

# Where is God in all this?

## 7 June - Cain and Abel

**Locked out of Eden:** Coping with lockdown and social distancing

*Notes and discussion questions for home groups or personal study – Brian Bull*

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### Readings

Genesis 4:1-16

Philippians 2:1-11

John 13:30-35

### Key verses

"If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

"In humility consider others better than yourselves"

"Love one another as I have loved you"

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### Background

As we begin to explore where God is within our strange and perhaps disturbing situation, one thing that is true for all of us is that everything has changed. Family relationships, working situations, opportunities for relaxation and exercise, shopping, church fellowship and worship, all have to be done differently. For many of us it means coping with illness or death of loved ones, and facing up to our own mortality.

Lockdown means both isolation *from*, and isolation *with*. Isolation *from* our extended families, friends, work colleagues, church community (at least face to face). Isolation *with* our immediate family – partner, children, siblings, perhaps grandparents. For some, living with our own company and finding ways to keep ourselves occupied and amused.

- What things do you miss most, from your previous normal daily routine or relaxation?
  - What pressures do you have to cope with, that you didn't have before lockdown?
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## Locked out of Eden

Read **Genesis 4:1-16**

For Adam and Eve, being locked out of Eden brought much the same problems. Isolated *from* the Garden that provided their sustenance, their purpose in life, their work responsibilities caring for God's creation, and most of all their fellowship with God. Isolated *with* their own immediate family, and coping together with the difficulties and tensions that lock-out raised.

- How would you describe the relationship that existed between Adam and Eve?... between them and God?
- How did family relationships change as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience? (see especially Genesis 3:11-13, 16)
- How do you think the deterioration of relationships between Adam and Eve would affect subsequent generations?

(NB: Many Christians see Genesis 3:16 as justification for male leadership in church and family. My view is that this situation results from the relationship breakdown caused by Adam and Eve's disobedience and does *not* represent God's proper plan or purpose for family dynamics.)

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### Relationships under stress

Our broken human nature is always threatening to undermine our family relationships. As God says to Cain: "*If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.*"

In many families, lockdown can exacerbate existing tensions and lead to very difficult and sometimes violent results. Incidents of domestic abuse since lockdown are distressing,

In Genesis 4 the tension and rivalry is between siblings rather than marriage partners, but both can end equally badly. I have a friend in Germany who is very distressed right now because her two sons are at opposite ends of the political spectrum and are consistently at loggerheads, with her caught in the middle. Thankfully they are not living in the same house, but it's bad enough anyway!

- What kind of issues tend to cause the biggest tensions within your own family situation?
- What strategies have you found useful for resolving such tension?

## Sibling rivalry

Undoubtedly there must have been a history of sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel, and it's a recurring theme in Biblical stories (e.g. between Joseph and his brothers, between Jacob and Esau) as well as in our own society.

- What was the underlying cause for Cain's jealousy?
- Why do you think Cain reacted the way he did?
- God warns Cain about his attitude and his thoughts, but Cain ignores the warning. Why do you think he thought he would get away with it?

(NB: The reason that God accepted Abel's offering and not Cain's is unclear, but many commentators point out that Abel's was not just an animal sacrifice, but consisted of the fat parts (the best parts) of the firstborn of his flock. Cain brought "some of the fruit" of his harvest, not necessarily either the first fruits, or the best fruits, which suggests his sacrifice was half-hearted and less sincere.)

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## Keeping the lion from the door

Read **Philippians 2:1-11**

The New Jerusalem Bible translates God's warning to Cain: "*Sin is crouching at the door hungry to get you*". Hungry like a wild animal, just waiting for us to let down our guard. Jesus tells us that we need to master our thoughts and desires before they turn into actions. It's our heart attitude that matters.

- What attitudes does Philippians 2:3 tell us to avoid?
- How are we supposed to keep them from surfacing?
- What difference do you think it would have made if Cain had followed this advice?
- Whose example does Paul tell us to follow?

Think about what it means to put these principles into practice in your own family relationships.

- Are there any changes that you could make within your own family that would help you to cope with lockdown tensions?
  - Do you have any encouragement or advice that might help others who are finding it difficult to cope?
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## Witnessing within our locked down community

We should be serving as a witness to the world around us by showing the same kind of love to one another that Jesus showed in leaving his heavenly throne, taking the form of a servant and dying on the cross for our sins.

- What opportunities do we have to mirror that humility shown by Jesus Christ?
- How can we encourage people within our community who are finding lockdown stressful?

You might want to think about specific individuals or sections of the community who might be disproportionately affected and commit to praying for them and giving practical support if you can.

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## Cain's punishment

As a footnote, we might compare Cain's punishment with that of Adam and Eve.

Adam and Eve and their descendants retained a "virtual" communication link with God. Although locked out of the Garden, they were forgiven (symbolised by their being clothed in garments from an animal that was slain) and accepted by God through sacrifice and worship, which were continued by Adam's descendants. The final verse of Genesis 4 tells us, "*Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh. At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD.*"

However Cain's punishment amounted to total isolation, which Cain himself bemoaned: "*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*" (Genesis 4:14).

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## Final thought

The worst possible kind of isolation is isolation from God. Without that, there is no hope, no future, no joy in this life, or in the next.

Let's conclude by thanking God that he *has* made a way for us to know him and to receive his love and care. We may be temporarily isolated in our own homes, but we are not totally isolated from one another, or from God. He is still with us.

Let's pray for our own families, and for all who are finding lockdown particularly difficult, especially those facing emotional or physical abuse.