

WHEN GOD ISN'T FAIR

Scriptures: Genesis 4:1-16, Genesis 50:15-21

I once read a story about an elementary school teacher on playground duty with a group of second graders. One by one they came to her to complain: “Teacher, it isn’t fair. I was standing here first and he got the ball before I did, and I had been waiting longer than he has, and it’s just not fair.” Then another said, “Teacher, I was line, and he pushed me out of line, and he has had two turns and I haven’t had any, and it’s just not fair.” Then a third said, “Teacher, she won’t let me play four-square, and when she does she says I hit it out when I didn’t, and she doesn’t play by the rules, and it just isn’t fair.” After the fourteenth complaint like that, the teacher turned to the playground and yelled, “Well, that’s life.”

Maybe so, but you would hope for something better from God. Genesis 4 says, “In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.” Does that seem fair?

I know there have been many attempts to explain this. One of the most common comes from *The Children’s Bible in 365 Stories* that we used several years ago in our church. Here is how it explains the story of Cain and Abel:

(God) knew that Abel loved and trusted him, so he accepted Abel and his gift. But God refused Cain’s present. He could not accept Cain because he was cold and proud and self-willed (p. 15).

That is a very interesting interpretation, but it does not say that here in Genesis. It says that Abel was a keeper of sheep and that Cain was a farmer, but prior to bringing their offering it says nothing about either one being nicer or closer to God than the other.

Others have suggested that Cain brought the wrong kind of sacrifice: that God wanted the sacrifice of a lamb instead of some produce, because the sacrifice of a lamb would be more like the later sacrifice of Jesus. But would anyone expect Cain to know that?

I’ve also read that Abel’s sacrifice was better, because he brought the best portions—the “fat portions”—of his lambs to God. The assumption is that Cain’s offering was second rate. But again, there is no indication of that in the Bible. There are no fat portions on a bushel of wheat. We have no reason to think that Cain brought a substandard sacrifice, especially when later on in Leviticus God commands the people of Israel to bring grain offerings just like Cain’s.

In Genesis there is no reason given for why God preferred Abel’s sacrifice to Cain’s. Whatever reasons you might suggest are pure speculation.

This fits a pattern we will see in the rest of the book of Genesis. Let me take you on a little preview of coming attractions in the book of Genesis. Look at Genesis 17, beginning at verse 20 (OT, p. 13). Abraham has a child named Ishmael who was born to him by one of his

maids named Hagar. That in itself is a story we will have to save for later in adult Sunday School, when children are not around. But look at verses 20-21. God says to Abraham,

As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.

Why did God choose Isaac instead of Ishmael to inherit the covenant? We are not told. It certainly wasn't because Isaac was a better person. Isaac was not even born yet! God chooses one of these brothers over the other for no apparent reason, and it causes bitter rivalry between their respective mothers. Do you see the pattern?

Now turn to Genesis 25, and look at verse 23 (OT, p. 21). Abraham's son Isaac and his wife Rebekah are expecting twins. Verse 23 says,

And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two people born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

The older twin is named Esau, and the younger is named Jacob. God says that Jacob will be greater than his brother Esau. Jacob will be the heir to God's promises made to Abraham. Why is Jacob chosen instead of Esau? We are not told. It is not because of their character. They are not even born yet. But this choice sets up a bitter rivalry between the brothers to the extent that at one point Esau tries to kill his brother Jacob. Do you see the pattern?

One more. Turn to Genesis 37, beginning at verse 5. Now we are talking about Jacob's children. Genesis could be a soap opera called "All My Children." Joseph is one of Jacob's twelve sons. Look at verses 5-8:

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

In the Old Testament a dream like this would mean that Joseph had been chosen above his brothers for a special role in God's plan. Again, let me pose the question: why Joseph? We are not told. It certainly isn't because of his humility. God chose Joseph, just because God chose Joseph, and his brothers are angry about it, to the point they almost kill him but decide instead to sell him as a slave to the Egyptians so at least they can make a little money.

Why does God have regard for Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's? We don't know. But here is the key. God also intends to bless Cain. Now turn back to our scripture reading from Genesis 4, and look at verses 6-7: "The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has

your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?” God plans blessing also for Cain, if Cain will only let go of jealousy and resentment and allow God to work. Remember what God said to Abraham about Ishmael? “I will bless him and make him fruitful.” Even when God chose Isaac, God intended blessing for Ishmael as well. Even when God chose Abel, God intended blessing for Cain as well.

The best example is the story of Joseph and his brothers. God chose Joseph over his brothers, and his brothers hated him for it. So they sold him as a slave to the Egyptians. But if you remember the story, Joseph rose to second in command among the Egyptians because he was the only ruler smart enough to save food in case of a famine. So when the famine hit, everyone had to go to him for food, including his brothers. And they all bowed down to Joseph, just like in the dream. But here is what Joseph said about that—Genesis 50:20: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve numerous people, as he is doing today.”

Every time God chooses one person in the Bible for favor, God does so in order to bring blessing to others. That is the key to the story of Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. Every time God chooses one person in the Bible for favor, God does so in order to bring blessing to others. Which means that those who seem unfairly treated by God are still intended for blessing, if they will only let go of their anger and resentment and allow God to work.

Basically there are two possibilities: either you feel favored by God like Abel, or like Cain you feel betrayed, left-out when God is passing around the favors. The key is how you react. Because in both cases sin lies crouching at your door. If you feel favored and blessed by God and react by being proud and disdainful, you will be brought down. It happened over and over to chosen people in the Bible. On the other hand, if you feel betrayed or abandoned by God, and you react with bitterness and resentment as Cain did, you will end up missing the blessing that God still has for you.

If like Abel, you feel favored by God, the only proper reaction is gratitude and sharing. For the only way you will experience being blessed by God is to share it. And if like Cain you feel abandoned by God, the only proper response is to wait—not to give into bitterness or resentment but to wait—because God is not finished yet with you or any of us.

- Ken Onstot
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