



A Post Tenebras Lux Sunday Sermon...

Damnably Proud...

Genesis 4:1-16

Pride is a damnably, debilitating, deadly sin that permeates the very core of our being. Scripture commands us to take and we must make every effort to root it out and tear it from our own wicked hearts.

But pride is hard to kill.

It is like the mythical monster that we track to the cavernous dungeon of some remote castle. With superhuman resolve we drag it out into the warmth of the morning sun, expose its hideous nature and drive a stake through its heart only to find that our own sense of self-adulation causes it to spring back to life when darkness comes.

Pride is a problem for all sinful humanity and it is no less a problem for us as the people of God. Each Lord's Day, we carry into our holy assemblies the hidden baggage of our own unrelenting pride. We do it as individuals and it affects us as a congregation. We come to worship our God and we wind up meditating on ourselves. Or even worse, we turn our jaundiced eye upon some other poor sinner at worship. We may admire his exposition of the word, or his rendition of a hymn or his finely crafted prayer. Yet, there is something pernicious inside that

causes us to envy him to the point that we wish we had been the one to exposit that text or sing that hymn or offer that prayer. There is a tendency to interpret the worship of others through the grid of our own unmitigated pride and sometimes that causes us to secretly loath even the brother who has done well.

That's why Genesis 4:1-16 has such a strong message for us today. It addresses the devastating effect of pride not just in general but specifically in relationship to our worship before God.

We, of course, know the story well. Adam and Eve had already tasted the bitter fruit of their own sinful pride. They had longed to be like God; they had envied His wisdom and His insight and they had been willing even to disobey His clear command in order to possess unlawfully that which He had forbidden. And they had suffered for their mistake. Adam had been cursed to toil in the dirt for his sin and Eve had been relegated to a role of submission toward her husband. In addition, she had been cursed to bear children in pain and in sorrow. That is why verse one shouts to get our attention.

^{NIV} **Genesis 4:1**...Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man."

Now what is remarkable about this passage is that it relates not her pain in childbirth but instead relates what she said after bearing the child. I understand her to say, "**I have created a man like the LORD.**" I have translated the passage that way because the underlying Hebrew is so ambiguous. Literally, it says, "**I have created a man, the Lord.**"

And that ambiguity has led translators and commentators alike to speculate that she may have meant something as extraordinary as **“I have created a man who is the Lord”** to something as innocuous as **“I have acquired a man with the help of the Lord.”** But I see something insidious in her remark. I see the continued remnant of the pride that had gotten her into so much trouble in the first place. I see her supposing that in the act of childbirth she had attained to something of the likeness of God. She had wanted to be like Him and now at least, at very least, she had approached Him in the likeness of His creative power. He had created Adam and now she like Him had created Cain.

Verse 2 tells us that after a period of time Eve conceived again and gave birth to Cain’s brother, Abel. I want you to notice how verse two relates Abel’s birth without comment and moves quickly into a description of the vocation of the two boys.

^{NIV} **Genesis 4:2**...Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.

You will notice, I hope, that nothing is mentioned of the childhood of either boy. The passage of a period of time is just assumed in the text. As they grew, they pursued their callings. Cain is not denigrated for being farmer any more than Abel is exalted for being a shepherd. The text simply tells us what happened and it does so in order to make sense of what follows.

^{NIV} **Genesis 4:3**... In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. ⁴ But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.

After a period of time, perhaps at the end of a particular harvest season, Cain and Abel brought their respective offerings to the Lord. We are not told that the offerings were commanded nor are we told that they decided to so on their own. We are not even told how they made their offerings. We are just told what happened. Cain brought an offering from the ground and Abel brought an offering of his flocks. But even here, early on, there is a hint of a difference between the offerings of the two boys.

The text says...Cain brought some fruit of the ground as an offering to the Lord...

And then it says...and Abel also came, he with the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions.

The point is not that Cain brought rotten produce or even that his produce was in and of itself an inappropriate offering. The point is that it was just some fruit of the ground. While Abel's offering was costly to Abel. It was lavish. Abel's offering was not just of the firstborn of his flock; it was the best part of the firstborn of his flock. His offering was superior to the extent that it was the best he had. Cain's offering may have been substantial but it was not lavish and the implication is that he retained for himself the best that he had. To that extent, Cain was already consumed by his pride in that he regarded himself a more worthy recipient of the fruit of his labor than the God who had blessed the work of his hands.

So in a sense, it was not just the offering but the motivation behind the offering that made God's evaluation of the offerings turn out the way it did. The text tells us:

^{NIV} **Genesis 4:4b-5** ...The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

When God assessed the two offerings, one brought him pleasure and one did not. But it was not just the offerings themselves that pleased or displeased Him; it was the intent behind the offerings themselves. God peered intently into what Abel had brought and into the intention of Abel's heart and He nodded His approval. On the other hand, when He assessed Cain's offering God found it wanting. He snubbed Cain's offering and Cain with it just as Cain had snubbed Him. And Cain resented the rejection bitterly.

We are not told how Cain knew that God was displeased with his offering. Some have suggested that fire fell from heaven and consumed Abel's offering and left Cain's offering untouched. Perhaps, God spoke a word of confirmation to Abel and none to Cain. No matter how it happened, they knew. They both knew. And there in the lingering silence of the rejection Cain stewed in anger. The focus of his anger doubtlessly moved back and forth between Abel and between God. On the one hand he hated his brother because his offering had been accepted. On the other hand he hated God who had so clearly brought the difference between the two offerings to his attention.

It is an emotion that I have experienced firsthand.

In 1986, in what I thought was my last year of seminary, I was driving a 1965 Ford pickup that used a quart of oil a day. One morning I had a Hebrew test. I had studied for the test most of the night and though exhausted I was as ready as I could get. About three blocks from school, my radiator hose broke and began to spray water on the engine. I decided that I didn't want to miss the test, so I just stepped on it. As I pulled into the parking lot, the water spraying onto the hot engine emitted huge clouds of billowing steam. And as providence allowed, the only parking space I could find was between a BMW and a Mercedes. Passers by were staring.

I'm sure they thought my truck was about to explode and I am equally sure that they must have been concerned that the conflagration was going to burn up two really nice cars. When I got out of the truck, I wasn't thinking about the test, or the seminary. I was thinking about those two cars. I wasn't mad that the hose had burst, I was mad instead that God just did not get it.

"God", I thought to myself, "don't you see what I'm trying to do here. I've been busting my rear-end the last eight years working a full time job, trying to raise my family on pauper's wages. You give these guys decent cars and rich daddy's to pay their tuition and I'm dying down here. God, I'm trying to advance your kingdom and I deserve better than you're giving."

I left the simmering remains of my truck on the parking lot and went to class.

When class was over, I walked in silent rage to the parking lot. There was a note on my windshield. I yanked it out from under the wipers seething that somebody would be mean enough to leave some smart remark.

It read: **"Do not lay up for yourself treasures upon earth, where hoses break and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. Though in your case, this last part may be less warranted. But lay up for yourself treasures in heaven, for where your treasure is there will your heart be also. Brother, if you need a ride, I get out of class at 10:30. You're doing O.K., stay in the stuff."**

I sat in my truck and cried. I had been focusing on my own self-worth. I had lost sight of the high privilege that had been granted to me. I had lost sight of the fact that God had given me the honor of studying His word and that He had also given me a family made of stern enough stuff to endure the privilege I had been granted. I had lost sight of the offering I had started out to give to God. I had begun to focus on God's apparent approval of others and I had lost sight of the worthlessness of the gift I was offering. I kept that note in my wallet until it finally just faded away but the message of the note is still written on my heart fifteen years later.

I think it is worth noting that God too understood the danger behind Cain's seething anger. It was extraordinary kindness on His part to warn Cain about the danger that lurked in the recesses of his own murderous heart. Listen to His warning.

^{NIV} **Genesis 4:6...** Then the LORD said to Cain, **"Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷ If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."**

God tried to restore Cain. He promised him that if he did well and offered an appropriate sacrifice in the future it would be accepted. Cain was given a chance

to lay his rage aside. And God, in His kindness, went so far as to solemnly warn Cain that if he refused to control his rage it would be just like a ravenous wild animal sleeping at the door, who when finally stirred awake would bound forth to destroy and to kill.

So, God charged Cain to get a grip on himself. He charged him to get past this one event. But Cain refused to listen. He was so consumed by anger he could not control the devastating effects of his own unrelenting pride. Cain decided instead to wake up the beast lying at the door.

Verse 8 is painfully short. There is no elaboration; there is no further explanation. There is no gruesome detail. It simply tells us that Cain killed his brother.

^{NIV} **Genesis 4:8**...Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "**Let's go out to the field.**" And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

You will notice that I have added the phrase, "**Let us go to the field**".

Many ancient manuscripts include the phrase though most of the modern translations do not. I have supplied it because it seems to be the best way to flesh out an otherwise awkward phrase. If you have the NAS, you will notice it has, "**And Cain told Abel his brother**" but the Hebrew really says "**And Cain said to Abel his brother**" and then just leaves what he said blank.

If I am right in supplying what he said it makes his crime all the more heinous and all the more diabolical because it makes the murder premeditated.

While they were in the field, perhaps out among Cain's own crops, Cain rose up against his brother and murdered him. The text leaves unsaid how Cain killed Abel but we know it was sudden. We know it was violent. We know it was bloody. And we know the Lord God knew what had happened.

In verse 9, the Lord comes down to question Cain. The scene is designed to remind us of God's questioning of Adam and Eve after the fall. But instead of cowering in fear at the Lord's coming Cain was so brazen. He didn't even try to shift the blame. Instead, he lied to God unashamedly about his crime.

NIV Genesis 4:9...Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Cain not only lied to God in his answer but he did so with extraordinary impertinence. He was not only a liar; he was a hateful liar as well. His answer is so vile; it is so hateful. In effect, he was saying, **"What? Am I now the shepherd's shepherd too?"** He expressed his contempt for Abel and in doing so expressed his contempt for the God before whom he now stood. And when he did that, God growled back.

NIV Genesis 4:10... The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

God knowing all along what Cain had done now executed his sentence on Cain the murderer. **"What have you done, Cain?"** God replied. **"Don't you realize I can hear you brother's blood crying out to me for justice? Don't you realize the**

horror of what you have done? I will not let this pass. Because you have done this you are cursed. Because you have done this the ground in which you have made your living will no longer respond to you. You have caused it to drink the blood of your brother and now it is through with you. And because the ground will no longer respond to you, you will have no permanent place to live. You will be a wanderer and vagrant flitting from place to place trying to scratch out an existence."

But even here Cain was unrepentant. His concern was not about what he had done. His only concern was that God was too harsh with him and that his own life might be in danger. Cain, in his pride, could recast his murder of Abel in terms of how it caused him pain. Cain tried to turn himself into the victim.

^{NIV} **Genesis 4:13...** Cain said to the LORD, "**My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴ 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.**"

Cain's plea was that God protect him and God responded in a way I simply cannot understand. He granted Cain's underlying wish. He decided to grant Cain His protection.

^{NIV} **Genesis 4:15...** But the LORD said to him, "**Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over.**" Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him.

God put his mark of protection on Cain. I can say that confidently though I have no idea what that meant. I do not know what the mark looked like or how other people knew to keep their hands off Cain but I do know that it was effective.

Cain found kindness from the God he had slighted, disobeyed and insulted. And now he was on his own.

^{NIV} **Genesis 4:16**...So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Now the only question that remains for us to consider is how this story is to impact us thousands of years after the fact. I think there are two answers to that question.

I think there are two applications for us to consider.

First, we are to take thought about what we offer to God. It doesn't matter whether it is our efforts as teachers, or as parents or as husbands and wives. When we offer our efforts or our abilities we are to offer that which constitutes the best we have.

Secondly, when we offer what we offer we are let it stand or fall on the basis of what we were able to do. That is, we should never seek to amplify our offering of worship by the denigration of what others have offered. There is nothing to be gained either in our consciences or in the sight of God by the prideful condemnation of some other poor sinner who sought to do his best. That does not mean we are to fail to instruct or to fail to evaluate truth. But it does mean we are to put an end to exalting ourselves by the unnecessary criticism of others. When we harshly criticize others for that which they have offered to God we are acting out the part of Cain. When we disparage some other poor brother in order commend ourselves to ourselves we are taking that brother out into the field.

When we trash his motives and question his commitment, we are pouring out his lifeblood on the ground. And when we do we will have invalidated our own act of worship.

Of course, there will be heresies to fight. Of course, there will be doctrinal error to correct. But let us be ever aware of letting our own sloth, or own incompetence, our own half-heartedness drift over into our words or thoughts or feelings about someone else's faithfulness that God has chosen to honor.

Instead, let us affirm with Paul to strive to be faithful in what we do and let us leave our evaluation to God.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 4:5**...Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

Let us offer to the Lord Christ what we can and let us be content when others offer that which we are unable to emulate. Let our hearts be filled with gratitude knowing that He has redeemed us and called with a holy calling.

When we approach that frame of mind, we are prepared for ministry and for worship. I can't think of any illustration better suited to demonstrate this truth than the one I heard Alister Begg recount about a young, Scottish minister.

There was once a young, Scottish minister who had recently graduated from seminary. On his return home, he expected to be offered any number of pulpit opportunities, but none came. So week after week, he was forced to sit in the pew in his own home church and listen to the incessant droning of his own pastor. He critiqued every sermon, every gesture, and every exegetical tidbit.

Inwardly, he knew he could do a better job, so he waited and as he waited he grew more and more critical. If he could just get his chance, oh how he would shine.

Finally, when he thought he could bear it no more, his elderly pastor asked him to prepare a sermon, but there was little need for preparation or prayer, because he had played out the scene a thousand times in his mind. At last, his chance came and on the Sunday morning he was to preach, he was a bundle of explosive energy. When at last the hymns were completed and it was his time to approach the pulpit he literally bounded up the stairs to the pulpit. But as he opened his Bible and looked out on the congregation, he suddenly felt the inadequacy of his preparation. He looked out on the wrinkled faces of a congregation that had known the consequences and anguish of sin and pain and suddenly it seemed as if everything he had prepared was so trite, so pathetic that he literally became speechless. In deep humiliation, he struggled through his prepared sermon and after what seemed like a lifetime he choked out a very faint and whispered prayer and slinked out of the pulpit. With an enormous sigh and sagging shoulders, he made his way to a pew and sat down fighting back tears of shame.

The congregation sat silently and finally one elderly Scotsman feeling compassion for the young man turned to his wife and whispered, **“Had he gone up the way he come down, he would have come down the way he gone up.”**

Let’s pray.