

1. We cannot get away with it

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[0 : 00] We're going to be looking at chapters 4 and 5, perhaps going into chapter 6. The fall has taken place. Adam and Eve have rebelled against God.

They've been driven out of Eden. This is the story of what happens next. Chapter 4, verse 1. Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.

And again she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions.

And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry?

Why is your face fallen? 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 for you, but you must rule over it.

[1 : 15] Cain spoke to Abel, his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, Where is Abel, your brother?

He said, I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper? And the Lord said, What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground, and now you are cursed from the ground which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

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 said to the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground and from your face. I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.

Then the Lord said to him, Not so. If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him.

[2 : 27] Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. Amen. This is the word of God.

May he bless it to us. Amen. Amen. So, according to the Bible, the first baby to be born into the world was a murderer.

And the second baby to be born was his victim. And so the first thing we notice is the remorseless spread of sin. In Genesis 4 and 5, we see it in individuals.

We see it in communities. We see the whole culture, the whole world going to be affected. And that's so relevant to us. Because as we look at those early chapters of Genesis, we're going to be looking at our own day.

We're going to be looking not only at our own day, but about what God says about it. Because you see, it's more than just realistic. If we simply say these chapters are realistic, they are true to life, then it would be like looking at old photographs, wouldn't it?

[3 : 36] It's a great passion for old photographs today. If you go to any of the bookshops, you'll find masses of albums of photographs. Bath Street in 1899, Ardrossham Beach in 1902, and that sort of thing.

They're very interesting. I have a great love of looking at these myself. But the Bible is doing a bit more than that. The Bible is giving us the reason for the way things are.

It's not just saying this is the way things were and this is the way things are. It's giving us the reason. But it's not only giving us the reason, it's giving us the remedy. And these really are the two things we're going to look at.

The reason and the remedy. So first of all, we're going to look at the blatant arrogance of sin. That's what this incident shows us first of all. See, there's nothing humble about sin.

Sin never talks the language of responsibility. It only ever talks the language of rights. Sin never looks to serve, but only to dominate.

[4 : 42] Sin never looks to build up, but only to tear down. Sin never looks beyond me. It simply looks inward. Sin never looks to be. Sin never looks to be.

And here we have what Claudius in Hamlet calls the primal eldest curse. A brother's murder. This is the first example of the blatant arrogance of sin.

See, at first sight it seemed like a new start, didn't it? Adam and Eve have been driven east of Eden. But they may be getting another chance. Life east of Eden might be quite comfortable.

Two boys, new hopes. These hopes were to be cruelly dashed. And we see here a dysfunctional family, don't we? We know all about dysfunctional families nowadays.

A friend of mine always says that all families are dysfunctional without the grace of God. And that's true. We mustn't idolize families in order to make them seem as if the kingdom of God has come on earth.

[5 : 46] Although a good family is one of the greatest blessings that God gives us. But it is a blessing of God. It's not a natural right. Now, this is a typical Old Testament narrative.

It doesn't waste its words. It doesn't give us much background. There's all kinds of hints of this dysfunctional family. Clearly, you don't go from harmonious living, the two brothers enjoying a good relationship, and then suddenly, out of the blue, one decides to murder the other.

Clearly, behind all this is tension, jealousy, and probably the failure of their father. Just as Adam had failed back in chapter 3 to overrule his wife, so here he has obviously failed to be a model to his sons.

Of course, isn't that a great problem nowadays? This is the problem of so many young men who go off the rails. They don't have good male role models. That's something that so many people comment on nowadays.

And those who are fathers, particularly those who are fathers who have sons, need to pray to God to be a good role model for these boys as they grow up. So here, there is no restraining influence.

[7 : 01] So that's the first thing in the blatant arrogance of sin, the dysfunctional family. And then there is the simmering jealousy as well. Verse 3, In course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering, and Abel also brought an offering.

Now, in course of time is not just a narrative marker of how, you know, sometime after they had grown up. It's more than a sense of time passing.

There's a sense that time has been building up to this incident, which is going to reveal the true person that Cain is. And that's why I think it says in the course of time.

What Cain and Abel were, in essence, is embodied in these sacrifices they bring to the Lord. Why was one accepted and the other wasn't?

The Lord had regard for Abel, verse 4, and his offering. For Cain and his offering, he had no regard. Now, it doesn't mean, as some people say, that the Lord preferred the flock to the fruit of the ground, because Leviticus makes it clear that grain offerings are perfectly acceptable.

[8 : 15] And after all, Moses is writing this story to people who knew about the offerings in Leviticus, who knew that offerings of the fruit of the ground were perfectly acceptable. There's something different here.

And we have to go to the New Testament, to Hebrews 11, to find out the reason. By faith, says Hebrews 11, verse 4, Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, because it pointed to the one true sacrifice of the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world.

That raises another question, doesn't it? How would Abel know this? And it's very clear, although it's not said, that God must have revealed his will. Because if Cain hadn't known what God's will was, then he could not be criticized for disobeying it.

If Abel had not known what God's will was, he could scarcely have known how to obey it. So you see what's happening here. Cain is placing what he thinks is right above what God says is right.

And isn't that where so many people are today? That's what lay behind that dreadful decision at the General Assembly at the weekend, to say that we know better than God.

[9 : 35] God has said this is sinful, but we know better. We have to keep up with the times. We have to keep up with society. And of course, when the Church does that, it doesn't even manage to do this.

I was reading the Scotsman coming in the train this morning, and Magnus Linklater, who has written continuously in the last few weeks on this subject, says the Church lacks the courage of its convictions.

It's tried to be liberal. All it's ended up being is looking indecisive. See, that's what happens when the Church tries to imitate the world. It doesn't impress the world. Because people say, well, why bother about the Church at all, if it's simply a pale echo of the world?

So you see, Cain is the patron saint of religion, of the gospel of good works. What does religion say? I'm really doing God a favour.

Look, I brought him a present. First fruits of the ground. I've given a donation to the Church. I want to have a Church wedding because it's nicer.

[10 : 35] That's religion. And it's dead, dead, dead. No life ever comes from the religion of good works. Religion says, I do good, therefore God accepts me.

The gospel of the grace of God says, God accepts me, therefore I do good. And I come to him in forgiveness. But even here in verse 6, God is merciful. The Lord said, why are you angry?

If you do well, verse 7. Now if you do well doesn't mean if you do good works. It means if you obey what I've revealed to you, then I will accept you.

Sin is crouching at the door. Now sin here is personified. And behind sin, of course, lurks another S word. The serpent is crouching at your door.

But he can be resisted. In other words, sin is never inevitable. We don't have to sin. We can resist it. And we need to resist it. So you see how, you see the blatant arrogance of sin.

[11 : 40] The dysfunctional family. The jealousy. And then we have violent murder. How do we know it's violent murder? Well look at verse 10. The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.

This was a crime of passion and a crime of violence. But surely the murder was only the end product of the arrogance and the jealousy.

As I say, you don't suddenly, in the middle of a friendly conversation with your brother or anybody else, snatch up a weapon and murder them. The whole indication is, verse 8, Cain spoke to Abel his brother when they were in the field.

Well, they said, let's go out to the countryside and have a chat with each other. And we haven't had a chat for a long time. And then there is this violent, aggressive murder. The end product of arrogance.

We know better than God. And that itself becomes arrogant defiance. Verse 9. The Lord said to Cain, where is Abel, your brother? Adam, where are you?

[12 : 44] Not that God didn't know where Abel was. But Cain had to be forced to realize. But you see, sin has increased here.

Adam tried to be evasive. Cain tries to brazen it out. And we're going to see next week it becomes ever more arrogant as it continues. Cain tells a blatant lie, followed by an impertinent witticism.

That's how Cain tries to get it out. I don't know. There's the blatant lie and then the impertinent witticism. Am I my brother's keeper? And God confronts the guilty man. The whole world rises up to condemn him, as it were.

The voice of your brother's blood. I don't know if anyone reads Edgar Allan Poe nowadays. But if you have, you may remember the story, the tell-tale heart. Where a man kills his wife and hides her body behind a panel in the sitting room.

And as time goes on, gradually he imagines her heart is beating. Even though it can't be, of course. But in his ears, it's beating, beating, beating until he can stand it no longer.

[13 : 51] And confesses his sin. That's what's happening here. And then we have stern judgment. Sin behaves arrogant. At least the stern judgment.

And you see the judgment is on the man himself here. In chapter 3, the ground was cursed. Here the man himself is cursed. Verse 11.

Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. Cain is going to have no home, no roots, no settled resting place.

So as we'll see next week, he's going to try to create all these things without any success. That's what Augustine, great church father, says. Lord, you have made us for yourself.

And our hearts can find no rest until they find it in you. And here we have a picture of a hopeless world. Look at verse 16.

[14 : 50] Cain went away from the presence of the Lord. In a very real sense, it's impossible to go away from the presence of the Lord. Cain is going not to some children's mythical land, the land of Nod.

In Hebrew, the word Nod means wandering. Cain is literally going nowhere. And we try to go away from God. Where do we go?

We go nowhere. This reminds us of the expulsion from Eden. Once again, going away from God.

Going on a journey that's going to take him to hell and to judgment. A land of wandering. A land of darkness. East of Eden.

So, let's say, first thing, the blatant arrogance of sin. But secondly, I want to say something about the patient mercy of God. Because both aspects are in the gospel.

[15 : 48] Until we recognize we are sinful. And that our sin makes us arrogant. Our sin makes us conceited. Then we're never going to see the patient mercy of God. Look back at the beginning at verse 1 and 2.

Now Adam knew if his wife she conceived and bore Cain, saying, I've gotten a man with the help of the Lord. And again she bore his brother Abel. Back at the beginning, the Lord had blessed humanity and said, This blessing is particularly going to be expressed as you produce children.

Humanity in the image of God is to produce other images of God who are going to populate the whole world. And you'll notice after the fall, that still remains God's purpose. It's still...

God has said that childbearing will be with pain, with suffering. But he didn't actually condemn Eve to barrenness. Otherwise the story would have ended.

So the patient mercy of God. Now this first verse can be translated, I have gained a man, the Lord. Did Eve imagine that the promised serpent crusher, the promised deliverer, had already come?

[17 : 00] But sin is far too deeply rooted for that. The time is going to be unthinkable long. The promised serpent crusher, the descendant of the woman, will come. But it's not going to be the descendant of this woman.

It's going to be the descendant of another woman sent you. We have no idea how long later. And God works, not in our time, but in his own.

You've got to remember this. When we become depressed by the arrogance and the evil of the world, that God is working his purpose out. We may not see it. We may not see it in our lifetimes.

But God is working his purpose out. And God is committed to that purpose. The second example of the patient mercy of God is the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice.

Verse 4, The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering. Now the reason God accepted Abel's sacrifice was because it pointed to the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world.

[17 : 59] Now think about that for a moment. The Lamb of God died. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, as the Apostles' Creed said. Round about AD 30, on the day we call Good Friday, in the city of Jerusalem, the Son of God, who loved us, gave himself for us.

Specific time and a specific place. And yet an action which had impact throughout all times and places, and indeed in eternity. Think about it. If the death of Christ can save us who come thousands of years after it, surely it can also save those who lived thousands of years before it.

Those who saw, according to the light that was given to them, the only way they could approach the presence of a holy and defended God was through a sacrifice. The only way they could stand in his presence was by offering the kind of sacrifice that he had prescribed.

See, in the Old Testament, salvation is by faith. Read Hebrews 11. By faith, Abel. By faith, Enoch. We'll look at Enoch in a few weeks' time. By faith, Noah. We may get to him.

We may not. But they all lived by faith. They all died by faith. So, gospel grace is the answer to sin's arrogance.

[19 : 17] The answer to sin's arrogance is not for us to do a little bit better. The answer to sin's arrogance is gospel grace. And the final point is God's common, what we might call God's common grace.

Now, the common grace of God is not saving grace, but it's the kind of grace that gives us food and shelter in our daily lives. Jesus talked about this, the rain falls on the just and the unjust and so on.

And God still protects Cain, even in his rebellious and arrogant state. God is giving Cain, in other words, opportunities to repent.

And because Cain failed to repent, we know that from the New Testament, then his sin is all the more severe. And his sin is all the more severe because unlike Eve, he was not tempted.

This simply came out of his own aggressive and self-centered nature. So you see, hope for a hopeless world. The world is hopeless.

[20 : 19] Why is the world hopeless? Because of the arrogance of human sin, giving in to the tempter, giving in to the serpent, giving in to our own evil impulses.

What's the answer to that great grace? Wesley sang, boundless grace with you is found, grace to cover all my sin. That's what we'll be looking at as we go through it today.

And just one final word. If you have never experienced this grace of God, if you still believe that you can make it on your own, reflect on this story.

Because only the grace of God can transform us and make us into his children. And he's so willing to do that. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord our Father, we praise you for your grace. We don't deserve it. And yet, in your mercy and in your love, you have provided a way back to yourself from the dark paths of sin.

[21 : 22] And we pray that each one of us, as we go from this place, may go rejoicing in that great grace and resisting that sin which oppresses us.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.