

Genesis Bible Study 4

A Covering for Shame

taken from

***Salvation for the Social Order: For Those Who Haven't Read the Bible
and for Those Who Think Religion is Merely a Private Matter***

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Reading: Genesis 4-5

Principal Question: How can shame be removed?

Main Point: Shame leads to competition, jealousy, and violence.

New Themes

1. Worship
2. Violence
3. Human Civilization
4. Polygamy

Old Themes Developed

1. Shame
2. Death
3. Male and Female

Discussion

1. Compare Eve's comment in Genesis 4:1 with God's message to the snake in Genesis 3:15.
2. What was Eve expecting her son to do? (Note that the pronoun, he, in "he will strike your head," is singular, not plural.)
3. What is the role of sacrifice in religion, as you understand it?
4. What role does shame play in the murder of Abel?
5. Can you find anything in Genesis 2 that would explain why God accepted Abel's offering, but not the offering of Cain?
6. What good things did Cain's family accomplish?
7. What do you think about Lamech's attitude towards his own violent outburst?
8. How would you describe the picture of male/female relationships in the story of Lamech?
9. What do we know about the family of Seth?

10. Which family appears more successful in Genesis 4, the family of Cain, or the family of Seth?
11. Which family would you think is more likely to survive and prosper for 100's of years?
12. In Genesis 5, what people in the family of Seth do you find impressive?

Notes

- Was God fair?
 - A student once asked me, "Why did God protect Cain? Cain should have been executed." Please consider the family dynamics. What do you imagine Adam did when he learned about the murder? Would he allow Cain to happily come back home? No, Cain would be expelled. Did God punish Cain with exile, or did his father, Adam, punish Cain? The answer must be both. In the world God created, fathers discipline their sons. Without a close relationship to their Heavenly Father, fathers on earth may dominate and terrify their sons. When he learns of his fate, Cain is terrified. Unprotected by the protection of home and family, he is a target for any angry person who wants to kill him. God says to Cain, "I will put a mark on you; so that no one kills you." We don't know what that mark was, but if we understand the human community, it is likely that all other children who were born later heard terrible stories about Cain, and feared to go near him, at least for many years. The Bible teaches us about a God who continues to interact with the human community, even though humans try to hide from him.
- What was wrong with Cain's offering?
 - In Genesis 3:21 God killed animals to cover Adam and Eve's shame. Killing an animal to appease a deity is probably the oldest human ritual in history, and this custom begins here. Cain repeated the same mistake his father and mother had made. He wanted to negotiate his own status with God. A generation earlier and inside the Garden, a sacrifice of fruit or plants would have been appropriate, but not any more. Now blood must flow. The penalty for revolutionaries who fail in any country is always death, but in this case, God mercifully permitted an animal to substitute as a temporary measure until Jesus died for the shame of the race. Cain, however, found this unacceptable. He would have to beg or buy the animal from his brother, and this was too much loss of face for Cain. If the brothers had been at peace together, Cain would have had no problem accepting a lamb from Abel to offer in worship.
 - Shame is the ultimate cause of violence. Armies march and street gangs fight for honor, because it is a shame to be naked and vulnerable. No one wants to be caught naked without an adequate defense, whether in court or on the battlefield. The story of Cain's civilization begins with murder and ends with murder. Here only the fittest survive. Here the woman is only property. Lamech's wives listen, but they have nothing to say. As a reflection of God, humanity is like a shattered mirror with broken pieces falling out of the frame everywhere.

Further Discussion

Can humans have a relationship with God?

If you are my professor, and I am working on my Ph.D., I will have to follow your directions. Once I receive my degree, however, then I am equal to you, and our relationship must be renegotiated. You may hire me for continued work, but in the future I possibly could hire you. The Snake's suggestion was that humans could be equal to God, and the relationship renegotiated. Good and evil would be relative to both parties' interests and ability to negotiate. This is what Cain demanded of God.

If, on the other hand, you are my father, not my professor, there is no way I can achieve equal status with you, at least not during your lifetime. Only upon your death, at the time I receive my inheritance, do I attain equality. When you die, if you are the owner of a large estate, I become the owner of that same estate, equal to whatever you were in society.

Jesus told a story of a son who demanded that his father give him the inheritance immediately. In Middle Eastern culture, this meant he wanted his father to die; so that he could take his father's place. Although the story of Genesis originated thousands of years before Jesus was born, the idea is present in Genesis 3-4. In Jesus' story, the son was given the inheritance and went far from home, where he lost all the money. When he came home he offered to work for his father as an employee, hoping that in time he could pay back the money he had squandered. His father would hear nothing of the plan. The father took him back immediately as a son, because he loved him. There was no way he could earn back the amount of money he had lost, and there was no way he could buy his status as a son. His father did not want an employee; instead he wanted his son.

What the snake offered in Genesis 3, the couple already had. They already were like God, a mirror reflecting God's perfect unity, just as a child grows up looking and acting like its parents. Like the son in Jesus' story, humanity was driven out¹ of its home in the garden, and the Father became only a distant memory to them. Jesus said that God is waiting for humanity to return. Cain did not return, but the children of Seth did return (Genesis 4:26), and we also still have that opportunity.

¹ In Jesus' story, the father did not drive the boy away, but following Middle Eastern culture, the villagers and relatives would certainly have done so. Jesus' original listeners would have understood this. See the exegesis of Luke 15 in Kenneth Bailey's book, *Poet and Peasant Through Peasant Eyes*, published by Eerdmans, 1976.