

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

Sermon: Grace for the wayward.

Scripture: Genesis 4:1-16, 1 John 3:11-15

Rev. Steve Filyk

September 21, 2025

Opener: Praise to the Lord 321

Choruses: Amazing Grace (My chains are gone), Jesus, all for Jesus

Hymn after sermon: Take my life and let it be 637

Closer: I need thee every hour

You don't have to look far to witness sibling rivalry.

Some of us grew up with it in our own homes.

And if not, we've all seen it—on playgrounds, in workplaces,
and yes, even in royal families.

Take Prince William and Prince Harry.

When they were young, the world often saw them as inseparable,
two brothers leaning on each other after the death of their mother.

But as they grew older, the differences in their roles became harder to ignore:

William, the immediate heir to the throne,
and Harry much further down the line.

What started as an unspoken tension
eventually turned into open conflict.

In his memoir *Spare*, Harry describes one argument in 2019 at his London home.

Speaking about William, Harry says:

*"He grabbed me by the collar, ripping my necklace,
and ... knocked me to the floor."*

(Harry, Prince. *Spare*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2023. Quoted in Martin Belam, "Prince Harry claims William physically attacked him in leaked extract from memoir," *The Guardian*, 4 January 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jan/04/prince-harry-william-physical-attack-2019-meghan-spare-book>).

Imagine that—two princes, with all the privilege and wealth in the world,
still struggling with the same jealousy, rivalry, and hurt feelings
that so many brothers and sisters experience.

It's also a reminder that sibling rivalry
isn't just about toys in the playroom—
it can follow us into adulthood
and lead to untold pain and sadness.

Over the past few weeks we have taken a dive

Into the first book of the Bible.

Genesis chapter one begins with a creation story

Describing how God ordered the world

And appointed humanity as caretakers and overseers.

Genesis chapter two and three tells another creation story
that illustrates how humanity approaches their task,
choosing to ignore God's directions,
thinking that they know better.

Today we've moved into Genesis chapter four.

It echoes what came before in chapter three—
another story where humanity struggles to trust God
and relationships are ruptured.

Let's take another walk through what we've already heard.

Today we encounter Adam and Eve's sons, Cain and Abel.

The two brothers are fulfilling God's mandate
to oversee and care for God's creation.

The older, Cain, works the fields. He's the farmer.

The younger, Abel, tends animals. He's the rancher.

We are told that they make an offering to the Lord:

"In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil
as an offering to the LORD.

And Abel also brought an offering—
fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock."

We **aren't told how they knew** that giving back to God was important

And up to this point in the Bible there aren't any instructions
about making sacrifices.

But they both knew that demonstrations of gratitude were important.

And this is where the plot thickens.

We are told that "the Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering,
But on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor."

This is a sore point for Cain.

The story tells us that "Cain was very angry,
And his face was downcast."

God speaks to him,

Inviting him to reflect on his own anger.
 At the same time God asserts the Cain already knows
 How to remedy the situation:
 "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?"

Scholars have long debated why only one offering was accepted.

Some wonder whether it was the **"type of sacrifice"** that matter,
 That a blood offering was deemed more valuable.
 Of course later Scripture teaches
 that grain was a legitimate offering gift.

Other suggest it wasn't the type
 But the **"quality of the sacrifice"** that mattered.
 Abel brought a sacrifice of some "of the firstborn from his flock".
 Later in Scripture the people were commanded
 to bring the first and the best
 Of herds and crops and other resources
 To recognize that God was the ultimate source of all these blessings
 and expression their confidence in the Lord's ongoing provision.
 (see Exodus 23:19)

Others suggest that what determined acceptance or rejection
 Was the **"heart behind the sacrifice"**.
 The question is whether Cain was already harbouring anger and jealousy
 Against his brother and that unrepentant sin disqualified a legitimate gift.
 In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught his listeners:
 "if you are offering your gift at the altar
 and there remember that your brother or sister
 has something against you,
 leave your gift there in front of the altar.
 First go and be reconciled to them;
 then come and offer your gift."

What was the reason for God
 accepting Abel's offering and not Cain's? We don't know?

Cain knows.
 He how to make things right.
 But he isn't ready to reflect.

He isn't ready to change his behavior.
 Sometimes it feels easier to stay angry
 than to face the hard work of making things right.

Most can imagine that behind his rage
 Is likely a longer history of sibling rivalry.
 Maybe Abel was the favoured son
 Showered with special gifts and opportunities,
 While Cain always went unnoticed.
 There is probably a much longer history
 But the story doesn't give us any details.

It simply tells us that Cain knew how to make a better offering.
 And it tells us that God warned Cain
 about letting this problem fester.
 "But if you do not do what is right,
 sin is crouching at your door..."

God encourages Cain,
 But God won't limit his freedom.
 Cain already has in his own mind
 What he wants to do.
 He lures Abel out into the fields.
 I can image something like:
 "Hey Abel, let's go check the harvest".
 There in the fields he attacks and kills his own flesh and blood.

Cain may have thought he'd get away with it.
 But everyone is missed by someone,
 And God sees everything too.

What follows reads like a trial:
 God questions Cain.
 Cain obfuscates and lies.
 God points out the consequences.
 [Note that the story doesn't read so much
 As God judging but bearing witness
 And pointing out the curse that Cain has brought upon himself]
 It's not hard to imagine that Cain and Abel have their own grown families,
 Abel's family will soon be searching for their father,
 And when they figure out what has happened to him

They will be looking for revenge.

God questions. Cain lies.

God point out the consequences.

And then Cain laments: "My punishment is more than I can bear".

At this point you would think the Lord would have had enough.

At no point does Cain take any responsibility.

At no point does Cain offer any repentance.

At no point does Cain indicate he is able to consider anyone but himself.

At this point you would think the Lord would have had enough

And exact some retribution on behalf of innocent Abel.

But this is where it gets interesting.

God listens to the lament of the unrepentant Cain,

And offers him protection.

The Lord puts him into protective custody.

Yes Cain will be driven from the land and forced to be a wanderer,

But because the mark God places on him,

His life will be preserved.

What is the mark?

Again we are not told.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann notes that:

"God's mark over Cain has evoked endless speculation.

There is no consensus on its meaning.

While it may originally have referred to a visible mark as a tattoo,

it must now be understood in terms of its function in the narrative.

That function is two-edged.

On the one hand, it announces the guilt of Cain.

On the other, it marks Cain as safe in God's protection.

(Walter Brueggemann Genesis 70)

So what are we to learn from this story?

A story leaves its modern listeners with so many questions,

But offers so few answers.

I think we learn at least a couple things about ourselves and God.

If we let the story read us, on its own terms, not our,

I think we will recognise that despite

The best guidance and encouragement

We sometimes get trapped into tunnel vision

And make terrible choices that lead to horrific consequences.

Very few can claim they have killed a sibling.

More than a few of us have siblings that we are estranged from,

That are 'dead to us'.

Maybe Cain is not that stranger we first thought...

But if the story speak about us, it also speaks about our God.

And this is where it is even more interesting.

In this story we encounter a God that respects our freedom.

God knows the murderous thoughts of Cain,

But God doesn't tip off Abel about a brother who is raging

Or prevent Cain from smashing in his brother's skull.

This doesn't mean that God is unconcerned about injustice.

God hears Abel's blood crying out from the ground.

And when it comes to Cain having to abandon his settled life

For a life on the run, God doesn't give him a pass.

He lets Cain both act

and then endure the consequences of his action.

But when Cain laments the severity of those consequences

We encounter something about God that maybe was not expected

At least this far into the book of Genesis.

God offers grace so Cain can endure the consequence of his choices.

I think that sometimes in the church we sometimes think

That God does more and maybe less than what we observe in these stories.

We think that God will intervene to first prevent and then later to punish.

Or maybe if we see ourselves in the shoes of Cain

We think that God will give us an exemption from experiencing

The consequences of our choices...

This story shows us a God who respects our freedom.
God calls, advises, and warns—
but ultimately lets us make choices and face the consequences.
And even then, God's grace is present, helping us endure
The suffering we created for ourselves.

Maybe you are estranged from a friend or a family member.
Maybe you've been praying about it,
and have been waiting for a miracle to occur
instead of using your own God-given freedom.

Could it be that today God is inviting you
to take one small step toward reconciliation.
And if that's not possible, maybe God is offering you the grace
to carry the weight of brokenness without being crushed by it.
Either way, God's grace meets us where we are—and it is enough.
May God give us courage.
May God grant us peace.
Amen.