

TUTORIAL
1.18

Cain and Abel's offerings

See Tutorial 1.6 notes for overall instructions.
The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are:
Genesis 4:2-26.

Last time

Innocent animals died in order for God to make acceptable clothing to hide Adam and Eve's shame. Knowing the terrible prospects of them eating from the tree of life and living forever in their current state, God shut them out from the garden. Although they were far from what God intended for them, He gave them the gift of being able to reproduce their lives – two sons were born to them. Cain and Abel, like their parents, are born outside, cut off from the pure, innocent, free access to God He desired for them and all human beings.

God had given them a way to approach Him

God continues His Narrative by relating to us some events from which we can glean a great deal about Him and His intentions for man. Also, we see some of the terrible consequences of Adam and Eve's choice for them, and for us all, to become our own moral compass...to make our own choices, independent of God.

It is apparent from the way these events are described, that God had given Adam and Eve – and through them, Cain and Abel – a way to relate to Him in this new, fallen, cursed context that was now their lives. Of course, as we know, they had no way to restore the relationship they were responsible for fracturing. Their rebellion, their choices, their willing alignment with God's Enemy, the stench of death that clung about them, the evil in their hearts...all formed a barrier they could never overcome. And God has already shown graphically that any effort of theirs to make themselves presentable or to gloss over what they've done - who they now are - will be a pathetic failure. He simply will not, cannot, accept anything that is the fruit of their corrupted efforts, their tainted hearts. Or ours, for that matter. But because of this thing about Him that we see illuminated ever more brightly against the dark backdrop of human evil - His grace - He has provided a way for them to approach Him.

They were to kill an animal – a sheep – letting its blood flow out. This - and of course the animals dying to clothe Adam and Eve previously – sets a pattern which is to become very familiar in God’s Narrative from here on. And the principle that emerges is that the only way that God’s corrupted image-bearers can approach Him is after blood has flowed resulting in loss of life.

Cain and Abel approach God in different ways

The Narrative, as we’ve noted before, is sparse in detail but immeasurably full and rich in its implications. Cain and Abel approach God, seek perhaps His blessing, or even – we’re not told exactly – to venerate Him. Clearly Adam’s sons take God’s existence and presence for granted...surely they’ve heard much from their parents over the years, and no doubt have been instructed in the appropriate way to come to Him in their fallen state.

Cain, a “cultivator of the ground” brings crops – no doubt burns them in oblation, in offering. Abel, a shepherd, on the other hand, brings lambs (Genesis 4:2-4) – and we can safely assume, presents them to God with their throats cut and the blood running out until they’re dead...these too would be burnt. And the result? God accepted Abel’s offering but not Cain’s.

Why? Because any approach to God is only possible under these conditions: when it’s made on His terms, i.e. only after there has been death – innocent blood has flowed; when the one approaching knows they, and not the innocent victim – is the one truly deserving of death; and the approach is made in faith, believing what God says about the whole thing. So, as the Narrative tells us here (Genesis 4:4,5), God accepted Abel’s approach, but rejected Cain’s. Cain had come on his own terms, there had been no death, no blood shed, no recognition that death was his just deserts, and unlike his brother, he’d not come in faith, believing what God said, what God offered, to be true.

This matter of coming in faith, or *by faith*, is of course going to be another major theme that God will regularly illustrate with real events in His Story. And we’ll also see that human beings constantly get this wrong. By nature, by inclination, by choice, we try to figure it out for ourselves. People want to find acceptance, blessing, forgiveness etc. from God the way they want. They’ll try to make Him look different, try to change what He says, to underplay their sin and exaggerate the good...anything at all to come on their own terms. That will come out more in the Narrative but it’s something we see and hear around us – and in us – on a daily basis.

The first murder

Showing amazing patience, God tries to make Cain see reason. (Genesis 4:6,7) He warns him about where his pride and anger are taking him. God is under no obligation to do this at all...to reason with Cain, to reach out to him. This is

Grace shining out again. But Cain is beyond listening. Wounded pride, jealousy, fury have taken hold. The blood is pounding in his head. He wants revenge. The Enemy rides him like a wild animal. Driving him on to the terrible conclusion. He invites his brother out to the fields and kills him. (Genesis 4:8)

The Enemy's hatred of God and His image-bearers (now fallen) knows no bounds. He loves to destroy life. To crush hope.

The aftermath

As with his parents before him, God gives Cain opportunity to respond in contrition and humility. Obviously not for information, but giving Cain a chance to come to his senses, He asks where his brother Abel is. Cain comes back with the infamous line (Genesis 4:9). "I don't know, am I my brother's keeper?" Abdicating all responsibility for the life of his fellow image-bearers. Denying any value for the life that God alone had given each of them. And then, also like his parents, he hears God utter a terrible curse in response to his rebellion and sin.

We see here the high value that God places on the life He gives to humans. He avenges evil done against others; punishes the murderous taking of life. The curse on Cain, again with similarities to his parents, is to be banished from that area and to wander, to be a nomad, without a home. (Genesis 4:10-15). Even now there's no sign of any kind of repentance with Cain. No recognition of God's perspective on him and what he's done...no acknowledgement that he deserves whatever is coming to him...that he desperately needs God's help.

The whole issue of repentance is going to emerge more out of the Narrative as God teaches us what it is, what it's meant to be. And it will become clear that God's definition goes a lot further and deeper than a dictionary, and common usage might say: "feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin".

So the Narrative concludes the tale of Cain's disastrous life with some details that paint a sad picture. Succeeding generations of his descendants increasingly focused on materialism and were indifferent to God their Creator. (Genesis 4:16-24)

Finally, the Narrative flashes back to Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:25,26) to whom God gives another son, "in place of Abel". He, Seth, founded a family line that understood their need for God in their lives. In fact, it says, they began to worship the Lord by name. Clearly, it's possible for the relationship, though fractured by the fall, to be restored when the approach to God is by faith, on His terms. That's really what the rest of the Narrative is about.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Would you agree that our society highly values the intellect, the mind, being able to think things through and work them out for ourselves? Much of our education is built around that value. Okay, think about Cain and Abel...did God want them to reason things out for themselves? If not, then how does this relate to faith? Are faith and reason mutually exclusive? Do they function in completely separate categories as our society generally assumes?
2. Take a moment to consider the amazing fact that even though Adam and Eve had rejected so much that God had done for them and had listened to the lies of His Enemy, God was still willing to give them a way to relate to Him. What does that tell you about the importance he places on His relationship with these human beings, created in His image? How does thinking about His grace impact you on a personal level?
3. In everyday life, how much do you find yourself weighing up the things you consider to be good against others you're not so pleased with? How much does this whole "weighing up" process feature in your relationship with God as His child? Are there truths underlined by the story of Cain and Abel that shed any light on all of that?



ACTIVITIES

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1. Read the Wikipedia article on faith and rationality. In approximately half a page, comment on what you agree or disagree with in the article. Feel free to include any thoughts from what's been covered in the Biblical Narrative so far.