

STUDY 2

NAVIGATING FAMILY CONFLICT

INTRODUCTION

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Build Relationships. Among our human relationships, none is more important than the relationships within the family. By considering both positive and negative examples from the book of Genesis, we discover how to build relationships in a positive way that is Christ-honoring.

Writer Bio

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A STUDY ON MAINTAINING GODLY RELATIONSHIPS

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Many eruptions of anger or dysfunction in the workplace, church, traffic, sporting activities (like booing the umpire) and nonconstructive conversations can stem from unresolved family conflict.

We have not called this series Avoiding Family Conflict. Changing the subject or sitting farther away from each other does not solve anything.

- **It is not called *Denying Family Conflict*.** Deny all you want; you will only delay the inevitable work necessary to restore or repair your broken relationships.
- **It is not called *Fleeing Family Conflict*.** Some people run away, separate, or sever their relationships. You can run, but you can't hide. It's still there.
- **It is not called *Blaming Family Conflict*.** Because we are often accurate about the other person's fault, we feel justified in blaming

them while excusing ourselves from our responsibility in the conflict.

- It is not called, *Repeating Family Conflict*. We want to help you stop making the same mistakes that bring on so much pain.

In this study, we will look at six different families from the Old Testament. Each example will allow us to grow in Christ-likeness as we pursue the Lord's vision for family. We will endeavor to leave no stone unturned as we learn to trust God in newer, deeper ways. From insights in Genesis, let's find our way through it rather than avoiding, denying, fleeing, blaming, or repeating our family conflicts. God made our families, He cares about them even more than we do, and He is committed to guiding us by His Spirit to love them as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:39).

Join us on this rewarding journey of Navigating Family Conflict.

SESSION 1

CAIN AND ABEL: FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY

Leader pages on pp. 130-133

THE POINT:
GOD EXPECTS US TO
LOOK AFTER OUR
FAMILY MEMBERS.

GENESIS 4:1-12

¹ The man was intimate with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain. She said, "I have had a male child with the LORD's help." ² She also gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel became a shepherd of flocks, but Cain worked the ground.

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³ In the course of time Cain presented some of the land's produce as an offering to the LORD. ⁴ And Abel also presented an offering—some of the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions. The LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵ but he did not have regard for Cain and his offering. Cain was furious, and he looked despondent. ⁶ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you furious? And why do you look despondent?" ⁷ **If you do what is right, won't you be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.**

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MEMORY VERSE

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⁸ Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. ⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's guardian?" ¹⁰ Then he said, "What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" ¹¹ So now you are cursed, alienated from the ground that opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood you have shed. ¹² If you work the ground, it will never again give you its yield. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

KEYWORDS

Became (v. 2)—Hebrew verb: meanings include "to be, become, exist" or "to happen." Unlike Cain, who followed Adam's vocation, Abel *became*/was a shepherd; *kept* sheep.

Presented Brought . . . an offering (v. 3)—The same word for offering is used of both Cain's and Abel's gifts.

Sin is crouching . . . door (v. 7)
The Lord compared sin with an animal lurking at the door, a reference to the animal's resting place or den.

What have . . . done? (v. 10)—This second question to Cain echoes the one He asked Eve. The Lord sought to elicit confession from Cain.

WHAT RESPONSIBILITY DOES EACH MEMBER HAVE TO THE FAMILY?

Most parents can speak of how different their children are from one another. One may be an outdoorsman, a hunter, and a fisherman. Another child reared in the same family, may grow to become a musician, preferring the arts and all things indoors. One's idea of a vacation is camping and sleeping on the ground. The other might protest, "If the outside is so great, how come all the bugs try to get inside?"

I am the third-born child of five. I have an older brother and sister. We were each born two years apart. For six years, I was the baby of the family. My brother was wired for fun, my sister was wired for friends, and I was wired to get my way. Whether through tears, fears, friendliness, or fury, I convinced others to do things my way—same family and genetics, different kids.

It's amazing that children from the same gene pool, raised in the same environment, can be so different from each other. The same is true of the first siblings mentioned in the Bible: Cain and Abel. Even though they lived ages ago, their story carries a certain familiarity. So how do we navigate the often treacherous waters of conflict in our families? How do we respond to the responsibility we have to look after our family members?

A Work Assignment // Genesis 4:1-2

From his profession, we understand there are many things to respect about Cain. He "worked the ground." He had to exhibit the many skills a wise farmer must possess to be successful. This included knowledge and foresight to plant his crops, knowing how to protect his crops from weeds and poaching animals, preparing the soil for each vegetation type, cultivating the soil to receive the nutrients of moisture and sunlight, irrigating water from rivers and streams to his crops, and storing his crops to maintain sustenance for the life of his family. Cain was a skilled man who led an agricultural enterprise that fed human life.

Abel was the shepherd of a flock. A shepherd required entirely different skills. He needed to guide his flock and protect them from the dangers of straying and from animals of prey. A shepherd leads his flock with understanding. He accepts that sheep have limitations and will not be frustrated with his sheep because they act like sheep. A shepherd knows when and how to use his staff for direction or correction. A shepherd will feed his flock and facilitate his flock to reproduce and increase the number of his flock.



THE POINT: GOD EXPECTS US TO LOOK AFTER OUR FAMILY MEMBERS.

Cain and Abel needed each other and benefited from each other's strengths. Cain "worked the ground" and farmed food. He cultivated the land and grew crops to feed his family. Abel was a "shepherd of flocks." He shepherded sheep which provided valuable protein and the many benefits of wool. From wool came clothing, blankets, carpets, upholstery, and tents.

Both brothers provided sustenance for themselves and their extended family. Cain and Abel knew they needed to contribute to their family's well-being through their professions, but what should have been a relationship of cooperation became infected by comparison.

HOW DOES OUR WORK CONTRIBUTE TO THE OVERALL WELL-BEING OF THE FAMILY?

A Worship Assessment // Genesis 4:3-7

As Cain and Abel grew, it came time for them to worship the Lord. This is the first reference to presenting an offering to God in the Bible. The two brothers both gave an offering to God as an act of worship. The same word for offering is used for both Cain and Abel's gifts. This word also functions as a technical term for the grain offering (Lev. 2:1-7). Both men felt the need for worship long before the Lord introduced the sacrificial system in the time of Moses. Perhaps they learned the practice from Adam.

As a farmer, Cain brought some of his crops to the altar. Cain's offering probably appeared dignified, perhaps his spread of vegetation was lavish, beautiful, and costly. But it appears that something was missing.

By contrast, Abel's offering as a shepherd consisted of some of the firstborns of his flock and their fat portions. Over time, God's people realized the Lord required not only the best but also the first share of all their produce. Thus, the first fruits of plants and animals belonged to Him. At the first Passover, the Israelites were taught that the firstborn males of the flock belonged to the Lord (Ex. 13:12). The Israelites also presented the tithe or tenth of the flock to Him (Lev. 27:32). The offering of fat, the tastiest part of the animal, symbolized the worshiper's desire to offer God the best.

The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering. The Hebrew verb means to look at with approval. Abel's offering was acceptable because Abel was acceptable. But the Lord did not have regard for Cain and his offering.

Why was Cain's gift rejected while Abel's was accepted? There are several possible interpretations. Part of the answer lies in the fact that Cain's offering is not identified as the best of his



DIGGING DEEPER NEW BLOOD

In Genesis 4:10, God told Cain, "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" That is a seemingly unfamiliar statement to 21st-century Christians, but it would have echoed in the hearts and minds of early Jewish believers reading the Septuagint. They were taught the spilled blood of the innocent defiles the earth (Num. 35:33). Not only would they have immediately recognized the Lord's reprimand to Cain and the negative effect of his bloodshed, but they could easily draw the connection—as we should—to the sacred, eternal effects of a New Blood. They would turn to the example of "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which says better things than the blood of Abel" (Heb. 12:24). God, in His omniscience, offers healing to the soil of our souls through the blood of Christ, which can "cleanse our consciences from dead works" (Heb. 9:14).

What significance has the blood of Christ made in your life?

produce. In contrast, Abel brought some of the firstborn animals and their fat portions—the best of the flock.

Another possibility is that the difference in the two men's hearts or attitudes made the difference in the acceptability of their offerings. The difference in the Lord's response to Cain and Abel's offerings lies in the integrity of the giver. The writer of Hebrews noted that the Lord accepted Abel's offering because he offered it in faith (Heb. 11:4). The rest of the story (v. 8-12) reveals that Cain's attitude or heart was not right with the Lord.

Another perspective focuses on the issue of sacrifice. In this interpretation, the brothers must have been taught by their parents that, in our humanity, we are all sinful and that God requires a sacrifice to pay for our sins. William MacDonald states, "Cain and Abel were instructed that sinful man can approach the holy God only on the ground of the blood of a substitutionary sacrifice."¹²

"The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering." We read in Hebrews 11:4, "By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did." The Lord's regard for Abel and his offering was because of his faith.

If offering a sacrifice is the key point Cain would have known what God required. He was responsible for knowing what to do in his worship of the Lord. What we know is that the Lord "did not have regard for Cain and his offering."

In the New Testament, we find the expression, "The way of Cain" (Jude 11). Some think "the way of Cain" refers to murder, but it's far more subtle and self-deceiving. The "way of Cain" is the way that leads to death.

WHY IS GIVING OUR BEST TO GOD CONSIDERED AN ACT OF WORSHIP?

We see that Cain's response was anger and rage. Anger robs us of the kindness, care, and love we should have for our families. Anger distracts us from productivity, purpose, and peace in our relationships. Ultimately, a heart that harbors anger toward someone reflects a heart that is not right with God. Even still, God came to Cain in mercy and asked questions to help Cain find understanding, reason, and repentance. Instead of confessing his

sin and offering a sacrifice, Cain let sin take over. He remained furious with God and unrepentant in his soul.

A Watch Over One Another

// Genesis 4:8-12



Instead of changing his attitude, Cain became angry. In Cain's unrepentant fury against God for not regarding him or his offering, he took it out on his brother. Cain's heart was filled with anger toward his brother because he was angry with God. Cain decided that nobody could be regarded if he couldn't be regarded—if Cain could not present his offering the way he wanted, Abel had presented his last offering. And that hatred could not find rest within him, so he vented his rage on his brother. It was premeditated murder fueled by his hatred.

Our anger never remains only in our hearts. Unless we deal with it, we pack it down until it explodes. And when we explode it is usually on our loved ones.

When we consider the anger of Cain, we tend to think, "I'm nothing like him. It's not like I have killed anyone." But Jesus said we should resist harboring the emotion of anger because God understands our hearts and considers anger as harmful as murder: "You have heard that it was said to our ancestors, Do not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment" (Matthew 5:21-22).

After Cain murdered his brother, the Lord gave him another opportunity to confess and repent

THE POINT: GOD EXPECTS US TO LOOK AFTER OUR FAMILY MEMBERS.

by asking him, "Where is your brother Abel?" But instead of confession, Cain lied and offered a snide remark: "I don't know. Am I my brother's guardian?" People often try to avoid a direct answer when caught in a lie. Did Cain think he could outwit the Lord?

The Lord gave Cain yet another opportunity to confess his sin, but instead of drawing close to the Lord, Cain only complained about his degree of punishment.

The apostle John said Cain killed Abel because his "deeds were evil and his brother's were righteous." (1 John 3:12). His evil deeds began by worshiping God his way, on his terms, which ultimately led to death. Cain's hatred cut short the life and career of his brother. And it cost Cain his career and a lifetime in exile. Romans 12:10 tells us, "Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters." There are dire and long-lasting consequences when we do not act as our "brother's keeper."

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THIS PASSAGE ABOUT GOD'S EXPECTATIONS FOR US TO BE OUR BROTHER'S KEEPER?

DID YOU KNOW?

In 1991, a 16-year-old boy was shot and killed after committing an armed robbery at a liquor store in San Bernardino, CA. Major news outlets, including the Los Angeles Times, covered the story because the boy was Ronnie Newt of the rising R&B group The Newtrons. The Newtrons' three members were Ronnie, Bobby, and Johnny Newt—all brothers. After the incident, MCA Records terminated their deal, forcing them to move back to their old drug-infested neighborhood in northern California. In an interview, his brothers spoke about that moment in time. They alluded to Ronnie's behavior as an "extension of our father,"¹³ referring to Ron Newt, Sr., who was in prison at the time of his namesake's death. He was an infamous hustler in the Bay Area who spent years in and out of jail cells, often at his family's expense. Perhaps worst of all, he glorified his life of crime as an example to his sons, who inherited the fruit of his misdeeds.

Biblical Truth: As children of God, we inherit the fruit of His Spirit.

How might our decisions affect the lives of our family members?

LIVE IT

How can we reflect the heart of God even when we feel treated unfairly?

Sometimes we are unaware that we, and not others, are out of line. We should accept responsibility for our actions and repent before God—and sometimes to one another. The story of Cain and Abel serves as a reminder of the damage that can escalate in unresolved family conflicts. Taking time to get God's perspective on justice helps paint a clearer picture in these instances.

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- **Make worship real.** Worship is more than hymns, songs, and preaching during Sunday services. Take time this week to worship God as a part of your daily quiet time.
- **Deal with relational pain.** Take time to reflect on relationships in your family where you have experienced hurt feelings. Ask the Holy Spirit to be your counselor in these matters.
- **Deal with anger.** Begin the process of identifying your anger and begin the process of forgiving those who have hurt you.

DAILY READINGS

1. WORKING THROUGH THE CURSE // GENESIS 3:17B

God expects our best regardless of the circumstances surrounding the task—even a curse. Following Adam and Eve's disobedience, God cursed the ground and declared that through painful labor will you eat from it (Gen. 3:17b). Cain was the son responsible for working the cursed ground. Like Cain, we may find ourselves responsible for tasks that require extra effort, but we must be careful to continue to give God our best. Here's where Cain stumbled. He worked the land, but when it was time to give God an offering (an act of worship) Cain failed to give God his best.

Christians that whatever task God assigns us, we are to complete it by giving our all.

2. DO WHAT IS RIGHT // GENESIS 4:7; ROMANS 12:9

Each day brings new challenges and decisions, yet believers should always strive to do what is right. While interacting with family, friends, and non-family members, situations occur that require us to decide to do what is right or opt for the sinful choice. Romans 12:9b reminds us to "detest evil; cling to what is good". Psalms 34:14, 37:27, and 1 Peter 3:11 echo the phrase to do good. Sin wants us to choose evil, but as God told Cain even before he thought to kill his brother, we must rule over it (Gen. 4:7). Since God knows when we, like Cain, are contemplating doing wrong, He provides a way of escape (1 Cor. 10:13).

Choose daily to do what is right.

3. FACING CONSEQUENCES // 1 JOHN 1:9

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us" (1 John 1:9a), but the consequences are ours to face. In Genesis 4:10-12, Cain experienced God's grace and forgiveness for his sin. Yet, he was faced with the consequence of being a wanderer for the rest of his life. As we reflect on our own sins and God's forgiveness, we may see the residual effects of the sin.

For example, gluttony is forgiven; however, high blood pressure or diabetes may be consequences resulting from the sin. These consequences don't leave when forgiveness is granted; but our loving Father extends grace to help us through them.

We must trust God to be with us as we face the consequences of forgiven sin.

4. RICHES AT A PRICE // GENESIS 13:6

Conflicts over possessions may arise in the best of families. Family members may accumulate riches as Abram did on his journey with God. He was blessed with riches that exceeded what the land could contain (Gen. 13:6). His family, like many families today, began to quarrel over possessions that did not belong to them. Sometimes when people pass away, members of the family get angry over "stuff" that God bless someone else to possess. In Abram's case, while the family was acting ridiculously, he reached out to Lot to resolve the conflict. Both the uncle and nephew agreed that the best resolution to the conflict was to separate.

Families can avoid conflicts over possessions by realizing that all riches ultimately belong to God.

5. BLESSINGS AND CHALLENGES // MICAH 6:8

Families are a precious gift from God that provides us with blessings and challenges. On good days, the family unit is loving, encouraging, and supportive of one another. However, there are days when challenges spring up because people see things through their own lenses without concern for the other person. Each person thinks their way is unquestionably correct, their rights supersede the rights of others, and compromise is no longer in their vocabulary. When these challenges surface, Christians should handle the conflicts like ambassadors of Christ. As families practice acting justly, loving faithfully, and walking with God (Mic. 6:8), conflicts cease to be major obstacles.

Focusing on God and not self will make the gift of family more of a blessing than a challenge.