



Catalog No. 1579

Genesis 4:11-16

17th Message

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August 2, 2009

FORBEARANCE

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

“Forbearance” is a useful word that is too little known and too little practiced. Last Thursday we saw the president host a beer summit in the White House with a Harvard professor and a police sergeant. Lack of forbearance in both actions and comments had landed all three in hot water. They met to try to defuse the situation.

We live in a multicultural, pluralistic society which exalts tolerance as a supreme value. A tolerant society ought to be a forbearing society, yet our society shows little forbearance. We are quick to take offense, quick to speak out, quick to initiate legal action. Forbearance is a virtue, but are there things we should not forbear? This is a particular challenge for a “tolerant” society. If there is behavior beyond forbearance, who decides what that behavior is?

Forbearance is also a virtue when it applies to our own circumstances. Life is difficult. It may get so difficult for some people that they decide their circumstances are unbearable and they do radical things to escape them: have a midlife crisis, divorce their spouse, run away, commit suicide. Yet other people are able to bear much more difficult circumstances without finding them unbearable.

Cain’s murder of Abel was the tragic outcome of a lack of forbearance: towards God, towards his brother, and towards his circumstances. God’s non-acceptance of his offering aroused Cain’s anger. He rejected God’s reminder that if he did what was right he would be fine. Instead, rejecting any notion that he might have responsibility toward his brother, he decided that his circumstances required killing his brother who was a reminder to him of what it meant to do right. Today we look at the aftermath in Cain’s life of this murder. Would God forbear Cain’s behavior or judge it unbearable? Would Cain find his life any more bearable now that he had rid himself of his brother? We’ll see that there are certain things which God will not forbear, and that Cain found his life to be more unbearable than ever.

The centerline of the story of Cain and Abel is the murder itself (4:8), briefly reported with the minimum of detail. This is bracketed either side by the Lord questioning Cain. Prior to the murder, God warned Cain but Cain was silent. After the murder the Lord again spoke to Cain. This time there was dialog as Cain responded to the Lord. But there was no meeting of the minds. Thursday’s beer summit ended without any apologies; the police sergeant said that he and the Harvard professor “agreed to disagree.” God’s dialogue with Cain will end without any apologies and with the two parties going their separate ways.

We pick up the story after Cain’s murder of Abel with the Lord addressing Cain.

Curse: Unbearable Evil (4:11-12)

The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to

receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.” (Gen 4:10-12 TNIV)

For the third time in Genesis we hear the word “cursed.” Following the woman’s act of taking the forbidden fruit the Lord had cursed the serpent (3:14) and the ground (3:17). Now for the first time a human is cursed. “Curse” is a jarring word to hear because Genesis ought to be a book about blessing.

God had created the world in a state of blessing, blessing the first living creatures, the first humans, and the seventh day. To bless means to endow with fruitful life. I find it helpful to think of blessing as an arrow signifying a forward-moving trajectory in life. By blessing something God endows it with fruitfulness to successfully fulfill the purposes for which he created it. Thus he endowed the living creatures, the humans and the seventh day.

Curse is the opposite of bless, meaning to deprive of fruitful life. If “bless” is a forward-moving arrow, “curse” is a line leading to a dead-end. When God curses something he frustrates it, rendering it futile. God curses what he will not forbear. He cursed the serpent; he would not forbear what the serpent had done. Later Scripture shows that he was also cursing the evil powers that lay behind the serpent. He cursed the ground, frustrating its fertility. The ground would yield its produce but only as the result of much toil and sweat on the part of the human.

God had not cursed the first man and woman, though since they had disobeyed him he could clearly have done so. But he had greater purposes in mind: he would forbear humanity, ensuring that life continued so that the woman would bear a seed who would defeat the serpent and the evil forces behind it.

But now God cursed a human. By cursing Cain he robbed him of a forward-moving trajectory in life, instead imposing a dead-end. This is actually good news. It indicates that God would not tolerate what Cain had done. He tolerated the disobedience of Adam and Eve but not Cain’s murder of his brother. Cain’s behavior was unbearable to God; he would not forbear it.

Since Cain’s sin was connected with the ground, so God connected his curse with the ground. Cain was a worker of the ground and it was of the fruit of the ground that he brought an offering to the Lord. He had poured Abel’s blood out upon the ground, and from the ground that blood was crying out to the Lord. Therefore the curse upon Cain concerned his relationship to the ground. But here lies another of the many ambiguities in this narrative. What was that altered relationship between Cain and the ground? More “literal” translations render it “you are cursed from the ground” (NASB, ESV), but this leaves the statement ambiguous. Is it that he was cursed more than the ground (JPS), or that the ground was the source of his cursing since it was the custodian of Abel’s shed blood, or that he was cursed by being separated from the ground (TNIV,

HCSB, NET)? All are justifiable translations, but the latter best fits the context and is the way most translations render it, usually with the help of some additional words to resolve the ambiguity (e.g., TNIV adds “and driven”).

In passing judgment upon Adam the Lord had cursed the ground. Instead of enjoying the bounty of God’s provision in the garden Adam would have to toil for his sustenance from the ground that would only unwillingly yield its fruit. It was presumably through toil, sweat and pain that Cain wrested produce from the earth. But under curse he would no longer be able to do even that. No longer would the ground give its strength or “yield its crops” to Cain. His occupation would no longer be a worker of the ground, a tiller of the soil. Instead he would be a “restless wanderer” on the earth. The ground (*adamah*) is the area brought under agriculture, whether growing crops or grazing flocks. Now Cain would have to live beyond that realm, beyond the limits of human society. God would not forbear Cain’s behavior nor should human society forbear such behavior. Henceforth Cain would have to live beyond human society.

“Curse” seems a harsh concept to us, but there is a silver lining to it. By cursing Cain the Lord was saying that Cain’s behavior was unbearable, intolerable, something he would not forbear. By cursing Cain the Lord frustrated him, rendering his life futile. He placed a dead-end across his trajectory in life. But he did not immediately execute that dead-end. He allowed Cain to live, though with a serious degradation in the quality of his life. He even gave him a protective sign. He allowed his line to continue down to the seventh generation. And then we read no more of Cain’s line. It died out, presumably in the Flood. It reached the dead-end that was implicit in the curse on Cain. God allowed Cain to continue. He even allowed sin to multiply in Cain’s line, for Lamech made Cain look gentle. But in the long run he would not tolerate Cain’s line; it was unbearable.

Cain was the first human cursed but he would not be the last. After the Flood the Lord cursed Canaan (Gen 9:25) because of the behavior of his father Ham which involved some sort of sexual immorality with his father. Again the Lord would not forbear such behavior, so he placed a dead-end across Canaan’s trajectory in life. But he allowed Canaan to live, indeed allowed Canaan’s line to continue for many generations, even many centuries. He promised to give Abraham their land, the land of the Canaanites or the Amorites, but not yet because “the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen 15:16). In the short term God forbore the sin of the Canaanites but in the long-term it was unbearable.

The Lord executed the dead-end implicit in the curse when he brought his people into the land. He instructed them to completely destroy the Canaanites (Deut 7:1-2). The technical term for this is *herem*, a Hebrew word meaning devotion to complete destruction. This episode of Israel’s history has received a lot of bad press. It is hard for people to understand, and is one of the topics I am most frequently asked about.

Herem was the fulfillment of the curse pronounced on Canaan. This was genocide; there’s no getting around that. It was specifically targeted at removing an entire people. This is not a pleasant topic, but there are three very important things to realize about this judgment.

Firstly, God did not give Israel *carte blanche* to do this to any people they liked. They were to do this to the Canaanites or the Amorites, the inhabitants of the land into which God was bringing his people. And they were to do this also to the Amalekites for their

attack upon God’s people as they journeyed through the wilderness (Exod 17:14; 1 Sam 15:3). This concept of *herem* could not be used by Israel against any other people, and it cannot be used today as justification for seeking to destroy any people.

Secondly, God provided a way of escape. This is illustrated in the back-to-back stories of Rahab and Achan. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho, the city that blocked the entrance of God’s people into the land, and therefore the first city in the land that was to be completely destroyed. Rahab had heard about the Lord: what he had done in Egypt and what Israel had done to the Amorite kings on the east side of the Jordan. She responded in faith and asked for mercy:

“I know that the LORD has given this land to you...the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you.” (Josh 2:9-12)

She asked the two Israelite spies to show her *hesed*, covenant loyalty, as she had shown to them in hiding them. When Jericho was captured the city and its inhabitants were completely destroyed (*herem*), except for Rahab and her family (Josh 6). She responded in faith to the Lord, was saved, was incorporated into Israel, and was even grafted into the lineage of the Messiah, appearing in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5). A Canaanite prostitute, on the eve of the execution of the curse that had been hanging over the Canaanites for centuries, in faith responded to what she had heard about what God had done for his people, and she was saved. But in the very next chapter of Joshua (7) we read of Achan the Israelite. He took some of the things from Jericho that should have been destroyed. When he was discovered he and his family were completely destroyed (*herem*). Rahab and Achan traded places. On what basis? On the basis of Rahab’s faith and Achan’s disobedience. And so Rahab the Canaanite prostitute is included in the Hall of Faith:

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. (Heb 11:31)

The third thing about the Canaanite genocide is that it is a forerunner of final judgment, of what God will do at the end of time. All evil, wickedness and sin is unbearable to God. In the short term he does forbear it, allowing humanity to go its way. But the day is coming when God will execute a dead-end. Why does the Lord forbear what is ultimately unbearable? Why does he delay? So that people might be saved, just as Rahab the prostitute. In the context of the delay in final judgment, Peter writes,

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Pet 3:9)

The Lord cursed Cain and Canaan, but the most frequent target of the word is actually his own people Israel, the people whom he chose to restore blessing to the world. If Israel kept Torah, the Law that God gave to show how to be holy as he was holy, then it would enjoy God’s blessing. But if not, it would fall under God’s curse. When the people entered the land the Levites were to pronounce a twelve-fold curse upon Israel, to each of which Israel was to respond “Amen!” (Deut 27:15-26). The twelfth was the most comprehensive of all:

“Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.” (Deut 27:26)

The warning was driven home in the next chapter:

“However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you:

“You will be cursed...cursed...cursed...” (Deut 28:15-19)

“Cursed, cursed, cursed...” six more times on top of the dozen in the previous chapter. Disobedience to God is a serious matter. At the end of the curse lay death:

“The LORD will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him.” (Deut 28:20)

The Lord would not tolerate the breaking of Torah, of his commandments. It is unbearable behavior. Though Israel signaled its willingness to keep Torah, it was of course unable to do so. And so God did begin to bring these curses upon Israel. But he delayed in bringing complete destruction; he showed forbearance to Israel until...

...until Christ. After quoting the last and most severe of the dozen curses from Deuteronomy 27, Paul wrote, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal 3:13). Jesus took upon himself the curse for breaking Torah, though he was the only one not liable for that curse. Thereby he redeemed God’s people from the curse. He bore the curse for unbearable sin, for sin that God would not forbear.

He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. (Gal 3:14)

At the end of time God will bring evil, sin and wickedness to an end. The cursing of Cain and of Canaan were forerunners of that. In the meantime he is delaying the dead-end while he offers salvation. How is one saved? The same way as Rahab: by responding in faith to who God is and what he has done.

Unbearable Sin (4:13-14)

Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.” (4:13-14)

Cain responded a second time to God, but his speech was self-focused. There was no real dialogue.

Cain’s first statement is yet another ambiguous one. It could be translated “My sin or my guilt or my punishment is too great to bear or is too great to be forgiven.” However one translates it, Cain clearly thought his situation unbearable, whether he meant too great for him to bear or too great for anyone else to bear in the sense of forgiveness.

His next statement made explicit what was implicit in the Lord’s curse: “Today you are driving me from the land.” But then Cain went a step further, with yet another ambiguous statement: either “I will be hidden from your presence” or “I must hide myself from your presence.” But here Cain went beyond the Lord: the Lord had said nothing about Cain having to leave his presence—the ground yes, but not his presence. Because of verse 16 I read this as Cain deciding that he must hide himself. So unbearable was the weight of his sin or guilt or punishment upon him that he felt God’s presence to be also unbearable. What a tragedy, for his only hope lay in the presence of the Lord.

What a ridiculous thought, for where can one go to escape the Lord’s presence? The psalmist found this a source of great comfort (Ps 139:7-12, read as our call to worship). Cain found it oppressive. Jonah tried to run away from the Lord’s presence; what a futile exercise that was! We sang, “I want to be where you are, O Lord” (based on Psalm 84). That’s the last place where Cain wanted to be.

How many think the same thing today! Some find God unbearable because they are not good enough. They remain aloof until they can clean up their act enough to be acceptable. How futile! No one will ever be able to clean up his act enough to be able to stand in his own merit in God’s presence. But nor does God ask one to do so. It is necessary to be woken up to a sense of one’s own sin; this is an important part of the work of the Spirit. But then one must be awoken to see the Savior who bids sinners come and find salvation. There is no sin too great for him to bear.

Others find God unbearable because they want to live their own lives. The subsequent narrative shows that this was Cain’s attitude. There is no indication of remorse or repentance, no throwing himself on the mercy of God. Instead, he was sorry only for the consequence: his life had been made more unbearable.

After acknowledging God’s sentence that he “be a restless wanderer on the earth,” Cain expressed his deep fear: “whoever finds me will kill me.” Throughout this encounter Cain showed no fear of God; it was other people he was afraid of. And well he might be afraid: anyone subsequently finding him would be a blood relative of Abel and would thus want to avenge the shedding of Abel’s innocent blood. Furthermore, Cain had opened the door for sin, opened the door for a way of life characterized by violence. Sin, ever ravenous, could easily turn around and devour him.

Cain’s fear was real, and it was justified because his fear was misplaced. If it was the Lord he feared then he need have no fear of anyone who found him. “Fear him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear.”

God’s Protection: Making Life Bearable (4:15)

But the LORD said to him, “Not so; anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. (4:15)

The Lord showed forbearance with Cain. He graciously countered Cain’s fear, promising that should Cain be killed he would be properly avenged. He also gave him a sign to prevent such a killing even happening. This has been popularly understood as a mark upon Cain, but the text simply says that the Lord placed a sign for Cain. There has been much speculation about what this might have been, both among Biblical commentators and in popular culture. The nature of the sign is unimportant; its meaning is clear: it signified that Cain was a murderer but also under God’s protective care.

God’s Unbearable Presence (4:16)

So Cain went out from the LORD’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden. (4:16)

The Cain and Abel story began with Cain and Abel bringing an offering to the Lord. Though the Lord had expelled Adam and Eve from his garden sanctuary, he had not expelled them fully from his presence. There was not the same degree of access as in the garden, but the Lord could still be approached. The story now ends with Cain leaving the Lord’s presence. In chapter 3 it was clearly the Lord

who expelled Adam and Eve from the garden: he is the subject of both verbs of expulsion (3:23-24). But here Cain not the Lord is the subject of the verb. It was Cain who went out from the Lord's presence, not the Lord who drove him out of his presence. Cain voluntarily exiled himself from the Lord. The Lord's presence was unbearable because he felt his sin or guilt or punishment to be unbearable. Henceforth Cain and his line would live life away from God.

He settled in the land of Nod, the land of Wandering. Now there's an oxymoron! There beyond human society he would establish an alternative society, a godless society away from God's presence. There his line would build cities, develop music and metal-working, and sink deeper into violent sin. And God would allow them to do so, showing forbearance. Of course they were never really out of his sight; he saw their wickedness, and so once he deemed their sin complete he cut them off, bringing the curse to fulfillment. And what of their cities, metallurgy and music? Did they have any value? That important topic will have to await our return to Genesis 4 in a few months time.

Conclusion

We have reached the end of the Cain and Abel story, this little story of only sixteen verses that has fascinated so many over the centuries and has occupied us for four weeks, this little story with all its ambiguous phrases which have fueled discussions among both commentators and novelists' characters.

This story forms part of Israel's story of origins, part of its pre-history. Here Israel was introduced to several important themes that were to inform its own behavior.

1. The theme of how to approach the Lord in worship. One brings one's best to the Lord, approaching him in faith with a whole heart.
2. The theme of doing what is right. There are two ways of living life: the way of Abel, doing what is right, and the way of Cain, doing what is not right. If one does what is right one will be fine. Otherwise, sin is a dangerous beast or demon lurking at the door. In the Torah God had shown Israel how to do what is right. When Israel departed from what was right, God sent prophets to urge Israel to do what is right (e.g., Jer 7:3), just as he warned Cain.

3. The theme of being a brother's keeper. Contrary to Cain's denial, Israel was to understand that each one was his brother's keeper. They were in covenant both with God and with one another. They were to care for one another, especially for the weak such as the widows, the orphans, the poor, the strangers. They were not to shed innocent blood.
4. The theme of innocent blood crying out for justice. God would see and hear every such crime, and he would ultimately provide justice. Nothing is hidden from God's gaze or ear. He sees every time one of his faithful saints, doing what is right, is killed.
5. The theme of exile from God's presence. God warned that if Israel refused to do what is right he would cast them away from his presence (e.g., Jer 7:15). One of the reasons given for the exile is the amount of innocent blood shed by Manasseh, king of Judah.

This is also our story of origins, for Cain and Abel still speak today. It tells us things which secular stories of origin don't tell us—evolutionary biology, astrophysics, geology. Yet for us there is a very important difference in how we read this versus how Israel read it. We look back on this story through the lens of Christ and the Spirit. In Christ God provided one who bore the curse for Israel and who bears away our sin. There is no sin so unbearable that Christ cannot bear it away. In the Spirit God puts his presence within us to change us so we can do what is right. With Christ as our advocate and the Spirit crying out within us, we find God's presence to be not unbearable but our greatest delight and comfort. And so we can sing, "I want to be where you are, O Lord."

And for those who do find their sin or their life unbearable, God is showing forbearance so that you might find forgiveness in Christ before he declares that the sin of the world is complete. If a Canaanite prostitute found salvation, so can you.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other (forbearing one another κτν) and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Col 3:12-14)

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