

Justice, Vengeance, and Mercy

My brother is 15 years younger than me and is the only sibling I have. Our age difference has created some odd events along the way. For instance, I started my senior year of college the same day as he started first grade. He was the ring bearer in my wedding; I was the officiant in his. He would point out the kid who had been bullying him as he got off the bus, and I would stare down that kid until he ran away.

Both of us loved playing sports, especially basketball. For our one-on-one basketball games, I would line out our backyard court with chalk so that a two-point shot for him was a one-point shot for me, a three-point for him was a two-point for me, and a four-point for him was a three-point for me. As he grew and his athletic abilities far superseded my own, we reversed those lines so that a two-point shot for me was a one-point shot for him and so on!

Now that I'm 62 and he is 47, I still look up to him—both literally and figuratively. (I often teased our parents for having me three years into their marriage and then saving up 15 years of smarts, height, and good looks and giving them all to him!) In many ways, he's been my example—and friend, advisor, and teacher. I hope to be his, too. I want to be like him—compassionate, giving, and unselfish.

I am honored to be my brother's keeper, for I know he is also mine.

- 1. Who do you regard as your "brother" or "sister" in the biblical sense?*
- 2. In what ways are your relationships with your brothers and sisters in Christ unique?*
- 3. At times, why is it easy to become aggravated with your Christian brothers and sisters?*

The Birth of Cain and Abel

Genesis 4:1-2, KJV

1 And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD.

2 And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.

Genesis 4:1-2, NIV

¹Adam 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." ²Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.

Genesis covers a large expanse of time, from before recorded human history to when Joseph died around 1800 B.C. The first chapter describes God's creation of the universe and earth, including all land, sky, and sea creatures. Chapter 2 focuses on God bringing our first human parents into existence. Then chapter 3 recounts sin entering the human race as the couple disobey the Creator. After God pronounced punishment upon the serpent, the woman, and the man, "Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living" (3:20).

Chapter 4 begins with Adam and Eve being physically intimate, resulting in Eve becoming pregnant and giving birth to her firstborn son, Cain. Although Bible scholars can't be sure about the meaning of this name, the NIV translators added this footnote: "Cain sounds like the Hebrew for *brought forth* or *acquired*." This would be consistent with the words Eve spoke after her baby boy was born: "With the help of the Lord I have *brought forth* a man."

Sometime later, God enabled Eve to bear a second son, whom she named Abel. This name means *breath* and denotes what passes away quickly and proves to be insubstantial (especially considering Abel's tragically short life; see Eccl. 1:2). Whereas Abel shepherded "flocks" of sheep, Cain cultivated the "soil" (Gen. 4:2).

4. How did Eve respond to the birth of Cain?

The Contrast between Cain's Offering and Abel's Offering

Genesis 4:3-7, KJV

3 And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD.

4 And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering:

5 But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.

6 And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?

7 If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

Genesis 4:3-7, NIV

³In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? 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.”

At the end of the growing season, Cain presented an “offering” (vs. 3) to God from what had been harvested. Noteworthy is the fact that there was nothing exceptional about Cain’s effort. In contrast, Abel was especially conscientious to offer the best of his “firstborn” (vs. 4) lambs.

While the Creator was pleased with Abel’s gift, the Lord was displeased with Cain’s “offering” (vs. 5). In turn, Cain burned with anger, so much so that the verse literally says his “face fell.” This is an idiomatic way of referring to Cain’s dejection, jealousy, and resentment.

Despite Cain’s peevish response, God remained attentive and responsive. First, He rhetorically asked Cain about the reason for his burning anger. Second, the Lord wanted Cain to think about why he felt so depressed. He encouraged Cain

to “do what is right” (vs. 7). Expressed differently, God would accept and bless Cain. Otherwise, “sin,” here personified as a ravenous predator, was ready to pounce on Cain—the intense, inner desire to transgress would seek to control and dominate Cain. The only effective response was for him to overcome his sinful nature by doing what was appropriate in God’s eyes.

Numerous people have wondered why Abel’s sacrifice was superior to Cain’s. Some think God accepted Abel’s sacrifice because, as an animal offering, it involved blood, whereas Cain’s, as a type of grain offering, did not. However, we don’t have clearly recorded specifications for blood sacrifices until the Book of Leviticus. Perhaps the strongest reason Abel’s offering was accepted and Cain’s was rejected is the attitude of both brothers. Abel offered his sacrifice willingly, and so his was a demonstration of genuine “faith” (Heb. 11:4).

5. *What was distinctive about the respective offerings made by Cain and Abel?*

6. *How did the Lord respond to offerings made, respectively, by Cain and Abel?*

7. *What was God’s response to Cain’s anger?*

The Consequence of Cain Murdering Abel

Genesis 4:8–13, KJV

8 And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.

9 And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper?

10 And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground.

Genesis 4:8–13, NIV

⁸Now 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.

⁹Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

¹⁰The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the

KJV

11 And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;

12 When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

13 And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

NIV

ground. ¹¹Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹²When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

¹³Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear."

"Let's go out to the field" (vs. 8) indicates advance planning on Cain's part. While there, he attacked Abel, struck him dead, and likely buried his body in a concealed portion of the field.

Perhaps Cain imagined that, since no one else knew about the murder, they could not testify against him on his brother's behalf. However, God was fully aware of Cain's sin. God rhetorically asked Cain, "What have you done?" (vs. 10), perhaps giving him an opportunity to admit to what he had done and repent. But Cain callously retorted, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yet, paradoxically, by slaying his brother, Cain took Abel's well-being into his own hands.

God personified Abel's "blood" (vs. 10) as a witness in a court of law crying out for the righteous judge to condemn Cain for his crime. Indeed, the Lord immediately pronounced His sentence against Cain. It was fitting for him to exist under the ground's "curse" (vs. 11). Also, regardless of where he wandered, futility and frustration would be his constant companions. Cain, instead of confessing his guilt, responded by complaining that the "punishment" (vs. 13) for his sin was too severe for him to "bear."

8. *How did Cain respond to God's questioning?*

9. *What judgment did God pronounce against Cain?*

10. *What was Cain's reaction to God's pronouncement of judgment?*

'Ain't Heavy'

In the late 1960s when people were demonstrating for peace and justice, a song written by Bobby Scott and Bob Russell and recorded by The Hollies captured the hearts of people worldwide. This song was "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother."

In this song, the singer relates how life is difficult, but he is strong enough to carry his brother, knowing that his brother's welfare is his welfare. Moreover, the burden of his brother is light, because of the deep love he has for him.

This song expresses how Christ wants us to feel toward our Christian sisters and brothers and how we must carry their burdens if we are to behave justly in Him. It also says that we need to regard them as our beloved sisters and brothers, carrying them especially when the situation is difficult and circumstances are challenging.

Jesus Himself feels that way about us when He beckons us to "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Jesus not only takes our burdens upon Himself, but He also calls us to do the same for others. What better example is Jesus in doing what is right and just? Indeed, when we act justly toward those in need, Jesus says we are doing acts of mercy toward Him (see Matthew 25:31-46).

"What does the LORD require of you?" asked Micah. He then answered that question by telling us, "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8).

11. *What gives you the strength to carry your sisters and brothers in Christ?*

12. *Why is lifting up your Christian brothers and sisters the kind of justice God demands from you?*

13. *Give specific examples of how you can emulate the justice of God to the world.*

Acts of Mercy

The tragic murder of Abel was not a result of enmity between the brothers. Rather, Abel was an innocent victim of his brother's wrath. Cain should have subdued his rising anger and trusted God—but he wouldn't. As God's children, we have a mandate from our Lord to treat our sisters and brothers in Christ with deliberate justice.

► *List here or on an index card the names of Christian brothers and sisters you pledge to selflessly help this coming week. Then answer these questions: Are you willing to help them like Jesus did for those He met? How is caring for them also an act of God's justice?*

KEY VERSE

And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. —Genesis 4:10, KJV

The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." —Genesis 4:10, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

Week of January 3 through January 9

(See *The Quiet Hour* for devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Genesis 16:1-15—The Lord Blesses Hagar and Ishmael.

Tues. Psalm 5—Hear My Prayer, O God.

Wed. Matthew 5:3-12—The Pure in Heart Will See God.

Thurs. Genesis 17:23-27—Abraham and Ishmael Are Circumcised.

Fri. Genesis 25:12-18—The Twelve Tribes of Ishmael.

Sat. Psalm 106:1-5—Remember Me, O Lord.

Sun. Genesis 21:8-20—God Hears Ishmael's Voice.