, you too may get to the point of being able to kill.

When God found Adam after he had sinned, Adam told the truth, but he distorted it and shifted the blame onto Eve. Now we continue to see the progressive effects of sin through the generations. Cain told God a bald-faced lie and outrightly refused to take any responsibility for his act. "Am I my brother's keeper," he arrogantly replied to God's question about Abel. But Cain could not hide his crime. Although he would not confess it, God reported that "the voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground." Abel was dead, but his blood could not be silenced. The shed blood cried out from the ground into which it fell. Consequently, God pronounced judgment on Cain. "So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth." The earth which received Abel's blood will now reject Cain. Notice again the progression of sin. When Adam sinned, God cursed the ground, but not Adam. Now God hikes the stakes and curses Cain himself.

Language like this is difficult for us reared in the western materialist tradition to comprehend. We think we know what blood is. It is a mixture of organic compounds: serum, red and white cells, platelets, and other ingredients. In particular, blood does not cry out. And then we think cursing is using bad language, maybe swear words. We limit the effect of a curse to its impact on those who hear it. But Proverbs says, "Like a flitting sparrow, like a flying swallow, So a curse without cause shall not alight." (Proverbs 26:2) Now whatever else you make of this verse, there is no doubt that it implies a certain effectiveness to the curse. It implies that a curse justly spoken will harm the one cursed. Earlier in Proverbs we find, "The curse of the LORD is on the house of the wicked, But He blesses the home of the just." (Proverbs 3:33) God's blessing is not merely a warm sentiment – it is a verbal power to benefit the one blessed. And neither is His curse God venting His frustration. When God curses you, your life inevitably takes a turn for the worse. This takes us back to chapter one, when we mentioned that God works by speaking. God's words are not mere sound waves, they are a power that makes things happen. God's word of curse was in response to the word of Abel's blood. I'm not sure how to explain exactly what was going on here, but it was more than a symbolic gesture. Apparently the blood of righteous Abel in some way caused the earth to reject the work of wicked Cain.

Cain has spent his life rebelling against God, and now God has rejected him. God patiently bore with Cain for many years. All the way until the end God tried to persuade Cain to repent and believe His word, but Cain refused. Even after God cursed Him he was remorseless. Instead of showing even a little regret, he complained, "My punishment is greater than I can bear!" Here we see the immense depth of God's mercy. Cain deserved nothing but the worst form of death, but God not only let him live, God even protected him from the injustice of others. Cain would not live by God's laws, but God nevertheless protected him by those laws. It is always true that the wicked survive only because God does not treat them like they treat others.

### ***A Culture of Murder***

And now as the chapter proceeds we see the development of a whole culture based on the ethic of Cain. In many ways it was a beautiful and prosperous culture. Industry and the arts were invented and flourished. But it was an evil culture. Polygamy began as men used women for their own pleasure. It was a murderous culture, in line with its founder. By the time we get to Lamech in the sixth generation, he is man who murders with delight. He takes pride in his murder and sings to his wives of it.

Do you know of any cultures like this? There are some fairly nasty places in the world. In the Sudan the government has been killing, torturing, raping, and enslaving any Christians who refuse to convert to Islam. The rest of Africa has seen some brutal regimes as well. Perhaps the most famous 20<sup>th</sup> century culture of murder was Nazi Germany, which killed 6 million Jews and anyone else who got in the way of their military ambitions. But what about our own culture? We, right here in America, have killed over 40 million babies for pleasure. We make the Germans look positively humanitarian. What is a Christian to do in a culture awash in sin? How can we cope with the evil all around us? Psalm 49 gives us some perspective on living in an evil culture. Let's read it together.

### **Psalm 49**

- 1 Hear this, all peoples; \*  
*Give ear, all inhabitants of the world,*
- 2 Both low and high, \*  
*Rich and poor together.*
- 3 My mouth shall speak wisdom, \*  
*And the meditation of my heart shall give understanding.*
- 4 I will incline my ear to a proverb; \*  
*I will disclose my dark saying on the harp.*
- 5 Why should I fear in the days of evil, \*  
*When the iniquity at my heels surrounds me?*
- 6 Those who trust in their wealth \*  
*And boast in the multitude of their riches,*
- 7 None of them can by any means redeem his brother, \*  
*Nor give to God a ransom for him;*
- 8 For the redemption of their souls is costly, \*  
*And it shall cease forever;*
- 9 That he should continue to live eternally, \*  
*And not see the Pit.*
- 10 For he sees wise men die; \*  
*Likewise the fool and the senseless person perish, and leave their wealth to others.*
- 11 Their inner thought is that their houses will last forever, their dwelling places to all generations; \*  
*They call their lands after their own names.*
- 12 Nevertheless man, though in honor, does not remain; \*

- He is like the beasts that perish.*
- 13 This is the way of those who are foolish, \*  
*And of their posterity who approve their sayings.* Selah
- 14 Like sheep they are laid in the grave; \*  
*Death shall feed on them;*  
The upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; \*  
*And their beauty shall be consumed in the grave, far from their dwelling.*
- 15 But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, \*  
*For He shall receive me.* Selah
- 16 Do not be afraid when one becomes rich, \*  
*When the glory of his house is increased;*
- 17 For when he dies he shall carry nothing away; \*  
*His glory shall not descend after him.*
- 18 Though while he lives he blesses himself \*  
*(For men will praise you when you do well for yourself),*
- 19 He shall go to the generation of his fathers; \*  
*They shall never see light.*
- 20 A man who is in honor, yet does not understand, \*  
*Is like the beasts that perish.*

The wicked seem to prosper. They and their offspring flourish. They become rich and glorious, but it's an illusion. Soon they will be rotting in the grave and be forgotten. He will be as worthless as a dead animal, but the godly shall rule the earth. Take heart! Remember this! Don't be intimidated or discouraged by the success of evil men.

### ***Salvation in Peril***

I'm sure you can imagine the incredible heartbreak of Adam and Eve as they saw their beautiful baby, upon whom they had placed such high hopes, turn out to be a cruel man. And think of the incredible grief when Abel was killed. To lose one son would be devastating, but to lose him at the hand of another son would be too horrible for words. Cain was fed up with the land around Eden and he left, so Adam and Eve had nothing – no children at all. But what heightens the agony and the hopelessness is the promise which was dashed by Cain rebellion – the promise of the seed. Adam and Eve's only hope was to bear a child who would crush the serpent's head. Cain was supposed to be that child, but he was not the seed of the woman – he was the seed of the serpent. Rebelling against God he became beast-like and demonic. The serpent was victorious! Adam and Eve were faced with the crushing reality that they would die forever.

But God intervened. When all hope was lost, when Eve was helpless, God stepped in and gave her another baby. By now Eve is a humbler woman. When she names the baby she doesn't say, "I have acquired a man, Yahweh." Now she puts God at the center. God is the subject of the sentence as she said, "God has appointed another seed for me." Next week we will see how God used Seth to prepare salvation for His people.

### ***Better Blood Than Abel's***

Abel's blood cried out to God from the ground, and God cursed Cain as a result. The New Testament tells us that Abel's blood still cries out. We read in Hebrews, "By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks." (Hebrews 11:4) And what does Abel's blood speak of? It tells us that the wicked will be punished in the end, and that the faithful will endure, though they suffer in this life. But Hebrews tells us that there is a better blood than Abel's.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven...

Hebrews 12:22-25

Abel's blood cried out for vengeance. Jesus's blood cries out for mercy. Abel's blood fouled the earth. Jesus' blood cleansed the earth. Abel's blood brought a curse on Cain. Jesus' blood removed the curse from the human race. This is the blood that we receive in the wine of Lord's supper. When we take and drink that wine, we receive the blessing of the blood of Jesus. Jesus is the final, perfect sacrifice, and His blood converts wicked people and wicked cultures. Never forget that Jesus' blood is effective to forgive your sins, and never neglect the Lord's Supper in which Jesus declares that forgiveness. And always praise God for His immeasurable grace!

C. David Green  
Lehigh University  
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