

# REAL PEOPLE, REAL GOD:

## Giving to Live

Roy and I haven't really given each other gifts during our thirty+ years of marriage. In the early years, we barely had enough money for groceries, so homemade birthday, anniversary, and Valentine's cards were the best we could do. We've never exchanged Christmas or birthday gifts, but one summer I was browsing in our local Christian bookstore and saw the perfect gift.

You're familiar with those Willow Tree figurines, right? You know, the simple yet elegant earth tone statues depicting intimate sentiments to which nothing on earth can compare...those figurines. Did I mention that I found the PERFECT set? A mother hugging her daughter paired with a father and daughter sitting on the ground. It looked like our family (or at least what our family would be like in a perfect world).



So I bought it...for my husband...for Father's Day. Ummmm, did I mention that I THOUGHT IT WAS PERFECT. You see, he sort of thought a table saw or new golf clubs might be nice for Father's Day. The gift I gave fit *my* wants, *my* wishes, *my* selfish desires and gave no thought at all to what *he* might want.

But it all worked out. Next year for Mother's Day, I got a bench grinder.

We see a similar situation when the first humans lived in relationship with God. Adam and Eve had children—as God intended—and those children offered gifts to their Creator...

### What Are REAL PEOPLE Doing?

Sometime after leaving the garden Adam and Eve conceive a child, and Eve feels the first of those promised pains in childbirth. Regardless of her great pain, however, she doesn't seem to hold a grudge against God and, in fact, names her son "Cain" revealing her gratefulness and love toward the Creator.

"With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." **Genesis 4:1**

Adam and Eve continue their relationship with the Lord, even though it is a broken one.

## Working

The first thing we learn about Cain and his brother Abel are their occupations.

“Abel was a keeper of the sheep, and Cain worked the ground.” **Genesis 4:2**

We know from Adam and Eve’s story that because of sin the ground was cursed to produce thistles and thorns when being worked. This made Cain’s job a hard one. And not just hard work, but frustrating work. The first human born into the now broken world was resigned to working the cursed ground. *Ouch!*

As for Abel, was his shepherding job as cursed and difficult and frustrating as working the ground? We don’t know. But they each had a job to do.

## Giving

One day, after working the ground and tending the sheep for who knows how many months or years, we see each of these brothers **offering up a gift to his Creator**.

“In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions.” **Genesis 4:3**

Have you ever wondered what prompted them to bring offerings? Did something simply spring up in their hearts? Did their parents tell them to do it? Did God tell them to do it? The text doesn’t enlighten us about the whys, but it does tell us what happened when they brought their gifts...the Lord had regard for one brother’s offering and did not have regard for the other brother’s offering. Thus began the first (and maybe the worst) case of sibling rivalry on the planet.

## Rivalry Gone Wrong

The Cain we see in this story seems scarred from years of bitterness, which makes us wonder if perhaps Cain/Abel’s sibling rivalry was long-standing. We think siblings vying for their parents’ attention is brutal...imagine vying for the attention of the Creator of the world!! That’s high stakes!

So, when the Lord regards one brother’s offering and not the other brother’s offering, it’s quite a blow for Cain. But what if—even before this—Cain had spent years feeling outdone by Abel? Maybe he’d even convinced himself that his gift didn’t matter —“Why bother choosing a great offering for God?” Maybe his offering was given with that chip already on his shoulder. Maybe it was easier to cast blame — on God, on his cursed work, or on Abel — than it was to actually TRY to please God.

Regardless of the reason for Cain's inferior gift, we see that God does not have regard for his offering. Why? What was our REAL GOD doing there?

## **Our REAL GOD Always Teaching**

**Remember our overarching story: God longs to reveal Himself and relate to us.**

His intention is to restore the kind of unhindered relationship He had with humankind in the Garden. Why would He approve one offering and disapprove another?

*Answer:* To reveal something about Himself that will help us relate to Him better.

That's always His goal—in good times and bad. It's like my husband and the Willow tree figurines. Those are the things that constitute a good gift in my husband's eyes. I gave him what I would have wanted, not what he would have wanted. He used my Mother's Day gift as a teaching moment to reveal something about himself and teach me how to relate better to him. In Genesis 4, God is showing Cain that in the offering he gave, he had not regarded God's standards. He had regarded only his own. Therefore, God had no regard for Cain's offering.

## **Offering Invitation & Setting Standards**

In His effort to reveal Himself and relate to Cain, our REAL GOD enters into a conversation with him.

“Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” **Genesis 4:6-7**

Although Cain has offered up a gift that is unsatisfactory to the Lord, and is throwing a tantrum about God's lack of regard, God gently invites him into a discussion. God doesn't shy away from Cain's anger or punish him for it. He invites Cain to express it fully to Him.

But neither does God lower His standard for offerings. He clearly—and succinctly—challenges Cain to do right. It's not an outline of the 10 commandments and the rest of the law. It's a moment in which God reveals a glimpse of His standard, His nature, and extends another invitation to Cain.

“If you do what is right, I will accept you.” **Genesis 4:7**

Wow! Isn't it amazing that even after Cain offered an inferior gift, God offered an invitation to talk about the problem, a clear picture of His standards, and an invitation to try again and be accepted? What patience and kindness, right?

...But, honestly, kind of a bummer. For Cain. For us. I mean, who wants to be told their gift is inferior? It's depressing when we realize we don't measure up to God's standard. That feels like a blow to my ego. It makes me feel not good enough. I'm guessing it felt that way to Cain—who was already struggling with rivalry/inferiority to his brother.

Granted, it's amazing that God revealed His nature, His heart, and His standards. That He would relate to Cain—to us. What a blessing! But it's also the moment when we find that we are lacking.

## **Protection/Responsibility**

As part of this conversation, God reminds Cain of the protection he enjoys as long as he remains within the shelter of their relationship. The word “crouching” used in the Genesis 4:7 phrase, “sin is crouching at your door,” is taken from an ancient Babylonian word referring to a demon waiting outside the door of a building, threatening the people inside. In essence, God is saying to Cain, “Sin will attack/overwhelm/consume you if you WILLFULLY step outside the shelter of our relationship. Don't do it, Cain!” Our REAL GOD is asking two things of His belligerent child:

1. Talk to Me!
2. Stay with Me!

What parent hasn't begged a prodigal to do those things?

## **REAL PEOPLE Miss the Mark**

What is Cain's response to God's plea? Does he take this opportunity to talk with God? Does he pour out his anger or confess his lack of regard for the Creator?

No. Instead, the next thing Cain does is talk to his brother...and then kill him. Just like that.

Cain attacks the wrong problem. Rather than working on his relationship with God to live up to His standards, he kills his brother who gave the better offering. Rather than comparing himself to God's standards, Cain compares himself to Abel, and then takes out his self-imposed competition. After all, it might be easier to wipe out an opponent than to change from within. When all the while, the thing needing to be killed was his own stubborn heart, his own bitterness, his own selfish pride.

## **REAL PEOPLE's Downhill Slide**

By now, we have seen the actions of REAL people going REALLY downhill REALLY quickly. Placed into a perfect world, walking in the evenings with God, and then doing the ONE thing they weren't supposed to do, which introduced a knowledge of evil, blame, shame, hiding from God, and now all of a sudden MURDER!

And then? Lying. God confronts Cain about his brother, and Cain lies about the whole thing. Things are going downhill fast!

Throughout this story, it seems Cain has a giant chip on his shoulder. Most of his interactions with God, and especially his cold-shouldered, deceitful response when asked about his brother, leave us feeling like he must think, "God has no regard for me, so I have no regard for Him."

## **But Whose Fault Is It?**

Though we may be able to understand how Cain might have felt — working the cursed ground, having his offering met with no regard, being outdone by his brother Abel — this does not justify putting any blame on God for his situation.

*It is not God's fault that the world is hard for us.*

It's sin's fault, and many times—if we're honest or set aside our pride—it's our poor life choices that cause our hardships. Granted, God allowed the serpent into the Garden and planted that tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God even had the nerve to give Adam and Eve free choice. But He didn't shove that fruit into their hands or make them swallow it. That's on us. I have no excuse for blaming cancer and car accidents on God...but I serve a God who can take all the bad things in this sin-sick world and use them for my good if I trust Him with my life.

## **Our REAL GOD Confronts Sin**

Even though Cain killed his brother, a precious creation made in God's image, and then lied straight to God's face about it, God continues to interact with Cain. This time, though, there are some unpleasant consequences.

"Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

**Genesis 4:11-12**

Cain FINALLY takes this opportunity to dialogue with God about the problem. He laments and cries out that this punishment is more than he can bear. He is afraid that anyone who finds him will kill him.

“But the LORD said to him, ‘...Anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.’ Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him.” **Genesis 4:15**

Even after Cain’s unrepentant attitude, our REAL GOD, takes actions to *protect* Cain from being killed by others. Wow! What grace and mercy! Two times we’ve seen REAL PEOPLE disobey and reject God’s good plan for them, and both times our REAL GOD proclaimed punishment and curses...while providing unmerited protection. What a gracious God He is!

\*Originally posted by Mesu Andrews on May 13th, 2016\*