

---

# Cain and Abel

## DAVE BAST

Have you ever switched off the news in disgust, wondering why they never seem to show anything but bad news? Why is it that stories and reports seem to focus on nothing but violence and tragedy, crime and corruption? It is not the media's fault, you know. This is how the human story has always gone, almost from the start. In fact, the Bible's first recorded news story is of a murder, where the killer and his victim were brothers. Their names were Cain and Abel, and today we will look at their story on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

## DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and we are now in the middle—the midpoint of five programs, which look at the most significant stories from the early chapters of Genesis. So, in the first program, we looked at the creation story from Genesis 1, and a little bit from Genesis 2, where God creates Adam and Eve from the dust. We then considered the tragic story of the fall of humans into sin—our first parents, who chose their own way rather than God's way. We will finish out this series in a bit with programs on the flood and on the Tower of Babel; but today, we want to look at the story of Cain and Abel; and we are welcoming once more to help us, Old Testament scholar John Hilber. He is Professor of Old Testament at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. John, welcome to *Groundwork*.

## JOHN HILBER

Well, thank you. I am enjoying being here.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we are now moving in to Genesis Chapter 4 in this program, Dave, as you said; and that tragic story of Cain and Abel, and this is our first biblical example of where the original sin, as we call it, of Adam and Eve went; and it went somewhere very bad very fast.

## DAVE BAST

Before we get into the story, though, John, I would like to talk a little bit about the background, because for anyone who has thought about this seriously...who has read these early accounts, inevitably it raises questions that are very difficult to answer about the culture and the world in which Cain and Abel lived; because we go from Genesis and the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1, 2, and 3, and we turn the page in Genesis 4, and suddenly there is agriculture and there is animal husbandry and there are cities and people, and Cain and Abel...you know, they are married...at least Cain is...

## JOHN HILBER

Yes.

## DAVE BAST

How do we deal with all that? How do we understand that?

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes, a complex society has suddenly emerged. There is a narrative technique that is called telescoping, where...and it is not just used in the Bible, but it is used, you know, across the ancient Near East as well, especially with their stories of the history of civilizations, where they will, in broad brushstrokes, or the illustration we used in the last session that we had together, the impressionist painting versus the photograph, where they telescope together in very short order what really would take a long, long time to unpack; and so, Genesis, as we mentioned last time, is not really interested in trying to give us this blow-by-blow chronological outworking of things. It is thematically painting for us the important themes; and for the ancient people, they were interested in where civilization came from, and what the nature of that was; and so, Genesis 4 will telescope for us the outworkings from the earliest human origins to population civilization as they knew it.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I know that growing up...sort of the Sunday school understanding I had kind of growing up, was that, you know, you had four people: You had Adam and Eve and their two kids, Cain and Abel. If we are really supposed to believe something like that, then the author of Genesis would have been more careful than to refer to cities...and later we will see that Cain was worried that people might murder him; and he goes to the land of Nod. If we were really just supposed to picture four people huddled together on one little piece of real estate, the author would not have included those details, because that is basically telling us...right, we are telescoping here. We are kind of doing a time leap here. We are a little farther down the road here in this story of Cain and Abel; but, the story itself, of course, has incredible meaning.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; you know, Scott, you mentioned Sunday school. I can still remember as a child asking my father, who was a pastor, where are the cavemen in the Bible? Where do they come in? So, I guess what we have to say is Genesis 4 does not really answer that for us.

**JOHN HILBER**

Exactly.

**DAVE BAST**

There are mysteries here that maybe we need to study more fully. We do not have the time in this program to go into detail, but a lot of scholars are working on this—evangelical scholars, in their writing stuff, and it is possible to...

**JOHN HILBER**

It might be worth mentioning that there has been a view held by respected people, like John Stott, who has been around for a long time...

**DAVE BAST**

My hero.

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes...that Adam and Eve were a representative pair of a larger population of maybe some villages, or a few thousand or such, and there are models that scholars have worked using that that seem to be very workable.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And however we understand Adam and Eve, the main thing we know is that God gave them something special, which we saw in program one, in terms of the image of God. They ruined that by their own sinful choice; and now we get to Genesis 4 and we see the result of that. So, let's listen to this first part of Genesis 4 about their first children, Cain and Abel.

4:2<sup>b</sup>Now, Abel kept flocks and Cain worked the soil. <sup>3</sup>In the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord, <sup>4</sup>but Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup>but on Cain and his offering, he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry and his face was downcast. <sup>6</sup>The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? <sup>7</sup>If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it.”

### **DAVE BAST**

So here, right away we are in a familiar world. It is ancient. It might be kind of stone age technology, but there is cultivation; there are flocks and herds; and these two brothers each want to bring an offering; and they are bringing their offerings to the Lord...to the God of Israel... I think the text even uses the name Yahweh...

### **JOHN HILBER**

Yes.

### **DAVE BAST**

Although that would not be described and explained until much later, in Moses' day; but these are not idols that are receiving these sacrifices—these gifts—it is the Lord; and yet, the story says God accepted one and not the other. Is there some reason behind that, John?

### **JOHN HILBER**

Yes; there is a popular misunderstanding about the difference in the offerings. Abel's was an animal and Cain's was vegetable, as though the animal was superior in some way because it is an animal; but in fact, both of those offerings are described elsewhere in Mosaic writings as being perfectly acceptable offerings to the Lord. So, there is nothing inherently wrong or inferior about Cain's offering. It has more to do with his attitude in bringing it.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Is there something, John... I remember reading one time that in the text we are told that Cain brought some of the vegetables from his gardens, but it doesn't say it was the firstfruits; where with Abel it does say he brought fat portions from the firstborn. So, Abel bringing the best of the best...the firstborn; Cain maybe kept the best of the best and just brought some other things. Is there anything to that in the text?

### **JOHN HILBER**

I think you are exactly right. The narrative by its nature has gaps, and we have to fill in the gaps as readers; and so, there are a lot of things that are there almost by silence or omission; and the omission of anything distinctive about Cain's offering makes it sound like it is kind of generic and half-thought; whereas, the text goes out of its way to say that Abel's offering is firstborn, and the best portions...the fatty...

### **DAVE BAST**

I have to laugh a little bit because it is not a funny story, but I suddenly thought of those people who try to calculate what is the least amount they can get away with giving, you know? And Cain is the father of all such who very carefully parse their tithes so they don't give a nickel more than they have to; but of course, it is Cain's reaction. God confronts him. The Lord says: Watch out, you are in a danger zone now because you have lost your temper; you are angry. Sin is crouching at the door. It is this wonderful, vivid image of sin, almost like some wild beast that is going to take you and slay...

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes, it is like it is on the front porch and it is ringing the doorbell, and God says: Don't open the door. Cain opens the door. We will explore that in just a moment.

*Segment 2*

**DAVE BAST**

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I am Scott Hoezee.

**JOHN HILBER**

And I am John Hilber.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And today we are in this third program of a five-part series from the earliest stories of the Bible; and we are in Genesis 4 today, where we just saw the story, for anyone who knows the Bible, a familiar story of Cain and Abel. Cain and Abel both offered sacrifices, and somehow Cain picked up on the idea that his was less pleasing to God...not sure how he knew that...but somehow he sensed his was less pleasing than Abel's, and he got angry.

**DAVE BAST**

Right; and we are going to read the consequences of that anger as we continue the story: <sup>8</sup>Now Cain said to his brother, Abel, "Let's go out to the field," and while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother, Abel and killed him. <sup>9</sup>Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother, Abel?" "I don't know," he replied, "Am I my brother's keeper?" <sup>10</sup>The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground."

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

So, there we have, again, as we said earlier, sin came on the scene in Genesis 3, and now in Genesis 4 a terrible consequence is shown: Fratricide, a brother murdering a brother, which in so many ways sets up the rest of history. I saw a while back in an illustrated Bible, the artist had depicted Cain and Abel, and in the background you could see what was depicted as the kind of garments that prisoners wore in Auschwitz in the concentration camps; that was sort of in the background of this picture of Cain and Abel, as if to say: Brother murdering brother...

**DAVE BAST**

Yes.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

This has set up all of history.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; on and on it goes. Another way of putting it, I think, is to say that we have left Eden behind and we have entered our world, really. We talked earlier about, you know, the people and the cities, but really, it is our world in terms of human relationships.

John Hilber:

One of the things that consensus is clear now from the science of genetics is that the entire human population is related. There is the unity of the human race.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Am I my brother's keeper? The answer is yes; and who is my brother? Well, everybody. It is sort of like the parable of the Good Samaritan: Who is my neighbor? "Everybody," Jesus said. Who is my brother? Everybody; and yes, Cain, you are your brother's keeper; we all are.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, and you just look at the dynamics of this first crime. How much is there. There is deception. Hey, let's go out into the field, Cain says to Abel; and Abel, all innocently, you know, goes along. Cain is just kind of setting him up, looking for the opportunity; and then the Lord's question to Cain is so powerful, it seems to me: Where is your brother? Cain's flippant reply: How am I supposed to know? What are you asking me for?

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes, this is no unintentional sin. It was premeditated...

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, right.

**JOHN HILBER**

In the best sense of the word...well, the best sense of the word is not the way to say that.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; but he had been warned, even, by God himself, right? And this really...so, if in Genesis 3...sort of the original sins were sort of pride and covetousness, as we looked at in the previous program in this series, here we see the second of the deadly sins. If pride is the first deadly sin, the second one is envy; and here Cain envies Abel; because in envy somebody has something you don't have, and if you cannot have it, then you don't want him to have it either; and so, the one who envies always wants to despoil the person of what they have; or remove the rival altogether so you don't have to keep feeling bad, right? So, your neighbor has a bigger boat than you, or you don't even have a boat and he does; so, what do you do? You sabotage the boat or you do something so your neighbor cannot have the boat either; or you get rid of your neighbor altogether because you are tired of living in the chill shadow of his superiority. That is what Cain does here. He says: I don't have the favor of God; I don't know how to get the favor of God; Abel has it; it is driving me crazy; get rid of Abel, I get rid of my problem; and that is classic envy.

**DAVE BAST**

Right; but really, that is ironic, isn't it? Aren't we intended to sit up and ask why here? Because he could have had the favor of God...

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right.

**DAVE BAST**

I mean, the favor of God is available to anyone and everyone. He is envying Abel for something he himself...it is not a finite possession, you know. It is not a zero sum game. You can be favored by God; I can be favored by God; all you need is to approach him in the right way.

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes; and the problem was his heart attitude, and what he ended up doing revealed what was in his heart.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And there is a sense in which there is that irrationality of sin; and particularly envy. Envy sort of makes people lose their minds. They do crazy things.

**DAVE BAST**

As does anger.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; anger and envy...deadly, deadly combination here. So, yes, Cain was not thinking straight. God had approached him somewhat tenderly. He didn't even rebuke him for his anger, but just says: You know, you can do it right. Don't give in to sin. I am still here for you, Cain. And Cain nevertheless murders his brother—removes the rival.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; you know, as we go on with the story...it goes on into the next chapters...we will say a little bit more about that maybe in the next program, as we look at the progress of the human race...progressively more and more wicked...more and more evil...more and more violence; but God does some strange things. He does not immediately call Cain to account. He does not sort of punish him, at least apparently he doesn't punish Cain for murdering his brother. Instead, Cain sort of pleads with him and begs with him, and he is afraid other people are going to hunt him down as a murderer; and so God puts a mark on him, the Bible says. What is that about?

**JOHN HILBER**

He is cut off from the ground. The interesting thing is, the phrase "curse" appears here with respect to Cain, which interestingly did not happen in Genesis Chapter 3; and so, he is chopped off from his livelihood, what he knew and was familiar with...

**DAVE BAST**

He becomes a wanderer.

**JOHN HILBER**

He is sent into exile; and of course, for the Israelites, that was a big word for them.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

It is interesting, when I have preached on this text...and we have talked about the deadly sins, I think, before on *Groundwork*, including envy...one of the key characteristics of envy is that it gnaws at you, and it just makes you pace the floor, and you are never satisfied, knowing that somebody out there is better than you are or outstrips you; and so, the punishment fits the crime. Cain is consigned to be a restless wanderer on the earth, and that is what envy does. It makes you a restless person. You are always being upset that somebody has...

**DAVE BAST**

You cannot be satisfied with what you have.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

So, the punishment fits the crime. He is cut off from the earth, and he is consigned to be a restless wanderer.

**JOHN HILBER**

You know what I think is interesting as I am listening to our conversation here is how easily we enter into the experience of Cain, identifying with the temptation and what it is really like in our hearts.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes, right; this is a story about us...

**JOHN HILBER**

It is; it is indeed.

**DAVE BAST**

This is not a story about ancient, prehistoric people. This is us; it is our world; it is our psyche; it is our spiritual malaise...

**JOHN HILBER**

We need to own this.

**DAVE BAST**

Yes; and we are living east of Eden, all of us.

**JOHN HILBER**

Right, yes.

**DAVE BAST**

We have lost Eden.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Where Abel's blood cries out from the ground, and the blood of so many in all of history cries out. If we cannot hear it, God can. So, what do we do with this? What does the New Testament even kind of do with this story? How does this all tie in ultimately to Christ? We will look at that as we close the program.

*Segment 3*

**DAVE BAST**

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and today we are also joined again by John Hilber, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are talking about the story of Cain and Abel—the story of the first murder—of fratricide—Cain's condemnation to wander the earth as an exile. He is punished by God, but he is also protected by God in a strange sort of way. There is one reference to Cain in the New Testament. It comes in the little letter of Jude, where Cain is associated with Balaam and Korah. So, he is kind of classed with those who attack God's people, and that sets up Abel as a representative of the righteous people of God, the people who belong to the Lord, which is exactly what the letter to Hebrews calls him.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; if you remember, in Hebrews 11, we sort of have the hall of fame, the list of all the saints, and there is an interesting line there in Hebrews 11, where we read this: <sup>4</sup>By faith, Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith, he was commended as righteous when God spoke well of his offerings; and by faith Abel still speaks even though he is dead.

**DAVE BAST**

So, John, you mentioned a little bit earlier that there was a difference in attitude between Cain and Abel, in the way they brought their gifts; but here we are given a little more insight into what made Abel different.

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes; at the heart of it was his sense of relationship to the Lord—his dependence—his faith; and for Abel, that moved his heart to give back to God what was his best; and for Cain, the opposite led to him withholding.

**DAVE BAST**

So, the key thing it seems to me is that the difference is in the worshippers, not in the offerings that they bring; and I love something that Calvin says about Abel. Calvin wrote that Abel's sacrifice pleased God because he himself was pleasing to God, and where did this pleasing come from other than he had a heart purified by faith. So really, it is faith that is the ground of our acceptance with God, isn't it?

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes, indeed.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And it is interesting that, you know, the text in Genesis that we just looked at a little while ago said that the blood of Abel cried out from the ground. God could hear his blood; and now Hebrews says that Abel is still speaking, but a better word, even though he is dead, and the word Abel is speaking is that indeed it is faith. So, we are a long way from...in this story in Genesis 4...we are a long way from Paul in the New Testament saying that we are saved by faith alone and grace alone, but here is an early biblical hint...

**DAVE BAST**

It is certainly pointing that way.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; that faith is indeed the gift God gives, and it is the gift that keeps on giving; because once God puts that into us, then indeed, we are acceptable to God, and everything we do is transformed by grace.

**DAVE BAST**

So, Paul is going to have a lot to say about the righteousness that comes from faith, a righteousness not based on works; and he is also going to have a lot to say about the efficacy of the blood of Christ, the sacrifice that Jesus offered on the cross; and actually, the letter to the Hebrews...we have been quoting from Chapter 11, but in the next chapter, Chapter 12, Hebrews has this profound thing that it says about Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross—his blood, where it says that it (verse 24) speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. So, Abel's blood cries out for vengeance, and how good it is that God pays attention to that...that we do not live in a world where God is indifferent to human suffering, but how much better it is that in Christ there is a word of mercy and forgiveness and grace.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I think that is so important because really what the message of the New Testament ultimately means is that in Christ all that old enmity and spite and vengeance is put away; and so, through Christ, you know, God will raise Abel, but God will also raise Cain, right? That God's grace will extend to all, because the blood of Christ speaks a better word, which is good news for all the Abels of history, but also good news in some ways for even Cain and the Cains of history, that God will raise both to new life, if only we have faith in him.

**DAVE BAST**

You know, one of the things, I think, John, that people...I am going to kind of broaden this conversation a little bit beyond Cain and Abel...but one of the misconceptions I think people bring to the Old Testament is the idea that their God is only a God of vengeance—he is only a God of justice—it is all about the blood that cries out, and grace comes in in the New Testament, but that is not really true, is it? The God is the same from beginning to end.

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes, indeed; the old heresy of Marcion was that the Old Testament God was a different god even than the God of the New Testament, and yet, when you look through the Old Testament from beginning to end, it is the story of human failure, and God responding over and over again in gracious kindness. Humans run, God pursues, draws into relationship with them, provides covenants to give the structure and the promises of his ultimate good salvation. That is the storyline that runs through...is the backbone of the entire Old Testament.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And we saw that here. We mentioned it briefly earlier in this program, but Cain does something horrible; he does something absolutely horrible, but God does not crush him; God does not squash him. Yes, he becomes an exile, but God also gives him a mysterious, protective mark. What a gracious thing for God to do. I mean, I think most people who read this story would not have been at all surprised to read: And then the Lord God said to Cain: Thou art finished; and boom! Cain dropped dead on the spot. He doesn't do it. So, we saw in the previous program...we get a preview of the Gospel immediately, before the dust has even settled from the



first sin, we get a promise of a Messiah; and now, in the next chapter, a murderer is kind of forgiven, and his life is not taken from him, but is given back to him, and God even protects him.

**DAVE BAST**

Well, he goes into exile, but of course, in the Old Testament we know that God is a God who can bring the exile home again, too. Thanks be to God.

**JOHN HILBER**

Yes.

**DAVE BAST**

Thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and our guest today was John Hilber. We hope you will join us again next time when we look at God's grief and grace in the story of the flood.

Connect with us at [groundworkonline.com](http://groundworkonline.com) to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or tell us what you would like to hear on *Groundwork*.

---

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/cain-and-abel>

*Printed on February 22, 2025*