

JEALOUSY AND WORSHIP

by Steve Zeisler

Our contemporaries do not know how to regard human weakness and failure. Without clear convictions of right and wrong and humble awareness of the universality of human sin, silly commentary proliferates on every side. Public scandal is greeted with astonishment ("Who would do such a thing?") or voyeuristic interest ("Tell me more!") or cavalier dismissal ("Private immorality is of no consequence").

One healthy response to such failure is to recall Jesus' words in John 8: "I will deal with this woman and her sin. You folks with stones examine yourselves." So we might ask how have we fared in the task of self-examination amidst the celebrity sinfulness of the last month or so, the contradiction of good intentions and failed performance, the white-washed exteriors covering up corruption.

Let me note a few things. It turns out that a high percentage of American voters will approve of political leaders whom they credit with bringing prosperity without regard for the moral climate in which that prosperity is enjoyed. A president may love his country, long to benefit its poorest citizens, be a good father, and still be guilty of adultery and perjury. Well-credentialed prosecutors can be arrogant. Olympic athletes smoke pot. Urbane and upstanding Palo Altons will fight over shovels and steal sandbags when the security of their homes is threatened. But the question remains when commentary about another's failure and shortcomings is in the air: When we examine our own hearts, what need for repentance is ours?

I want to invite you to consider the all-time great celebrity sinner, the individual who is probably most identified with stiff-necked sin of anyone in history: Cain the son of Adam and Eve. We'll find the story in Genesis 4:1-15. It is appropriate for us to focus on Cain's sin, to look at his failure, to listen to his conversations with God, to observe his rebellion-precisely so we can learn about ourselves.

Genesis 1-3 is about never-to-be-repeated beginnings: the creation of energy, matter, the stars and planets, the plant and animal life, the first two people. They began with an innocence that no human will ever experience again.

In chapters 4-11, however, we have powerful insight into facets of human nature that are expressed over and over again: Cain's killing his brother, the formation of family and dysfunctionality in the family, the creation of a civilization and judgment of a civilization, the beginning of nations and disharmony among nations, and the breakdown of communication among human beings. These are the sorts of things that make up the world as we know it today. So we will do well to examine the life of the celebrity sinner Cain, the ancient first murderer, liar, and stiff-necked rebel. We can learn from him what it's like to be us. And if we learn the lessons that Cain's life teaches us, hopefully we will learn to repent, be changed, and cling to God as he did not.

Let's read Genesis 4:1-15:

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.

EVERY REASON FOR SELF-CONFIDENCE

We're going to look carefully at the interaction between Cain and God. That's the heart of this story.

But first, it's worthwhile to look at Cain himself in the context of his family. What was Cain like before the fateful day on which God refused his offering? We can surmise a little bit about Cain's problem when we realize, to begin with, that his mother thought he was the Lord. Literally, her words in verse 1 are, "I have gotten a man, the LORD." Now, I'm the oldest of four children, and my mother has always thought I was terrific, but she never cast me in messianic terms. That's really what Eve's declaration in verse 1 says. She knew God had foretold (see Genesis 3:15) that some human child would be born who would save the race, and she thought it was this boy, her first baby. Eve (and presumably Adam) regarded Cain as the savior, the central focus of God's saving power in the world.

Notice verse 2 by way of contrast: "Later she gave birth to his brother Abel." No fanfare for Abel. Abel was likely his brother's physical equal, but with less favor and lower expectations. The record says nothing of God's role in his birth, nor of his parents' hopes for him. Abel had his identity in being Cain's brother.

So Cain started out with his mother thinking he was the Lord. That was his first problem. But in addition, let's imagine the life Cain lived. Although the creation had suffered judgment because Adam and Eve had been judged, the earth was still an extraordinary place, not yet polluted or defiled. Cain's surroundings must have been beautiful and responsive-not the degraded environment that we live in.

Additionally, he was raised by parents who didn't have a history of brokenness. Cain's parents had walked with God, and although they had sinned, they still had the memory of innocence in their past to bring to bear on his parenting.

Sin took time to do its work across generations. Human beings lived to a great age in that early era, partly because the functioning of their bodies was much closer to the created order than the functioning of ours is.

Try to imagine Cain walking through the world he lived in. We can see him pausing to appreciate the remarkable face and body he finds reflected in still waters. He is struck by the profundity of his thoughts. He

is overcome by the impressive feats of strength and speed and agility that come so naturally to him. We've been watching the winter Olympics, and have seen people do extraordinary things on snow and ice. But none could even come near the physical ability that this first son of the race would have had. I can imagine that at times Cain was moved to tears at the genius of his artistic accomplishments. Cain's sensitivity to spiritual things impressed him, and he surely expected them to impress God.

At an appointed time, verse 3 tells us, Cain brought an offering to the Lord. His offering was the bountiful produce of the earth. It was, I imagine, made up of the most gorgeous fruits and vegetables and grain, beautifully arranged, fragrant-an extraordinary display to place before God. Along with Cain, his younger brother Abel also brought an offering.

Leslie and I have three children. The first two were born with the ordinary range of both capabilities and shortcomings. But the youngest of the three was born with extra handicaps and difficulties. He is the second of our two sons, and he has always wished he could be just like his big brother. Perhaps Abel wished for something similar.

We have already noted that Abel was born and raised in magnificent Cain's shadow. Later, verse 8 records Abel's murder with no mention of struggle. Perhaps Abel regarded himself as no match for Cain even when his life was at stake. Such observations make the actions of God all the more remarkable. Cain offered a magnificent array of the produce of the earth to God. Abel's gift, a bloody thing, was, as expected, no match for his brother's offering. God's response overturned all expectations.

To me this story is a wonderful illustration of Jesus' observation that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24). Cain was a very rich man in terms of capability and accomplishment. He had everything. Yet his brother, who had less, was the one who found favor with God. It was Cain's very riches in ability and strength that masked the problems he had inside.

So God accepted the offering of Abel and rejected the offering of Cain. And the Bible is silent about all kinds of things we want to know at this point. Why did it happen this way?

WHEN GOD DISAPPOINTS US

The way verses 4 and 5 are written is worth noting: "The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering...But on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor." The statement made twice is that God looked at the man and then at his offering. We can infer that God started with the heart of the one bringing the offering, and on that basis made a decision about the offering. But again, the Bible doesn't exactly teach that. We don't know precisely why God accepted Abel's offering and not Cain's. And we're not supposed to know.

"[Aslan] is not a Tame Lion," I C.S. Lewis wrote. Christ (who is portrayed as Aslan in Lewis' children's stories) doesn't do what we expect him to do all the time. There will be any number of times when you, and the best Christians you know, will find God inscrutable. The very thing he did for years in a row, he stops doing for no reason that he feels required to explain to us. He has the right to disappoint us without having to defend it. The warm fellowship that we might have experienced with people we love and care about gets broken up. Folks move away. Someone falls ill. Jobs change. Why would God do that? So much good was happening in our fellowship. Or you may have joyfully had God answer prayer after prayer in your life, and then he doesn't appear to answer them anymore, and he doesn't tell you why. He is not required to do what we expect him to do.

That is exactly the lesson that Cain received here. God was saying to him, "What are you going to do now that I've disappointed you? How will you respond when you don't get what you want?" This was very hard for Cain, because he had always gotten what he wanted. He was a golden boy, someone who could do it all. He wasn't used to being rejected, especially in favor of his second-fiddle younger brother.

Cain discovered powerful impulses and dark thoughts inside. He was furious and filled with self-pity. How

did this happen to him, who was so used to being self-satisfied? The critical question was whether it was his fault that he was angry, or God's fault. Was he discovering something wrong with him, or was he being treated badly by this Sovereign who claimed he was loving and good? That's why God asked, "Why are you angry? Why are you downcast? Why are you thinking thoughts of vengeance? Why are you consumed with how hard and pitiful and unfair your life is?" These are real questions.

God pressed questions on Cain, and at every point, Cain could have cried out and grabbed onto the Lord the way Jacob did at the ford of the Jabbok (Genesis 32:22-29). He could have wrestled with God, demanded help, vented his anger at God, called for mercy. Or he could have said, "No, I don't believe you. It's your fault that I'm unhappy, and I'm going to do something about it myself. To hell with you."

THE VICIOUS BEAST INSIDE

When the pouting and fury overtook Cain, God warned him, "You're a rebel, not a victim. Do what's right-repent, turn back. You're not the refined and elegant soul you believe yourself to be. You're a battleground, Cain. There is a vicious beast inside you, crouching at the door of your heart, and it wants to take over. You've got to look hard at what's wrong with you and get the help you need to survive it, not bask in some exalted sense of self-approval."

But Cain didn't ask for help. He decided to fight back. Part of the death of Abel was jealousy. Part of it was irrationally striking out: "If I'm hurt, someone else is going to hurt." But much of it was retaliation: "If God likes Abel best, I will make God pay for his choice. I will hurt the beloved of God." And it worked. Abel's blood cried out from the ground and broke God's heart.

James makes an insightful comment about why we fight, hurt and give way to jealousy and venom with each other. It all has to do with God. "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." (James 4:1-3.) "Why do you treat each other so badly?" James says. Because you're unhappy with your lot in life. And the reason you're unhappy is not the fault of the person you're fighting with. The reason you're unhappy is that you won't humble yourself and ask God for what you need." The ultimate reason for friction, anger, violence, jealousy, coldness, and rage in society, among nations, in families, between us and the person who has treated us the worst and whom we have treated the worst, is an essential anger with God that he has not given us what we want. So we strike out at people around us.

Cain's murder of Abel was vicious and premeditated. He knew exactly what he was doing. He invited Abel into the field, and he killed his brother with no compunction at all. Then he defended it in God's face.

"Where is your brother?"

"You got me. I don't know. Why should I know? Why should I care?" He lied to God and rejected God's right to even question him about his brother.

But God said, "Cain, I know exactly what you've done. I hear the voice of the blood of my child crying to me from the ground."

Then Cain went from being defensive, callous, and deceitful to being a whining coward. "Oh, it's too hard for me! I won't be able to stand all that wandering, restlessness, and loneliness. And someone might hurt me. I feel so sorry for myself." And even then God loved him enough to put a mark on him so that he wouldn't be killed.

Time after time God appealed to this man. He gave Cain every opening to say, "There's something wrong with me. I don't understand myself. I'm up one day and down the next. I'm furious. I'm lonely. I'm miserable. I'm lying. I'm afraid. God, please help me. I don't know what to do with myself." But every time God gave Cain an opening, Cain stiffened his neck: "It's your fault that I'm unhappy, angry, and not accepted."

What lessons can we draw from this? Remember, we're looking at a celebrity sinner-not one of our contemporary celebrity sinners, but the ancient son of Adam. And we're looking at him not because we want to enjoy his tragedy, but because we believe that the heart of Cain is reproduced in everyone else who has been born. All of us have the same problem. All of us will resonate, if we're honest, with what happened to Cain. People like us have three things we can learn from this story.

WHAT A RELIGIOUS PERSON IS CAPABLE OF

First of all, sin is crouching at the door. Don't be fooled. You and I are capable of the worst things we can imagine. It is a fabrication to look at someone else's violence, lust, deception, pride, or jealousy and say, "I'm not capable of that! People like that are disgusting!" God's warning to Cain is that sin is like a vicious animal, and if you acknowledge and resist it you are as vulnerable as anyone else. We can persuade ourselves that arrogance, anger, self-pity, murder, lies, and rejection of God are reasonable and even heroic. We can talk ourselves into anything. We can do the most reprehensible thing, and the next day defend it. The warning God gave Cain is a warning to us.

Remember, Cain was a religious man, a worshiper. Cain brought his offering to God. He was like us. He would have been welcome in our church. He would have been the lead singer in the choir! But sin was crouching at the door, and he murdered his brother and lied to God and felt sorry for himself. We too are capable of anything, and we have to recognize the battleground on the inside and call out for help.

THE ADVANTAGE OF BEING WEAK

A second lesson is that this story makes sense of all the statements in the Bible that come afterward, telling us it's an advantage to be weak.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit...." (Matthew 5:3).

"Blessed are those who mourn...." (Matthew 5:4).

"...When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

"...The last will be first...." (Matthew 20:16).

**"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss...that I may gain Christ...."
(Philippians 3:7-8).**

The poor find themselves with easy access to God, but the capable, rich, smart, and beautiful struggle. And the story of the second generation of human beings illustrates the point. The better we are, the more successful at defending and promoting ourselves, the more we are likely to blame God when things go wrong. "I've done so well all my life. Now I'm miserable. It's got to be someone else's fault, not mine. I win all the competitions, I get all the beautiful girls, I make money when I invest. That's the kind of person I am."

On the other hand, somebody who doesn't expect to win all the competitions has an easier time of saying, "Lord, help me. I'm the kind of person who needs help. I always have been." The warnings of Jesus and others about the danger of being excessively impressed with ourselves all have their roots back at the beginning. It was Abel, the overlooked younger brother, who ended up pleasing God.

THE REAL HELP GOD OFFERS

A third lesson is that all of the questions of God were real offers of help. "Why are you angry, Cain? Why is your face downcast? Where is your brother?" God didn't force himself on Cain, but over and over again he asked questions. Cain could have answered, "You want to know where my brother is? I killed him. I hate what I've done. Please have mercy?" And if Cain had fallen on his knees at any point, God would have picked him up and put his arms around him. Even at the end when Cain was whining and cowardly, God put a mark

on him and said, "I'm not going to let anybody kill you. I'm going to woo you the rest of your life. You're going to live a long time and I'm going to keep coming after you."

Another celebrity sinner of the Old Testament was David the king. When God approached David in 2 Samuel 7 and said through Nathan the prophet, "You're the man. You have taken another man's wife, murdered him, and lied about it," David's heart broke. He wrote what is probably the best-known sinner's confession, Psalm 51. The option Cain had was the option David took. This is what a brokenhearted man says to God. Psalm 51:1-4, 10-12:

**"Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.**

**Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.**

**For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.**

**Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge...**

**Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.**

**Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.**

**Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."**

NOTES

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, ©1956. Collier Books, New York, NY. P. 16.

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