

Cain, Abel, and Choice

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Suppose you have two little children, and you ask them to make a picture of a puppy. You leave the room. One takes out crayons and uses them to draw and color a picture of a puppy. The other takes out paints and uses them to paint a picture of a puppy.

You come back into the room and say to the one who used paints, "Oh, what a wonderful picture of a puppy! I'm going to hang it up and admire it." But you say to the one who used crayons, "I'm sorry, but I only accept pictures that are painted. Try again with paints."

Obviously, I don't recommend doing this with your children; that is, not if you want to maintain peace and harmony in your home. Chances are that the child who used the crayons will not only have hurt feelings but will also resent the choice you made and become jealous and hateful toward his or her sibling. Nevertheless, this example illustrates in a setting we are more familiar with just what God did with Cain and Abel (Genesis 4). But why did He do it?

Most commentators say that God rejected Cain's offering and accepted Abel's because He would accept only a bloody sacrifice that pictured the atonement of Jesus Christ. No doubt this is true. But I believe there is more to it than that. That's why I started off with the story of the children and the picture of the puppy. It removes the blood element from the story for the moment so it does not distract us from learning the other lesson that I believe God wants us to learn from the account of Cain and Abel.

Sovereignty

As the parent in the story of the children and the picture of the puppy, what have you done? You have demonstrated your sovereignty in making choices. The children did not have to understand why you chose paints over crayons. You made the choice and that is that. The end result of your choice of paints over crayons was that you also chose one child over the other. But this occurred in a more complex process.

All that happened initially was that you chose paints and rejected crayons. By doing this, you also accepted the painter. But what happened to the child who used crayons? You told the child that all he

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or she needed to do was try again using paints (notice Genesis 4:7). But, if we continue the story in the pattern set by Cain and Abel, the child who used crayons resents your right to make the choice. Why? Because the child feels he or she has the right to make the choice. Crayons are a perfectly good art medium, so your choice is not fair!

Isn't this the way we react when things don't go our way? Perhaps nothing is more indicative of a struggle of wills between children and parents, or between any human and God, as the cry, It's not fair! When this cry is heard frequently, it is absolutely symptomatic of a serious problem. With children, it shows a lack of respect and/or understanding of the position their parents hold. With adults, it shows the same thing toward God. When we want our way over God's, we are saying that we think we would make a better God than God Himself.

So, what is the point? The point is that, whatever else we may get from it, the account of Cain and Abel is a lesson in God's sovereignty. Some people say that God had previously given instructions that He would accept bloody sacrifices only. Perhaps He gave such instruction when He shed blood to make coats of skins for Adam and Eve. But this matters little for the point I am making here. Cain wanted to make a choice that God had sovereignly reserved to Himself. God then told Cain that Cain did indeed have a choice: he could do well and be accepted, or he could sin. Cain chose the latter. I don't at this time want to go into whether Cain could have chosen anything other than the wrong offering and to sin in reaction to God's response. That is a much broader topic than I want to go into in this small article.

What I want to emphasize here is that this account teaches God's sovereignty in making choices. He can choose what is acceptable to Him and what is not. And, by doing so, He makes choices and causes division among humans between those who do what is acceptable (significantly in this case, doing what was acceptable was a demonstration of faith in the—at that time—still future atoning sacrifice of the woman's Seed; see Genesis 3:15) and those who rebel against God's sovereignty in favor of making their own choices. This theme of God's sovereign choice is repeated continuously through the rest of Scripture as God chooses whom He will to worship Him as He wills while the rest rebelliously try to make their own choices, go their own way, and often react with jealousy, hatred, and murder toward those whom God has chosen and accepted. But perhaps there are additional applications that can be gleaned from the account.

God Did Not Create Everyone Equally

But there is something else, something unexpected, that we can also learn. We can learn that God never intended human society to be a uniform mass of equals. That is, although in the United States everyone is supposed to be treated equally under the law, God neither created everyone equally nor does He treat everyone equally. Although a parent would be making a mistake to treat children as in our story at the beginning of this article, God knew what He was doing. He knew that the result of His choice would be a society that is not homogenous, one that is not made up of people who are all the same. Like the lesson in God's sovereignty, this too can be found throughout Scripture.

When post-flood culture tried to stay homogenous by building a city and devising a project (the Tower of Babel—see Genesis 11) to keep them occupied and working toward a single goal, no doubt under the sacral system of a unifying cult, God intervened. He confounded their language, causing them to no longer understand each other. This caused them to scatter, decentralize, and create a multitude of civilizations.

God took Abraham and Lot out of their civilization (Genesis 11:26-12:4), and later He divided them again to create more civilizations (Genesis 13:9-12). God separated Jacob from Laban (Genesis 31). When Israel went down to Egypt because of famine (Genesis 46:3-4), God kept them separate from the Egyptians, first because of their occupation as shepherds (Genesis 46:33-34), and later by having them made a slave caste (Exodus 1:9-14). Eventually, in the Exodus, He removed them from Egypt altogether and gave them laws to keep them apart from the nations around them.

I don't want to be tedious, so I will hit only a couple more examples in the Old Testament. Although we tend to remember the period of the judges as exceedingly wicked because "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6 and 21:25), when the people wanted the unifying symbol and influence of a king, God told Samuel that this desire stemmed from their rejecting God as king (1 Samuel 8:5-7). He gave them their king, Saul. Yet, after Solomon's reign, He divided the kingdom between north and south.

Now, let's skip to the New Testament. Here, we find Jesus choosing disciples and then telling them, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given"

(Matthew 13:11). Jesus declares, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44). He states, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you...I have chosen you out of the world" (John 15:16, 19), implying, of course, that He has left those He has not chosen in the world.

The apostle Paul speaks the same way: "But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:13); and, "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4). A choosing always implies a separation; some are chosen, and some are not. This is not equality.

Should anyone childishly scream, "But that's not fair!" Paul replies,

Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

Romans 9:19-24

And so we see that God's sovereignty and His not creating everyone equally are inextricably connected. But you might still be thinking that something is not right. If God does this choosing among humans, why does it seem so wrong when we apply it to our children? But the answer is in the question. It is wrong because they are our children. The child who painted the puppy and the child who drew and colored it with crayons are both the offspring of their parents. Cain and Abel were both sons of Adam and Eve. But they were *not* both sons of God. Only Abel was God's son. The separation is between those who are sons and those who are not: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the

flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). Without any regard to moral standing, mental or physical abilities, race, nationality, or sex, God has sovereignly created an inequality in the human race. He has graciously elected some to be His sons. We are to preach the Gospel indiscriminately and show love to all (see Matthew 5:44-48; 28:19-20; Mark 16:15). But who believes and becomes a son of God is not our choice. It is exclusively the choice of the sovereign God.