

Weekly Study of Sunday's Message

July 12, 2026 ***"The first stories. What can the first stories in Genesis tell us about God and ourselves?" "Cain and Abel"***

I Intro.

We're smack dab in the middle of summer. Our schedule will slow down a bit, but there are still things happening. You'll want to keep up with everything that's happening at NCC. Stay connected through our social media to keep up with everything that's going on. This is our companion devotional to Sunday's message. It's just a part of all we have to offer to you. Whether you were able to participate in this service or not, this devotion is free-standing. We hope you find this tool helpful on your spiritual journey. We don't want you to miss out on anything. We consider you part of our community. We have many ways you can plug into life at NCC. You can find all those through our website, app, and social media sites. Our app is the best way to livestream our services, but you can also livestream on FaceBook and YouTube. You can revisit past services, sign up for events and even give. We're encouraged by your presence when you gather with us. New and familiar faces join us every Sunday. If you join us online, we appreciate your presence. We are fully committed to our virtual attenders. We are your church family. If there is anything you need, prayer, or anything else, please let us know.

II Recap.

We're in the second Sunday in our series ***"First Stories: The first four stories in Genesis"***. Each of the stories we're hitting have some historical inconsistencies that could distract us. We have to be careful of getting bogged down in trying to find the specific historicity of these four first stories we're covering in Genesis. We need to learn to dig deeper to see what these stories are trying to tell us about who God is. And frame these as a history of God revealing himself to his people. We want to avoid questions; **Is this really true? If so, how did it actually happen?** Those aren't interesting questions. Engaging those questions won't call us to live a specific way. We're approaching this series so as not to get bogged down in the historicity of them. We'll hit a few of the details, because those are important in revealing truths. But more importantly we're asking; **What do these stories teach us about the nature of God? Who he is.** And: **What call do these stories make on how we live our lives?** Last week we talked about Adam and Eve. Hiding from God and him seeking us. Today we do the story of Cain and Abel.

III Sunday.

As always...questions. **How many of you remember healthy, helpful habits, routines, you learned as you moved from childhood, through your teenage years, into adulthood?**

For those of you who still are learning...good for you. Going from a young kid who didn't care about being messy to becoming interested in girls, I started to care about my hygiene. Because of that, my life began to change. I began to make different intentional choices, because I was responding to this growing awareness that was happening inside of me. I wanted to be a different person. Today we're talking about the regular incorporation of 'practices' into our daily life. It's going to get REALLY nerdy.

This is such a deep and rich story. There are specific historical elements in this passage that just won't make sense. We'll hit them briefly, but mostly dwell on what this story is supposed to teach us. **Genesis 4:1-11. Now Adam had sexual relations with his wife, Eve, and she became pregnant. When she gave birth to Cain, she said, "With the LORD's help, I have produced a man!" Later**

she gave birth to his brother and named him Abel. When they grew up, Abel became a shepherd, while Cain cultivated the ground. When it was time for the harvest, Cain presented some of his crops as a gift to the LORD. Abel also brought a gift—the best portions of the firstborn lambs from his flock. The LORD accepted Abel and his gift, but he did not accept Cain and his gift. This made Cain very angry, and he looked dejected. “Why are you so angry?” the LORD asked Cain. “Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.” One day Cain suggested to his brother, “Let’s go out into the fields.” And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother, Abel, and killed him. Afterward the LORD asked Cain, “Where is your brother? Where is Abel?” “I don’t know,” Cain responded. “Am I my brother’s guardian?” But the LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground! Now you are cursed and banished from the ground, which has swallowed your brother’s blood. No longer will the ground yield good crops for you, no matter how hard you work! From now on you will be a homeless wanderer on the earth.” Cain replied to the LORD, “My punishment is too great for me to bear! You have banished me from the land and from your presence; you have made me a homeless wanderer. Anyone who finds me will kill me!” The LORD replied, “No, for I will give a sevenfold punishment to anyone who kills you.” Then the LORD put a mark on Cain to warn anyone who might try to kill him. So Cain left the LORD’s presence and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”

We have to deal with the historicity of this story. There are all sorts of questions around this story. **Who did Cain marry?** Vs 12 says: ***“Cain had sexual relations with his wife”***. Some people say it might have been his sister. But we have no record of a sister. And it would break what is widely accepted by every religion, a ban on incest. An even bigger question. **Who would have tried to kill Cain?** We would have to create a narrative of other people scripture doesn’t specifically address. Again, be careful of forcing the; **How did this happen?** onto these stories. That’s not the right question. The church has gotten preoccupied with proving; did certain stories really happen, which is a convenient distraction to keep us from asking the real questions. Whether this is actually specifically historical. Cain and Abel were the only two offspring on the planet. Or this is a story pulled out from a larger story. And Cain and Abel are examples of sins we all struggle with. The truths about God, his nature, and our relationship to him remain the same.

What does this story tell us about God?

And what does this story tell us about our relationship with God...and each other?

All I can say is: **PRACTICE A SERIOUSNESS AND HONEST CURIOSITY WHEN IT COMES TO READING AND INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE.** Look at the details, and facts of the story. But don’t let them distract you from a deeper dive of what they say to us about God, and how we relate to him. I’m not clear what to do with the sacrificial system in this story. In the time period the story is set, a sacrificial system hadn’t been established. **Why were they doing this? What’s motivating them?** Again, we don’t know for certain. One of the best understandings I’ve seen is how religion has evolved. There is something innate, deep within us, (I believe it’s the divine image of God) that is constantly speaking to us about reconnecting with God. It’s like a homing device. Your phone looking for WiFi. This is not a grind it out work. It’s letting go of all of the things we pick up, that block our ability to find God, and the importance of surrendering to the natural bend towards God.

1. The evolution of experiencing God. Think about these stages of our experiences with God.

Ritual. This is the embodied movement that helps us connect with the sacred. It's when you feel this greater divine presence, and an appreciation grows. And out of that encounter you voice an appreciation that bubbles out of your soul. It's like blessing your food. This is a first response to an experience with God. These people probably didn't have any history or specific spelled out knowledge of God. Cain and Abel simply felt an urge to show a thankfulness for what they have.

Emotion. As we begin to practice rituals, they connect us with the sacred. We find power in them. And we feel things that validate what we're doing. Awe, wonder, intimacy, a felt interdependency with each other grow out of regularly practicing sacred rituals. When you feel this rising surge of gratitude and emotions. You want to seek out a closer relationship with God.

Belief. We begin to put words and ideas to these rituals and emotions. We use ideas and words to try to describe how we encounter God. And what we feel and value in these encounters. We write songs, messages, books, journal, and post online what our rituals and emotions mean to us. We try to put into words the emotions we experience. Put meaning, descriptions, to voice our gratitude or what it means to live generously and give...in all ways. This is the foundation for the formation of scripture.

Organization. Finally, we begin to organize the above experiences into something we can use to help others experience and adopt the above three practices. At NCC we talk about Gathering, Growing, Going, diversity, and more. Organization is trying to share these rituals, emotions, and beliefs with others. This creates further opportunities to experience the above elements. We create structures to formalize our rituals, emotions, and beliefs. This obviously is religion. But that's what religion is supposed to be. We meet, plan, and create future experiences to encounter God.

Before we can put words to a growing, expanding understanding, relationship with God. We have this inner thing that drives us to put words and organization to our rituals. This is how we understand and frame Cain and Abel giving a sacrifice offering. Whether it was already an established practice, or it bubbled up from their spirit, this is how we understand growth in our relationship with God. We find rituals that move us, create stated beliefs for us, that we then can organize to help create continued moments to be with God. **What rituals have you incorporated into your daily life to be with God?**

B. Get to the important truths in the story of Cain and Abel. We have a pretty agreed upon idea why Abel's sacrifice was accepted, and Cain's wasn't. This is just a tough part of this story we have to give some framing to. If these sacrifices hadn't been asked for or were required. **Why is one accepted and not the other? How were the sacrifices different?** Cain brought "*min-peri*" of his crops. He just had some, and he brought that. Abel brought "*mibkhorot*" of his flock. The first born, the best of what he had. Cain gave out of duty, obligation, at best perfunctory. Abel was out of an overflow of his heart. It bubbled up from someplace deep. And was genuine and heartfelt.

1. Talk about 'the bringing' in worship.

Let's talk about our relationship with others.

What do you bring to others in your relationships? Can you tell when someone presents a thoughtful gift? It may not be elaborate, fancy, or expensive. But you can tell they gave thought to it. The lesson we learn from this part of the story is it's not what you bring. But the condition of your heart when you do bring it. **How do you approach worship? How do you approach God?**

What best, considering where you are right now, can you bring to God?

This is the story of the Widow's Mite in Luke 21. A small gift given with a big heart.

2. God has placed within us an early warning system to alert us when we're considering doing wrong. This is an interesting facet of this story. It tells us we have this thing inside of us that warns us when we're about to stray. When sin is crouching. But– the Spirit is always there...always giving us guidance. But two questions arise.

1. Do we actually listen to it when we get that gentle urging from the Spirit?

2. Are there areas of our life that we stopped listening to that voice so long ago, about certain things in our life, and we just can't hear it anymore?

If we're honest, there are times we've shut this inner voice off in certain areas in our own life. We are all given that inner connection to the voice of God. The Holy Spirit. It's not there to make our life worse or no fun. It's there to protect us. It's like the warning lights on your dashboard.

What do you have in place to help you listen to the movement of the Spirit?

3. Our actions affect everything around us. This is just a plain and simple fact. We are all connected. We belong to everyone. *"Your brother's blood cries out from the ground."* We are our brother's and sister's keeper. We can't ever say: *"It's my life, I can do what I want"*. Okay we can say it. But it's inherently so not true. We have to not only listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. But we also have to have something in place that continually reminds us that our actions do affect things around us. Always asking; **If I were to do this thing, who would it affect?**

What in your life reminds you that your actions matter and affect others?

4. Lastly, revenge is God's work. God told Cain he would protect him from anyone who would seek to make Cain pay. Not a whole lot to say here. We talked about this in our book series in June. Fight the temptation to believe that you know how best to carry out the work that's reserved for God.

IV Challenge.

So, what do we do with all of this? Commit to continually working to understand who God is. God's desire is to call us to this greater life. Liberating us from ourselves. God deeply wants us to get to know him, and receive his love. God has placed within us this inner desire to seek him out. So, be very aware of when you're looking in other places. Or not aware of the things within you hindering your relationship with God. Not judging or condemning you. But rescuing you from future bondage. We as a community of faith, a family, traveling this path together, (Gathering, Growing and Going) are trying to figure out what it looks like. How to be there in the best way possible for each other on this journey. How we live that life needs to be constantly maturing and growing in understanding. Understand what rituals and practices help you to live fully into how God made you. Then do them!! This is such a key truth. Put specific practices in place so the Holy Spirit can do that formation work within you. And just know it takes time. Fight the desire to only remove bad. Put healthy, life-giving practices in place. There is a work we commit to that is the commitment to the life God calls us to. And like above, this needs to be a constant and growing movement of incorporating different practices into your spiritual routine.

If you are just trying to figure out what this life following Jesus looks like, what it involves, how you want to belong to this work. We're so glad you're searching. There are no expectations for those of you who are checking us and this life following Jesus out. This is a commitment to fellowship, to simply *"come and see"*. And not having it all figured out first. Jesus even told the people who would gather to listen to him; *"Count the cost first."* Make sure you're all in, committing to this

specific life. Because you'll look silly if you commit and then find out it's not for you. This decision, to follow Jesus, isn't only about being saved. It's about choosing a very specific life. It makes me nervous to see us celebrate, and lift up some celebrity who makes some first time public profession of faith. *"Look who's on our team now"*. And then they stumble and struggle...very publicly. And then we pile on our judgment. This life is tough, it takes a lifetime, even longer, to commit to grow into maturity. It's wise to listen, and learn to see if this is a choice you're willing to commit to.

But, if you've been following Jesus for a while. You've already made a commitment to make spiritual practices central to your life. Then there ought to be this natural, almost organic (out of your commitment to following Jesus) maturity and development that is continually happening within you. There ought to be this ever elevating, increasing, pursuit of different, new, fresh practices and commitments to encountering God. To root out where sin is crouching, and to grow our heart and relationship with God and just be with him. We learn from this story of Cain and Abel, the importance of the evolution of experiencing God we talked about at the beginning.

1. Establish rituals.

2. Feel and name your emotions.

3. Put those experiences into words. Beliefs.

4. Participate in organized corporate experiences of these rituals.

These are some of the deeper truths we can learn from the unfortunate story of Cain and Abel. Next week. Seth.