

Genesis 3:21 –4:5

“Worship Outside the Garden-Temple”

May 17, 2020

²¹ And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them. ²² Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever--" ²³ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. ^{4:1} Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." ² And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. ³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴ and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.

The transition from chapter 3 to chapter 4 of Genesis marks a significant transition in man's relation to God. As a result of man's fall into sin, Adam and Eve were removed from the garden-temple of Eden. They were cast out of God's holy mountain. And God shut the gates of his temple. He placed cherubim with a flaming sword at the entrance of the garden "to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen 3:24). The way to the tree of life became a death-path. To walk on the path to the tree of life, one had to pass through the flaming sword of God's judgment wielded by the cherubim stationed at the foot of God's holy mountain.

Cain and Abel are worshipping God at the foot of his holy mountain, in the courtyard of his garden-temple, in front of the entrance to the holy realm, which is barred by "the cherubim and a flaming sword" (3:24). To better understand the setting of Cain and Abel's worship, we can compare it to the setting of Israel's worship at Mount Sinai (cf. Ex 19–24). After God brought Israel out of the land of Egypt, he led them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai. When they had encamped at the foot of the mountain, God instructed them to consecrate themselves and prepare to meet with him on the third day, for the Glory-Spirit of God, which fills his heavenly temple, would descend from heaven to the top of Mount Sinai (Ex 19:2–20). The Israelites would see the Glory-Presence of God coming down on the mountain in the form of a pillar of cloud and pillar of fire (Ex 19:16–20; 24:15–18). God's presence would consecrate the mountain as a holy realm, which the Israelites were forbidden to touch on pain of death (Ex 19:12–13).

That setting for Israel's worship at Mount Sinai is analogous to the setting of Cain and Abel's worship at Mount Eden. Cain and Abel were at the foot of God's holy mountain, in the courtyard of his garden-temple, outside of the barred entrance to the sanctuary (cf. Gen 4:16). And Cain and Abel brought offerings to the courtyard of the mountain-temple to present them to God as sacrifices. Again, the setting of Israel's worship at the tabernacle and the temple helps us to understand the setting of Cain and Abel's worship in Genesis 4. The Israelites brought offerings to the courtyard of the temple on

Mount Zion to present them to God as sacrifices. The common Israelites were not allowed to enter the sanctuary, which had two parts: the holy place and the most holy place. The outer court of the temple was as far as the common Israelite could go in his journey into the dwelling place of God. But the offering, which he brought to the temple, would symbolically continue the journey into the presence of God on behalf of the worshiper.

When the worshiper brought his offering into the courtyard, he would identify himself with it by laying his hand on the head of the animal and confessing his sins (cf. Lev 1:4; 3:2; 4:4; 16:21). The sins of the worshiper were thereby imputed to the animal and borne vicariously by it (cf. Isa 53:5–6). The animal stood in the place of the worshiper as his representative and substitute. The worshiper, then, continued his journey into the presence of God symbolically and vicariously through his representative, his sacrificial offering. His offering would make the rest of the journey into the presence of God as the worshiper's representative.

What did the animal have to pass through in order to make that journey into God's dwelling place? It had to pass through the flaming sword of God's judgment wielded by the cherubim stationed at the foot of God's mountain (Gen 3:24). It had to walk through that death-path before it could ascend the holy mountain and enter God's presence at the summit. The animal, as the worshiper's representative, would be slain and cut into pieces and consumed by the fire on top of the altar (cf. Lev 1). The knife and the fire that were used to slay and immolate the animal were symbolic replicas of the flaming sword at the entrance of the garden. And the altar on which it was burned was a symbolic replica of the holy mountain.

Think back again to Mount Sinai. On the third day, the Glory-Spirit of God that fills his heavenly temple descended from heaven to the top of Mount Sinai (Ex 19:16–20). The Israelites saw God's Presence on top of the mountain in the form of a pillar of cloud and pillar of fire. If the altar is a small replica of the mountain, then the fire and smoke that rose from the top of the altar were symbolic replicas of the two-columned Glory-Spirit theophany on top of the mountain: the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire (cf. Ex 19:18).

The worshiper who brought his offering to the temple would symbolically and vicariously, through his representative, ascend to the top of that mountain and be transformed by the consuming fire into an ascending pillar of cloud rising higher and higher until it reaches the highest heaven, the glorious and permanent dwelling place of God, the realm of Glory (cf. Judg 13:19–22; Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9).

In the courtyard of the garden-temple at the foot of Mount Eden, there was an altar. And Cain and Abel brought their offerings to the courtyard of God's mountain-temple to offer their gifts to God as sacrifices on that altar. The altar at the foot of the mountain was a symbolic, miniature replica of Mount Eden. Standing at the foot of God's holy mountain, Cain and Abel could see the Glory-Presence of God at its summit in the form of a pillar of cloud and pillar of fire (cf. Gen 3:8). They beheld the same phenomenon at Mount Eden that the Israelites would later behold at Mount Sinai and, later, at Mount Zion. And just like the altars that stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, an altar stood at the foot of Mount Eden, in the courtyard of God's mountain-temple. That's where God's people would go to present their offerings. That's where Cain and Abel went in Genesis 4.

“In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions” (Gen 4:3–4). How did they bring their offerings to the LORD? Where did they bring them? They brought them to the courtyard of his dwelling place, to the entrance of his temple-garden (cf. Lev 1:2–3). An altar was built there on which they could offer their sacrifices. Cain and Abel arrived at the entrance of God’s sanctuary with their gifts, but they could not enter. The gate was shut (Gen 3:24). The courtyard to the garden-temple was as far as they could go. They could not personally enter God’s sanctuary and ascend his holy mountain. They intended to symbolically continue their journey into the presence of God vicariously through their representatives, namely, the offerings, which they brought to the altar.

The LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard” (Gen 4:4–5). Put differently, Abel’s symbolic and vicarious journey into God’s presence was successful. Cain’s was not. Symbolically speaking, Abel was vicariously translated from the realm of earth to the realm of heaven, God’s glorious and permanent dwelling place, his heavenly temple (cf. Isa 6:1–7). Abel’s offering was consumed by the fire on top of the altar at the foot of Mount Eden and transformed by that fire into a pillar of smoke that ascended into heaven. Symbolically speaking, Abel vicariously passed through the flaming sword at the entrance of the garden and ascended God’s holy mountain to its summit, the holy of holies. Through his representative, Abel symbolically passed through the death-path and received the reward of glorified, eternal life in heaven. He passed from death to life eternal, from suffering to glory. The way to the tree of life was opened to him through the death of the sacrificed animal that atoned for his sins.

That is what happened to Abel symbolically. Abel’s worship at the foot of Mount Eden symbolically preenacted the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ into the presence of God in the highest heaven. What was going to happen to Christ truly in the fullness of time happened symbolically to the animal that Abel brought to the altar at the foot of Mount Eden. When Abel arrived at the altar, he identified himself with the animal by leaning his hand on its head and confessing his sins. Then, as Abel’s representative, the animal, a sinless sin-bearer, passed through the flaming sword of God’s judgment, laid down its life, took it up again, and was translated by the Spirit of God from the realm of earth to the realm of heaven.

What Abel’s offering did symbolically, Christ did truly in “the fullness of time” (Eph 1:10; Gal 4:4). Our sins were imputed to Christ; he carried our sins and vicariously died in our place for our sins (cf. Isa 53:5, 6; 1 Pet 1:18–19; 2:25). Christ truly passed through the flaming sword of God’s judgment, laid down his life for his people, took it up again, and was translated by the Glory-Spirit of God from earth to heaven. Christ truly opened the way to the tree of life for all whom he represented (cf. Luke 23:43; Rev 2:7; 22:2). And Abel’s worship at the foot of Mount Eden symbolically preenacted what Christ would truly do in the fullness of time to fulfil God’s plan of redemption revealed in Genesis 3:15.

God promised in that verse that the champion seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent and bring redemption and that his heel would be bruised in the process (Gen 3:15). God not only gave Adam and Eve a promise of redemption, he gave them a sign of what its fulfillment would look like (cf. Gen 3:21). He gave them a sacrificial system of worship in which they would symbolically preenact the fulfillment of the promise of redemption. That was the whole purpose of the sacrificial system of worship in the Old Testament. It symbolically preenacted in the form of types and shadows what Christ would truly do in the fullness of time to purchase our salvation (cf. Heb 10:1–22).

We don't know exactly how much of the sacrificial system was revealed to Adam and Eve, but in the first several chapters of Genesis, we get hints here and there of what had been revealed. For example, Cain and Abel know a lot about sacrifices. They knew that there were different kinds of offerings, such as grain offerings (like Cain's offering) and animal sacrifices (like Abel's offering). And notice also that Abel "brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions" (Gen 4:4). They knew that the firstborn of the flock belonged to God and that their fat portions had to be burned on the altar (cf. Ex 13:2, 12; Lev 3:16–17; 7:23–25). Cain and Abel knew a whole lot about sacrifices.

Likewise, Noah knew the difference between clean animals and unclean animals and that only clean animals could serve as offerings (cf. Lev 11). Genesis 8 says that "Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar" (Gen 8:20). Likewise, Abraham knew a lot about sacrifices. In Genesis 15, Abraham offered a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon, which are the same kind of animals used in the sacrificial worship of the tabernacle and temple (Gen 15:9; cf. Lev 1–7).

The sacrificial system was not revealed for the first time to Israel at Mount Sinai but was revealed, at least in part, to Adam and Eve before Genesis 4. The way that Adam and Eve and their first descendants worshiped in the courtyard of the garden-temple at the foot of Mount Eden is very similar to the way that the Israelites worshiped at Mount Sinai, at the tabernacle, and at the temple on Mount Zion. The basic setting and structure of worship and the sacrifices used in worship in Israel's history were already in place by Genesis 4. Israel's worship was much more elaborate and detailed than the worship of our first parents and their first descendants east of Eden, but the basic form and structure and ceremonies of temple worship were already in place by the time that Cain and Abel were born. And the basic theological significance of the offerings of Cain and Abel at Eden is identical to the basic theological significance of the offerings of Israel at the temple. From Abel's offering in Genesis 4 all the way through to the very end of sacrificial worship with the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, the sacrifices in the Old Testament symbolically preenacted the fulfillment of the promise of redemption in Genesis 3:15.

Cain and Abel represent the two groups of people into which all humanity is divided: the offspring of the serpent and the offspring of the woman (Gen 3:15; cf. 1 John 3:10–15). The offspring of the woman are the elect. The offspring of the serpent are the non-elect (reprobate). The champion seed of the woman, the Messiah who crushes the serpent's head and procures redemption, represents the rest of the woman's offspring, the elect (cf. Rev 12:1–17). For the elect to be redeemed, the heel of the woman's champion seed must be bruised. What the bruising of his heel entailed was revealed in the sacrifices that God appointed for our first parents and their children. Thus, Abel's offering symbolically depicted the bruising of Christ's heel. It symbolically preenacted the way in which the champion seed of the woman would procure our redemption.

He would die in our place as our sinless sin-bearer to satisfy the demands of God's justice. He would pass through the flaming sword of God's judgment, lay down his life, and take it up again. And by his atoning death, he would open the way to the tree of life for the rest of the woman's offspring, the elect. But the offspring of the serpent, the reprobate, would be passed by and left in their sins and would, therefore, remain under the curse sanction of the covenant of works, eternal death.

In Genesis 4, Cain and Abel represent those two groups of people: the offspring of the serpent (the reprobate) and the offspring of the woman (the elect). Abel was elect; Cain was not. Abel was

regenerate; Cain was not. Abel was a child of God; Cain was not. He was a child of the devil. The devil was a murderer from the beginning, and his children follow his example, as did Cain. Jesus said to the unbelieving Jews, "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). The unbelieving Jews who sought to murder Jesus were of their father the devil. That was true of Cain as well. He was of his father the devil, and his will was to do the will of his father. That's why he murdered his brother. Cain was of the evil one.

As John says, "We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:12). "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15). Cain did not have eternal life abiding in him. He was unregenerate, an unbeliever, a child of the devil. If you want to know why God rejected Cain's offering, here's the answer. God rejected his offering because he was evil.

It wasn't rejected simply because the offering was defective but because Cain was defective. Cain's offering would have been rejected even if had he offered the exact same kind of offering that Abel offered. Why? because his heart was far from God. He did not love God but hated him and hated his brother. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). Cain did not love God, and that's why his offering was rejected.

But the offering itself was also defective. It was defective because it did not include the shedding of blood, and "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb 9:22). God, in fact, did accept grain offerings like the kind that Cain offered but not apart from animal sacrifices. Grain offerings were supposed to be appended to the animal sacrifices apart from which they would have been unacceptable. By bringing "to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground" (Gen 4:3) without also bringing an animal sacrifice, Cain was effectively denying the Word of God in Genesis 3:15 that redemption would only be procured by the bruising of the Redeemer's heel. According to God's promise, the woman's champion seed must suffer to accomplish our redemption. Cain did not draw near to God on the basis of the coming Redeemer's atoning death. That's why Cain and his offering were rejected by God.

Since we, like Cain and Abel, live east of Eden, the only way that we can draw near to God is on the ground of the Redeemer's atoning death. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). That's the lesson we learn from the rejection of Cain and his offering. No one can come to the Father except through Christ, the Redeemer, whose heel was bruised to open the gates of paradise for us. Let us, therefore, draw near to God through him.