

The Offerings of Cain and Abel

Girl, have you been dipping in 'the sauce'? Your wig looks tilted," Lacresha said to her sister, Chantelle.

Chantelle mustered a smile at her older sister. "No, I haven't been drinking."

Chantelle moved away from the dessert table and closer to the door. The festivities were winding down. Chantelle, Lacresha, and their brother, Terrance, were hosting a surprise seventy-fifth birthday party for their mother.

Chantelle prepared a wonderful presentation and, through her contacts with the city, had arranged for the mayor to come to read a proclamation which dedicated the day to their mother. Their mother was obviously pleased and proud of her three children, who had made such an effort to celebrate her. They all were grateful for how much their mother had sacrificed, raising three children on her own after their father had left.

But the cost of this party had fallen squarely on Chantelle and Terrance, without help from their sister. They both knew her finances were in poor shape after years of poor decisions. And they had decided to let it go.

As Chantelle made her way to the restroom, her friend caught up with her. "Lacresha can be so mean. She knows you have alopecia," she said. "I think she is jealous of you."

"I don't know why." Chantelle said with a sigh.

"Because your mom is proud of you. Because you've done good."

1. What are some acceptable and unacceptable sacrifices to God?

2. How do we compare what we have and do for God against what others give to the Lord?

3. Is God pleased with all "sacrifices?"

LESSON FOCUS: Let God decide what is acceptable.

Cain's Temptation

Genesis 4:1–7 KJV

1 And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD.

2 And she again bare his brother Abel.

And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. 3 And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. 4 And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: 5 But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.

6 And the LORD said unto Cain, why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?

7 If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

Genesis 4:1–7 NIV

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."

When Adam and Eve are excluded from the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:23), human life continues. But it is altered by humanity's sin. Humans become part of the problem, instead of perfectly reflecting the image of their Creator.

In Genesis 4:1, Adam and Eve have their first child, Cain. Some older commentaries have taken Eve's exclamation to mean that she sees Cain as an answer to God's promise, someone to crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). But her words are not specific, and most suggest that Eve is simply acknowledging God's hand in bringing life. Now that humans have become subject to death and decay, it falls to Eve and other women to bear children to outlive their parents. Eve rejoices that she has given birth to a child, with God's help.

Verse 2 says that Eve has a second son, Abel. In Hebrew, Abel means "breath" or "vanity." Even the name is a clue about the brevity of Abel's life. The narrative gives only one detail about each of these men: Abel is a shepherd and Cain is a farmer (v. 3).

From the work of each of their hands, the brothers offer sacrifices to the Lord (v. 4). Cain brings the fruit of the ground and Abel brings fat portions from the firstborn of his flock. Abel's is seen favorably by God and Cain's is not. We are left to wonder, *Why?*

The text gives no indication of why Abel's offering is accepted, while Cain's is not. People have long theorized about this, but the Lord determines what is or is not acceptable. Since Cain is upset about the situation, God speaks directly to him (vv. 6–7). He warns Cain about sin. God's words paint an image of something dangerous (a wild animal or a demon perhaps). Sin is "crouching" and waiting to pounce on Cain (v. 7). Cain faces a choice: he can "do what is right," or he can do the opposite. God urges Cain to master this threat. Sin "desires" him, but he must not be overtaken.

4. *What changed about the nature of humans who were created in the image of God?*

5. *How might God's warnings about sin teach us to respond when we feel temptation?*

6. *What makes sin like a ruler or a master?*

The First Murder

Genesis 4:8–16 KJV

8 And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

9 And the LORD said unto Cain, where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?

10 And he said, what hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. 11 And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; 12 When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. 13 And Cain said unto the LORD, my punishment is greater than I can bear. 14 Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.

15 And the LORD said unto him, therefore whosoever slayeth

Genesis 4:8–16 NIV

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

Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. 16 And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

seven times over." Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶ So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Four chapters into the Bible, we read about the first murder. As this shows, the consequences of sin are already wide-ranging and disastrous. Sin does not just alter our relationship with God, but it alters the ways that we relate to one another.

Cain ends his brother's life (v. 8). This isn't what a jury would call "manslaughter." It is premeditated murder.

So God responds by asking the simple question to Cain, "Where is . . . Abel?" (v. 9). God already knows that Cain did not heed the warning. But God offers an opportunity for Cain to confess his sin. Instead, Cain lies to God and denies responsibility.

In verses 10–11, God exposes the crime. Shedding innocent blood is a severe offense (see what God will reiterate in Gen. 9:6). Even the ground which Cain tends as a farmer betrays him. It cannot hide what Cain has done. Whether as a punishment or natural consequence, God says that the ground shall no longer cooperate to grow food for him (v. 12). He will be left to roam the earth.

Cain feels sorry for himself and pleads with God (vv. 13–14). This sounds nothing like sincere repentance; but God shows mercy. Cain shall have a mark, a warning so that no one shall mistakenly take his life (v. 15). Cain leaves God's presence, and he travels further from Eden.

7. Why is the shedding of innocent blood so offensive to God?

8. Why did the ground betray Cain after his murder?

9. Why do you think God sent Cain away?

What Does the Lord Require of You?

Brie wanted to make a difference. To ensure a spot in her dream graduate school, she was desperate to complete her degree with honors. But she had so much going on—classes, work, church. Brie felt overwhelmed, and convinced herself that it was okay to plagiarize papers. *After all, she thought to herself, as a future counselor, I'll be helping so many people.* But her professor didn't share the sentiment.

Brie's final paper got flagged for plagiarism, and she was called before the student-conduct board. She failed the course and was dismissed from the university. While her friends celebrated and dreamed about their futures, Brie was left feeling the pain of her choices.

But eventually, Brie got back on track. She finished her degree the following year. She got into a graduate school—just not the one that would've fast-tracked her career. She took internships and worked multiple jobs for years until she finally reached her career goals. After many years, she would often think of her choice, which caused her a long delay on the journey.

Cain found himself faced with a choice too. He could have submitted to God and found the right way to honor the Creator. Instead, Cain seized the opportunity to make himself the authority. When we fail to grant God the authority over our lives, we always put ourselves in charge. If we allow sin to be our guide, we might even have the impression that we did nothing wrong.

10. *When have you been tempted to place yourself as the authority, rather than God?*

11. *What are examples of lies that we might tell ourselves, giving permission to do what is wrong?*

12. *What happens if we decide for ourselves what is right?*

Submitting to God's Authority

There are no shortage of circumstances that tempt us to take a shortcut, to make our own way, or to decide for ourselves what is acceptable. But God is with us in our struggles with sin and with other people. He urges us to do what is right!

► *Is there a particular relationship that causes you heart-ache? Write the name below of a particular person, and commit to holding that relationship before God in the week ahead.*

I will hold _____ before God in prayer this week. I submit our relationship to God's authority.

KEY VERSES

And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

—Genesis 4:6–7 KJV

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."

— Genesis 4:6–7 NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of June 2 through June 8

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* for devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Genesis 6:11–22—Obedience to God's Command.

Tues. John 6:15–20—Jesus Joins Us in the Storm.

Wed. John 14:18–27—Peace through the Word.

Thurs. Genesis 7:11–24—God Protects.

Fri. 2 Peter 2:1–9—Divine Rescue.

Sat. Psalm 77:1–2, 7–20—A Cry for Deliverance.

Sun. Genesis 8:13–22; 9:11–13—A Covenant of Peace.

A GOD WHO RESTORES

The book of Genesis tells of a God who does not step away after creating the world. Yahweh does not set the universe in motion to leave it alone—the earth spinning on its axis with creation left to manage itself. Rather, God creates humans in His own image, with their own creative and productive capacity, in order that they might be agents of order and justice for the world (Gen. 1:27–28). But that is not how the story would go.

In a crushing blow, men and women walk away from God’s designs and follow the serpent’s twisted logic. Instead of bringing order, they bring chaos. Instead of bringing justice, they cause harm. As a result, God excludes them from the garden and from the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:21–24). And death becomes part of the human story.

The first family of the Bible—the children of Adam and Eve—test the limits of God’s patience. For when the first shepherd and the first farmer bring offerings, God looks with favor upon the sacrifice of Abel, in contrast to the offering of his brother, Cain (Gen. 4:2–5). God knows the human heart, and He pleads with Cain to master sin. But it is Cain who is mastered; he does the unthinkable by murdering his brother (Gen. 4:6–8).

And yet, God does not turn away from the humans He has made. Since they are no longer following the order of God’s design, God chooses one righteous man—Noah—whom God preserves from destruction, along with his family (Gen. 6–7). Noah and his kin receive God’s blessing, just as Adam and Eve had been blessed before (Gen. 9:1). And Noah’s offering prompts God to promise restraint, to hold back from sending another flood and wiping evil away (Gen. 8:20–22).

Since evil is allowed to endure, God turns to another individual, Abram, whom God renames Abraham. After receiving covenants and promises, Abraham comes to trust Yahweh as a God who keeps His word (Gen. 15:6). Abraham and Sarah have a child in their old age, and this child is destined to receive all of God’s covenant blessings (Gen. 21:1–7). Yet even when God tests Abraham by commanding that he sacrifice his beloved child of promise, Isaac, Abraham is ready to obey (Gen. 21:9–12).

Years later, after Abraham has died, Isaac is left to question whether God shall be faithful again. Yet God is able to turn Isaac’s enemies into allies, and Isaac discovers the water his family needs to survive (Gen. 26:28–32). God is faithful indeed. Isaac’s own children appear ready to repeat the pattern by engaging in trickery and murder. But God’s faithfulness does not relent or turn away. God chooses the trickster Jacob as the recipient of covenant blessings, and when Jacob is at his lowest, God appears to him and brings consolation: “I . . . will watch over you wherever you go,” says God (Gen. 28:15).

Through these dealings with humanity, God displays a redemptive purpose that cannot be matched. The sin that might lead a person to murder cannot be wiped away in a flood, but it can be defeated by a faithful God who enters covenant relationships with utmost fidelity, promising to restore what has been broken. We serve a God who restores.



This tiled mosaic by Matthew Digby Wyatt (1820–1877) depicts Abraham’s offering of Isaac. It is found in All Saints Church in London.
sedmak/Getty Images Plus



The discovery of water and the building of a well in the desert meant survival for Isaac and his family. God gave precisely what they needed to survive (Gen. 28:32).

Tatsiana Volskaya/Getty Images



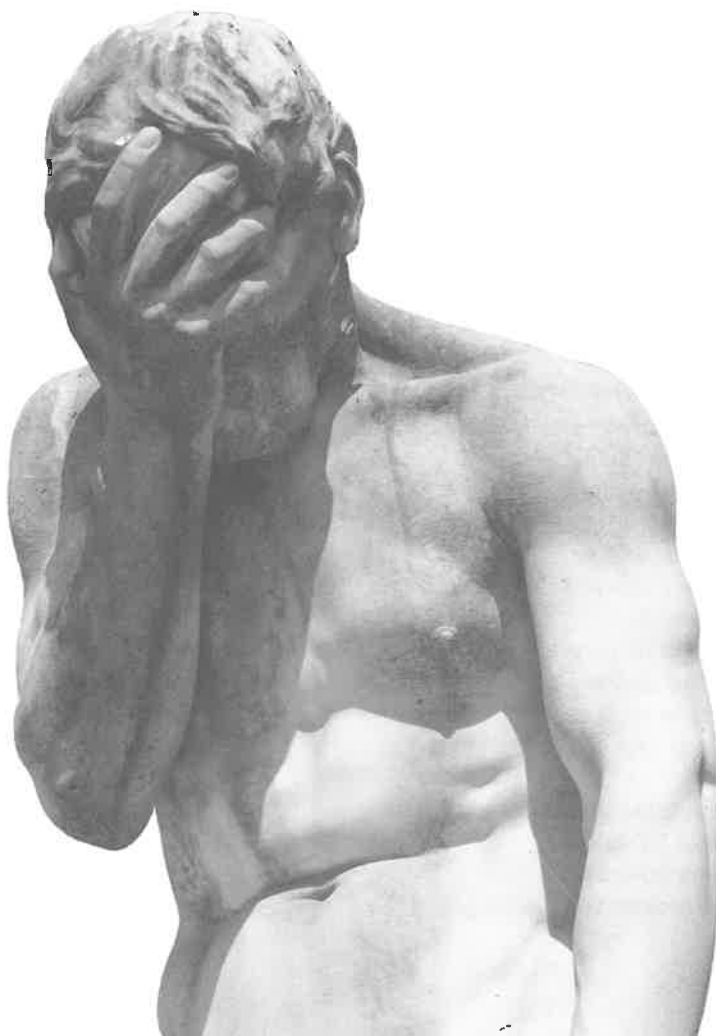
When Jacob was at his lowest, on the run and using a rock for a pillow, God appeared to him. God promises to be with Jacob wherever he might go (Gen. 28:15).

5 Cent Dollar



This mural dates to the eleventh century and is found in the Abbey Church of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe in France. It is sometimes called the “Romanesque Sistine Chapel”.

GO69



This nineteenth-century statue by Henri Vidal is located in the Tuileries Garden near the Leuvre in France. It is titled *Cain venant de tuer son frère Abel* (“Cain has just killed his brother, Abel”).

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What God Considers Acceptable

Cain and Abel both brought offerings to God. With very little detail, we are told one was accepted and looked on with favor and one was not. While we do not know why Cain's offering was unacceptable, we know he was given an opportunity to do what was right and to trust in God. Cain was invited to focus on himself and his offering rather than on his brother's. He was invited to trust in God's generosity and to lay aside his own presumptions. Cain was asked to trust God to define what was acceptable. And Cain chose not to trust.

While we might not literally follow Cain's example, it is all too easy for us to decide who deserves favor and who does not, who is worthy and who is not. In the space below, reflect on the following questions:

In the past, how have you responded when someone was given recognition that you felt they didn't deserve?

Have you ever done something, then didn't receive recognition? How did you respond?

How do you feel toward God when you believe someone is being shown favor? How do you feel if you believe a person is undeserving of favor?

How might the example of Cain and Abel shape the way you understand God's favor in your life and in the lives of those around you?