

Series: Answering God's Questions

3. A Question for Cain WHY ARE YOU ANGRY?

Genesis 4v6.

This is the third in our current series, 'Answering God's Questions.' It brings us to the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4.

This ancient story is still in the public consciousness today. 'Cain and Abel' is the title of a blockbuster by Jeffrey Archer and the inspiration behind John Steinbeck's great novel 'East of Eden.' It is the subject of great paintings. In Formula 1 racing The 'Cain and Abel Award' is given to brothers who collide during a race; Ralf and Michael Schumacher have taken this "award" twice following collisions in Luxemburg and Spain. 'Cain and Abel' is also a password recovery tool for Microsoft Operating systems!

Recently there was even a ferocious attack on the God of the Bible by Robert Ilson in the 'New Statesman' magazine over His treatment of Cain. Something of a delayed reaction, you might think. He wrote: *"The most awful story in the world may well be the tale of Cain and Abel."* He rails against God not accepting Cain's offering and says it shows that we are at the mercy of God's whim. Even *"corpse-like obedience,"* says Ilson, *"may not suffice to placate Him."* He concludes: *"Those who continue to believe in God may, should they meet Him after they die, be in for a nasty shock if He chooses to flaunt his power by damning them anyway. – just to show He can."* (1)

Let's look at the text. God asks Cain several questions in Genesis 4v1-10. We will look at one of them over two weeks: **"Why are you angry?"**

1. Cain's Birth (v1)

v1: Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant Adam and Eve are now outside Eden, and Cain is the first child born to a woman. How traumatic must that have been for Eve? Today expectant mum's have plenty of support and information. There are ante-natal classes, books, and best of all – other mothers and your own mum! But imagine how it must have been for Eve. Why was her tummy getting bigger? Why did she suddenly have a craving for marmite? And what was this inside her kicking so violently? Even when she and her husband caught on to what was happening, how could they be sure when and how the baby would be born? Eve faced all this and more.

Then she **gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man"**? Francis Schaeffer wonders if something specific was going through her mind at this point. Was she recalling God's promise of offspring who would crush the serpent and vanquish the sin their disobedience had spawned. *"Maybe this is the one who will bring the solution to the problem, we introduced?"* (2) Would this firstborn be the one?

Sadly, no! That was far in the future. That would be Jesus, the firstborn over all creation, the Beloved Son, the heir of all things. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* (John 3v16) Jesus would come to reverse the effects of the Fall, not Cain. Rather than solve anything Cain would make things much worse. Rather than *give* his life for the salvation of others, Cain would be the first to *take* another’s life.

2. Cain’s Rival (v2)

As the first born he would have been cherished and given a special status. He would have had the best and the first of everything. There were no rivals for the affection of his parents. That was soon to end.

v2: Later (Eve) gave birth to his brother Abel. So begins generations of sibling rivalry. This is clear throughout Genesis: Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. The Fall had not just affected Adam and Eve and the created world. It was going to affect their offspring too. This disease of the soul called sin would not only eat away at each of their children, it would also subvert their relationships. It would stir up strife between brothers.

This story is in the book of “origins” (Genesis) to explain why nations war against each other; why there are civil wars and ethnic “cleansing”; why there is violence on our streets and families are torn apart. It is why we fall out with one another. It was never meant to be like this.

But Jesus came to reverse this result of the Fall – to break down the barriers and root causes of conflict, and reconcile man with God and with man. *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.”* (Ephesians 2v13f)

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. The text actually contains the word *“but”*, which introduces a note of tension. **But Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.** In other words, these two brothers were very different. Much has been made of one being a shepherd and the other a farmer. Some scholars see in this the influence of an ancient Sumerian story of the conflict between a shepherd god and the farmer god, representing a clash of interests between the pastoral and the agricultural. But this is alien to the biblical text. The real issue is much more fundamental than that as we shall now see.

3. Cain’s Offering (v3,4)

v3,4: In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. They are outside Eden but there is still an awareness of God. There is no law that we know of which said they were to bring an offering. There is no Scripture which says God spoke directly to them about

such offerings. But they brought them all the same. But what can they possibly offer God who created everything and lacks nothing?

There is something. **v4,5: The LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour.** So what was it about Abel's offering that so pleased God? And why was God not politically correct, showing equal favour to Cain? There is no explanation.

What do Muslims and Jews make of this story? In Islam the Qur'an says that each brother was born with a twin sister. When they grew up, Adam ordered Cain to marry Abel's twin sister and Abel to marry Cain's. But Cain refused because he desired his own sister, so Adam ordered them to make sacrifice to Allah who would judge the dispute. Cain offered a sheaf of *the worst* of his corn whereas Abel offered a fat lamb from the best of his flock.

In Judaism the story of Cain and Abel is discussed with special attention to the subject of sacrifice. What was so wrong with Cain's offering in this first recorded act of sacrifice? Some Rabbis believe God was looking for a blood sacrifice; others point out that Abel brought the best of his flock. One fifteenth century Rabbi even understood Cain's subsequent murder of his brother to be offering a *human* sacrifice to outdo Abel's *animal* sacrifice.

The Christian's perspective is guided by Hebrews 11v4: *'By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings.'* What delighted God so much about Abel's offering was *faith*. This is what turns God's head! This is what woos the God who owns everything. Faith!

But you could argue that Cain *also* had faith. He believed God existed and came with an offering. So there must have been something about Abel's faith which was different. What was it? I believe the Psalmist knew the answer. God is interested in faith which expresses heart devotion *"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."* (Psalm 51v16,17)

Jesus parable of the two men in temple illustrates this. *"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."* (Luke 18v9-14)

God looks for faith which expresses love and trust and longing and worship. Without this, any offering we bring can easily become a duty or a display of

our credentials. When we come in simple trust to Him with all our weakness and frailty and needs – when we come in total dependence on Him – He is delighted. This is of the essence of the Gospel. *“Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling!”* This is the issue, not farmers or shepherds and not God having favourites.

4. Cain’s Anger (v5,6)

v5,6: So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?” Cain was sulking and beneath this was an angry heart.

Godly anger:

Let’s be clear about this, anger, in itself, is not sinful. In fact it is possible to make a strong case for anger being one way in which we reflect the image of God. Anger is something a holy God displays many times in Scripture. There are 375 references to God’s anger in the Old Testament.

In the Gospels we find Jesus, who was without sin, getting angry too. Mark 3v1-5: *“He went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.” Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent. He looked round at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.”* When holiness and love confront sin, anger is the result.

Some of us need to get more angry! Anger has often fuelled men and women to overturn great evils. Godly anger made Wilberforce a fighter against the slave trade. This week on BBC2 Julie Walters will play Mary Whitehouse who campaigned about *“blasphemy, bad language, violence and indecency”* in the media. (3) Anger made her a fighter. In the Radio Times Walters admits she loathed Mary Whitehouse, but now realises that she *“lobbied against child pornography before most people even knew such things existed.”*

Ungodly anger

So the Bible doesn’t teach that anger is always sinful. This is why God’s question is such an important one. **“Why are you angry?”** This is always the key question. Was there a *righteous* reason for Cain’s anger? Was his purity and love reacting to some terrible evil? No, he was offended at God. That is “why” he was angry. His facial expression and body language is saying: *“You love him more than me. He is your favourite. I never get chosen. I never get noticed. Nothing I do is ever good enough for you.”* He was accusing God of the sin of injustice.

God's anger is so different from Cain's. Gary Collins writes *"Because God is wise, sovereign, powerful, perfect, and all-knowing, He never misinterprets a situation, never feels threatened, never loses control, and is always angered by sin and injustice. In contrast, we humans misinterpret circumstances, make mistakes in judgment, react quickly when we feel threatened or hurt, and sometimes respond with vengeance and vindictiveness."* (4)

Our anger is more often like Cain's anger than God's because it is so often rooted in self-interest, not hatred of sin or love for others. We feel personally thwarted or threatened. The apostle Paul wrote: *"In your anger do not sin, and do not give the devil a foothold."* (Ephesians 4v26f) Be warned! John Stott comments, the devil *"loves to lurk round angry people, hoping to be able to exploit the situation to his own advantage."* (5) Cain's anger was not righteous, and it made him vulnerable. What about you? Are you aware of any unrighteous anger in your own heart?

- Are you angry with God? Do you feel He has let you down? Perhaps over some unanswered prayer, or some big disappointment in your life? Other people speak of His love and grace but you feel passed by.
- Are you angry because you always seem to come second best? You are overshadowed by someone else? Could you never please your parents however hard you tried?
- Do you look at others and feel angry because they seem to have such an easy time compared to you? They have the talent you lack, or the marriage you would have liked or the successful career, or the good looks, or the health, or the financial success or the respect of others.
- Is your anger affecting you as a person? Anger can twist you and eat away at you. It can take hold of you and sow bitterness in your soul. Like Cain, has it even become visible? Does your body language, your words, your demeanor betray you?
- Has anger begun to affect your relationships – perhaps even with those closest to you?

The two ways most people deal with anger is referred to as "dumping" or "stuffing"! Some people dump their anger on the people around them. Often it is their nearest and dearest. Or they overreact to something that is said or done. Other people stuff it inside; they hold it in and make themselves ill.

There is another way. Take it to God. The Psalmists knew how to do this. They poured out their angry feelings in the presence of God. That is why some Psalms deserve an 18 certificate. We too can pour out our angry feelings in His presence. Let Him filter out the impurities - the self-pity, the resentment, the ungodly thinking. Yes, there may be real issues to handle in your life – and with others; but first, let God deal with the unrighteous anger. Will you allow Him to do that? Don't be controlled and destroyed by your anger. Bring it to God. You can do this today.

5. Cain's Sin (v7,8)

v7: "If you do what is right will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you"

This is the first direct mention of the word **sin** in the Bible. The Hebrew here is 'chattath', (pronounced *khat-tawth*). It is a word for *deviation* from the will of God. Here it is pictured as a wild beast crouching and ready to spring on its prey. The Fall has let loose a ferocious beast called "sin" which seeks to pounce on you and drag you away from pleasing God. It wants to devour you with ugly passions which will keep you alienated from God.

The current 'Alpha News' (6) carries the story of Peter Dobbs, once a member of the notorious 'Chelsea Headhunters' whose life was controlled by extreme violence. On one occasion he was even hired to kill a man; he sat in a pub with a sawn-off shotgun waiting for his victim, who fortunately didn't turn up. His life was fuelled by rage; the slightest thing would release the violence. Then God stepped in. Read the amazing story.

"sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." Even here, outside Eden, God tells Cain he can master sin. But he walks away from God and takes no notice. Very soon *he* is mastered, and *he* becomes the wild beast crouching and then springing on his prey.

v8: Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. This is the first recorded murder. Jealousy gave way to anger which, uncontrolled, led to murder. You and I may never be murderers like Cain but every day we are faced with the same kind of issues. How do we handle favour being shown to someone else? What does this uncover in us?

In Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15v11-32) we see the contrasting reception a "lost" son receives from his father and his older brother. The father is overjoyed at his return of but the older brother is full of bitterness because he feels his father is showing favour to a "waster", while he is taken for granted. Yet the father is reaching out in love to him too; the father is not comparing or preferring one over the other. This is how God loves! In his wonderful book 'The Return of the Prodigal Son' (7) Henri Nowen writes:

"This is not easy for me to grasp. In a world that constantly compares people, ranking them as more or less intelligent, more or less attractive, more or less successful, it is not easy to really believe in a love that does not do the same. When I hear someone praised, it is hard not to think of myself as less praiseworthy. The world in which I have grown up is a world so full of grades, scores and statistics that, consciously or unconsciously, I always try to take my measure against all the others. Much sadness and gladness in my life flows directly from my comparing, and most if not all, of this comparing is useless and a terrible waste of time and energy." (7)

6. Cain's Line (v9,10)

v9,10: Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" There is no hiding this time as there had been by Adam and Eve in the Garden. God does not have to go seeking Cain saying "Where are you?" Instead Cain is out in the open and we find a hardness in him we have not seen before. He even has a clever, insolent answer ready for God's question. **"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"** Listen to God's anguished response. **The LORD said, "What have you done?"** Feel the weight of this moment. Listen to the way these words echo.

There has been an earthquake. A seismic shift has taken place. What Cain had done, beyond even murdering his brother, has been to take up his position at the head of a new line of humanity.

Cain's line!

Cain has turned away from any relationship with God; and he has torn apart his human relationships as well. But there is no penitence or remorse; there is no seeking God's mercy or his family's forgiveness and he complains at God's judgment even though it could have been more severe.

Some poets in the forefront of the Romantic Movement in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, men like Coleridge and Byron, deliberately proclaimed themselves as being of "Cain's party". Both tackled the story of Cain; Coleridge in an unfinished prose poem, 'The Wanderings of Cain' (circa 1798) and Byron in 'Cain, a Mystery'. (1821). Both were fascinated by the thought of exile and alienation. They were proud to be in Cain's line; they identified with him in his status as a moral and social outcast. They saw themselves as proud outsiders and sceptics

Even so, this line of Cain has never been abandoned by God. Cain had a son who built a city. His line also produces people who developed music and metal tools. But it also produced a man called Lamech (Gen. 4v18-24) who flexed his muscles by taking more than one wife – therefore producing more offspring, and who boasted in song of killing another man! Cain's line! The apostle John writes, *'Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother'* (1 John 3v12)

But there is an alternative line. The Old Testament scholar John Goldingay writes: *"Alongside this first line is a second that looks less impressive but in the end counts for more.* (8)

Abel's line.

But how can we speak of Abel's line if he died without producing offspring? The answer is found in Hebrews chapter 11 which puts Abel in a long line of men and women of faith. In fact, Francis Schaeffer point out: *"Abel is actually the first one named in this line, and so in a real way this could be called the line of Abel."* (2) Hebrews 11v4 declares *"And by faith he still speaks, even*

though he is dead." Abel stands at the head of the line of those seeking a personal relationship with God.

After Abel's murder Adam and Eve conceived again and a third son was born and named Seth (Gen. 4v25) and it soon became clear that he belonged to the line of Abel; Gen. 4v26 tells us that this line began "to call on the name of the Lord". Schaeffer: *"From this time on in the flow of history there are two humanities. The one humanity says there is no God, or it makes gods in its own imagination, or it tries to come to the true God in its own way. The other humanity comes to the true God in God's way. There is no neutral ground."* (2)

Those in Cain's line are mastered by sin, but they don't know it. Those in Abel's line realize their need of a Saviour. So God calls for us, He longs for all men and women, to cross over into Abel's line. This is why we do Alpha. It is a way of communicating this call of God. I have already mentioned one story from the current Alpha News, but I'll finish with two others.

Claire Jerath (35) from south east London, belonged to Cain's line. Her life was ruled by Tarot and Kabala cards, wish sticks, tea leaves, crystal balls and astrology. Eventually "readings" governed every decision she and her close friend took. Then a series of unusual incidents scared her and she realized some outside dark power was trying to control her. Then a Christian friend invited her to an Alpha course in London, and very soon she had asked Jesus into her life and binned all her cards and crystals and charts. *"Afterwards I felt there was a freshness- the sun was shining and I felt released. It was literally like a weight had been removed from my shoulders. Now Jesus gives me hope and I can rely on him 100%. I put everything, every concern that I have, any decision that I have to make, whatever it is, into his hands."* (6) Claire was no longer in Cain's line, she now belonged to Abel's – the line of faith.

Billy Gilvear (37) from Guernsey in the Channel Islands is the son of a former Glasgow gangster who was powerfully changed by Jesus Christ and had gone to Africa as a missionary. But Billy rejected his father's faith. He was of Cain's line! After some time in the British army Billy worked as a close protection bodyguard for celebrities like Stallone, Mel Gibson and Take That. By now he was married with a child, but his life was soon dominated by parties and then serious drugs. Everything spiralled out of control and he tried to take his life. When he came round in hospital his mother was there saying *"Billy, I've got to tell you this. God still loves you and he told me that one day you're going to preach the gospel."* Then she prayed for him. But there was no overnight change. He made his wife's life a misery and he almost went down for grievous bodily harm when he assaulted a man at a party. *"I'd become this real scumbag, a really disgusting person."* This was 1999 – 2000. So he made plans to hang himself the weekend before his 30th birthday. At that time he was living and working on a farm run by Christians. One morning he came down to breakfast to find the wife holding an old kettle covered in black grime; she was polishing it and it was coming up sparkling clean as she rubbed. In that moment God began to speak to him and say *"Billy, this is your life"*. Get the Alpha paper and read the rest of the story. It is an extraordinary one. (6) He gave his life to Jesus Christ, went on to study theology at Spurgeon's

College and then to lead a church in Guernsey. He is also a chaplain in the prison there running Alpha courses. Billy had crossed over from Cain's line to Abel's.

Which line do you belong to? Cain's line, walking away from God? Or Abel's – calling out to God, turning away from sin and looking to Him for mercy and grace and living a life of faith? There is no neutral ground.

John Wilthew. May/June 2008

1. Robert Ilson. 'In God we trust?' 'New Statesman' 17 April 2008
2. Francis Schaeffer: 'Genesis in Space and Time'. Hodder & Stoughton. 1972
3. 'Filth: The Mary Whitehouse Story.' BBC2. 28/5/2008
4. Gary R. Collins: 'Christian Counselling.' Word. 1980.
5. John R.W. Stott: 'The Message of Ephesians' IVP. 1979.
6. Alpha News. March – June 2008.
7. Henri J.M. Nouwen. 'The Return of the Prodigal Son.' Darton, Longman & Todd. 1992
8. John Goldingay. 'Old Testament Theology' Vol. 1. Israel's Gospel'. IVP Academic. 2003.