

Sin crouching at the door

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[0 : 00] In 1998, a married couple, Colin and Faye Lagerwell, decided to go camping in the Kruger National Park.

And halfway through their tour of the park, they arrived at the Lower Sabe Rest Camp. I don't know if you've ever been there or if you've ever camped at Kruger National Park, but the rest camps they have, because of the proximity to wildlife in the park, they have these high fences, and it was fenced in on all sides.

They were a little bit concerned because when they arrived there, the fences weren't like they are today. They were only about chest high. But the guide said, no, it's fine, it's fine. The animals never venture into the camp.

And so they pitched their tent just before sunrise and went to bed at about 10 o'clock in the evening. They had only been asleep a few hours when they were woken to the bizarre sound of crunching just outside their tent.

And they didn't know what on earth would be making this sound. So they sat there for a while listening to this rhythmic crunching sound.

[1 : 13] And then Faye decided to unzip the tent a little bit and look outside. And she did so to see two meters from their tent a full-size male lion tucking into their braille leftovers.

Now, given that the only thing they had to defend themselves was a can of mosquito spray, they decided to stay in their tent. Their first reaction, in fact, recounting the event afterwards, they said their first reaction, they didn't know what to do, but their first reaction was to get dressed in their day clothes because they didn't want to be found mauled in their pajamas.

But they really didn't know what else to do. What can you do in that situation? One thing they weren't going to dare do, of course, was leave their tent. So all they did was they sat dead still in their clothes, in their tent for about five hours, listening to the scurrying and the crunching outside. And dawn started to break at about five o'clock in the morning. And they heard their neighbor in the next tent, who was apparently a large Afrikaans man, arousing, yawning, getting out of bed. And they were too scared to say anything to him. And then, sure enough, they heard him unzip his tent. And about two seconds later, they heard a loud scream, Hi, das ist ein Leo in die Kamp!

[2 : 29] At which point, the lion bounded away in surprise, and everybody started screaming, and all hell broke loose. Eventually, the lion got bored, and he trotted away out of the camp, and thankfully no one was harmed.

But I want you to put yourself in their situation. I want you to put yourself in that tent in the middle of the night, knowing that a full-grown wild lion is right outside.

What would you do? I'm probably right in guessing that you're not going to go back to sleep. And I'm probably right in guessing that you're not going to walk out of that tent until the danger has passed.

Right? And the reason is because we take the threat of wild animals seriously, don't we? They are dangerous. We know how dangerous they are.

But imagine for a second that we took the threat of sin in our lives as seriously as that, and treated it with that much fear and urgency.

[3 : 34] Because that is precisely what God wanted the first human born into our fallen world to understand about the danger of sin. This man's name was Cain.

And God wanted him to realize that sin is in fact dangerous, and it is serious, and it is waiting to consume him. So we see in verse 7 how God put it.

He said to Cain, When sin is crouching at your door, it desires to have you, to devour you, to consume you. Just like a lion outside of your tent, if you're not careful, sin is going to take you away

and utterly destroy you.

That was God's warning to Cain. He wanted Cain to realize that, and he still wants us to realize that today. Sin has not got less dangerous than it was then.

In fact, in the New Testament, Peter uses very similar terms. We're in warning Christians against sin. He says in 1 Peter 5.8, Be alert and sober-minded. Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

[4 : 45] It's a scary picture, isn't it, that the Bible paints for sin. One that we're not that scared of, I think. But we should be. Because sin is far more dangerous than most people think it is.

We tend to play fast and loose with sin in our lives, don't we? It's a bit of naughtiness on the side of whatever we think about sin. And we don't bother about it too much because we don't realize it's very real threat to our lives and not just our temporary lives, but our eternal lives.

You see, when God talks about sin, he talks about it with deadly seriousness. And we need to learn to see it in that way too. And so here in Genesis 4, that's one of the main things we learn.

We learn how dangerous sin really is and how it tends to get into our lives, what mechanics it uses, what opportunities it uses to get into our lives.

But that's not all we learn in Genesis 4. Thankfully, we also discover what God has done to allow his people to safely escape from the clutches of sin. So that's what we're going to look at today.

[5 : 53] Now last week, Dylan took us through Genesis 3 and we saw the fall of humanity. We understood humanity rejecting God's rule is what cut us off from eternal life, as well as cut us off from the blessings of the ground, the blessings of Eden, the blessings of the world.

And with the fall into sin, the world was broken. And then in Genesis 4, this morning's passage, we now meet the first children born into this fallen world, the brothers Cain and Abel.

And the question we obviously have when we come to Genesis 4 is, well, what's going to happen? What is family life in a fallen world going to look like? Well, it doesn't turn out too well, does it?

The world's first family experiences the world's first murder. So there's not much prospect for the human race already. If you thought your family was dysfunctional, then if you read the early families in Genesis, as well as the patriarchs, you'll realize actually it's not too bad.

But, yeah, so we come to Genesis 4, we realize there's really not much prospect for us. And we also found out the events that led to this sad outcome.

[7 : 10] And that's what I want us to focus on this morning. What is it that caused this murder? What is it that led up to this murder that Cain committed on Abel?

And what we do, if we rewind back from that event, we notice that it all started with an offering to God. So both brothers obviously realized that God was real, even though they'd been cut off from the garden.

Their parents obviously did their job and told them, you know, what the score was about life and what had happened. So both brothers realized that God was there and he deserved their devotion at least.

And they both expressed that devotion in making sacrifices from their respective livelihoods. So Abel from the livestock, because he was a shepherd, and Cain from the ground, because he was a farmer.

The first surprise in the story comes when we discover that God only accepted Abel's offering and not Cain's. And of course Cain is understandably quite put out by this.

[8 : 15] I mean, how would you feel? It was probably hard enough to get all this stuff out of the ground after God cursed it in Genesis 3. You know, Abel gets to play with sheep all day.

He's not working by the sweat of his brow in painful toil. So the least God can do is accept whatever he gets from Cain, right? And so you can understand why Cain's a bit grumpy, that his hard-earned sacrifice by the sweat of his brow is not accepted.

But then what happens is that God has a private word with him and explains to him just why his offering wasn't accepted. So look at verse 6.

Then the Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? So the question, of course, that we have is, well, why wasn't his offering accepted?

Well, according to this text and what God said, it was obviously because he didn't do what was right. If he had done what was right, it would have been accepted. So what does that mean? What does it mean that he didn't do what was right?

[9 : 24] Well, to do right, in the original Hebrew, that phrase, to do what is right, also has a sense of doing what is pleasing to God. And so, it's obvious that these offerings themselves are not by themselves pleasing to God.

Because even though Cain made an offering, even though he was religious, in a sense, it wasn't pleasing to God. And we, of course, see that theme developed later in Scripture, that offerings themselves, religious service itself, is not by itself pleasing to God.

But it's the heart and the motive by which it is done. The attitude in which the sacrifices and the offerings are given is what's important. And we see a hint, in fact, of the wrong attitude when we go back and we look at the offerings more carefully and compare the two.

I wonder if you noticed the slight difference in how they were described. So, if you notice, Abel, he brought the firstborn of the best portions of his flock, the fat portions, which are the best parts. But then we read Cain's offering and it's just some of the fruit of the ground. There's no equivalent of Cain bringing the first fruits of his produce, which, in fact, later on in Israel, the Israelites were explicitly told to bring the first fruits of their produce, unlike Cain.

[10 : 41] So, for example, in Exodus 23, 19, you shall bring the choice first fruits of your soil into the house of the Lord your God. And so there's already here a hint that Cain's heart is not really in his religion, right?

That he's just going through the motions. And the inspired writers of the New Testament, when we get to the New Testament, actually confirm this when they talk about Cain. So Hebrews 11 teaches us that Abel's offering was accepted because it was offered in a faith that pleased God, while Cain's was not.

And then in Jude 11, we learn that Cain was an example of greed, implying that he wanted to keep the best produce back for himself. And so what we learn when we read this and we take it in light of what the rest of Scripture says, we learn that Cain's failure, which led to this sin, was actually, it started with a failure to worship God properly.

Cain's failure was really rooted in a failure of worship. That's what I need us to see this morning. Now you probably know the word worship, what it means. It actually just comes from Old English two words, worth and ship.

So the value we attach to something is how much we worship it. Worship is not just coming and singing songs in a church. We worship things throughout our week, depending on how much value we attach to them and how much of ourselves we invest in those things and put into them.

[12 : 17] And the whole concept of sacrifice in worship, which is a concept that's developed later in Scripture, is there to give people an opportunity to see whether they truly value God like they say they do.

So there's one thing worshipping with our lips. It's how much we're willing to actually sacrifice, which is the true sense of how much we worship God.

Paul, for example, in Romans 12, says, Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. And then he says, This is your true and proper worship.

You see, your true and proper worship as a Christian is not how loudly you sing on a Sunday. Of course, that should inspire you to worship throughout the week. But your true worship is seen in how much you are willing to sacrifice Monday to Saturday.

That's what Paul is saying in Romans 12. In fact, that's what the book of the month called Sacrifice is all about. If you don't have a copy, if there's still some left on the table, Simon Gillibald, he talks about Romans 12 and what it means to be living sacrifices to express our worship to God.

[13 : 25] So pick up one of those books if you can. But the idea is that true and proper worship is really seen in sacrifice. And that is what pleases God, a heart that is ready and willing to sacrifice for him.

And so Cain's action was not pleasing to God because it betrayed a lack of true worship for God. But then we also discover here in this very same chapter not only what was the root of the problem, but we discover the danger that happens or the danger that we're exposed to when we do not worship God properly.

In that, it actually opens the door for sin. That's exactly what happened in Genesis 4, isn't it? Cain's lack of true worship and pleasing God actually opened the door for him to actually commit sin. So that's exactly what God warns him of in verse 7. Have a look. But if you do not do what is right or pleasing, then sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you but you must rule over it.

So God is telling Cain here that sin is waiting for just such an opportunity. And when your worship of God is not where it should be, and when God doesn't have his rightful place in your life and your devotion, that's when sin tends to strike.

[14:57] Doesn't it? From our own experience, I think we can confirm that. I mean, think of the sins that you're struggling with at the moment and don't pretend like you're not.

All have sinned. No one is righteous, the Bible says. We all struggle with sins. We're all trying to master over them and yet to a greater or lesser degree of success.

But think of the sins that you're struggling with at the moment. More often than not, the reason you struggle with a particular sin is because you believe that sin will give you something, some pleasure or satisfaction that God can't give you.

And what that is, of course, is a failure to truly worship God, truly value him for who he is, to recognize how much he is worth in your life. Because if you really give him the worth that he deserves, then sin would lose its attraction, wouldn't it?

God would outshine whatever sin can offer you. But too often he doesn't. And the sin seems far more attractive than God himself, which is a failure of worship. Do you see what I'm saying?

[16:06] Sin is rooted in a failure of worship just like Cain's was. And in my experience, those who make, those who I've met who actually make the biggest sacrifices for God, showing the biggest worship of him, they tend to be the holiest people I know, the people I want to be like, the ones who can most successfully put off sin in their lives, are the ones who tend to make the most sacrifices for God.

It's a very interesting phenomenon. And so that's the first thing this passage reveals to us, the link between right sacrifice and the sway of sin in our lives.

Worship, the link between our worship of God, seen in sacrifice, and the sway and the power of sin over us. The second thing we notice is the vicious cycle of sin in this passage.

So look at this with me. Look at the conversation between God and Cain after his sin from verse 9. Then the Lord said to Cain, Where is your brother Abel?

Of course not that God didn't know, but he wants to see Cain's response. I don't know, he replied. Am I my brother's keeper? The Lord said, What have you done?

[17:26] Listen, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under curse and driven from the ground which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you.

You will be a restless wanderer on the earth. And then at the end, verse 16, So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden. Okay, so look at the pattern here.

God questions Cain. Cain makes an excuse and denies responsibility. Then his punishment is a frustration from the ground and ultimately a banishment from the place.

Does that remind you of anything? Genesis 3, isn't it? Again. So Genesis 3, God questions Adam. He makes an excuse and denies responsibility.

Blames Eve. His punishment is a frustration of the ground and a banishment from Eden. See, these two stories, Genesis chapter 3 and Genesis chapter 4, are very closely linked and deliberately so to make the point that sin is cyclical.

[18:39] Right? It tends to cycle itself and repeat itself over and over again by the same kind of mechanics. So just like sin did with Cain's parents, it does again with him, but this time the result is even worse than before.

So before, the ground was just hard to work. Now Cain can't work it at all. Before, Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden, now Cain is driven further, even away from God's very presence.

So effectively, what's happening here is that not only is the pattern of sin being repeated, it's being intensified. It's driving humanity further and further away from God the more sin cycles itself.

Because that is of course how sin works. Sin tends to breed more sin and the results get worse each time. And it's not impossible that Cain's sin, which started with his inadequate offering of the ground's produce, was connected to the result of his dad's sin, which was the curse of the ground and the toil of working it.

Maybe that's why Cain was unwilling to give of the produce that he had sweated and toiled to earn for himself, because of his dad's sin. So there might be a connection there. But whatever the reason is, the truth we see is how sin tends to breed more sin.

[20 : 07] That's the idea here. Sin is breeding more sin. It's like the rust on my car. You've probably heard me use this in a sermon illustration before, the rust on my car.

And you know why? Because it's still there and it's getting worse. And that's the point. Rust does not get better. I don't know if you've ever dealt with rust on a car or any other thing. It doesn't improve.

It just gets worse. And it tends to breed more rust. So in my car's situation, what's happened is that the rust on the roof has actually created holes, which then when it rains, as it's been doing a lot recently, water gets in.

And what does water do when it's exposed to metal? It creates more rust. So the whole point is that the more rust there is, the more rust that happens, because rust breeds more rust. Well, it's the same with sin.

You've probably experienced it, how sin tends to breed more sin in your life, doesn't it? One sin tends to open up the opportunity for more sin in more different places, just like the rust on my car.

[21 : 14] One greedy thought, perhaps, just one greedy thought, opens up the door when you see the opportunity to taking something that doesn't belong to you, which was inspired by that greedy thought you had, which then, when questioned about it, leads to a lie to cover it up, which then leads to another lie and a whole string of lies to cover up that original lie, which covers up the original sin, which was inspired by the original thought, and on and on it goes, right?

Or how often, for example, has one lustful thought led to a physical sin, which then leads to a world of lies and trouble. You probably know people who have been caught up in sexual sin because it started with one simple lustful thought.

I mean, King David is a fitting example, isn't he? A lustful look on his rooftop which led to adultery with Bathsheba, which led to a cover-up and a string of lies, which then led to him eventually having Bathsheba's husband killed.

Sin breeds more sin. And so this passage is here to show us that right from the beginning, that's how sin has worked. The repeated and intensifying nature of sin in our world.

And in fact, that's the very thing Cain was afraid of in verse 14, that his sin was going to breed more sin. Have a look at what he says to God. Today you are driving me from the land and I will be hidden from your presence.

[22 : 49] I will be a restless wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will kill me. So that's what he's afraid of, that in the future other children of Adam and Eve, hearing about their older brother Abel and the story, are going to now hunt Cain down and kill him in vengeance.

And so Cain is rightly afraid that his sin will intensify and it will lead to more, because that's what sin does. And it's then that the story takes a very surprising twist, and God does something very unexpected.

Verse 15, the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who found him would kill him. Now precisely what this mark was, no one knows, but what's interesting is just that God did it at all.

Why should he? Cain deserved whatever came to him, right? For his murder? Of Abel? Why does God have mercy on him and protect him from being murdered himself?

Well, because God doesn't want sin to breed more sin. That's why. So, the final thing we learn in this passage is how God stems the tide of sin.

[24 : 07] And that is in his very nature, God stemming the tide. Now, the thing is, it's inevitable that sin will breed more sin. And the rest of chapter 7, not chapter 7, chapter 4, and you know, up until chapter 10, the rest of this chapter shows us how Cain's family line was just the story of this increasing sinfulness.

So, if you scan your eyes down to verse 23, Lamech, which is one of Cain's descendants, he boasts about how much worse than Cain he is. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me.

If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech 77 times. Lamech is boasting to his wives about his murder. And so, we see from Cain's sin, the dam wall has already been broken open.

And once the dam wall is broken through, it's no use trying to plug the hole. It's just going to get worse and eventually just the whole torrent of sin will come, which God eventually had to deal with the flood, which we'll see next week.

But God knows that it's only going to get worse. So why did he put the mark on Cain to stem the tide of sin when he knows that it's going to get worse?

[25 : 25] Well, because God wants to show us something about himself. Yeah. He wants to show us his desire is to stop the vicious cycle of sin from continuing in his world, even though justice must be done.

So even though he had to banish Cain, there's this little sign, this little hint of grace, this little hint of God's desire to stop sin before it gets out of hand.

And so there's this tension in the story, the tension between the need for sin to be punished and the need for Cain to be punished and become a wanderer and be exposed to vengeance, but also the need to stem the tide of sin that God desires.

So you see the tension, the need for justice to be done and the need for sin to be stopped. So how can God do both? That's the real question this passage asks.

And it's only later in the human story that we find out how God can do both when he sends his son Jesus to stop the cycle of sin in its tracks by doing justice.

[26 : 37] And so both are achieved on the cross and only on the cross. In the gospel, God through his son both judges sin and stems the tide of sin by sparing us from the effects of the justice for sin when Jesus died on the cross in the place of his people.

sin. And that is God's ultimate way to stop the vicious cycle of sin that was started by Cain in the lives of all who come to trust and obey Jesus.

But now here's the amazing thing. When we read the New Testament, we realize that what Jesus did on the cross and when he rose again and ascended, the gospel, what he achieved, not only does it stop the vicious cycle of sin in the lives of those who have come under that, come under his lordship, but it also starts reversing it.

And that's the beautiful thing about what the gospel does. It doesn't only stop sin and stop the power of sin, but it starts reversing it and that is something that John picks up in 1 John chapter 3. Turn there now, the passage that Eliel read for us earlier. When John talks about the results of someone coming under the lordship of Christ and the new life, the new way of life that coming under Christ brings us into, look what he says, John chapter 3 from verse 11.

[28 : 14] For this is the message you heard from the beginning. We should love one another. Do not be like Cain who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him?

Because his own actions were evil and his brothers were righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love each other.

Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. So John is saying here, either you're part of the vicious cycle of sin that Cain started or you're part of the opposite, a new cycle of love made possible by the cross.

You can't be both. You're one or the other. Every single person sitting here is contributing to one of those cycles. And you should ask yourself which one you tend to contribute towards.

The vicious cycle of sin or the virtuous cycle of love inspired by the gospel. Read on from verse 16. This is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

[29 : 25] If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

So that's how you can know what cycle you belong to. Your actions, not just your words. But you see, God has now made a way in the gospel, in Jesus, he's made a way not only to stop but to reverse the vicious cycle of sin in this world and in your life.

And that way is the way of love. The very opposite of Cain's actions. And it's through love that we can actually master over sin like Cain could not.

But I'm not talking about some emotional, sentimental love. You know, when the world talks about love, it talks about kind of romantic love you see on cheesy movies. No, the love that the Bible talks about is the love of God working in his people, which is only possible for those who have come to trust and follow Christ.

because it's a type of love inspired and fueled by Jesus' death on the cross. This is how we know what love is, verse 16.

[30 : 53] Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And those who put their trust in that and that comes into their life and they fall under the lordship and salvation of Christ, well then they realize, they start to realize as they grow as followers of Christ and disciples of Christ, they start to realize that he is the most valuable thing in their life and that they owe their whole life to him, every part of it, and they are therefore willing to make the sacrifices of worship which Cain could not make.

So you see through the gospel and through Jesus and what he did for his people, we are able to make sacrifices, true sacrifices, pleasing to God, which Cain couldn't.

Sacrifices like, John says, loving those that nobody else loves, those in need, those who are ignored by the rest of the world. It's when we do that, out of a true worship of Christ, which leads us to love others sacrificially like Christ did, it's then that not only do we close the door on sin being able to take hold and devour us and our marriages and our families, but we also slowly but surely reverse the destructive cycles of sin and start a new cycle which the gospel inspires in our lives and the lives of those around us and in the communities in which we live as more and more people come to bow the knee to the Lord Jesus, who at the end of the day is the only one who can rescue you from sin that threatens to devour you every day.

And so let us pray that we will follow his example. Lord, we do thank you for the story of Cain and Abel, even though they lived thousands and thousands of years ago, you caused that story to be preserved and recorded for us so that we could learn the destructive cycle of sin, but we could also learn about your grace and Lord, we do thank you for sending Jesus to reverse the destructive cycle of sin in our lives that we are all too aware of.

Lord, thank you for the warning. Sin is crouching at the door and thank you for the salvation and the rescue you have given us out of its power. And Lord, we do pray that you would help us to follow Christ.

[33 : 34] I pray for anyone here this morning who has not followed Christ, who has not bowed the knee, who has not come under his lordship, who has not put their trust in his salvation, that you would help them to realize there is no other way that they can be rescued from their sin.

That if they don't come to Christ, they will be devoured by their sin in judgment one day. Lord, help us all to realize the seriousness of sin and respond to it through trusting Christ, through obeying him, and through following his example as we love others that you have put in our life.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.