



Catalog No. 1578

Genesis 4:8-10

16th Message

Bernard Bell

July 26, 2009

WHEN INNOCENT BLOOD IS SHED

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

“His love can never fail.” Much of our service has been structured around this idea of God’s unfailing love. Our call to worship was the closing verses of Romans 8: nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord, not even death. We sang, “O love that will not let me go,” by George Matheson, the beloved blind preacher of Scotland. He wrote the hymn in five minutes when his heart was in a state of great anguish; the grip of God’s love on his life brought him great comfort.

But God has a funny way of expressing his love to those who love him, to those who are faithful to him. Our Scripture reading was drawn from the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11, the great cloud of Old Testament witnesses who lived by faith. The first three listed are Abel, Enoch and Noah. But their lives of faith had very different outcomes. Abel lived by faith and died at the hands of his brother. Enoch lived by faith and did not die because the Lord took him up. Noah lived by faith and everyone else died. What sense do we make of that?

After extensive portraits of Abraham and Moses, the chapter quickly presents heroes of faith who accomplished great things:

I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. (Heb 11:32-34 TNIV)

But then there is a dramatic turn:

There were others who were tortured...Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated...They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. (Heb 11:35-38)

“These were all commended for their faith” (11:39). Yet some lived long successful lives, while others suffered and were brutally killed. Does God know what he is doing? The text on the cover of the bulletin is Psalm 116:15, “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (NIV) or “of those faithful to him” (TNIV). How can the death of his people be precious to God?

The pattern continues in the New Testament: John the Baptist, Stephen and James were brutally killed. Reliable tradition holds that both Peter and Paul were brutally killed under Nero. Why does God allow those faithful to him to be killed, often savagely? Does he do anything about their deaths?

Cain’s murder of Abel created three problems for God: what should he do about Cain, what should he do about Abel, and what

should he do about sin? We find out immediately what God does about Cain the murderer (4:11-16); we’ll look at that next week. It was the easiest of the problems because Cain was still around for God to do something about. The problem of Abel is much harder: Abel was no longer around to do anything about. He was no longer a living being; all that was left was a dead body and some spilled blood. We’ll look at this matter today.

The third problem, that of sin which Cain had allowed in the door, was our topic last week. Before we turn to Abel I want to say a few more words about last week’s sermon since it provoked several long conversations. Some people thought that I was joking in some of my comments. Not so: I spoke in earnest.

I distinguished salvation and sanctification. God saves us *from* something *for* something. He calls us to a new lifestyle, a life of holiness in which sin is kept outside the door. How does God guide his people into this life of holiness? Under the old covenant God gave Israel the Torah, the Law, to show them how to live holy lives. But the Torah could not change their hearts. Under the new covenant God puts his Spirit in us to transform us into his image, to change our hearts so that we actually are able to live holy lives when we walk in the Spirit.

The Torah was a precious gift, given specifically to Israel whom it served as a guardian pending the coming of Christ. It was a guide for Israel’s life and it led to Christ. The death of Christ marked the end of the Torah: he took upon himself the curse that was upon Israel for its failure to keep the Torah. The gift of the Spirit on Pentecost marked the beginning of the new age: it unleashed upon the world both the gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ, and the enabling presence of God in the lives of his people to transform their hearts, renewing them into God’s image.

The Torah is done, even the Ten Commandments. The Torah was given only to Israel. There is no third use of the Law: the moral law, encapsulated in the Ten Commandments as a guide for Christians.

Does this mean that I dismiss the Old Testament? No. But every time I read the Old Testament, including the Torah, including the Ten Commandments, I have to pass it through the lens of Christ and the Spirit in order to appropriate its message for today. There is much we can learn from the Torah concerning the love of God and the love of neighbor, as long as we remember it was for Israel.

Does this mean that it’s all right to murder, commit adultery, steal or bear false witness if we don’t have the Ten Commandments to tell us not to do these things? I’m always amazed when people jump to this conclusion, as some did last week. Not at all! May it never be, as Paul would say. The same principle of sanctification applies under the new covenant as under the old: we are to be holy as God is holy. We are called to “be imitators of God” (Eph 5:1 NIV), to “find out what pleases the Lord” (Eph 5:10).

We are not free to be and do whatever we want, seeking God's approval for our lifestyle. Some want to say, "The Lord has shown me that my behavior is OK." But life in the Spirit tends to be the exact opposite. As the Spirit probes deeper and deeper into our lives we find that parts of us that we thought were all right are in fact riddled with sin. The more the Spirit works on us the worse we find ourselves to be. Life in the Spirit is not a lessening of the standard of living, but an intensification of the standard. Through his Spirit God is at work to root out the rottenness in the farthest recesses of our hearts.

Some of you defended the presence of the Ten Commandments in courtrooms as a symbol that we are a nation under law. It is a great privilege to live in a nation under law. But the laws of this nation are shaped not just by the Ten Commandments but also by other bodies of law: the Code of Hammurabi, Roman Law, the Magna Carta. Those who place the Ten Commandments in courtrooms, sometimes covertly in the middle of the night, are usually trying to show that we as a nation are under God's moral law expressed in those commandments. But those who argue for the moral law are actually very selective. The penalty for breaking most of the Ten Commandments was death. We don't put to death disobedient children or idolaters. In fact the controversy about the moral law mostly swirls around the fourth commandment, the law about the Sabbath. This is why the sailing of that ferry in Scotland last Sunday was such a big deal.

I'm not arguing for a lessening of our standards of behavior but that God is up to something far greater, seeking to transform every corner of our lives and to renew us into his image in the Lord Jesus Christ. Through his Spirit he puts his enabling presence within us.

Let's return to the story of Cain and Abel, and specifically to Cain's murder of Abel. As we saw last week, Cain's murder of Abel is told with the minimum of detail:

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. (Gen 4:8)

Cain attacked Abel out in the field, out of earshot. He thought no one would hear Abel's cries for help. But Cain had forgotten that there is one who always sees and hears: God himself.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." (4:9-10)

The Lord saw Abel's absence and gave Cain the opportunity to explain it. But Cain refused to take any responsibility for his brother. The word "brother" haunts this narrative. It is used exactly seven times in the Cain and Abel story, with a particular concentration in these verses: six times in verses 8-11. The word is always used of Abel being Cain's brother, never of Cain being Abel's brother. "Cain has a brother but *is not* a brother, whereas Abel is a brother but *does not have* a brother."¹

The Lord then said to Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground." Abel, though dead, still had a voice, even if it was only the voice of his spilled blood. What was the voice crying out for and what would the Lord do about it? These two questions are our topic for today.

In our opening hymn we sang "sin and death shall not prevail."² But at this point both sin and death have prevailed. Why did God allow this to happen? Why did he allow Abel to die? Even worse,

why did he allow Abel to be killed by his brother? Worst of all, why did he allow the good guy to be killed by the bad guy? This is the very first death in the Bible. Death is a consequence of the Fall in the previous chapter. But this first death was not by "natural causes" but by murder. Surely God could have easily intervened to prevent this.

Abel has a very light presence in this narrative; he's an almost non-existent character. He never speaks, and we never hear any words spoken to him, since Cain's statement "Let's go out to the field" (8) is not in the Hebrew text but added from the Septuagint. Abel is the subject of only two verbs: he was a shepherd and he brought an offering. He's the object of four more: he was born, the Lord looked on his offering, Cain rose up against him and killed him. That is the sum total of Abel's life. In that short life he was faithful as indicated by his offering and by the Lord's approval of both his offering and Abel himself.

Now we're ready for the meaning of Abel's name. His name is *Hevel*. It's the word used 38 times in Ecclesiastes and translated as "vanity" (KJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV), "meaningless" (NIV, TNIV), "futility" (HCSB). It designates something that is empty or transitory. The meaning of Abel's name was not given at the beginning of the chapter because the story illustrates that meaning. Abel was blown away like a puff of wind. Here one moment, living a life of faith; the next moment gone. His name appears exactly seven times to emphasize the point. Can God allow life to end just like that? What meaning does life have if a good life can be snuffed out, especially if it is snuffed out by the bad guy?

Yet Abel was not completely gone. His blood still spoke. It spoke because it was innocent blood. Guilty blood would not have been able to speak. Abel's shed blood was crying out to God. The verb "crying out" implies utter helplessness and deep distress. It was to the Lord that the blood was crying out. Though Cain's murder of Abel was out in the field, out of earshot, it was not out of God's earshot. The blood cried out and God heard the cry. The blood was crying out for justice and vengeance.

Vengeance is a concept that is open to grave misunderstanding. In English we now distinguish between *revenge* and *avenge*. (It is unfortunate that while "revenge" can be used as both verb and noun, there is no noun corresponding to the verb "avenge.") Both imply putting things right, but there is a big difference in how this is done. Revenge is negative, *avenge* is positive. Revenge is prompted by negative attitudes of anger or shame, though it can easily be disguised as a concern for justice. It usually takes the form of retaliation, and is executed by the recipient of the real or perceived injustice. *Avenge* is prompted by a true concern for justice. It is therefore dispassionate, not driven by emotions. It is therefore best left to a third party, to one entrusted with upholding justice. David understood this when he said to Saul, "May the LORD judge between you and me. And may the LORD *avenge* the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you" (1 Sam 24:12).

Israel's law, the Torah, laid down procedures for the avenging of innocent blood. When innocent blood was shed, the next of kin had the responsibility to act as the Avenger of Blood. The word is *go'el*, the same word used for kinsman-redeemer. The basic premise of the kinsman-redeemer is to come to the aid of the next of kin who is in a helpless condition. The most extreme form of helplessness is being dead. The Blood Avenger had the weighty responsibility to track down the killer and bring him to justice. But if the death was unintentional, the killer could flee to one of the cities of refuge where

he would be safe. These cities were provided “lest innocent blood be shed” (Deut 19:10).

In Abel’s case the next of kin was the murderer and so in no position to avenge. Cain needed to be the target of the vengeance not the executor thereof. Indeed he would be afraid that vengeance would be taken out on him.

Vengeance is retributive justice. Cain was guilty and God would pass judgment upon him to avenge Abel’s blood, as we’ll see next week. Retributive justice is necessary in order to punish, limit and ultimately remove evil from the world. But retributive justice is not full justice. It just produces a lot of dead people. Retributive justice does nothing to establish justice for Abel. It can’t bring him back to life again. What Abel needs is restorative justice.

What happens when one dies? What happened to Abel when he died? When Abel died he entered the afterlife, the realm which the Old Testament calls Sheol, the Grave, the Pit, or Death. Abel continued to exist but no longer as a living creature; he was now disembodied, separated from his body which decayed back to dust. All ancient peoples believed in this afterlife. But God’s people slowly came to realize another truth: that the Lord who sent people into Sheol could also bring them back out of Sheol. He could and would resurrect his people, restoring physical bodies to them. If there was any justice, any order in the cosmos, then God must do this for his people. His justice must be not only retributive but also restorative. He must vindicate his faithful people in resurrection.

By the time of Jesus belief in the resurrection was fully formed. It had been especially shaped in the crucible of martyrdom, the death of God’s faithful people, especially at the hands of the enemies of God and his people. Precious though the death of his saints might be in his eyes, God could not allow his faithful saints to stay dead.

The loudest cry of innocent blood was shouted by the spilled blood of Jesus. His was the most innocent blood that had ever been shed. Like Abel’s it was shed by his brothers. As we affirm in the Apostles’ Creed, Jesus “descended into Hell,” into Sheol or Hades, the realm of all dead, disembodied people. But Jesus had done nothing deserving of death. His innocent blood cried out. For three days the world hung in the balance, the cosmos waited to see what God would do. Would he allow his son to stay in the grave? Would he allow Death to hold on to innocent blood? On the third day God raised his son from the dead. He didn’t simply bring him back into some spiritual state or resuscitate his body. He gave him a new body. This re-embodiment of Jesus brought justice to his shed innocent blood. The hope of the Jews was true: there was life beyond life-after-death, and that life was a bodily life. But this resurrection also surprised the Jewish hope in several ways. What the Jews expected to happen to all God’s people at the end of time, God had now done to one person in the middle of time. The Jews expected resurrection into normal physical bodies, but Jesus was resurrected into a transformed body. The Jews thought that the crucifixion showed that Jesus was not the Messiah, but in the resurrection God showed that he was the Messiah.

Why is the bodily resurrection of Jesus so important? Why is it such a serious issue when churchmen or theologians deny the bodily resurrection? Without the resurrection there is no defeat of death, no vindication of innocent blood, either for Jesus or for us. Jesus is the firstborn of those who rise from the dead. He has paved the way in the middle of time for what God will do to all his people at the end of time: raise them from the dead.

What happens when we die? Yes, we go to be with the Lord. But if that’s all there is then justice has not really been done. If we go to be with the Lord then those who kill us are really doing us a favor, hastening our departure for the Lord’s presence. Furthermore, this negates the value of life on earth. If God saves us simply to take us out of this world to heaven, then life on earth has little meaning. This is the view of platonism, which under the guise of neoplatonism has had such a powerful influence upon the church. Platonism belittles the physical world: death frees the soul from the body in which it is imprisoned. But God created this world and he will restore it by ridding it of evil. He will then restore his people to it in bodies which presumably will be after the pattern of the resurrection body of Jesus Christ, firstborn from the dead.

If we are in Christ then God himself has taken up residence in us through his Spirit. Therefore, for God’s people, any death, be it violent death at the hands of the wicked or peaceful death in sleep, is the shedding of innocent blood. Justice is done for that innocent blood only in bodily resurrection. This passage from death to life is prefigured in baptism.

This passage through death is symbolically presented in Revelation. When the fifth seal was opened, John

saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:9-10)

These were the faithful witnesses, faithful even unto death. Each was given a white robe indicating God’s verdict that they were in the right, and they were told to wait until more of them had been killed. Near the end of the book John has a vision in which he sees the verdict God delivers to his saints:

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. (Rev 20:4-6)

There are some unfortunate translation choices here which obscure the meaning of this paragraph. Those seated on the thrones are the martyrs who had been killed for their faithful witness and refusal to worship the beast. “Judgment was given to them” (NASB): not the authority to judge others (TNIV), but a ruling issued by God the judge. As a result of the ruling they lived, just as Christ lives though he was once dead (Rev 1:18).

I used this text at my father’s funeral service last December. He died a faithful witness. What is God’s verdict on him? That he lives because he follows Jesus Christ, “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead” (Rev 1:5). The risen Christ has the keys of death and Hades (Rev 1:18), so that those who follow him follow him through death into life. Not just a disembodied life with the Lord in heaven, but ultimately a resurrection life just as is true for Jesus.

On my father’s headstone in the cemetery in Edinburgh is the text “Blessed are they who die in the Lord,” abbreviated from “Blessed

are the dead who die in the Lord from now on” (Rev 14:13). Why are they blessed? Because they are freed from their bodies so as to be with the Lord? No, more than that: because they follow Jesus through death into life beyond the grave. They will not stay dead.

Meanwhile, how are we to live in a world where innocent blood is being shed? Paul tells us:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary:

**“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”**

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:17-21)

This last phrase is a very familiar one for me, for it is the motto of my school in England (St Lawrence College, Ramsgate, Kent): *in bono vince*, “conquer with good,” drawn from the Latin translation (Vulgate) of verse 21, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Vg *noli vinci a malo sed vince in bono malum*).

We leave vengeance to the Lord, and seek every opportunity to overcome evil with good. God is doing the same.

Around AD 200, little over 100 years after Revelation was written, Tertullian, a brilliant lawyer from North Africa and an adult convert to Christ, wrote a defense of the faith addressed to the “Rulers of the Roman Empire.” He said of the Church,

We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods... The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.³

From this last statement was developed the famous saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” In the face of violent persecution the Church had grown to fill every corner of the Empire. The fearlessness of these martyrs in the face of death was striking to the Romans. God used it as a powerful testimony to draw many to Christ.

In the Apostles’ Creed we affirm, “I believe in the resurrection of the dead.” The blood of Abel cried out for that resurrection. The blood of Jesus cried even louder for that resurrection. In Jesus God has begun that resurrection.

God’s justice is both retributive and restorative. Retributive justice is necessary to rid the world of evil. But it’s his restorative justice that has the last word. Retributive justice fills hell with disembodied people. Restorative justice fills a renewed earth with re-embodied people resurrected from the dead.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

1. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), citing Ellen van Wolde, “The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study,” *JSOT* 52 (1991): 25-41.

2. Anon., *Praise the Lord! ye heavens, adore him* (1796).

3. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.