

“The Patience & Mercy in God’s Judgment”

Genesis 4:8-16

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Epiphany Season

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Our sermon text today is Genesis 4:8-16. Listen now once more to God’s holy and inerrant word.

8 Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. 9 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?” 10 And the Lord said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground. 11 And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. 12 When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”

13 Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is greater than I can bear. 14 Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.” 15 Then the Lord said to him, “Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. 16 Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Prayer...

The horror our text this morning can hardly be overstated.

Earlier in chapter 4, the Lord draws near to Cain and warns him about the sin that is crouching in his heart, desiring to overpower him.

But Cain refuses to repent, refuses to change course, and he speaks to his brother Abel, enticing him out into the field. And there, as the text tells us, "Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him."

Several things are important to understand to fully grasp the horror of this murder and Cain's transgression against God.

First, we know from the end of Genesis 4 that the Lord soon gave Seth to Adam and Eve as a replacement for Abel after his death at the hands of Cain.

And at the beginning of Genesis 5, we are told that Adam was 130 years old when Seth was born.

Taking these facts together, it seems very likely that at the time of Abel's murder, he and Cain were mature men, probably at least 100 years old, already with wives and families of their own.

This story of Cain's murder of his brother is not two teenage boys fighting in a moment of anger with an unfortunate result.

No, it is the story of a mature and full grown man striking down his brother in a bid for power and primacy.

This wasn't just about Cain having a grudge against Abel, this was about Cain seeking to dominate the human race at the very beginning of its life, and being willing to kill his brother to bring about that outcome.

It's also important to remember that Cain did not kill his brother in a pique of anger. No, this murder was cold blooded and well thought out.

Cain had received the warning of the Lord and consciously rejected God's authority and rebuke. Cain falsely led his brother out into the field, to a vulnerable place. And Cain he turned against Abel and put him to death.

The final horror of this story is just the violence of it.

There were no swords or spears at this time in human history, no bows and arrows, no advanced human tools for warfare. In fact, as far as we know, no one had ever actually physically died before this moment.

And yet we know from the Lord's own mouth that Abel died through bloodshed.

If Cain killed his brother in this way, there was only way to do it—by beating him to death—perhaps with a rock or tree branch—until Abel's blood flowed into the earth.

I know it may be hard to think about these things, but we can't turn our face away from the truth of this story if we are going to understand its meaning, and particularly, the significance of the Lord's response to Cain's sin.

Right here at the headwaters of human history, right at the beginning of the Scriptural narrative, is recorded for us one of the most heinous of human sins that will ever be committed.

So, given that reality, how will God respond? Who, really, is this God who made heaven and earth?

Our passage this morning reveals clearly, and unmistakably, that the God of the Scriptures is the God who shows mercy and patience in his judgment.

Remember, when God revealed himself to Moses at Mount Sinai in Exodus 34, he did so with these words: *"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty."*

God justice and holiness means that he will by no means clear the guilty.

Yes.

And yet, in the midst of God's promise to judge, there is also this promise: — God will be slow to anger, will show patience in his judgment, and will always be ready to forgive.

Our passage this morning demonstrates that God's own self-description is rooted in his historical actions with humanity. There is absolute integrity between who he claims to be and who he is.

For in this passage, God is unmistakably slow to anger.

Consider, for a moment, how the Lord might have responded to Cain after his sin.

He might have, for example, simply executed him.

Clearly, Cain deserved that. If the Lord had put Cain to death, who could have complained?

Cain had killed his brother in cold blood. And he had done so in a deeply heinous way. His action was not just murder, it was also high-handed and deliberate rebellion against God.

But God does not kill Cain.

Even after Cain lies and seeks to deceive God, scoffing at him and saying: "*I don't know where Abel is. Am I my brother's keeper?*" - still God does not put him to death.

Instead, God says that Cain will be cursed from the ground, that the ground will not easily produce fruit from his labors, and he declares that Cain will be a wanderer and fugitive on the earth.

Fascinatingly, Cain, rather than just simply realizing that he's getting an incredible amount of mercy from God by walking away with his life after murdering his brother, at this point complains to God.

In a remarkable example of apparently unintentional irony, Cain says to the Lord, *"My punishment is greater than I can bear! Whoever finds me will kill me!"*

Now if it had been me handing out judgment that day, I'm pretty sure that I would have had something smart to say to Cain in response to his complaint, something like, *"Wait a second, Cain, you're afraid someone will **KILL** you? You mean like you just **KILLED** your brother?!"*

But that's not how the Lord responds. Not at all. Rather, the Lord, who is slow to anger, doesn't even point out Cain's hypocrisy.

He simply agrees that Cain will be in danger, and promises that he will protect Cain's life, marking Cain and swearing that if anyone puts Cain to death, he will be subject to the sevenfold vengeance of God.

Beloved, right here, at the beginning of the Scriptures, we learn something essential about the character of the one and only living and true God.

Yes, he will judge. Yes, he will by no means clear the guilty.

But his judgment will almost always be delayed. He will not judge or punish immediately. He will be patient in his judgment. And even in response to our unrepentant sin, he will show mercy.

Why does God do this? Why does he behave in this way?

The apostle Paul, living thousands of years later, reflects on the slowness of God's judgment and writes these words in Romans 2:

"Do you presume on the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"

The slowness of God's judgment, his patience and forbearance in his judgment is a kindness, and it is a kindness showed to humanity that is meant to lead us to repentance.

And certainly, that was God's intention for Cain. He did not judge Cain immediately for the sin of murdering Abel, even though Abel's blood cried out from the ground for justice.

Instead, God protected Cain's life and sent him out to wander from place to place.

The Scriptures don't tell us how long Cain lived, but given the typical lifespans of that age, and God's protection on Cain, it seems likely that Cain lived for hundreds and hundreds of years after he murdered his brother — and in all those years, God's kindness, God holding back his judgment on Cain was meant to lead Cain to repentance.

Did Cain repent? Ultimately, we don't know for sure, although the rest of Genesis 4 doesn't give us much hope that he did.

But the important point here is to notice, right here at the beginning of the Scriptures, one of the most significant aspects of God's character is this — God does judge — he will be no means clear the guilty — but his judgment is almost always delayed, and this delay in his judgment, this patience in his judgment, is a demonstration of his mercy and kindness — kindness that is meant to lead us to repentance.

We see this pattern of God's delayed judgment all throughout the Scripture.

When God judges the world for its wickedness in Genesis 6 and 7, he doesn't do so immediately. He is patient. First he finds Noah. And then he tells him to build an Ark with his own hands - as a visible testimony that the flood was on its way.

We don't know exactly how long Noah took to build the Ark, but given the size of the project, it must have taken a number of years. And all of those years, those around him received a highly visible warning that God's judgment was coming.

In the Exodus from Egypt, God judges Pharaoh - yes. But only after a series of ten dramatic plagues, each of which were intended to convince Pharaoh to repent of his sins and release Israel from her slavery.

God judges the Canaanites, yes. But only after four hundred years - from the time of Abraham to the time of Joshua — during which time allows the Canaanite's wickedness to continue without interruption before the people of Israel come finally to the walls of Jericho to enact God's judgment against them.

But of course, God's patience in judgment is demonstrated nowhere so clearly as it is with his people Israel.

Israel rebels against the Lord in the wilderness, refusing to go into the promised land that he prepared for them—but the Lord does not strike them down dead. Instead he gives that generation that turned against him forty years to embrace repentance before they died.

And once they are finally in the land, Israel almost immediately turns against the Lord, giving herself over to idolatry.

Remember, back in Deuteronomy, the Lord warned Israel specifically against this sin, and explicitly forbid it in the first and second commandments he gave them.

But the story of Israel's life in the land is the story of almost constant idolatry.

There are some exceptions of course — there were some faithful periods, but again and again and again, the people of Israel give themselves over to idolatry, the most heinous sin possible they could commit against the God who had chosen them and delivered them from slavery and given them all of his love.

But the Lord delays his judgment. He sends prophets to his people. He sends Elijah and Isaiah and Hosea and Jeremiah and so many others — and each of these prophets warn Israel and Judah to turn from her sin.

And it is only after hundreds and hundreds of years go by that finally, in the end, the Lord judges his people and destroys their city and their temple and sends them into exile.

Beloved, this is who God is. Yes, he judges. But always slowly, always with patience and mercy — and this kindness is meant to lead to our repentance.

Even, as we look around the world today, we can see God's patience on display with the nations of the world, including our own.

Some of us might be frustrated by God's delay in judging the wickedness of the world.

And, to a certain extent, that frustration is understandable.

I wonder, as I read this story in Genesis 4, how Adam and Eve felt about God's decision to let Cain walk away, apparently Scott-free, from the murder of their son.

Surely they would have struggled to understand why God did not enact justice for the murder of Abel. Surely they would have struggled to understand why God protected Cain's life instead of taking it.

And we ourselves can wrestle with this aspect of God's character in the same way — both on a large scale - as we look around the world and see the evil of the nations, as well as on a very personal scale — as we consider the actions of those who have sinned against us — and seem to have so far gotten away without God's judgment.

But if we're frustrated by this aspect of God's character, well, we're in good company.

Indeed, the Scriptures are full of the cries of the righteous, asking God to come quickly in judgment.

Think of the Psalms, as the psalmists again and again and again ask God to judge the wicked. You can't read or pray the psalms without seeing this cry for judgment all over the place.

Or think of the souls of the martyrs in Revelation 6, who cry out to the Lord Jesus, saying, *"How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"*

Or think of the Apostles in Acts 1, shortly after Jesus' resurrection, ask him with eager expectation: "Lord, now - will you at this time restore the kingdom?"

Indeed, this aspect of submitting to God's sovereignty — longing for the fullness of God's judgment against evil and waiting for it to come — without any control over when it *will* come, is one of the most profound tensions of the Christian life.

And as we wait in that place of longing, as we still look around and see the Cains of the world seeming to escape Scott-free in the midst of all their evil deeds — God certainly doesn't answer all the questions we might have.

But he does, in his Scriptures, tell us at least two things that help us wait, help us trust him.

First, as we have meditated on at length today — God's patience in judgment is rooted in his love and mercy — and his kindness is meant to lead to repentance in those for whom he delays his judgment.

And we should be thankful for this aspect of God's character!

For we need God's patience and forbearance his in judgment too.

Indeed, I would dare to suggest, that the only reason that any of us have been given the window of opportunity ourselves to repent and come to the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins is because of this same pattern of God's patience toward us.

And that reality — that we ourselves are saved by God's patience in judgment, as we look around at the evil done to us, or the evil in the world generally, is very much worth remembering.

Indeed, if we are wise, we will learn to say, as the Apostle Paul did near the end of his life: *"The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."*

Beloved, I am confident that the reason the Lord Jesus has not yet judged the nations is because he waits for their repentance, just as he has waited for yours and mine.

And I suspect that the one who, with all authority in heaven and on earth, commanded his apostles to go and make disciples of all the nations means for that Great Commission to be fulfilled.

But the second thing that we must remember as we wait for God's judgment is simply this.

Though God's judgment may be delayed, still, beloved, it will come.

And the prophet tells us: If God's judgment seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come.

For it is in this way that the righteous have always lived by Faith.

For we are not those who look around at the wickedness and evil of the world and say — "The Lord God does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive."

No, we are those who say, full of faith and hope and confidence, with the psalmist:

The needy will not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor will not perish forever.

For one day, our Lord will come to judge both the living and the dead.

Thanks be to God!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.