

Cain & Abel *A movie with an unhappy ending* Genesis 4:1-16

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Have you ever been to the movies and watched a classic Disney scenario?

Beautiful orphaned girl being raised by frail grandmother.

No money to pay rent.

Enter rich evil other willing to support grandmother for girl's hand in marriage.

Wedding planned.

Enter dark, handsome stranger.

Eyes meet, room fades.

No.1 hit love song plays in background while relationship grows in rapid scene progression.

Evil other jealous.

Handsome stranger disappears.

Girl searches.

Source of rich evil other's wealth discovered – unlawful trafficking of poor.

Girl finds and rescues dark, handsome stranger.

Dramatic fight scene.

Evil other defeated.

Girl and dark, handsome stranger free to marry.

The Grandmother is now cared for.

The trafficked poor are restored to their homes.

Final scene of glorious wedding, screen fades as couple kiss.

The world loves happy endings. Final scenes where the good win, the bad lose, all the loose ends are tidied up and all the questions answered.

Perhaps the world's love for Disney movies with happy endings reflects a desire to hide the truth of how it really is. Happy endings are not always what we see in our own lives. The Bible speaks more truthfully of this. The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1-16 is one such story. It is a story that reveals the tragic consequences when humanity gives into sin's evil desires and dealings. It is a story that leaves us with unanswered questions. It is a story that helps us understand what the right questions to ask are.

Found in the prologue of Genesis 1-11, Chapter 4 continues the de-creation that begins with the disobedience of Adam and Eve in Chapter 3. We the audience, need to sense the magnitude of humanity's descent into sin from God's "very good" creation of Genesis 1:31 to a world where an angry jealous brother can kill his own sibling.

The movie version of Genesis 4:1-16 would be short and dramatic.

The first scene opens. The now adult older brother Cain, a worker of the soil, brings an offering of worship to God. We assume it is veges and fruit, all grown by his hand. We cannot see it though, it is boxed. The younger brother Abel, a shepherd, arrives with an offering also. It is visible and clearly of the choicest portions of the best animals in his care. God lavishes praise and acceptance

on Abel and his offering. But on Cain he does not look with favour, disregarding and rejecting what he has brought. The look on Cain's face could sink a navy. The anger in his eyes builds the tension and God sees it. With the look of a loving father who is concerned for his son (reminiscent of the parable in Luke 15), God speaks to Cain. He begins with a question. "Why does Cain look this way?" God encourages him to do what is right. The speech concludes with a warning. "To not do what is right will be like letting loose a wild animal that crouches at Cain's door. Its lustful desire is to devour him, but, if he chooses, Cain does have the power to prevent this". Cain remains silent, the anger is still etched on his face as he turns to where Abel is standing not far off.

The scene changes to a new place. Cain and Abel are together. Cain suggests a trip to the fields. As they head off we zoom in on Cain's face and see his eyes searching. We see him grab a handle and turn, slowly walking behind Abel. The music in the background, the way he walks and holds the implement, indicates something bad is about to happen. The implement is raised. In a close up shot a hand falls limply to the ground. Blood flows through the outstretched fingers down onto the ground where it stains the earth as it begins to soak in.

The scene changes yet again to the climactic conversation between God and Cain. God asks a question, "Where is your brother Abel?" It invites Cain to confess, to make public the guilt of his actions. Unlike a scene from an earlier movie from Genesis 3 (Gen. 3:10) where Adam and Eve told at least part of the truth of what they had done, Cain denies all knowledge. The hardness of Cain's demeanour speaks volumes about his disrespect for God. He lies easily and underlines his arrogance by questioning God, "is it his job to shepherd the shepherd?" God asks another question but this time it is rhetorical, "What have you done?" He commands Cain to "listen," for the blood of his victim cries out from the ground. God hears. He is not deaf to the cry of the innocent, those victims of injustice (Exod. 22:22,26), those without food (Gen.41:55), those expecting to die (Exod. 14:10), those bullied and oppressed by their enemies (Judg. 4:3), the cry for help of a woman being raped (Deut. 22:24,27). God always hears. Cain's act of murder demands vengeance, and that is what Abel's blood cries out for. And so God judges, as he must. The verdict: the blood of his brother has polluted the ground for Cain. No matter how hard he may work it, there will be no easy crops anymore. Cain's choice for sin has overwhelmed him and must be punished, his life will be one of restless wandering.

Cain's tone changes from his earlier reply, not to confession, but to fear. He is fearful of being driven from the land, of leaving the safety of God's presence, of suffering the same fate as his brother, being murdered in retaliation.

In a final act of mercy, God marks Cain, telling him that even in the land of "wandering" his life will be protected from blood vengeance.

The movie concludes with Cain slowly turning and walking away from God.

Just before the credits roll God lifts his arm towards Cain. The final view is of the shadow of God's finger touching Cain once again. This final shot leaves the viewer with a sense of despair, a need to jump up and shout "that's not how it is supposed to finish". But the shot freezes and no more is offered.

Gen 4:1-16 is no Disney story

It speaks of sin's power over us should we choose not to attempt to master it. Its lustful desire brings destruction, a living death, breaking our relationship with humanity, creation and ultimately with God. The broken vertical relationship of Chapter 3 has now spread to a rupture of the horizontal relationship between brothers. A story that begins with brothers worshipping together

ends with one dead and the other dead in sin. The one thing required of Cain was to give up his anger and allow reconciliation to take place. Instead he chooses to remain unreconciled and life is “perpetually skewed”.

We, like Cain, have the choice to master what lurks at our door. If we do not, we choose to let its destructive power overcome us. Sin requires judgement and ultimately brings death. Sin can only be mastered, by being placed in the hands of another, one who bears it on a cross, that is where its power is ended.

Many questions in this story are left without tidy answers.

There is no answer to why Cain’s offering was never accepted. Although New Testament passages would give witness to the faith of Abel’s offering (Hebrews 11:4) and the evil heart of Cain (1 Jn. 3:12) here there is no such commentary. One might even ask did God reject Cain’s offering that he might confront the sin lurking within him? Does God allow us to be challenged to draw out that within us that needs to be pruned?

We may ask why God’s protection never prevented Abel’s murder even though his cries are heard? Is God not active for the innocent also?

And why did Cain allow himself to be devoured? Rejecting both God’s encouragement and warning. Had he not heard from his parents of the need to obey?

All of these questions require us to sit before God as Job did, as the Psalmist did when they wrote “my God my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1). We too have our unanswered questions. Why this tsunami, this earthquake, the death of this innocent child, why cancer, the injustice carried out by this power? We are surrounded by lives filled with questions that the only answer found is silence. We must not fall into the temptation of trying to solve the text, to somehow make a Disney answer of it. We must ask does it point to a bigger question. That in the face of all these questions is there hope?

Throughout Genesis 4:1-16 there are hints of God’s movement towards grace. The encouragement, the warning, the opportunity to confess and show remorse, and the mark. This mark stands as a sign, just as the rainbow after the flood, and the circumcision after the covenant, the same word is used for God’s protection of Cain’s life. The passage should shock us to see the tragic and disturbing results of relationship breakdown but it should also point us to realise the desperate need for redemption. That humanity’s choices follow Adam’s, to allow sin’s lust to devour us. If there is any hope for the sinful one, the story of Cain and Abel suggests it will be found in God. The same God who marks a convicted killer, the same God who in the resurrection of another Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), brings freedom for all.

But the story concludes by saying “So Cain went out from the Lord’s presence”

The story gives a sense of this is not the way it was meant to be ... but it is the way it is.

The final scene may speak of the possibility of a sequel, the God who reaches out in grace, perhaps doing something in the future that sees the story change and a different ending made possible.

But in this movie at least we leave the theatre silent, disturbed and challenged.

And that is how sin’s story should affect us – silent and disturbed.

For we need to be honest with ourselves, we have the potential to make the same choices as Cain, the potential to ignore the sin that crouches at our door, to let temptation rule our decisions, the potential to be devoured.

I remember the experience of going out with some friends a few days before my wedding. Among other things we went to Lazerforce and as I entered into the darkened maze I was overcome with a realisation that some of these friends were very likely to want to “celebrate” my imminent wedding by playing some kind of prank on me. I had this sudden dread that they were going to gang up on me, attack me, leaving me wearing nothing but my underwear and the Lazerforce uniform. I was instantly on edge and aware of every movement around me. I found a corner I could hide in and stayed there the whole game. I was primed and ready to fight whatever they tried to do. You know what, no one even came near me I was so well hidden. I lost the game but at least I kept my clothes.

Then two days later I was leading my final morning youth group before our wedding the following weekend. A large number of these same friends were present. We had a party which finished with a group photo and a whole lot of “visitors” who had helped me out with YG over the years. I was totally unsuspecting as they told me to sit in the middle of the front for the photo. I sat there smiling for the photo as they jumped me. They handcuffed me to a pole, gave me gifts of eggs, flour and whatever else I never managed to get out of my hair and clothes.

In a similar way is that not what sin is like in our lives.

When we are not guarding our lives, taking care to watch what is around us and the traps we might fall into, we can oh so easily get handcuffed to a pole that does more than get our hair dirty. We can enter situations, make choices that will change our lives forever.

In 2 Samuel 11 we read that David walked on his roof in the cool of the late afternoon while his army was away at war. He sees a woman bathing and in that moment sin crouches ready to spring. David could have turned sharply and averted his eyes from the beautiful form of Bathsheba. He could have gone back inside knowing unhelpful thoughts were entering his head. But he does not. Instead we find he lingers. Lingers as sin leaps upon him and overpowers him just as it did Cain. We read that from this rooftop David makes decisions that led him to commit injustices by the abuse of the authority God has given him as king, adultery and murder. It affected his own life and the life of his family in tragic ways. - Sin never leaves us unscarred.

But unlike Cain, David eventually comes to a place of remorse. He confesses and repents. And he is forgiven.

A friend of mine sent me a text when I was preparing for this sermon. It read “Daily Bonhoeffer quote: *confession is a breakthrough to community. Sin wants to be alone with people. It takes them away from community ... Sin wants to remain unknown.*”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks the truth.

For us to “do right” as God encourages Cain to, we need to acknowledge the sin in our lives and be wary of the potential to head that way.

Have you ever experienced the freedom of confessing sin? Of unlocking the secrets, the regrets, the bad choices. Confession is the beginning of the journey to restored relationships. Restored to God and restored to the community.

In confessing we allow the light of Christ to flood our lives and restore us to the community of light.

We may not have murdered anyone but Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:21-22 that even if we have held on to anger towards another we are just as guilty as if we had murdered.

“Loving your enemies” (Matt 5:44) is something only possible with God’s help but to not do that is to fall into the hands of the sin that will eventually cause us to move away from God’s presence into a wilderness that does not allow us to be all we were created to be.

In Ephesians 4:26-27 Paul quotes the Psalmist

“In your anger do not sin” (Psa. 4:4).

My wife Christine also had a night of gathering with friends before our wedding. This group of ladies were asked to write some words of advice for her in a little book she was presented with. Almost every one of those wise friends without realising it wrote the same thing. Similar words to what Paul goes on to write in Ephesians 4. “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold”.

How many times have we gone to bed at night steamed at what someone has said or done or not done to us. Rather than settle it with God, with our partner, our kids, our friends, we leave it to prowl around in our mind and in doing so to begin to devour us.

Is that what Jesus was warning us against? When we allow anger to remain untethered in our lives are we walking down the path that ends in murdered relationships, inhuman responses to those around us who we refuse to forgive just as we have been forgiven?

How can we choose other than Cain?

I believe...

...we need to pray for a sharpened conscience that will poke us sharply when we are walking into situations where we will be tempted to do wrong. We need to spend time close to God in prayer and in reading and understanding his words in the Bible, in asking the Holy Spirit to lead us and grow us into the mature Christ-follower we are called to be.

As we walk closer with God we will see with his eyes, what is of him and what is not.

In the end I do believe God gives us the freedom to make choices. He will not prevent temptation coming into our lives, but he does promise that he won’t allow any temptation to come that we cannot overcome with his help.

But how we choose will determine many things.

So today, this week, this year ... Will we choose to wander away from God and allow the choice of sin to devour us?

Or will we choose to allow his grace to change who we are and how we think. To walk as a confessional people. To let the one who has made possible our redemption, change the movie of our lives and in doing so begin to change the world.

Let us pray.