

SERMON TITLE- "Family Feud"

TEXT- Genesis 4

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Genesis is the story of beginnings- the beginning of the cosmos- the beginning of the world- the beginning of plant and animal life- the beginning of human life.

It is also the story of the beginning of evil and then of suffering and pain- something that Ryan talked about last week.

Obviously these are big complex stories about big difficult subjects. But they are also important stories that tell us how life actually works. Because of that understanding them is very important. And that's why we're doing the series.

So far we can summarize the story as-

-God created a beautiful world

-and then evil entered.

And what allowed that entry? The answer is very important- it entered because of the freedom to choose that God gave people.

This is a contrast to a very common way of looking at the problem of evil. That common way is that evil has its origins in some diabolical force at work in the universe.

Genesis does not challenge the existence of evil in the universe but the problem was not the "snake"- the problem was the choice Adam and Eve made when given a choice.

Since the beginning of time when people have done terrible things they have always given an excuse that both Adam and Eve gave God- "something made me do it- I'm not responsible."

God's answer is blunt and simple and foundational- "you are responsible for your choice- end of story." From the beginning to the end of the Bible that principle is repeated over and over again.

Ryan also reminded us that in this principle there is also great hope- we are also empowered by God to choose good and through those choices bring healing to this broken world.

And so it was that through human choices "sin" entered the world. The perfect creation that God had made and into which He had put the first 2 people became the world that we know- a world where pain and sadness and mixed into the "very good" creation.

The summary of the state of affairs is-

Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it';

Cursed is the ground because of you;

In toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.

Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;

And you will eat the plants of the field;

By the sweat of your face you will eat bread,

Till you return to the ground,

Because from it you were taken;

For you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Genesis 3:17-19

So that's the picture- a general mess.

But now the story of Genesis moves on to the specifics of how sin and evil actually affect life reveal themselves.

And where do they reveal themselves? The story of Genesis 4 show how pain and suffering enter one of the most special aspects of all creation- something that God created that could easily be missed in that grand story of the creation of the cosmos.

There in chapter 2 is a little nugget of the "very good" creation. It goes like this-

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." . . . For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. Genesis 2:18-24

And what did God create? He created the family and the purpose of family is- within a perfect cosmos- to be a place of special joy. It is why, as humans, we crave good relationships. We need each other and there is nothing a precious that the family.

So when the true consequences of sin start spreading themselves through creation- guess where they reveal themselves first? In the first family- the family of all of the family ever created that had the least amount of baggage- the most perfect environment- and closer contact with God than any who would follow.

Genesis 4 is that story-

Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, "I have gotten a manchild with the help of the LORD." Again, she gave birth to his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of flocks, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. Genesis 4:1-2

Family life begins and goes through its paces and all looks good. But not for long- **So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Genesis 4:3-5**

If you are wondering why God was not happy with Cain's offering or how Cain knew that God was not pleased with Cain's offering- wonder away. You have the same clues as everyone else in real terms it is fair to say that you have no more and no less information than anyone else. At the end of the day I think we have to conclude we haven't a clue. But we know Cain was angry.

And then God speaks to Cain-

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." Genesis 4:6-7

From there the story turns from a bad mood into a full-blown catastrophe.

Cain told Abel his brother. And it came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" He said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground . . ." Genesis 4:8-10

I think that most people who think about this story would feel like there is a very big disconnect happening here. How do we in a few short sentences go from a perfect family with a mom and dad and 2 boys- to murder and then to denial and cover up? It is the kind of thing that happens on news stories- not in the families that we live in- right?

I believe we are supposed to be- first of all- shocked by how fast the progression moves. And then second we are to realize this really is the story of life on earth.

#1. Sin Hits Families First

It is no surprise, if you think about it, that blemishes would show up on the things that are supposed to be the most beautiful.

No one worries about getting a few stains on work jeans but on your Sunday pants it matters they show up.

And so it is that the very family that was supposed to be the place of blessing and joy is filled with the deepest possible pain.

For those who have ever done prison ministry and have spent time talking to inmates will know that you are overwhelmed with stories of family pain. You will hear stories of how deep the wounds are.

There are times after hearing those stories that you would think that here are people who would want nothing to do with family- that they would vow to remain single and childless.

Far from it, however. It is in jail among people who are most deeply wounded by their families that the desire to be part of family units is most consistently and passionately expressed. And alongside of this you will hear the continuing pain of the families that they are currently involved in.

Sin, it should not surprise us- destroys what we value the most.

And this leads to a reminder-

#2. That Pain Shows How Important Family Is

We are designed to live in families. In fact we desperately need family and because of this both our deepest joys and sorrows come out of our families.

There is no Plan B when it comes to God's creation- for all the pain that fills families- they are God's gift.

Genesis establishes the argument carefully-

1. Family Is Important
2. Sin Fills Family With Pain

But then it moves on to carefully explain exactly where the problem began- and what the solution is.

The solution has 2 parts- first really understanding where sin comes from.

The first part of that solution comes in God's response to Cain when his sacrifice was first rejected.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." Genesis 4:6-7

Genesis is basically an exclamation mark on and elaboration on what Ryan talked about last week. It is essentially a biopsy of what took place among people after Adam and Eve disobeyed God.

After all besides being scolded by God and being driven from the Garden- you could assume that life went on.

Genesis 4 shows what life- post disobedience- looked like.

#1. The Source Of Sin Is Our Choices

It began when Cain did something to cause God's disapproval and now he was dealing with the consequences.

I have just said that we don't know what Cain did to be on the receiving end of God's disapproval but for I would suggest that it probably wasn't something very big.

Had he already had a fight with his father, mother and brother? There wasn't a very big crowd around at this moment.

Was he just in a bad mood?

Had his mother or father favoured Abel over him?

Life was very simple at that moment and we just don't know what it was.

None-the-less Cain found himself out of sorts.

But what happens next is a pattern we see around ourselves on at least a daily basis. A bad mood or small incident grows to become a disaster.

In this look at Genesis 4 we have enough to deal with without side issues. But there is a vitally important side issue here that does need emphasis. We can always make things worse. Cain demonstrated that vividly.

When we blunder as Cain did- there is a very big temptation to think that things can't get worse- and so excuse ourselves

Cain went from that place to the ultimate disaster- the murder of his brother.

But at the earliest part of the process- God intervenes and gives Cain the instruction we must all hear very carefully- **"sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."**

Sin and evil are active in our world. That is a Biblical fact.

The other Biblical fact is that we will encounter it at very close range. It will crouch at our doors.

The assignment God gives to humanity is that we are to **"master it."** As human beings this is not what we want to hear. We want to be given some kind of technique for getting rid of our problems.

Let's for example assume that Cain's original problem was jealousy because their mother has shown Abel favour over Cain. This is something we can all understand. What do we want to happen when we are jealous?

-We want to be treated better

-We want our feelings to go away

But in most cases neither of these things happen and the jealousy just sits there and festers. In response we make all kind of interesting responses.

There was a time when Janet and I were in a Christian environment that taught us to give commands to issues like jealous. "Be gone, spirit of jealousy!" we would say. In other words, "Stop crouching at my door!"

For a long time it seemed like a good plan- but it is not Biblical. Instead the Biblical instruction in the NT follows exactly the pattern set out at the very beginning-

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

Are you faced by sin crouching at the door? First, assume you are and second, you can beat this thing even if it simply means enduring it.

If the jealousy doesn't go away- make sure that jealousy does not lead to anger.

We all have battles within our souls- every single one of us. We also lose these battles far more often than we should- every single one of us.

But that is not to be the end of the story. One of the cries of a person who struggled with himself was Paul and he expressed his struggle in these immortal words-

. . . there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me . . . Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:7-9

The theme, "we don't know the details" is repeated over and over again. We don't know what Paul's thorn was- and frankly we don't need to. We are told that it was a messenger of evil and we can be quite sure that it was still bothering Paul.

And yet he was not defeated by it.

Why not? First, because Paul understood his responsibility.

But second, because of God's grace. And that grace is the true message of hope. Without it, we will eventually buckle under the temptation. That grace was shown to Cain all along the way.

#2. God Offers Healing

It began in the first encounter between God and Cain. God immediately offers Cain a way out. **"If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?"**

From the very beginning God extends grace to Cain. Yes, you may say that it was easy in the beginning because it didn't start out as a big deal but was a big deal because something serious had gone wrong in Cain's heart.

But even after that, after Cain has continued down the road to disaster, God still offers Cain grace- right to the end.

Yes, Cain was punished for his crime and the punishment was exclusion from society.

. . . you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth." Genesis 4:12

That was the punishment. Cain had broken the deepest code of conduct in killing his brother and is cut off from society.

But even in this God's grace extends-

Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is too great to bear!" Genesis 4:13

And in response to this, God put a limit on the punishment given to Cain. Cain was given hope again. His punishment is not complete even though he deserves it. Cain receives grace.

And after that comes one of the saddest verses in the Bible-

Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD . . . Genesis 4:16

It is now Cain- after receiving God's grace that leaves His presence.

The rest of the Bible continues the story and it is the story of people choosing.

It is about the choices to serve God and about choices not to. It is the story of that complex mix that life is for human beings.

But right to the end it is the story of God extending grace again and again. And in the end it is the story of Jesus coming with a completely fresh message of grace- from God.

That part of the story is captured by Paul-

It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 1 Timothy 1:15

The story of Cain is the biopsy of sin. In many ways it is an ugly story- one we would rather skip over but within it there are some things we absolutely need to understand-

-sin is about choice- not evil spirits floating around in the heavens

-sin affects family most deeply

-we are charged with mastering the crouching sin

-God extends grace and healing- that is very Good News