

The Book of Beginnings – Studies in Genesis

LESSON XXIV : GENESIS 4:9-16 – THIRD PARAGRAPH: THE MURDERER'S SENTENCE

“Back in Genesis 3:15, God had prophesied that there would be a continuing conflict between the descendants of Eve and the descendants of the serpent (a struggle that would reach its climax at the cross). Adam and Eve are now to witness the reality of the prophecy in the tragic history of their first two sons. While the story of Cain and Abel is to be understood as historical, yet it also symbolizes the age-long conflict between good and evil, right and wrong, and between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.” [Currid, 1:143]

Third Paragraph – The Murderer's Sentence:

‘⁹ Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?”’¹⁰ And He said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground.”¹¹ So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.¹² When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth.”’¹³ And Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is greater than I can bear!¹⁴ Surely You have driven me out this day from the face of the ground; I shall be hidden from Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me.”’¹⁵ And the Lord said to him, “Therefore, whoever kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the Lord set a mark on Cain, lest anyone finding him should kill him.¹⁶ Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden.’ (Gen 4:9-16 NKJV)

Rabbi Cassuto's translation:

v. 9 – Then the Lord said to Cain,

‘Where is Abel your brother?’

He said,

‘I do not know; / am I my brother's keeper?’

v. 10 – And He said,

**‘What have you done? / Hark! your brother's blood
is crying to Me / from the ground.**

**v. 11 – And now you are cursed / from the ground,
which has opened its mouth / to receive your brother's blood
from your hand.**

**v. 12 – When you till the ground, / it shall no longer yield to you its strength;
a vagrant and a wanderer / shall you be on the earth.’**

v. 13 – Cain said to the Lord,

‘My iniquity is too great / to be forgiven.

**v. 14 – Behold, Thou hast driven me out / this day
from the face of the earth; / and from Thy face I shall seek to hide;**

*and I shall be a vagrant and a wanderer / on the earth,
and everyone who finds me / will seek to slay me.'*

v. 15 – *Then the Lord said to him,*

'Therefore, if any one slays Cain / sevenfold shall he be avenged.'

And the Lord set / a sign for Cain,

so that any one who came upon him / would not slay him.

v. 16 – *Then Cain went away / from the presence of the Lord,*

and dwelt in the land of Nod ['Wandering'], / east of Eden [qidhmah 'Edhen].

v. 9 – *Then the Lord said to Cain,* — Immediately after the murder, Cain rose up and fled; there would have been no reason to ask where Abel was if Cain was standing over the corpse. But before he had gone far, he heard the Lord's voice calling him to account for his deed. No human being had seen what had happened but the Lord saw and knew. It is for this reason the words *'the Lord said'* is in juxtaposition with *'and killed him'* – no sooner had the murder been committed than *'the Lord said to Cain...'*

'Where is Abel your brother?' — This is a rhetorical question, implying rebuke: *'Why is your brother, who but a little while ago was walking beside you, not with you now? See, he is no more, and you are to blame for it.'* God is prompting Cain to acknowledge his responsibility for his actions against his brother.

He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' — Cain makes a desperate attempt to silence the voice that confronts him with this terrifying question and to free himself from the burden of responsibility for his crime by brazen words that reject this responsibility. *'I do not know, this matter is not my concern.'* Since Abel kept sheep and *'keeper'* is a term for shepherds (cf. Gen 30:31; 1 Sam 17:20; Hos 12:12), Cain's reply could be paraphrased *'Am I the shepherd's shepherd?'* Cain, unlike Adam, answers with a defiant repudiation of responsibility. Adam at least told the truth (albeit maybe not the whole truth, 3:10) but Cain tells a bare-faced lie. "The truculent reply, equally in character, betrays a hardening in comparison with the shuffling answers of 3:10ff." [Kidner, 76; *'truculent'* = *'eager or quick to argue or fight, aggressively defiant.'*]

ARE WE OUR 'BROTHER'S KEEPER'? — It should be noted no man is called on in the OT to act as another's *'keeper'* in the fullest sense of the word; to do so would involve keeping an eye on a person all the time which would be somewhat intrusive. But Biblical law does expect a man's brother to be the first to assist him in time of trouble (Lev 25:48). Cain also might not have been expected to *'keep'* Abel but as his brother he certainly should have been ready to act as redeemer and to avenge his blood when he was murdered (Num 36:12-28). His outright denial of all responsibility reveals the hardness of his heart. "Here arose a widely prevalent doctrine among sinners that in no sense is one man another's keeper; that there is no responsibility on one man for the well-being of another." [Carroll, 126] But that is an extreme and an excuse; Jesus Himself rebukes this worldview in the parable of the Good Samaritan: *"But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"* Then Jesus answered with the parable, concluding with these words: *"'So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?' And he said, 'He who showed mercy on him.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'" (Luke 10:29, 36, 37)*

v. 10 – And He said, ‘What have you done?’ — Cain’s effort is quite in vain; it is impossible to silence that mighty voice. It is the voice of the Judge, who responds to the cry of the blood that has been shed. The Lord asks another rhetorical question; ‘*See now what you have done! How could you do such a terrible thing?*’ Hamilton notes this should be punctuated as follows, ‘*What have you done!*’ rather than a question mark; God is making an accusation, not seeking information.

Hark! your brother’s blood is crying to Me from the ground. — Hark! = literally, ‘a voice.’ ‘Blood’ is plural in the Hebrew, common of shed blood, particularly in rhetorical and poetic diction. *Just as a man who is wronged cries to the judge on account of his oppressors, so the shed blood of the murdered man, even though he can no longer speak, cries before the Heavenly Court. “This is one of the monumental sentences in the Bible. It needs no explanation and retains its validity through the centuries for each generation. The most important word in the sentence is ’ēlay , ‘to me.’ It is no empty sentence that the blood of the victim cries out; there is someone there to whom it cries out. Cain cannot hide his deed.”* [Westermann, Genesis vol 1 p305; q.v. Ross, 159] “Life is in the blood (Lev 17:11), so shed blood is the most polluting of all substances. Consequently, unatoned-for murders pollute the holy land, making it unfit for the divine presence. To prevent such a catastrophe, the cities of refuge were established (Num 35:9-34; Deut 19:1-13). In cases where the murderer could not be traced, the rite prescribed in Deut 21:1-9 had to be carried out. Because man is made in God’s image, homicide must be avenged (Gen 9:5).” [Wenham, 1:107]

v. 11 – And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. — Cassuto divides these verses as follows to emphasize the chiasmic parallelism between vv. 10 and 11.

¹⁰ And He said, ‘What have you done? Hark! your brother’s blood
is crying to Me from the ground.

¹¹ And now you are cursed from the ground,
which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood
from your hand.

At the end of these two verses is a single word that stands alone, and its very isolation at the conclusion of the verse lends it emphasis: ‘from your hand.’ The emphasis is that this happened from the hand of the murdered man’s **brother!**

v. 11 – And now — This phrase usually serves to introduce a conclusion; ‘*Since the charge was brought before My court, it is compelled to pronounce its sentence.*’

you are cursed — This is the third time a curse is uttered: first upon the serpent (3:14), then upon the ground (3:17), and now upon Cain himself. Because of the sin of Adam the soil was cursed, but here Cain’s transgression brings down a curse upon the transgressor himself. The word ‘you’ is emphatic. **This is the first place in Scripture where a human is cursed.**

from the ground, — ‘Your curse shall come upon you from the ground, just as the cry of your brother’s blood came to Me from the ground.’ As we will see in the verse that follows, there is a double reference here. ‘*And now cursed art thou from (off) the ground,*’ i.e., not from the earth’s surface but from the cultivated ground; not that he is barred from contact with the soil but from enjoyment of its productivity. In addition to that, there is a sense where it means ‘*you are cursed away from the land,*’ i.e., you are banished from the cultivated area that was man’s original home to the uncultivated land. The next verse will expand on both of these truths.

which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood — The world of the dead (i.e., Sheol: 'So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol;' Num 16:33 ESV) is depicted as swallowing up the people with its jaws and drinking their blood thirstily. As a rule it swallows up the departed; the engulfment of Korah and his company while still alive was an exception, where we see the identical phrase occurring:

'and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them ... and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods.' (Num 16:30, 32)

'how the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, their households, their tents, and all the substance that was in their possession' (Deut 11:6)

'The earth opened up and swallowed Dathan' (Ps 106:17)

Other verses throughout the Old Testament maintains this theme:

'Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure, and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down, her revelers and he who exults in her.' (Isa 5:14)

'His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough.' (Hab 2:5)

Rabbi Cassuto goes into greater detail in his commentary (see 219f) but the thought of Sheol in these verses connects with our story as follows: ***Cain slew his brother, and the netherworld greeted his deed with joy, greedily opening its mouth to drink his brother's blood from his hand.***

from your hand. — "Cain's culpability is emphasized by the direct accusation 'from your [own] hand.'" [Mathews, 1:275]

v. 12 – When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; a vagrant and a wanderer shall you be on the earth.' — "The curse 'from off the ground' has two sides: (1) The ground will 'no longer yield its strength' to the murderer, so that even if he wished he will be unable to resume his husbandry; and (2) he is to be a 'vagrant and wanderer in the earth.' The second is the negative consequence of the first, and need not be regarded as a separate curse, or a symbol of the inward unrest which springs from a guilty conscience." [Skinner, 108f]

When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; — From Adam's sin, the ground yielded its produce scantily and only as a result of hard labor (3:17-19); nevertheless it was possible to subsist thereon as Cain well knew as a farmer himself (4:2). "But from now on, the earth will give you nought. You and the ground became partners in the act of violence: you gave it your brother's blood, and it accepted this from your hand; therefore the punishment shall be made to fit the crime, and all connection between you and the ground shall be severed." [Cassuto, 221; see also Mathews, 1:275f]

a vagrant and a wanderer shall you be on the earth.' — This is not to suggest the life of a nomad is a cursed life; the life of wandering shepherds who would move their tents periodically from place to place to fulfill their needs was certainly not a curse. But 'a vagrant and a wanderer' was one who never found rest and was a vagabond all his days because he can nowhere obtain his livelihood. Thus is the curse found in the Psalms:

'Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children continually be vagabonds, and beg; let them seek their bread also from their desolate places.' (Ps 109:9, 10)

Cain's curse was like that put upon those children found in the Psalm. The same verb *'to wander'* is used to describe the children of Israel in exile among the nations (Amos 9:9). ***"Cain is not being condemned to a Bedouin-like existence; the terminology is too extreme to describe such a life-style. Rather it seems likely that the curse on Cain reflects the expulsion from the family that was the fate in tribal societies of those who murdered close relatives.... 'To be driven away from the land' is to have all relationships, particularly with the family, broken. Moreover, it is to have one's relationship with the Lord broken."*** [Wenham, 1:108]

A HENDIADYS? — Some translates the rhyming Hebrew phrase *'wandering and aimless'* as a hendiadys; e.g., the NIV's *'restless wanderer;'* Hamilton [1:232], *'a wandering fugitive.'* "This, then, is Cain's fate. In some ways it is a fate worse than death. It is to lose all sense of belonging and identification with a community. It is to become rootless and detached.... Cain, once a farmer, is now ousted from civilization and is to become a vagabond. Rootlessness is the punishment and the wilderness is the refuge of the sinner." [Hamilton, 1:232]

v. 13 — There is disagreement as to Cain's response to the Lord's judgment.

Cain said to the Lord, 'My iniquity is too great to be forgiven. [Cassuto] — According to Cassuto, the combination of the Hebrew words used here typically has the sense of *'to forgive iniquity;'* thus Cain's heart is now filled with remorse as he realizes the enormity of his crime and accepts the judgment. Some early versions understood it this way, having *'my guilt is too great to forgive, my sin is too great for forgiveness'* (LXX, *Targum Onkelos*, Vulgate), which is also followed by Luther and some modern commentators. Rabbinic interpretation took the verse in this way but as a question, *'Is my guilt too great to be forgiven?'* (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, 101b). If true, Cain would be expressing remorse over his sin and requesting God's forgiveness.

And Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! [NKVJ] — Most of those I am using in these studies however agree the context demands this to be a lament rather than a plea for forgiveness. The problem is the meaning of the two words: Hebrew *'awônî* may be translated *'my iniquity'* or *'my punishment,'* and *nāsā'* likewise is ambiguous, meaning *'forgiveness'* or *'bear.'* While this could mean that Cain was asking for forgiveness, *"the context gives no support to this."* [Kidner, 76] All the major translations render it as follows (or something with a similar meaning): *'My punishment is greater than I can bear.'* (ASV, RV, ESV, KJV, NASB, NET, NIV, NKJV, RSV) "The context of v. 14 is more in keeping with complaint than request. Cain protests that his penalty is too harsh; he argues that isolation from God's protective presence effectively results in a death sentence. Under the weight of this curse, Cain goes to pieces, though not in remorse." [Mathews, 1:276; see also Skinner, 109]

v. 14 – *Behold, Thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth;* — Most understand this to mean, *'You have driven me out from the cultivated ground into the desert.'* But the Hebrew word used here *'aḏāmāh* could refer to a piece of agricultural ground or the earth as a whole. Cassuto therefore argues that the general meaning fits the context better, thus Cain cannot find rest anywhere; no sooner does he arrive at any place than he feels that he cannot remain there. He is conscious of being an outcast – cast out from the whole earth.

this day — *'The sentence was passed upon Cain that very day;'* we will see later why Cain emphasizes this point.

and from Thy face I shall seek to hide; [Cassuto] – I shall be hidden from Your face; [NKJV] – and from your face I shall be hidden. [ESV] — Not only was Cain *'driven out*

from the face of the earth' but was banished from the divine presence, 'a distinct ingredient in his cup of misery.' [Skinner, 109] God's dominion extends over the entire world so Cain is saying, 'I shall constantly flee from Thy presence, but wherever I go I shall find Thee there also, and so I shall have to flee from that place too, in my continual and desperate endeavor to hide from Thy face.' The same thought is found in the Psalms,

'Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence [literally, 'Thy face']? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!' (Ps 139:7, 8)

and I shall be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth, — This coincides with the previous verses. Here Cain seems to acquiesces to his punishment and repeats the words of the Lord to indicate his submission to the decree.

and everyone who finds me will seek to slay me.' — Although Cain will submit to the punishment that the Lord decreed upon him 'this day' (now we understand why Cain stressed that above), yet Cain was afraid lest 'in the future' something over and above what the Lord decreed would befall him. In essence, 'it is not enough that I will be forced to wander throughout the earth but I will also be forced to conceal myself from every human being, since they will 'all' desire to kill me and will attempt to do so, since they are 'all' relatives of the murdered man.' **Although there is even today a sense in which we all are related to each other, how much more so in the early history of man. There were at that time none save Abel's father and brothers and his brothers' children and children's children; all of which may wish to avenge the blood of Abel.** "Cain's fear for his life presupposes the expansion of civilization over the course of his long life during which there will be many opportunities for retribution by a blood-avenger (e.g., Seth lives 912 years, 5:8)." [Mathews, 1:277]

v. 15 – Then the Lord said to him, 'Therefore, — The force of 'therefore' is this: 'in order to remove this apprehension from your mind, and to assure you that only what I said would come to pass and what I did not say would not happen, I make this further proclamation...'. The Lord was giving assurance to Cain that nothing more than the original sentence (banishment) would occur. "God's concern for the innocent (10) is matched only by His care for the sinner. Even the querulous prayer of Cain had contained a germ of entreaty; God's answering pledge, together with His 'mark' or 'sign' (the same word as in 9:13; 17:11) – not a stigma but a safe-conduct – is almost a covenant, making Him virtually Cain's *gō'ēl* or protector; cf. 2 Samuel 14:14b; AV, RV. **It is the utmost that mercy can do for the unrepentant.**" [Kidner, 76; querulous = 'complaining in a petulant or whining manner; ' *gō'ēl* = 'redeemer, kinsman redeemer; ' Lev 25:48, 'One of his brothers may redeem him. ']

if any one slays Cain — It is forbidden to take blood revenge upon Cain. Note the verse says, 'if any one slays CAIN' and not, 'if any one slays YOU.' **This proclamation is being addressed to everyone, not just to Cain.**

sevenfold — Most understand this as 'a poetic turn of speech meaning full divine retribution' [Wenham, 1:109], or 'as a figure of speech meaning completeness or fullness' [Mathews, 1:278], or since seven is the number of perfection, 'seven times' connotes 'in perfect measure; ' i.e., with the fullest severity of the law [Cassuto, 1:226]. Some understand this more literally however; e.g., Skinner [110] understands this to mean that if someone slays Cain, seven members of the murderer's clan would be slain; and Ken Ham [147] says they and seven generations of their family would be judged.

shall he be avenged.’ — This is an established legal term, signifying his slayer shall be punished. The person who slays Cain would be guilty of a dual offense: the crime of shedding blood along with the sin of disrespecting and scorning the Lord’s judgment by augmenting to the Divine punishment.

And the Lord set a sign for Cain, so that any one who came upon him would not slay him. — *sign* = Hebrew ’ôth ‘*sign, mark, indicator.*’ It is used in three ways:

- it can be a sign of proof or evidence of God’s power (Ex 7:3; 4:8, 9, 17, 28, 30)
- it can be a symbol, suggesting something else by virtue of resemblance or conventional association; e.g., Ezekiel’s sun-dried brick (Ezek 4:3)
- it can be a sign of cognition, awakening knowledge of something in the observer; e.g., the rainbow after the flood (Gen 9:12, 13, 17)

Here it is used of something either on Cain or about Cain that was visible to all the world, marking him as one whose death would be avenged sevenfold. Much ink has been wasted about the exact nature of the sign but there is no hint in Scripture as to what this sign involved. ***Note this was something relating to Cain alone and not his offspring, as some expositors relates this to a tribal mark.***

so that any one who came upon him would not slay him. — The purpose for the sign is now given. This is not just a warning to others but an assurance to Cain that no one would slay him.

LAW AND GRACE — “*Again we hear in the narrative the voice of both law and grace. Sin cannot be ignored or justified. Cain must pay a penalty for his actions. But the God who pronounces the sentence also makes available to the criminal his protection and concern that he too not become a victim of violence. Cain is banned and blessed. He is a marked man, in a positive sense. He leaves God’s presence but not God’s protection.*” [Hamilton, 1:235]

would not slay him. — The Hebrew word here *hakôth* which means literally, ‘*to strike, to smite, to smite fatally.*’ While this word may include slaying, note Moses does not use the word *harôgh* which means ‘*to slay as one man slays another or enemies in battle.*’ ***Thus the warning was not only in killing Cain but would also include any assault that does not cause death.***

v. 16 – Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, — After the conclusion of the judgment, Cain left the presence of the Lord to forever be fleeing the face of the Lord. “It was in ‘*the presence of the Lord*’ that the crisis had arisen (5); Cain’s departure was both his sentence and his choice. On the one hand, he had feared banishment ‘*from thy face*’ (14) and the ‘*wandering*’ now expressed in the name ‘*Nod*’ (‘*wandering*’); on the other hand, he had disdained contrition and now set himself to make some success of his independence. The ensuing account gives a first taste of a self-sufficient society, which is the essence of what the New Testament calls ‘*the world.*’” [Kidner, 77] “Cain will live outside ‘*the Lord’s presence,*’ which is another narrative reminder of Adam’s crime and penalty (3:22). This same expression also describes Jonah, who fled the Lord’s presence (Jonah 1:3, 10).” [Mathews, 1:278]

and dwelt in the land of Nod [‘Wandering’], — This is the only place where ‘*Nod*’ is mentioned in the Scriptures and cannot be identified geographically. The word itself means ‘*to be moved, to be driven about, to wander, to flit from place to place.*’ [New Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies] Two interpretations are possible: (1) Cain dwelt in the land called Nod which can no longer be identified; or (2) he abode in a land of ‘*wandering;*’ i.e., his residence was never permanent but he was constantly roaming from place to place. The second explanation fits the context best.

east of Eden [qidhmath 'Edhen]. — Note again Eden and 'east' are linked together; cp. 2:8; 3:24.

LESSONS FROM CAIN — “First, sacrifices were to be offered to God from a heart of faith. With such a motivation the sacrifice was bound to represent the first and the best of the worshiper’s possessions. Second, Israelites did have responsibility for one another. They were one another’s keepers in the covenant and dared not destroy the life of a brother. Third, homicidal blood would pollute the land and require purification. Shed blood would cry out for vengeance, accusing the murderer of the crime. Fourth, punishment for the guilty was at the foundation of society. Fifth, God made provision against blood revenge through the protective care of the guilty, here by decree, and later by the establishment of the cities of refuge. Sixth, life without God or his blessing was a dangerous life without protection. Godless society was reduced to seeking compensation wherever it could find it. And seventh, the elder brother was rejected in favor of the younger for inheritance. Cain showed himself unfaithful and rebellious and therefore was disqualified, for the line of blessing would now proceed through Abel’s replacement.” [Ross, 153]