

THE GROWTH AND POWER OF SIN

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"And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto Yahweh. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock, and of the fat thereof. And Yahweh had respect unto Abel, and to his offering: But unto Cain, and to his offering, he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And Yahweh said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? 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. 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. And Yahweh said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not. Am I my brother's keeper? And He said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto Me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand. 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. And Cain said unto Yahweh, My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, Thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from Thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth: and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me. And Yahweh said unto him, Therefore, whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And Yahweh set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. And Cain went out from the presence of Yahweh, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden." Genesis 4:3-16.

Many lessons crowd on us from this section. Its general purport is to show the growth of sin, and its power to part man from man even as it has parted man from God. We may call the whole 'The beginning of the fatal operations of sin on human society.'

1. The first recorded act of worship occasions the first murder. Is not that only too correct a forecast of the oceans of blood which have been shed in the name of religion, and a striking proof of the subtle power of sin to corrupt even the best, and out of it to make the worst? What a lesson against the bitter hatred which has too often sprung up on so-called religious grounds! No malice is so venomous, no hate so fierce, no cruelty so fiendish, as those which are fed and fanned by religion. Here is the first triumph of sin, that it poisons the very springs of worship, and makes what should be the great uniter of men in sweet and holy bonds their great separator.

2. Sin here appears as having power to bar men's way to God. Much ingenuity has been spent on the question why Abel's offering was accepted and Cain's rejected. But the narrative itself shows in the words of Jehovah, 'If thou doest well, is there not acceptance?' that the reason lay in Cain's evil deeds. So, in I John 3:12, the fratricide is put down to the fact that 'his works were evil, and his brother's righteous'; and Hebrews 11:4 differs from this view only in making the ground of righteousness prominent, when it ascribes the acceptableness of Abel's offering to faith. Both these passages are founded on the narrative, and we need not seek farther for the reason of the different reception of the two offerings. Character, then, or, more truly, faith, which is the foundation of a righteous character, determines the acceptableness of worship. Cain's offering had no sense of dependence, no outgoing of love and trust, no adoration,--though it may have had fear,--and no moral element. So it had no sweet odor for God. Abel's was sprinkled with some drops of the incense of lowly trust, and came from a heart which fain would be pure; therefore it was a joy to God. So we are taught at the very beginning, that, as is the man, so is his sacrifice; that the prayer of the wicked is an abomination. Plenty of worship nowadays is Cain worship. Many reputable professing Christians bring just such sacrifices. The prayers of such never reach higher than the church ceiling. Of course, the lesson of the story is not that a man must be pure before his sacrifice is accepted. Of course, the faintest cry of trust is heard, and a contrite heart, however sinful,

is always welcome. But we are taught that our acts of worship must have our hearts in them, and that it is vain to pray and to love evil. Sin has the awful power of blocking our way to God.

3. Note in one word that we have here at the beginning of human history the solemn distinction which runs through it all. These two, so near in blood, so separate in spirit, head the two classes into which Scripture decisively parts men, especially men who have heard the gospel. It is unfashionable now to draw that broad line between the righteous and the wicked, believers and unbelievers. Sheep and goats are all one. Modern liberal sentiment--so-called--will not consent to such narrowness as the old-fashioned classification. There are none of us black, and none white; we are all different shades of grey. But facts do not quite bear out such amiable views. Perhaps it is not less charitable, and a great deal truer, to draw the line broad and plain, on one side of which is peace and safety, and on the other trouble and death, if only we make it plain that no man need stop one minute on the dark side.

4. The solemn divine voice reads the lesson of the power of sin, when once done, over the sinner. Like a wild beast, it crouches in ambush at his door, ready to spring and devour. The evil deed once committed takes shape, as it were, and waits to seize the doer. Remorse, inward disturbance, and above all, the fatal inclination to repeat sin till it becomes a habit, are set forth with terrible force in these grim figures. What a menagerie of ravenous beasts some of us have at the doors of our hearts! With what murderous longing they glare at us, seeking to fascinate us, and make us their prey! When we sin, we cannot escape the issues; and every wrong thing we do has a kind of horrible life given it, and sits henceforth there, beside us, ready to rend us. The tempting, seducing power of our own evils was never put in more startling and solemnly true words, on which the bitter experience of many a poor victim of his own past is a commentary. The eternal duty of resistance is farther taught by the words. Hope of victory, encouragement to struggle, the assurance that even these savage beasts may be subdued, and the lion and adder (the hidden and the glaring evils--those which wound unseen, and which spring with a roar) may be overcome, led in a silken leash or charmed into harmlessness, are given in the command, which is also a promise, 'Rule thou over it.'

5. The deadly fruit of hate is taught us in the brief account of the actual murder. Notice the impressive plainness and fewness of the words. 'Cain rose up against his brother, and slew him.' A kind of horror-struck awe of the crime is audible. Observe the emphasis with which 'his brother' is repeated in the verse and throughout. Observe, also, the vivid light thrown by the story on the rise and progress of the sin. It begins with envy and jealousy. Cain was not wroth because his offering was rejected. What did he care for that? But what angered him was that his brother had what he had not. So selfishness was at the bottom, and that led on to envy, and that to hatred. Then comes a pause, in which God speaks remonstrances,--as God's voice--conscience--does now to us all,--between the imagination and the act of evil. A real or a feigned reconciliation is effected. The brothers go in apparent harmony to the field. No new provocation appears, but the old feelings, kept down for a time, come in again with a rush, and Cain is swept away by them. Hatred left to work means murder. The heart is the source of all evil. Selfishness is the mother tincture out of which all sorts of sin can be made. Guard the thoughts, and keep down self, and the deeds will take care of themselves.

6. Mark how close on the heels of sin God's question treads! How God spoke, we know not. Doubtless in some fashion suited to the needs of Cain. But He speaks to us as really as to him, and no sooner is the rush of passion over, and the bad deed done, than a revulsion comes. What we call conscience asks the question in stern tones, which make a man's flesh creep. Our sin is like touching the electric bells which people sometimes put on their windows to give notice of thieves. As soon as we step beyond the line of duty we set the alarm going, and it wakens the sleeping conscience. Some of us go so far as to have silenced the voice within; but, for the most part, it speaks immediately after we have gratified our inclinations wrongly.

7. Cain's defiant answer teaches us how a man hardens himself against God's voice. It also shows us how intensely selfish all sin is, and how weakly foolish its excuses are. It is sin which has rent men apart from men, and made them deny the very idea that they have duties to all men. The first sin was only against God; the second was against God and man. The first sin did not break, though it saddened, human love; the second kindled the flames of infernal hatred, and caused the first drops to flow of the torrents of blood which have soaked the earth. When men break away from God, they will soon murder one another.

Cain was his brother's keeper. His question answered itself. If Abel was his brother, then he was bound to look after him. His self-condemning excuse is but a specimen of the shallow pleas by which the forgetfulness of duties we owe to all mankind, and all sins, are defended.

8. The stern sentence is next pronounced. First we have the grand figure of the innocent blood having a voice which pierces the heavens. That teaches in the most forcible way the truth that God knows the crimes done by 'man's inhumanity to man,' even when the meek sufferers are silent. According to the fine old legend of the cranes of Ibycus, a bird of the air will carry the matter. It speaks, too, of God's tender regard for His saints, whose blood is precious in His sight; and it teaches that He will surely requite. We cannot but think of the innocent blood shed on Calvary, of the Brother of us all, whose sacrifice was accepted of God. His blood, too, crieth from the ground, has a voice which speaks in the ear of God, but not to plead for vengeance, but pardon.

'Jesus' blood through earth and skies,
Mercy, free, boundless mercy, cries.'

Then follows the sentence which falls into two parts--the curse of bitter, unrequited toil, and the doom of homeless wandering. The blood which has been poured out on the battlefield fertilizes the soil; but Abel's blasted the earth. It was a supernatural infliction, to teach that bloodshed polluted the earth, and so to shed a nameless horror over the deed. We see an analogous feeling in the common belief that places where some foul sin has been committed are cursed. We see a weak natural correspondence in the devastating effect of war, as expressed in the old saying that no grass would grow where the hoof of the Turk's horse had stamped.

The doom of wandering, which would be compulsory by reason of the earth's barrenness, is a parable. The murderer is hunted from place to place, as the Greek fable has it, by the furies, who suffer him not to rest. Conscience drives a man 'through dry places, seeking rest, and finding none.' All sin makes us homeless wanderers. There is but one home for the heart, one place of repose for a man, namely, in the heart of God, the secret place of the Most High; and he who, for his sin, durst not enter there, is driven forth into 'a salt land and not inhabited,' and has to wander wearily there. The legend of the wandering Jew, and that other of the sailor, condemned forever to fly before the gale through stormy seas, have in them a deep truth. The earthly punishment of departing from God is that we have not where to lay our heads. Every sinner is a fugitive and a vagabond. But if we love God we are still wanderers indeed, but we are 'pilgrims and sojourners with Thee.'

9. Cain's remonstrance completes the tragic picture. We see in it despair without penitence. He has no word of confession. If he had accepted his chastisement, and learned by it his sin, all the bitterness would have passed away. But he only writhes in agony, and adds, to the sentence pronounced, terrors of his own devising. God had not forbidden him to come into His presence. But he feels that he dare not venture thither. And he was right; for, whether we suppose that some sensible manifestation of the divine presence is meant by 'Thy face' or no, a man who had unrepented sin on his conscience, and murmurings in his heart, could not hold intercourse with God; nor would he wish to do so. Thus we learn again the lesson that

sin separates from our Father, and that chastisements, not accepted as signs of His love, build up a black wall between God and us.

Nor had Cain been told that his life was in danger. But his conscience made a coward of him, as of us all, and told him what he deserved. There were, no doubt, many other children of Adam, who would be ready to avenge Abel's death. The wild justice of revenge is deep in the heart of men; and the natural impulse would be to hunt down the murderer like a wolf. It is a dreadful picture of the defiant and despairing sinner, tortured by well-founded fears, shut out from the presence of God, but not able to shut out thoughts of Him, and seeing an avenger in every man.

We need not ask how God set a mark on Cain. Enough that His doing so was a merciful alleviation of his lot, and teaches us how God's long-suffering spares life, and tempers judgment, that there may still be space for repentance. If even Cain has gracious protection and mercy blended with his chastisement, who can be beyond the pale of God's compassion, and with whom will not His loving providence and patient pity labor? No man is so scorched by the fire of retribution, but many a dewy drop from God's tenderness falls on him. No doubt, the story of the preservation of Cain was meant to restrain the blood-feuds so common and ruinous in early times; and we need the lesson yet, to keep us from vengeance under the mask of justice. But the deepest lesson and truest pathos of it lies in the picture of the watchful kindness of God lingering round the wretched man, like gracious sunshine playing on some scarred and black rock, to win him back by goodness to penitence, and through penitence to peace.