

“Sin Is Crouching at Your Door”

What was the difference between Cain’s offering and Abel’s? Why did God accept one and not the other? Some people believe and teach that God prefers animal sacrifices. Abel gave him animals from his flock, and so God was pleased. Cain gave God plants, vegetables. That wasn’t what God was looking for, so he didn’t like it. To support this idea, people will point out that later on, God did require animal sacrifices. He did indeed. But that was not the issue in this case.

No, we find that the difference, the real difference between Cain’s offering and Abel’s was not the offerings themselves, but the attitude in which they were given. We get a sense of that right away from this Genesis account: **“Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil.”** Abel, though, **“brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.”** Abel, out of love for God, brought the best parts of his best animals to present as an offering. Cain, out of some sort of obligation, brought some of what he grew. So there was a difference in the quality of the offerings because they reflected two very different attitudes. Our second lesson put it this way: **“[Cain’s] own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous”** (1 John 3:12). Hebrews 11:4 tells us, **“By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain.”**

That was the difference: faith. Abel’s offering was a fruit of faith and pleasing to God. Cain’s was not. If Abel had been the farmer, he would have and could have brought the best of his vegetables, the firstfruits of his crops, to God and God would have been pleased. As we look more closely at this account today, we see that even though it took place so very long ago, it still has valuable and important lessons for our lives today. We want to be like Abel. Or to say it another way, we don’t want to be like Cain. We want to heed the warning that God gave him: **“Sin is crouching at your door.”**

We can’t really appreciate fully the account of Cain and Abel, or the warning and encouragement that it provides, without thinking about its place in the history of our world. This account takes us back to very near the beginning of the world. When God first created the world, everything was very good. It was perfect. And into the world he placed two people, a man and a woman, Adam and Eve. In fact, he put them in a beautiful, lush garden with plenty of fruit trees, gave them productive work to do, and provided them the opportunity to worship and obey him by setting one special tree in the middle of the garden off limits. That tree was the one from which Adam and Eve were not allowed to eat.

But the perfection of the garden was short-lived. Satan in the form of a serpent tempted Eve and Adam to turn their backs on God’s command, to listen to Satan’s lies rather than God’s truth and to eat the forbidden fruit. And they did. They ate it. And everything changed: their relationship with each other, their relationship with God, even their relationship with the created world around them. The world was no longer a perfect place.

Now there is a lot about the perfect world and the world in those early stages of sinful corruption that we simply do not know and cannot know. There are all sorts of questions that might come to mind, both about how Adam and Eve lived in perfect Eden, and about how they adjusted to the sinful cursed world. We don’t know how or how often God communicated with people the way we hear him doing so in our account this morning. We don’t know whether God asked for sacrifices to be made or if they were a more spontaneous reaction to his gifts and his promises.

But we do know some things. We know that before he barred Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, he gave them a promise that he would send a rescuer. He would send someone, an offspring of the woman who, though struck by the serpent would ultimately crush the serpent’s head. And we know that Adam and Eve had a son whom they named Cain. It seems that in giving him that name, which means “I have acquired” or “I have brought forth,” Adam and Eve had in mind the promise of God, that promise of a woman’s offspring. In fact, what Eve said could be understood to mean that she thought the Savior had been born. If that is indeed what she thought, she was sadly and sorely mistaken. In any case, some time later came another son, Abel.

We know little about Cain and Abel as children, though we can safely assume that they heard from their parents about what God had done and about what he promised. And we have already heard about their sacrifices. Abel, moved by God's love to respond in kind, sacrificed the best of his flocks. Cain, too, offered sacrifices. And somehow he became aware that God was not pleased with those offerings, even though he was pleased with Abel's. Cain was angry and it showed on his face. And the Lord asked him about this, **"Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?"** And he offered a warning: **"Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."**

Two things in particular I would like you to notice about God's warning. First, remember that this is the very first generation of people from perfection. Sin did not take long to cause destruction and damage. Already Cain is in danger and his anger threatens to get the better of him. But that brings us to the second thing, that God doesn't simply let Cain go his own way. He offers a warning. We might call it a gentle warning or a kind warning. God wanted Cain to recognize the dangerous path that he was on, one that would take him away from God and into eternal destruction. Instead of simply watching him walk away, God invited him to turn. He was eager to remind Cain of his promise. His anger and disgust would be forgiven by the Savior who was still to come.

Through his Word and through his people, God gives us similar warnings. He helps us to see that our lives are filled with sin. Just like Cain we were born not in the image of God as perfect Adam and Eve, but in the image of our sinful parents. We have sinful natures that want to be concerned only with ourselves and never with others. We find sin and temptations all around us. Satan still slithers around with his temptations. Sin is crouching at our doors. But God is not interested in watching us walk away from him to our own destruction, and so he reminds us of his promises and he invites us to turn away from sin and from temptation.

But his gracious warnings are not always heeded. God's gentle warning was ignored by Cain. Instead, his anger and jealousy against his brother continued to build. He invited Abel out into the field with him, and there the son of once perfect people murdered his own brother.

And then the Lord came to Cain again. God asked Cain, **"Where is your brother?"** Of course God knew the answer. He knows all things. And yet he asked. He gave Cain another opportunity to come clean about rejecting God's warning, to see that sin was no longer crouching at his door but was actually overwhelming him and dragging him straight toward hell itself. He gave Cain the opportunity to repent. God's promise had not gone away. The heinous crime that Cain had committed was not beyond the love of God, his power to forgive, or his strength to keep his promises.

But even then, Cain did not listen. **"I don't know,"** he said, **"Am I my brother's keeper?"** And the absolute foolishness of sin was on display again. How could Cain not know that God knew the answer to his question? How could he expect to fool God by the suggestion that Abel was not his responsibility? How could he not realize that before God he was like the child with chocolate all over his face insisting to his parents that he did not eat that chocolate chip cookie? Immediately there were serious and significant consequences for Cain. And more seriously, Cain had ahead of him eternal consequences for his sin.

Our other Scripture lessons this morning help us to apply the truth of this account to our lives. As John writes in his epistle: **"Do not be like Cain... Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer"** (1 John 3:12, 15). This history is not recorded for us to read and then forget about it. It is not there for us to say, "I would never do something like what Cain did." No, it is there to remind us that sin is always crouching at our doors. It always wishes to have us. It always wants to master us. And in so many cases it already has. In so many ways we have said, **"Am I my brother's keeper? Am I responsible for someone else?"** And God says **"yes. Love one another."**

But to a world of sinners who fall short of this goal, God has kept his promise to send the woman's offspring, the serpent-destroyer. To a world of people who have refused to love their brothers, Jesus Christ, true God, became their brother. He allowed himself to be murdered in order to pay the price for

all murders and murderers, all sins of all people. **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers”** (1 John 3:16).

You know God’s promise. And you know God’s promise fulfilled in Jesus. Yet don’t live without heeding the warning: sin is crouching at your door. So turn always to the one who has conquered sin for you. Turn always to the one who has sent his Holy Spirit into your heart and your life. Offer him your all, your best. Be like Abel. While it seems on the surface that he was nothing more than a victim of senseless murder, the truth is much more amazing. He escaped the sin that was crouching all around him and God turned his tragedy into joy by welcoming him into heaven. Through faith in Jesus Christ, when our lives of service are complete, that same heaven will be our eternal home.

The Text: Genesis 4:1–16 (NIV84)

⁴ Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.” ² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. ⁴ But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶ Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”

⁸ Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

⁹ Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

¹⁰ The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”

¹³ Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴ Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, “Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶ So Cain went out from the Lord’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.