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Murder at the Altar

Genesis 4:1-17

May 3, 2009

Peter Hiett

[Peter looks through the offering plate and picks up a check.]

Peter: Wow, Jonathan - \$500 this week! What a wonderful gift.

[Peter takes another check from the offering plate.]

Peter: Duncan - \$500 this week.

[Peter walks to Duncan, and gives his check back.]

Peter: Here, take it! We don't want it!

[Duncan looks dejected and angry.]

Peter: Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be happy? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at your door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it!

Genesis 4:1 *"Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.'"*

Now that's really a big deal, for in the last chapter, God said, *"The seed of the woman will crush the head of the snake."* Cain means "gotten." It may also mean "smith," as in "metal worker." Cain is a big deal, a man, hard like iron and this could be the seed. Eve says, *"I've gotten a man with the help of the Lord."* Or perhaps, *"I've gotten a man equal with the Lord."* Or perhaps even, *"I've gotten a man, namely the Lord."* Whatever the case, Eve is pretty excited about Cain.

Genesis 4:2-17 *"And again, she bore his brother Abel. (Abel means 'vapor' or 'weakness' or 'nothingness' or 'breath') Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time..."*

Literally in Hebrew, this reads "At the end of days," which is utterly fascinating and mysterious. But translators don't like mysterious, so they change it. But it says, "At the end of days..."

"...Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you

not be accepted (literally: “lifted”)? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” And the Lord said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.” Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground (An “Adam” driven from “Adamah.” A man, ungrounded.), and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.” Then the Lord said to him, “Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”

Nod means “wandering,” so Cain literally “settles in unsettledness.”

“Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch.”

Cain, the unsettled, built a city of unsettledness in the land of unsettledness. And this is not rest, in the image of God.

Well, right off the bat, we learn several things... rather counter-intuitive things:

1. Doing good things doesn’t mean good things will happen to you... at least in this world (outside the garden). Doing good things may very likely get you killed - like Abel, like Jesus. And yet you’ll be “lifted,” says Yahweh. *“If you do well, will you not be lifted?”* (Whatever that means.)
2. We learn that trying to be good can make you very bad. In all recorded history, this is the first instance of religion, and it’s also the first instance of murder. In the last chapter, God makes a sacrifice. In this chapter, man makes a sacrifice, then a man becomes a sacrifice.
3. It’s very difficult for us to judge a good deed from the outside, objectively. Both fruit offering and meat offering were prescribed in Israel. Objectively, they were both acceptable. It’s not like God hates farmers and loves ranchers. Objectively, they were both probably worth just about the same - \$500 or so.

So you’ve got to wonder: “What makes an offering good or bad?”

And that begs an even deeper question: “Why are they giving offerings at all?” I mean, we’ve just read how God created everything with a word, and everything He creates is good. Does God need a sheep or a goat? Does he need a sack of grain? Does God need your \$100? Is he short of cash? Does God need our money? He just made everything with a word... He has everything!

What do you give the man who has everything? Nothing. You can only really give your nothing, unless you think you're really something.

In Romans 11:35, Paul writes: *"Who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"* Well, probably not Abel. "Abel" means "vapor," "weakness" or "emptiness." He's like an empty vessel, pipe or conduit. I imagine that whatever he gives, he knows was first given to him. So Abel's gift is literally a gift from "weakness." He's able because he's not able. That's Abel.

But Cain... Cain is a big deal, and I bet he thinks he's even the promised seed. Maybe he thinks he could give *"a gift that might be repaid."* Because of Cain's sorrow, anger and envy, it's clear that Cain expected to be repaid with gratitude, validation and love. Cain expected to earn God's love. But who's *"given a gift to God that it might be repaid? For from Him, to Him and through Him are all things."*

Did Cain make that grain? Did Cain make the Cain who farmed the grain? Can you make grain? Can you make a lamb? Can you make money? (Kind of.) Can you make the you that made the money? We say, "I made good choices." Who made you that made those choices? To have a choice, there must be a chooser, and who makes the chooser?

Romans 9:16 *"So it depends not on human will or exertion."*

But not according to Cain. He must've felt responsible for himself and his gift, and therefore he expected something in return. And when he didn't get it, he used his "knowledge of good and evil" to judge God, judge Abel, and then judge himself. He grew angry at God. Where's God? How do you take out your anger on God? Does God have flesh and blood? Cain took out his anger on Abel. How do you take out your anger at God? Here's how: You judge someone "last and least"... *"And whatever you do to the last and least..."* Well, Cain slayed Abel.

God had said, *"If you do well, will you not be lifted?"* So Abel was well and lifted. Another way to say that would be "weakness" was "strong"... "Humility" was "exalted." I doubt Cain could understand that; but he could see it and want it and envy it. Cain envied Abel at the altar (humble Abel). In our faith, envy is absurd... competition is absurd, literally absurd.

There was once a rabbi who, overcome with a sense of humility before God's magnificent creation, threw himself before the altar of the temple and cried, "I am nobody! I am nobody!"

The cantor (choir director), observing the rabbi from the rear of the synagogue, was moved by the rabbi's humility and devotion. He, too, joined the rabbi at the altar, crying, "I am nobody! I am nobody!"

Then the janitor, sweeping the floors in the hall, heard the cries of the two religious men, and similarly moved by their devotion, also joined them at the altar crying out "I am nobody! I am nobody!"

At which point the cantor turned to the rabbi, and indicating the janitor, remarked, "Look who thinks he's nobody."

Jesus said, *"If any would be first, He must be last of all."* He said *"Many who are first will be last, and the last first."* So if you want to be first at being last, you're really first, you're actually last. But as soon as you really think you're last, you're first... but then you're last.

I mean, that must continue till we stop judging who's last and who's first. Absurd until we stop playing that game. Absurd until we're all first and last somehow. Absurd until we finally hear a voice from the throne, the voice of the Lamb that was slain, crying, *"I am the first and the last – Alpha and Omega."*

Cain envied Abel. God said, "If you do well... Cain." That is: "What does this have to do with Abel, Cain?" Cain envied Abel and produced Hell.

There's a Jewish legend that an angel appeared to an old merchant and said "I'll grant you whatever you wish, but whatever you wish, I will grant double to your rival on the other side of the street." So the old man thought and said, "I wish to be blind in one eye."

When we envy, we turn all blessings into curses. We compete with our neighbor, and so curse our neighbor. In order to be first, we make everyone else last. If I want to be the best preacher in town, I want all others to be worse. Then I end up wishing everyone to Hell and God to Hell, and in the end myself. When I envy, I want to be first and best, and so make others last and least. And Jesus says, *"Whatever you do to the last and least, you do to me."*

So where was Jesus when Cain slayed Abel? He was in Abel. So trying to impress God, he murdered God (like a sacrificial lamb). Cain envied Abel and so wished Abel to Hell, which was wishing God to Hell, and then wishing himself to Hell, for Cain is alone, and Cain is afraid... of what? Being murdered. As if "the judgment you pronounce is the judgment you receive." God tells Cain to wander in the wilderness and Cain builds a city: A city of disobedience, unrest and fear; a city of envy and competition, wrapped in religion. You know the most religious city on Earth is Jerusalem. It's also the most divided and violent. It slaughtered Jesus, the Lamb. Jerusalem... we need a new one... a New Jerusalem... one not built by Cain.

Well, Cain kills Abel and God punishes Cain. And Cain says, *"My punishment is more than I can bear"* (*nawsaw*). Maybe Cain now sees himself as *"last and least."* So maybe Jesus is somehow with him. God puts a mark on Cain: Cain is guilty of sin, but protected by grace. The mark – the sign (*"oath"* in Hebrew) – is the mark of guilt covered by grace. The next place the word appears in Scripture it's describing a rainbow, which is the mark – the sign – of God's covenant of grace.

In Scripture, there are quite a few murderers marked with the covenant of grace... religious big shots who envied and murdered, and yet were marked:

Moses – killed an Egyptian; wandered in the wilderness; received the sign of the covenant

David – envied and murdered

St. Paul – religious Pharisee that dragged Christians to their death – *"Chief of sinners"*

Biblically, you can't be a worse sinner than Paul, and he writes, *"I bear on my body the mark of Christ"* – the Lamb.

Well, iron-man Cain must have thought he was really something, so he had really produced something and thus expected payment in return. But vapor-boy Abel must have thought he was more like “nothing,” yet with capacity to give something. So he gave a lamb, but he didn’t make the lamb, own the lamb. He could only slaughter the lamb. He didn’t create the good, so he didn’t expect to earn the good. He couldn’t earn God’s approval, favor, or love. He could only receive love and give love – all gift. So I doubt he gave in order to get. I doubt he gave for some reward. So why’d he give?

Perhaps giving was its own reward.

You know, if I give in order to get, I’m not giving... I’m getting (I’m purchasing).

If I love for another reason, I’m not loving, for love is the reason.

If I do good for a reward, I’m not doing good, for the good is its own reward.

And so, the best things that are done, are done for no reason... for they are the reason. We are to love for no reason, because love is the reason. God is love, and Jesus is the reason: the Logos, the Word.

The best offering is given for no reason, because it is the reason:

Like the lady who dumped a year’s worth of ointment on Jesus’ feet. He said it was like the greatest offering.

But why’d she do it? What did she hope to get out of that?

Like the sheep before the Throne. Jesus said, *“You clothed me, fed me, loved me.”*

But they don’t even remember it. So why’d they do it?

Like Jesus said, *“When you give, don’t even let your right hand know what your left hand is doing.”*

So why do it?

Like when I was a young father, I’d sneak in the kid’s bedroom every night and kiss them on the cheek. They never knew it.

So why’d I do it?

Like why does God love you? Why does He give you your next heartbeat? Why did He make you and why does He sustain you? I think He sneaks in your room every night and kisses you on the cheek. Why is God good to you? Why does God love you?

There is no “why” for God’s love, because LOVE is who God is, and Heaven is where, when and how God is. So Heaven is not a bribe to get people to be nice.

C.S. Lewis writes:

Heaven alters nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to.

People think:

“I must be good to get to Heaven”... but being good is Heaven.

“I must love in order to get to Heaven”... but love is Heaven.

“I must give an offering to get to Heaven”... but Heaven is a continuous offering.

So if you hate loving people, and you hate forgiving people...

If giving gifts to people that don't deserve those gifts gets in your craw...

If you hate mercy...

...Well, you might as well just go to Hell, because you're not going to enjoy Heaven in the least bit. In fact, Heaven will burn you like the most intense of flames. It is a flame, an eternal flame... the unadulterated, unmitigated presence of God, who is love. You might as well just go to Hell, because you don't understand. You might as well go stand in the field with the older brother Cain. If you want payment for your offering, go stand in the middle of nowhere and nothing, because that's what your offering is worth: nowhere and nothing.

You see, if God were to validate Cain's gift, He'd be validating Cain's Hell. When God had no regard for Cain's offering, He was loving Cain with a perfect love.

Why do you give offerings? Why do you do good deeds?

God asks: “Peter Hiett, why do you preach? Is it for approval? Is it for accolades? Is it for a salary? Is it to be best, so others are worst? Is it to prove something? Peter, is it to gain my favor and my love? Oh Peter, that must be Hell. Peter, could you preach my word like a bird sings its song? Because it is your nature?”

See, I think the last few years have been a painful but tremendous gift. God is liberating and God is asking: “Peter, will you sing my song when there is no reward but the song itself? If you will, your countenance is lifted and Heaven is at hand.”

When your obedience feels like suffering, I think God is asking: “Will you love when there's no reward but love itself? No reward but me?”

In other words: “Am I enough?”

Or this way: “All things are in me.”

Brennan Manning tells about a New Year's Day in 1969 in St. Ramey, France. He was a monk with the "Little Brothers of Jesus." He sat with six other monks in an old stone house. Each of them was committed to living a contemplative life among the poor. The days devoted to manual labor and the nights wrapped in silence and prayer. Their lives were an offering.

On this New Year's morning, the talk at the breakfast table was very animated, and soon turned to the topic of their jobs in town. The German brother remarked that their wages were sub-standard (60cents/hour). Brennan commented that their employers were never seen at mass. The French brother suggested that this showed hypocrisy. In disgust, the monks concluded that their self-sufficient, voracious employers slept all Sunday, and satiated their lusts, never thinking of God, while they themselves gave their very lives as living offerings.

At the end of the table sat one old monk named Dominique Voilaume. The whole time, he never opened his mouth. Brennan looked and saw tears running down his cheeks. He said, "Dominique, what's the matter?" His voice barely audible, "Ils ne comprennent pas." "They don't understand." It was all he said.

Jesus was "lifted up" and there he cried, "Father, forgive. They don't understand."

God said, "*Cain, if you do well, will you not be lifted?*" Abel did well, and so he must have been lifted. His countenance was lifted. Doing well is love, and love is freedom. But we can only love – truly love – by faith.

Hebrews 11:4 "*By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain.*"

By faith... faith in what?

Hebrews 11:13,16 "*These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar... Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.*"

Abel had faith in God's grace: that God's word would conquer, the seed would crush the head of the snake, and God would build for them a city – a new Eden, a New Jerusalem. Cain built a city with envy, and Abel had faith in a city whose builder and maker is God, who is love. That faith "lifted" Abel. Faith, hope and love "lifted" Abel.

You see, "doing well" was its own reward. It lifted Abel not only into Heaven up there, but Heaven into Abel down here. So Abel was no longer controlled by this world. When you love, you belong to another world. Abel must have looked like Jesus, and it made Cain jealous and envious.

You know the chief priests and religious leaders crucified Jesus out of "envy." Perhaps all of our sin is a form of envy. Eve envied God, and so wanted the "*fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*"

All our sin is envy, and it's our sin that crucified Jesus, that slaughtered the Lamb. *"Behold the lamb, who takes away the sin of the world."* Abel offered a lamb, and Jesus is the Lamb. God said, *"If you do well,"* and we all assume that Cain could do well. *"If you do well,"* and we all assume that we could do well. But that all depends on whether or not we have a lamb to offer.

Now I know on one level in ancient history, Cain and Abel's offerings were the same, and yet not at all. The story hints at it. The New Testament reveals it: Abel offered his offering in faith. And *"what is faith? The substance of things hoped for,"* and we hope in Christ. So faith is the substance of Christ in us. *"Christ dwells in our hearts by faith,"* writes Paul. *"So faith in us, is Christ in us,"* writes Augustine.

You see: FAITH is a gift. Faith is the presence of the slaughtered Lamb, and that slaughtered Lamb is the perfect offering. If we haven't received that offering, we can't give that offering, and yet that offering is all around us.

Everything was created with a word, and that word is Jesus. *"That word became flesh and we beheld his glory."* We beheld His glory when He was lifted on a cross and slain for the sins of the world.

At the end of the Bible – the End of Days – and the beginning of the 7th Day, John looks and sees a slaughtered lamb standing on the throne. We overcome by *"the blood of the lamb and the word of our testimony."* Cain, you can only overcome sin and rule sin by the *"blood of the lamb and the word of your testimony."*

In the Revelation, John sees the lamb on the throne; then John sees the wine press at the fury of the wrath of God. I think it's a picture of the cross. Blood flows from the winepress and fills the land to the depth of a horse's bridle... a war horse.

Cain and Abel were the first war, and in the end, all wars will cease, they will all grind to a halt in a river of lamb's blood: God's mercy. Yet even now, God's mercy is all around you, like oxygen, but because we don't believe it, we won't receive it, and we won't give it. We think it's a limited commodity, so we hoard it and try to control it.

We're like the people that preach about oxygen, but are afraid to breathe it.

"God loves you"

"Trust in His grace"

"It's life"

"It's free"

No, breathe it in, and breathe it out. You can't make it; you can't own it. It's not yours, Cain... and yet it's all yours.

St. Paul puts it this way in I Corinthians 3:

“Brothers... you are still in the flesh... for there is jealousy. One says, ‘I belong to Paul.’ Another, ‘I belong to Apollos.’ Let no one boast in men, for all things are yours: Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life and death or the present or the future, all are yours, and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s.”

You see, Cain thought God’s love was limited, so Cain thought it had to be won, purchased or stolen. So Cain killed Abel; he killed the last and least; he killed Christ and Christ bled an ocean of love. The problem isn’t a lack of love. The problem is that you need to breathe, and you’re full of yourself. Cain, you’re full of yourself. Breathe out, like Abel, the breath. And breathe in: you have to be empty to be full of God. You have to be weak to be strong. You have to receive love to give love. You must believe God’s offering to give back an acceptable offering, an offering to God. And where’s God? “Cain, he’s in your brother, and when you give that offering, you’re lifted. You “enter the joy of your master,” your dad.”

Imagine if your dad was Bill Gates, and every morning, he gave you a million dollars and said, “Hey, spend what you need, but go walk the streets of Denver, and if you see anyone that might like some money, give ‘em 20 or 30 grand. And don’t worry, I won’t run out. I’ll give you more tomorrow morning.” Does that sound like fun? Would that “lift your spirits?” Now, some might not believe you – they’d say “I don’t need charity.” But if any took it, they’d change.

Well, your father is God, and He hasn’t asked you to pass out unlimited money. He’s asked you to pass out something far more valuable – unlimited grace... *“New every morning.”* And there’s nothing that can lift your spirits quite like looking someone in the eye and saying “In the name of Jesus, your sins are forgiven you.” Now, some might not believe you, so they’ll keep envying, murdering and wandering... but that’s not up to you, and not why you sing the song. Some may get insulted, for to receive mercy is to admit that you need it. Some may not receive the offering, but some may. And when they do, they change. For the one forgiven much, loves much. And loving much is the image of God.

Now pay attention: Genesis 4:3 *“At the end of days,”* Cain brought an offering, and Abel brought an offering. It was a firstborn of the flock (that could be sheep or goat). Jesus is the firstborn of all creation, and our Passover lamb.

Hebrews 12:22 *“You’ve come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem ... and the sprinkled blood speaks better than the blood of Abel.”*

Jesus is the spotless lamb. And Jesus is even the scapegoat that wanders into the wilderness, bearing our sin. He became sin for us. It’s *“more than we can bear.”* Perhaps He became Cain for us, and Abel in us. He is the grace of God – the perfect offering in us. He makes us able. He bears our sin and makes us able.

Genesis 4:3 *“At the end of days,”* we see judgment and grace. We see Christ on the cross, and we see a slaughtered lamb on the throne. We see the love of God poured out, and it creates us in the image of God.

Now pay attention:

Genesis 4:25 – 5:3 *“And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, “For God has appointed another seed for me instead of Abel, whom Cain killed.” And as for Seth, to him also a son was born; and he named him Enosh. Then men began to call on the name of the Lord. This is the book of the genealogy of Adam. In the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created. And Adam lived one hundred and thirty years, and begot a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.”*

Seth is your grandfather. He is made in the image of Adam, in the image of God, on the 6th day, through the blood of the lamb, offered at the “*end of days*” as He cried, “*It is finished!*”

Now pay attention: On the Passover, Jesus took bread (that’s the fruit offering – grain), and He broke it, saying, “This is my body given to you. Take and eat.” And in the same way, after supper, having given thanks, He took the cup, saying, “This is the new covenant in my blood” (that’s the lamb’s blood). Bread & wine – the harvest of the earth (Rev. 14:14-20). And God knew what He was doing all along. Believe the Gospel, and you will do well.

Communion.

Benediction

Remember the old monk Dominique? The following year, Father Dominique learned he was dying of cancer. He moved to Paris, and got a job as a night watchman. Every morning after work, he’d go to the park, sit on a bench, and hang out with drifters, winos, and dirty old men. He never criticized. He laughed, told stories, and shared his candy... and accepted them into his heart. One day, they asked him to talk about himself. He told them: “Jesus loved them tenderly and stubbornly, and Jesus came for people like them.” One morning, He didn’t appear. He’d died in the obscurity of the slum. They found his diary, and his last entry was this:

All that is not the love of God has no meaning for me. I can truthfully say that I have no interest in anything but the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. If God wants it to, my life will be useful through my word and witness. If he wants it to, my life will bear fruit through my prayers and sacrifices. But the usefulness of my life is his concern, not mine. It would be indecent of me to worry about that.

He was buried in a pine box, with a simple wooden cross over his grave. The inscription: “Dominique Voilaume, a witness to Jesus Christ.” More than 7,000 people from all over Europe attended his funeral.

Believe the Gospel, and you will do well. You may not ever see it. In this life, you will probably be unable to judge it, but His word does not return void. You will do well, because God will do well, in you.