

Genesis 4:1-12 “Learning from the First Parents & Children”** [1]

Main Idea: By looking at the world’s first parents and first children in Genesis 4:1-12 we learn about the proper and improper responses to God’s grace.

I. The first parents experienced God’s grace (1-2).

- A. God gave them children.
- B. They gave God the credit.

II. The first children experienced God’s grace (3-12).

A. Abel responded in the right way (3-4).

- 1. He exhibited proper faith.
- 2. He exhibited proper action.
 - a. True faith involves a relationship.
 - b. True faith involves a life-changing acceptance.
 - c. True faith involves the heart, not just externals.

B. Cain responded in the wrong way (5-12).

- 1. He had privileges (1-2).
 - a. He was raised in the same home with Abel.
 - b. He received the same opportunities Abel did.
- 2. He had a deficient faith (3-12).
 - a. He disobeyed God (3-5).
 - b. He became angry and depressed (5b).
 - c. He killed his brother and lied about it (8).
 - d. He ended up living a self-sufficient life (12-18).

Make It Personal: What do we learn from the first family?

- 1. We learn about God.
- 2. We learn about the problem of sin.
- 3. We learn about our need for grace.

With our thoughts turned towards the home on this Mother’s Day I’d like to turn our attention to a very special family in the Bible, *the first family*. God, of course, created all things for His honor, including the family. If we want to know how to have families that honor Him we must open His Word and take heed.

What kind of family was the first family? As we turn to Genesis 2 we meet Adam, *Ish*, the first man, created by God from the dust of the ground. And we meet *Isha*, as Adam first called her, ‘woman,’ later renamed ‘Eve.’ God made them in His image and placed them in a perfect garden. They enjoyed unhindered communion with God and each other, never a cross word, never a reason to utter a cross word. It was total paradise in the Genesis 2 world.

That all changed in Genesis 3 when one fateful day Ish and Isha foolishly disobeyed God’s commandment. God’s warning couldn’t have been clearer: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it *you will surely die* (Gen. 2:17).”

They knew better, but they listened to the serpent rather than God. They *ate* the forbidden fruit. And life changed immediately, not only for them but for all creation.

The first children were born in the post-Genesis 3 world. We’ll meet them in a moment, but ponder that thought. Adam and Eve didn’t raise their children in a perfect ‘Walgreen’ world, and they didn’t get perfect results either.

I need not tell you that we do not live in a Genesis 2 world. We live in a post-Genesis 3 world, an important point to remember if you’re serious about having God’s kind of family.

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? Hardly! No two children are exactly alike, even children from the same family.

That’s true not only today. It was true in the *first family*. When we open our Bibles to Genesis 4 we’re introduced to the world’s first parents, Adam and Eve, and the world’s first children, Cain and Abel.

In light of God’s warning in Genesis 2 and man’s sinful choice in Genesis 3, what would you expect to find in Genesis 4? The Genesis 2 prediction was *eat and you will die*. The Genesis 3 choice was *to eat*. You would expect, then, to see next the record of *death*, wouldn’t you?

But what do we find when we come to Genesis 4? Do we see death? The answer is surprising. Yes, we see a *dying* world, but Adam won’t die physically until chapter 5. What do we see in Genesis 4? In a word we see *grace*, what theologians refer to as *common grace*. In fact, we see two amazing expressions of God’s common grace in Genesis 4:1-12. Let’s take a closer look...

I. The first parents experienced God’s grace (1-2).

Notice verse 1, “Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant.” Stop there. Does that sound like death? Just the opposite. Although Adam and Eve sinned, God now graciously enables them to create *life*. What kind of life?

A. God gave them children. Verse 1 again, “Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain.” And another child in verse 2, “Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.”

Remember, God created Adam and Eve as mature, grown adults, Adam fashioned out of the dirt, Eve out of a rib from Adam’s side. With the rest of humanity God used a different means. Adam ‘knew’ Eve his wife (as the KJV renders it). God created Adam and Eve with the ability to procreate, and this as a demonstration of His kindness and generosity. He *gave* them children.

How did the first parents respond?

B. They gave God the credit. Listen to Eve in verse 1, “She said, ‘With the help of the LORD I have brought forth [KJV ‘have gotten’] a man.’” That’s an amazing confession from Eve. She acknowledges that God exists, that God helps, and that God is the giver of children.^[2]

Ponder Eve's faith-cry. 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 believing that God exists, that He's personally involved in your life graciously providing for your needs. Real faith shows up when you come to church on Sunday to give thanks, yes, but also when you have a child. A person who truly believes in God acknowledges God as the source of that and every gift.

By the way, don't miss Eve's perspective on children. Children are a blessing, a gift from God, certainly not a nuisance and never a mistake. Children are an opportunity to bring into the world another generation of people who can honor and serve God.

Moms and dads, is that the way you view your children, as an undeserved expression of God's common grace, a blessing which prompts you to turn to God with thanksgiving? But there's more. Not only did the first parents experience God's grace, but...

II. The first children experienced God's grace (3-12).

Grace is when God gives us what we don't deserve. Grace is God's unmerited favor and help. The expressions of God's grace in our lives are so many that we're prone to miss them. What effect should grace have on us? We find out by looking at the first children. One got it right. The other missed it again and again.

The two brothers were very different. Occupationally, they differed—Cain was a farmer, Abel a herdsman. And they were different when it came to their response to God's grace. Very different.

A. Abel responded in the right way (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...

1. *He exhibited proper faith.* Remember, Abel never knew the joy of Eden. Like every other child post-Genesis 3, Abel entered the world with a sin nature, cut off from God. But somewhere along life's journey, by the grace of God, Abel began to believe in the God he could not see. 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."

Did you catch that? *By faith... by faith... by faith.* The verse repeats the phrase three times as a summary of Abel's life. Abel was a man who, enabled by grace, exhibited genuine, real, proper faith. He also exemplified a second mark that will characterize any person who is pleasing God.

2. *He exhibited proper action.* Faith and action always 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—have recognized that the God who gave them life deserves their worship and reverence.

However, not all worship is acceptable worship. In Abel's case, he worshiped God by bringing an acceptable offering to God. He gave God some fat portions from firstborn animals he raised. His offering was evidence of his faith. And it pleased the Lord.

Not so with Cain, as verse 5 reveals, “But on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.” 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.

Thankfully, God gives us the answer in Hebrews 11:4. “By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did.” What pleased God about Abel's offering? He brought it *by faith*. Again, the text tells us three times that Abel brought his offering *by faith*. The implication? 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. James 2:19 says that demons have a type of faith—they “believe God, yet tremble.”

Which raises the question, “What's true of *genuine* faith?” According to Hebrews 11, true faith involves three ingredients.

a. True faith involves a relationship. It's more than saying, “Sure I believe in God. Doesn't everybody?” Genuine faith involves a relationship. “By faith Abel offered *God* a better sacrifice. True faith involves a personal relationship with God.

b. 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.^[3]

c. 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-based-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 say that Cain brought leftovers, either.

Both men brought their best to God. Both participated in worship. Both brothers did the same thing *outwardly*. The only difference was something only God could discern because only God knew their hearts.

Please realize that *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.

If you want to know the proper response to grace, look at Abel. 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. What about Cain? To put it plainly...

B. Cain responded in the wrong way (5-12). Cain was not what we might call a 'secular' man. He had a religious side to him. He brought God an offering, a costly offering, one he raised with his own hands and sweat. And he brought it "to the LORD," as verse 3 clearly specifies.

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

1. He had privileges (1-2). By occupation, Cain worked the soil. Nothing wrong with that. Adam, too, worked the soil. Cain had a lot going for him. Like what?

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

b. 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 told their boys 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 sons about the consequences of disobeying God and the blessings of obeying him.

Both sons, 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 so often for social ills these days. Yes, Cain had privileges. That wasn't the problem. This was...

2. He had a deficient faith (3-12). You can't hide genuine faith. The same is true for deficient faith. Give it time, put a little pressure on it, and it will show its true colors. Cain's deficient faith showed up in four very tangible ways. You'll note a downward spiral in these four expressions of Cain's deficient faith.

a. He disobeyed God (5). Cain brought a grain offering to God. That might impress us, but it didn't impress God for reasons we've already discussed. And so, God rejected Cain's offering.

When I was about five I went into our neighbor's garage and found an old football. It was lopsided from use and the inside rubber was exposed. That gave me an idea. I ran home, got a pin, and returned to conduct an experiment on that football. I wondered what would happen if I put the pin into the exposed rubber on the ball, and so I did it. And the ball went flat. I told my mother about my experiment and do you know what she did? She made me go knock on my neighbor's door, confess my deed, and ask for their forgiveness.

Why did my mother confront my sinful behavior rather than overlook it? It was an expression of her love for me, right?

The fact that God rejected Cain's offering and let him know about it is a good thing for Cain. God's rejection is actually a demonstration of His grace. By helping Cain see his shortcoming God is giving Cain an opportunity to change.

How did Cain react? Here's the second expression of his deficient faith.

b. He became angry and depressed (5b). "So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast." 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.

It ticked off Cain that God didn't accept his offering. Consequently, his anger affected his countenance. Literally, 'his face slumped.' What a vivid word picture of depression. It's worth noting that 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?"

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 but are his feelings the problem? Does he have 'emotional' problems? No. His emotions are working just fine. His depressed feelings are God's gracious gift to tell him there's a problem. The problem? Cain has failed to do what's right! The solution? Cain needs to do what's right!

Which is exactly why God followed up the third question with a stern warning in verse 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 master it."

Do you hear God's grace in that warning? God is giving Cain an opportunity to change. What a merciful God! God didn't want Cain to fail. Granted, God knew what Cain would do, yet still 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. Your depression is due to your 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, what do 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*. Like Paul did who confessed in Galatians 2:20, "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 the place of sinners for their sin. He rose again and now offers you new life. He will live *through you*. But you must repent of your sins and put your trust, your *faith*, in Him. Then, by His power, you must choose to *do right*.

How did Cain respond to God's counsel? He didn't say a word. Rather he responded with a third expression of his deficient faith.

c. 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."

We discover an important insight 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.

Had Cain heeded God's counsel, he could have broken his 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 he did the unthinkable.

He talked with his brother 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 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. In the end, he chose the latter.

This is the first murder in the Bible. It happened because a man didn't deal with his anger. Know this. Anger will destroy us, too, if left unchecked. It'll also cause a lot of pain for those near us.

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." [\[4\]](#)

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."

Once again, this penalty was actually another expression of God's grace. He's trying to get Cain's attention by touching what he loves most, *his work*. Every time Cain would reach down to work the soil and got a handful of thorns, it would be a reminder that he wasn't right with God and desperately needed to be!

But how did Cain respond? Was he remorseful? Did he cry out, “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 then?

Scan the next verses and you'll see. Initially, he complained about his bad lot in life (13-14). Then he 'went out from the LORD's presence' (16). In other words, Cain just got on with life, but he did so *without the Lord*. In that condition, he had a son and built a city and named it after his son (17). To put it simply...

d. He ended up living a self-sufficient life (12-18). Time and time again, God extended grace to Cain. And time and time again, Cain said *no thanks*. So God gave Cain what he wanted, a self-sufficient life, a life without God, to his own peril.

There's a lesson here for us, dear friend. Where did Cain go wrong? He settled for what Patrick Morley calls 'cultural Christianity.' In his book *Man in the Mirror* Morley observes: “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.”^[5]

Make It Personal: What do we learn from the first family?

We learn about three vital subjects.

1. *We learn about God.* We learn that God is patient and longsuffering, merciful and kind. But He is also holy and just, and to come to Him you must come on *His terms*.

2. *We learn about the problem of sin.* “If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at *your* door.” That warning God gave Cain applies to us, too. We're born in sin. Sin isn't some abstract concept. Sin is an active reality within us. It's a monster, and if we don't deal with it, it will destroy us and even those around us.

But the problem is, we can't deal with it. It's too powerful for us. You can't put chains on this monster. You can't tame him either. You can try to hide him behind the walls of a 'good life,' you can even add religion to your life to make your monster look respectable, but at the end of the day that monster is still there, growing in strength, looking for the right opportunity to destroy you, to destroy you *eternally*.

My friend, learn from the first family! Don't cling to your self-righteous efforts to please God, as Cain did. Be like Abel. Put your faith fully in God, specifically in His perfect Son, Jesus Christ, who nailed monster-sin to the cross (see Col . 2:13-15).

3. *We learn about our need for grace.* How different the first family's story would read if Cain had acknowledged his need for grace! How different our family's story will read if only we learn to cherish grace!

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] This message is based on a message preached at WBC on 2/27/2000 in our Genesis series.

[2] In fact, in Hebrew Cain's name means 'to acquire.' There seems to be a play on words when Eve says, “With the LORD's help I have *acquired* a man.”

[3] Perhaps Abel was influenced by God's actions (see Gen. 3:21).

[4] Youngblood, p. 74.

[5] Patrick Morley, *Man in the Mirror*, p. 33.