

The Book of Genesis

Lesson 4: Cain and Abel -- Genesis 4:1–26

Eden is behind them now. Adam and Eve are east of the garden, raising a family in a world that bites back. And when their first son is born, Eve says something hopeful: “I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.” Maybe this is the promised one, the offspring who will set things right. But the story that follows is not a story of rescue. It is the story of the first family, and the first funeral, and it happens between two brothers standing at an altar.

Both brothers bring an offering to God. Abel brings the best of his flock, the firstborn and the fat portions, his very finest. Cain brings some of the fruit of the ground. God looks with favor on Abel and his offering, but not on Cain and his. And here is where the chapter turns. Cain has a choice to make about what to do with his disappointment, and so do we, because we all know what it feels like when someone else is blessed and we are not.

God comes to Cain with astonishing patience. He does not condemn him; He counsels him. “Why are you angry? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” There it is, one of the most vivid pictures in all of Scripture: sin like a wild animal crouched on the threshold, waiting to spring. And God says to Cain, and to you, you can master this. You do not have to open the door.

But Cain opens the door. He invites his brother out to the field, and there he kills him, and the ground that once received Abel’s offering now drinks Abel’s blood. “Where is your brother?” God asks. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain snaps back. The chapter spirals downward from there, into Lamech’s boasting about violence, and yet it does not end in the dark. The very last verse turns a corner: a new son is born, and “people began to call upon the name of the Lord.” Even now, even here, there is a thread of grace. Read this chapter and watch your own heart, because the question God put to Cain is a question He still puts to us: what will you do with the thing crouching at your door?

Group Discussion: God told Cain, “sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it” (4:7). What does this picture teach us about how temptation works, and about our responsibility to resist it rather than excuse it?

Personal Reflection: Cain’s downfall began not with the murder but with anger and resentment that he refused to deal with. Where in your life is there a resentment, jealousy, or anger that you have been nursing rather than bringing to God? What might it grow into if left unchecked?

Read Genesis 4:1–26

Study Questions

1. God accepted Abel's offering but not Cain's. Hebrews 11:4 says it was "by faith" that Abel offered a better sacrifice. What does this teach us about what makes worship acceptable to God, and about the heart behind our offerings?
2. Think honestly about your own worship and giving to God. Do you tend to bring Him your best and your first, or your leftovers? Where might you be going through the motions outwardly while your heart is somewhere else?
3. God warns Cain that "sin is crouching at the door... but you must rule over it" (4:7). What does this reveal about the nature of temptation, and about our genuine responsibility and ability to resist it?
4. What sin is "crouching at the door" of your life right now, waiting for an opening? Are you mastering it, or is it mastering you? What would taking responsibility for it look like this week?
5. Cain's jealousy grew into anger, and his anger into murder. Compare this with 1 John 3:11–15 and Matthew 5:21–22. What does the account teach us about where violence and hatred truly begin, and how seriously God takes the condition of our hearts?
6. Where does comparison or envy most easily take root in you, watching someone else be blessed, praised, or chosen over you? How do you usually respond, and how does God want you to respond instead?
7. After the murder, God both judges Cain and shows him mercy, placing a mark on him to protect his life (4:9–16). What does this reveal about God's justice and His grace, even toward a guilty man?
8. Have you experienced God's mercy in a time when you deserved judgment? How does receiving that kind of grace shape the way you treat people who have wronged you, especially the temptation toward bitterness or revenge?
9. The chapter traces sin spreading and escalating (Lamech even boasts of his violence in 4:23–24), and yet it ends with people beginning to "call upon the name of the Lord" (4:26). What does this contrast teach us about the two paths open to humanity, and about worship as the dividing line between them?
10. Look back over the whole chapter. Name one specific way God is forming you through it, whether in how you worship, how you handle anger and envy, or how you treat the brother or sister standing next to you.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 11:4, Abel's offering by faith; 1 John 3:11–15, not being like Cain, who hated his brother; Matthew 5:21–24, anger, reconciliation, and the roots of murder; Hebrews 12:24, the blood of Jesus that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel; Romans 12:19, leaving vengeance to God.