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Genesis 4:1–12, ESV

4 Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD."² And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,⁴ and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.⁶ The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?⁷ If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it."

⁸ Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"¹⁰ And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.¹¹ And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.¹² When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

We are Cain and Abel.

There are a handful of classic tales from the Old Testament that we have all heard over and over. One of them is the story of two brothers, Cain and Abel. You might remember that after Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden of Eden, Eve gave birth to two children, first Cain, then Abel. Abel grows up to be a shepherd and Cain becomes a farmer. We're going to look at a core question: just

why did Cain kill his kid brother Abel? More importantly, though, what does this mean for us today? A lot of people over the centuries have seen in the Cain and Abel story the traditional conflict between nomads and settlers, between shepherders and farmers. Farmers stay on the land; they cultivate and protect the land; shepherders let their animals use the land up and then they are gone. Cain and Abel both offer God the produce of their efforts. God rejects Cain's offering, and very interestingly, no reason for this is given. It's true that Cain has "*brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground*" while Abel "*brought of the **firstborn** of his flock*", so maybe there is a hint there that Cain's offering was not as impressive. But surely, there is no strong statement that Cain didn't offer something worthy of God's honor. God responds to Cain's anger at this rejection with an ominous declaration: "*sin is crouching at the door*". But God tells Cain that he still has a chance to get in God's good favor. God says of that sin that Cain is prone to and awaits him: "*you must rule over it.*" But rather than taking his lumps and doing the right thing, Cain blows his last chance at being Godly and kills his brother Abel in anger. Then God says to Cain: "*Where is Abel your brother?*" God of course knows very well what has happened to Abel, but Cain responds with "*I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?*" That's a very famous line: Am I my brother's keeper? Here's the odd part. Remember that Cain is the older

brother. In this society and at this time, the older brother had both authority over and responsibility for the younger brother. Cain is indeed his kid brother's keeper in his culture. God replies to Cain with a terrifying line: *"The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."* God continues with the ultimate condemnation of the man who has killed his younger brother: *"Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."* Cain is no longer a farmer. He is a wanderer, exiled from the land. He has lost his family, his livelihood, his home. He lives outside of civilization. He is a rootless vagabond. He will live in a land that has no law, no morality, no connection to God. As a man, for the rest of his life, Cain will be a shadow of his former self.

When I was about eleven and my brother was eighteen, we shared a room in our parents' tiny house. Given our extreme age difference, we lived very different lives. I was still a little kid, riding my bike around town with my friends, stopping to buy a ten cent Orange Crush, going to G rated movies, enjoying a carefree life. My brother was becoming an adult. He was facing the Vietnam draft, but when he went in for his physical, his severe asthma disqualified him. He wasn't that much of a student and was making a decision to go to a junior college.

He owned a car, worked at a job, and was very much into music. He ended up studying jazz in college, and no, it's not the most marketable college degree. Did I mention that his name is Jeff? One day, he was off somewhere, and I did one of those things that little brothers love to do: I started messing with Jeff's stuff. I played some of his records, his precious records that he treated like they were blown glass. The tiniest scratch, and the record is ruined for the true connoisseur. And, of course, I put a nice, big, juicy scratch in one of his favorite records. I believe it was Roy Orbison's Pretty Lady. Now, you can image what happened a bit later when Jeff came home and found out that Buzzy had just ruined one of his most prized records: Cain wanted very much to kill Abel.

Getting back to the story of the real Cain and Abel, later in the story, Cain says to God, *"from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."* It would seem suitable that a man who kills his kid brother should himself be murdered, but God has mercy on Cain, and we are told that God *"put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him."*¹⁶ *Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden."* Perhaps this mark is some sort of a terrifying scar or warning tattoo, but whatever it is, Cain at least knows that no

one will dare kill him. Still, his will be a lonely, desolate life, while the younger brother Abel has left this life carrying God's blessing.

Does this mean that you shouldn't mess with your big brother's records, lest he do a Cain on you? Is this simply an allegory about the traditional strife between farmers and shepherders? I don't think so. You see, we are both Cain and Abel, all of us. Like Abel, we try to dedicate our lives to God, to live according to the teachings of Jesus, to be loving, forgiving, empathetic, to treat the lowest of people as if they were the greatest of people. But, also like Abel, we do not know when we will leave this life. We don't know if we will receive the blessing of God and then go on to live a long, successful life tilling the land or raising our sheep, or if we will, after gaining that blessing, suddenly disappear from the face of this planet. We struggle and we do not know what will happen. No matter how hard we fight to be Christ-like, we will suffer and die. We are also like Cain. We are subject to anger, to sinful impulses, to the desire to strike out at other people and at God. Even though we know that in the end, it is not at all a good thing to do, we sometimes do very evil things. In sum, as both Cain and Abel, we are caught up in the confusion, the complexity, the chaos of human life. Like Cain after his fall, we do not live in Eden. We live somewhere "east of Eden" for as long as we are in this life on this world in this society.

So, my brother. There I was, sitting on my bed, as innocently as could be, when my brother walks in, sees me playing his record, looks at what is on the turntable, and sees that it is scratched. Cain very much wants to kill little Abel. His eyes flashed in anger and he charged at me. He grabbed me by the feet as I tried to fly backward off my bed. He had me tightly. I was at his mercy. But you know what? Jeff was not Cain. Suddenly, the fire went out of his eyes, he let go of my feet and shook his head. Damn it, Buzzy, you ruined that record, he said to me. In truth, I was never afraid. I knew that my big brother would not hurt me. He has always been a very kind, gentle man. My father heard the ruckus, however, and came into our room. What's going on here, he asked. My brother explained that I had ruined his record. My father told me that I shouldn't have been messing with Jeff's stuff. Then, my father said, hey, I have to go run some errands, Jeff, so keep an eye on your brother, okay?

Damn, the kid brother destroys a Roy Orbison record, and what does Jeff have to do? Be his brother's keeper. We can only put our faith in God and know that in the very end, we will be perfectly fine, and in the meantime, our trials bring us closer to God by forcing us to reach out for God. And yes, we are often in the position of protecting someone we don't like, at least not in the moment.

There's a bit more to the story of Cain. He doesn't actually spend his entire life wandering the earth. He founds a city, probably in Mesopotamia. We are told: *"¹⁷ Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch."* After Cain founds the city of Enoch, there is eventually a descendent of Cain's son Enoch, and that man is named Lamech. Lamech goes on to be a very evil man. At the end of the tale of Cain and Abel, is this remark: *"²⁴ If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold."* So, Cain's anger, vengeance, and violence lives on in his descendants, and is in fact increased by over tenfold.

But God always shows grace. We are told, at the very end of the story of Cain and Abel that Adam and Eve have more children than just Cain and Abel. *²⁵ And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him."* *²⁶ To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD.* Adam and Eve give birth to a son named Seth, and Seth has a son named Enosh. With Enosh, the people again learn to live by the laws of God. The bond between God and God's people is regenerated. Enosh is in a sense a spiritual replacement for the murdered Abel. He restores the relationship that God has with those who have faith.

Now, as it turned out, my brother Jeff did not kill little Buzzy. And so, my parents did not have to have another child to go on and save the human race. But seriously, we should all see ourselves in the story of Cain and Abel. We are human. We are highly imperfect. We are tempted to sin in vicious ways. We also know just what God wants from us and we know the rewards of listening to God. We are also left with one, clear truth: that we cannot control the future, and that we must therefore put all of our faith, our trust, and our love in God. The bottom line is that God will absolutely never abandon us; God will always find a way to help us regenerate our damaged souls, and God will always bring us back into God's graces. Please pray with me.

God, we are Cain and we are Abel. We live in times that make us think that we are simply wandering east of Eden. We often feel alone and abandoned. We feel that we have failed. We feel that no matter what we do, life crushes us beneath its monstrous feet. Please never let us forget that you are with us. Let us always keep in mind that all of us are descendants of that third child of Adam and Eve, Seth, and that we are destined to live according to that overriding principle taught to us by your son, Jesus the Christ, that greatest of all commandments: We must love our neighbor as ourself. If we do that, we know that we will be fine. Amen.