

THE PRIORITY OF TRUE WORSHIP

Genesis 4:1-16

There is a fundamental principle of Bible interpretation called the LAW OF FIRST MENTION. It simply means that clues to understanding a biblical subject are often found in the first time it is mentioned in scripture. This is one reason why the book of Genesis is so vital to biblical theology and Christian doctrine. It is the book of beginnings that addresses matters of origin. **Genesis 1-2** record the story of creation. **Genesis 3** records to story of the Fall of humanity into sin. Yet as you read into chapter 4, Genesis continues to introduce you to important firsts in human history.

- **The first sex act**
- **The first pregnancy**
- **The first birth**
- **The first siblings**
- **The first shepherd**
- **The first murder**
- **The first lie**

In this message, I want to focus your attention on the most important first in this story. It is the first record of the offering of worship to the Lord. I do not believe it was the first offering of worship ever made. Most likely, Adam and Eve offered worship to the Lord and taught the children to do so. But this is the first record of worship to God. As such, it sets precedence. This first act of worship teaches us the priority of true worship: Make sure God is pleased. D. JAMES KENNEDY wrote: "Most people think of the church as a drama, with the minister as the chief actor, God as the prompter, and the laity as the critic. What is actually the case is that the congregation is the chief actor, the minister is the prompter, and God is the critic." The story of God's response to the worship of Cain and Abel teaches us to make sure our ultimate priority in worship is that the Lord is pleased.

I. MAKE SURE GOD IS PLEASED WITH YOUR OFFERING.

Genesis 2-3 tells us about Adam and Eve's life together in the Garden of Eden. Chapter 2 is about their life together before the Fall. Chapter 3 is about their life together after the Fall. Now chapter 4 tells us about Adam and Eve's life together after they were banished from Eden. They have had to find a new home. But their marriage is still in tack. Genesis 4:1 says, "*Now Adam knew Eve his wife.*" The word "*knew*" is more than a discreet statement about Adam and Eve's conjugal relations. It is a subtle reminder of their fallen condition. It all started with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent told Eve that she and Adam would not die if they ate of the tree; but their eyes would be opened, and they would be like God, knowing good and evil. After they sinned, their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked. Now we are told that Adam knew his wife Eve.

Eve conceived and gave birth to a son. At the birth of Cain, Eve declared, *"I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord"* This statement reflects Adam and Eve's sense of hope at the birth of Cain. In **Genesis 3:15**, God says to the serpent, *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."* It may be that Eve thought that the birth of Cain was the fulfillment of this great promise. Verse 2 says, *"And again, she bore his brother Abel."* Verse 2 introduces us to the vocations of history's first siblings: *"Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground."* Abel was the first of a long line of godly shepherds that include Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David. In **John 10:11**, Jesus says, *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* Cain followed in his father's footsteps and worked the ground as a farmer.

After introducing us to Cain and Abel and their respective vocations, the text abruptly shifts to the offering of worship they presented to God one day. Verses 3-4 say, *"In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions."* This record of Cain and Abel's offerings makes no obvious point. It simply reports that both men brought an offering in keeping with their vocation. Cain the farmer brought an offering from the fruit of the ground. Abel the shepherd brought an offering from this flock of sheep. Yet there is a distinction. Verse 3 says Cain gave from the fruit of the ground. But verse 4 says that Abel gave from the first, finest, and fattest of his sheep. This may be a hint to why the way the offerings were received and why. The text does not say that Cain offered tainted fruit. But it is clear that Abel offering the Lord the very best that he had.

The end of verse 4 records the Lord's response to these two offerings of worship: *"And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering. He had no regard."* This first recorded act of worship was definitely not about what Cain and Abel got out of it. It was about whether God was pleased. And the text is clear that God accepted one offering and not the other. In fact, the text ties these brothers to their offerings. The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering. But the Lord had no regard for Cain and his offering. This is how it is. You cannot separate how God views you from how God views your offering. **1 Samuel 16:7b** says: *"For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."*

Why did God regard Abel and his offering and disregard Cain and his offering? The text does not specify. Yet it is the subject of much debate. The common reason given why God rejected Cain's offering is because of the nature of it. It was not a sin offering. A blood offering would later be legislated for the atonement of sin. Moreover, blood offerings point forward to the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. **Hebrews 12:24** says we have come to *"Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."* But in the Old Testament, God accepted both blood and grain offerings. Others contend that the problem was the quality of Cain's offering, that he gave less than his best. But the text does not explicitly say this. Still others contend that God took issue with the manner of Cain's offering - that his attitude was wrong.

That may have been the case. But, again, the text does not tell us what either brother's attitude was as they presented their offerings.

All we know for sure is that one boy presented an offering that pleased the Lord and the other did not. That does not answer all of our questions. But I believe it makes the point: The priority of true worship is to make sure God is pleased. God alone is the subject and object of true worship. That is, it is both about God and for God. MARVA DAWN wrote a book about Christian worship with a provocative title: *"A Royal Waste of Time."* She means by this title worship is not a means to an end. It is an end in and of itself. **Hebrews 11:4** says: *"By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks."*

II. MAKE SURE GOD IS PLEASED WITH YOUR ATTITUDE.

Genesis 4:5b records Cain's sinful response to God's rejection of him and his worship: *"So Cain was very angry, and his face fell."* What an interesting response. When God confronted Cain with whatever was unacceptable about his worship, Cain did not confess and repent. He became angry. He lost his temper. He was indignant. And verse 5 says: *"his face fell."* Some take this to mean that Cain became depressed. But don't replace the theological with the psychological. Cain was boiling mad. And it showed all over his face. His countenance revealed the bitterness of his darkened soul. Verses 5-7 record the Lord's holy response to Cain's sinful anger. It is a divine warning that teaches us to make sure God is pleased with your attitude in worship. Notice three ways the text makes the point in the Lord's first confrontation with Cain.

A. GOD CONFRONTED CAIN WITH A QUESTION ABOUT HIS SINFUL ATTITUDE.

In verse 6, the Lord said to Cain, *"Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?"* Don't be thrown off by this question. God is OMNISCIENT. God is all-knowing. God knows everything known, unknown, and knowable. Yet there are times when God asks questions. But God does not ask questions for his own information. Divine questions are for the benefit of the one to whom God asks the question.

After Adam's sin, God asked, *"Where are you?"* Now, after Cain's sin, "God asked, *"Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?"* The Lord knew what was in Cain's heart. The Lord knew that Cain was angry and why? In fact, the Lord knew why Cain was angry better than Cain himself did. And God knows what is in your heart.

B. GOD CONFRONTED CAIN WITH AN AFFIRMATION OF HIS GOODNESS.

In verse 7, God asks Cain, *"If you do well, will you not be accepted?"* This question tells us that God had determined that Cain had now done well. In

presenting his offering, Cain had not done the right thing. This question also tells us that God's rejection of Cain's offering was not cruel, prejudiced, or unfair. Abel's acceptance and Cain's rejection were not rooted in the mystery of divine election. The acceptable way was open for both Cain and Abel. We cannot blame God for Cain's rejection. And we must not blame God when we are judged. In **Psalm 51:4**, David confesses, *"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment."*

C. GOD CONFRONTED CAIN WITH A WARNING ABOUT THE DANGER OF SIN.

Listen to verse 7 again: *"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."* The Lord laid a clear choice before Cain. He can quickly recover from his unacceptable worship. Or it can get worse. It was his decision. But the Lord will not allow him to claim to be ignorant or helpless. If Cain chooses to go further into sin (and he will), he will do so with his eyes wide open to the consequences: *"If you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door."* What a dramatic picture. If you step out of the safety of God's will, you will run into sin that is crouching at the door, like a wild animal waiting to attack.

The Lord adds: *"its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."* God warns Cain of sin's determination to get Cain. His only hope was to stand up to it and put it down. But that's the problem of sin. We cannot rule over it on our own. In Matthew 12:43-45, Jesus said: *"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. The it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and well there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation."* You cannot rule over sin on your own. You can only make cosmetic changes. But only the Lord Jesus Christ can give you victory over sin. We see that in Cain's sad story. God warned Cain about the danger of sin. Yet can pressed forward in sin anyway. This the sinfulness of sin.

PHIL YANCEY writes of talking to a friend who planned to commit adultery. He asked Yancey, "Will God forgive me for what I'm about to do?" Yancey answered: "Can God forgive you? Of course. Read your Bible. David, Peter, Paul – God builds his church on the backs of people who murder, commit adultery, deny him and persecute his followers. But because of Christ, forgiveness is now God's problem, not ours. What we have to go through to commit sin distances us from God – we change in the very act of rebellion – and there is no guarantee we will come back. You ask me about forgiveness now, but will you even want it later, especially if it involves repentance?"

III. MAKE SURE GOD IS PLEASED WITH YOUR RELATIONSHIPS.

The story of Cain and Abel warns us about the power of sin. But it also warns us about the progression of sin. In **Genesis 3**, humanity sinned against divinity. In **Genesis 4**, humanity sins against humanity. But there is another important progression here. In **Genesis 3**, the serpent talked Eve into sin. In **Genesis 4**, the Lord himself cannot Cain out of it. Cain's first sin of unacceptable worship leads to a second sin of premeditated murder. Don't ignore the warning: The consequence of sin is sin. Sin begets sin. If you do not repent, one sin will quickly lead to another. And sin will get worse the further you go. **James 1:14-15** says: *"But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."* Don't play with sin. It will take you further than you want to go. It will cost you more than you want to pay. It will keep you longer than you want to stay. We see this in Cain's rejection of God's authority and God's rejection of Cain's independence.

A. CAIN REJECTS GOD'S AUTHORITY.

After God rejected his offering, Cain rejected God's authority in two ways.

CAIN MURDERED ABEL. Verse 8 says, *"Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him."* This verse records the first murder in history. How did Cain kill Abel? Cain murdered Abel with premeditated brutality. He was angry. He rejected the Lord's warning. He lured his brother into a death trap. And with murder in heart, he violently attacked his younger, weaker brother, leaving him dead in a field. This was not manslaughter, negligent homicide, or second-degree murder. This was murder in the first degree. Why did Cain kill Abel? **1 John 3:12** says: *"We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous."*

CAIN MOCKED GOD. For the second time, God asked Cain a question he already knew the answer to. In verse 6, the Lord said, *"Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?"* In verse 9, the Lord said, *"Where is Abel your brother?"* God asked the father, "Where are you?" Now he asks the son, "Where is your brother?" Verse 9 also records Cain's remarkable response: *"I do not know, am I my brother's keeper?"* This answer consists of a statement and a question. Cain's statement is a lie: *"I do not know."* This was a flat out lie. Cain knew exactly where Abel was. Abel's dead body was wherever Cain left it. Then Cain asked a question of his own: *"Am I my brother's keeper?"* When God confronted Adam, he acknowledged his sin, even though he blamed Eve for leading him into it. But Cain refused to acknowledge the sin of murder he committed. He wouldn't take responsibility for Abel's life, much less his death. *"Am I my brother's keeper?"* he asked.

The word "keeper" is the same word used in verse 2 to describe Abel's vocation as a shepherd. Cain said, "I am not a shepherd. It's not my job to watch over my brother." Was he right? Absolutely not. Every time Abel is mentioned in this passage he is identified as Cain's brother. Yet Cain's sarcastic question is the dominant philosophy of life today. We believe our lives are private. We think no one has the right to say anything about how we live our lives. And we feel no one should have the right to say how we should live. But this is not what scripture teaches. The

Law of Moses will answer Cain's question affirmatively. Community solidarity was vital to Israel's existence. And not even death eliminated one's responsibility to his brother. And this sense of community carries over into the New Testament.

Mark it down: You are your brother's keeper!

Our worship of God and our fellowship with one another are inextricably tied together. In **Matthew 5:23-24**, Jesus says, *"So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."*

B. GOD REJECTS CAIN'S INDEPENDENCE.

Cain may have rejected God's authority. But God rejected Cain's rejection. The Lord would not allow Cain to act as if he was independent from divine authority. God rejected Cain's independence two ways.

GOD CURSED CAIN. In verse 10, the Lord said to Cain, *"What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."* Here is yet another question God already knew the answer to. God knew what Cain had done. God asked this question to confront Cain with the truth he would not confess. Then, like prosecuting attorney, the Lord lays out the evident against Cain: *"The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."* There is no record of Abel speaking in scripture. But after his death, the voice of his blood cried out to the Lord from the ground. It was a postmortem call for vindication that affirms the sanctity of human life.

The Lord answered. In verses 11, God says to Cain: *"And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand."* This is the third curse God renders because of sin. In **Genesis 3:14**, God curses the serpent for deceiving Eve. And in **Genesis 3:17**, God curses the ground because of Adam's sin. Interestingly, God did not curse Adam and Eve. But he did curse their son Cain for killing his brother Abel. According to verse 12, this first human curse carried two consequences: *"When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."* First, Cain was cursed with fruitless labor. **Genesis 4:2** says that Cain was *"a worker of the ground."*

GOD MARKED CAIN. Verses 13-14 record Cain's remorse: *Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."* Cain was remorseful. But he was not penitent. Notice that Cain did not acknowledge his guilt. He only lamented his punishment. This is the key difference between remorse and repentance. Remorse is primarily concerned about the consequences of getting caught. But repentance is concerned about the offense itself. Remorse responds to punishment. Repentance responds to guilt. Cain was not penitent. Listen to his response to the divine curse that was placed on him. He did not care about the spiritual implications of it. He only cared about his personal safety. This was not confession of sin. It was self-pity. Cain was still only concerned about himself.

Verses 15 records God's response: *Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him.*

Verse 16 says, *"Then Cain went away from the present of the Lord and settled in the land of No, east of Eden."*

DONALD GREY BARNHOUSE summarized Cain's story: "He started with human reason as opposed to divine revelation; he continued in human willfulness instead of divine will; he opposed human pride to divine humility; he sank to human hatred instead of rising to divine love; he presented human excuses instead of seeking divine grace; he went into wandering instead of seeking to return; he ended in human loneliness instead of in divine fellowship. To be lone without God is the worst thing that earth can hold, to go thus into eternity is, indeed, the second death."