

Justice, Vengeance, and Mercy

Printed Text • Genesis 4:1–16

Devotional Reading • Hebrews 2:14–18

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXPLORE God’s justice in the face of human sinfulness; REFLECT on the dangers of allowing sin to control us; and REPENT of thoughts and actions that could harm others and ask for God’s mercy and forgiveness.

In Focus

Reginald remembered the anger that once burned like a hot coal in his heart. He had spent most of his life as a troubled person. By the age of 37, he had not held a job for longer than a couple of years and was about to be fired from his present job. He was in a terrible state back then. His wife had just left him, taking their only child, a son he adored. She was no longer willing to bear the brunt of his angry outbursts. He had lost all that was dear to him because of his bad temper.

Reginald’s life probably would have remained unchanged had it not been for his coworker Cheryl who sat down with him during lunch one day. They got to chatting about their families, and Reginald ended up admitting that he was having troubles. Cheryl prayed for him right then and there, and told him, “God has a better way for you.” That message of hope started Reginald on the road to the righteous life that God desires for everyone.

After a time of working through his anger and committing his life to Christ, Reginald’s family was reunited. As he thinks about the peaceful life he enjoys today, he wonders how different things would be if his former coworker had not had the courage to confront his negative behavior.

How do you react when someone confronts you about your harmful actions? Ask members to share periods in their lives when they felt deluged by tragic events. Invite them to share how God’s grace sustained them.

Keep In Mind

“And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground.”
(Genesis 4:10, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Offering (Genesis 4:5) minkha (Heb.) — An offering, usually of agricultural produce, especially a grain offering

B. Slew (v. 8) harag (Heb.) — To kill, smite, or slay

Say It Correctly

Sheol. SHEE-ole

Euphemistically. YOU-feh-MISS-tih-kal-lee

KJV

Genesis 4:1 And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord.

2 And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.

3 And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord.

4 And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering:

5 But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.

6 And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?

7 If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

8 And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

9 And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?

10 And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.

11 And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;

12 When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

13 And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

14 Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.

15 And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.

16 And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

NLT

Genesis 4:1 Now Adam had sexual relations with his wife, Eve, and she became pregnant. When she gave birth to Cain, she said, "With the Lord's help, I have produced a man!"

2 Later she gave birth to his brother and named him Abel.

When they grew up, Abel became a shepherd, while Cain cultivated the ground.

3 When it was time for the harvest, Cain presented some of his crops as a gift to the Lord.

4 Abel also brought a gift—the best portions of the firstborn lambs from his flock. The Lord accepted Abel and his gift,

5 but he did not accept Cain and his gift. This made Cain very angry, and he looked dejected.

6 "Why are you so angry?" the Lord asked Cain. "Why do you look so dejected?"

7 You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master."

8 One day Cain suggested to his brother, "Let's go out into the fields." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother, Abel, and killed him.

9 Afterward the Lord asked Cain, "Where is your brother? Where is Abel?"

"I don't know," Cain responded. "Am I my brother's guardian?"

10 But the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!

11 Now you are cursed and banished from the ground, which has swallowed your brother's blood.

12 No longer will the ground yield good crops for you, no matter how hard you work! From now on you will be a homeless wanderer on the earth."

13 Cain replied to the Lord, “My punishment is too great for me to bear!

14 You have banished me from the land and from your presence; you have made me a homeless wanderer. Anyone who finds me will kill me!”

15 The Lord replied, “No, for I will give a sevenfold punishment to anyone who kills you.” Then the Lord put a mark on Cain to warn anyone who might try to kill him.

16 So Cain left the Lord’s presence and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

The People, Places, and Times

Firstfruits - This word was used in reference to the choicest examples of the harvest that should be dedicated to God. According to Mosaic Law, individual Israelites brought the best of the firstfruits of the land to Yahweh (Exodus 23:19; 34:26). The Book of Proverbs promises prosperity to those who honor God with their firstfruits (Proverbs 3:9).

The term is also used figuratively for a person or group that represents a special, preeminent treasure. Israel was described as God’s “firstfruits” (Jeremiah 2:3). Christ, in His Resurrection, was described as the “firstfruits” of those who have died (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). The Holy Spirit is referred to as a “firstfruits” in Romans 8:23. Believers are a “kind of firstfruits,” according to James 1:18.

Firstborn - A couple’s first born son was required to be dedicated to Yahweh, in remembrance of the Passover when God claimed all the firstborns. The firstborn of a newly married couple, according to tradition, was believed to represent the prime of human vitality (Genesis 49:3).

The birthright of a firstborn son included a double portion of the family estate and leadership of the family. The firstborn would become head of the household upon his father’s death. He could sell his birthright, as Esau did (Genesis 25:29–34) or forfeit it due to misconduct, as Reuben did (Genesis 35:22; 49:3, 4).

How do you give the first and the best to God in your offerings, including time, talent, and money?

Background

Sons were important to the Hebrew people for a variety of reasons. The ability to farm and herd animals was vital to their survival, a task well-performed by strong, young men. Fathers who had sons gained a measure of respect from the community.

The birth of Adam and Eve’s sons was the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s directive to them that they “be fruitful and multiply” (see Genesis 1:22). Some Bible scholars believe that the phrase “and she again bare” (v. 2) suggests that Cain and Abel were twins. The text is not explicit, however, as it is with the birth of later twins (Genesis 25:24; 38:27).

The story of these two brothers is deeper than that of sibling rivalry. It reflects the willingness and desire of one faithful steward to give his best to please the Lord. Another steward, his own brother, wanted God’s favor, yet, did not want to give his best in order to obtain it. The jealousy and anger which Cain held for his brother led him to take Abel’s life.

What actions have you taken in jealousy or anger that you regretted later?

At-A-Glance

1. The First Brothers (Genesis 4:1–7)
2. Jealousy Leads to Sin (vv. 8–9)
3. God Deals with Cain (vv. 10–16)

In Depth

1. The First Brothers (Genesis 4:1–7)

Eve readily acknowledges that the birth of her first son is the work of the Lord. She also gives birth to another son, Abel. The brothers assume occupations vital to their survival and well-being. These brothers were comparably employed, and each makes an offering of their wares to the Lord. God looks with favor upon Abel's offering, but not Cain's.

When God does not look upon Cain's offering with favor, Cain becomes very angry. No different than any of us, Cain wants God to approve of him. Instead of examining himself to find any hidden sin, however, Cain chose to direct his anger toward Abel.

Not all gifts are equal before God. He weighs both what we give as well as our attitude about our gift. Anger, envy, and self-pity can twist our minds and lay the foundation for trouble. God knew that if Cain did not examine his own shortcomings and try to do right, Cain would fall to sin. Anger's sinful fruit was perched at Cain's door. God makes it clear to Cain that he has to master the sin. When we become angry, we must learn to control and channel it into positive results.

What are positive, constructive channels for your anger?

2. Jealousy Leads to Sin (vv. 8–9)

The fact that Cain invites Abel to go out into the field indicates possible premeditation of his deed. However, it is equally possible that Cain led his brother into the field simply to scare or bully him. Either way, Cain's anger ruled the moment. Anger can provoke us to do things we would not do normally. In this case, anger took control of Cain, and in the end, his brother was dead. Cain refused to feel any sense of responsibility for what happened. Instead of focusing on doing what was right, as God had told him to do, Cain chose to make his brother the problem.

God questioned the whereabouts of Cain's brother: "Where is Abel thy brother?" Cain's unrepentant guilt prompted him to answer the Lord's question with a question (v. 9), "Am I my brother's keeper?" Apparently, God's answer to Cain's question was "Yes" as He continued to query the guilty firstborn about his younger brother.

3. God Deals with Cain (vv. 10–16)

The expression used in verse 10 concerning the earth "which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood," is consistent with an Old Testament concern that the depths of the earth (Sheol, hell) have an insatiable appetite for human beings, wanting to devour them at every opportunity. Sheol is not so deep, however, that God did not hear the cry of Abel's blood.

Cain is punished with a nomadic lifestyle because the earth, now holding his brother's blood, will no longer yield crops for him. Life as he knew it as a farmer would be no more. At this point, Cain finally

exhibits sorrow, but it is because of his punishment and not for his misdeed, complaining that his punishment was more that he can bear.

In His grace, God places a mark (v. 15) of protection upon Cain to prevent harm from coming to him. Cain then leaves the presence of the Lord because there was no longer fellowship between him and Yahweh. His sin was unpardonable because Cain displays no desire to repent or reconcile with the Lord. The broken bond between Cain and God was the result of Cain's lack of faith, not God's lack of mercy.

Is Cain's punishment and protection fair?

Search the Scriptures

1. What was Eve's comment concerning her first born (v. 1)?
2. What advice did the Lord give to Cain concerning his offering (vv. 6–7)?
3. What punishment and what mercy did Cain receive for his misdeed (vv. 12–14)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why was it easier for Cain to focus on Abel rather than on himself and his own offerings to the Lord?
2. How is it possible that Cain felt no responsibility for Abel's whereabouts, yet he felt Abel had been responsible for the poor reception of his own offerings?
3. Are you your "brother's" keeper? Look for biblical references to support the fact that believers do bear some responsibility for one another.

Liberating Lesson

The term "rageaholic" describes those who appear to be addicted to anger. Such people have rampant anger that may often be directed at unsuspecting, innocent people. Anger can lead us to commit acts that we later regret, including acts of violence. Even though our anger may only last for a moment, like a bomb, anger's momentary explosion can cause widespread damage. Discuss possible ways that people become addicted to anger. How can Christians be rageaholics? How can rage affect a person's ability to be an effective witness for Christ?

Application for Activation

Consider times when you have chosen to focus on another person's ability or dedication, rather than on your own shortcomings? What factors influenced your actions? How, if at all, did you resolve the issue? Take an honest assessment of yourself to determine whether you have feelings of anger or jealousy toward someone because you do not want to take responsibility for your own behavior. Share with the class what you feel the root causes of anger and jealousy are. Prayerfully consider feelings of anger or jealousy you may harbor which have shattered one or more relationships.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Genesis 4:1–16

1 And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD.

The word “knew” is the Hebrew *yada* (yaw–DAH). It is used throughout Scripture in various ways: figuratively, literally, euphemistically, and inferentially. Thus, it includes keen observation for the purpose of understanding. It means bringing careful attention to bear on something, especially an idea. It could also mean recognition or awareness, especially as it relates to the will of God. It represents a comprehensive form of knowing. Here, it is used as the Hebrew figure of speech representing intimate sexual relations between Adam and his wife Eve. One could actually interpret this as meaning that the man and the woman shared intellectual, spiritual, and emotional depth, which is why the Hebrew use of the word “know” is so appropriate. If this is so, then, there is nothing casual about sexual intimacy, as the Bible teaches.

When Eve bares her first child, she recognizes that he comes from God. Eve goes further than just saying, “I have gotten a man.” She says “I have gotten a man from the LORD.” Remembering her part of the curse, Eve has experienced the pain of bringing children into the world. She knows it was only by help from the Lord that she survived. Even though modern medicine has eased some of the effects of this part of the curse, the experience remains physically and emotionally draining. Many still die in childbirth even in the developed world. It truly still is only from the Lord that children are born.

2 And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.

Eve gives birth to another child and calls him Abel. Here a distinction is made between the two brothers, based on the meanings of their names. While Cain means “acquired,” Abel means “transitoriness” or vanity. The celebration and thankfulness of Cain’s birth is followed by the acknowledgment of brevity in Abel’s. It may be that Eve was now becoming aware of the effect of the curse, especially as it relates to human finitude.

When they are grown, the brothers engage in two of the oldest professions known to humanity: keeping the flocks, and keeping the fields. While even nomadic cultures may herd cattle, the fact that Cain works the ground shows that their family stays in a relatively small area. Only when a family puts down roots figuratively can they put down roots literally. Farmers must stay by their fields to tend and harvest them. A stable place to live and call home gives a person a sense of safety and belonging that little else can match.

3 And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. 4 And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And

the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: 5 But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.

When the two brothers came to offer sacrifices to Yahweh, we find a contrast between the worshiping attitudes of the two brothers. In many traditions the sacrifice of animals was a way to bring thanks to God, and also a way to express one's gratitude to God as the One who owns all. As the Igbo say, He is "the One who owns the world." We know the brothers knew that their sacrifice was either accepted by God or rejected. God respected Abel's offering. To "have respect unto" simply means when God looked over the sacrifice, Abel's offering was acceptable, which resulted in God's favor being bestowed upon him.

We know from the Law that there was nothing inherently wrong with the material that Cain brought. Food offerings like Cain's and fatty offerings like Abel's were both common. In fact, the word used of the offering the brothers brought (Heb. *minkha*, *meen-KHAH*) usually refers to agricultural produce. It is often translated "grain offering" (Leviticus 2). So God's rejection of Cain's sacrifice could mean, as is common among ancient religions, that Cain's offering was done in the wrong way. In the religion of Israel, the correct method was emphasized in the offering of sacrifice. Not conducting the sacrificial process in the proper way could lead to rejection and divine displeasure (see Leviticus 10:1-2). Some Jewish interpreters have argued that it was Cain's passivity against the curse which made his offering displeasing. They suggest that by continuing to farm the ground that suffers thorns and weeds from the curse, Cain is dejectedly accepting his fate, but Abel understood how to use sheep to his advantage for farming and other purposes. In this reading, Cain simply accepts the curse, while Abel tries to build something beautiful from it. Whatever the case might have been, the point of the narrative is not to specify why Cain's offering was rejected but to focus on Cain's reaction to God's disapproval.

Cain knew that his offering was not acceptable to God. Instead of correcting his attitude, he became angry. This anger could have been the continuation of the improper attitude that Cain brought to the place of sacrifice. The prophets record that sacrifice without inner righteousness is not pleasing to God. Cain's animosity toward his brother led him to murder.

6. And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? 7 If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

God engaged Cain in a conversation in order to save him from trouble. Note however, that Cain does not enter into dialogue with God. Maybe a dialogue with God would have saved him, as it did later. God focused on Cain's anger and his hot temper. The Hebrew word for wrath or anger is *kharah* (*khaw-RAW*), which means to glow red hot. Though the smoke of his sacrifice could not move heaven, the stench of his anger burning inside him did reach up to heaven. How different it would have been were he burning with the love of God. What a difference it would have been had the smoke of repentance and the sacrifice of a broken heart reached heaven, instead of the stench of his unrighteous anger.

God's point to Cain was, "if you do well, will you not be accepted?" (v. 7). From the passage, it would seem that Cain's anger was not directed at God, but at his brother. This statement speaks to the impartiality of God. If Cain had done well, God would not have refused him. Cain's major problem was his desire for a righteous reward, without the demonstration of righteousness.

The statement, "and if you do not well, sin lies at your door" is a warning, denoting that refusal to listen to God often leads to sinful action. God's words envision sin as a demon crouching in a

doorway, ready to pounce on any passing victim. However, God not only says that sin is near, but also says that Cain “must rule over it.” From God’s perspective it was not Cain’s destiny to kill Abel. With help “from the Lord,” as his mother affirmed at his birth, Cain could have mastered his sinful anger. Sadly, since we do not find that he confessed, it is safe to assume that Cain continued to carry the bitterness toward his brother in his heart.

8 And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

God attempted to draw Cain into talking about the source and reason for his bitterness. Cain refused to enter into dialogue. Cain refused to listen to the wisdom of God. Instead, he talks with his brother, continuing to focus on Abel instead of God’s instructions.

When they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother. Since Cain could not rise to Abel’s spiritual level, he seems to believe that the only way to deal with Abel was to kill him. So we read that Cain murdered his brother. The Hebrew word used in this passage is harag (haw–ROG), which means “to smite, or to kill.” In the legal text portions of Numbers and Deuteronomy, some distinction might be made between harag to refer to manslaughter (unintentional killing) and ratsakh to refer to premeditated murder. However, throughout the many uses of harag in Genesis and the narrative portions of Exodus, harag is used exclusively for premeditated murders. No doubt, Cain intended to kill Abel. Here we see two brothers who, because of some sibling rivalry, let bitterness get between them resulting in death.

9 And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper? 10 And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground.

This passage represents the second dialogue between God and Cain. As with Adam and Eve’s fall, the focus of the narrative is on the conversations with the adversary and God surrounding the sin, rather than on the specifics of the sin itself, which is mentioned in a single, quick line. Cain has just killed his brother and apparently buried him.

God’s question to Cain, “Where is thy brother?” does not mean that God is unaware of the plight of the deceased brother. Similarly, God asked Adam where he was after the Fall in the Garden. Here we see God’s desire to call Cain to a righteous consciousness. Cain’s response is simply to remind God that he was not his brother’s “keeper.” This could also mean Cain was saying to God that he was not his brother’s attendant or guardian. The Hebrew word shamar (shaw–MAR) is used, meaning, “to keep, observe, or guard.”

In many discussions, the one asking the questions is in control of the conversation. Cain does not like where God’s first question is leading, so he counters with his own question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” However, God does not take the rhetorical bait. He retains control of the conversation and asks another question, deep and penetrating: “What hast thou done?” This again echoes the dreadful questioning Adam and Eve endured after their sin.

God expected Cain to act differently. God knew he could act differently. He told Cain so in the first dialogue. Now, however, Abel’s blood “crieth unto” God. This word (Heb. tsa’aq, tsaw– OCK) is usually used of calling out for help, whether from God or another leader. Abel’s blood asks God to help administer the justice that he did not receive in life.

11 And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; 12 When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

The consequence of Cain's sin comes swiftly from God. This is the first time a curse is placed directly on a human being. In Genesis 3, only the serpent receives such deadly judgment. Though God definitely judged Adam and Eve, God refrained from cursing them, rather cursing the ground because of Adam and warning Eve of her future anxieties and pains concerning children. Here, God does use the word to define the state of Cain's relation to the ground he used to till. In Genesis 3, God told Adam and Eve that the earth shall yield freely for them as it did in the garden, but they must now sweat to bring forth the yield. Now Cain is cut off completely from the fruit of the earth. Instead of the stable home he used to enjoy, he must be a hunter-gather: "fugitive and vagabond ... upon the face of the earth." His parents had lost the garden; now he loses a sense of being at home anywhere in the world.

Cain became a person of no significance and was doomed to stagger. In fact, he was going to be one who wandered with no purpose in mind. By murdering his brother, Cain had taken away all of his remaining sense of human dignity. The word "vagabond" (Heb. nood, NOOD) puts further weight on the curse, as it means "to run scared." These words God spoke to Cain show how grievous the sin of murder is in the sight of God.

13 And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear. 14 Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.

Cain finally gets the message. He enters into a dialogue with God. This time, he communicates humbly instead of defiantly, as had been characteristic of him. He acknowledges his dependence on the Lord. Cain accepts the nature of his heinous sin. He does not say that the punishment is not justified, but that it is more than he can bear.

Cain then summarizes his understanding of the judgment: (a) it included alienation from the land. In many ancient cultures, including Israel, removal from the land by exile was punishment for some crimes. One of the most important principles of ancient life is the principle of connection to the land. In Israel, God's covenant was always connected to the land. To be alienated from the land was to be in disfavor with God. Taking people away from the land was also one way in which oppressive rulers and conquerors asserted their power. Both the Assyrians and Babylonians did this.

(b) It included alienation from God. "And from thy face shall I be hid" implies that God was turning away His face, and thereby withdrawing His favor. Cain worries that anyone who finds him will "slay" (Heb. harag) him, just as he did Abel.

15 And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. 16 And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

Here we find God showing mercy to Cain even though Cain showed no mercy to his brother. God's ways are not our ways. God heard Cain's plea. Though God does not take back the curse of the earth and the driving of Cain from the land, God takes away capital punishment, which would be the fair judgment. God made a promise to Cain to preserve his life from the severe judgment by making it an

even greater sin to kill Cain. Anyone who killed Cain out of hatred would suffer sevenfold. God placed a mark on Cain that would broadcast this protection, though it is not clear what form this mark took.

Even after receiving some mercy from God, Cain still must leave the face of the Lord. He must depart from the presence and covenant circle of God. This is ultimately what any sin does. By disregarding the place of God before all creation or disregarding the place of our neighbors (who bear God's image), we shun the proper place of God in our lives. In doing so, we remove ourselves from His divine, holy presence, which is the only place to find true justice or mercy.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Stephen Prays for Mercy for His Persecutors
(Acts 7:54–60)

TUESDAY

Herod's Vengeance
(Matthew 2:1–8, 16–18)

WEDNESDAY

Martyrs Long for Justice
(Revelation 6:9–17)

THURSDAY

Shine Forth, God of Vengeance!
(Psalm 94:1–10)

FRIDAY

God's Just Acts
(Psalm 94:11–23)

SATURDAY

Love One Another
(1 John 3:4–13)

SUNDAY

Abel's Blood Cries Out for Vengeance
(Genesis 4:1–13)