

# ***Battling Brothers***

*Genesis 4: 1-16*

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Two brothers. Love. Competition. Play. Conflict. Of course I tweaked his nose for this picture. While your hands are occupied with holding me, let me mess with you. Two brothers. Annoying. Raging. Denying. In a few years, it was all about how fast I could get down the steps and dive for my grandfather's lap. The pounding of the giant behind me made me leap the last three stairs. You see, it had been a commando raid. I snuck into the giant's lair and smashed his train. There, that should pay him back for being such an ogre. But the giant was quick. As I ran, I could feel the memory of hard fists and an angry red face shouting at me. I didn't want to feel that again. Oh, what had I done? If I made it alive to my grandfather, only one strategy could save me. Turn it all around against the giant. "Granddaddy!" I cried in my best helpless little child voice. "He's chasing me! He's being mean to me! He's trying to hurt me." My brother stopped on the threshold, unable to cross the protective force field of my grandfather's arms. "We were only playing," he said through clenched teeth. I was safe. But only for the moment. The look in his eyes silently communicated three words, "Later, punk. Later." This would not end well.

Two boys. Competition. Conflict. Rage. Denial. Twas ever thus. Exiled from the Garden, Adam and Eve began life amidst the curse of pain and toil. By God's grace, they brought forth new life. First Cain. He became a worker of the ground. A strong, hard-working farmer. Then came

Abel. He became a hard-working keeper of sheep.

In due time, these young men prepared to make an offering to the LORD God. They would give the Creator a portion of what the Creator's earth had yielded to their work, in recognition and thanks to the true Giver of all life and provision. They brought gifts from what they had, gifts suitable to their unique talents and efforts. Cain brought to the LORD an offering from the fruit of the ground. At first reading, this sounds just fine. Farming is what you do, so produce is what you bring. Abel brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. He tended sheep, so he brought the first lamb that had been born that season, and offered to the LORD the choice parts of the meat.

Genesis then tells us that "the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain he had no regard." Two boys with two occupations both made offerings. God accepted one but not the other. Conflict would inevitably follow. As listeners, we are meant to ask the question, "On what basis did God make his choice?" Abel offered the firstborn lamb, and then the choice parts of that first lamb. That was the most precious offering, the lamb that represented the whole flock. Cain's offering is described generically as an offering from the fruit of the ground. Not specifically the firstfruit, the best portion, the one that represents all of it. So maybe Abel's offering indicated a more consecrated heart. He made a costlier sacrifice. Whereas Cain's offering may have been leftovers, or at the least not as thoughtful, not as clearly a token of giving his whole heart.

That would make sense of why the LORD looked with favor on one offering and not the other. "Look Cain, you know you didn't really try like your brother did. You thought you could get away with it. Your gift was practical but not inspired." We can feel that about our lives. I don't feel the LORD's favor and I think I know why: I'm not really opening myself to God. I'm not really giving myself. I'm just sort of relating to him half-heartedly. He knows that, and so I don't experience the vivid presence and evident favor some other people feel. You get out what you put in, and I know, when I'm honest, when I've only given partial effort, and so does God.

That interpretation has a lot of truth to it. The greatest commandment is to love the LORD our God first and above all. Cain may well have failed

to do that. But sometimes as I read this account of Cain and Abel, a more haunting explanation often arises for me. What if there were no definite reasons why God accepted one offering and not the other? What if it was just because that's the way God wanted it? What if a sovereign God made a decision to take the younger brother's offering and not the older brother's and the message was simply, "You just have to deal with this reality."

We can torture ourselves sometimes with wondering why some people seem more favored than others. Why things work out for some people and not us. Maybe my loved one didn't get better because I didn't pray hard enough, but that person did pray hard enough for her loved one. Or, their kids came out so much happier and more successful than mine—did I not do a good job in parenting? He's so much healthier than I am. Is that because God is punishing me? I figure there's got to be some reason to explain, from a human point of view, why some people seem to have the LORD's regard more than others. But maybe the words from the old Van Morrison song are words for us, "It ain't why, why, why, why. It just is." This is the way it is. And the question is not "Why me? Or why not me?" The question is "What is God calling me to do *now*? If this is the way it is, then how am I going to respond faithfully to God in the next moment?"

Cain was having none of that. He got angry. The elder brother was supposed to realize the dream for the family. And he had been rejected. Genesis tells us that his face fell. He couldn't smile any more. There was a storm cloud across his countenance. These boys hadn't yet learned how to hide their emotions. No adolescent sphinx face for Cain. His heart came out in his expressions.

The LORD, who did not regard Cain's offering with favor, yet regarded Cain's face with concern. God was not afraid of human emotions. God still cared for Cain. He did not want him to fail. God was not disengaged with this young man. But neither was he coddling him. He wanted Cain to grow. To be better. So he asked some questions to which he already knew the answers, "Cain, why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?" The more literal translation says, "If you do well, will you not be *lifted up*?" Your fallen face can be lifted up, if you get this right, Cain. In other words, it didn't have to be over for Cain. The LORD wanted to accept his offering. He wanted Cain

to have a face lifted up with the accepting favor of his God. Cain could experience God's shining face of blessing.

An important choice was before Cain. The first attempt at worship had not gone well. He had felt rejection, jealousy and then anger. He could still turn from that path and get it right. But it would not be easy. The LORD went on, "And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." I love that from the beginning, our God speaks to us in word pictures. Sin is like a crouching animal. The lion ready to spring on its prey. If you aren't paying attention, when you walk out the door he will leap on you and eat you alive. We know all about this, don't we? Jealousy is the green-eyed monster who runs amok through our lives. Rage burns like a brush fire through our words and fists. Stabbed by rejection, we can lash out with incredible intensity. Cain, if you don't master this feeling, you will never connect with me the way we both want. The epistle of James tells us, "For the anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God" (James 1: 20). It's one thing to acknowledge feelings and not deny them. It's another thing to give into those feelings and let them sweep you into destruction.

So what should Cain have done in that moment? What would have saved him? What advice would you give him? Today, we might have said, "Cain, not every text needs to be answered the minute you get it. Take time to breathe. And think. Cain, don't ever write an email in anger. And if you do, don't hit send. Not until you read it again the next morning. Cain, don't open your mouth when you're in a rage. If it's truly important, it will be important tomorrow when you can speak rationally about it. And Cain, don't keep this to yourself. Talk to God about it. Tell him how mad you are. Ask for help. Cain, ask God to show you what to do. Don't try to solve this yourself. Ask God to show you how to do well."

Cain's face had fallen. The LORD called him to lift up his face by doing well. The downcast face is looking only at oneself. Only at present wounds and worries. The uplifted face looks to God. The uplifted face looks beyond the moment with a greater perspective.

Of course, Cain did not speak to the LORD. He spoke to Abel. He invited him into the field and there he killed him. The rage ruled and the first murder was committed. When the LORD confronted Cain, again he spoke in

word pictures, “The ground has opened up to swallow your brother’s blood from your hand. And now that very ground cries out to me. For the dirt ate what it never should have tasted, innocent blood. Whenever you go to work the dirt in your farming, the ground will remember the life blood you spilled and it will not yield back life to you. You will wander from place to place like a fugitive.”

At this Cain’s heart broke. “This is too much!” he cried. “You have driven me from your face and from the ground I love. I will have no place and those who see me will kill me!” Cain wanted to solve his brother problem by killing him. But violence in word and deed always leads to further isolation. You can’t have life and hate your brother. You can’t hate your brother and love God (see I John 3). Cain began to despair as he realized he had cut himself off from life as surely as he had cut off his brother’s life.

But God had mercy. He placed a mysterious mark on Cain. Maybe it looked like a birth mark, or a Harry Potter lightening bolt on the forehead. It was clearly a sign for all to see. Cain was under both God’s curse and God’s protection. He had done the unspeakable. But his punishment belonged to God not to any man. The mark of Cain was simultaneously a reminder of Cain’s sin and a reminder of God’s mercy. It was a mark of God’s exiling Cain and yet also meant God’s claiming and ownership.

The marks we bear in this life function in the same way, don’t they? The scar on your arm from the chemo portal represents your battle with cancer. You went down into the poisoning of the monster, yet still you live. The thin scar on your wrist represents the night you couldn’t take any more. It’s a sign you succumbed once to despair. And yet you live. And yet God is at work in you. The pink round bullet scar represents the shots you took on the battlefield and the mysterious protection of your survival. These marks we bear work both ways, as signs of sin and death, and as tokens of grace and mercy.

One of the best signs is the one we watch enacted each month at church. Baptism is the sign Christ gave us to represent his saving work and our participation in Christ by faith. Our baptism joins us to Christ’s baptism on our behalf. He went under the waters like a common sinner because he

accepted our sin as his own. So he got baptized in blood on the cross, dying in our place. But just as he came out of the Jordan River so he came out of the tomb. Alive forevermore. His baptism was a sign of God's condemnation of human sin *and* God's forgiveness of sin by paying for it himself. When we are joined to Jesus in baptism, we get in on what he did in living, dying and rising for us. And we get connected to the entire community of the baptized. We belong to each other in Christ. That's what we pledge to each other every time someone is baptized.

In a way all the baptized bear the mark of Cain. Baptism is a mark of our *shame*. We needed Christ to die for us because we sinned beyond any help in heaven or earth. Baptism is also a mark of God's protective *grace*. He paid for our sin. Though we suffer through a broken world, he does not forsake us. He gives us everlasting life. You can't see this mark like you can a tattoo, but it's there. The water may dry, but the reality remains. The mark is the blessed Spirit inside us, Christ's great, eternal gift to us. That's why we pay special attention when someone gets baptized in church: it is a visible reminder of the mark of the Spirit given to us. Remember your baptism, every time you splash or shower in water!

So in the midst of life where the curses and rewards don't always make sense, one clear word comes through to the Cain inside all of us: Don't let your face fall with disappointment that turns to envy that turns to evil. Lift up your hearts. Lift them up to the Lord. Lift them up and give thanks, as we will today during communion. Christ alone can save, and he will as we look to him.