Cain and Abel: Sin at the Door

Bible Stories Anthology — Genesis 4

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

The First Brothers

The first child ever born grew up to kill the second.

It happened just outside the garden, within a single generation of the Fall. It began with worship: two brothers brought offerings to God. It ended in a field, with blood soaking into the ground and a question from God that still echoes today: **"Where is Abel thy brother?"**

Between the altar and the field stands one of the most important warnings in all of scripture. God Himself came to Cain before he did anything. He told Cain plainly that sin was crouching at his door like an animal waiting to spring, and that he could master it. Cain would not listen.

This short chapter holds the first worship, the first murder, the first lie told to God's face, the first city, the first music, the first metalwork, and the first cry for revenge. It also holds the first family line that called on the name of the LORD — the line through which the promised Seed would come. The New Testament comes back to these two brothers again and again. One of them, the Bible says, **"being dead yet speaketh."**

The Setting

When. After the Fall and the closing of the garden (Genesis 3). Adam and Eve are living east of Eden, working ground that now fights back. Seth was born when Adam was 130 (Genesis 5:3), and Genesis 4:25 presents him as God's replacement for Abel, so Abel was murdered within the first 130 years of human history.

Where. Outside the garden, **"at the east of the garden of Eden"** (Genesis 3:24), where the cherubim guarded the way of the tree of life.

The administration. The Garden administration ended with the Fall. The next, often called the **Patriarchal** administration, opened with God's own voice in Genesis 3:14-19. In it God dealt with men mainly through the heads of families and through their consciences, not yet through a written law. God's words to Cain in this story — *if thou doest well, … if thou doest not well* — speak to exactly that: conscience.

What they knew. Genesis 3 had ended with two things Adam's family would never forget. First, a promise: the Seed of the woman would one day bruise the serpent's head (3:15). Second, a covering: **"Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them"** (3:21). An animal had died so that their shame could be covered. As this series understands it, that was their first lesson in approaching God — not with their own work, but through a life given in their place.

The Story, Told Faithfully

Gotten, and Breath

> **Genesis 4:1** *And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD.*
>
> **Genesis 4:2** *And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.*

"Adam knew Eve his wife." "Knew" is a Hebrew **idiom** for the intimacy of marriage.

"I have gotten a man from the LORD." The name Cain sounds like the Hebrew *qanah*, "to get" or "acquire." Eve's words are unusual in Hebrew. They can be read literally *I have gotten a man — the LORD*, or *a man with the LORD's help*. As this series understands it, Eve may well have hoped that this first son was the promised Seed of Genesis 3:15. If so, she was wrong. The first son born into the world became the first murderer.

"And she again bare his brother Abel." There is no mention of Adam "knowing" Eve a second time, and some Bible students have suggested Cain and Abel were twins. The text does not say. Abel's name is the Hebrew *hevel*, "breath" or "vapour" — the same word translated "vanity" in **"vanity of vanities"** (Ecclesiastes 1:2). No speech of Eve's is recorded at his birth, and his life was as brief as a breath.

"Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground." Both were honourable work. Adam himself had been told to till the ground (Genesis 3:23). Their jobs were not the problem. What each brought to God was.

Two Offerings

> **Genesis 4:3** *And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD.*
>
> **Genesis 4:4** *And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering:*
>
> **Genesis 4:5** *But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.*

"In process of time." Literally *at the end of days* — as this series understands it, an appointed time, perhaps a set season for bringing offerings.

"Cain brought of the fruit of the ground." Scripture says only "of the fruit." Of Abel's offering it says more: **"the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof"** — the first and the best.

"The LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect." Notice the order: first the man, then the offering. God looked at the heart before He looked at the gift. **"The LORD looketh on the heart"** (1 Samuel 16:7).

How did they know God had accepted one and not the other? The text does not say. An old tradition holds that fire fell from heaven on Abel's offering, as it later did on the altar in Leviticus 9:24 and on Mount Carmel. That is tradition, not scripture.

Why was Abel's offering accepted? The New Testament answers directly:

> **Hebrews 11:4** *By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.*

"By faith." And **"faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"** (Romans 10:17). Abel could not have offered by faith unless God had first said something for him to believe. As this series understands it, God had shown Adam's family how to approach Him — by the blood of an innocent substitute, as He had shown with the coats of skins. Abel believed what God said and did it. Cain came his own way, with the work of his own hands.

"A more excellent sacrifice." The Greek word *thysia*, sacrifice, is used of Abel's offering. Abel's offering pointed forward to the Lamb of God. Cain's pointed only to Cain.

"Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell." Cain did not ask God what was wrong. He got angry. His face fell — the Hebrew picture is of a face dropped in sullen resentment.

Sin Lieth at the Door

> **Genesis 4:6** *And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?*
>
> **Genesis 4:7** *If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.*

"Why art thou wroth?" Before Cain did anything, God came to him. As He had asked Adam, **"Where art thou?"** (Genesis 3:9), God asked Cain questions — not because He did not know the answers, but to help Cain see his own heart. God was not looking for a reason to punish Cain. He was trying to save him.

"If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?" The door was open. Cain could still come God's way and be accepted. The word "accepted" is literally *lifted up* — the same idea as a face lifted up, the opposite of Cain's fallen face.

"Sin lieth at the door." The Hebrew word translated "lieth" is *robets*, crouching, the word used of an animal lying in wait. Sin is pictured as a wild beast crouched at the entrance to Cain's life, ready to pounce. This is the figure of speech called **personification** — speaking of a thing as if it were a living creature. (The Hebrew word for "sin," *chatta'ah*, can also mean "sin offering," and some have read the

verse as *a sin offering lies at the door* — the remedy close at hand. The plain reading, supported by what follows, is sin as the crouching beast.)

"And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him." These are almost exactly the words of Genesis 3:16 — desire and rule. Sin wanted to have Cain. But God told Cain he could master it. Sin is strong, but it is not stronger than a man who listens to God.

In the Field

> **Genesis 4:8** *And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.*

"Cain talked with Abel his brother." The Hebrew says literally *Cain said to Abel his brother*, but then gives no words. Some ancient versions — the Greek Septuagint and the Samaritan text — supply them: *Let us go into the field*. Whatever was said, it led Abel out to a lonely place.

"Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him." Twice in one verse — "his brother." The first death of a human being in the Bible was not old age or sickness. It was murder, and the murderer was a brother.

The New Testament names what was behind it:

> **1 John 3:11** *For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.*
>
> **1 John 3:12** *Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous.*

"Of that wicked one." Cain's act was born of the adversary, who, Jesus said, **"was a murderer from the beginning"** (John 8:44). **"Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous."** Abel's righteousness showed up Cain's evil. Cain hated what he saw, and killed the one who made him see it. John adds: **"Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer"** (1 John 3:15). Jesus said the same thing — anger against a brother is the root that murder grows from (Matthew 5:21-22).

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

> **Genesis 4:9** *And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?*
>
> **Genesis 4:10** *And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.*

"Where is Abel thy brother?" Again, a question — one more chance to confess.

"I know not." The first recorded lie in the Bible spoken by a man, told to God's face.

"Am I my brother's keeper?" The word "keeper" is *shomer*, from *shamar*, the very word used when Adam was put in the garden **"to dress it and to keep it"** (Genesis 2:15). Cain meant it as an insolent brush-off. The answer, the whole of scripture says, is yes. We are meant to keep — to guard and care for — one another.

"The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground." In Hebrew "blood" is plural: *bloods*. Jewish teachers noted that Cain destroyed not only Abel but all who would have come from him. Blood

that cannot speak is given a voice. This figure is **prosopopoeia** — giving a voice to something that has none. Abel's life was over, but God had not forgotten him. The Law would later say that shed blood defiles the land and cries for justice (Numbers 35:33). And after the Flood, God would give the reason murder is so grave: **"for in the image of God made he man"** (Genesis 9:6).

"Being dead yet speaketh." Hebrews 11:4 says Abel still speaks — through his faith, recorded for our learning. And Hebrews 12:24 sets his blood beside Another's:

> **Hebrews 12:24** *And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.*

Abel's blood cried out for justice. The blood of Jesus Christ speaks better things — forgiveness, peace, and access to God.

A Fugitive and a Vagabond

> **Genesis 4:11** *And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;*
>
> **Genesis 4:12** *When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.*
>
> **Genesis 4:13** *And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.*
>
> **Genesis 4:14** *Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.*
>
> **Genesis 4:15** *And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.*

"Now art thou cursed from the earth." In Genesis 3, God cursed the serpent and the ground, but not Adam or Eve. Cain is the first human being God pronounces cursed. The ground that had drunk his brother's blood would no longer give him its strength.

"A fugitive and a vagabond." In Hebrew *na va-nad* — two rhyming words, wandering and straying. Cain would never be at rest.

"My punishment is greater than I can bear." The word *avon* can mean either iniquity or its punishment; the King James margin gives *Mine iniquity is greater than that it may be forgiven*. Either way, Cain spoke only of his own suffering. There is no sorrow here for his brother, and no confession to God. He feared for himself: **"every one that findeth me shall slay me."** By then Adam and Eve had other sons and daughters (Genesis 5:4); Cain feared his own relatives would avenge Abel.

"The LORD set a mark upon Cain." Even the murderer received mercy. God protected Cain's life. Scripture does not say what the mark was. There is no basis whatsoever for the old, harmful teaching that it was dark skin, or that any race carries a so-called curse of Cain. That idea is found nowhere in the Bible. Cain's line, in any case, perished in the Flood.

The Land of Nod

> **Genesis 4:16** *And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.*

> **Genesis 4:17** *And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch.*

"Cain went out from the presence of the LORD." This is the saddest sentence in the story. Cain did not just leave a place. He turned his back on God.

"The land of Nod." *Nod* means "wandering" — the same root as *nad*, "vagabond," in verse 12. Cain settled in the Land of Wandering. There is a play on words here, a **paronomasia**.

"Cain knew his wife." A question often asked is: where did Cain get a wife? Scripture has already told us Adam **"begat sons and daughters"** (Genesis 5:4). Cain married a sister, or perhaps a niece. In the first generations, before centuries of accumulated genetic damage, such marriages carried none of the risks they would carry later; God did not forbid marriage to close relatives until the Law of Moses (Leviticus 18). (The genetic point is creation-science reasoning, not a statement of scripture.)

"He builded a city." The man God had sentenced to wander built a city and named it after his son — a man trying to put down roots his own way, on his own terms, apart from God.

The Line of Cain

> **Genesis 4:18** *And unto Enoch was born Irad: and Irad begat Mehujael: and Mehujael begat Methusael: and Methusael begat Lamech.*
>
> **Genesis 4:19** *And Lamech took unto him two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah.*
>
> **Genesis 4:20** *And Adah bare Jabal: he was the father of such as dwell in tents, and of such as have cattle.*
>
> **Genesis 4:21** *And his brother's name was Jubal: he was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ.*
>
> **Genesis 4:22** *And Zillah, she also bare Tubal-cain, an instructer of every artificer in brass and iron: and the sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.*
>
> **Genesis 4:23** *And Lamech said unto his wives, Adah and Zillah, Hear my voice; ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech: for I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt.*
>
> **Genesis 4:24** *If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold.*

In a few verses, Cain's line produced much of what we call civilisation:

- **Jabal**, **"the father of such as dwell in tents, and of such as have cattle"** — organised herding.
- **Jubal**, **"the father of all such as handle the harp and organ"** — music, string and pipe.
- **Tubal-cain**, **"an instructer of every artificer in brass and iron"** — metalwork, taught as a trade.

These are gifts, and good in themselves. But the line that produced them was the line that went out from the presence of the LORD. Skill and culture grew; godliness did not.

"Lamech took unto him two wives." The first recorded case of more than one wife — a clear departure from God's pattern of one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24).

"I have slain a man to my wounding." Lamech's boast to his wives is the first poem in the Bible after Adam's words over Eve, and it is a song of violence. A young man hurt him, so he killed him. Then he

twisted God's own mercy to Cain into a boast: **"If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold."**

Compare the Lord Jesus Christ. When Peter asked whether he should forgive his brother seven times, Jesus answered, **"I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven"** (Matthew 18:22). Lamech multiplied vengeance. Jesus multiplied forgiveness.

Another Seed

> **Genesis 4:25** *And Adam knew his wife again; and she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew.*
>
> **Genesis 4:26** *And to Seth, to him also there was born a son; and he called his name Enos: then began men to call upon the name of the LORD.*

"God… hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel." Seth's name means "appointed" or "set." Eve's hope had not died with Abel. She spoke of a **seed** — the very word of Genesis 3:15. The line of the promise continued through Seth. Luke's genealogy of Jesus runs **"the son of Seth, which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God"** (Luke 3:38).

"Then began men to call upon the name of the LORD." While Cain's line built cities and forged metal and boasted of revenge, Seth's line began to call on the name of the LORD. (The King James margin offers *to call themselves by the name of the LORD* — to be known as the LORD's people.) Two lines now run side by side through the rest of Genesis: the line that went out from the presence of the LORD, and the line that called upon His name. As this series understands it, when Genesis 6 speaks of "the sons of God" and "the daughters of men," it is these two lines that are meant.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The Lamb. Abel brought a firstling of the flock, and by faith. His offering looked forward to **"the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world"** (John 1:29).

The righteous one slain by his brother. Abel was hated and killed by his own brother because his works were righteous. Jesus called him **"righteous Abel"** (Matthew 23:35) and counted him first among the prophets whose blood was shed (Luke 11:50-51). Jesus Himself was handed over by His own people **"for envy"** (Matthew 27:18).

Better blood. Abel's blood cried from the ground for justice. Christ's blood speaks better things (Hebrews 12:24). He died, was raised, and ascended to God's right hand, the mediator of a new covenant.

Another seed. When it looked as though the promise had died with Abel, God appointed another seed. The line of Seth leads to the Christ.

To the Grace Administration

Accepted — but not by our own works. Cain's question lives on in every heart: *how can I be accepted by God?* In the grace administration the answer is complete: **"he hath made us accepted in the beloved"**

(Ephesians 1:6). Jude warns of those who **"have gone in the way of Cain"** (Jude 11) — coming to God on their own terms, with their own works, and resenting those who don't.

Sin shall not have dominion. God told Cain, *thou shalt rule over him*. To believers today He says even more: **"sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace"** (Romans 6:14). **"Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh"** (Galatians 5:16).

Love one another. "For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain" (1 John 3:11-12). We are our brother's keeper.

To the Topic of Anger and Envy

- **Anger starts small.** A fallen face came before a raised hand.
- **God warns before sin acts.** Listen to Him when He asks, *Why?*
- **Sin crouches at the door.** It wants you — but you can rule over it.
- **Envy of another's blessing is deadly.** Cain hated Abel for being right.
- **Confession is always offered.** "Where is Abel thy brother?" was a door, not a trap.
- **Self-pity is not repentance.** Cain mourned his punishment, not his sin.

The Main Takeaway

Abel came to God by faith, God's way, and was accepted; Cain came his own way, refused God's warning that sin was crouching at his door, and killed his brother — yet God still showed Cain mercy, and when it looked as though the promise had died with Abel, God appointed another seed to carry it on toward the Messiah.

- **God looks at the heart before the gift.**
- **Faith is doing what God said** — Abel's offering was "by faith."
- **God warns before sin strikes,** and tells us we can master it.
- **We are our brother's keeper.**
- **Hatred is the root of murder.**
- **God's promise cannot be killed.**

For Our Learning — The People

- **Adam and Eve.** The first parents, living east of Eden after the Fall.
- **Cain.** The firstborn, a tiller of the ground; the first murderer; went out from the presence of the LORD and built the first city.
- **Abel.** The second son, a keeper of sheep; offered by faith and was accepted; the first man to die; called "righteous" by Jesus.
- **The LORD.** Who accepted Abel, warned Cain, questioned him, judged him and yet protected him.
- **Cain's wife.** Unnamed; a daughter of Adam and Eve.
- **Enoch son of Cain.** Not the Enoch who walked with God (Genesis 5); Cain named his city after him.
- **Lamech.** Sixth from Adam in Cain's line; the first to take two wives; boasted of killing a man.

- **Adah and Zillah.** Lamech's wives.
- **Jabal, Jubal and Tubal-cain.** Lamech's sons, fathers of herding, music and metalwork.
- **Naamah.** Tubal-cain's sister.
- **Seth.** The son "appointed" in Abel's place; ancestor of Noah, Abraham and Christ.
- **Enos.** Seth's son; in his days men began to call upon the name of the LORD.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Firstlings and the fat.** The firstborn of the flock and the fat portions were counted the best, and were later given to God under the Law.
- **Shepherds and farmers.** The two great ways of living in the ancient East, often in tension.
- **The avenger of blood.** In the East, a murdered man's nearest kinsman was expected to avenge him; hence Cain's fear.
- **A protective mark.** A sign that a man was under a greater one's protection.
- **Naming cities after sons.** A way to make one's name live on.
- **Boasting songs.** Eastern warriors sang of their exploits to their households; Lamech's song is the oldest recorded.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Idiom** — "Adam knew Eve" (4:1): the intimacy of marriage. "His countenance fell" (4:5): sullen anger.
- **Personification** — speaking of a thing as a living creature. "Sin lieth at the door" (4:7): sin as a crouching beast.
- **Prosopopoeia** — giving a voice to what has none. "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground" (4:10).
- **Erotesis** — questions asked not for information but for effect. "Why art thou wroth?" "Where is Abel thy brother?" "What hast thou done?" (4:6, 9, 10).
- **Paronomasia** — word plays. Cain / *qanah*, "gotten" (4:1); *nad*, vagabond, and the land of *Nod* (4:12, 16).
- **Repetition** — "brother" seven times in 4:2-11: Cain never escapes whose blood he shed.

What the Bible Actually Says

- **Both brothers brought offerings;** God accepted Abel's and not Cain's.
- **Abel offered "by faith"** (Hebrews 11:4).
- **God warned Cain before the murder** and told him he could rule over sin.
- **Cain lied to God.**
- **Cain was cursed from the earth,** the first person God pronounced cursed.

- **God protected Cain** with a mark; scripture never says what it was, and it has nothing to do with race.
- **Cain's wife was a daughter of Adam and Eve.**
- **Cain built the first city;** his line began herding, music and metalwork.
- **Lamech was the first to take two wives.**
- **Seth was appointed "another seed instead of Abel."**
- **Jesus called him "righteous Abel."**

God's Will and Intent

- **God wants to accept us** — He told Cain so.
- **God warns before harm is done** — and gives us power to master sin.
- **God invites confession** with His questions.
- **God values every human life,** made in His image.
- **God shows mercy even in judgment.**
- **God's promise of the Seed will be kept,** whatever men do.
- **God wants brothers to love one another.**