

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

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“And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell” (Genesis 4:4-5). Many theologians have debated about why it is that God accepted Abel’s animal sacrifice and not Cain’s sacrifice of vegetable produce. Some say it is only because Cain neglected to offer an animal. Others say it is because Cain did not offer the best of what he had (it was only Abel’s offering that was described as *“the firstlings of his flock”*). But there is a very simple explanation. First of all, Abel’s sacrifice was offered by faith, as is clear from Hebrews 11:4, and Cain’s was not. Realize that faith is the direct result of hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17). Therefore, Abel offered what God had commanded them to offer through His word and Cain did not (*Commentary on Genesis*, Dunagan). The same is true today, in that when we hear the Word of the God through the Gospel and *obey it*, God is pleased with us (John 14:15). When we disregard and ignore the Word, God is not pleased (Matthew 7:26-27).

A Fallen Countenance

Notice how God responds to Cain’s anger in 4:6-7. Even though Adam and Eve had been ejected from the Garden, God still has a loving relationship with mankind. It is also encouraging to see that God never just tells Cain that he is wrong without offering a solution to the problem. *“If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?”* It is definitely a sign of God’s grace when He encourages us to do well and witness the uplifting and joyful outcome of our repentance. But along with the encouragement also comes a warning. *“And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.”* Again, God does not simply tell the negative side of the story, but gives the way of escape also (1 Corinthians 10:13).

It is interesting to see that almost immediately after being spoken to by God, Cain goes away and informs his brother about what had happened (4:8). Nobody knows exactly what he told Abel, but it is likely that Abel said something to Cain that further enraged him. With the discussion over, they both head to the field, where Cain murders his brother Abel. The same action is taken by many people today – when one man does not like the fact that he is wrong, and cannot take the honest criticism of a well-intentioned friend or family member, he will inevitably try to find the first available scapegoat and unleash his anger on the innocent party.

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If poor worship, jealousy, anger at an innocent man, and murdering his brother are not bad enough, Cain next tells a blatant lie to God’s face. *“Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ And he said, ‘I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?’”* (4:9). When Adam was confronted by God, he at least told the truth, in part. But Cain cannot admit to God what he has done, and must lie. But notice how patient God is toward Cain, in asking yet another question, *“What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to Me from the ground”* (4:10). God certainly does not want to condemn Cain, and is trying in every way possible to give him a chance to redeem himself by coming clean. This is telling of the mercy of God; in the same way that He kept giving Adam chances to admit his failures, He also gives Cain the same chances (*“The Lord is not slow about His promises, as some count slowness, but is*

patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” [2 Peter 3:9].

In 4:11-12, God pronounces judgment on Cain, revealing that his work will always be in vain, and that he must go forth as a vagabond on the earth. While this is a rather harsh punishment, the benefit is that it allows time for repentance. Cain can spend the rest of his days in misery, but knowing that his eternal fate is not sealed until his death. A valuable lesson we can learn from this is that the result of sin is most often the loss of what is most important to us. Cain tried to do things his way, mercilessly striking down an innocent man because of his own refusal to change. Because of this sin, his vocation as a farmer is ruined. Beyond that, we need to realize that it was all because of one, small act that this series of events was put into play, and at any point Cain could have repented and repaired his life. Truly, we must all understand that the bad things that happen to us because of our sins are our own fault (Jeremiah 4:18).