

Genesis 4:1-16 Resolving Anger

Introduction

You are walking down Brook Street in the centre of Broughty Ferry and notice a mum pass you with her young baby. What thoughts do you think- if any- about the potential in that little boy or girl? They might be a future Scientist who will produce a breakthrough in the treatment and possible cure of a serious disease afflicting many people today? They might be a future sports star we will one day watch on TV at an Olympic Games or some other sporting championship. They might be a doctor or dentist; a shop assistant or clerical worker or one of a vast number of potential needed occupations in society. The potential for good in society is vast. The little people starting formal education this year have so many opportunities before them but how many will realise their potential in the coming years? Sadly not every beautiful baby will become a productive member of society. There are some who will grow up making bad choices, that in the worst case scenarios could lead to imprisonment or an early grave through substance abuse, for example. It is encouraging to hear stories of people realising their dreams in their careers or other areas of life after years of struggles or hard work. But what about you and me? How are we coping with life's 'ups' and 'downs'? The days when everything is wonderful, to others when things could barely get worse –to the many somewhere in between! It is so often in the times of adversity that we grow closest to God and grow in our maturity as a human being created in the image of God. The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 is incredibly brief. At one level it is so short and simple that we quickly can read it, pass a judgement on their choices and move on to the next chapter of the book. However, there is something about this story that draws us back to look at it and reflect time and again. There are questions here that challenge us about our choices today? Am I like Cain or like Abel in my choices? I am not referring to Cain's appalling act of reckless folly in the later part of the story – I trust none of us will ever be tempted to think that extreme violence will ever solve any of our personal problems. What is important was the choices made by these brothers in the earlier part of the story. In this respect the story can become like a mirror in which, potentially, we can view the choices you and I might make and their possible consequences.

1. The God-given potential in each new life (Genesis 4:1-2a)

(a) The fall that overshadowed the birth (Genesis 3) It is an exciting time for Adam and Eve when they become aware that another human being is growing in Eve's womb –their first child. In the previous chapter of Genesis was an account of the darkest day so far in human history when a barrier of human sinfulness came between our first ancestors and their Creator. The perfect fellowship they had enjoyed was shattered when they failed to maintain their trust in God and listened to the voice of the tempter who persuaded them that God had been unduly restrictive in the boundaries He had placed around their lives. There was only one simple restriction recorded in Genesis 2:15-17: *The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*¹⁶ *And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden;*¹⁷ *but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.'* The issue here was not what kind of fruit was on that tree –rather it was this: would Adam and Eve trust God's goodness and grace sufficiently not to transgress the boundaries He had marked out for their lives? Exactly the same issue of trust is at the heart of our relationship with God and with other human beings. How far can you and I trust each other in this church? And how far can you trust

other people in your families, your workplace or any other context you care to name. Any social context with an absence of trust between the persons present will be a difficult place to live or work. Adam and Eve failed to exercise the self control they ought to have exhibited that day. You and I too have occasions in our own lives when we wish we had said or not said, done or not done things that cannot be reversed. Is there hope for such people who fail? Yes there is! Our Creator God is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who died in our place on the cross so that guilty sinners might be forgiven, cleansed and renewed, transformed within by the blessed Holy Spirit to be the man or woman He has planned us to be. God had promised Adam and Eve that a future descendant of theirs would be the Saviour of the world (Genesis 3:15: *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*) The future was not hopeless, despite the dark clouds of difficulty that overshadowed them from that day; instead God gave them a hope and a future. No-one is past redemption; no-one is without need of forgiveness for our own failures; therefore, with humility we look within our own hearts and rejoice at the availability of the wonderful grace and mercy of God; but we must also look at other people and see the potential grace and mercy of God at work in them also. There are no people we can permanently write off as totally hopeless cases. Nor are there any who need never experience the grace of God because they have never failed (apart from Jesus Hebrews 4:15)! If you are here feeling condemned may these words from Hebrews 4:14-16 encourage you: *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.*¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin.*¹⁶ **Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.** However, if you are feeling spiritually complacent take heed. God expects us to take Him seriously and heed His voice in the choices we make about our lives, including the requirement for self-control when our potential words and actions might be those we would later regret.

(b) **The new life that presented hope for the future** (Genesis 4:1-2) *Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, 'With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.'*² *Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.* Eve's words could be more clearly translated here. The words *with the help of...* are added to the English text by the translators to help with reading the text. The name Cain sounds like the Hebrew word *to acquire*. Martin Luther's translation may seem at first glance surprising. 'She said: I have received a man, namely (or even) the Lord', that is in the birth of Cain Eve believed that God had sent the divinely promised Saviour mentioned in Genesis 3:15. As the divine name used here was not understood or explained until the time of Moses (in Exodus 6:2-3: *God also said to Moses, 'I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by My name the Lord I did not make Myself known to them.*) It is likely Eve was using the title *Lord* in the sense of 'one who brings into being', 'gives life' or 'delivers'. In modern English, therefore, we might translate this verse with Eve saying: *I have brought forth a man, even the deliverer* (J. M. Boice, *Genesis*, Vol.1, pp. 200-201). In other words Eve had the highest hopes for her first-born child. What a tragedy her hopes would not be realised. Are you and I fulfilling the potential God has given to us? It is easy to notice the shortcomings of others, but do I have things I need to work on just now? If the answer is 'yes' –what steps do I need to take?

2. **The gift given by Abel and Cain to God** (Genesis 4:2b-5a)

(a) **The background to the offerings** (Genesis 4:2b) *Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.* Although Adam and Eve would have many other children over the course of their long lives this section of the book of Genesis focuses on the two eldest children. All that we know

about their lives from childhood into adulthood is contained in this sentence! Abel was a shepherd who took care of his sheep and possibly cattle as well. Cain, by contrast grew crops for food. In a context where the parents at least had lived on a vegetarian diet for many years, it is possible that the growing of crops for food was valued more highly as an occupation and chose it for their elder son, but this is far from certain. There is so much of the story we know nothing about. We must assume that their lives were pleasant and ordinary and that nothing of significance to us took place prior to the events shortly to be narrated in Genesis chapter four. Therefore, it is fair to say that both young men had the potential to bring offerings to God with which He would be pleased and that both equally had the opportunity to live in a way that reflected His values. Each one of us likewise is responsible for the choices we make. Have you given God first place in your life? Are you choosing to follow Him? This is the most important decision you will ever make.

(b) **The nature of the offerings brought by them** (Genesis 4:3-4a) *In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord.⁴ But Abel also brought an offering – fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.* We must be clear that until the exodus from Egypt and the formation of the nation of Israel in the time of Moses and Aaron, a long time into the future, there was no detailed prescription for what should be offered in acts of worship to the Lord. It is most probable that this was a regular activity they undertook so whatever guidance God had given them would have been known and interpreted by Cain and Abel in the context of their daily lives. Any comments on why one sacrifice was acceptable and the other not must be tentative because we read what happened in the light of later guidance from God concerning the sacrificial system. It does seem likely that Cain offered good quality produce, but it was not the first or the best quality produce that appeared on his cultivated land. Abel brought the most highly prized portions *from some of the firstborn of his flock* (Genesis 4:4a). Leviticus 2 contains guidance from God about grain offerings. Twice in Leviticus there is this guidance: 2:12: *You may bring them to the Lord as an offering of the first-fruits...* and 2:14: *If you bring a grain offering of first-fruits to the Lord...* Leviticus 3:3-5 explains that the fatty portions of the animal carcass. *From the fellowship offering you are to bring a food offering to the Lord: the internal organs and all the fat that is connected to them* (Leviticus 3:3). Only God knows if a simpler form of that guidance had been given to Adam and Eve and their descendants.

(c) **How God viewed the offerings they brought** (Genesis 4:4b-5a) *The Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering,⁵ but on Cain and his offering He did not look with favour.* The Old Testament does not give an explanation of the choices God made on this occasion. Is this because God wanted the first readers and hearers of this story to ask questions of themselves and their own responses to the loving kindness of God? The principle of offering either *some of the fruits of the soil* or *fat portions from an animal* under the care of the worshipper was that either form of sacrifice was then acceptable but deep down it was the attitude of the one bringing the sacrifice that mattered. The question comes back to us: when I give of my money, my time and my talents in God's service –so I do it willingly or grudgingly? Do I give generously or reluctantly? Do I offer it to please God or primarily to please other people so that I am seen to do the 'right thing'? In II Corinthians 9:6-7 Paul wrote this advice to the Church in Corinth about their attitude towards giving to God and His work. *Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful [an enthusiastic] giver.* It does appear if I understand the story correctly that Cain was going through the motions of worship and service. What he was doing looked good on the outside, but in his heart he was less than committed to what he

was doing. In other words even before this incident his attitude towards God and possibly towards other people might have needed some attention.

3. **The Context of Cain's anger** (Genesis 4:5b-7)

(a) **When things don't go my way** (Genesis 4:5b) *So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.* Yet the focus of this story is not on the offerings and whether God accepted them or not, but on Cain and his response to things not going his own way. The question then comes back to you and to me –how do we respond when things don't go our way? How do we react when someone expresses an opinion with which we disagree? How do we respond when someone's actions are very different to how we would have acted in the same situation? How do we react when God appears to decline our request in prayer, or the plans we would like to take forward in church or some other setting? For the vast majority of us the answer will begin something like this: it depends...! How committed we were to an idea or agenda? Or maybe how the issues were handled or how someone expressed a contrary viewpoint; Part of maturity as an adult is being willing and able to handle our disappointments and setbacks. No-one will have everything going their way, in all circumstances throughout life –it is totally impossible! Sometimes with hindsight we are glad not to get from God things we asked for; or grateful that sometimes circumstances have turned out better in ways we might not have anticipated. If you or I have a problem with our self control in reaction to the words or actions of other people –maybe it would be good when alone before God to ask why it might be and what we can do to enable us to exercise greater self-control. Too often we can get angry with something or someone but never take the time calmly to analyse why we reacted the way we did? Sometimes we need someone we trust to help us reflect on how we are getting on

(b) **The space God provided for reflection** (Genesis 4:6-7) (i) **God's open questions** *Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?'* There can be a place for allowing someone we respect and value as a friend or family member to ask us what may turn out to be challenging open questions. Sometimes we don't stop to face the 'why' questions. We are creatures of habit. In certain contexts we assume roles very easily. In relationships there are some people we naturally like and get on with as if we had known them for years and others with whom it is a real effort to get on and an afternoon or evening in their company might be completely exhausting! If someone naturally by their temperament or opinions seems to rub us up the wrong way whenever we meet we have to think and work very hard how to get over the impasse and find a more constructive way of getting on. However, the first stage is seeking to understand why we have a problem. Sometimes we think we know why but our perception may not be entirely accurate. In the book of Jonah the prophet was extremely disgruntled that the wicked people of Nineveh had repented of their sins and turned to God. He had been thrilled to preach hellfire and judgement hoping for no response to confirm how deserving they were of God's punishment! In Jonah 4:4 it states: *But the Lord replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"* Jonah then retired outside the city under the shade of a large plant that God had caused to grow to shield him from the fierce rays of the sun. He chose to allow the plant to die so Jonah missed his sunshade. Then God repeated the question to Jonah about his anger. God wanted to challenge him over his attitude problem. He was really valuing the life of the plant but had no concern for the welfare of the people and the animals in the city of Nineveh- was that a correct priority? Sometimes you and I need to reflect on our lives and ask: 'should I have this attitude towards this situation?' If the attitude is right is my reason for thinking or speaking or acting this way correct? We can sometimes do the right thing for the wrong reason, or vice versa. God wanted Cain here to stop and think

through the choices before him prior to speaking or taking action. (ii) **God's encouraging attitude** (Genesis 4:7a) *If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?* What happened next was not a foregone conclusion. Even within the sovereign purposes of God there is more than one way by which God's plans for His world can be fulfilled. There are easier ways and harder ones sometimes, but even a past failure does not rule out future usefulness in His service. Does anyone need that encouragement today? There may be someone for whom you are praying to come back to the Lord who is backslidden –keep on praying for them, the door of restoration to fellowship with God is still open (iii) **God's serious warning** (Genesis 4:7b) *But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.* The visual image here is like the robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho portrayed so vividly in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). They waited ready to pounce on an unsuspecting victim. God's warning to Cain was very clear. You will not have unlimited opportunities to sort out your attitude problem. If you are not willing to address this problem now the situation could become significantly worse. I don't think when God uttered those words to Cain that this young man had already decided to kill his brother. The initial thoughts may have crossed his mind but I doubt it was a settled conviction at that stage. The problem was that if he didn't root out his resentment of Abel it would fester and fester until his emotions erupted out of control. What began as an attitude of resentment towards God for not accepting his offering was twisted into hatred for his brother because he had been honoured by God in the way Abel had approached that opportunity for worship. In our lives there are a small number of times when the choices we make have a major impact on the pathway that we take possibly for many years to come. We need to think very carefully at such times because wrong choices are sometimes very hard to recover from. Is there an issue today that you need to address and resolve to choose the pathway most pleasing to God? If so remember to put Him first – otherwise other things will crowd into our time for God and our lives will move away from Him with possibly unintended negative consequences.

4. **The Consequences of Cain's anger** (Genesis 4:8-16)

(a) **Ruin or reconciliation?** (Genesis 4:8) ⁸ *Now Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let's go out to the field.'* While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. I am sure we would like to think that if God gave us a personal warning to rethink our attitude or our proposed course of action that we might make such changes? Yet did not Jesus warn Peter of the need to be careful and not complacent in thinking he could stand with Jesus at the Last Supper, yet within less than twelve hours Peter had denied several times that he had no association with Jesus (Luke 22:31-34)? Paul reminded the congregation in Ephesus that there is a rightful place for anger. Ephesians 4:26-27 states: *'In your anger do not sin'; do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,* ²⁷ *and do not give the devil a foothold.* There are situations that happen in life with which we should be angry –if our conscience is operating! Observing an elderly person being assaulted on the street in front of you by an assailant seeking to rob them of their bag should cause an observer to be angry! Yet Paul's thoughtful words remind us that our legitimate anger must be controlled and any action resulting from it proportionate to the need of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We are urged to process issues related to relationship breakdowns the same day if at all possible. And in all things to prevent an opportunity for the cause of Christ to be harmed by our failure to be proactive in addressing a situation that has arisen; Why did Cain not heed the warning from God? We will never know the answer to this important question. Did his pride get in the way so that he was unwilling to admit he was guilty of hastily acting in an improper way?

Whatever the reason was this situation became a tragedy with the murder of his brother Abel. His resentment of Abel's acceptance by God was too much for him to handle. I trust that all of us will avoid ever being remotely close to behaving in this appalling manner. However, I have come across Christians who would never forgive a fellow believer for something said or done years earlier. When we profess to believe in a Gospel of grace we have a responsibility to seek to enable our behavioural choices to increasingly reflect the choices of Jesus. Is there another person you need to speak to about improving your relationship with them? Or a situation where you know you need to act differently in the future? If God brings something to our minds we need to ask Him for the strength to work through that issue until it is resolved.

(b) **Restless or repentant?** (Genesis 4:9-16) ⁹ *Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' 'I don't know,' he replied. 'Am I my brother's keeper?'* ¹⁰ *The Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.'* ¹¹ *Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.* ¹² *When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.'* ¹³ *Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is more than I can bear.'* ¹⁴ *Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.'* ¹⁵ *But the Lord said to him, 'Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.'* *Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him.* ¹⁶ *So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.* Some years ago a member of the infamous Great Train robbery gang Ronnie Biggs returned to the United Kingdom from Brazil where he had gone to hide after the gang had committed a heinous crime for which they had been sentenced to a long period of imprisonment. In an interview with the BBC Biggs acknowledged that though he had lived in Brazil for many years he never felt safe or secure because he knew that at any time the hand of a British police officer might tap him on the shoulder and declare that he was under arrest. Here there was a fear factor, but in the few features on his life I saw on TV there appeared to be an absence of repentance; an absence of a willingness to make some kind of restitution to the victims of this crime. He was certainly restless but not repentant. How do you and I react when we are in the wrong? Are we willing to acknowledge our shortcomings and work on putting right what we have done or said wrong? If not why not? Amongst the people of God we must always be willing to pray to God for wisdom when we need it (James 1:5). There are times when confession 'I'm sorry' is absolutely the right thing to say. Proverbs 28:13-14 reminds us: *Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.* ¹⁴ *Blessed is the one who always trembles before God, but whoever hardens their heart falls into trouble.* There are times when confrontation with grace as well as truth is required because we are interested in winning over the person more than the argument – I hope?! Paul's words in Colossians 3:12-14 are apt words on which to finish this message: *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.* ¹³ *Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.* ¹⁴ *And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.* When we live in the light of such words of Scripture I hope and pray that each of us when placed in difficult circumstances can successfully resolve any anger issues that may arise, for Jesus' sake, Amen

Week 6 Genesis 4:1-16 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Q1. In what kinds of situations do people in general find it difficult to maintain self-control and avoid 'loosing it'? At a more personal level where appropriate, in what kind of situations do you struggle to retain your composure and why?

Q2. In the light of Genesis 4:1-16 what do you think was Cain's 'problem' and why did he eventually make such a tragic mistake?

Q3. How did God attempt to get Cain to address his anger issues in Genesis 4:6-7? Is there anything we can learn from this passage in how we ought to resolve conflicts with other people?

Q4. *Am I my 'brother's keeper'?* said Cain (Genesis 4:9b); What answer was he expecting from God and why? Why ought we to give a very different answer (See Matthew 25:31-46)

Q5. What advice does Paul give in Ephesians 4:26-27 about handling anger issues?

Q6. What do I need to take away from the passage to work on? (private question)