

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Pray for the Lord's protection

I praise You, Lord Jesus, because You have done something impossible for my mind to grasp, my heart to comprehend or my feelings to appreciate. You have proved Your love for me in Jesus and demonstrated that it has no conditions. So now, somewhere within my spirit there is an unspoken yet powerful bond between us by which I am protected within this life despite all that might be expected to overcome me. I praise You for Your amazing love, Lord Jesus Christ; You have never let me go, and I will not let You go! AMEN

For myself

Pray for the discipline to manage your life well, and so avoid the problems of indiscipline in fitness, eating inappropriately, allowing yourself to become mentally slack and giving permission for the enemy to draw you away from what is true and of 'good report'.

For others

Pray earnestly for the leaders of the nations who have gathered and have made their pronouncements at the G8 summit. Pray that greater good will come from their meeting than we can currently see, for the benefit of all.

Meditation

My soul cries out to the true and living God:
Save me from all sin, and deliver me from evil;
Save me from all this means, now and forever.

Save me Lord God, for just like everyone else
I 'miss the mark' in all manner of things each day,
I cannot understand why sin and evil persist.

Save me from rejecting the right, without intending
Or rebelling against the truth You placed my heart:
For I feel powerless to stop, however much I want to.

Save me, Holy Spirit, from the oppressions of guilt,
Which hold my spirit down when I want so much to rise;

And break the stranglehold of Satan on my soul.

My soul cries out to the true and living God;
Save me from all sin, and deliver me from evil.
Secure my soul, remove my guilt, set me free to be;

For I submit to Your love, both now and evermore.

Bible Passage

Genesis 4:1-7

¹ Adam made love with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said,

'I have produced a man with the help of the LORD.'

² She also gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel became a shepherd, and Cain worked the land.

³ In due course Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground, ⁴ whilst Abel brought the fat portions of the first and best of his flock. And the LORD was most pleased with Abel's offering, ⁵ but He was not impressed with Cain and his offering. So Cain was furious and utterly downcast.

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain,

'Why are you so angry and upset? ⁷ If you do well, should you not take heart? And if you do not do well, sin is hanging around the doorway; its desire is for you, but you must conquer it.'

Review

The story of Cain and Abel is a well known tale of two brothers, the sons of Adam and Eve, who fall out with each other over their work and their acceptance by Almighty God. The story eventually ends in tragedy when in the passage which follows this, Cain, out of jealousy, kills Abel, his brother. It is a very ancient tale, and it can be understood at many levels; but within its place here in scripture coming immediately after the story of the Fall (Gen 3), it illustrates the power and extent of the sin that has now entered humanity. Eating an apple, as Eve and Adam had done, could hardly be described as a sin, except that this was something God expressly forbade, and the spiritual significance of this disobedience was immense.

Now, some people have observed quite correctly that at this point in Scripture, the Ten Commandments had not been given, and so the sin of murder did not, strictly, exist. However, although God may not have specifically forbidden the committing of murder at this point in the general history of humanity, it was certainly against the natural order of the good within creation which God was so pleased about (see Gen 1). The story of Cain and Abel graphically illustrates the depths of human sin and the potential for depravity found within human sin by the Fall. The story says to us - yes the Fall is this serious, and this is what it leads to ...

Today's reading relates the beginning of this story, and introduces the two characters, Eve's sons, Cain the eldest, and Abel the youngest. Frequently in scripture, names have

meanings; however, the two brothers have names with no immediately obvious meanings, indeed, no real meaning within the Hebrew language! There may be a play on words involved in Cain's name, because it is similar to the Hebrew word for '*produced*', which is referred to in Eve's declaration at his birth; '*I have produced a man with the help of the Lord*' (4:1). This outburst expresses joy in the aftermath of fear, after God's pronouncement on woman of difficulty in labour (3:16), but to know this does not help our understanding of the passage in general. What can help us far more is to remember that Genesis has a general theme throughout, in which the younger son is favoured over the older. For example, Isaac prefers his younger son Jacob to the elder son Esau (Gen 27), or see Jacob's special treatment of his young son Joseph over his jealous older brothers (Gen 37). Is Genesis leading us to a place where we might expect this inverted favouritism?

The whole of today's story is about God's favour shown towards Abel instead of the elder Cain, for reasons that are not immediately clear and which evidently create much distress. Yet if we think about this a little more, we may realise that there is within this story a reflection of the general mystery of God's grace. We never know why God chooses instead of Cain's offering, or later on in Genesis, he chooses Abraham and not Lot, or why you or I have been blessed with faith, where others have not. Our attempts at understanding the 'why's and wherefores' of this tend to end in as much failure as the efforts of scholars to try and work out why Abel was favoured over Cain!

Towards the end of the passage, however, there is just one hint at the possible reasons for the Lord's disapproval of Cain. The Lord speaks to Cain after his offering was not accepted, and reminds him that if he had offered his best, then he would have had nothing to worry about, favoured or not. If you look at verse 3 you will see there that Cain brought a sample of his produce, it does not say that what Cain brought was 'the best'. The implication here is that Cain had not really given his best at the first offering, and he knew it. If I am right, then this would be a good reason for God to say to Cain later on that '*sin is hanging around the doorway*' (4:7). These words of God are prophetic, as we will discover tomorrow.

Within the stories of Genesis are some remarkable literary features which can surprise us today because they are so unfamiliar to us. One of these features is the use of numbers, and here, the writer of this story has used the number seven as a basis for the story, even though the word itself is not used! In the whole story of Cain and Abel (split between today and tomorrow), Abel is mentioned seven times, and Cain is mentioned twice that, fourteen times! The number seven, of course, was regarded as a 'complete' number, and in this way, the writer of the story for Scripture is perhaps trying to say something more. Is he saying that although something may seem to be perfect, God is looking for something more; fourteen instead of the perfect seven?

Other examples of strange (to us) ways of constructing stories to make them 'complete' are found in the use of the Hebrew word '*eretz*' meaning 'earth' which is contained seven times within the second account of the Creation (from Genesis 2:4ff). In addition; the name of God (in its different forms) occurs 35 times in the first account of creation (Gen 1:1 – 2:4), and 35 times in the second account (Gen 2:4 – 4:26)! This gives a total of 70, and the last and seventieth use of the name of God is in Genesis 4:26, where Scripture says; '*at that time people began to invoke the Name of the Lord!*' This statement concludes the opening stories of Genesis before it continues with genealogies and the stories of the flood. It may be hard to try and work out the meaning of these features of the text and we should not try to find obscure and meaningless conclusions to such matters; but we cannot ignore some of these literary features.

Discipleship

Application

The nature of sin within

It becomes clear very quickly in the coming verses that Cain was not able to accept God's advice, and his sense of injustice prevented him from trusting God. This was the opportunity that evil was waiting for, and in tomorrow's reading we will hear of how Cain murders Abel as a direct consequence of the evil that has penetrated his heart. Proverbs 21:27 says '*the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination, how much more when brought with evil intent*', reflecting an early interpretation of the whole story of Cain and Abel.

Yet within the story of Cain and Abel there are plenty of other important scriptural themes. These are first the nature of sin which lies in wait for us to ignore God's word to us, second the discernment of God's ways which are frequently at odds with those of society and the culture in which we live, and third and most importantly, the nature of worship as an act of bringing ourselves and our gifts to God; a suitable and fitting thing for us to do to express thanks and worship to our Creator God.

Observations about worship

It is interesting that it is the activity of worship which is responsible for the division between Cain and Abel. In an age in which Christians have largely lost their 'theological' way, the most severe differences and arguments between God's people are about how, why, where and when worship is done; and some of the divisions are about as deep as it is possible to imagine. We have much to learn from the story of Cain and Abel.

Ideas for what to do

- Think about why God has blessed you. Has this come at someone else's expense, or their perceived expense? Is there anything you can do about this, or should you leave this alone?
- Pray for all those who find it hard to understand either their brother or their sister, and find that family relationships are very hard to sustain. Pray that they will be able to rest in God's love and place their family into His hands.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What different forms of work cause division between people today, and why?
2. What are the key differences between Abel's and Cain's offerings to God? Why do we think that what God did was unfair?
3. What issues in the life of the church are like sin that 'hangs around the door' and what can be done about this?

Final Prayer

Heavenly Lord, in your mercy, listen to my prayer. I pray your blessing on those I love, and on those who trouble me. I pray for your will to be done in my life, and in the lives of all for

whom I now pray. Lead me day by day to do Your will, and may I not come into conflict with others unnecessarily. Thank You, heavenly Lord; AMEN