

“SIN IS LURKING AT THE DOOR” **(Genesis 4:1-16)**

Some years ago, when Sharla and I traveled through the southern United States, and we learned about a plant we’d never heard of before called “Kudzu.” The Kudzu vine was first introduced into the U.S. by Japan in 1876 as part of a decorative plant exhibition in Philadelphia, and it became popular in the southern states during the Great Depression when it was planted as a way to slow soil erosion. What no one realized is how deadly and dominating Kudzu would become, taking over anything standing in its path.

Kudzu grows insanely fast – up to a foot a day in the summer months and a single vine can grow as long as 100 feet. Kudzu grows all on its own – you don’t have to water it or tend to it, it just grows. In the south you’ll often see telephone poles, abandoned cars, and even full houses completely blanketed in kudzu. They’ve tried everything they can think of to stop it, but it just keeps coming back, killing trees and taking over orchards and farmland.

Kudzu is an excellent example of the power and devastation of sin – it grows quickly and easily with very little effort. Growing positive traits like the fruit of the spirit requires time and attention and perseverance, but sin doesn’t take any effort. And like Kudzu, if sin is left unchecked, it will take over and dominate our life. John Owen, the great 17th century English theologian, said, *“Kill sin or it will kill you.”*

Nowhere are the effects of sin better illustrated than in the life of Cain, and this morning we come to his story in Genesis 4. In chapter 4 we see how the sin committed by Adam and Eve in chapter 3 now grows and spreads with their offspring, and results in the worst sin imaginable – the first murder in the Bible. As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, the outward act of murder begins in the heart, and Cain provides us a fascinating look at the formation of sin and its deadly consequences.

In the New Testament book of Jude, Jude refers to those who have “followed the way of Cain.” Cain is a forerunner of ungodly people who give in to the vices of sin and allow it to take over their lives. Cain’s story can be divided into five sections: his hopeful beginning, the revelation of his character, the formation of his sin, the murder of his brother, and the judgment of his sin.

In verses 1-2 we see his hopeful beginning... Adam made love to 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.” Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In chapter one God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, and here they willingly obey... we can do that! Keep in mind that the whole idea of having a baby is a brand-new concept – there’s no midwife or doctor to help them – there’s no epidural shot – and they have no idea what they’re getting into – Focus on the Family wasn’t around to give them parenting advice. But they’re excited and they’re full of hope.

They’re full of hope because they remember God’s promise in chapter 3 that their offspring would crush the head of the serpent and restore all that has been lost. It’s natural for them to think that this baby is the one who will do that. They name their baby “Cain,” which means, “To acquire or to get.” Eve says, “With God’s help I have brought forth a man.” Cain’s name recognizes that life comes from God – God created Adam and Eve with the ability to reproduce and create other image bearers.

Adam and Eve go on to have a second baby they name “Abel,” which means “breath.” It’s the same Hebrew word that’s used 38 times in Ecclesiastes to picture the brevity of life – that our life on earth is but a breath. The names of the first two babies signify that life both comes from the Lord – Cain’s name – and that life is short and brief – reflected in Abel’s name. Like all parents, they have high hopes for their first child, but little do they know the pain and heartache their little guy will bring.

As the boys grow older, their interests and skills begin to form. Cain takes a liking to farming, while Abel liked working with livestock and animals – both noble occupations. Verses 3-4a says, “In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.”

The text doesn’t tell us, but we can assume that Cain and Abel learned from their mom and dad the importance of presenting an offering or sacrifice to the Lord as a way of honoring Him as their creator and acknowledging that everything they produced came from Him. It’s the same principle we practice today when we bring a portion of our income to church and place it in the offering box as a way of honoring Him and all He provides us. It appears as though there’s a set time to present their offerings, and Cain brings some of his crop to present to the Lord, and Abel brings a sacrifice from his livestock. So far, so good.

Verses 4b-5... “The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.” Both brothers bring an offering, but the Lord accepts Abel’s and rejects Cain’s. Why? We’re not told exactly, but we have a clue in verse 3 where it says that Cain brought “some” of the fruit of the soil, but Abel brought the “firstborn” of his flock. Cain grabbed some fruits and vegetables and grain – but the implication is that they weren’t his best. He keeps the best crops – the biggest, the ripest, the most robust – for himself, and gives God the leftovers. Abel, on the other hand, gave the best of his flock – the firstborn – and he gave the choicest part of the animals – the fat portions.

And here we see a principle that is repeated throughout scripture, and that is presenting to God our first and best – He deserves our first and our best. God taught Israel to bring the “firstfruits” of their crops to the Lord – don’t wait to see if you have a lean crop or a bumper crop, but give to God the first portion of the harvest and trust that He will provide for your needs after that. This takes faith. What if I don’t have enough to feed my family? What if there’s a drought or a flood? What if my crop is ruined?

Abel shows his faith in God by bringing the firstborn of his flock – he doesn’t wait to see if other sheep are going to be healthy or deformed – in faith he gives God the first and best of his flock. Cain, on the other hand, says, “I worked hard for my crop, and I’m going to keep the best grain, the best vegetables, the best fruit for myself – and I’ll give God the rest.”

Abel represents heartfelt, sincere worship, while Cain symbolizes those who make a pretense of worship – it does not come from the heart. Jesus confronted this attitude many times in dealing with the Pharisees, who were all about the outward show of religion, but inwardly their hearts were full of sin and rebellion. A great example of this is when the Pharisees came to the temple and made a big show of giving huge offerings of money to the Lord so that everyone could see how religious they were. But the person Jesus noticed was a little old lady who quietly entered the temple and offered to God two small coins – just a couple of pennies. Jesus said, “Everyone else gave far more than this lady, but she gave everything she had to live on.”

Man looks at the outward appearance – the Bible says – but God looks at the heart – and He sees in Cain a heart that is far from Him – he was just going through the motions of religious activity, not worshipping out of love and faith for the Lord. 1 John 3:12 says that Cain “belonged to the evil one” and that his actions were “evil.” God looked at Cain’s heart and saw that one was evil and one was righteous, and because of that Abel’s offering was looked upon with favor, and Cain’s was not.

We get a further glimpse into Cain’s heart in verse 5a... “So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.” Cain does not take the rejection of his offering well. He’s mad. The Hebrew word for “angry” means he was “burning hot.” And he can’t hide his emotions showing up in his face. He’s downcast – his pride has been wounded and he broods and mopes.

Verses 6-7... Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 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 rule over it.” Just as God sought Adam and Eve out in the garden and asked them questions, He does the same with Cain... “Why are you angry? Why are you moping around?”

When we were raising kids, I remember hearing that anger is a secondary emotion that is rooted in a deeper, underlying cause. A common source of anger is hurt feelings. As they say, “Hurt people hurt people.” When someone rejects you, puts you down, or criticizes you, your feelings are hurt and anger bubbles up to the surface. When Cain is told that his offering is unacceptable, his pride is wounded and he burns with anger.

Another underlying cause of his anger is jealousy. He’s jealous that his brother has earned God’s favor but not him. The same thing happened in the story of the prodigal son – when the younger brother returned home after dishonoring the family and his given a big party by his father, the older brother seethed with anger. It not fair – it’s not right. King Saul became enraged when the young women of Israel began to sing the praises of David instead of him, and his anger drove him to try to kill David.

Cain has a huge anger issue, but notice how God shows incredible grace towards him – he doesn’t judge or condemn him – but offers him a way out of his anger. He says, “If you do what I right, will you not be accepted?” “Cain, you can fix this problem right now by repenting and saying, ‘I messed up – I offered a sacrifice, but my heart was not in it. My offering did not show faith and love for you, and I’m sorry. I’m going to go back to the field right now and get the first and best of my crop and give it to you.’” God says, “Just do what is right, and all will be fine between you and me.”

But God also gives Cain a warning, “If you don’t do what is right, sin is crouching at your door – it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.” In other words, if you don’t kill this sin of pride and anger, it will kill you. Sin is crouching at your door. Sin is like a hungry lion ready to pounce – all he’s waiting for is for you to open the door.” 1 Peter 5:8 says Satan is like roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. He wants sin to dominate your life and control you, so that your walk with God is neutralized and ineffective. Sin is like Kudzu – if you plant just a little of it, it will grow and take over.

Drinking alcohol, for example, may start with a few drinks, but if it is not mastered, it will master you. Pornography is something that escalates – it feeds the pleasure center of the brain and gets you hooked. Greed and lust and gluttony – any kind of sin – if it is not dealt with and repented of and brought to the cross of Christ will dominate you. That’s why Colossians 3:5 says, *“Put to death whatever belongs to your fleshly nature.”* Kill it before it kills you.

God says, “Cain, right now is a turning point. If you do what is right, you’ll shut the door to sin. If you don’t, you’re in trouble. You must rule over sin so that it does not rule over you.” The good news of the gospel is that any sin can be forgiven and God will give you divine power to conquer sin. Listen to what Paul says in Galatians 5:24, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.”

It’s interesting how Paul uses the word “crucified.” It instantly takes us to the cross. There Jesus died for our sin, and by belonging to Him in faith, we have died to sin. As we’ve seen, sin does not disappear, but we are no longer held captive to it. It no longer dominates us. Through Christ we have the power to overcome our sinful passions and desires and “crucify” them. But we are responsible to not open the door to sin and let the lions in.

Because of the curse, we must battle sin until the day the Lord returns, but because of the cross we can have victory over sin. You and I will never be sinless, but as we walk with the Lord and depend on His power, we will sin less and less. And the more victories we get under our belts, the less a grip sin has on our lives.

Sadly, Cain does not heed God’s warning, but lets his anger boil – and as we all know, his anger spills outward – just as Jesus said – whatever is in the heart will eventually rise to the surface and come out. Verse 8... Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. It’s no wonder God rejected Cain’s offering. His inward, spiritual condition is now revealed in a horrific act. He lures Abel out to a field where no one can see, and kills him. In today’s judicial system we call this premeditated murder. He didn’t just lose his head and kill Abel in the heat of the moment. He thought it out and planned it ahead of time.

In the story of Cain and Abel, Cain gets all the attention, but let’s not forget the life and example of Abel. In Matthew 23:35 Jesus cites Abel as the first in a long line of martyrs who were put to death by those who reject the Lord. Jesus promised that the world will hate you for living a righteous life. Rather than being rewarded and commended, you’ll be despised and marginalized. In a world of increasing antagonism against Christians, Abel reminds us that we should care far more about what God thinks than what the world thinks.

In the hall of faith chapter of Hebrews 11, Abel is the first one mentioned as an example of faith. 11:4 says, “By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.” Abel’s life was short and tragic, but in the big scheme of things God used his life as an inspiration for you and me to serve God with a whole heart and live a righteousness life regardless of what others may think.

Just as Adam and Eve could not hide their sin from God, neither can Cain hide his sin. Verse 9 says, Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” You can see how sin is progressing in Cain’s heart and is taking over. Like so many who sin, Cain tells a lie to try and cover his sin. “Where’s your brother?” I don’t know.

Then Cain flippantly says, “Am I my brother’s keeper? Why should I know where he is? Am I supposed to be taking care of him?” Guilty people deny and deflect. The truth is that Cain knows exactly where his brother is, and that he’s responsible for his death. Rather than confess, Cain evades and dodges. Once sin is allowed in the door, it seeks to devour you – and sin has completely taken over Cain’s life.

In verses 10-12 God exposes Cain’s sin and brings out into the light what he has tried to keep hidden... The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”

Cain may have thought that once he hid or buried his brother’s body that no one would ever know what happened, but God says, “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Abel may be dead and unable to speak, but I know, Cain, that you killed him and his death cries out for justice and accountability.” God says, “I made Abel in my own image and his life matters. Justice demands that there be a punishment for taking his life.”

Cain receives poetic justice from God. As a farmer he prided himself in what he produced from the ground – now as punishment, God curses the ground so that whatever Cain tries to grow will not produce a crop. It’s a perfect example of you reap what you sow. You withheld the first and best of your crops, and now you will have no crops at all.

Secondly, Cain is consigned to spend the rest of his life as a nomad – a wanderer. This is not describing a romantic, adventurous lifestyle – it’s describing a life that is socially isolated, and being cut off from the love and care of family and community. He’ll be a man without a country. God designed for us to live in relationships, and without close connections with people we wither away. It reminds me of the famous prisoner at Alcatraz – called the birdman of Alcatraz – who spend 42 years of his life in solitary confinement. Cain is now consigned to live in his own prison of isolation. He scoffed at being his brother’s keeper, and now God is saying, “Now no one is going to be your keeper.” You reap exactly what you sow.

Verses 13-14, Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is more than I can bear. 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.” Reaping what we sow is painful. As the Bible says, “*They sow the wind, but reap the whirlwind*” (Hosea 8:7). The consequences of sin are always more than we expect. You foolishly throw some seed up in the wind, and before you know it, you reap a whirlwind of consequences. Cain feels it. He feels the heat. It might seem like he’s remorseful and sorry for what he did, but from all we know about Cain in the rest of the Bible, he is sorry he got caught. He’s sorry he has to pay for his crime.

What we don’t hear Cain say is, “Lord God, I have sinned and deeply offended you by taking the life of my own brother – my brother made in your image. Lord, have mercy on my soul. I don’t deserve any mercy, but I humbly ask you to forgive me for my horrific act of violence.” Instead, Cain says, “God, you’re not fair – my punishment is too great.” Amazing... Cain just kills someone and complains about his punishment. It’s another sign that sin has so dominated his life that he can no longer recognize his sin.

One of his complaints is that as he's roaming around from place to place, someone in the future from Abel's side of the family might try to hunt him down and kill him. Verses 15-16, But the Lord said to him, "Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

God shows amazing mercy on Cain. He could have killed Cain on the spot. Later in chapter 9 God will institute the law of capital punishment – a life for a life – whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed. And the reason given is that every person is made in God's image and is intensely valuable. To not hold someone accountable for murder would be to say the murdered victim's life didn't mean anything.

But in this case, God shows mercy to Cain and issues a warning for anyone who seeks vengeance on Cain. God is letting us know that vengeance belongs to Him – He will repay. We are not to mete out our own justice, but trust God to do it. In the New Testament God entrusts human government with the sword of justice – including capital punishment. And even if justice is not carried out in this life – and many times it isn't – we can trust God to make all wrongs right at the final judgment.

To ensure that no one kills Cain, God puts a mark on him – and we have no idea what that mark was – whether it was a tattoo or a scar – the mark is not important. What is important is that God is protecting Cain from vigilante justice.

In God's protection of Cain we see what theologians refer to as "common grace." Common grace means that God bestows certain blessings even on atheists and rebels and those who defy Him. God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. God is patient and longsuffering with everyone, wishing for all to come to repentance. This includes Cain.

But in verse 16 we read that instead of responding to God's mercy and kindness, he "went out from the Lord's presence and live in the land of Nod, east of Eden." In spite of God's mercy, Cain chooses to live a life apart from God. He chooses to be his own man and live on his own terms. He lives, poetically, in the land of Nod which means "wandering." "East of Eden" means that he was even further removed from the garden that Adam and Eve were. In the land of Nod Cain lived out his days detached and alienated from God.

Cain's story is recorded as an example to us – to observe his tragic life and make sure we do not follow his pattern. As we wrap up this message and apply it, I want to leave you with five questions to consider...

Number one, are you giving God your first and best? Like Abel, are you in faith giving God the best of your income, your time, your energy, and your talents? He deserves our first and our best.

Number two, is there a sin that is lurking at your door? Is there unresolved anger or bitterness? Is there jealousy over how someone else's life is faring and not yours?

Number three, what are you doing about your sin? Do you humbly recognize that it's wrong and repenting of it? Are you asking God, through His Holy Spirit, to rule over that sin before it rules over you?

Number four, when confronted with sin, do you try to hide it and make excuses for it? Or do you come clean with God and receive His forgiveness?

Number five, are you grateful for God's grace and the fact that you don't deserve it? God's grace and forgiveness is available to anyone who will humbly bring their sin before Him, repent of it, and be saved. When you do, you – by God's grace – rule over sin so that it will not rule over you – and you can live joyfully and freely in His presence and receive His favor.