

“LEAVE ME ALONE!”

by Walton Weaver

When God rejected Cain’s offering, he must have felt the cards were stacked against him. His response was, according to Genesis 4:5, that he became “very angry, and his countenance fell.” His disposition was such that not only did he get angry at God, but he stayed angry. He could cry “unfair” all he liked, still he had to deal with reality, which was this conflict over his offering. But, instead of dealing with it, he became so dejected that “his faces fell.” Cain was like Lucy in the comic strip. She was obviously distressed. Charlie Brown kept coming to her rescue, offering Kool-Aid, a candy bar, a glass of chocolate milk. Then he asked, “Can I do anything else?” Lucy stormed out, “Leave me alone. I just want to be miserable!” That was Cain. He wanted to be miserable. He was hurt. It made him angry and he refused to be comforted.

Cain, Our Contemporary

Cain wasn't the first to cry “Leave me alone!” and he wouldn’t be the last. His parents did it with their fig-leaf aprons. Job did it. “Leave me alone!” he cried (Job 7:16), and perhaps in our own way of thinking, with some justification. But God is saying to Job and to us that there is a mystery in suffering that he hasn’t seen fit to reveal yet. This desire to be left alone forces us to identify with Cain—he becomes one of us, our own contemporary—for we must admit that we too get angry at God and sometimes take it out on other people. Of course we are wrong when we do so, as was Cain.

Cain refused to be comforted because his jealousy so wounded his pride until it permeated every corner of his existence. Hurt pride turned to anger which resulted in suspicion; that suspicion became hatred and this hatred was projected onto his brother Abel—the scapegoat! Sometimes we detest what is in us so that we deny it is there and dump on others. Cain couldn't take it out on God so his brother Abel would do just fine.

It is true that this is an ancient story but the feelings it brings to the surface are current. Occasions for hurt pride and anger are numerous for people in our time just as they were in the day of Cain. How we react to them constructively is one of our greatest challenges. Cain chose the wrong way. He denied it and projected it. Blinded by his pain, it didn't matter to him that Abel was his brother. He ignored God's warning and his promise. He just wanted to be left alone.

We Are Never Left Alone

We don't have to live too long until we learn that life won't leave us alone. The Internal Revenue Service won't leave us alone. Our families won't. The church won't; neither will God. He didn't let Sodom alone or Nineveh or Jerusalem or Babylon. The Bible is a record of a God who won't leave us alone. He will bother us when we err. Moses didn't let the Hebrews alone in Egyptian slavery. Nathan the prophet didn't leave King David alone when he callously murdered

Uriah the Hittite. "Thou art the man!" thundered the prophet. Elijah didn't let Jezebel alone for stealing Naboth's vineyard. Jesus didn't let Zacchaeus alone, or Peter, or Mary. John the Baptist didn't let Herodias alone for her commitment of adultery.

And God didn't let Cain alone in his agony. "The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? ... If you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it'" (Gen. 4:6-7). But Cain didn't heed God's warning. Then God promised his care, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" (v. 7a).

Cain didn't hear God's promise very well either. All he could see was God preferring Abel's offering. His hurt feelings caused him to want to strike out in a revengeful way. The problem with this kind of response to God's rejection of his offering was that vengeance is an emotional word and it was these feelings that were about to get him into serious trouble. And what we often do not realize is that most of us have some appetite for it too. It is so natural when we think we have been wronged; our gut reaction is to retaliate. If we are not careful we will find ourselves following the "way of Cain" by subscribing to the popular philosophy, "Don't get mad, get even." It was this philosophy that led Cain to kill his brother Abel (v. 8). But it cost him severely.

We Can't Fool God, Nor Can We Ignore Him

At last Cain thought he was free of the shepherd, but God wouldn't leave him alone. You see, the problem was, God missed Abel. So he came to Cain to inquire about him. His question must have irked Cain sorely. But he had lost control of the situation. It is when we have lost control that God always steps in. "Where is Abel your brother?" God asked (v. 9). To protect himself Cain lied, "I do not know." Then he insulted God, sarcastically asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain tried to play innocent but quickly learned that he couldn't fool God. He failed to see that what he did to his brother affected God, too. And although he didn't "keep his brother," God said he was "his brother's keeper." We are responsible for what we do.

And God keeps coming back and reminding us of our responsibility. This time he asked Cain, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground" (v. 10). God has no place in his world for a person who refuses to be responsible for others. Neither did Jesus who said, "As you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). The consequences of Cain's behavior was due to his irresponsibility. To Cain God said, "You are cursed from the ground ..." (v. 11). And Cain became a vagabond, "a fugitive and a wanderer" (v. 14).

What was Cain's attitude toward these consequences of his wrongdoing? It appears that at first he just brushed it off. But then the loneliness began to gnaw at him. Suppose someone should harm him like he did his brother Abel? Cain learned fast that pain is possible to those who are out of step with God. He was fair game to all. He came to his moment of truth when he sadly cried, "My punishment is greater than I can bear" (v. 13).

The God of Mercy

But God still cared for Cain. He persistently dogged him. He proved himself to be the “hound of heaven,” as someone has described him. God simply would not leave Cain alone. He wouldn't leave him alone in judgment, now he wouldn't leave him alone in mercy. He promised Cain his protection. God tempered his judgment with mercy, doing for Cain what Cain refused to do for Abel—be his keeper. As a sign of his protection, God put a mark on Cain's forehead (v. 15). The mark is not to be misrepresented as a curse, but a sign of mercy, intended for Cain's protection. God is merciful even to a murderer, and that can only be good news for those familiar with failure.

“Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (v. 16). Nod means “fugitive” or “wandering.” Absence from God is the result of Cain's conflict. Cain lived in a constant state of transition and restlessness. Unable to be at home anywhere, he was doomed to wander in vain.

This is the “way of Cain” mentioned by the writer of Jude (v. 11). By the time the New Testament was written, this sort of behavior had been coined the “way of Cain.” It stood for the cynic, skeptic, materialist, who believed neither in God nor moral order in the world. Cain is the epitome of a man who tried to live exactly as he pleased. And those who go the “way of Cain” usually find that living the way we please isn't very pleasing. It was true then and is still true today, the person who chooses to go without God is going to have to reckon with him. Those who go the “way of Cain” will still have to learn, always with pain and sometimes through tragedy, that you can't defy the moral order of God's universe with impunity.

Our Own Guilt

Honesty will keep us from pointing a blaming finger at Cain. We know something of his guilt. We may not be murderers, but we have certainly injured other people by entertaining Cain's philosophy of life ... living as we please. We know from experience that the cost of doing things our own way is high. There is a cure however. It is symbolized by the mark of protection that God put on Cain (v. 15). It stands for grace and mercy.

If we have given ourselves over to follow the “way of Cain,” the question for us is, are we willing to heed God's warning and rely on his mercy? But the “way of Cain” can also be avoided. Jeremiah did not yield to vengeance but left it in the hands of God: “let me see thy vengeance upon them, for to thee have I committed my cause” (Jer. 11:20). The same theme of repudiating vengeance is seen in the example of Jesus, who when he was reviled, did not retaliate (see 1 Pet. 2:21-24). Francis Bacon said, “By taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy, but in passing over it, he is superior.” Perhaps that statement was inspired by the life of Jesus of Nazareth.