

Genesis 4:1-12 "The First Children"*

Proposition: In Genesis 4:1-12 we're introduced to the world's first children, Cain and Abel. By looking at the record of their lives we can gain valuable insight into the difference between true faith and mere religion.

Here are the main characters in the story...

▷ We meet the parents (1).

▷ We meet the children (2).

I. Abel was a person who pleased God (3-4).

A. He exhibited proper faith.

B. He exhibited proper action.

1. True faith involves a relationship.

2. True faith involves a life-changing acceptance.

3. True faith involves the heart, not just externals.

II. Cain was a person with enough religion to be dangerous (5-12).

A. He had privileges (1-2).

1. He was raised in the same home with Abel.

2. He received the same opportunities Abel did.

B. He had a severe problem (3-12).

1. He disobeyed God (3-5).

Result: God rejected his offering.

2. He became angry and depressed (5b).

Result: God gave him opportunity to change (6-7).

3. He killed his brother and lied about it (8).

Result: God judged him (9-12).

· Work will be futile.

· Life will be futile.

Lessons: What can we learn from this?

1. A person can know about faith and not have it.

2. A person can know what's right and not do what's right.

3. If God is real in my life, it will show.

There's something interesting about children. Two children can have the same parents, grow up in the same home, experience the same opportunities, and they always turn out the same, right? Wrong! No two children are exactly alike, even two children in the same family.

That's true not only today. It was true in the *first family*. In Genesis 4:1-12 we're introduced to the world's first children, Cain and Abel. By looking at the record of their lives we can gain valuable insight into the difference between true faith and mere religion.

I know some people who have just enough religion to be dangerous. Don't you? They have enough religion to satisfy themselves, and maybe even impress those around them, but not enough to make a difference in their lives.

Of course, they don't need more religion. They need *Christ*. But the point is this--a little religion is a dangerous thing.

Frankly, I find it easier to help someone who knows nothing of the truths of the Bible as opposed to the person who has a veneer of religion--especially if the religious person has learned the religious rituals and become a "cultural Christian."

What's a *cultural Christian*? A cultural Christian allows his culture, rather than the Bible, to define his Christianity. A cultural Christian is a dangerous commodity.

In his book *Man in the Mirror*, Patrick Morley offers this definition (33): "Cultural Christianity means to pursue the God we want instead of the God who is. It is the tendency to be shallow in our understanding of God, wanting him to be more of a gentle grandfather type who spoils us and lets us have our own way. It is sensing a need for God, but on our own terms. It is wanting the God we have underlined in our Bibles without wanting the rest of Him, too. It is God relative instead of God absolute."

Those are powerful words. Is cultural Christianity a new problem? No. In fact, it raised its ugly head in the world's first family. In Genesis 4 we're introduced to two children. In terms of spirituality, one was the real thing, the other--in today's terminology--was a *cultural Christian*.

Here are the main characters in the story...

P We meet the parents (1). "Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant." Stop there. Here are the world's first parents, Adam and Eve.

God created Adam and Eve as grown adults, as described in chapter 2, and then placed them in a perfect environment. Tragedy struck the first family in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve rebelled against God and ate the forbidden fruit. As a consequence they brought the judgment of God upon themselves and their descendants.

Genesis 3 concludes with this sad scene. God banished the first man and woman from the garden, and placed an angelic guard there to prevent their return. They were *cut off from God*.

Answer this. Does sin affect any other relationships? It sure does. First, sin alienates us from God--that's what we see in Genesis 3. But sin also alienates sinners from each other--that's what we'll see in Genesis 4.

In Genesis 4 we're going to see in living color how sin corrupts relationships and divides families. Sin produces jealousy, resentment, and even hostility, so much so that a brother would kill a blood brother. And why? We'll see.

P We meet the children (2). Genesis 3 concluded with despair, but Genesis 4 begins with a ray of hope.

"Adam lay with 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.' Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil."

Adam "knew" Eve his wife (as the KJV renders it). In obedience to God's command to procreate given in Genesis 1:28, the first couple had a son. They named him "Cain," a name which means "to get."

Notice Eve's faith-cry in verse 1, "I have gotten a man from the LORD (KJV)." Was Eve saved? What did it even mean to be "saved" then? Eve didn't know of Jesus or the Cross, though God gave her a veiled promise in Genesis 3:15. There would be no sacrificial system until Moses came along in the fifteenth century B.C.

Eve knew that God was holy. She knew that God judged sin. She knew He had been merciful to her. She knew God provided for her need of clothing, and now had given her a son. Eve was saved by faith alone, just as we are. Faith is more than a mere mental agreement with some facts about God. Faith is an allegiance to a personal God, and belief in His promises. Eve exhibited that.

By the way, notice Eve's perspective on children. Children are a blessing, a gift from God, certainly not a nuisance. Children are an opportunity to bring into the world another generation of people who will honor and serve God.

In verse 2 Eve bore a second son, Abel. The two brothers were very different. In occupation--Cain was a farmer, Abel a herdsman. And they were different in spirituality. Very different.

How so? There's a strong contrast between the first children in the biblical record. Let's look at Abel first. In terms of spirituality, what was true of Abel?

I. Abel was a person who pleased God (3-4).

How do we know? Look at what happened in verses 3-4, "In the course of time [how much time we're not told] Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering."

Abel was a man of God. How do I know? Two marks characterize the life of a person who pleases God, and Abel exhibited both of them. First...

A. He exhibited proper faith. Remember, mankind was cut off from God in chapter 3. But Abel believed in God. He longed to be right with God. He wanted to please God. He exhibited faith in God.

You say, "How do you know Abel had proper faith?" Because Hebrews 11:4 says so. In fact Hebrews 11:4 tells us more about Abel than Genesis 4 does. "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead."

By faith, by faith, by faith--the phrase is used three times in that verse to sum up Abel's life. He was a man who exhibited proper faith. He also exemplified a second mark that characterizes any person who is pleasing God.

B. He exhibited proper action. Proper faith and proper action go hand in hand. In Abel's case, what was the proper action? In the course of time, Abel did something. For that matter, so did Cain but his action was deficient.

What did they do? They both brought offerings to God. Why? Did God tell them to do so? The text doesn't

say. But from the beginning, people--even wicked Cain--recognized there is a God who deserves our worship and reverence.

In Abel's case, the proper action was this. He worshiped God. We've been created to worship God, to give God the best from our lives. Abel had proper faith and backed it up with proper action. His offering was evidence of his faith.

You say, "But wait. Cain brought an offering, too, didn't he?" Yes he did. But in Cain's case, there wasn't proper faith but a *deficient* faith.

I recognize that's a blunt assessment. Before you accuse someone of having *deficient* faith you'd better have solid evidence to support it. In Cain's case we do.

Listen to verse 5, "But on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor." God was not pleased with Cain's offering. Why not? We might conjecture, "It's because Cain brought a grain offering instead of an animal offering." But later in Israel's worship God commanded and accepted grain offerings (e.g. Lev 2:1). Others have suggested that sheep-herders were more acceptable to God than farmers. One ancient Jewish interpretation says Cain's problem was that he failed to observe proper ritual when he brought his offering. The fact is that none of these suggestions have biblical support.

The answer is found in Hebrews 11:4. "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. Again, we're told three times that Abel brought his offering *by faith*. The implication being? Cain's offering was *not* by faith. Cain did not have what Abel did. Cain had a *deficient* faith.

Please know this. Not all faith is *saving* faith. Is that true? James 2:19 says that demons have a type of faith--they "believe God"--but it's lacking faith.

Which raises the question, "What's true of *genuine* faith or *true* faith?" We find the answer in Hebrews 11. True faith involves three ingredients.

1. *True faith involves a relationship.* Faith is more than intellectual assent. It's more than saying, "Oh yea, I believe in God. Doesn't everybody?" Genuine faith involves a relationship. What kind of relationship? A relationship between a person and God.

2. *True faith involves a life-changing acceptance.* Acceptance of what? Of the provision and promise of God. That's the point Hebrews 11 makes at the outset. What is true faith? Verses 1-2, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for."

Who are "the ancients?" Abel was one of them. And for what were they commended? They took God at His word. They were *sure* about God's provision and promise.

What did Abel offer to God? Some of the firstborn of his flock, the best he had. And what part of the animal is specifically mentioned? He offered "fat portions" to God. Maybe it goes without saying, but in order to offer the fat portion to God, what did Abel need to do? He had to kill the animal and cut out the fat portion--just like the priests would later do in Moses' day. Was Abel influenced by God's actions in Genesis 3:21?

3. *True faith involves the heart, not just externals.* Hebrews 11:6 indicates that people of faith are those who "believe that God exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek him."

You see, a person can have ritual and not have a faith-relationship with God. Apparently Cain did. Did Cain have ritual? Yes. Was Cain a "religious" person? I think so. He was religious enough to bring an offering to God. And Genesis 4 doesn't indicate that Cain brought leftovers, either.

Both men brought their best to God. Both participated in worship. Outwardly, they did the same thing. The only difference was something only God could discern--because He knew their hearts. The difference between these two men had to do with their hearts.

Please don't miss this. What Cain did was not wrong. Why he did it was wrong. Cain's problem is one the Bible attacks from Genesis to Revelation. God takes no pleasure in outward forms of worship when our hearts are corrupt.

The Bible commends Abel as a righteous man, and even though he's dead he still speaks to us, as Hebrews 11:4 puts it. Abel was a person who pleased God. What about Cain? In stark contrast...

II. Cain was a person with enough religion to be dangerous (5-12).

Cain was not what we might call a "secular" man. He had a religious side to him. Abel brought an offering. So did Cain. In fact, when you compare the two offerings you see many similarities. Both men brought offerings. Both men brought something they had raised by their own hands, so it cost them something. And both men brought their offerings to the LORD--in Cain's case verse 3 specifically says he presented his fruit as an offering "to the LORD."

What went wrong with Cain? I'd like to make a couple of observations about Cain.

A. He had privileges (1-2). By occupation, Cain worked the soil. There was nothing wrong with his occupation. Remember, Adam worked the soil, too. Cain had a lot going for him. Like what?

1. *He was raised in the same home with Abel.* Which meant secondly...

2. *He received the same opportunities Abel did.* The same parental love, the same teaching, the same modeling, the same exposure to divine truth.

Can't you just imagine the stories Adam and Eve told their children as they sat around the dinner table? About their walks with God prior to sin. About the garden paradise they enjoyed. And forfeited. I'm sure they shared about their fateful conversation with the serpent and their foolish decision to listen to his evil advice. Certainly, Adam and Eve talked frankly with their boys about the consequences of disobeying God and the blessings of obeying him.

Both boys, Cain as well as Abel. There is no indication in the biblical record that Cain's problem was his environment or a lack of education or any of the maladies blamed for our social ills these days. Yes, Cain had privileges. Which is what makes observation #2 so grievous...

B. He had a severe problem (3-12). What went wrong with Cain? Cain provides us with a classic case study on *depression*. Cain was not a victim of a chemical imbalance. He was a man who didn't do what God had said, and consequently, plummeted into the pit of despair.

Cain went on a downward spiral in sin that involved three steps described in verses 3-12. Here's where it all started.

1. *Step #1: He disobeyed God (3-5).* Verse 3 says that Cain brought a grain offering to God. That may impress us, but it didn't impress God for reasons we've already discussed.

We discover an insightful comment about Cain in 1 John 3:12, "Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because *his own actions were evil* and his brother's were righteous."

Why did Cain kill his brother? Cain's problem preceded his murder. John says he did so because his *actions* were evil. "Big" sins start with "little" sins. In Cain's situation, before he ever murdered his brother he brought God an unacceptable sacrifice.

It's the "little foxes that spoil the vine (Song of Songs 2:15)." It starts with "little" sins. Ananias and Sapphira sold some property and gave a gift to the church. The problem wasn't with what they gave, but with what they *said* they gave, yet didn't. Their "little" sin cost them their lives.

Cain disobeyed God, too. As a result...

Result: God rejected his offering. Verse 5, "But on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor."

But it's the thought that counts, isn't it? God doesn't care how we worship Him as long as we try, does He? Wrong. Some people worship the wrong God. Other people profess to worship the *right* God, but do so in the wrong way.

Cain brought an offering to God, but God rejected it. How did Cain react? Here's step two.

2. Step #2: He became angry and depressed (5b). "So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast." Uh oh, Cain is angry. Who is he angry with? Apparently, with *God*. The world says it's okay to be angry with God if you're disappointed with Him. That's not what the Bible teaches.

Notice how Cain's unjustified anger affected his countenance. His face was downcast. Literally, "his face slumped." What a vivid picture of depression. A depressed person is not someone who is "down," but someone who is "down and out." By the way, depression and anger often go hand in hand.. They did with Cain.

What should Cain have done when God rejected his offering? He should have found out *why* his offering was unacceptable, right? And then he should have changed.

How do we know? Just listen to the questions God asked Cain in response to Cain's despondency. Three questions in verses 6-7, "Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry?'" That's a good question for a self-absorbed, depressed person. The second question, "Why is your face downcast?" In other words, "Cain, snap out of it!" And the third question, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?" That is, "Cain, if you *do right*, you will be lifted up (that's the idea in the Hebrew word translated "accepted")."

God is obviously the best counselor anyone could ever have. Watch how He works with Cain. First, He asks him two probing questions about his *feelings*. Then, with his third question He helps Cain see that his poor feelings are linked to his sinful *actions*.

What's Cain's problem? He's feeling poorly. Does he need a support group? Does he need people to "understand" him? Does he have "emotional" problems? No, not according to God. His emotions are working just fine. His emotions are telling him there's a problem. What's the problem? He has failed to do what's right! What does he need to do about it? He needs to do what's right!

Which is exactly why God followed up the third question with a stern warning in verse 7, "And if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him [is how the KJV translators put it]." The NIV captures the sense, "But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

Do you see what God was doing with Cain? After Cain became angry and depressed...

Result: God gave him opportunity to change (6-7). What a merciful God! God didn't want Cain to fail. True,

God knew what Cain would do, yet he warned him. He talked straight with Cain about the *danger of sin*--"it's crouching at your door;" and the *power of sin*--"it desires to have you;" and the *remedy for sin*--"you must master it."

Notice something. Cain is not a victim. In essence, God told Cain, "Cain, you don't have to remain in your depressed stupor. Snap out of your depression. Your depression is due to sin. Deal with your sin, or your sin will deal with you."

Let's set the record straight. Successful Christians aren't perfect. But when they get off track, do you know what they do? They admit it, go back to the spot in the trail of life where they got lost, and ask God to show them where they should have gone.

For example, Moses killed a man, but through it learned to wait on God. John Mark quit the ministry once, but through his failure learned how to be faithful. God gave Cain the same opportunity to change. Just like he's giving you.

By the way, how do you "master" sin? God says by doing what is right. That's how we get rid of bad habits. We replace them with good habits.

"But I can't help myself!" you say. "I'm a slave to sin. How can I master it?" The fact is, you can't on your own strength. But you can if you will do what God says is right, namely, learn to live *by faith*--as Galatians 2:20 says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live *by faith* in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Jesus Christ lived perfectly, and then died in your place and for your sins. He rose again and offers you new life. He will live *through you*. But you must repent of your sins and place your confidence in Him. And then you must choose to *do right* by His power.

How did Cain respond to God's counsel? He didn't say a word. Instead he responded with action, tragic action, step three...

3. Step #3: He killed his brother and lied about it (8). "Now Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let's go out to the field.' And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him."

Had Cain heeded God's counsel, he could have broken the downward spiral into sin. But he didn't. His disobedience, which led to anger, which resulted in depression, sent him into a deep brooding, until the unthinkable happened.

He talked with Abel, and apparently used deception to coax Abel into a secluded place in the field. And there he killed him. Cain committed cold-hearted, premeditated murder. He killed his brother.

Why? Why did Cain take out his anger on Abel? Abel hadn't done anything but live a godly life, had he? True, but godly people cause ungodly people to feel exposed. A godly person is like a burr in the saddle to an ungodly person, a constant reminder that there is a standard that they've missed.

Think back to your school days. Remember the person who was the brain in the class, the guy or gal that always aced the tests? How do students often treat the student that excels? Do they congratulate him, pat him on the back and say, "Way to go! It's great to have you around!?" Hardly. Usually, classmates despise the "brain." Why? Does he make them miss answers on their tests? No. But his very presence is a reminder that they're missing the mark.

Cain could take it no longer. Every time he saw Abel the madder he got. He either had to get right with God or get rid of Abel. Sadly, he chose the latter.

Here is the first murder in the Bible. It happened because a man didn't control his temper. Listen. Anger will destroy us if left unchecked. It'll cause a lot of pain for those near us, too.

By the way, consider this question. Does biblical counseling work? Did it work here? It depends on what we mean by "work," doesn't it? Could Cain have had a better counselor than God? Could Cain have received better counsel than what God gave him?

Biblical counseling isn't magical. The task of a biblical counselor is to apply God's Word to the problems in people's lives. But then what? Either they will *do it* or they *won't*.

Suppose my doctor prescribes an antibiotic for an illness with these instructions--"Take two pills a day for two weeks." Now suppose I take one pill a day for three days, and then quit, but remain sick. Is the problem with the medicine? No. The problem is with me, right?

Know this. God's Word is sufficient to bring about change in people's lives. It can restore troubled marriages, empower the fearful, and give hope to the depressed. But only if we what? Do what it says.

Cain didn't. As a result...

Result: God judged him (9-12). Verse 9, "Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?'" Cain lied, "'I don't know,' he replied. 'Am I my brother's keeper?'" Notice the hiding and hurling, just like Adam and Eve did with God in chapter 3.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain asked. No, Cain, you're his killer.

God continued the questioning in verse 10, "The LORD said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.'"

In the city of Jerusalem today, there is a holocaust museum that contains the remains of a few of the six million Jews who were exterminated by the Nazis during World War II. There are several shocking exhibits, including lampshades made of human skin and bars of soap made of human fat. The relics are a vivid reminder of man's inhumanity to man. Outside the building is a simple plaque inscribed with a brief quotation from this verse, "Listen! Your brother's blood cries out."

So God judged Cain for his crime. Verses 11-12, "Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

Cain's curse was twofold. First...

- Work will be futile. Though Cain would continue to till the ground, it wouldn't produce crops for him. God touched Cain where he'd feel it the most. Cain's idol was his work, namely working the soil. But from now, work will be futile. Secondly...

- Life will be futile. Cain, from now on you will be a *restless wanderer*. You will reap the consequences of the choices you have made.

How did Cain respond? Was he remorseful? Did he cry out to God with penitence, "Oh God! I have sinned. I deserve my punishment for You are just in your ways! Be merciful to me a sinner!?" Was that Cain's response? No. What was his response then? We'll find out next time.

Lessons: What can we learn from this?

Do you know what's sad? There are a lot of Cains sitting in churches this morning. They naively think that God is impressed with their religious efforts. Yes, they have religion, but they lack a true relationship with God. They have just enough religion to be dangerous, but what's missing? Faith is, genuine faith.

Perhaps you're wondering, "How can I tell if I have true, saving faith?" Here's the answer Hebrews 11 gives. If you have true faith, there will be evidence of it. What kind of evidence?

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice (4). By faith Enoch was taken from this life (5). By faith Noah built an ark (7). By faith Abraham left his homeland when God told him to go (8).

What's the point? This. If you have genuine faith, God will be real in your life. If you don't, He won't. So ask yourself, "Is He?" Is God real in your life?

Are you like Abel, a person who pleased God? Or are you like Cain, a person with just enough religion to be dangerous? There are three simple, yet profound lessons for us in Genesis 4. Ponder them carefully...

1. A person can know about faith and not have it. You may be able to lead someone else to Christ and not know Him yourself. Have you truly placed your faith in Jesus Christ? Be honest. Do you have saving faith or merely vain religion?

2. A person can know what's right and not do what's right. Cain knew what was right, but he refused to do it. How about you? Is there any area in your life--big or small--where you are not doing what is right?

3. If God is real in my life, it will show. Is it showing in your life? Please don't settle for mere religion like Cain did. Be like Abel, a person of faith who pleased God.