

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Pray for the Lord's protection

Pray simply, asking the Lord to keep you safe in the midst of your conversations and social life today.

For myself

Jesus, Light of the world, enlighten my darkness ...
Dispel the gloom of hesitancy and doubt, of weariness and fear,
Chase away the gathering shadows of temptation and transgression,
Pour into my life the light of joy and confidence, of peace and hope,
Flood my heart with Your gift of knowledge and understanding,
Jesus, light of the world, lift the darkness so I see You!
AMEN

For others

Pray for the peace of the world, especially in those 'hotspots', which are catalysts for the peace of the world - Jerusalem being one of these, of course.

Meditation

The great Love of our God is stronger than:

The allegiance we feel to our closest friend;
The ancient foundations of a famous city;
The power of the body to heal itself;
The need of a man or woman to find love;
The structures of steel supporting great buildings;
The familial ties that bind parents to children.
The trust in the systems which undergird finance;
The spiritual bonds of a true and godly marriage;

The great Love of God is stronger than these,
For each finds its source in His Creative power.
Nothing we know would make sense without Love;
His Love, which we spell with a capital 'L'!

Bible Passage

Genesis 4:8-16

⁸ Cain spoke to his brother Abel. Then, when they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel, and killed him.

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain,

'Where is your brother Abel?'

He replied,

'I don't know; am I my brother's keeper?'

¹⁰ So the LORD said,

'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! ¹¹ And now you are cursed, alienated from the earth, which has consumed your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the soil, it will no longer give you of its best; you will be a restless wanderer on the earth.'

¹³ Cain said to the LORD,

'My punishment is greater than I can bear! ¹⁴ Today You have driven me away like the earth, and I shall be hidden from You and be a restless wanderer on the earth; and anyone who finds me may kill me.'

¹⁵ Then the LORD said to him,

'Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.'

And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶ Then Cain went out of the LORD's presence, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Review

As we read on further into the story of Cain and Abel, it becomes tragically clear that as sin follows sin, scripture describes further degrees of alienation from God. Yesterday we read about the growing discord between Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve, as they had to deal with what appeared to them to be favouritism on the part of God. They might have been the first people to say 'life isn't fair' but they were not the last! In our reading today, the alienation between the two brothers swiftly develops to the point where Cain's anger spills over and he kills Abel (4:8). The subsequent conversation between Cain and God (4:9f.) demonstrates the almost complete lack of spiritual understanding between God and Cain, who as Adam's only remaining son at this point in time, represents the future of humanity.

The original sin committed by the Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was the first act of disobedience against God, and it led to the alienation between people and God we call the 'Fall'. This sin led in turn to even more alienation, this time between Adam and Eve themselves. Firstly, they were embarrassed to see each other's 'nakedness' (3:10f.), but their sin divided them, and they blamed each other for the sin that had ruined life itself. After this barrier formed between Adam and Eve, alienation quickly followed between Adam and the ground he worked which was 'cursed' (Gen 3:17) and his work became hard and difficult (in days when agriculture was not just dependent on effort but also on the weather). Then, in our reading today, family relationships were torn apart by the murder of Abel by Cain (4:3-7).

This breakdown of his family was like the last straw for Cain, and although he was responsible for it, he was not able to understand that his actions had consequences. After the murder, He complained to God saying, *'my punishment is more than I can bear'* (4:13). Yet again, as He has done throughout the story, God responds to this arrogant self pity and refusal to accept responsibility with love and care. He provides the murderous Cain with personal protection because of his badly damaged soul (4:15,16)

The murder of Abel is also the first great injustice recorded by the Bible. It was a terribly selfish act, and in murdering his brother, Cain showed complete disregard for God as well as Abel, his brother. His casual remark when challenged; *'am I my brother's keeper?'* has gone down in history as the epitome of ignorance and irresponsibility. In saying this to God, Cain refused to accept personal responsibility for his own actions, and compounded his sin by the arrogance of one who thought he could *'get away with murder'*. Phrases like these with their roots in this story have certainly contributed to the history of language over the centuries!

Remarkably, as we have seen, God always responds to injustice within the world with a display of His own justice, and this is what happens here. He tells Cain the consequences of his crime, and faces him with the unpalatable truth (4:10-12); but Cain was incapable of showing anything more than a sad and sorry concern for his own fate having just killed his brother (4:13). The story tells us that God placed a mark on Cain (4:15), some kind of mysterious protection for him in response to his sense of vulnerability; it is a sign that no-one has ever managed to describe or explain. We are simply not given any information about it apart from what we can read here.

There have been many theories about the sign placed on Cain by God. Some think of it as a means of warding off others - but how would this work in a world not yet populated by others? There are no easy answers here, though when we face this question again in the coming chapters, I will give a considered answer to this 'problem' within Genesis of whether there are or were other people 'around' at the time of the story of Adam and Eve, enough for their sons to marry, for example (see later with Seth - Gen 4:25f.). Others have suggested that the 'mark of Cain' is the mark of God's image, a promise, if you like, of the work of saving grace God planned to do some day in the future for the people He has made. This makes sense to us who approach this story with an understanding of Christian faith, but there is no real evidence in the text to verify this. The mark could equally be a sign of God's ultimate disfavour, because Cain's own lineage became prone to destruction (4:24,25) and the future of humanity lay not in his lineage but that of a new child of Adam and Eve, that is, Seth (4:25,26).

As with the text of the first part of the story of Cain and Abel which we read yesterday, the Hebrew of these verses is at times very obscure. It is nevertheless important to try and uncover what 'the original' text may be. The mysteries of these early stories of Genesis are considerable, and yet they teach us so much about humanity. They are too important for us to leave and fail to use all means to search out the truths that God would teach us in His Word.

Discipleship

Application

The signs and patterns of alienation from God

The pattern of sin and alienation within this story does not make good reading. Perhaps it is a story which even ancient people struggled with as they passed it on by word of mouth

before it was written down. That could well explain why some of the words are odd, and there are some peculiar features such as Cain's fear of others.

Within the story, however, we can clearly discern the completion of a fourfold pattern of alienation caused by sin; alienation with God (1), between man and woman (2), with Creation as a whole (3), and finally, social alienation (4). It does not take too much observation to see that this is a fairly accurate description of the Godlessness of society in our world now. If it seems acute today, then this may simply be because we are aware of it in a world where information is so freely available; but God's purposes may well be for us to see this and face our responsibilities as disciples to mission a lost world.

The alternative love of God, which stands out against human sin

Yet this is a complex story, and there is much more for us to take hold of and pursue. God's Spirit can take us beyond the complexities of the text to 'hear the land crying out for justice when it is abused', for example, or to observe in Cain the callousness of sin as it consumes the life of the sinner long after the original 'event', or ponder over the mark of Cain planted on him by God as a possible sign of hope for the sinner. This text may well be at its best when it inspires us to pursue such issues beyond what we read here. Scripture always directs us further, for there is no end to what we can discover in God's Word

The way evil finds a foothold

The murder of Abel by Cain was a terrible blow to the whole process of Creation and the story of God's dealings with people. It is a representative story, whatever you believe lies behind scripture here, as is all of the story of Adam and Eve. Perhaps scripture illustrates the way in which evil, once given a foothold, and given the permission to enter and remain within our own 'world', will hang around until its temptations are accepted and it becomes fully fledged. We either submit to sin, or we must bring it out and let God deal with it through our confession. Cain could not do this, but through Jesus Christ, we can!

Ideas for what to do

- We may not have committed the sin of murder, but many of us have felt very angry at times and we need to be reminded that Jesus taught that anger lies at the root of murder. What feelings and situations bring out the worst in you? Pray and ask the Lord to help you find a consistent way of dealing with this.
- In what ways does God 'touch' our lives, or 'mark' us, so that we are protected? Are you conscious of God's protection in any ways, and does this help you? Discuss this with others if you can to try and tease out what this means to you.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What alienation exists between God and people today, and how and where do we observe this?
2. Does Cain deserve the punishment God gives him? Why does God not show Cain some degree of mercy and protection? Does he deserve this?
3. To what extent do you find people around in the world today like Cain? Does this scripture give us enough for us to picture him?

Final Prayer

There are so many people, heavenly Father, who live in this world and do not know You. Help us not to be judgemental, but anxious to show to all who we meet, the glories of our salvation and the happiness, love and hope of a life in Jesus Christ. Heavenly Father, please help us in this task. AMEN