

SESSION 35: THE WAILING VOICE OF INNOCENT BLOOD, PART ONE

Genesis 4:9-16

July 21, 2024

PREFACE

As the story of Creation's first family draws closer to its conclusion, we are presented with little to commend its members. The one bright spot in the family was Abel—and he now lies dead out in the field.

Before we move ahead to examine Cain's behavior before his Inquisitor, however, let us all breathe a collective sigh of relief that each of *our* lives are not so chronicled for all posterity. Just as we have few stones we can throw at the rebellious and ungrateful Hebrews coming out of Egypt—or even after they are settled in the Promised Land—we must confess that there have been times in our own lives when we have behaved as, or almost as badly as the members of this family. And the reason for this is that the depravity introduced by their disobedience remains alive and well, not just in the world, but within our flesh.

This fact does not excuse Cain's offense and subsequent attitude, but it does mean that our response should be tempered, knowing that that same impulse dwells within us.

Have someone read Genesis 4:8-16.

v9

**Then Yahweh said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?"
And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"**

Even after what I have just proposed, Cain's insolence before Almighty God is breathtaking. More than one commentator sees a contrast between Cain's response and those of his mom and dad; Leupold offers one example:

Here is the second cross-examination found in the Scriptures. The contrast with the first is apparent. The first found Adam and Eve humble, though given to evasion and excuses. The second finds Cain impudent and hardened, at least at the beginning of the interview.

Sorry, but I don't see it. Read again Genesis 3; I see the evasion and excuses Leupold mentions, but not a trace of humility, much less, contrition or confession in Adam and Eve.

Adam and Eve seem to accept Yahweh God's verdict, but they do so mute, so how can we know there is humility in their hearts? No, again with the exception of Abel, they are all of a piece: blaming others, denying their own complicity, and at least in Cain's instance, whining about the verdict.

Then Yahweh said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?"

Just as when He earlier called out to Adam, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9), Yahweh isn't seeking information of which He is ignorant. He is giving Cain the opportunity to come clean and confess what he did.

And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

Big mistake, lying to God. Cain's response betrays how small and unimportant God is in his eyes; we have a rather low opinion of those we think are foolish enough to believe our lies.

Alexander MacLaren: Cain's defiant answer teaches us how a man hardens himself against God's voice. It also shows us how intensely selfish all sin is, and how weakly foolish its excuses are. It is sin which has rent men apart from men, and made them deny the very idea that they have duties to all men. The first sin was only against God; the second was against God and man. The first sin did not break, though it saddened, human love; the second kindled the flames of infernal hatred, and caused the first drops to flow of the torrents of blood which have soaked the earth. When men break away from God, they will soon murder one another.

v10-11

Question: Look again at vv10-12. Does something jump out at you?

And He said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to Me from the ground. "And now, cursed are you from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. "When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth." (emphasis added)

Thus far in this narrative—from Chapter One through Chapter Four—Yahweh has had an extraordinary focus on the ground, earth, soil.

In the Creation epoch of Chapter One the word that stands out for its repetition is “earth” (*eres*); in our study of that chapter we realized that even His creation of the celestial objects was for the benefit of the earth: “And God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth” (Genesis 1:17 [cf. v15]).

The word “man” translates the Hebrew *adam* or *adahm*, which later will become the proper name of the first man, Adam. The Hebrew means ruddy—either, as some say, ruddy in color, or as others say, ruddy as from the reddish earth from which he was formed (which is the interpretation I favor). Thus Yahweh called this first man—both as a species and as a proper name—from the ground, the soil from whence he came. For whatever His reason, God wanted human beings to be of the earth, of the soil—not just *residing* on this planet, but *of it*. And this sets up the perfect contrast between the first and second “Adam,” as Paul puts it in his first letter to the church in Corinth.

Have someone read 1 Corinthians 15:45-47.

The verdict Yahweh God announced upon Adam in Chapter Three was all about “the ground,” finishing with the promise that,

**“By the sweat of your face You will eat bread,
Till you return to the ground,
Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust,
And to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19)**

Now here in the passage before us Yahweh once again emphasizes “the ground,” interestingly with the Hebrew variant that immediately takes us back to Chapter One and the first man: *adamah*. There is not only this connection, but Yahweh actually *personifies* the ground (along with the victim’s blood), speaking of it as an audible witness to the horrendous murder.

v10

And He said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying out to Me from the ground.”

In this context I read Yahweh’s question as more an astonished exclamation, as well as one of incredulity: *What have you done! You murder your brother and then you lie to Me about it! Don’t you realize that even now I hear the sound of his blood crying out to Me?*

The words of this verse paint a vivid picture of the horror of death. “Blood” here is plural—that is, an abundance of blood—and the Hebrew *damim* speaks of that which when shed causes death; that is, not a simple cut or sore, but a grievous wound resulting in death. The “crying out” is not just a single shout, but persistent and continual, a wailing of pain. The depth of feeling behind the words of this verse illustrate what Leupold writes: “Men may esteem souls or blood lightly. Not so God.”

From v10 we might surmise that Abel’s body still lies there with his blood soaking into the soil, but v11 seems to indicate that Cain may have tried to hide his crime by burying his brother.

v11

“And now, cursed are you from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.”

Adam Clarke assumes a burial.

Clarke: It is probable that Cain, having killed his brother, dug a hole and buried him in the earth, hoping thereby to prevent the murder from being known; and that this is what is designed in the words, Thy brother’s blood crieth unto me From The Ground—which hath opened her mouth to receive it from thy hand. 📖

The phrase “cursed are you from the ground,” while accurate and literal for the Hebrew, can be a little confusing. The NIVs do a good job rendering the proper meaning of the phrase for modern ears: “Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground...” Cain is cursed *min-ha’adhamah*, “away from the ground.” This means that Cain’s curse is worse than we might think at first; the phrase means “so that there is no ground for you”—which sets up what will be stated in the next verse.

But let us think about that for a moment. Recall the last time you felt truly homesick. You were far from home in a location alien to you and suffered an almost nauseating feeling in the pit of your stomach. You wanted nothing more than to just return *home*. Well, henceforth Cain will not have a home to return to. For the remainder of his time on earth he will be a homeless vagrant, a perpetual alien no matter where he is.

It would be a mistake to conclude from this that the blood spilled into the ground is what renders it infertile for Cain, or that, as some say, by drinking the innocent blood the ground becomes an accomplice in the sin of murder. In the Law God said that this is what Israel was to do with the blood of the flesh instead of eating it:

“Only you shall not eat the blood; you are to pour it out on the ground like water.”
(Deuteronomy 12:16)

“When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth.” ☞

Verse 12 makes it clear that God’s judgment on Cain goes one step further from that inflicted on his parents. Cain is not to be moved to a new setting, but is consigned to be a wandering nomad.

“When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its strength to you...”

It’s difficult to know how far to press this and the second part of the verse. The commentators mostly prefer to make this as dramatic and dark as possible—and they may be correct. But just looking at the definitions of the Hebrew words doesn’t immediately reveal the depth of this curse. Does this just mean that his farming would be made even more difficult than that given to Adam—or that the earth would yield *nothing* for his efforts? As I said, the commentators mostly go with the latter.

David Guzik: The curse upon Cain was that Adam’s curse would be amplified in regard to him. If bringing forth food from the earth would be hard for Adam (Gen 3:17-18), it would be **impossible** for Cain.

Adam Clarke: Thou shalt be expelled from the presence of God, and from thy family connections, and shalt have **no fixed secure residence in any place**. The Septuagint render this στενων και τρεμων εση, thou shalt be groaning and trembling upon the earth - the horror of thy crime shall ever haunt thee, and **thou shalt never have any well-grounded hope that God will remit the punishment thou deservest. No state out of endless perdition can be considered more awful than this.**

JFB: ...**condemned to perpetual exile; a degraded outcast; the miserable victim of an accusing conscience.** (emphasis added throughout)

...you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth.”

Leupold makes an interesting point, that “the second part of the curse may also quite properly be regarded as...producing the first. For if a man be continually ‘shifting and straying about in the earth,’ it will not be possible for him to settle down to any fixed occupation like agriculture.”

God’s judgment against Cain is almost identical to His judgment against his father Adam. In both instances they are thrown out of their present domicile, and the ground rendered inhospitable to their agricultural needs. But if you think about it, there is a progression—a worsening—from the first to the second. The ground to which Adam was exiled was outside of the Garden and cursed. It was here where Cain and Abel were born and raised. So from a cursed ground Cain is being exiled to a place even worse.

The KJV renders this “a fugitive and a vagabond.” Translating the Hebrew as “vagabond” was solid scholarship for the time, taken from the Latin *vagare*, which means “to stray about.” To our ears, however, “vagabond” has come to mean a hobo or tramp, so it is rightly translated now “wanderer” by most. The first word, translated “vagrant” in the LSB, means to quiver, waver, tremble, totter, to stagger like a drunkard. It is a picture of someone wandering about aimlessly, someone not applied diligently to anything.

No matter how dark our interpretation of the text in this verse, it is indeed a dismal and discouraging prospect for Cain. God’s judgment administered upon the man is harsh—but just. He has destroyed the life of his brother, murdering him in cold blood, out of jealousy. He is already a miserable human being; now, by Yahweh’s verdict, his life from here on out will be miserable.

Yet, even in this we see God’s grace extended—and we will see even more in the rest of this passage. In the future God’s Law will dictate what will happen to someone who does what Cain just did.

“He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint you a place to which he may flee. If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him by deceit, you shall take him even from My altar, that he may die.” (Exodus 21:12–14)

But God extends a merciful hand to Cain, *not* killing him, as he deserves, but instead banishing him to a life wandering aimlessly about the earth.

SESSION 35

The Wailing Voice of Innocent Blood, part one Genesis 4:9-16

v9

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