

West Van Baptist, April 26
Family Foundations – Sibling Rivalry
Genesis 4:1-16

I. Some misbehaving brothers

Some people move around a lot while growing up. I had the good fortune (at least, I think it was good) to live in the same house from kindergarten through my college years. It was very handy. I only had to learn one street address and phone number!

We moved into that house when I was 5. Not long after I made my first friends in the neighborhood. They were 3 brothers: Mark, Greg, and Brad, and they lived just up the street. I met them on our front porch. One spring afternoon the doorbell rang, and there they were, with their mother—all looking a bit unhappy. Mrs. L introduced herself and explained that the boys were there to apologize. Apparently that morning they had picked a bunch of flowers from my mom’s garden and taken them home to her. Mrs. L wasn’t pleased with the gift. She marched the boys to our door to learn a lesson about respecting other people’s property.

We all became great friends that day. My mom immediately liked Mrs. L, and I spent years playing with the boys: road hockey in winter, football in summer, various games in their basement or mine. We walked to school together and visited each other’s churches.

In some ways, Mark, Greg, and Brad became the brothers I never had. Well, almost. If they irritated me, I could leave. They were stuck with each other. But I learned a lot about brotherhood by watching them. I saw them keep each other entertained, and stand up for one another when needed. I saw them argue and become angry, and sometimes fight like cats in a sack. There were days when a visit to their house made me glad I had no brothers of my own. Other days I thought about how nice it might have been to have siblings. It was an education either way.

This morning we’ve read a passage about two brothers who didn’t get along. Sadly, their problems went way beyond picking flowers from a neighbor’s garden, or fighting over toys or chores. Cain and Abel are a powerful example of how not to live together, and how quickly relationships can go from bad to worse. Genesis 4 is not a happy story. But it teaches us some lessons that fit into our current sermon series about family life based on the book of Genesis.

Let’s start with a quick reminder from 2 weeks ago. Genesis tells us that God created human beings “in His image,” and this applies not only to our individual lives, but also to the significant relationships we have with one another. When our relationships are healthy, we are like a beautiful picture of God’s own loving, triune character. When our relationships are unhealthy, we not only suffer ourselves, but we also dishonor our Lord by representing Him badly. So we want to grow strong and healthy relationships in our families, and in our other contexts—including the church, which is the family of God.

To help us on this journey, this morning we’ll walk through the Cain-and-Abel story together, then think about some key lessons it offers us.

II. Highlights in the Cain-and-Abel story

First, a little context. In Genesis 1 and 2 we learn that God created the world as well as humankind, beginning with our first parents, Adam and Eve. God was pleased and declared it all “very good!” However, that first man and woman chose to stop trusting their Creator, disobeying Him and setting themselves up as little gods in His place. Genesis 3 describes their fall into sin and the consequences that followed: curses instead of blessing, hard labor instead of a luxurious garden, increased pain and difficulty in bearing (and raising) children.

That brings us to Genesis 4. Here we see that sin and its consequences pass from one generation to another. God made human beings to be individuals-in-relationship. So sin affects us as individuals-in-relationship. Adam and Eve’s failures weren’t just a private matter; sin impacted their family, too.

The chapter begins: *Adam had sexual relations with his wife, Eve, and she became pregnant (4:1)*. In time the couple would have a number of children. Here we read about the first two: Cain and Abel. We don’t know much about these brothers. What games did they play? Did they pick flowers for Eve? We don’t know—the passage is short, and it focuses on several key ideas.

First, Cain and Abel were both farmers, though with different specialties. *Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil (4:2)*. This isn’t a surprise. At creation God gave human beings dominion over other creatures, and they always obtained food from the land. The work was harder in a fallen world than it had been in Eden, but it was all consistent with God’s design.

Second, both Cain and Abel brought offerings to God. *When it was time for the harvest, Cain presented some of his crops as a gift to the Lord. Abel also brought a gift—the best portions of the firstborn lambs from his flock (4:3-4)*. Genesis doesn’t tell us how this practice began, but wherever we read in this book, people who love the Lord bring offerings to Him, expressing worship and thanksgiving and acknowledging their need for forgiveness and mercy.

Now the story heats up. The two young men bring very different offerings. Cain, the fruit-and-vegetable-grower, brings some of his crops. Abel, the shepherd, sacrifices several lambs.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with either gift. Later in the Law of Moses, God’s people are instructed to bring various types of offerings: lambs, bulls, rams, birds, and also grain and fruit and oil.

The biggest difference isn’t *what* they offer. It is the *attitude*, and what we might call the “depth of commitment” involved. *“Cain presented **some** of his crops.”* Abel, on the other hand, brought *“**the best portions of the firstborn lambs.**”* Right away we sense two different mindsets in these brothers. Both know a gift is needed. One brings “something.” The other gives his very best.

God notices this—as He always does—and He responds differently to each. *The Lord accepted Abel and his gift, but He did not accept Cain and his gift (4:4-5)*. This is no surprise to anyone who knows their Bible well. God always welcomes those who come with a right heart, and He always resists those whose worship is just skin-deep. So, for example ...

- Samuel tells Saul: *“To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed [God’s Word] is better than the fat of rams.”* (1 Sam 15:22)

- Or in Psalm 51 David observes: *“You do not delight in sacrifice ... You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart You, God, will not despise.”* (51:16-17)
- It’s in the prophets, like Isaiah, who says: *“Stop bringing meaningless offerings! ... I cannot endure sin and the solemn assembly.”* (Isa 1:13)
- And it’s everywhere in the New Testament, beginning with Jesus, who teaches that God is most concerned with what is in the heart. *“A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”* (Lk 6:43)

We quickly see Cain’s heart. Does he say, “Lord, I’m sorry for not honoring You as I should. How can I worship better? What should I do differently?” Not at all. Instead, God’s response *made Cain very angry, and he looked dejected* (4:5). He’s not unhappy because he has offended God. He’s upset because he didn’t get what he wanted, and he’s embarrassed that his younger brother has been more successful. This attitude is dangerous, so God gives a warning.

“Why are you so angry?” the Lord asked Cain. “Why do you look so dejected. You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse ... then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.” (4:6-7)

God knows Cain’s heart. He doesn’t ask the questions to gain information. This is like His question “Where are you?” to Adam and Eve—it’s an invitation to think, and to talk with the Lord. God is saying, “Let’s discuss this. You know I’m just and fair. If I’ve rejected you, I have a good reason. Let’s get your attitude sorted out before something worse happens. Like your father and mother, you have choices to make. Make the right ones!”

Sadly, Cain makes the wrong choice. He gives way to anger and cooks up a plan to get rid of Abel. He lures his brother into the field and kills him. From the very beginning, God warned that sin would bring death. That process has already begun since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden. But it’s been happening slowly, gradually. Now for the first time we see the full-on, physical death of a human being. It’s violent and shocking. Instead of loving and caring for each other, as brothers should, one brother has taken the life of another.

God speaks again—because He cares too much to leave these human beings alone, even in their sin. He asks: *“Where is your brother? Where is Abel?”* Another question means another invitation to come clean, to repent and seek forgiveness. Instead, Cain lies and tries to avoid responsibility. *“I don’t know.... Am I my brother’s guardian?”*

God is gracious; yet there are limits to His patience when people stubbornly refuse to listen. Finally He responds with words of judgment. If there is no repentance, there will be consequences, in this case amplifying the curses from Genesis 3. Because of Adam and Eve’s sin the earth produces thorns and thistles, and it takes effort to grow food. Now, Cain, your farming will fail completely, and you will wander the earth looking for food and shelter.

Still, God remains gracious. Cain complains: *“My punishment is too great for me to bear!”* (4:13). “I am cut off from God, cut off from the land, and everyone will hate me and want to kill me.” This is ironic, since he has just killed his own brother. Nevertheless, God offers some help—not because

Cain deserves it, but because He is merciful and willing to limit the spread and multiplication of sin. So, *the Lord put a mark on Cain to warn anyone who might try to kill him (4:15).*

The story comes to a sad conclusion in verse 16, which says *Cain left the Lord's presence*. Apparently he has never really loved God with a whole heart. Now he turns his back, walks away, and lives in the land of Nod—the land of wandering.

III. The core problem: jealousy

What a sad story! One sin leads to another, bigger sin. God is still present: warning, inviting, working to restore. But Cain's heart is hard, and he cuts himself off from the Lord who loves him.

What do we do with this? How do we make it relevant today?

As we study Genesis we will regularly find that the stories leave us with lots of questions. We're not told what Cain used to kill Abel. We're not told what Adam and Eve were doing while all this was going on. We're not told whether Cain ever repented later. These narratives don't satisfy our curiosity on every question. Instead, over and over they point us to matters of the heart.

(Remember: that's what Jesus teaches us to look for in Scripture.) Here in Genesis 4 we're invited to ask "Why?" What is going on in Cain's heart that causes so much anger and hate and eventual murder? That's the first question God asks Cain: "*Why are you so angry?*"

The answer is very simple: **Cain is jealous**. Not jealous in the healthy sense of protecting something that rightfully belongs to him, as God is sometimes said to be "jealous" over His people. Cain is jealous in the more common, sinful sense. This is kind of jealousy has 2 dimensions:

- ***It involves wanting what someone else has.*** A jealous person may want what someone else possesses: their nice car, or lavish house, or beautiful boat. Sometimes people are jealous of personal qualities: someone else's beautiful face, or six-pack abs, or trim figure, or intelligence, or talent. Sometimes we're jealous about relationships: "I wish so-and-so was my friend or mentor, not theirs." Sometimes it's about approval. I can be jealous because people like someone else's preaching better than mine, or they think I'm a nicer person ... or because God approves their offering and doesn't welcome mine in the same way.
- Then jealousy goes further. ***It resents the other person for having what I want.*** "It's not fair! I'm not getting my fair share. I deserve that boat, or talent, or relationship, or approval as much as that other person. Why do they get it instead? Maybe they've stolen it from me, somehow? At the very least, they are part of the unfair system that doesn't reward me, and they make me feel bad. I hate that about them! In fact, I hate *them!*"

Genesis 4 is a story of jealousy. Cain doesn't love God deeply, but he wants God's approval. He wants the gold star beside his name for being such a good guy. He wants it all the more because Abel has it. So Cain is jealous. "This isn't right! Why should little brother be rewarded and not me?! I hate this—and I hate him!" We see jealousy in Cain's anger, even more in his act of murder, and it's still there when he lies and complains to God.

Sin enters the human experience in Genesis 3. It brings full-blown destruction of human relationships in Genesis 4. How does it escalate so quickly? Through jealousy. Jealousy is one of the most basic, most deadly threats to relationship, especially in the family.

This is reinforced through the rest of Genesis. Keep reading and you will find:

- Isaac and Ishmael can't live in the same house—because of jealousy. (Gen 21)
- Jacob deceives and defrauds Esau, and spends years running away as a result—because of jealousy. (Gen 25-27)
- Rachel and Leah compete for Jacob's affection and created a permanently divided family—because of jealousy. (Gen 29-30)
- Joseph's brothers plot to kill him, then sell him into slavery instead—because of jealousy. (Gen 37)

These examples all involve brothers and sisters. They don't surprise us, because we've all seen many cases of "sibling rivalry," where one brother or sister is angry with another "because mom and dad treat him better," or "she's more popular than me," or "she gets all the praise for her good grades," or "Grandma spends more time with his kids than mine," or "they got a bigger slice of the inheritance," or well, we could multiply the examples. You've all seen it. I first learned about it watching Mark, Greg, and Brad fight as kids, and I've seen it many times since. It's one of the most common sources of tension in our families.

Of course, siblings aren't the only ones who struggle with jealousy. Children can be jealous of parents, and parents of their children. Husbands can be jealous of wives (in the sinful sense), and wives of husbands. And there can be all kinds of tensions when you bring in extended family and in-laws.

Jealousy is especially ugly in the family, which should be characterized by mutual love and care. But it can tarnish all types of relationships: among friends, at work or school, at church between brothers and sisters who are the "family of God." We're all children of Adam and Eve, all capable of wanting what someone else has, and all capable of becoming angry and resentful toward others who enjoy things we wish we had.

So it's no surprise that the Bible is full of warnings against jealousy. We find them in the Old Testament narratives, like the story of Saul and David. We see them in Proverbs and the Psalms. They are everywhere in the New Testament, beginning with the teaching of Jesus. We're warned that jealousy is woven together with other sins. It comes with wrong priorities, with loving things more than God. For us, as for Adam and Eve, it arises because we don't trust our Lord's wisdom, fearing that He doesn't really want what is best for us. At the very core, jealousy is an expression of selfishness rather than self-giving love—it is the very opposite of our Lord's greatest commandments.

Jealousy is a sin. We need to be clear about this, because modern culture tends to treat it as a normal part of human nature. We're surrounded by messages that say it's OK to feel jealous. In fact, parts of our economy are built around promoting envy and jealousy. It's a major driver in social media. But make no mistake, this is not how God views things. Harboring jealousy is a sin, and a channel through which other sins operate. No wonder Genesis 3 flows so naturally into Genesis 4.

The Bible sometimes compares God's people—God's family—to a body. When a body is healthy, all the cells and organs and parts work together, caring for each other and supporting each other and doing what is good for the whole. The body doesn't operate on a "survival of the fittest" model, where cells and organs fight for resources. That would be a disaster.

It *is* a disaster. It actually happens. There are diseases where some cells begin to function as if they were independent and selfish, expanding into other nearby cells, stealing resources, and causing trouble. We call those diseases "cancer." And we fear and hate cancer, because we know it produces nothing but sickness and potential death.

Jealousy is a relationship cancer. It destroys relationships—between brothers and sisters, parents and children, husbands and wives, between friends and colleagues, between members of the church. It led to the first murder. It does harm wherever it appears. It takes the beautiful image of our loving, giving God, and turns it into something ugly. If we want healthy families, and a healthy church family, we need to understand that jealousy is one of our worst enemies.

IV. Some practical suggestions

So what do we do about jealousy? It's not enough to say it's a bad thing. We need practical tools to help us recognize and fight it if we want our families, and our church family, to be healthy.

Genesis 4 makes us aware of the problem, but this chapter doesn't offer us a lot of solutions. For that we need to learn from the rest of Scripture. We don't have time to expand our study far and wide this morning, but I can offer a few suggestions that I think you'll recognize as consistent with the larger message of the Bible.

First, with jealousy as with cancer, we must pay attention to symptoms that something evil is growing inside us. Generally we're good at seeing the faults in others, but not so quick to recognize our own shortcomings. We need to do some honest self-assessment, watching for possible hints that jealousy is brewing in our hearts. Here are a few warning signs.

- *Constant comparison.* Do I often compare myself to others—comparing what we have, what we're like, what we can do, how we're treated—especially with people I know well? Occasional comparisons are natural. Constant comparison may signal a problem.
- *Chronic disappointment.* We're all disappointed sometimes—as every Vancouver Canuck fan knows. But do I find that I am frequently, even regularly disappointed—with my stuff, my job, my circumstances, my life? If I'm always dejected, as Cain "looked dejected," it may be a sign that I'm too focused on the things I don't have that others around me do.
- *Frequent anger.* Do I get angry often, especially in certain situations or around certain people? Do I have a general feeling of anger or upset that isn't connected with a specific injury or source—it's just a mood that I fall into? Cain teaches us that anger can reflect a jealous heart.
- *Difficulty loving, giving, and caring for someone.* Are there people in my life that I find it especially hard to help, to care about, to pray for? Am I annoyed when I see or hear that things are going well for them, and secretly glad when they struggle? If they need help, do I naturally respond, or just say "I'm not my brother's keeper"?

There may be more than one reason for these symptoms. But if I spot them in my life, I should probably look deeper, to be sure I'm not struggling with jealousy.

There are also some practical things you and I can do to protect ourselves from jealousy and to overcome it if it starts to put down roots.

- *Practice thankfulness.* Thankfulness is a discipline, and the Bible constantly commands it. It's appropriate, because God is good, and we *should* be thankful. It's also a powerful safeguard against jealousy. When I'm grateful for what I do have, I'm less bothered by what I don't have.
- *Pray for that person or group.* It's hard to stay resentful or uncaring about someone when you pray for them regularly. No wonder Jesus instructed us to pray for those we don't like! At first it can feel forced, but as I continue praying for them, inviting God's Spirit to help me, my own heart will begin to change.
- *Build a gifts-in-the-body perspective.* The Bible teaches Christians to see ourselves as members of a larger body, each with unique God-given gifts that make us special, each called to use those gifts for the good of the whole community. God has distributed His gifts wisely, knowing what is best for us and for the body. This applies to the church, and also to our families and other relationships. Embracing this truth cuts away the roots of jealousy.
- *Cultivate true worship.* When I recognize how wise and good my Lord is, I'm better equipped to trust Him. And as I find my joy and satisfaction in Him I am less controlled by the desire for other things that I don't have.

These things aren't as easy as they sound, and we can forget them when jealousy starts to whisper in our ears. The world around us will bombard us with very different messages. And we're all children of Adam and Eve, capable of making the same mistakes as Cain. Sin crouches at everyone's door, ready to pounce.

Still, there is good news. Today's reading ended with Cain, who is a warning for us all. But the Bible's story doesn't stop there. At the end of this chapter people begin to "call on the name of the Lord" (4:26), to practice true thankfulness and worship. And Adam and Eve will have another son, whose family will lead to Abraham, and eventually to David, and ultimately to Jesus. God doesn't abandon people when they fall. He is in the business of forgiving, healing, helping, and restoring.

We don't have to fight the battle against jealousy and other sins all by ourselves. If we will let Him, God will work in us, transforming us into the image of Jesus, who perfectly reflects the goodness and love and selflessness of the Heavenly Father. That's what the Christian life is about. That's the Bible's invitation to you and me today and every day. May God give us grace to receive it, for the sake of our families, our church, and for His Kingdom.