

CAIN AND ABEL OFFER SACRIFICES

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Genesis 4:1–25

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?” (Gen. 4:6–7a)

Daily Bible Readings

M	May 26	Prov. 3:1–10	Honor God with Your First Fruits
T	May 27	Heb. 10:26–34	Struggles of Faith
W	May 28	Heb. 10:35–11:4	The Righteous Will Live by Faith
Th	May 29	Acts 5:1–11	Half-hearted Giving
F	May 30	Luke 20:45–21:4	Give Your All
Sa	May 31	Rev. 6:9–17	The Martyrs’ Cry for Justice

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Our exploration of worship begins in Genesis. The action takes place on two stages. The first, seen in chapters 1–11, is the world itself, with the whole human family as characters. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah and his family stand in for all of humanity. The blessings and brokenness of human life show up in these characters, in whom we are invited to see ourselves.

In chapters 12–50, the stage shrinks into tighter focus. The characters are the family of Abraham, chosen by God to become the means by which God would bless the world. The stage stretches out to Egypt and Mesopotamia, but at the center stands the land of Canaan, to which Abraham is called by God and around which the action of the story revolves.

A central event drives the story in each of the two sections. For Genesis 1–11, that event is creation, which plays itself out across the arc that runs from the beginning of the world envisioned in chapter 1 through the “reset” and reclamation of that world represented by the story of Noah and the ark. In chapters 12–50, the event is covenant: God calls and chooses Abraham and his descendants, setting them apart to be God’s “priestly kingdom and holy nation” (Exod. 19:6).

Both of these events spur the characters—and us, the readers—to worship. The point of the creation story is to confront us with our need for God, to fill us with holy awe and lead us to give ourselves to the One who has given everything to us. Covenant drives home the point of creation, showing us that the one who creates also chooses and calls us to go into the world to give ourselves for others.

Creating and covenanting God, we offer ourselves to you on this journey of worship. Make us worthy of the gifts you give us and the call by which you claim us. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Genesis 4:1–16

4:1 Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain,^[a] saying, “I have produced a man with the help of the LORD.” ²Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. ³In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. ⁶The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? ⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

⁸Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. ⁹Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” ¹⁰And the LORD said, “What have you done? Listen, your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! ¹¹And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹²When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” ¹³Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear! ¹⁴Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.” ¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold ven-

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

geance.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. ¹⁶Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

CAIN AND ABEL

Reading about Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 leaves us with a surprising number of questions. The first is why the two brothers brought their sacrifices to God in the first place. Did God command them to do it? The passage does not say. Perhaps the answer lies in the connection we see in Genesis between *creation* and *worship*. Creation is received as an inestimable gift by the characters in this section of the book. The fact that we have life, without merit or input on our part, makes our life a pure gift. We find ourselves planted within a world described as a garden and given all we need to thrive, especially human companionship. The implication of God’s act of creation is that we are radically dependent on God for everything we are and have. The only authentic response to this reality is worship and sacrifice. To thank God for all the gifts that sustain our life, we give back to God from among those same gifts as a way to recognize our dependence and express our gratitude. That Cain and Abel should offer sacrifice in response to creation is no mystery.

The next question is why God chose to accept Abel’s sacrifice, but not Cain’s. Our familiarity with the story might lead us to conclude that the Bible explains this choice, but it does not. Did Cain hold something back? Was Abel’s attitude better? Genesis 4 does not say why, although other biblical allusions to the story assume that Abel and his sacrifice were righteous (Heb. 11:4), while Cain and his were not (1 John 3:12; Jude 11).

On one point the passage is clear: God is determined to remain connected to Cain even in the aftermath of Cain’s murder of his brother. Upon seeing Cain’s dejection when Abel’s sacrifice is accepted but not his, God warns Cain that violence and sin are “lurking at the door,” seeking to take control. God lets Cain know that the power here is his. Sin (in the form of resentment and rage) wants to take over Cain’s life, but he can master it and himself. When Cain decides to cut himself off from God by killing his brother, even God’s judgment involves connection, as the mark of Cain provides protection from human retribution.

 **Why was Abel’s offering received over Cain’s? What makes one act of worship more pleasing to God than another?**

WORSHIP AND RECONCILIATION

Today's Scripture passage speaks to the central importance of worship in our lives. It also points to the problem of our estrangement from God and one another, and it shows us the link between these two crucial biblical themes. The passage does not tell us explicitly why Cain's offering was not acceptable to God. Yet, it is clear that Cain harbored resentment toward his brother. Resentment grew into an internal rage that overwhelmed him, leading Cain to take his brother's life. The passage demonstrates the unavoidable link between love and worship of God on the one hand, and care for our fellow human beings on the other. When Jesus summarizes the teachings of the law, the link is clear: "Love God, love neighbor" (see Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28). It is taught again in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus tells us to leave our offering at the altar, go find the one from whom we are estranged, reconcile with them, and then return to complete our offering (Matt. 5:23–24). First John 4:20 reminds us of the futility of trying to love the God we have not seen while refusing to offer love to the brother or sister we see.

Why is this? Maybe it is as simple as the fact that the person from whom we've become estranged is as beloved by God as we are. Maybe that flawed human being has things to show us about loving God that we need to see. Maybe they will become the voice or hand of God for us in a moment when we most need it. Right now, in the midst of their brokenness and limitation (not to mention ours), the image of the God we would worship shines forth in them, offering to bless us with God's presence. But none of these things will happen if we close ourselves off to that person. This is what Cain's anger did. It trapped him within a cycle of resentment and rage, making the true worship of God impossible. Perhaps Cain's heart, rather than his offering, was the problem.

Ours is a world awash in people trying to worship God while bearing grudges against their sisters and brothers. When we bring our personal grievances and political animosities with us into the sanctuary, is it any wonder that people are not drawn to that worship, that it sounds to them like hollow noise and empty words?



Why does it seem easier to ask God's forgiveness than to ask the same of a relative, a friend, or a neighbor whom we've wronged?


STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

The connection between worship and reconciliation makes a lot of sense, but the actual work of reconciliation is hard. Seeking someone's forgiveness in our day and age feels awkward and perhaps just a bit weird. What's more, anger, annoyance, and frustration with another person lead most of us to respond to that person in kind, resulting in hard words and hurt feelings on everyone's part. Think of anyone whose forgiveness you might need to seek; chances are good that you can think up things for which they should ask your forgiveness in kind. It's easy to see how the cycle of anger and resentment keeps spinning outward.

So, if it's hard to think about coming out and asking for someone's forgiveness, then perhaps we can begin to seek reconciliation by taking other steps involving those with whom we share a grievance.

- We can start with a specific kind of prayer for such persons. Most people whom we encounter believe they are trying to make the world better, that they have a particular calling to do so. We can pray for the success of their mission, that God will indeed use them to lighten another's burden or make their community a little bit more just and fair. Do we, because of our hurt feelings, have a hard time believing that they are likely to bring this good into the world? That's ok; God doesn't.
- We can sign up for their mission ourselves. Anger and resentment are infectious; they pass from one relationship to another, bringing everyone down. This is the "sin lurking at the door" about which God warned Cain. Yet grace works in the same way. We can add to the sum of human joy and kindness in the specific ways our antagonist tries to make the world better. Do we love animals? We can volunteer at a shelter for homeless or abused pets. Do we get mad when people junk up the neighborhood? We can organize a cleanup day with our neighbors. These may have us serving alongside our antagonist, encountering them in new ways.
- We can use others' grievances with us as a mirror. What did I contribute to the hurt feelings between us? Where did I get defensive and prickly? What harmful words did I say, even when I knew the wounds they would open? How might I have turned aside these animosities had I addressed

them when feelings were not so old and hardened? Knowing these things, how can I avoid this kind of situation in the future?

 **When has someone sought your forgiveness for having wronged you? What did you learn from that experience about seeking someone's forgiveness yourself?**

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Both brothers' offerings, in themselves, were acceptable. Cain's "fruits of the soil" was as appropriate for a farmer as Abel's "firstfruits of his flock" was for a shepherd. Perhaps the designation "firstfruits" propels Abel's offering above Cain's. (Lev. 3:16 says that the fat of the fellowship offering was the Lord's and was to be burned on the altar.) Motivation and heart attitude are critical. God looked with favor on Abel and his offering because of Abel's faith (see Heb. 11:4).
2. "Lurking" (4:7) refers to a well-known Mesopotamian demon (*rabisu*) who lingers around doorways. "Sin" is pictured as a doorway demon waiting for its victim to cross the threshold. Such demons were considered evil and were thought to ambush their victims.
3. In Mesopotamia, the ideal lifestyle is urban. Civilized life in the city is the gift of the gods and highly valued. Agricultural and pastoral activities are part of the urban landscape and are foundational to the success of the city. Nomadic groups are considered uncivilized and a threat to society. Cain's status as a wanderer marks him as undesirable. His wandering is in contrast to being a farmer rather than being a city dweller. In fact, the arts of civilization are developed from his descendants (vv. 17–22).
4. Violence escalates from the murder of one brother by another to Lamech, the last in Cain's line, who commits murder to be avenged eleven times more than his ancestor, Cain. In the ancient world, the family avenged the death of one of its members. Biblical law includes provisions for cities of refuge and the avenger of blood (Num. 35; Deut. 19:1–14).