

January 31, 2010

THE BLOOD OF ABEL, Part Two

Jeffery D. Woodhams

Have you ever heard of Romulus and Remus? They are twin brothers who, according to legend, founded the city of Rome in ancient times. The short version of the story is that, as infants, they were ordered to be executed by their evil grand uncle, who had usurped the throne of Alba Longa from the boys' grandfather. The uncle didn't want them to grow up and compete with him for the throne. The details of how everything occurred differ from author to author, but essentially the boys were left out in the wild to die, where they were found and raised by a female wolf. In time, they grew up, were reunited with human society, restored Alba Longa to their grandfather, and decided to found a city of their own.

However, the question of which of the boys would ultimately rule the city plagued them. Each one felt that he had the greater claim. Eventually Romulus began digging a furrow around the planned perimeter of his city to show where the wall would be erected, and Remus, in a fit of anger, jumped over the ditch. This was an insult, because it meant that the wall, once erected, would be as easy to penetrate as a simple jump over a ditch. At that point, legend tells us that Romulus (or one of his followers) killed Remus with a shovel. In the Roman mind, this murder was justified, and one ancient historian named Livy attributes these words to Romulus: "So perish every one that shall hereafter leap over my wall."

Whether or not there is any truth at all in this story is unknown; but the Romans accepted and believed it. This story is the foundation of Rome and Roman society: a story of strife and bloodshed. We see in this story the character of human justice: if you harm me, if you insult me, I have the right to do the same to you, and worse. A milder but more common form of this today is "road rage." Don't we get upset and angry when people drive inconsiderately? *Don't answer that!*

There are a number of parallels in this story to the story of Cain and Abel; but the main parallel is that one brother killed another over a perceived insult. At the bottom of it all, Cain felt insulted. His pride was wounded, because God had accepted his brother's offering and refused Cain's, as we discussed in detail last week.

We pick up the story this week with God addressing Cain gently, trying to point him in the right direction. Please turn your attention now to Genesis 4:6-7:

And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?

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.

We see God personally take Cain aside and counsel him. The essence of what God says to him is that there is no need to be angry; God had made provision for Cain to be accepted, and the choice was Cain's to make. That is God's clear message to Cain here.

Now, there is some discussion about how that message is to be translated into English. There is no

mistaking the understanding, but the wording could be understood in one of two ways. The reason is that the Hebrew word translated *sin* here is the same Hebrew word used of *sin offering*: *sin lieth at the door*. Because of this, some understand this to mean that right nearby was an animal that would make an acceptable offering; in fact, the next sentence adds the idea that the animal would willingly comply with Cain, not even attempting to flee: *And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him*. The essence is that God has made provision for Cain to be accepted.

If we understand *sin* to be correctly translated as *sin*, rather than as *sin offering*, then the idea would be that sin is crouching at the door, ready to pounce on Cain. The NIV paraphrased this idea in these words:

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, but you must master it.

The NIV takes some liberties in translating this verse in this way, but I've included it here because it gives a sense of what this verse means if we take the word *sin* to mean *sin* rather than as a *sin offering*. The essence is that God is giving Cain a warning about the choice that he will make.

Either way, the overall message is the same. God is gently but directly encouraging Cain to do what is right. Can we not see ourselves here? God Himself still speaks to us through various means and messengers. We may not hear His voice directly, as Cain did, but God does speak to us now as surely as He did to Cain. He speaks to us through His written Word primarily, but also through the preaching of the Word, through our conscience, through godly people, and even through life's circumstances. The fact is that the closer we stay to God, the more likely we are to hear and to respond to His voice.

I think it is also appropriate to point out that people haven't changed much since the days of Cain. You may have heard people challenge God, like the captain of the shrimping vessel in *Forrest Gump*, who shouts at God. Militant atheists mock Christians who claim to converse with God; many have claimed they would listen to God if He spoke to them. The truth is that God has revealed Himself just as much to them as He has to the Christian, or to Cain for that matter. It is significant that Cain, hearing God's voice, has the absolute choice whether to obey or not to obey, just as every human has had since then. Paul observed in Romans 1:18-20 that every person has knowledge of God:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold [suppress] the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:

All men have access to the knowledge of God. We can see from the order and design in the natural world that there is a Creator. We can see and know that there is an eternal, almighty God.

The significant thing from this episode with Cain is that even though Cain could clearly, without argument, have a dialogue with God, he still was free to accept or reject what that Voice said. We today have that same choice; and I dare say that, given the same set of circumstances, those who are rejecting

God at this moment would not change their minds, even if they heard His voice in the exact manner that Cain heard it. The Bible is full of examples of this very phenomenon: people hearing or seeing God's power, and summarily rejecting His authority. We can mention the Egyptians and the children of Israel in the book of Exodus; but we can also point to the book of Revelation, which tells us that in the days to come, God's power will be directly revealed to a world that is facing His judgment. Even though He clearly proclaims mercy through many means to the inhabitants of the earth, and even though it is very clear that standing in opposition to Him is futile, many people will still choose to reject Him and His mercy. Cain has a choice, and we have the same choice: will we yield to God's authority and accept His mercy, or will we yield to our own pride and sinfulness? *If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?*

We come now to Cain's point of decision. Let's look at 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 despised God's gracious offer. He hardened his heart and determined that God's ways were not fair. In his mind and in his heart, he hated God. He felt rejected and insulted, but it wasn't God's fault that he felt this way. He had his own choice to make, and he chose *pride* over *humility*, *self* over *sacrifice*. And that inner choice had a fearful external consequence. As that hatred for God roiled inside him, and as he talked with his godly brother, he fell prey to the ultimate form of selfishness: he killed his brother when the two of them were quite alone.

There is a suggestion that this was something premeditated. It's as if he lured him out into the field, beyond witnesses, beyond a call for help. Perhaps it wasn't premeditated; but the fact is that Cain determined that life was so unfair that *he was going to make it fair*--he was going to murder Able to get back at God for accepting Able's sacrifice and rejecting his own. Here is the natural man's response to injury, real or perceived: "I'll get you back!" Remember, Romulus allegedly said, "So perish every one that shall hereafter leap over my wall."

In the Scriptural record, we do find "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" as part of God's law in the governance of Israel. I would suggest to you that God was making allowance for the natural man to have a legal venue to exact his revenge rather than take matters into his own hands and "up the ante" by doing more and worse to the one who had injured him. In other words, it was to prevent someone from doing *more than* "an eye for an eye." It is a recognition of fallen human nature, because God does not exact the "eye for an eye" penalty against us for the damage that we do to Him. Who could stand before Him if He did? Second, He instituted that particular rule as a deterrent to criminal acts in the first place. God Himself does not govern according to that rule; and Jesus made it very clear that God's will for us is to live as He does, to "turn the other cheek" against insults, to return blessings when we are cursed. That doesn't mean we abandon self defense, but rather that we *overlook insults* and allow God to judge in matters where our human nature calls for revenge.

In the next verse, we see Cain's infamous prideful retort to the prodding of God.

And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? (Genesis 4:9)

We notice again that rather than use a direct accusation, God confronts Cain with a question. God reveals in the next verse that He knows all about what has occurred. God's method is to ask a question as a means of allowing for a truthful response to make way for repentance. There is no sign of repentance in Cain's answer: "I know not; am I my brother's keeper?" The term *brother's keeper* would be best understood as a *babysitter*. "I don't know what you're talking about. Do I look like his babysitter?" There's an unspoken denial of involvement. No one saw him commit the crime, so how can he be charged with the crime? He's just going to "play dumb."

But God knows all. God reveals to Cain what he thought was hidden:

And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.

God knows all. God sees all; and all of the injustices of the world will be dealt with in minute fairness. God could not simply walk away from this transgression of man versus man, brother versus brother, and still be a moral Being. He *must* take up the cause of the innocent. Notice that Abel himself is not crying out--Abel is removed from this world. In one sense Cain was right: he did not know where Abel was. Abel was the first to die this physical death which we have been facing ever since. Abel's blood, however, spilled with violence upon the ground, speaks to God's keen sense of justice: this murder *must* be dealt with.

We see the love of God for both Cain and Abel here. God has diligently worked to restore Cain to fellowship, even after his hideous act. However, He cannot ignore what has happened to Abel, for He loves Abel. Cain's act of murder must be punished. God *cannot* and *will not* ignore abuse and victimization.

There are many lessons here for us. First, we should always keep in mind that the ultimate goal of any sort of punishment we deal out must be restoration. Restoration of fellowship is the goal. To put it another way, the goal of punishment is not vengeance. As parents we should never lash out just to get back at a naughty child. The goal of punishment is restoration of fellowship.

Another lesson is that fellowship cannot be restored by simply ignoring the offense. Abel's blood called out to God and demanded satisfaction; and God would have been utterly immoral to ignore this evil act. Don't ignore bad behavior; engage it properly. We'll see God's response next week.

A third lesson here is that the choice rested with Cain. God does not change; He could only do what is fair, just, and loving. Cain, however, had the choice to *humble* himself or *harden* himself. I say all this because sometimes as parents, we do our very best, and our children still turn away from the Lord. That is their choice. Adam and Eve were not bad parents. In fact, of their three children discussed in any detail, two of them were godly. So the third lesson is that even the very best parents may have children who turn away from the Lord and disappoint them. Oh, how our hearts swell, though, when we can say with the Apostle John, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth."

The fourth and final lesson today is that all wrongs will be righted. All abuses will be judged. Man's way of exacting justice by getting revenge is not God's way of dealing out justice, though. Make no mistake: every sinful act ever committed will be judged in exact fairness by an Eternal Judge who knows every thought, every motive. Nothing is hidden from Him. Because of this, none of us dare to

stand before Him. We have all sinned against Him. I want to, in closing, share one verse with you. Look at 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.

Do you see this? God's Son Jesus died in our place to fulfill the demands of God's justice against our sins. Jesus died a terrible death to satisfy God's keen sense of justice for all who will believe. That is why His blood, the blood that He allowed sinful men to drain from His body, speaks "better things" than the blood of Abel. Abel's blood calls for *justice*; Jesus' blood paid the price and satisfied that justice, and therefore His blood calls out "*Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!*" to all who believe in His name. The spirit of Cain calls for *retribution for insult*; the blood of Abel calls for *justice* upon victimizers; but the blood of Jesus calls for *peace with God*.

Do you this morning accept God's verdict, revealed in His Word, that all of us are sinful and have offended Him? Do you accept God's record that we cannot by our own means escape His judgment? Do you trust Jesus' action to substitute His blood for yours, His sinlessness for your sinfulness? If you've never accepted God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, do not delay. Accept His wonderful gift today.