

When Good Turns to Bad

Genesis 1: 31, 4: 1 – 8

May 16, 2010

I. Introduction

A. I was the new teacher for the toddler-age Sunday school class, writes Carol J. Rivest, of Owasso, MI. The class included my 14-month-old daughter, Becky.

1. During a lesson on creation, I'd ask questions like, "Who made the trees?" or "Who made the sun?" and the children would respond, "God did."

a. I was pleased the children learned quickly that God made everything.

A. Teaching lessons at home was more of a challenge. I had tried hard to teach my daughter to pick up her toys, and she wasn't learning very quickly.

1. One day I walked into the living room to find toys scattered everywhere. In exasperation I asked, "Who made this mess?"

a. Becky looked at me with a proud smile and said, "God did!"

A. Most of us would surely agree that God made the trees and the sun

1. And everything else in this great creation in which we live

A. We would, no doubt, also be in agreement with the statement in Gen. 1:31

1. That the universe, as God created it, was very good

A. But sometimes, when we look around at the condition of the world today

1. Where there is violence and hatred and jealousy and pride

a. Where some people seem to have so much and others so little

2. Where people and nature groan together at the suffering and pain

a. That is a part of the everyday life of so many of God's creatures

3. We may ask the same question Mrs. Rivest asked – "Who made this mess?"

a. Clearly, we would not say, as little Becky did, that God made it

A. What may not be so clear, however, is how something that was created so good

1. The world, the sun, the trees, and yes – we human beings, too

a. Who were created in God's own image, no less

2. How can such a good creation turn into such a grand, royal mess

A. How would we explain to a visitor from some other far-away part of the universe

1. How something that is so good can sometimes turn into something not so good

A. And, closer to home for each one of us, is a similar question

1. How, or why, if we are a part of God's good creation, can we sometimes mess things up, in our own lives and in the lives of others around us
 - a. To the point that we may sometimes feel that we are no good at all

II. This sermon is the first in a four-part series from the Book of Genesis

A. Looking at some "stories from the beginning" that deal with basic issues of faith

1. Why God created the human race with freedom of choice
 - a. And why sin has been a problem for us from the very beginning

A. The story of Cain and Abel brings up that question perhaps even more

1. Than the story of Adam and Eve, that we may be more familiar with

A. Adam and Eve represent for us the very first act of disobedience against God

1. Believing the devil, who appeared in the form of a serpent, rather than believing God
 - a. And putting their human vanity and desire ahead of God's desire for them

A. We still live with the result of sin entering into the world even today

1. The pain of childbirth that foreshadows all of the pain and suffering
 - a. That we can expect as a part of our natural existence
2. The need to work for our food and shelter, rather than the abundant supply
 - a. That is described in the Garden of Eden where life began

A. Another result of Adam and Eve's disobedience, mentioned near the end of Ch. 3

1. Just before they are driven out of the garden, is "the knowledge of good and evil"
 - a. That first spiritual step away from the goodness/perfection of creation
2. To the realization that human beings can be/are separated from a holy God
 - a. By disobedience, pride and rebellion against God's authority
 - (1) In short, the human race learned about sin
3. The possibility of displeasing God, and the consequences that follow

A. It is in that context that we hear the story of Cain and Abel – the first two human children

1. Who surely grew up with their parents' understanding of the sovereignty of God
 - a. What it means to sin, and to displease God
2. And then we read about each of them, as young men, offering a sacrifice to God
 - a. As an act of worship, or to appease God or win God's approval

A. I have heard discussions about why Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to God

1. While Cain's sacrifice did not seem to win God's approval

A. But have you ever asked yourself the question –

1. How did they know whether their sacrifices were pleasing to God, or not?

- A. We read of God speaking directly to Cain some time later
 - 1. After Cain has become angry, or as our scripture says – “his countenance had fallen”
 - a. In other words, he has become sullen and unhappy
 - 2. But we don’t hear that God spoke to him before that time
 - a. So what made him believe that his sacrifice was not acceptable to God?
- A. I don’t remember who it was that offered this explanation
 - 1. And I don’t know for certain that this is the way it happened
 - a. But it makes sense with my understanding of human nature
 - (1) So I will offer it to you for your consideration
- A. Much like we may do today, Cain may have offered his sacrifice to God
 - 1. Expecting that God would bless him in return
- A. What would that blessing look like? Well, as any farmer or gardener would know
 - 1. Cain would most likely have been hoping for the right amount of sunshine
 - a. Just enough, but not too much moisture for his crops to grow
 - 2. An abundant harvest, or at least good prospects
 - a. Isn’t that what every “tiller of the soil” would see as a blessing from God?
- A. So what if Cain didn’t see all of those things after he offered his sacrifice
 - 1. What if the seeds he planted didn’t come up all that well
 - a. Or if the plants looked weak and spindly, or if they withered in the hot sun
 - 2. Could it be that Cain looked at such things, and then said to himself –
 - a. God must not be pleased with me – what could be wrong?
- A. And what if, at the same time, Cain looked at his brother, Abel
 - 1. A keeper of the sheep, or of other flocks and herds
 - a. And his animals seem to be producing well – the lambs are growing up quickly
 - (1) All of them seem to be healthy, the very picture of God’s blessing
- A. Can’t you just hear Cain saying – what did Abel do to deserve such good fortune?
 - 1. Was it because God was pleased with his offering – unlike mine?
- A. That’s just an imaginary story of how things might have happened
 - 1. But from our understanding of offerings made to God, as talked about in scripture
 - a. The difference in whether a sacrifice is acceptable to God, or not
 - (1) Depends more on the attitude behind the gift, than on the gift itself
 - 2. As the prophets would remind God’s people many years later
 - a. The offering that is acceptable to God, is first of all, a pure heart and a right spirit

- A. An element of faith is a part of our understanding of an acceptable offering, too
 - 1. Giving an offering out of a sense of obligation or fear of reprisal is totally different
 - a. Than giving an offering as an act of worship, or a response to God's love
 - (1) Out of a heart filled with thanksgiving and praise
- A. And note what God asks Cain when he is confronted about his poor attitude
 - 1. Why are you so angry and unhappy?
 - a. Don't you know that if you do well, you will be accepted
- A. In other words, God hasn't written Cain off at that point
 - 1. Whatever else is involved with the unacceptable offering Cain has made
 - a. It has not made an irreparable rift between him and God
 - 2. God is still open to reconciliation and a good relationship
- A. But, the warning God gives to Cain is, if you do not do well, then sin is lurking at the door
 - 1. I would take that to mean – Cain, if you continue on with this attitude that you have
 - a. Holding on to the belief that you are not receiving my blessing
 - (1) Jealous of the good things that are happening for your brother
 - b. Angry at your circumstances, and fearful about your relationship with God
 - (1) Then ...then you are in serious trouble, for sin is on the prowl
 - c. And it's waiting just outside your door, waiting for it to open just a crack
 - (1) Isn't that an interesting description of how sin operates
 - 2. Many years later, the Apostle Paul would describe Satan as a lion stalking his prey
 - a. Maybe Vern or Shirley can tell us more about what that is like
 - (1) But the warning is given to keep Cain, and us, from being devoured
- A. Young people, I hope you are paying attention to this
 - 1. Because it is becoming increasingly popular to think that life just happens
 - a. Life can be good, or it can be rotten – there's not a whole lot anybody can do about it – stuff happens!
- A. God's word to Cain is – faith matters, faith makes a difference
 - 1. Because what you believe, about God, about how the world operates
 - a. Can make a difference in your attitude
 - (1) In how you look at life, and how you talk and act
 - 2. More importantly, if your attitude toward God and toward life is not good
 - a. It will make you more vulnerable to the temptations of Satan
- A. That's where Cain was at, but even there God continues to speak to him -

1. Sin is lurking at your door, and it's desire is to overcome you
 - a. The old devil is licking his chops, so to speak
 2. But! God says, you must master it! You can still beat the devil at his tricks!
 - a. Come on, let's do this together!
- A. I chose to stop the reading of the scripture passage at this point this morning
1. Because I wanted to focus on this part about the nature of sin
 - a. Turning the good that God created, into something bad
 - (1) But we don't want to overlook "the rest of the story"
- A. We may think that by now, Cain is already past the point of no return
1. He's angry – with God, with his brother, maybe even with himself
 - a. Out of the three, there's only one that he can strike back at
 2. So he invites his brother Abel out to the field on some pretext
 - a. And in a fit of rage, Cain kills his brother
- A. You talk about a good thing thing gone bad – that's about the ultimate evil
1. But it didn't have to happen that way
- A. If only Cain had listened when God said to him – I know you are angry
1. I know you are upset and frustrated and don't understand
- A. The devil may be close by, and he'd like nothing better than to see you give in
1. But I'm telling you – you don't have to
 - a. I will be with you, and I can give you the victory!
 2. That's the first indication of God's grace and love
- A. But the story doesn't stop with the murder of Abel
1. Even though Cain didn't listen to God, God didn't give up on him
 - a. There would be consequences to the sin that Cain committed
 - (1) Just as sin and evil always bring about consequences in our lives
 2. God goes again to Cain, with the question – "Where is your brother, Abel?"
 - a. And Cain responds with the infamous line – "I don't know"
 - (1) "Am I supposed to be my brother's keeper?"
- A. Of course, in God's plan for the world, Cain was his brother's keeper, or helper
1. Every one of us is given a certain responsibility for all of our sisters and brothers
 - a. Not to keep track of where they are every moment of every day
 2. But, in the sense that we are to care about each other
 - a. And in God's scheme of things, every person in the world is my brother/sister

- A. God says to Cain, “Listen, your brother’s blood is calling out to me
 - 1. From the very ground on which it was spilled
 - a. From now on, that ground will be cursed for you
 - 2. You thought your crops were bad before – now it will be even more difficult
 - a. No matter where you go, you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth
- A. And finally, Cain realizes the enormity of what he has done
 - 1. He cries out to God, “That’s more than I can bear”
 - a. I’ll be a marked man for life, everyone will hate me
 - (1) Sooner or later, someone will kill me without a second thought
- A. And here we see God’s grace coming through again, as God says –
 - 1. No! I’m going to place my mark on you, but it will be a mark of protection
 - a. Anyone who harms you will receive his just dues
- A. In other words, the consequences of your sin are yours to bear
 - 1. But I will still be with you, there is still the opportunity to turn from bad to good
- III. That note of grace is what I want to leave with us this morning
 - A. God has created the world as a place of beauty and goodness
 - 1. And God created human beings to live in it and to enjoy that beauty
 - a. And to walk with God in a loving relationship, with a clear conscience
 - A. But God also created us with a will of our own and the freedom of choice
 - 1. Otherwise, we would be no different than a bunch of robots
 - A. With the freedom to choose, we have also been given the understanding
 - 1. That some choices are pleasing to God and some are not
 - A. Life will always be best when we make choices in line with God’s divine will for us
 - 1. But like Cain, and like his parents before him, we don’t always listen to God
 - a. And in our own strength, we will always fail to live up to God’s perfection
 - (1) That’s when the good God created in us turns bad
 - A. The good news is that God doesn’t give up on us when we sin
 - 1. In the person of Jesus Christ, God went so far as to die for us
 - a. So that we can be restored once again to the fullness of God’s perfection
 - A. So the bad in us, and in our world, can also be turned to good
 - 1. The mess can be cleaned up again!
 - a. It won’t happen completely as long as this world stands
 - 2. But it is possible for each one of us if we simply believe – God did do that!