

First Victim, First Victor

Text: Genesis 4:1-15

Hymn: "By Grace I'm Saved" (LSB 566)

Throughout the Old Testament we read of righteous people suffering at the hands of unrighteous people. Sometimes their suffering is resolved, as in the case of Elijah at the hands of Jezebel or Joseph at the hands of his brothers. Sometimes the suffering, as seems to be the case with Abel, is left unresolved. The righteous one suffers at the hands of the unrighteous and there's no comeback. That's just the story. The end. But as Jesus Himself tells us, all of the Old Testament points to Him. Not just the clear, direct predictions of His birth and life and death and resurrection but even the patterns and themes that run through the Old Testament, including that of the righteous suffering at the hands of the unrighteous, find their fulfillment—they suddenly make sense!—in the light of Christ.

And the first righteous one to suffer at the hands of the unrighteous was Abel. The second son, the younger son, the lesser son of Adam and Eve. When Cain the firstborn is born, he is named Cain, which sounds a little like the Hebrew word for "gotten." Eve says, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." Adam doesn't even get mentioned. This is a *divine* gift, according to Eve. And when Cain grows up, he inherits his father's profession—the task given to Adam by God Himself¹—and becomes a worker of the ground. And though the ground is now cursed, it is still the source of God's nourishment and sustenance for His people.

¹ "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it" (Gen 2:15).

Abel, by contrast, we are simply told, is born. In fact, there is something quite peculiar about the name he's given, which in Hebrew sounds similar to the word for "vapor." False gods are "Abels," empty of substance, "vanity of vanities." Being the second son, he has to branch out from the family line of business. And we have no report of Eve's joy at his birth or her thinking him a divine gift.

Both were brought up by Adam and Eve, no doubt to learn all the skills parents are supposed to teach their children but also instructed in the promise which was still ringing in their ears from when they had left the Garden. Although the creation had been fatally damaged by Adam and Eve's rebellion, there was a promise, which may very well be the reason that Eve was so delighted at Cain's birth. She was told that her seed would crush the serpent's head.² There he was. Her seed was now born. Maybe here was the fulfillment of that promise already. Whereas Abel as the little brother was less significant. He didn't have that same importance in the fulfillment of God's promise, or so it would seem to Eve who judged things by sight and her own reason.

It might also have seemed at the time that Cain's work was far more worthwhile. If we follow the Biblical text very closely, we find that God allows mankind to turn to meat and to kill animals for food only after the flood. At this time, then, the raising of fruits and vegetables is a very valuable profession, whereas the rearing of sheep, less so—important for producing wool, but not for something that would sustain you.

But here Eve and Cain had missed something. Already at their expulsion from the Garden God had indicated the shape of things to come by clothing Adam and Eve, who had made pathetic attempts at covering their nakedness by sewing together fig

² "The LORD God said to the serpent, '...I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He shall crush your head, and you shall crush his heel'" (Gen 3:14-15).

leaves. What did God do? He gave and made for Adam and his wife garments of skins and clothed them.³ Already before the expulsion from the Garden, God ensured that Adam and Eve should live at the expense of another. That they might live, another must die. Because the wages of sin is death.⁴ And if you, a sinner, are to live, another death must occur. So Abel, as a keeper of sheep, as a provider of garments to cover nakedness, though despised by his brother and seemingly by his parents, was in fact engaged in divine work! The working of the ground was work for *man*. The clothing of the naked was a work of *God*.

Moreover, Scripture reveals to us indirectly here and more directly later on, there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood.⁵ There is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood. Why? Because the wages of sin is death. Any other sacrifice for sin is simply inadequate. It doesn't take much imagination to come up with examples for what happens to a justice system if capital crimes are dealt with leniently. All you have to do is hear stories every now and then about people who commit terrible crimes and get off lightly. Someone has been killed and the murderer just gets a few years in prison?! Where is the justice in that? And so when it comes to the capital crime against God—"The day that you eat of it you shall surely die"—the only punishment that is commensurate with the crime is the shedding of blood. Life is in the blood. Life for life.⁶

³ Genesis 3:21

⁴ Romans 6:23

⁵ Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 9:22

⁶ Leviticus 17:11; Exodus 21:23

And when Cain and Abel come to bring their offerings to the Lord, it would seem they are both doing the same thing. They are both bringing the fruit of their own work to God. Cain works with the ground, so he brings the produce of the ground. Abel works with sheep, and so he brings some of the animals from his flock. But the Book of Hebrews tells us that this isn't true: "By faith Abel offered a better sacrifice and it was acceptable to God" (Hebrews 11:4).

Not only that, but what did Cain bring? Cain brought some of the produce of the ground. He brought some of the things that he himself had worked on—the ground that he had kept. What did Abel bring? Well, what did Abel do? He was a keeper of sheep. But we know that this was not for food. If Abel had wanted to bring an offering equivalent to Cain's, he would have brought wool. But what he brought was of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. He brought a sacrifice far more complete than merely the product of his hands. He brought the life of another as an offering. He brought shed blood and death to God as an offering. And that was acceptable to God.

For that act of righteousness, that recognition of the depths of his sin and therefore the understanding of what it would take to bring a pleasing offering to God, for that act of righteousness Abel died at the hands of a sinful brother. And Abel's name lives on for the rest of eternity as the first righteous to shed his blood at the hands of the unrighteous. The first martyr. But therefore the first person in human history to escape from the world of sin and death through his death in faith in God's promise. The first victim and the first victor. And what is it that Abel's blood does? He sheds his blood and that blood cries out to God. Abel's blood cries out to God, because of the injustice of his death, because of his righteousness. But because it is

the blood of Abel, who is himself a sinner, all that the blood can cry out is an accusation. Abel's blood cries for vengeance. It has no power to do anything else.

Fast forward a few millennia. Another righteous man dies at the hands of the unrighteous. Another righteous man who knows the depth of human sin and who knows what it takes for sinful humans to come before God and be pleasing to Him. Another righteous man who is willing to make the sacrifice that is required so that there might be peace with God, even our Lord Jesus Christ, who also brings a lamb as His offering to God. But this time He is the Lamb. He is the firstborn of all creation, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And He, too, dies because He is righteous, not in spite of, but because of His righteousness. It is His very righteousness that causes the wrath of the world to fall upon Him and for His brothers, descendants of Abraham, to slay Him in anger and in envy. In fact, we are told that even Pilate recognized that it was envy that caused the leaders of the Jews to deliver Jesus over (Mt 27:18). And unwittingly they took on the role of Cain. The honored, respected, privileged first son of God, Israel, turns against Him who comes in the role of the little brother, the despised one. And in envy they slay Him, because they are unable to bear the sight of His righteousness.

This time it is not an accident. This is not a plan gone wrong. But this is God's plan brought to its fulfillment. Jesus offers Himself as the firstborn Lamb. He sheds His blood which also falls to the ground but it cries out not for vengeance but for pardon. He offers His blood for those who slew him. He offers His righteousness and therefore unjust death as the substitute and the replacement for your just death as the unrighteous one.

You, who in this story are Cain, are given the place of Abel as the righteous one. And the sprinkled blood of Jesus is the means by which this all takes place. Jesus' blood is not wasted into the ground. But it's gathered by God Himself and distributed again and again throughout generations. And so as the writer of Hebrews points out to the Christians who are struggling, Every time we come into the presence of God in the divine service, every time we come into His presence, we come to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than Abel's (Hebrews 12:24) It's gathered into the chalice and there given for us to drink in faith. The lifeblood of Jesus is our lifeblood!

And so though it seems that the suffering of Abel in Genesis 4 is one of those unresolved sufferings where there is no recompense, no resolution to the injustice, not so! God takes the unjust suffering of Abel and sets it up as a sign of His own salvation—the time when His own Son would die at the hands of sinners, as Adam's son died at the hands of a sinner, so that Abel would become a watchword for all who trust in the righteous blood of Jesus Christ and live by it.

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