

January 2 Lesson 5 (NIV)

JUSTICE, VENGEANCE, AND MERCY

DEVOTIONAL READING: Genesis 4:1–13

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Genesis 4

GENESIS 4:1–15

¹ 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.” ² Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴ And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ 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.”

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.

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

¹⁰ The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”

¹³ Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴ 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.”

¹⁵ 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.

KEY TEXT

The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.”—Genesis 4:10

JUSTICE, LAW, HISTORY

Unit 2: God: The Source of Justice

LESSONS 5–9

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- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Leviticus *Leh-vit-ih-kus*.

Moses *Mo-zes* or *Mo-zez*.

primeval *pry-mee-vuhl*.

Terah *Tair-uh*.

Introduction

A. Acing Sisterhood

The Williams sisters *know* tennis. Together Serena and Venus have dominated the women’s field, winning 14 Grand Slam doubles titles. They both excel in singles competition as well, although the younger sister has been the brighter star. As of this writing, Serena has won a staggering 73 singles titles while Venus has 49 of her own.

Serena's relatively greater successes could have made Venus bitter. The 19–12 record of Serena's wins against Venus in head to head matches could have soured their relationship. Instead, the competition seems to fuel their continued excellence. Both sisters understand the struggles of performing at the highest level of their sport. Instead of giving in to jealousy over their relative successes, the sisters demonstrate their love by cheering each other on, always hoping for the other's success.

What an example of sibling love! But we know that many siblings do not take joy in the other's accomplishments. Our text today does not explore a relationship like Serena and Venus have; it sadly shows us what happens when evil takes root in a brother's heart.

B. Lesson Context

The first part of the book of Genesis is general history (also called primeval history). As Moses introduced new people or nations throughout this section, the emphasis very quickly moved to the person or entity that he intended to feature at that point. For example, the accounts of the first sin and the first murder are set forth in Genesis 3 and 4 (see below), but the goal is to get to another son of Adam and Eve—namely, Seth. Notice the focus on him in Genesis 5:1–4. In Genesis 5:6–26, we see repeatedly that a certain descendant “had ... sons and daughters,” but the only one mentioned by name in each case is the one leading to Noah and the flood. This trend continues until the account finally reaches Abram and stays focused on his family (see lesson 6).

Today's passage comes early in the general history as it focuses on the first human family. The account begins immediately after the fall (Genesis 3). It is worth naming four consequences of sin already in the world at this stage. Two are listed in Genesis 3:16: (1) the woman will experience pain in childbirth, and (2) her desire will be for her husband and he will rule over her. Most scholars agree that the woman's anticipated “desire” for her husband and his expected “rule” over her are not ideal, but are fallen in nature. This interpretation is grounded in part on the observation that the same words for “desire” and “rule” occur in Genesis 4:7 to describe Cain's conflicted relationship with sin (see below).

Relevant consequence (3) is that God had cursed the ground on account of sin (Genesis 3:17). This means that humans have to work the ground with hard labor. Food was no longer easy to come by. Noteworthy consequence (4) is that God barred Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden so they could no longer partake of the tree of life (3:23–24). Without such access, they eventually died.

I. Sibling Rivalry **(GENESIS 4:1–7)**

A. Eve's Sons (vv. 1–2)

1a. Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain.

The conception and birth of the first human offspring follow what people through the generations have known as the ordinary course of events. Unlike *Adam* and *Eve*, *Cain* was a child born through ordinary human sexual reproduction.

1b. She said, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.”

Cain's name is a play on words. First, it has some of the same Hebrew consonants as the word Eve used to describe how she had *brought forth a man*. Second, Eve specified that *the Lord* helped her beget her first son. She did not mention Adam. Alone, this observation has ambiguous meaning, but combined with the third and most remarkable insight, we get a clearer picture of her meaning.

Referring to a newborn baby as *a man* is unique to Eve's experience with Cain. The same Hebrew word is translated "husband" and was used when God told Eve that she would desire Adam and he would rule over her (Genesis 3:16). In the ancient world, naming infers the authority of the name giver. Adam's rule over her was demonstrated immediately when he named her Eve (3:20; compare 2:19; 17:5, 15; 41:45; Daniel 1:7).

But God also acknowledged that the woman would have desire for her man. This likely means in part that she would want the power she experienced her husband exercising over her. Thus in taking the initiative to name their son, in stating that she has named a "man," and in emphasizing her direct relationship to God in this process, Eve may be asserting her own authority in response to the authority that Adam exercised when he named her.

2a. Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

There is no fanfare in learning Abel's name. Nor is its meaning very grand, given that the Hebrew word can refer to something that is vain (examples: Job 9:29; Psalm 39:6), something of little substance that disperses quickly into the air (see Hosea 6:4; 13:3; compare James 4:14). The name *Abel* proves to be tragically apt for Eve's second son (see Genesis 4:8, below).

2b. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.

We should not draw too fine a distinction between *Abel* and *Cain* in their work. Though the former specialized in keeping *flocks* of sheep and the latter on working *the soil*, modern subsistence-level farming (and agriculture throughout the ages) suggests that they were working together to keep the ground productive and the animals healthy. It should be noted that God had cursed the ground because of sin (see Lesson Context).

Even so, a distinction certainly was made between shepherds and farmers in the ancient Near East. For instance, the Egyptians looked down on the Hebrews for being shepherds, a profession they disdained (Genesis 46:34). But that was several centuries later; it's hard to tell for sure what distinction was really made between Cain's and Abel's work.

B. The Sons' Offerings (vv. 3–5a)

3–4a. 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.

Perhaps Adam taught *Cain* to offer a portion of *the fruits of the soil* to *the Lord*. Nowhere are we told that God explicitly asked this of the first family. But even before being codified into Israel's laws (example: Leviticus 2), righteous men offered gifts to God (example: Genesis 8:20–21). *Abel* apparently followed either his father's or his older brother's lead.

4b–5a. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.

God's accepting Abel's *offering* and not Cain's has led to all sorts of speculation. Most propose that Cain didn't actually do anything wrong. Some have theorized that God preferred shepherds to farmers, in contrast to the Egyptians who despised shepherds (see Genesis 46:34). A related

explanation is that God had less regard for Cain's offering because it reminded him of the cursed soil. *Cain* had to wrestle with the cursed soil to get it to produce food, whereas a shepherd like *Abel* had to care for his flock. In short, the theory is that God preferred the offering of *Abel* because of what it signified in that time and place.

Instead, we understand that *Abel* brought the best of his flock as later required in Israel's laws (the firstborn and fat portions; see Leviticus 3; Deuteronomy 12:5–7), and *Cain* did not (Hebrews 11:4). This is an early introduction to a series of events in which God preferred a younger son to the firstborn in the face of cultural convention (example: Genesis 21:12; see lesson 6). While God had reason other than *Abel*'s birth order to prefer the man's sacrifice, this account does pave the way for this theme to be pursued throughout the book.

C. God's Warning (vv. 5b–7)

5b–6. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?"

It is little wonder *Cain* felt snubbed. God recognized this and initiated a conversation with him by asking questions. This echoes his approach to Adam and Eve after they sinned (Genesis 3:9, 11, 13). God was not ignorant of their deeds and thoughts. Like a good teacher, he drew them out of their negative inner monologue.

This tactful approach from the powerful Creator emphasizes God's loving desire for relationship. Though he was not pleased with *Cain*'s sacrifice, God still actively sought out a relationship with the man. From the very beginning, then, we see *the Lord* seeking to save the lost (see Luke 19:10).

7. "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."

God's question here implies what the writer of Hebrews asserted: that *Cain* was not accepted because he did not do well (11:4; see Genesis 4b–5a, above). Failure to do what one knows to be right opens the door to *sin*. God's warning contains a heartbreaking echo of the antagonistic relationship between Adam and Eve that was a consequence of their disobedience (3:16; see Lesson Context and 4:1b, above).

This is God's first instruction about sin, and it rings as true for us today. Ruling over sin isn't a matter of obsessing about it; it is about busying ourselves with doing the right thing. The first step to inviting sin into our lives is to neglect doing what we ought to be doing. It is the vacuum created by inactivity in righteousness that sucks wickedness into our lives.

II. Divine Mercy

(GENESIS 4:8–15)

A. Fratricide (v. 8)

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.

Rather than heed God’s warning, *Cain* committed the first murder, probably even the first premeditated murder. Cain did not slay *Abel* at home, but instead led him into *the field*. It’s unclear why this place was better to kill his brother than another. Maybe this was where Abel raised his sheep, or where Cain raised his own crops. Or maybe he meant to hide the evidence of his sin against his brother, burying him where he was struck or making the murder look like a workplace accident.

Cain is an example of the extreme opposite of what a Christian ought to be. His problem was that he “belonged to the evil one,” the devil (1 John 3:12). As a result, he did wrong instead of right. But instead of repenting, Cain went wild with jealousy.

So I am warned. If I feel inclined to hate a fellow Christian, is it possibly because he or she is more *righteous* than I am? Should I be cleaning up my own way of living instead of envying someone whose godly living wins for him or her some honor that is denied to me?

B. Consequences (vv. 9–12)

9a. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied.

The Lord again confronted *Cain* with a question (see Genesis 4:5b–6, above). Cain’s lie indicated that he thought he could play dumb and God would be none the wiser. This lack of both respect and holy fear was reflected in Cain’s inferior sacrifice (see 4:4b–5a, above).

9b. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Here is another play on words. Abel was earlier introduced as a keeper of flocks (Genesis 4:2, above). In essence Cain asked God, “Am I the *keeper* of the keeper?”

10. The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.

This time the Lord’s question is rhetorical. There’s no need for Cain to say anything, because Abel’s *blood* was crying out loudly. God will later declare the shedding of innocent blood to be a pollution on the land (Numbers 35:33).

11. “Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.

Genesis 3–9 emphasizes that the estrangement between humans and God resulted not only in consequences for people but also for nonhuman creation (examples: Genesis 3:14–15, 17–19; 6:11–21). This being the case, we ought to be careful not to reduce God’s concern just to people. Though we are made in his image and occupy a special position in his creation (1:27–28), God is not *solely* concerned with the consequences of sin on humans. He still cares for his creation (examples: Jonah 4:11; Matthew 10:29). For this reason, salvation is an all-out, multidimensional solution to the global sin catastrophe (see Romans 8:18–23).

12. “When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”

If Cain could not be trusted with his brother’s life, he could not be trusted with God’s land. The land itself would resist all of Cain’s efforts to wrest sustenance from it (compare Deuteronomy 28:15–24). And Cain could not simply run away from this problem. He could not

find greener pastures elsewhere and resume his farming profession. No piece of land anywhere would cooperate with the first person who defiled the soil with human blood. He was therefore consigned to a life of roaming without a homeland.

C. Limiting Consequences (vv. 13–15)

13. Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is more than I can bear.

The word translated *punishment* here has three senses, any one of which could be appropriate in this context: (1) It can refer to the wicked deed Cain committed. While in English we would think of punishment as a consequence of a misdeed, this sense implies that the action has natural consequences of its own that will now play out. (2) The word could refer to the guilt Cain bore or felt because of what he did. And finally, (3) it could refer to the sentence that he has received, the most natural English understanding. This final sense is preferable because Cain did not ask for forgiveness or mercy.

14a. “Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence;

When Cain’s parents were forced out of the garden, God’s presence remained with them, even though they might have believed that God would abandon them. His faithfulness to them was evident in providing clothing (Genesis 3:21), helping Eve in childbirth, and continuing conversations with Cain.

But Cain connected his wandering status with separation from God’s presence. Did he understand that sin creates a rift between people and God (Romans 3:23; Ephesians 4:18)? Or did he believe that God’s geographic reach was limited to his parents’ home? Perhaps Cain viewed his connection with the soil as his primary contact point with God. He would meet God each day as he worked in God’s good creation.

In any case, the murderer believed he was being sent outside of God’s care. The Lord would not be his keeper (see Genesis 4:9b, above; contrast Psalm 23).

14b. “I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”

Cain’s concern regarded his own family’s desire for vengeance for Abel. He was convinced that his guilt would be known in any case and that, while God did not kill him outright now, he was effectively sentencing Cain to death.

15. 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.

Quite in character, God responded with mercy. He recognized the truth in Cain’s concern. People are inclined toward evil from birth (Genesis 8:21), and the desire for revenge is often a powerful motivator to act with evil, violent intent. Vengeful people do not trust God or leave vengeance to him; they take it upon themselves to repay evil. They organize mob actions against the Cains of this world. They authorize and deputize someone who is willing to do whatever necessary to rid the world of any and all threats to their community.

Cain would have to live with the consequences of his sin, but he would live nonetheless. We often experience the same. While our sins come with consequences, we know that through Christ we are spared death that is the natural consequence of sin (Romans 6:23).

The text provides no clue as to what Cain’s *mark* might have been. Perhaps it was a unique physical feature that served as a deterrent. Or perhaps it was a visible sign of a sevenfold level of *vengeance*, should anyone lay a hand on him.

Conclusion

A. Mercy on Mercy

Cain was not the first to benefit from God's mercy. It permeates the early chapters of Genesis. He cares for the innocent and the wicked alike in ways that we are typically slow to understand (Matthew 5:45). God does not delight in the death of the wicked but longs for them to repent and live (Ezekiel 18:23). And though we were all enemies of God, Christ died for us (Romans 5:10).

So may we all learn *what* it means that vengeance belongs to God and *how* to bless those who persecute us—and so overcome evil with good (Romans 12:14–21). May we, like Abel, offer pleasing sacrifices to our Lord. May we, unlike Cain, ask for the Lord's mercy and so experience the peace of reconciliation.

B. Prayer

Merciful and just God, teach us to trust in your justice and in your timing. Give us the faith to extend your mercy, which you have lavishly poured on us, to a wicked world that needs it neither more nor less than we do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God calls all people to turn to him and live.¹
