

The Mark of Cain

by Ray C. Stedman

In our first study together of the story of Cain and Abel we examined the causes for human hatred and warfare. We saw what the New Testament confirms – that wars and murders spring from seeds of unreasoning jealousy and envy which are allowed to lie unjudged in human hearts. When they are small they are left unjudged and not faced. Men kill because they hate; they hate because they will not accept God's ordering of life. They want their own way, they want God to act as they want him to act (or perhaps I should say, as we want him to act).

Today we examine a very closely related problem, that of race relations, of human brotherhood. In this story of Cain and Abel it is highlighted for us by what followed the cold-blooded murder of Abel.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" {Gen 4:9 RSV}

Cain's insolent and arrogant response to God's question is a sign of his inward, unacknowledged guilt. This is always the way of guilt – to disclaim responsibility. Cain replies, "My brother? What have I to do with my brother? Am I my brother's keeper? Is it my responsibility to know where my brother is?" The hypocrisy of that is most evident. Though Cain could disclaim responsibility for knowing where his brother was, he did not hesitate to assume the far greater responsibility of taking his brother's life.

We hear much of the same thing today. When Martin Luther King was murdered, many were saying these same things. "Well, it's not our fault that Dr. King was killed. Why should we suffer for

what some fanatic did? It's not our responsibility." Soon some were saying, "He ought to have known this would happen. After all, if you stir up trouble, sooner or later you will pay the price for it." No one can deny the logic and truth of a statement like that. Yet it is very obviously incomplete. There is nothing in it of facing responsibility, and no honest answering of the terrible question from Cain's lips, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Two or three decades ago, Dr. Carl Henry wrote a book called *The Uneasy Conscience of Fundamentalism*, which bothered many people when it first came out. In it Dr. Henry pointed out that the isolationism which many Christians adopt, the isolationism which removes us from contact with non-Christians, has also successfully removed us from grappling with some of the pressing social questions of our hour. We have oftentimes been quite content to sing about going to heaven, but have shown very little concern for the sick and the poor, the lonely, the old, and the miserable of our world. Isaiah 58 is a ringing condemnation of such an attitude on the part of religious people. Other passages from the Scriptures make clear that God is infinitely concerned in this area of life, and those who bear his name dare not neglect these areas. Let us be perfectly frank and honest, and admit that this is a manifestation of Christian love which we evangelicals have tended greatly to neglect. The evangelical church, therefore, has largely become almost exclusively white, middle-class, Protestant, and Republican.

Now I don't have anything against any of these designations, except that their preponderance indicates that something is wrong with the church. The church was never intended to minister only to one segment of society, but is to include all people, all classes, all colors, without distinction. Both the

Old and New Testament alike are crystal clear in this respect. These distinctions are to be ignored in the church; they must be, otherwise we are not being faithful to the One who called us and who himself was the friend of sinners {Matt 11:19, Luke 7:34} of all kinds. We must be perfectly honest and admit that this has been the weak spot of evangelical life, this failure to move out in obedience to God's command to offer love, friendship, forgiveness, and grace to all people without regard to class, color, background, or heredity. We believe that the gospel is salt, to preserve society from corruption, and that in calling out "the mystery of godliness," God is forming a secret society which constitutes the church to be a counteraction to "the mystery of lawlessness" which is also at work. These are opposed, one to the other, and when lawlessness surges to the front as it has today, and seems to flow unchecked through the cities of our nation, it is because the mystery of godliness has been thwarted and held back, contained, and not turned loose in the midst of society.

If we still are reluctant to face some of the things this passage brings before us, perhaps we need to look on to Cain's punishment, given in Verses 10 through 12:

And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." {Gen 4:10-12 RSV}

God uses a very vivid figure here to describe his knowledge of Cain's deed. Cain thought he was acting in secret, but of course everything is open before God. God said, "The blood of your brother is crying to me, shrieking to me, from the ground!" Abel's blood shouts at God. It makes demands upon his justice and his love.

Hebrews speaks of "the blood of Jesus, which," says the writer, "speaks of better things than the blood of Abel," {cf, Heb 12:24 KJV}. We know what he means. The blood of Jesus is crying out before God for forgiveness. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," said Jesus from the cross {Luke 23:34 KJV}. The blood of Jesus is crying constantly for mercy, for grace to all who

take refuge under it, and thus it does speak of "better things" than the blood of Abel.

But the blood of Abel speaks too. That is what God is saying to Cain. "Your brother's blood is crying something to me that I can't ignore. It is shrieking to me from the ground. It is crying out!" For what? For redress, for vengeance, for justice, for the righting of wrong. It cries to a God of justice and says, "Do not let this deed go unavenged. Do something about this."

Now notice carefully that it is crying out for vengeance from God, not man. "Vengeance belongs to me," says the Lord {cf, Heb 10:30, Deut 32:35}. It never belongs to man. It is not man's task to avenge these things. In fact, when man assumes that role he only makes it worse. He unleashes a vicious cycle which escalates rapidly into all-out anarchy, and sometimes civil war and revolution. But nevertheless, God is driven to act. This is what this ancient story of Cain and Abel tells us. God cannot allow these things to occur and nothing happen as a result. His sense of justice is appealed to in the murderous act.

What then does he do? He sentences Cain! He assigns a punishment to him, and the nature of it is very significant. Notice, there are no thunderbolts of wrath here. God does not seize hold of Cain and take his life in vengeance. What happens is what writers sometimes call "poetic justice," i.e., a strangely fitting result. Cain was a man of the soil, a tiller of the ground; in this work he took pride and found joy. A man's work is always his pride. Cain was a farmer, who delighted in producing beautiful crops of fruit and grain. But now he has poured the blood of his brother upon the ground. So God says, the ground, the arena of your pride, will now be cursed toward you. It will no longer yield you its strength. You will find, in your attempts to work the ground, nothing but frustration, sweat, tears, and toil.

Cain, in other words, has lost his "green thumb." The ground will no longer release its fruitfulness to him; his working of the ground will result in fruitless labor. He would therefore, be forced to wander from place to place as the crops failed wherever he went. He would find himself unable to extract a living and this would turn him into a wanderer on the face of the earth.

I wonder if we are not still hearing echoes of this strange sentence upon Cain today. What is the pride of America? It is not in our great American

cities – these great showplaces of wealth and power, these planned communities, which we intended to be models of knowledge, wisdom, and happiness, where all the problems of life would be happily solved? Well, what has happened? Because we would not answer God’s question, “Where is your brother?” and we replied, as Cain, in arrogance and defiance, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” today our great cities are dying. The pride and joy of America is severely threatened, and we have not seen the worst of it yet. But to me, the ultimate fate is not the physical violence which threatens our nation, but the fact that America has lost its way home. American families no longer know how to have a home. We have become wanderers, lonely, empty, restless; a nation on wheels, driven and homeless, vainly seeking to find something to satisfy, fugitives from a pitiless fate.

But the account closes on a hopeful note,

Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me this day away from the ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me.” Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod [which means “the land of wandering”], east of Eden.” {Gen 4:14-16 RSV}

It is obvious from this account that Cain fears the vengeance of his other brothers.

You say, “What other brothers?” In the very next chapter, in Verse 4, we are told plainly that Adam and Eve “had other sons and daughters” beside the ones that are named in the Scripture. This is the explanation for the question many have asked out of a kind of naive ignorance, “Where did Cain get his wife?” The answer is, he married one of his sisters. This was yet a common occurrence as late as the days of Abraham, who also married one of his sisters, his half-sister.

But Cain knows that his life is in danger wherever he goes. Wherever he is he will run into his relatives (can you imagine anything worse?) who

will be motivated either by fear or vengeance to take his life.

Cain now is obsessed with his guilt, haunted by it. He knows he can go nowhere in human society without constantly wondering if the attitudes manifest toward him are subtle, sinister ones, or whether they are friendly and can be trusted. He is a man obsessed and haunted with guilt, and so he says to God, feeling the weight of this, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. I will live in constant danger of reprisal.” But God said, “No, you won’t.” And God put a mark upon him (which has now become a proverb) by which, as he says, “Anyone who sees this mark will know that God himself protects Cain, and whoever takes this life will be avenged sevenfold.”

I do not know what the mark of Cain was. It is impossible to tell whether it was some physical mark, some sign in his body, which indicated that he was God’s property, or something else. I do not know. I think perhaps it was a hopeless, pathetic look, something that would stir pity in any individual’s heart, so that Cain became (as man is, basically, everywhere in his guilt), an object of universal pity to those who saw him. But the point is, even the guilty man is still God’s property! God throws a circle of protective love about Cain and says, “Yes, he is guilty. He’s a murderer – but he is still my property, and don’t forget it in your dealings with him.”

Thus the mark of Cain is not a mark of shame, as we usually interpret it. It is not a mark to brand him in the eyes of others as a terrible murderer, to be shunned and treated as a pariah. It is rather, a mark of grace, by which God is saying, “This man is still my property. Hands off!” Thus the heart of God is always ready to show mercy.

There can only be one reason why God thus protected Cain. It was in order to give him time to think and to repent. This is always the way of God. Peter says, in his second letter, “Do not ever make the mistake of regarding the longsuffering of God as weakness,” {cf, 2 Pet 3:9}. You who say, “Twenty centuries of Christian life have gone by and nothing has happened; God will never do anything to right wrongs” – don’t make the mistake of thinking that indicates God’s impotence. “But,” Peter says, “it is rather his mercy, it is his grace, giving men time to repent in order that none may perish but that all may come to repentance,” {cf,

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2 Pet 3:9}. But don't presume upon his patience – utilize the time to repent and change.

Thus God gives even Cain a moment of grace, space to repent.

Prayer:

Forgive us, our Father, for the many weeks and years in which we have failed to judge ourselves in this particular area. How many times we have glossed over our prejudices and treated them as unimportant trivialities, never realizing that our silence

shouts, and our refusal to act speaks volumes. Lord, we pray that in this late hour of our history we may be faithful to you in every direction and manifest more fully than we ever have done before the saving love that is without prejudice or respect of persons. Thank you for this sharp word from the Scriptures to our own hearts helping us to understand what is happening in our nation today. May we face it in realism and in truth. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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