

This was a hard week for our country. The week began with the death of Iryna Zarutska, a 23-year-old Ukrainian refugee. As she rode public transit, she was stabbed in the neck and left to die in her own blood. While the nation was in shock and grief at this unspeakable violence against the innocent, Charlie Kirk, a devout Christian activist, was on a college campus, promoting free speech and conservative ideas—the value of life in the womb, humanity created in God’s image (male and female), the value of marriage and family, the importance of faith in Jesus—and while he was speaking, he was shot and killed. The world watched his body recoil and blood flow out of his neck. It's one of the most horrific images I've seen in my entire life. The events of this week have prompted a lot of tears, a lot of fears, and a lot of questions about what's next. Those are important to talk about as a church family.

I was planning on preaching from Genesis 3 today, the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But I think it's more appropriate to come back to that next week and to skip ahead to Genesis 4 today. We watched two horrific murders this week, and Genesis 4 is a passage about the first murder in history, and about the power of sin at work behind it. Let's pray and ask God to lead us.

One of the great gifts of the Bible is that the Bible doesn't only address spiritual, ethereal, philosophical questions; it speaks right to the most practical, most pressing, most relevant issues of our day. Genesis 1-2 teaches us how God made a good world, and Genesis 3-4 describes how this good world that God made is filled with sin, and how sin casts a shadow over every aspect of life in this world. Genesis 3 teaches us about original sin; we'll dive into that next week. Genesis 4 shows us the end results of sin. Genesis 3 shows us the seed; Genesis 4 shows us the full-grown tree and its deathly fruit. Let's dive in.

Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. (Genesis 4:1-5)

Sin—diminished worship

The first thing we learn about sin in Genesis 4 is that sin begins with diminished worship. Adam and Eve, the first two people, had two sons, Cain and Abel. (They eventually had many more children, but they started with these two.) Abel kept flocks. Cain grew crops. When it came time to bring an offering to the Lord, Abel brought a gift that God accepted and was pleased with. Cain also brought an offering, but it wasn't a worthy offering. We don't know exactly why but we can make some inferences from the text. The passage tells us that Abel, the younger brother, brought "fat portions" from the "firstborn" of the flock. The fact that the Bible highlights that he brought the best portion of the animal from the best portion of the flock is an indication of the cost and quality of his sacrifice. Abel brought his very best to the Lord, and "The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering." Isn't this really what all of us would want God to say about our lives—how we live, what we give? Wouldn't we want the Lord to look at the way we worship him, the way we love people, the way we

respond to adversity, the way we respond to prosperity, the humility and kindness in our hearts, and be filled with joy?

In contrast with Abel's offering, "...on Cain and his offering the Lord did not look with favor." We don't know exactly what was inadequate or insufficient, but we do know it wasn't what God desired. This is the essence of sin. Sin is more than sin simply falling short of certain expectations or violating certain commands; it's missing the purpose of our lives — God's glory, God's will, God's design.

Paul described it this way in Romans 12:1: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." What is true and proper worship God desires? Offering our bodies as a living sacrifice. That's why we were created. That's why we are here. To worship God. To glorify God. To honor God. The essence of sin isn't that we stumble by saying a bad word when we stub our toes. The essence of sin isn't that we told a white lie because we didn't want to offend someone or went 46 in a 45 MPH speed zone. The essence of sin is not "small little mistakes." The essence of sin is diminished worship. It's living in such a way that instead of the Lord looking at my life and saying, "Yes! That is what I designed you for, that is why I made you," he instead looks and says, "You are going in the wrong direction." Sin is diminished worship.

Sin—defensive reaction

Look how Cain responded to this: "Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast?'" (Genesis 4:5-6). The word translated "angry" here is "*hara*." It means to smolder; it means a fire is being stoked inside of him. It's not a flash of irritation, but consuming anger. The inner turmoil was clear on his face: it fell downcast. Cain's emotions are not random—they reveal a heart rejecting God's correction. That's what sin does: sin leads to defensive reaction. Instead of leading us to maintain a humble posture where we are approachable and correctable, sin bows up and then it blows up. Proverbs 9:8 says, "Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you." When we are humble and wise and loving, we are thankful when we get negative feedback. When we are proud, arrogant, and foolish, we get angry when we get negative feedback. How dare you not approve of my lifestyle? How dare you not approve of my choices? What gives you the right?

Sin—divine wisdom

God speaks with grace and caution into the situation. He says, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4:7). God sees the anger in Cain's heart and the dejection on his face and attempts to de-escalate his reaction and guide him to freedom. This is what we could call divine wisdom. God told Cain, "All you have to do is do what is right. Don't resent the consequences of sin; repent of the sin that caused them." The fool gets angry at the harvest; the wise change what they sow. But it's not just about deciding to do what's right; it's about understanding the severity of the threat posed by sin. God says sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you. This phrase translated "crouching at the door" is the same phrase that was used to describe a tiger crouching in the grass, concealing his presence in order to ambush and kill his prey. No one in their right mind is walking down that road! If you saw that, you'd run as fast as you could in the other direction. That is the threat of sin! Pride. Lust. Greed. Anger. Jealousy.

Selfishness. The desire to live our lives for ourselves rather than for God. It's a perpetual deadly threat. Sin is not only predatory and powerful, but also ravenous; it has an all-consuming appetite. God says that sin "desires to have you." Sin will not be added to your life; sin wants to take over your life. It wants to consume you. We sometimes look at sin as something we can dabble in, like a playful, harmless hobby. We don't realize that sin is predatory.

A few years ago Anthony Riggs, a man from Tennessee, went to the local animal shelter and brought home a Rottweiler. Later that very day, that dog killed him. That is what sin does in your life. It looks like a harmless little pet that just wants a little attention. It's not. It's predatory and powerful. It will kill you. That's why God says, "You must rule over it." This is an essential component to our understanding of sin. Sin is powerful, but it's not all-powerful. Sin has a gravitational pull, but it's not an irresistible pull. Through this one sentence we learn the double-edge truth: we should neither underestimate the power of sin (because it desires to devour us) nor overestimate the power of sin (because with God's help, we can rule over it.) This is very similar to what Jesus told Peter right before Jesus was going to be arrested. "Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:31-32). Succumbing to temptation is not inevitable. Satan wants to test us, but with God's help, we can pass the test. Listen to what God's word tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it." The power of sin is real, but God's power is infinitely greater! Romans 8:13 says, "For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live." God gives Cain (and us) a pathway to rule over sin, to defeat sin.

Sin—deadly consequences.

Rather than fight, Cain conceded. "Now Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let's go out to the field.' While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him" (Genesis 4:8). Cain committed a horrific act of violence against his own brother. The seed of sin turned into the fruit of murder. Sin has deadly consequences. The straight-line connection from sin to death is found throughout Scripture. Listen to James 1:14-15: "Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." Did you see that? Sin gives birth to death. This is Satan's ultimate agenda. God is the source of life and the author of life. Satan wants to ruin and take that life. Jesus said, "The devil was a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44), and "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). Death is the ultimate agenda and endgame of sin.

Death can manifest in small and large ways. Sin robs life on an individual level—lust, anger, and greed in our hearts, addiction in our bodies. Sin can kill your peace, joy, and hope. Sin robs life at a relational level—separating close friends, dividing spouses, even turning children away from their parents and parents away from their children. Sin robs life at a societal level—human trafficking, mass shootings, genocide, war. Sin may look small at the start, but it always has deadly consequences. Death may not be immediate, like Snow White eating the poisonous apple and falling into a sudden sleep, but death is always inevitable.

That's what this passage, all the way back in the book of Genesis, at the very beginning of creation, helps us to see. God's Word gives us the lens to understand the events that have happened in our world the last few days, to understand what is really going on, to see the spiritual forces at work. God's Word cuts through the noise of our world and the media's slanted, scripted talking points and pulls the mask off evil, calling it by its real name. There are spiritual forces of evil at work in our day—intent on destruction and death. It's not just the final murderous act that is evil. The entire structure, ideology, and worldview that is part of the system is evil and hell bent on death and destruction. After Charlie Kirk's assassination, social media was filled with thousands upon thousands of posts from people celebrating his death, the death of a 31-year-old Christian man, a husband and a father. What could lead us to that point? Satan has been a murderer from the beginning, and he is showing his true colors. Look at these images: Charlie Kirk. Iryna Zarutsky. Fletcher Merkel and Harper Moyski, children from the shooting at the Minneapolis church. These precious children of God are dead, not just because of isolated incidents, not just because of a haywire crazy person. These people are gone because sin and evil are running rampant in our world. As followers of Jesus, we need not only to be aware of this, but also to respond accordingly. There is a spiritual battle going on. We need to engage in spiritual warfare, through prayer, through love, through speaking the truth in love, through preaching the gospel. Listen to 1 Peter 3:14-16.

If you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

God's word specifically calls us not to be afraid, and even if we suffer, to give an answer to everyone for the hope we have, with gentleness and respect. This is how we are called to respond to the crisis of our day. Romans 12:17-21 says,

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Sin—denial of responsibility

As the story in Genesis unfolds, we see that God himself confronts Cain in his sin. "Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' 'I don't know,' he replied. 'Am I my brother's keeper?' The Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground'" (Genesis 4:9-10). When God approaches Cain, Cain feigns ignorance. "I don't know where he is. I'm not his babysitter." This is the classic pattern of sin—denial of responsibility. Sin always denies. Sin never accepts responsibility. It always says, "I didn't do it." People will lie through their teeth. I remember watching a show on which Department of Natural Resources officers were tracking down a guy who shot a deer out of season. They went to his house, knocked on the door, and asked if he had shot the deer. "Oh, no. I don't know anything about that. I would never shoot a deer out of season." They looked in his freezer. The deer meat was right there, with the date marked on it of when he shot it out of season. They asked him how that happened. He said, "I wrote down the wrong date." "You wrote down that it was June when it was actually November?" "Yeah." He was

arrested. Sin always denies responsibility. Sin will convince you it is never your fault! But God cuts through the denial and says, “Your brother’s blood is crying out to me. I hear it. I see it.” We can’t gaslight God. We can’t throw him off the scent. As a culture, we must own where we are and how we got here. God saw the blood on that railcar. He saw the blood on that college campus. We must acknowledge it before we can have a path forward from it. The same is true in our individual lives and families. If we want a path forward with God’s grace, it begins with acknowledgment. When Jesus began his public ministry, do you know the very first word he preached? Not grace, not forgiveness, not restoration. “From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’” (Matthew 4:17). Repentance requires an acknowledgment that we are heading in the wrong direction and we want to change direction and walk the way God is calling us to.

Sin—discipline and mercy

God then tells Cain the consequences for his sin. “Now you are under a 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” (Genesis 4:11-12). God doesn’t take Cain’s life, but rather he says the rest of Cain’s life will be filled with pain and strife. It’s a prison sentence all his own. But it’s not only discipline; there is also mercy. Cain feared that once word of what he had done to Abel spread to his brothers and sisters, anyone who found him would kill him. God said no, his life would be spared. The Lord even “put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him” (Genesis 4:15). This is God, in his infinite mercy, creating a way for even a murderer to have a second chance. This is God’s heart to all of us in our sin. Many people, when they look at the world in all its sin and brokenness, ask, “Why doesn’t God come back today and punish evil finally, once and for all?” It’s because of his mercy. 2 Peter 3:9 tells us exactly why: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” God, in his unparalleled wisdom, can both discipline us and show mercy to us at the exact same time. But that mercy and patience will not last forever; it’s intended to lead to our repentance.

Sin—desperation for God

That sets the stage for the conclusion of the story. After Cain kills his brother, he has children who have children who have children, and there is a lot of sin and dysfunction that spread through his lineage. Culture is on a sharp, downhill slide. But then right when it looks like all hope is lost, “At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord” (Genesis 4:26). Yes, sin leads to death. Yes, sin brings discipline and a whole host of consequences that are painful and calamitous. But sometimes, once people have been surrounded by enough sin and they’ve seen what it has to offer, they come to their senses and call on the name of the Lord. Their sin leads to desperation for God. This is what happened to the prodigal son. He told his father he wanted nothing to do with him. “Give me my inheritance and I’m gone.” He took that inheritance and went to a far-off land. He spent every dime on women and booze and wild living, chasing pleasure and passion. Then he found himself destitute. He had to work at a pig farm for a job. He was so broke he wanted to eat the food he was feeding the pigs. Then what happened? While standing in the heap of his sin, he came to his senses and decided to go back home and beg for mercy. Today, we are at a point where we need come to our senses and call out to God in desperation. We can do it for our nation. We can do it individually for salvation. Let’s call on the name of the Lord, remembering one of the greatest

promises in all the Bible: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13). The Bible tells us that Jesus is the true and ultimate Abel, the innocent man, killed not by one brother, but by the entire world. His blood is poured out. But instead of his blood calling out for justice, the blood of Jesus calls out to God to have mercy and forgiveness on all who place their faith in him.