

I have two younger brothers (TD & Trevor). Growing up there was intense competition between the three of us. Do any of you have siblings? Can you relate to that? The three of us are only four years apart in age and we could get into some of the worst fights. There was always friction. Always tension. We would argue about everything and anything. How many of you in here today are the youngest child? How many of you are the oldest? Now, who in here today is a middle child? Ok. So you're the ones. You see, I don't know about your family, but in mine, my middle brother TD was almost always the instigator. He loved to irritate my little brother especially, and this would get me riled up so before you knew it we were, all three of us, at each other's throats.

I remember one event in particular when we were very little, I think I was about six year old. My parents had hauled an old sofa outside to get rid of it and my brothers and I were playing on it. We were climbing up to the top of the sofa, jumping onto the cushions and then onto the ground. It was great fun, until my brother TD decided to lay down on the cushions so that no one else could jump- just to be irritating. So after several requests to move went unheeded I told him that I was just going to jump on him. I don't remember exactly how he replied, probably along the lines of "go for it." So I did- and broke his arm. If you've been with us the last two weeks then you're getting a glowing insight into my childhood. I steal kids' toys and I break my brother's arm. To make things worse, TD was still sucking his thumb at the time and I broke the arm of his favorite thumb. I remember he would have to lean over and contort just to get at it. Oh the terrible things brothers do to each other.

Sibling Rivalry. Some of us have experienced this and sometimes it's good natured and well intentioned and sometimes it does more than simply surface damage. Some of you may have a brother or a sister that you still feel a lot of anger or resentment toward. Maybe you're upset, to this day, with your parents, for letting things get bad between you and another sibling or because they played favorites between you. I'm very fortunate that after my brothers and I left our teens we also left our resentments toward each other and we are good friends, but that might not be the case for you. The feelings of discord that we have toward our siblings can be very difficult to move past, and today we're going to go back to the beginning to see where the root of all this began.

We're in the third week of our year-long journey through the Bible that we're calling Garden to City. Each week of 2016 we'll be digging in to inspect an important reference point within the Bible, to listen to what it tells us about God, or what it tells us about ourselves, and how we should live. In these pages we learn about our Creator and we discover His great love for us- how He designed us to be- and who we are in Him.

It's within God's story that we find the meaning and the purpose in our own stories.

We're beginning this year-long study in Genesis and we're calling this part of our journey Origins. On week one we learned about the goodness of creation- that existence came about because of God's creativity and power. We also learned that we are created in the image of God, which means we reflect His character and His heart. Last week we learned about the fall of humanity because of sin. Adam and Eve made a poor choice in the garden and the ripples of that decision have tremendous consequences. Humanity became separated from God because of sin. We are divided from Him, but not only that, our sin also creates division among each other. The tension and friction between my brother's and I growing up and that you've experienced in your life in your relationships with others has its roots in that potent little word: sin.

To learn about this we go back in Scripture to Genesis chapter four where we learn about Cain and Abel. Cain is the older brother and Abel is the younger.

When we first read about these boys we see that the way they arrive in the world is not unique. It's the

same way a lot of families experience new arrivals. When the first child comes into the world there is a lot of excitement. In verse one it says, "When (Eve) gave birth to Cain, she said, "With the Lord's help, I have produced a man!" This is an event to celebrate, right? She has delivered, not just a baby, not just a son, but a man. There's even an exclamation mark at the end of the sentence. "I have produced a man!" She's already imagining what he will be when he grows up. If you're a parent in the room you can relate. My wife and I welcomed a baby boy into our family this summer, and with him come hopes and expectations of who he will become one day. I can relate to Eve's words, "With the Lord's help, I have produced a man!" There's enthusiasm and excitement in her voice.

Then in the very next verse we read, "*Later she gave birth to his brother and named him Abel.*" No excitement no exclamation point, just "now there's another one." Not only that, but Abel isn't referred to as a boy or even son, he's "Cain's brother." How many of you younger siblings can relate to this? How many times were you introduced growing up, as your sibling's younger brother or sister? "Oh, you're so and so's little brother." Or, "You're so and so's little sister." How irritating is that? I can't really relate, because I'm the oldest brother, but I can imagine.

There's nothing in the text to show that the excitement over Cain's birth and the relative lack of enthusiasm over Abel's arrival carries over into their adulthood. In fact in the very next verse we see Abel's name mentioned first. He becomes a shepherd and manages flocks, while Cain becomes a farmer and manages the fields. They each have assumed very worthy roles, they're both doing respectable and productive work, and I'm sure that Adam and Eve were proud parents toward both of their sons.

But it's at this point when a problem rises to the surface and friction comes between the brothers.

In verse three of Genesis chapter four we read, "*When it was time for the harvest, Cain presented some of his crops as a gift to the Lord. 4 Abel also brought a gift—the best portions of the firstborn lambs from his flock. The Lord accepted Abel and his gift, 5 but he did not accept Cain and his gift. This made Cain very angry, and he looked dejected.*"

This causes me to want to ask several questions. Those of you who are familiar with this text have no doubt wanted to ask these too. First, why did God respond to Abel's offering with favor, but reject Cain's?

The text doesn't explain why this is the case, so we're going to have to speculate about this, but here are a few options. One possible reason that God was pleased with Abel's gift but not with Cain's was because of the proportion of the two offerings. We read that, "Cain presented some of his crops," while Abel brought "the best portions." It's possible, and this is just conjecture, but maybe Abel brought a significant amount of lamb in proportion to the size of his flock, while Cain brought a less significant portion of his crops in comparison to the size of his harvest.

In the Bible we are often taught about the significance of the proportions of our generosity. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were commanded to give a tenth of what they produced as an offering to God. The very first time we meet Abraham, which is just a few chapters from our text, we learn that he honored God by giving Him a tenth of all he had. In the New Testament, in the gospels, we see Jesus not only affirm the principle of offering God a tenth of what we have, but he goes even beyond that by encouraging generous giving.

You remember the time that Jesus and his disciples visited the temple and observed people entering the room. Several wealthy individuals come in and make a big show of the offerings that they drop into the temple coffers. Then a woman enters, a poor widow, who drops in two small coins, which were everything that she had to live on. Jesus points her out to his followers and declares that she's the most

generous person who had come into the room that day. Why, because of the size of her offering. Obviously not, it was because of the proportion of her offering. She gave all that she had.

It's could be that God accepts Abel's offering and rejects Cain's because of the size of their gifts in proportion to what they had. The second possibility is in the nature of their gifts. It's possible that God prefers animal offering as opposed to grain offerings. I'm not sure about you, but if my kids brought me two plates, one that had a nicely prepared filet mignon, and the other that had some granola bars, I'm going to prefer the steak! That's just me. But maybe it's true of God as well?

I think this option is less likely because in the Old Testament we see individuals who present both grain offerings and animal offerings to God. In fact God asks for both. There are times when He asks His people to present both types of gifts. So God is probably not choosing Abel's gift over Cain's because of the type of gift they brought.

Another possibility is the fact that Abel's offering was his best, while Cain's was simply some of what he had. That's how it's worded in the text. "Cain presented some of his crops as a gift to the Lord. Abel also brought a gift- the best portions of the firstborn lambs from his flock." Abel gave the best portions of meat from the firstborn of his sheep.

That's a significant difference between the two offerings. When Abel gives the best of what he has, he showing that God is worthy of worship and when we give to Him of our lives we give our best. That's certainly one reason why giving the best set Abel's offering apart. Another is the fact that in giving his best, Abel's gift demonstrated trust in God, and here's why that's the case. This might be a difficult concept for us to understand today because for most of us, when we work at our jobs, whether we're on salary or an hourly worker, we receive payment for our work in a regular way. Some of us are paid weekly, some bi-monthly, and some of us monthly, but regardless, it's a method that we can rely upon (hopefully). But when you consider how a rancher gains benefit from their work, you realize that their wages come in a drastically less predictable method. You don't know exactly during what part of the year that you will have animals being birthed. If you offer the firstborn of your flock it's not just letting God know that He deserves the first, it's also trusting that He will provide you with others.

It's likely that one of the reasons God favors Abel's gift over Cain's is because he gave his best and in so doing it demonstrated trust that God would provide for his needs.

The reality is that we don't know the answer to this question. It's hard to figure out the exact reason when it's not stated in the text. God doesn't explain it to them for us to learn about, but that raises the second question I want to ask about this story. Not just why God favored Abel's offering, but how did Cain know?

The text says in verse five, *"The Lord accepted Abel and his gift, but he did not accept Cain and his gift. This made Cain very angry, and he looked dejected."*

How did Cain know?

My guess is that Cain knew in the same way that we know when we haven't given our best, not just to God, but in any area of our lives. You've had the experience of knowing that the report you're turning in at school isn't your best work, or the job you've been performing where you're employed has been with less effort than you're capable of giving. We know when something we give isn't our best. We do. And I'm not talking about insecurity or worry that we don't measure up, I'm talking about times we know in our gut, "I could have done better."

It's important for us to pay attention to that inner voice speaking to us- about both our relationship

with God and our relationships with others- when it tells us that we are not giving our best. "I could have been more generous." "I could have been more forgiving." "I could have shown more restraint." When we hear that voice in our heads telling us that we have more to give, don't chalk that up to yesterday's chili digesting poorly. When we choose to trust Christ with our lives, he places His Spirit inside of us to instruct us and guide us and it is a wise person (a mature person) who listens when your Spirit tells you- "this wasn't my best."

This is a crucial moment in the story, because it's a potential turning point. Whenever we experience anger welling up within us, or greed, or pride, we have a decision to make in that moment. When you are upset with a family member because of something that they said, and you feel it welling up inside, you have a decision to make. Are you going to work toward reconciliation or are you going to get revenge? When you are frustrated at work because your boss didn't give you the promotion and you know you deserved it more than the person who received it, you have a decision to make. Are you going to undermine your boss and get revenge, or are you going to continue to work hard and be at peace?

Every time we feel intense feelings of anger or resentment or bitterness we have to decide if we're going to give in to those emotions and let them rule us, or if we're going to allow the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts.

It's important to pay attention to the way God speaks to Cain in this moment. I explained last week that when God comes searching for Adam and Eve in the garden and engages them in conversation that it's an indication of his love for them. Here in our text I think we see this again. God is engaging Cain like a loving Father would.

6 *"Why are you so angry?" the Lord asked Cain. "Why do you look so dejected? 7 You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master."*

If we learn to develop a sensitivity to God's still small voice in our lives, there will be many times we hear God speaking to us this way. "Why are you angry?" "Why are you jealous?" "Why are you behaving this way?" It's not a critical voice that condemns us, but a warning. It's as though God is explaining that we have a decision to make. We can do the right thing or the wrong thing, but beware, sin is crouching at the door. It wants to master you, but you must master it.

At this point with Cain, it's important to note that sin has not yet entered the picture. He hasn't done anything with his anger and dejection. Here's why that's important. I think it's possible for us to not give our best to God, to know that it's not our best, and for God to be displeased but not yet to have crossed the line into sin- direct rebellion against God.

In our text God tells Cain that sin is right outside the door, it's ready to strike, but he still has a choice to make before that happens. It's important that we develop a sensitivity to the voice of God, because it's likely He wants to speak words of warning to us in the same way.

The apostle Paul wrote these words to help us understand this better in his letter to the church in Corinth:

12 *If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. 13 The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure. (1 Corinthians 10:12-13)*

Cain ignored the voice of God. He didn't listen and he invited Abel out into the field where Cain killed his brother. The first man ever born of a woman killed the second.

I think it's important to note that Cain didn't just have a flash of anger at the moment that his offering was rejected and Abel's was accepted and in that intense moment he struck. That's not what happened. Cain's anger burned. Maybe for days. He had opportunity to quiet that hatred, to listen to God's warning, but instead he fanned those flames until they brought about the terrible act that ended Abel's life.

Have you ever considered the timeline of your own sin? Maybe that's an odd question, and it's probably not something you were considering at this point, but indulge me for just a moment. Consider the timeline that leads to sin in your life. Sometimes, when we let intense feelings make a home in our hearts, over time if we don't address them quickly they grow, they metastasize like a cancer and spread, and what started small becomes so large that they overpower us. When we don't deal with these feeling in their infancy, and I'm speaking about things like lust, or greed, or anger, or pride, if we let these feeling roam around unchecked in our minds and in our hearts, they will, with time, grow to dominate us.

When Cain felt all this anger and animosity toward his brother, when it was still just a mild notion, he had the opportunity to seek reconciliation and move toward peace, but instead he chose to let it sit there for a while. I have a number of friends who are in recovery. And this is one of the phrases that they use, "if you hang around a barbershop long enough, you're bound to get a haircut.

Can I simply offer a word of advice in this area? Don't let yourself stew on feelings of anger or pride or greed (or you fill in the blank). Don't let those emotions simmer. Release them. Ask God to give you His peace. Seek the counsel of a friend who knows you and loves you. Invite them into your struggle.

Cain let his feelings toward Abel boil over and he killed his brother. (Vs. 9 and following)

9 *Afterward the Lord asked Cain, "Where is your brother? Where is Abel?"*

"I don't know," Cain responded. "Am I my brother's guardian?"

10 *But the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!*

11 *Now you are cursed and banished from the ground, which has swallowed your brother's blood. 12 No longer will the ground yield good crops for you, no matter how hard you work! From now on you will be a homeless wanderer on the earth."*

13 *Cain replied to the Lord, "My punishment is too great for me to bear! 14 You have banished me from the land and from your presence; you have made me a homeless wanderer. Anyone who finds me will kill me!"*

15 *The Lord replied, "No, for I will give a sevenfold punishment to anyone who kills you." Then the Lord put a mark on Cain to warn anyone who might try to kill him. 16 So Cain left the Lord's presence and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.*

It's interesting that the punishment for Cain is an echo of the punishment brought against Adam and Eve, Cain's parents. God told Cain, "You're going to be driven from your home. Pushed out." Which is what happened to Adam and Eve who were banished from the Garden of Eden. God told Cain, "The ground will no longer produce for you." God had told Adam and Eve that their work would be harder and require more effort. Cain's going to be a restless wanderer on the earth.

But the thing Cain is most concerned about is really telling. He is worried that someone is going to find him and do to him what he did to his brother. Cain is the earth's first murderer, but already he

understands that violence breeds violence.

There's something inside of us that believes we have to get revenge. We have to respond to violence with violence, and Cain was concerned for his own life.

This another of those pivotal moments in the story. We begin to get the first hint that God has grace for us. God hears Cain's concern. He assures Cain that he won't allow anyone to take his life. God placed a protective mark on Cain.

This is really interesting. The mark God puts on Cain is not a punishment. This is a mark of God's protection. God says, "I know you're concerned for your life, but in spite of the fact that your sin will have consequences (you have to leave, and land you work won't yield crops, and you'll be a restless wanderer), but I'm going to protect you. God put a protective mark on Cain.

This is just a hint for us, as you think about From Garden to City. This is a hint of the grace that God has for us that will come in much greater ways. Cain's story is our story. Because sin has entered the picture it creates separation between God and us, it creates animosity between us and others, it brings suffering into this world, but don't ever forget that God is our protector. He intervenes on our behalf. Even when we act out on our evil urges, He still makes a way for us. His love never fails.

1 Peter 2:24-25 tells us:

24

*He personally carried our sins
in his body on the cross
so that we can be dead to sin
and live for what is right.*

*By his wounds
you are healed.*

25

*Once you were like sheep
who wandered away.
But now you have turned to your Shepherd,
the Guardian of your souls.*

Sin has consequences, yes it does. But even when we have sinned God has intervened on our behalf. Jesus, God in the flesh, suffered for us, He took the punishment we deserved, so that we could be rescued- restored.