

Dan Phillips: Cain II

Sermon presented at Seekers worship

8 August, 1999

by Dan Phillips

Cain II

I want to tell you a story. This is a tale from the first days, the days when everything was new, when all people knew they were a part of one Family, and when everyone talked and listened to God. It is a tale of life, of worship, and of murder.

Now Cain was the eldest child of the Family. He was the first, the strongest, and the smartest. He was used to that, and enjoyed his place of prominence. Beyond this, his life was ruled by his love of family, God, and farming, **not** in that order. As a farmer, he really enjoyed working with his hands, feeding his family, and fulfilling one of the **commands** that God had given to Adam and Eve: earning a living by toil and sweat. He delighted in growing the best, most varied, and most luscious vegetables and fruits. In fact, he could not imagine that everyone did not want to live as he did.

And every year, at the annual feast of celebration, he brought to God an offering of the best of his efforts. He was also proud of the fact that he always brought something special to God, and not just some small offering: he brought Her the best! At this time of worship and praise for God, who had taken care of the Family for another year, everyone brought offerings, but his was usually the largest, the prettiest, and the tastiest. And every year, God's light shone down on his offering, as Her light did on all the offerings She approved of. This made Cain very proud. Like many since him, he was satisfied with his rituals of worship, and determined to

always do them well.

Now Cain had many brothers and sisters. But his next youngest brother, Abel, was a problem. Abel, as the second child, seemed to take delight in showing up Cain. Whatever Cain did, Abel wanted to do better. And every year Abel tried to deliver a better offering than Cain, but Abel never could grow anything like what Cain grew. Finally, he got tired of trying, and went looking for a new form of offering.

As Abel began looking for a new way of life, he also looked for a new form of sacrifice, and a new symbol with which to worship God. He became a herder of animals, and gradually realized that they would make a wonderful sacrifice to God. He began to experiment in worship with the sacrifice of animals, and found the shedding of blood, and the offering of life to God, to be a very powerful symbol. He shared this idea with many in the Family, and eventually, even with Cain. Cain, of course, thought this was disgusting. Growing food from the ground was making something that had not existed. That was creation, the true act of God. Killing, that was nothing to be proud of. Shedding the blood of small, innocent animals seemed to be a sick pastime to Cain. He was appalled.

So, one year, the time for the Family's annual feast of celebration and thanks came again. When it was Abel's turn, Abel brought a small, baby lamb. It was so pretty, so cuddly, so cute. Abel walked it up to the altar of God. Everyone was wondering what he would do with this lovely animal. It would never stay still on the altar to see if God accepted it. Suddenly, Abel cut the lamb's throat, using one quick, cruel thrust of the knife. Blood sprayed everywhere, and the lamb struggled to escape, to breathe, and to live. When the lamb's struggles were over, Cain and many of the others leaped to their feet to remove Abel from this place of holiness. They wanted to confine him until something could be done to find a cure for Abel's illness, Abel's insanity, and Abel's madness! But as they approached Abel, God shone a light on the lamb

carcass, to show that She approved of what Abel had done. It was incredible! God had actually liked Cain's offering!

Then it was time for Cain's offering. As always, his offering was very grand. Cain had labored long on this year's display of fruit and vegetables, working hard to blend taste and appearance. It was a beautiful presentation, and everyone thought that Cain had once again brought the best. But Cain presented it still muttering in disbelief about a God that accepted ridiculous, obscene, animal offerings. And so no light shone on Cain's offering. As he stepped back and waited, he was puzzled, then angry, then furious. Finally, he turned and left the place of celebration. How could God do this, he cried. Was She saying that Abel was right? About everything? It was too much to bear.

So Cain went to God for answers. He asked why She had blessed that horrible offering of Abel, how She could condone such religious heresy! And further, he asked, why did you not reward my hard work? Haven't I worshipped you faithfully all these years? But God patiently asked why Cain was upset. Don't you know, She said, that if you do well, you will be rewarded? When you have done well, you have been blessed. But your anger at me and at your brother: this is not good. And my acceptance of his offering is between him and me. I am more than you can understand, She said. Many people will worship me in many different ways. It is up to me to decide whether they have worshipped me correctly. That is not your job. If you hold onto your anger and your hatred for your brother, She said, then sin will claim you, as it so much wants to do. Cain thought about this, and decided to try and accept it.

The next day, Cain went to talk to Abel. But Abel was just as insufferable as Cain had ever imagined he might be. Like many religious innovators, Abel did not seem to care how others felt. He, Abel said, was right, and Cain could just suffer or change! Cain should just learn to live with the fact that his worship had been inadequate all along, said Abel. Maybe in

time, Abel remarked, Cain could learn to worship the right way, the new way.

Finally, Cain asked Abel if they could take this painful religious discussion out into the field. After all, the field was where Cain most felt at home. Maybe there in the field, Cain thought, I can find a better understanding of Abel and he will see what I love about my life, my worship of God. But Abel just continued to stress that a meat offering was better than a vegetable or fruit offering, that the new way of worship was better than the old. Finally, Cain could stand it no more, and told Abel to just shut up. But Abel got louder, so Cain hit him with a hoe to make him shut up. And Abel died.

Cain was not used to death. He had seen it but never this close up. And never before had a member of the Family died. Cain was terrified. He did not know what to do. He panicked. And he did what he was good at: he dug in the dirt, and buried his brother. Perhaps in his shock he believed that like the seeds, Abel would rise again in the spring. (This is why ever since humans have buried their dead, waiting for the resurrection.)

Now the Family was used to Abel being out with his animals, and away from home for some time, so nobody worried about him. But God came looking for Abel. She asked everyone if they had seen Abel. Finally, some members of the Family remembered that Abel had left with Cain, and told God this. So God went looking for Cain, and asked him where Abel was. Cain was still angry with God, and in his guilt gave a careless answer: "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?" Then God revealed that Abel's blood called to Her from the ground. God (after all She is Sophia) **knew** what Cain had done.

God then undertook to punish and rehabilitate Cain. Knowing that our lifestyle often shapes our worship, She took from Cain the thing that Cain loved the most: Cain's farming. God told Cain that he would never again be able to grow things

because the ground itself was angry over the death of Abel. And since you can't farm, said God, you will be a wanderer and a fugitive: a nomad. In fact, you will need to adopt Abel's way to live: you will need to herd animals to survive.

Like many of us when we know we're wrong, but feel the punishment is too harsh, Cain was still angry with God. He cried out that this was too much: to lose work, and the Family, and home all at once! To have no security throughout the entire world! It was **too much**.

But God reminded him that She would be his security, protecting him as She always had protected the members of the Family. She told him that this was not so much punishment as it was a chance for him to learn, to grow, to feel a new call.

It is recorded then that Cain left the presence of God, angry, afraid, and rebellious. We know from God's promise that She followed him. We don't know if he ever listened to Her again, or brought Her offerings. Maybe, late in life, he found another Family, a group seeking the truth, to help him understand and again worship God in a different way. This is not recorded. But I do know this was not the last time someone who worshipped God was frustrated and angry with Her, and ran away.

Thus it was with the first brothers that humans learned to murder each other, and from that time to this brothers have killed brothers over differences in worship. Yet God still looks for victims that others have forgotten; forces changes to make us learn; and protects us all whether we deserve it or not.

So it was, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.