

The Offerings of Cain and Abel

Devotional Reading: [Luke 20:45–21:4](#)

Background Scripture: [Genesis 4:1–25](#)

Genesis 4:1–16

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

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³ In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴ And 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, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If 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.”

⁸ Now 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.

**⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”
“I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”**

¹⁰ The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”

¹³ Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴ Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”

¹⁵ But the LORD said to him, “Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶ So Cain went out from the LORD’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Key Text

The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?” —Genesis 4:6–7a

Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings

Unit 1: The Genesis of Altars and Sacrifices

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Compare and contrast the offerings of Cain and Abel.
2. Define what doing right required of Cain and Abel.
3. Commit to a practice of “doing right” through his or her giving.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

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B. Lesson Context

I. Two Births (Genesis 4:1–2a)

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B. Abel (v. 2a)

II. Two Offerings (Genesis 4:2b–7)

A. Different Occupations (vv. 2b–4a)

B. Different Reactions (vv. 4b–5a)

C. Cain’s Anger (v. 5b)

You, Karen?

D. The Lord’s Warning (vv. 6–7)

Recognizing Mercy

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B. The Lord Confronts Cain (vv. 9–10)

C. The Lord Punishes Cain (vv. 11–12)

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A. Cain’s Anguish (vv. 13–14)

B. The Lord’s Provision (v. 15)

C. Cain’s Departure (v. 16)

Conclusion

- A. Cain’s “Worship War”
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Pentateuch *Pen-ta-teuk*.

Introduction

A. Limited Resources

For over 30 years, my wife has worked as an editor of children’s Sunday school curriculum. She has always had a passion for teaching children about the Bible, so this job has been an ideal position for her. Her duties include editing lessons, selecting worship songs and choruses for children to learn, deciding which teaching pictures should accompany each lesson, and providing a variety of other helps for the teacher. And she works for just one of several companies that offer such materials!

The number of resources available nowadays for teaching children the Bible is staggering. Printed materials have been around for many years; add to that all of the resources that today’s technology has made available to teachers. Over the 30-plus years that my wife has held her position, she has had to receive appropriate training from time to time so she can keep up with how ministering to children in a church setting has changed.

Imagine what it was like for the first parents, Adam and Eve, to try and teach their two sons, Cain and Abel, about the God who created

them. Their resources were limited, to say the least! They could have used the world around them, “what has been made,” as Paul stated, to draw attention to the greatness and power of the One who created them ([Romans 1:20](#)). What did Adam and Eve understand about such basic matters as prayer, worship, and giving? We take these acts for granted, but what kind of instruction did the first family receive (if any)?

In today’s lesson, we examine the first acts of worship recorded in the Bible, as carried out by Adam and Eve’s two sons, Cain and Abel.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Genesis does not explicitly claim an author. But [Exodus 17:14; 24:4; 34:27](#); [Numbers 33:2](#); and [Deuteronomy 31:9](#); [Matthew 19:8](#); [Mark 10:5](#); [John 5:45–47](#); etc., suggest that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, a section we call the Pentateuch. However, many modern scholars have proposed that the text of the book of Genesis we possess today is a composite work of several different sources written hundreds of years after Moses would have lived. Because Genesis was part of the Law of Moses and Moses was certainly capable of writing, it seems best to take Genesis as having been authored by Moses.

The account of the offerings presented by Cain and Abel follows the eviction of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. That was a consequence of their sin against God. Adam lived 930 years ([Genesis 5:5](#)), but determining how long Adam and Eve lived in the garden is impossible. Neither can the events of today’s lesson be reliably dated.

I. Two Births ([Genesis 4:1–2a](#))

A. Cain (v. 1)

1. Adam 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.”

The Genesis record indicates that this was the first child of the first couple. God commanded the first couple to “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth” ([Genesis 1:28](#)), and Cain is the first evidence of that obedience. The name *Cain* sounds like the Hebrew word for “acquire.” Eve praised the Lord, acknowledging that this child was acquired *with the help of the Lord*. The name *Eve* comes from a Hebrew word meaning “living.” Adam had given her that name “because she would become the mother of all the living” ([3:20](#)). Eve was privileged to experience the fulfillment of that name.

B. Abel (v. 2a)

2a. Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Eve then *gave birth* to *Abel*, though we do not know how much time passed between the births of the two sons. No words of Eve are recorded following Abel’s birth. The name *Abel* comes from a Hebrew word meaning “breath” or “vapor.” The intentionality of their names should not be lost, as a Hebrew hearer would recognize the lesson of each of the sons’ names. Cain reminds us that life comes from the Lord, while Abel’s name would remind the hearer that life is brief, like a vapor.

What Do You Think?

What baby shower gifts could you give that give thanks to the Lord for the newborn child?

Digging Deeper

In what ways is parenthood strengthened when the Lord is worshipped?

II. Two Offerings (Genesis 4:2b–7)

A. Different Occupations (vv. 2b–4a)

2b. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.

The account records the occupation of the two boys: *Abel* became a shepherd, while *Cain* tilled *the soil*. Tilling the ground is what Adam began to do after he and Eve were sent out of Eden (Genesis 3:23).

3–4a. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.

Adam and Eve would have taught their sons how to worship as they had learned from God while in the garden. While we do not know when the brothers began to offer sacrifice, we do know that they chose to worship through their giving. It is clear from the text that each man gave from the produce of his labors. Cain, already described as someone who “worked the soil,” brought something from *the soil*, most likely a grain or vegetable *offering*. Abel, a keeper of flocks, offered something from *the firstborn of his flock*. This description brings to mind later laws given to Israel (Exodus 13:12; 34:19). Nothing is said, however, about Cain bringing the “firstfruits” of the soil, which was also later commanded of Israel (23:19). This may point to a higher quality of offering on Abel’s part.

Another indication of higher quality may be seen in how Abel

brought *fat portions* as a part of his offering. Once again, later requirements in the Law of Moses indicate the significance of offering the fat of an animal because “all the fat is the Lord’s” ([Leviticus 3:16](#)). The fat was considered the choice portion and thus the best part of the sacrifice.

What Do You Think?

How will you use your gifts of time, talent, and treasure as an act of worship to God?

Digging Deeper

What indicators of legalism should you be alert for in that regard?

B. Different Reactions (vv. [4b–5a](#))

[4b–5a](#). The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.

Why did the Lord accept Abel’s *offering* but reject Cain’s? One proposal is that Abel’s offering was a blood sacrifice, while Cain’s was only a grain offering, not costing him much. If so, the hearts or attitudes of the two men were the key factor distinguishing the two offerings.

At this point, the New Testament offers some important insights. [Hebrews 11:4](#) states, “By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous.”

Our text does not indicate precisely how the Lord expressed his acceptance of Abel’s offering and his rejection of Cain’s. Later, the Lord will speak to Cain, so he may have addressed each of the brothers, much as he had earlier spoken to the serpent, Adam, and Eve ([Genesis 3:14–19](#)).

C. Cain’s Anger (v. [5b](#))

5b. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Cain could have reacted with either remorse or anger. He chose the latter. So great was his bitterness that his facial expression showed his displeasure. As the sacrifices were acts of worship, Cain's heart posture is obvious.

What Do You Think?

What techniques can you adopt to control your anger?

Digging Deeper

To what extent does [Jonah 4](#) help you with that question?

You, Karen?

I watch a lot of online video clips of law enforcement officials making arrests. The name *Karen* often appears as part of the titles of these clips as a derogatory designation of someone who behaves in an “I’m entitled” kind of way.

The “Karens” of the videos are often extremely angry as they resist arrest. They will loudly attempt to justify, excuse, or otherwise “explain away” the behavior that has landed them in handcuffs. They close their ears to anything the officer has to say. They ask “Why?” relentlessly, although the officer has explained things five times already.

Anger is a God-given emotion. Anger is not sinful in and of itself—Jesus himself became angry on more than one occasion ([Mark 3:5](#); [11:15–17](#); [John 2:13–17](#)). But there's a difference between godly anger ([Romans 2:8](#)) and worldly anger ([Ephesians 4:26, 31](#); [James 1:20](#); etc.). Be warned: failure to discern the difference can make you a “Karen”—or worse, a Cain!

D. The Lord's Warning (vv. 6–7)

6. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?”

God had addressed Adam with a series of questions following his and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden ([Genesis 3:9–11](#)). He questioned Eve as well ([3:13](#)). Then *the Lord* confronted *Cain* about his anger. His questions were designed to make Cain think about his condition, and they prepared him for the counsel the Lord was about to provide. The Lord was as concerned about the offerer as he was about the offering.

7. “If 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.”

All was not lost for Cain. He did not have to remain angry. But Cain's heart needed to change; though the word *repent* is not used in this passage, Cain needed to do just that and determine to do what was pleasing to the Lord. If he did not take this step, *sin* was ready to exercise even further control over him. While the Lord did not specifically mention the devil, the language used in this verse is reminiscent of what Peter says about how the devil is like a roaring lion on the prowl, “looking for someone to devour” ([1 Peter 5:8](#)).

The Lord's warning assumes that Cain had some understanding of sin. (This is the first time the word is used in the Bible.) Perhaps his parents had told him about their own sad experience with sin in the Garden of Eden and tried to warn Cain not to follow that same path. Sin did not have to have the upper hand with Cain, any more than it did with his parents. If Cain did what was right, he would indeed rule over sin.

Recognizing Mercy

When I was young, there was a time I became so angry that I decided I would tell my mother that I hated her. When I did, however, I was met with mercy. She appeared unfazed. Her love for me did not change—whether or not I was angry. Her love quelled my anger, and I regretted my actions.

We see God’s mercy on display in the story of Cain and Abel. Instead of killing Cain, God spared him. God had every right to put him to death, but that’s not how the story goes.

Through Christ Jesus, God also offers us mercy today. We deserve to die eternally for our sins, but Jesus took the penalty for us. He paid off a debt we never could. Is there ever *any* reason to be angry with God? No! (See [Jonah 4](#).) And until we humble ourselves in repentance, we will miss the joy of knowing God’s deep, bubbling fountain of mercy and life. Are you missing it now?

—J. K.

III. Two Outcomes ([Genesis 4:8–12](#))

A. Cain Kills Abel (v. 8)

8. Now 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.

Anger is a powerful emotion that can be a gateway to sinful actions. The words *Let’s go out to the field* are not in the Hebrew text. However, several ancient versions, including the Septuagint (the Greek text of the

Old Testament), include Cain's words given in the *NIV*. At some point, *Cain* persuaded *Abel* to go with him to a field where the older brother took his younger brother's life.



Visual for [Lesson 1](#). Allow learners one minute of silent reflection on this statement before asking, "How do you ensure that you do what is right?"

[First John 3:12](#) offers insight into what motivated Cain to do the terrible thing he did to his brother. John contrasts the message of loving one another with the actions of Cain, "who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother." John then raises the question of why Cain killed Abel. The answer? "Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous." Rather than heed the Lord's counsel to do what was right, Cain harbored his bitter, envious feelings toward his brother to the point of killing him. It is sobering to consider that this early in the biblical record (we are still in single-digit pages in our Bibles), such a tragic act has occurred.

B. The Lord Confronts Cain (vv. [9–10](#))

9. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

The Lord knew where Abel was and what Cain had done to him, just like he knew Adam’s location when he asked him, “Where are you?” ([Genesis 3:9](#)). The question allowed Cain to do something right ([3:7](#)) rather than allow sin to tighten its stranglehold on him. *Cain*, however, denied knowing where Abel was. He even became defiant in his reply: *Am I my brother’s keeper?* Cain tried to deflect God’s question away from himself, much like his father had done in his response to the Lord after being confronted with his disobedience ([3:12](#)).

What Do You Think?

In what senses are we to be “our brother’s keeper”?

Digging Deeper

At what point do our responsibilities end in that regard, if at all?

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

The Lord asked yet another question of Cain—a question that revealed his full awareness of what Cain had *done* to his brother. The Lord’s description of how Abel’s *blood* was crying to him *from the ground* may indicate that Cain had buried his brother’s body in an effort to conceal his deed. His parents, too, tried to hide their sin ([Genesis 3:8](#)).

The writer of Hebrews mentions Abel’s blood, contrasting it with Jesus’ blood, which “speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” ([Hebrews 12:24](#)). Abel’s blood cried out for judgment on his brother. Jesus’ blood given at the cross speaks grace and forgiveness.

C. The Lord Punishes Cain (vv. 11–12)

11. “Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.

Previously, the Lord had cursed the serpent because of its role in deceiving Adam and Eve ([Genesis 3:14](#)). Here, Cain was cursed *from the ground*, meaning that the focus of the curse was to be the ground from which Cain made his living. Later, the Law of Moses will describe an act such as Cain’s shedding of his *brother’s innocent blood* as a defilement of the land ([Numbers 35:33](#)).

12. “When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”

The Lord had already told Adam that the ground would be cursed “because of you;” that is, because of his sin ([Genesis 3:17](#)). Working the soil would become a rigorous, demanding task, and the ground would produce thorns and thistles ([3:18–19](#)). Here, God told Cain that his labor in the soil would yield nothing in return. Thus what had been the source of productivity and satisfaction for Cain would become a source of frustration and devastation.

The Hebrew word translated *earth* at the end of this verse differs from the word earlier rendered *ground* and indicates a much larger area (perhaps the entire planet as it does in [Genesis 1:1–2](#)). Cain was consigned to live as *a restless wanderer*, likely having to search for food from whomever would be willing to share with him.

IV. Two Epilogues ([Genesis 4:13–16](#))

A. Cain's Anguish (vv. 13–14)

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

Cain was grieved to hear that his livelihood was being taken from him. While he saw his *punishment* as severe, at a later time, the Lord declared that death was the appropriate punishment for murder ([Genesis 9:5–6](#); [Exodus 21:12](#)). Thus, Cain's punishment was less severe than it could have been.

14. “Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”

At no point did Cain offer any admission of guilt or remorse for his action; like his father (see [Genesis 3:12](#)), Cain saw God as the culprit to be blamed for what lay ahead for him. Cain acknowledged that he could well become the target of revenge for his killing of Abel. Perhaps he was thinking of future family members who would learn of his despicable act. That Eve knew about it is clear from her statement in [Genesis 4:25](#). One wonders how much Cain read into other people's thinking about the evils of his own heart. If others were like him, he was indeed in grave danger.

Of course, it was not true that Cain would be *hidden* from the Lord. That is an impossibility for anyone, as David recognized ([Psalm 139:7–12](#)).

B. The Lord's Provision (v. 15)

15. But the LORD said to him, “Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the LORD put a mark on

Cain so that no one who found him would kill him.

The use of the phrase *seven times over* likely signifies completeness; that is, full *vengeance* will be carried out on *anyone who kills Cain*. It's all too easy to speculate about the composition of the *mark* placed on Cain and where it might have been placed on his body; it would have had to be someplace visible, such as his forehead. A primary point not to be overlooked is the Lord's measure of grace by not administering the punishment of the death penalty that Cain, in fact, deserved. But such a penalty isn't announced until [Genesis 9:6](#).

C. Cain's Departure (v. 16)

16. So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

We do not read of any expression of gratitude on Cain's part for the Lord's provision of protection from possible vigilante justice. *Cain* simply *went out* and began a new phase of his life *in the land of Nod*, a designation that means "wandering." It was certainly a fitting location for someone who had been sentenced to live as a vagabond.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to teach others to recognize God's presence?

Digging Deeper

How will you be an accountability partner for a person as he or she tries to notice the presence of God?

Conclusion

A. Cain's "Worship War"

From time to time, churches have engaged in what have come to be called “worship wars.” Usually, the issue that creates the conflict is the style of music. Cain, however, was engaged in another kind of worship war. It had nothing to do with music. Cain’s worship war went much deeper.

Faith, which God has always required from those who would please him ([Genesis 15:6](#); [Hebrews 11:6](#)), was absent from Cain’s offering. Instead of seeing Abel’s righteous act as something to learn from and imitate, Cain responded in anger. John says that Cain’s actions were evil ([1 John 3:12](#)), and evil will always seek to persecute and silence righteousness.

Prophets such as Isaiah challenged God’s people in his day to recognize that, despite all of the observances of worship in which they participated (incense, sabbaths, assemblies, feasts, and prayers), it was all worthless. Why? “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” ([Isaiah 29:13](#)). Jesus quoted these words to the religious leaders of his day, whose worship, like that of the people in Isaiah’s day, was filled with religious actions “but their hearts are far from me” ([Matthew 15:7–8](#)).

In many churches today, an abundance of resources aid in worship through modern technology. It is sobering to consider that if the condition of our hearts is deficient, our worship may be just as unacceptable as Cain’s was.

B. Prayer

Father, help us to take our preparation for worship more seriously. Before we enter the sanctuary of our church building, may we make sure that our hearts are a fitting sanctuary for your presence. May we never

forget that we are living sacrifices, called to worship and serve you between Sundays as well as on them. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Make your life an offering to the Lord.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Divide your class into groups of three. Ask half of the groups to discuss the topic, “The best gift I ever received.” The other half can share with each other their answer to the prompt, “The best gift I ever gave.”

After a few minutes, ask the groups to share what they discussed. Some possible discussion questions are: 1–What made these gifts special? 2–How did you feel about getting/giving the gifts? 3–How were these the “right” gifts?

Lead into the Bible study by saying, “Today, we will look at the first two gifts recorded in the Bible and explore why one was more acceptable than the other.”

Into the Word

Recruit four participants to read today's text from [Genesis 4](#) aloud, using these parts:

Narrator: [4:1a, 2–6a, 8a, 8c, 9a, 10a, 13a, 15a, 15c, 16](#)

Eve: [4:1b](#)

The Lord: [6b–7, 9b, 10b–12, 15b](#)

Cain: [4:8b, 9c, 13b–14](#)

Option. The reading will go more smoothly if you make a copy of the text for each reader, with the parts highlighted.

Form participants into study pairs or triads. Designate half the pairs/triads as **Brothers' Offerings** and the other pairs/triads as **God's Response**. Give each group one set of the following questions on hand-outs (you prepare):

Brothers' Offerings: 1–What do the different offerings reveal about the heart of each brother? 2–What indicators are there to suggest or refute this as being a case of sibling rivalry?

God's Response: 1–Why did God favor Abel's offering over Cain's? 2–What do we learn about the character of God from this passage?

After a few minutes, have the groups discuss their findings with the whole class.

Alternative. After the four-part reading of the lesson text, distribute copies of the "From What to Why" exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Follow small-group discussion with whole-class consideration.

Read and discuss [Hebrews 11:4](#) as a transition to the Into Life section.

Into Life

Have learners return to their study pairs or triads formed earlier to discuss these two questions: 1–What makes giving back to God easy? 2–Why is it sometimes difficult?

Ask the whole class to brainstorm various motivations for giving and withholding.

Option. At this point, distribute to study pairs/triads copies of the “Gifts Compared” exercise from the activity page. Allow time for volunteers to share and discuss their insights from the activity.

For a whole-class discussion, distribute handouts (you prepare) on which you have printed two lists: one list of faulty reasons for not giving and the other list of wrong motives for giving. Challenge learners to think of more entries for both lists. Then, ask learners to circle the one reason, excuse, or wrong motive that is most like their own giving patterns.

Have learners then write on their handouts a way each of them can commit to do right in giving back to God, in both quantity and quality.

Option. To expand this discussion to the giving expectations of the New Testament era, have learners work with a partner to consider these giving principles:

Proportional: [1 Corinthians 16:2](#)

Sacrificial: [2 Corinthians 8:3](#)

Cheerful: [2 Corinthians 9:7](#)

Discreet: [Matthew 6:1–4](#)

End with a time of worship, rereading of [Hebrews 11:4](#), and group prayer.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(June 1—The Offerings of Cain and Abel\)](#)
