

Foundations: Freefall
By Jason Huff
February 14, 2021
1 John 3:11-16; Matthew 5:21-24; Genesis 4:1-16

Our final Scripture reading today is Genesis 4:1-16. May God add His richest blessing on the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “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. In the course of time 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, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 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.” 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. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. 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 said to the LORD, “My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.” But the LORD said to him, “Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the LORD’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”

It’s Valentine’s Day. Doesn’t exactly seem to go with our Scripture passage for the day, does it? Of course, there are so many holidays that if we took time out of our Scripture studies for each holiday, we’d never get very far! But there are a few reasons why this Scripture is good for us to talk about on Valentine’s Day, and one is St. Valentine himself.

Valentinus was a priest in Italy in the 3rd century AD. Not much is known about him, mostly legends, but there are some core bits that show up in almost every story about him. While under house arrest, he spoke with the judge named Asterius about Christianity. Asterius said he would become a believer along with his whole household if Valentinus could restore his blind daughter’s sight. Valentinus prayed, Asterius’ daughter’s sight was restored, and Asterius was true to his word. A few years later, Valentinus was arrested for preaching the gospel and was martyred for his faith in 269 A.D. The legend has it that his last letter was written to Asterius’ daughter before his death, urging her to keep the faith, signed, “from your Valentine.”

The story of St. Valentine reminds us that loving God and loving our neighbors is the calling of Christians – even though it comes at a cost. Our desire is not to be like Cain, but like Abel, whose offering was accepted before God. So let’s dig into this passage and see what it tells us about a heart that loves God like St. Valentine’s.

After their fall into sin and their banishment from the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve have children. This is part of God's command to them in Genesis 1, to be fruitful and multiply, so they are in some sense still fulfilling God's purposes for them despite their choice to disobey. And they have not forgotten God; in some way, they are still in relationship with Him, it seems.

When Eve has Cain, she speaks highly of the LORD, acknowledging that Cain comes into being only through the LORD's help. But there's also an underpinning to this in the original language that suggests that Eve might see Cain as the seed God mentioned in Genesis 3, the one who is destined to destroy the serpent. Here is the one who will rescue us from that wicked creature that got us into this mess! In comparison, Abel is an afterthought. Nothing much is said about him, and his name itself means "breath" or "vapor." Maybe this is foreshadowing, or maybe it is that their hopes are pinned on the firstborn, not their second son.

Time passes. We really don't know how long. We know from later passages in Genesis that the first human beings had extraordinarily long lives, and that the events here happen within 130 years of the banishment from the garden. It is possible that Cain and Abel have their own families at this point; it doesn't seem so from the later text, but we just aren't sure. They have careers, Abel the shepherd and Cain the farmer; they are likely fully grown men.

And somewhere along the way, the idea of making a sacrifice to God has gotten to them. We're not sure where it came from, but there's an understanding even from the very beginning that the success of human hands is really in God's hands, and it's appropriate to give thanks to God through returning to Him some of what He's given. Cain brought something that he's grown to God as an offering. But Abel brought the fatty sections of some of his firstborn animals. It's not readily apparent from the English, but it appears that Abel made his sacrifice first. God approves of Abel's sacrifice...Cain's, not so much.

But the question is, why? The passage doesn't spell it out for us; we have to read between the lines, but it's there if we're paying attention. Cain brings something. It's non-descript. That's the point. Nothing stood out about Cain's sacrifice. It seems like Cain saw Abel making a sacrifice and he thought, "Yeah, guess I should do that."

But looks at Abel's sacrifice in comparison. Abel brings the fatty portion of the firstborn of his flocks. Abel's sacrifice is the best of the best. He's giving up the first signs of prosperity to God, because who knows if the flock's going to keep reproducing, and at what rate? He's also giving God the choicest cuts. You know, fat went out of style there for a while, right, everything was low-fat? Now the diets are all high-protein, high-fat, low carb. And science has shown that fat doesn't have flavor, but it prolongs flavor – if what you're eating has fat in it, you savor the flavor of it longer. No wonder that fat was prized.

Some scholars wonder if God approved of Abel's sacrifice because it was from animals and disapproved Cain's because it was crops. But that doesn't follow. In the sacrificial system that God would establish through Moses for His people, there were both kinds of sacrifices. Animal sacrifices were used to atone for sin, but offerings of grain and wheat and wine were acceptable too as fellowship offerings. In a sense, the animal sacrifices made it so the people could approach God, but the sacrifices of grain and wine were putting out the welcome mat for God.

And that's our first thought today that really applies to us: *a heart that has fallen in love with God gives its best in faith to God*. Thousands of years later, Jesus calls Abel righteous. The author of Hebrews puts Abel in the faith hall of fame. All because of this one sacrifice. Abel's sacrifice is the only thing we know about him other than that he is Cain's brother. But he is still remembered. Abel's sacrifice – giving his best in faith to God – gets to the heart of what it is to love God.

It is very easy for us to want to get legalistic about our giving to God. What about the tithes we read about in the Old Testament? Should we give 10%, or less, or more? What should we give? Often modern giving campaigns center around our time, our talents, and our treasures (that last one being a pseudonym for money). It often comes down to this – what will make God happy that I can live with?

But that's not what we see with Abel. We don't read that Abel carefully counted out 10% of his flock to give to God, or 10% of the prime rib or whatever. We don't see a law spelled out. We see two key parts – Abel didn't hold back the best for himself but he gave it to God, first off. And secondly, he gave in faith, not knowing what would come later. He had faith that God would provide for him, so he gives the firstborn animals to God, and he leaves himself in God's hands. There's an element of risk and genuine sacrifice here; Abel doesn't give out of amazing abundance here. The wisdom of the ages about herding cattle hasn't been passed down to him here; it could all fail in a moment without anyone to step in and rescue him. His gift to God is a leap of faith.

In the same way, we don't have now what about Cain's offering made it unacceptable; all we know is it was completely unremarkable. Cain gave a very real offering to God, but it didn't curry him favor with God, and he got very upset about it. (The original Hebrew literally says “it burned within him.”) But that seems to be the lynchpin – Cain doesn't understand why his sacrifice is so different from his brother's. It likely isn't the amount Cain gave that's at issue. It's that Cain's sacrifice is missing both elements his brother's offering included – the best, given in faith.

I think we in the modern church misunderstand giving to God's work because we do not have the heart of Abel towards giving. When I say this, I convict myself, because for a good chunk of my life, I was the same way. I thought of it as more of a transaction – I give what I can, and I'll receive blessings. I think Cain probably thought about it the same way. My check to the church was something of what was left at the end of the month. I gave a good amount of time to the church, but the first and best of myself went elsewhere. It was never in faith where I wasn't sure what I'd do if God didn't come through.

But a heart that has truly fallen in love with God commits to Him. It knows Him, and so it gives the best, beyond the measure of security. What does that look like? In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis described it this way: “The only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, [and] amusements is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.”

This works in our generation just as much as Lewis'. And it also gives room for those who genuinely love God but truly are going without. It is those who cannot give that we should come alongside and provide for, so that they can have that joy of giving their first and best as well. But most importantly, it calls us to self-examination. It isn't about giving solely to your church but to God's work in the world, Kingdom building work, work that brings justice, shelters the oppressed, feeds the needy. Do our hearts truly love God that we long for Him to have our first and best?

Moving back into the passage...God confronts Cain about his anger. God will accept Cain if he simply does what is right. No surprise there. But what God says next is incredibly important: "if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." Here's the second thought for us: *the heart that loves its neighbor seeks to master sin.*

The word picture here is sin being like a mountain lion that sits waiting to pounce on someone as they leave their house. The idea is that if you aren't wary of sin, it will rip you to pieces. But while the wild predator of sin seeks to destroy us, it can be mastered. We can't conquer it; while we live here on this earth, we will have to struggle with it. But we can overcome it if we have prepared ourselves for battle. In the New Testament, Paul writes about putting on the full armor of God so that we can overcome the fierce attacks of the devil and sin. It's the same idea.

But mastering sin is not just about saving ourselves from sin and regret and pain (not to mention punishment). It's about loving our neighbor. Sin by definition is rebellion against God, but it often comes through harming our neighbor in some way. We get angry with our neighbor and want to harm him, as Cain did. We want what belongs to our neighbor, whether it be his wife or his clothes or his car or his home. Without mastering sin, we eventually wind up hurting our neighbor and freefalling headlong into sin.

The word for "mastering" here is the same in Hebrew as "to rule over." It means dominance. For us to truly love our neighbors, we can't try to keep sin as a pet that we can play nice with. At the beginning of the pandemic, Netflix made a hit out of the show *Tiger King*. And without having seen the show, just seeing the previews, you know that keeping a tiger as a pet is a bad idea. It can seem tame until it rips somebody's arm off. We must not play around with sin.

Nor can we ignore sin as anything as the horror that it is. We have respectable sins. Gossip. Slander. Lying and false witness. Just a few. Yet they will destroy a neighbor just as sure as a wild mountain lion. As the saying goes, be killing sin, or sin will be killing you. And ultimately, on this day when we celebrate love, the best way to love our neighbor is to be on guard against anything that might harm him – including our own sinful desires, attitudes, and pursuits. Keep the door closed to the lion. From a practical perspective, that means knowing your own desires well enough to avoid those things that open the door. Everyone's desires are different – know yours well enough that when they come knocking, you've got a dozen locks on the door.

Sadly, Cain doesn't get it, and his anger at his rejected offering becomes anger at his brother and his worthy offering. Cain leads him out into the fields to kill him. And when God confronts Cain about it, very much like He confronted Adam and Eve by asking the question "where?", Cain lies about it. He says he doesn't know. When he says, "Am I my brother's keeper?", it shows immense disrespect. Everything about Cain reeks of angry entitlement.

Of course, God knows everything, and He speaks the truth of the matter. And God pronounces His judgment on Cain. He is cursed. He'll have to find another line of work because the ground will produce nothing for him. He'll be a restless wanderer without a home. Cain complains about it, primarily that as a wanderer, he'll be subject to the hand of fate. He suspects that when word gets out of what he's done, somebody will decide the same thing should happen to him. Yet there's no remorse, no repentance, only more anger at the punishment – punishment that yet again shows God's mercy, because the sentence is not what Cain deserves for the crime.

God is willing to take the worst fear from Cain's mind – He marks Cain in such a way that identifies him and warns others that killing him will bring sevenfold vengeance. But the part that's heartbreaking is not that Cain is now going to have to scrounge and scheme for a living. It's that Cain goes out of the LORD's presence. Despite Adam and Eve being driven from the garden, God was still in some fashion with them. Before his rash act, God spoke with Cain personally, as a wise friend urging him not to act on his worst impulses. Cain's actions do not just drive him away from his community; they drive him away from God. And Cain does not seem all that concerned.

That leads to my final thought for us today: *a heart that loves God and neighbor is repentant of sin because it longs for God's presence and the restoration of relationship with the family of faith.* Contrast Cain's reaction to being caught to the much later King David's reaction to being caught having committed adultery and indirect murder. Cain is worried only about the personal ramifications, not about his relationship with God. David, on the other hand, immediately confesses his sin when he is confronted. David begs God for mercy, for forgiveness, according to God's great compassion. "Do not cast me from your presence and do not take your Holy Spirit from me," he cries in remorse. He longs for a clean heart that only God can create inside of him.

In Jesus' teachings, the worst thing that someone can experience when they reach eternity is for God to tell them – "Go away, you who practice wickedness! I never knew you." From the stories Jesus tells, it seems to surprise those who are condemned – they have done wondrous things in Jesus' name. But it's not doing wonders that saves anybody; it's salvation by faith, knowing and loving the Son of God and doing what He commands as part of that love. They know Jesus and Jesus knows them because they've treated everyone as if they *were* Jesus – showing them love, providing for them, visiting them, caring for them. They long for the presence of God.

When the faithful are confronted by sin, they are grieved. They know it causes separation from God. More than anything, they want restoration. They want God's presence. They want to be restored to the fellowship of believers. True, godly love means being willing to admit our helplessness before sin and our desire to master it so we might experience the presence of God.

Friends, do you desire the presence of God? Do you long for more of Him in your life? I pray that it might be so for all of us, because God will reward the desires of a heart that earnestly seeks Him. A heart that's right with God is going to want more and more of Him. If your love for God has gone cold or you're not sure you've ever really desired His presence, it is not too late to rekindle that spark or set it aflame for the first time. Trust your life to Jesus, being willing to go where He leads, and He will not cast you out like Cain. The life of true and pure love God has for you is not always the easy road – as St. Valentine's own life and death prove – and yet there is no doubt that following that road pays eternal dividends. Shall we walk down that road together?