

13. GENESIS SERIES: Cain: The Beginning of Merit-Based Religion

'And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD. And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. 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: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? 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 (Genesis 4:1-7).'

Having been thrown out of Eden we now are confronted in Genesis with what life is like for fallen Adam and Eve and for all mankind after them. The depravity of man is clearly seen in the lives of their children, especially Cain. Abel is presented as the sinful believer who recognizes his need of the Lord's deliverance and as the one persecuted by the self-righteous religious unbeliever. It is in microcosm the way of the world, even in our own day.

NOTE: INDIVIDUAL DISCOVERY QUESTION HERE: What does Genesis 4:1 suggest about Eve's understanding of God's promise in Genesis 3?

Verse 1: Chapter 4 of Genesis begins with an act of obedience on the part of Adam and Eve (in contrast to chapter 3), for here our first parents begin the process of being fruitful and multiplying and thereby filling the earth. This is the significance of the word 'knew' in this context.

Eve rejoices in the birth of her firstborn son, whom they named 'Cain.' She recognizes the blessing of God in providing a son. Yet there seems to be more in this simple statement than just recognition that it is God who provides children, for Eve appears to be rejoicing in the fulfilment of God's promise concerning the coming Seed in Genesis 3:15. The name 'Cain' suggests the thought that they had acquired from the Lord the one who would lead them back to Eden and this would appear to be Eve's hope.

Verse 2: Another son is born to Eve in this verse. He is named 'Abel.' As to whether Cain and Abel were twins is not really proven from the verse and is merely conjecture.

As time went by Abel became a shepherd or a keeper of sheep. Cain was also a farmer, being a tiller of the ground. There is nothing in this verse to suggest that Cain's

employment was inferior to Abel's or that it held less merit before God. The reason for Cain's rejection in the coming verses has nothing to do with the employment in which the two brothers were engaged in.

Verse 3: In time Cain brought an 'offering' of sorts to the Lord - yet the context of the passage suggests that what he brought was unacceptable to the Lord. Clearly implied by what we read in Genesis 4 is that instruction had already been given as to what was acceptable and unacceptable by way of sacrifice to God. Cain however proved himself to be something of a forerunner of those concerned with self-merit based religion, bringing something of his own invention to God instead of that which God required (see 1 Sam 15:22). He was giving something to God of his own, not offering something that reflected that which he needed from God.

Verse 4: Abel brought a sacrifice to God that proved acceptable to God. What Abel brought was the best possible of the sheep. It was a sacrifice that reflected what he needed of God and was done in faith, for Abel recognized his need before God. So his sacrifice was acceptable to God on the grounds that it was what God required and also because of what it demonstrated of Abel himself - faith in the Lord's provision for meeting his sin problem.

QUESTIONS: What is the significance of sacrifices in this early period of man's history? Discuss.

What does the sacrifice of Cain and his reaction to its rejection in verse 5 reveal about Cain?

Verse 5: The act of bringing what was unacceptable to God by way of sacrifice betrayed Cain's real problem before God - that it was he himself who was unacceptable. He brought that which God had not asked for and brought what he did with an attitude of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness. In short he failed to recognize any sin problem with himself.

Cain's reaction to his rejection by God is one that demonstrates selfish pride and arrogance. He has placed himself not only above Abel in his own thinking, but also above God for he believes that God has no right to reject him and his sacrifice. God ought to comply with the dictates of Cain's desires and not vice-versa. With this attitude Cain becomes displeased not only with Abel, but also with God. Fury is growing within Cain, against both his brother and God.

Verse 6: In a verse that reminds the reader of God's questioning of Adam and Eve in the garden, Cain is questioned by God regarding his sinful disposition. It is not that God does not know Cain's situation, for He knows all things. Here he seeks to bring Cain to the full awareness of his sin that he might yet repent of it.

There can be no doubt that God is speaking directly to Cain and this Cain knew to be the case. Just how this took place we are not told - only that in some manner God spoke directly to Cain and that Cain knew it to be so.

Verse 7: In His grace God explains to Cain that he doesn't need to continue in his unacceptable condition - there is a better way, God's way! Cain can be just as acceptable to God as Abel was, but he must reject self-righteousness and sin and follow after God in His way. The text clearly implies that Cain already knew the right way but that he had chosen to go another way - his way.

If Cain continued to reject God's way there was worse to come for him. Here is an ominous warning from God, a warning which in hindsight surely foretold the deadly consequences of sin that were to follow. Sin was waiting to enslave him. If Cain was to yield to sin it would enslave him - indeed it was ready to possess him - Cain mustn't let that happen!

QUESTION: How could Cain gain the upper hand over sin and not fall before it?

INDIVIDUAL DISCOVERY

What does Cain's answer to God in verse 9 reveal about Cain's understanding of the nature of God?

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