

The Greatest Story Ever Told

A Back-to-Basics Catechesis

Cain and Abel

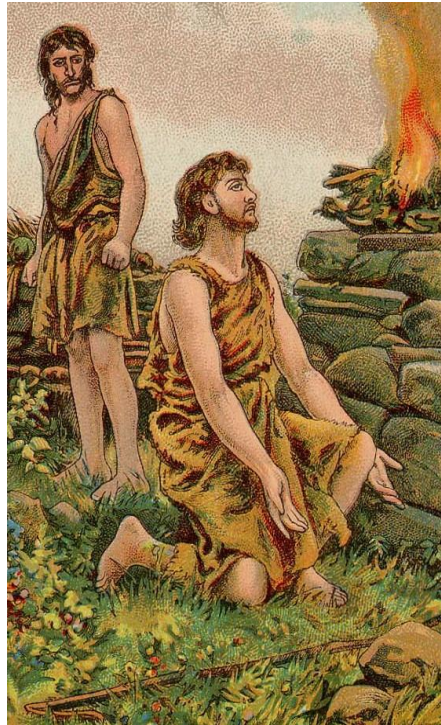
In the last flyer we saw how the beauty of creation was marred by the Sin of Adam and Eve. Not only was creation harmed, but so were Adam and Eve wounded in their very nature. They had been immortal, and their superior intellects had authority over their passions and emotions. But now, suffering, and ultimately death, have come to them. Passions and emotions like anger, love, sexual drives, hunger, fear and so forth now tend to dominate them and their descendants. It is hard for them to resist these drives with their minds and wills weakened. The strong inclination to sin we inherit is called by the Church, “concupiscence” and all of us know it well. For example, we know many things that are harmful for us, and we still want them, in abundance. We also know of things that are good for us and we don’t want them all that much. Something is desperately wrong with us and the Church teaches that this “concupiscence” is a lingering effect of Original Sin. It is only with effort and time that we gradually overcome these tendencies.

This weakened condition is illustrated very well in the sad story of Cain and Abel. It focuses on two deep drives of sin in us: envy and anger. Let’s read the story in full and learn some of its lessons.

Cain and Abel

And Adam had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain. “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man,” she said. Later she gave birth to Cain’s brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, while Cain was a tiller of the soil. So in the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruit of the soil as

an offering to the LORD, while Abel brought the best portions of the firstborn of his flock. And the LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but He had no regard for Cain and his offering. So, Cain became very angry, and his countenance fell. “Why are you angry,” said the LORD to Cain, “and why has your countenance fallen? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you refuse to do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires you, but you must master it.”



Then Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field.” And while they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. And the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I do not know!” he answered. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” “What have you done?” replied the LORD. “The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to

Me from the ground. Now you are cursed and banished from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield its produce to you. You will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” But Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, this day You have driven me from the face of the earth, and from Your face I will be hidden; I will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.” “Not so!” replied the LORD. “If anyone slays Cain, then Cain will be avenged sevenfold.” And the LORD placed a mark on Cain, so that no one who found him would kill him. So Cain went out from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.(Gen 4:1-16)

At this very early stage we are told of the birth of Cain and Abel. While other children are not mentioned, the text mentions the existence of other siblings later.

Greed

Abel was a shepherd and Cain was a farmer. In their offerings to God, Abel’s sacrifice was favored by God since Abel offered the “firstfruits” of his labor while Cain brought some indefinite offering from among his harvest. This likely indicates some greed in Cain who prefers to keep the best for himself whereas Abel gave the best and first of his fruits to God.

Envy and Anger

God favored Abel’s offering over Cain, and this elicited in Cain a deep and sinful drive we call “envy.” Envy

is sorrow and anger at the goodness or excellence of another person because I take it to lessen my own standing or excellence. In effect, Cain thinks that Abel's excellence makes him look bad by comparison. The proper response to seeing excellence in another person is to seek to imitate it if possible. And we should be happy when others are recognized for their excellence or performance. But too often, like Cain, we seethe with indignation that someone was favored over me or that they are better at something. Envy is far worse than jealousy since, if I am jealous, at least I want the good thing that you have. But when I am envious, I seek to destroy the goodness in you, so I don't look bad by comparison. That is why St. Augustine calls envy, "*the diabolical sin.*" Cain's envy causes an anger in him that is so deep he plots to kill Abel and so eliminate this threat to Cain's own standing. It is very ugly, and far too common in the human family. The envious do not always murder, but they often do discredit goodness and excellence and are more than willing to question or "murder" the reputations of those they perceive as competitors to their standing in the community.

A Warning and Teaching from God

Cain's passions of envy and anger are rising. And God warns him: "*Why are you angry... If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you refuse to do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires you, but you must master it.*"

Here then is God's first instruction to us after Original Sin: "Sin is crouching at your door, but you can master it." As we considered above, Adam and Eve had been weakened by their sin and handed on to us a human nature that was weak and prone to sin. Yes, sin and temptation are always crouching at the door, but God teaches us that he provides sufficient grace for us to take authority over our sinful drives and do what is right. Cain's

proper response is to accept correction, follow Abel's example, and do what is right. Our passions like envy are simmering, and our anger is often loud, but we can and must master them. If not, things get only worse. In our life we must grow virtue (good habits) and starve vices (bad habits). If not, sin multiplies, and consequences grow such as addictions, compulsions, and many bad habits that further weaken us. Listen to what God is saying. We can and must master our passions and the strong inclinations that "crouch at our door!" God will help us if we call to him. But, like most "skills" in life, it is a long journey and involves much training. That is why we must make use of all the help and medicines available to us such as Scripture to instruct us, Sacraments to heal and nourish us, prayer to steady us, and holy fellowship to encourage and admonish us (See Acts 2:42). Stay close to God and follow his paths and instructions. Otherwise, all bets are off and further misery awaits us, crouching at the door.

Sadly, as the story recounts, Cain did not master his sinful drives, vented his anger and yielded to envy's lie that his brother was a rival to his glory. But of course, none of this makes anything better for Cain. Sin is never a solution; it only complicates and worsens things.

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

Sin almost never affects us alone. It boils over into the lives of others and spreads misery. Cain's envious anger claims Abel's life. The loss of Abel grieves his family and, as we shall see, spreads the infection of anger and vengeance. The loss of Abel also deprives the early human community of his gifts and good example.

Note also that God hears Abel's blood crying out from the ground where it was shed. Human life is sacred to God, and we are not to take life, except in rare and regrettable

moments of self-defense. We will answer to God one day for what we have done (see 2 Cor 5:10). And thus, God asks Cain of his brother: "Where is your brother?" Cain's cynical response shows how disordered his heart has become: "Am I my brother's keeper." The answer is yes. The well-being of our brothers and sisters should be very important to us and we should guard and keep them from harm and ruin. We are called to love our neighbor, and even our enemy. Yes, we are our brother's keeper.

Consequences of Cain's Sin

Cain's sin also affects him. He laments that his sin has separated him from the human family: "I will be a fugitive and hidden from the land." He also laments how his sin has further distanced him from God: "From Your face I will be hidden." His violence has begotten fear in him of more violence in the vengeance of other members of the human family: "Whoever finds me will kill me!" Sin sets evil loose. The punishment for sin is more sin. But God does not utterly forsake Cain and says that despite his sin, Cain remains sacred to the Lord and that no one is to take his life. They will answer to God if they try and be punished severely. Sinners are still God's children and are to be respected as such.

Cain is exiled to the east of Eden in a place called "Nod." In Hebrew, "Nod" means to wander. Hence Cain becomes a vagabond, a fugitive, expelled from the Land. He is also exiled from the fruits of civilization: agriculture, and animal produce. Since he poisoned the land with Abel's shed blood, the land will yield nothing to his farming. Now he must forage from whatever the wild uncultivated land gives .

Sin is a terrible reality and its consequences are real. But in the greatest story ever told, God does not forget Cain and places a mark of love upon him.