

Sin and Guilt

In the Beginning: A Study on Genesis 1-11 Sermon 8

Genesis 4:8-16

March 27, 2022

A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

Genesis chapters three and four bring us face to face, not only with the fact of sin but with what sin does to us. In the past three weeks, we've encountered three of sins' consequences: *shame, exile, and bondage*. But we haven't stopped there. Along with seeing what sin does to us, we've gone further to see what Christ does for us. He covers our shame. He brings the exile home. He sets free those in bondage. Today, as we look at the ramifications of Cain's murder of his brother, Abel, we encounter a fourth consequence of sin: *guilt*.

Guilt is more of a legal category; it is the debt we incur for the wrongdoing we commit. If shame needs covering, exile aches for home, and bondage cries out for liberation, then guilt demands justice. God finds Cain as he's seemingly fleeing the murder scene. And God exposes, vividly, Cain's guilt: "the voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground ... which has opened its mouth to receive your brothers' blood *from your hand*" (Genesis 4:10-11). Cain has blood on his hands. Cain is guilty.

In the cry of Abel's blood, we hear the first human cry for justice. Abel's blood demands justice. The violence of Cain against Abel becomes the beginning of this tension between guilt and justice. But there is more. Guilt demands justice, yes. But in a fallen world filled with fallen people—if we are to have any hope at all—guilt not only must demand justice, but guilt must be met with something even more profound, *forgiveness*. All of this and more is found here in the ramifications of Cain's sin against Abel—if we have eyes to see. Before we turn to the text, a brief word about the presence of guilt and the need for justice in our own day is necessary.

A theory arose in the 19th century that as modern humanity outgrew belief in God, they would also outgrow guilt.¹ As belief in a holy God faded, so would our experience of not living up to that God's standards. Why feel guilty for dishonoring a being who's not there, or breaking rules that are old-fashioned and arbitrary? But this is not what's happened. As belief in God has faded, modern man's experience of guilt has exploded. In his brilliant essay, "The Strange Persistence of Guilt," historian Wilfred McClay traces this strange phenomenon. It seems the more connected we are with each other,

and the more aware we are of human influence upon people and the planet, the more the range of potential reasons for guilt expands. The modern person, McClay writes, has this type of experience:

I can never diminish my carbon footprint enough, or give to the poor enough, or support medical research enough, or otherwise do the things that would render me morally blameless. Colonialism, slavery, structural poverty, water pollution, deforestation—there's an endless list of items for which you and I can take the rap. To be found blameless is a pipe dream.... Indeed, when any one of us reflects on the brute fact of our being alive and taking up space on this planet, consuming resources that could have met some other, more worthy need, we may be led to feel guilty about the very fact of our existence.²

McClay's not making light of important issues that require our attention and care. Rather, he's pointing out something happening beneath the surface of these conversations—something in the human heart. People aren't merely interested in big issues. People are feeling *guilty* about them. The moral relativists constantly evaluate according to moral absolutes.

And it's not just that we're feeling more guilty. It's that we don't know what to do with our guilt. Ironically, with the fading of God, it has not been guilt that's gone away. It's been our means of atonement that we've lost. Guilt screams for expiation—for removal. *But in a Godless world, where we find such atonement?*

Journalist David Brooks, in an article referencing McClay's piece, observes, "the only reliable way to feel justified in [this] culture is to assume the role of victim. As McClay puts it, 'Claiming victim status is the sole sure means left of absolving oneself and securing one's sense of fundamental moral innocence.'"³ I would add that alongside victim status, another way people are dealing with guilt is *denial*. Here, we just deny or ignore the problems around us, claiming they're not our fault, or have been sufficiently dealt with in the past, or aren't just an unfortunate fact of life.

Whether claiming victimhood or denial, we all are trying to make ourselves innocent in a world where guilt is only rising. The problem, however, is that we've lost any clear framework for how to deal with our guilt. We've lost, as we'll see, not our taste for justice, but our grasp of forgiveness. It is with this rising tide of guilt that we turn to this scene in Genesis 4, and we see guilt and justice reframed in the

light of a God who is both just and merciful. If roadmaps help you, we'll work our way through this scene by considering (1) Abel's Blood, (2) Cain's Sentence, and (3) the Better Brother.

I. Abel's Blood

The orienting point in this passage is Abel's blood crying out to God: "And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground"" (v.10). Abel has been a silent figure. His name literally means "vapor," he's the younger brother—a position of inferiority—and he never speaks. But his blood is not silent. And in the cry of Abel's blood reaching the ears of God, we learn two things about guilt and justice from God's perspective.

1. No victim goes unseen

First, no victim goes unseen. God sees Abel. And God sees Abel's blood. The verse carries the sense that Abel's blood is constantly crying out—it's never silent. And this is a theme across the Bible: God hears and sees the oppressed. There's no blood, no tears, and no wounds that fade from His eyes. In the last book of the Bible, Revelation, it's the Christians who have been killed whose blood is added to this cry: "They cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' (Revelation 6:10). Abel's blood tells us that no victim goes unseen.

2. No culprit remains unknown

It also tells us that no culprit can remain hidden. Cain seems to be fleeing the scene when God speaks to him. And Cain doesn't show any signs of remorse: he's sarcastic when asked about his brother, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (v.9) And he only expresses pain when it comes to the pain of his own punishment, "my punishment is more than I can bear" (v.13).

And at this point, there are no human systems of justice to hold Cain accountable. But Cain cannot hide from God. This tells us something important about guilt. Guilt is something we can incur before people. Cain is guilty before his parents; he's murdered their son. And Cain is guilty before his brother, whose life he's snuffed out. But, as God's presence here emphasizes, Cain is guilty before God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer asks, "Why did Cain murder?" His answer, "Out of hatred for God." Cain kills Abel because he cannot kill God.⁴ Cain's anger issues from his dealings with God. And in killing Abel, Cain

has killed a possession of God's—Abel is God's creation, God's creature, God's possession.⁵ We have not begun to understand guilt until we have a God-centered view of it.

One immediate implication of this for us is this: we tend to reduce guilt to an emotion. We are guilty when we *feel* guilty. But guilt is more than an emotion. Guilt is a legal fact; it's the fact of violating God's standards. Notice that Cain does not *feel guilty* in this scene—but he is. So, in our own weighing of guilt vs. moral innocence, we'd do well to bring God's perspective into the equation.⁶

It may be easy enough for a spouse to feel guilty for neglecting their husband or wife. It may be natural for a parent to feel guilty for neglecting their kids. We understand this guilt because we can *feel* it. But the first commandment from God is this: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." And almost every second of every day is filled with people committing God-neglect: total indifference towards God. And we don't *feel* the slightest guilt about it. But according to God's words, we are all guilty of the deepest form of neglect.

So, this is the first thing we see when we bring our view of guilt and justice into God's perspective: **Abel's blood tells us that God takes both the victims and the culprit more seriously than even we do.** *How then does God respond to these issues?* Let's turn from Abel's blood to Cain's sentence.

II. Cain's Sentence

Cain's sentence echoes in many ways that of Adam and Eve's. There is a curse that will frustrate Cain's working of the ground and there is exile—Cain is sent farther away from God's presence, "east of Eden" (v.16). God punishes Cain. Also, however, there is this potentially scandalous note of grace: Just as God clothed Adam and Eve, God acts to protect Cain. God puts a mark on Cain so that no one will kill him (v.15).⁷ God protects the murderer.

We see with Cain both a punishment and mercy. *What is going on here? How can God extend mercy toward a murderer? Does this not already upset the scales of justice?* Abel is lying there murdered, and Cain is protected from being murdered. *What's going on?*

Here we see the beginning of a thread that runs through the whole Bible, culminating in Christ. The God of the Bible is a justice-making and justice-loving God. He hates sin, evil, and injustice.⁸ But, and at the same time, the God of the Bible is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast

love. And we can only understand how God holds these parts of His heart together, without polluting one or the other, when we turn to another brother: the *Better Brother*.

III. The Better Brother

The writer of Hebrews says Jesus is our brother (Hebrews 2:11-12). He also draws a direct connection between the voice of Abel's blood and the voice of Christ's blood. He writes, "the sprinkled blood [of Jesus] speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (Hebrews 12:24).

We can only understand God's actions towards Cain and Abel if we look at the cross.

On the cross, God enters into the pain of the brother Abel. He dies as the truly innocent victim. And on the cross, Jesus took the pain of the victim into His heart; it became His pain. "All the misery of the world, hidden and known, was concentrated in the cross of Golgotha, and there it became one great hurt in the heart of God," wrote Helmut Thielicke.⁹

But Jesus also became a brother to Cain. Jesus is murdered on the cross, as the just payment for Cain's murder of Abel.¹⁰ Jesus died for Cain while Cain was God's enemy so that He might reconcile, even a murderer, back to God (Romans 5:1-11).

The cross shows us that God judges injustice justly. Jesus takes on our guilt, and is mocked, beaten, stricken, and crushed for it. And God rightly turns His face away—away from all the horrible sin and injustice of the world. But on the cross, God also shows us the way through guilt to something bigger than justice—*forgiveness*. On the cross, God pays the penalty of the sinner's guilt and therefore *atones* for it. If we put our sin on the head of Jesus and believe in Him, our guilt is removed.

And so, God, through the cross of Christ, can simultaneously uphold the perfect standards of justice and extend mercy to the sinner. Guilt demands justice, but life—for any of us to have any hope—requires forgiveness. Only the cross can hold all this together.

IV. Living Under the Cross of Forgiveness

So, a final question for us: *as the tide of guilt rises, and the need for justice increases, how do we live in light of the Cross of Jesus Christ? How do we live in light of the justice-upholding and mercy-bestowing God of forgiveness?* I will leave us with five thoughts.

1. Offload your guilt onto Christ

Sin must be paid for. You either live under guilt before God, or you live under the Cross. To be forgiven, you need to first take on your guilt before you can take it off. You must then repent and believe in Christ. And if you do, your guilt is removed, and you receive forgiveness:

And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. (Acts 10:42-43).

But we also must be forgiving. And as we turn to how we not only receive forgiveness but live out of it, we need to note a few more things about it. Once forgiven, however, the Bible calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven. We need to consider carefully what offering forgiveness looks like.

2. God delights in reconciliation, not just vindication

One way to deal with wrongdoing is to get even, to get revenge. This, however, is a costly cycle to get into and it makes deeper healing impossible. There are other stories about wronged brothers in Genesis, and the story of Joseph and his brothers is instructive. Like Abel, Joseph's brothers "conspired to kill him" (Genesis 37:18), though they end up leaving him for dead in a pit. The story that unfolds is winding and remarkable, and in the end, Joseph is in a position to exact revenge upon his brothers. Instead, Joseph forgives them (see Genesis 50:17-21), in what is the first act of human forgiveness in the Bible.

God is after something more extravagant and radical than revenge. God does not want to spill enough of Cain's blood so that it equals that of Abel's. God spills Christ's blood so that the possibility is set forth where an Abel and Cain can be reconciled.¹¹

3. Forgiveness is costly

You can't hold on to shamming the person or standing over them—even though they may deserve it. You must give the hurt to God. You must stay open to reconciliation. This is hard and will look different in different circumstances. But the general posture is to *not return evil for evil*, but in the face of evil, to forgive.

4. Forgiveness cannot be a cop-out for restitution and rehabilitation

We can assume divine forgiveness removes all responsibility to make up for wrongs done. It can look like a cop-out and hurtful if it's cheapened: One person, leery of the Christian call to forgive, writes, "The notion that the victims of crime, oppression and sexual assault must forgive their oppressors piles more oppression and harshness on the victim"¹²

But this is not the case. When restitution and rehabilitation can be made, God expects us to do so—not to atone for our sin, but because it's the right thing to do. So, God instructs Moses to tell the people of Israel:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "If anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against the LORD by deceiving his neighbor ... by robbery or what he got by oppression ... or anything about which he has sworn falsely, he shall restore it in full and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to him to whom it belongs on the day he realizes his guilt" (See Leviticus 6:1-5).

See also the example of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:8:

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

5. Forgiveness is the fuller Gospel story

Justice matters to God. And the cross tells us He upholds it. But justice is not the full Gospel story. Forgiveness is. God desires justice and mercy. This is harder. But this is far more beautiful.

As we become more aware of reasons to be guilty, as the tide of guilt rises near all of our heads, let us demand not only justice but the full Gospel: A justice-upholding God who also extends forgiveness—even to men like Cain; to women and men, like you and me.

Endnotes

1. In his essay, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt,” historian Wilfred M. McClay notes this trend among thinkers to assume the waning of guilt alongside the “death of God.” He points especially to the work of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, “Prophets such as Friedrich Nietzsche were confident that once the modern Western world finally threw off the metaphysical strait-jacket that had confined the possibilities of all previous generations, the moral reflexes that had accompanied that framework would disappear along with them. With God dead, all would indeed be permitted. Chief among the outmoded reflexes would be the experience of guilt, an obvious vestige of irrational fear promulgated by oppressive, life-denying institutions erected in the name and image of a punitive deity.” It’s also been noted that in the work of Sigmund Freud the notion of guilt played a large role, and Freud saw guilt connected to one’s belief in the traditional God of Judeo-Christianity. As Mary Lamia, in her article, “Whatever Happened to Guilt?,” writes, “Sigmund Freud believed that the primary sources of guilt were fear of authority and fear of loss of parental love, which eventually become one’s conscience.¹ Civilization, then, reinforces the sense of guilt and maintains order and stability. The practice of psychotherapy developed, to a large extent, because people experienced guilt about their impulses and actions, which then caused them to develop symptoms. Through treatment, patients attained the insight that their symptoms developed as a compromise between their wish to express an impulse and the prohibition against expressing it, such as guilt.” see Lamia’s article online: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/intense-emotions-and-strong-feelings/201101/whatever-happened-guilt>
2. Wilfred M. McClay, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt,” *The Hedgehog Review*. Vol. 19, Issue 1 (Spring, 2017). The more we know about the world and our sin, we want to say with the prophet Isaiah, “¹⁹ The earth is utterly broken, the earth is split apart, the earth is violently shaken. ²⁰ The earth staggers like a drunken man; it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again” (Isaiah 24:19-20).
3. David Brooks, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt,” the *New York Times*, March 31, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/opinion/the-strange-persistence-of-guilt.html> Accessed March 25, 2022.

4. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (1959), 93.
5. Helmut Thielicke writes on this point, "He has also violated the property of God himself. Abel the nobody, Abel the *declass * belongs to the Lord God. Whoever touches him touches the Lord himself. And the Lord of the Last Judgement says the same thing: 'It was I, Jesus Christ, who you met you in rags and expected that you would give to me out of your abundance.... In what you did or did not do to your neighbor you hurt me.'" Helmut Thielicke, *How the World Began: Sermons on the Creation Story* (Lutterworth Press, 2016) p. 158.
6. This is why the Psalmist prays, "Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from *hidden faults*" (Ps 19:12).
7. God protects this *murderer*: 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 (Gen 4:15).
8. E.g., God is "of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot bear to look at wrong" (Habakkuk 1:13).
9. Helmut Thielicke, *How the World Began: Sermons on the Creation Story* (Lutterworth Press, 2016) p. 160
10. ²³ All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. (Rom 3:22-25).
11. Whereas Cain turned away from his brother, who deserved his love, Jesus turns towards us, while we were his enemies (Rom 5:1-11).
12. Cited in Tim Keller's, "The Fading of Forgiveness," *Comment Magazine*, September 16, 2021. https://comment.org/the-fading-of-forgiveness/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw8_qRBhCXARIsAE2AtRZL-JSIYu7fiB30VSSIJ-2a50nzsXENrx-inV4D2295WqwHCg3S-rMaAvi1EALw_wcB. Accessed March 25, 2022.