

fundamentals

RULE

IT!

understanding sin through Bible narratives.

What is **fundamentals**?

As a pastor's kid, it is easy to take the greatness of the gospel for granted. The fact that the Master of the universe became man and died for me somehow becomes normal. Crazy stories such as of a little boy defeating a giant, and a man opening a sea with a stick become a fairy tale. When you're used to reading Scripture, it becomes easy not to pay attention to the fascinating teachings, mysteries, and revelations of a God who loves His creation.

The Bible is full of treasures that we skip over because we think we already know the story. Because we read the story of Jacob fighting God in Genesis 32 over and over again we think there's nothing more to learn there. Because we heard the narrative of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3 sixty-seven times as a kid, we think there's no need to go back to read it and see if there is any new detail we can find there.

Fundamentals started as an initiative of 2 or more Church to provide a biblical study on books and themes of the Bible. The name is founded on our desire for Christians to have a solid foundation on core beliefs (fundamentals) of the Christian faith.

In the same way that you can never overdo the fundamentals of a sport, you can never overdo or overstudy the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

Our goal is not to "reinvent the wheel" and bring some new revelation that was never seen before in Church History. No. The goal is to go to the text and just search for the revelations that are in the Text. In doing so, we pray that your desire, hunger, and curiosity to know more about the God who has revealed Himself in His Word may grow.

The goal of Fundamentals is to bring back that child-like spirit of excitement and wonder of when you first heard the story of Elijah going up to heaven in a chariot of fire, or Jesus multiplying the five loaves of bread and two fish. And being, once again, struck by these narratives to honor Christ with your daily living.

The Bible is filled with way too many good stories for us to take for granted.

Blessings,
Abner.

Professor's Guide

This professor's guide contains extra information. Any text **in this color** is additional, and there are also extra tables and boards in some sections of the book. At the bottom of each page, you will find footnotes indicating where the information for the text given was retrieved.

If you go through the book, you will realize that there's a blank spot for each lesson's "take away." I believe that leaving it blank gives some cool opportunities to whoever is studying the material. Let me give you two examples:

1. If you are using the material for your devotional, after going through the text and the notes you can put into your own words what you believe is the teaching of the chapter;
2. if you're teaching a class, you can either come up with your own take away and then share it with your students or you can come to a take away working with your students.

In any case, my main goal is that you wrestle with the text and rely on the Holy Spirit's guidance in interpreting the passage.

As you study it or teach others, feel free to read and evaluate for yourself whether the information given is worth sharing. Also, I encourage you to search for more information and add it to your study/class.

Introduction

“We do not rule because we do not know the world as God’s creation, and because we do not receive our dominion as God-given but grasp it for ourselves” Dietrich Bonhoeffer

There are many ways in which one can view sin. Philosophers and theologians have studied and debated the subject for many years. Although this class's main idea is to look at sin and try to understand it through the use of Biblical narratives, it would be naive to ignore all the relevant work that has been done on the subject. With that in mind, our goal in this introduction will be to look at some of the theological concepts of sin and how systematic theology deals with this subject.

Starting with a brief study on original sin, we will go through some non-Biblical definitions and descriptions of sin. Then, we will move toward a more Biblical understanding of what sin is. In doing so, I hope that the technical knowledge we gather in this introduction can be applied as we look at the Biblical narratives selected for this class.

Original Sin

- From the very beginning, people tried to figure out the origin of sin. Back in ancient Greece, tales were told of when Zeus tricked humankind through the creation of the first woman that ever existed and the gift he gave her. The gift was actually the way in which all kinds of evil entered the world. This tale is called “Pandora’s Box.” The second-century theology Origen developed another attempt at understanding original sin. His theory was that the souls of men sinned voluntarily in a previous existence, and therefore, all enter the world in a sinful condition.
- Christian theologians (Reformed and Wesleyan) agree that original sin came through the sin of Adam. As the father of the human race and the representative of all his descendants, the guilt of his sin is placed on their account so that they are liable to the punishment of death. It is primarily in that sense that Adam’s sin is the sin of all.
- Man is wrong, all wrong, before God; therefore, everything he does is wrong. It is in this way that actual sin is always an expression of original sin. (Dunning, 1988)
- It is called “original sin” (1) because it is derived from the original root of the human race; (2) because it is present in the life of every individual from the time of his birth and therefore cannot be regarded as the result of imitation; and (3) because it is the inward root of all the actual sins that defile the life of man. We should be aware of the mistake of thinking that sin belongs to the original constitution of human nature, which would imply that God created man as a sinner. (Berkhof, 2021)
- Although both fields of theology agree on the initial definition of sin, each field interprets some of the consequences of the original sin differently. We will see those areas as we keep on studying.

Non-Biblical Views of Sin

The Dualistic Theory. A form of Gnosticism that found entrance into the early Church assumes the existence of an eternal principle of evil and holds that in man, the spirit represents the principle of good and the body that of evil. According to this view, which was current in Greek philosophy, the only escape from sin lies in deliverance from the body.

The Theory of Sin as Merely Privation. Developed by Leibnitz, this theory assumes that the present world is the best possible one. The existence of sin in it must be considered unavoidable. It cannot be referred to as the agency of God and, therefore, must be regarded as simple negation or privation, for which no efficient

cause is needed. Thus, sin is a necessary evil since creatures are necessarily limited, and sin is an unavoidable consequence of this limitation.

Pelagianism. Denying the doctrine of original sin, it defines sin in a casualistic and atomistic way. Its central proposition is that God has commanded man to do what is good; therefore, man must have the ability to do so.

- Adam was the first sinner, but his sin was in no sense passed on to his descendants. Each man is his own Adam, and born into the world in the same state of being as the first man, commits the original sin himself. This means there is freedom to sin or not to sin of one's determination.

- Humanity's future course must be determined by their own free choice.

- Personally, the main flaws that I see in this view are the denial of original sin and the implications of it when we look at the struggle between the spirit and the flesh.

Biblical Views of Sin

In Scripture, the English word "sin" has multiple names that convey somewhat different meanings:

- **Chatta'th** from the Hebrew root chet signifies having shot at a target and missed. It directs attention to sin as an action that misses the mark and consists in a deviation from the right way. When we shoot an arrow that hits its mark, we sometimes speak of the arrow having flown "true" to its target. In effect, when moral decisions are choices between truth and falsehood, it follows that I am trying to discern my Creator's expectations for me, and I am trying to act accordingly. (Fohrman, 2021)

In Jewish thinking, to sin is not primarily about hellfire and guilt (if it is, that part is only secondary) but primarily about "missing the mark" - failing to align oneself with the Will of the Creator.

- **'Avel** and **'avon** indicate that sin is a want of integrity and rectitude, a departure from the appointed path.

- **Peha'** refers to sin as a revolt or refusal of subjection to the rightful authority, a positive transgression of the law, and a breaking of the covenant.

- **Resha'** points to sin as a wicked and guilty departure from the law.

Reformed Theology

The academic source for this section was *Systematic Theology* by Louis Berkhof

- Fundamentally, sin is not something passive, such as weakness, a fault, or an imperfection, for which we cannot be held responsible, but an active opposition to God and a positive transgression of His law, which constitutes guilt. Therefore, sin is the result of a free but evil choice of man.

- According to Reformed theology, sin is a moral evil that always has relation to God and His will. Since the great central demand of the law is to love God, and if, from the material point of view moral goodness consists in love to God, then moral evil must consist in the opposite. Sin is separation from God, opposition to God, hatred of God, and this manifests itself in constant transgression of the law of God in thought, word, and deed.

- Sin does not reside in any one faculty of the soul but in the heart, which, in scriptural psychology, is the central organ of the soul, out of which are the issues of life. Therefore, sin does not consist of overt acts but also sinful habits and sinful conditions of the soul.

- Founded on the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, Reformed theology says that, because of the Fall, the nature of man, both physical and moral, is totally corrupted so that he cannot do otherwise than sin.

- From this foundational doctrine of original sin flows two of the most well-known doctrines of Reformed theology: Total depravity and total inability.

- **Total depravity** indicates (1) that the inherent corruption extends to every part of man's nature, to all the faculties and powers of both soul and body, and (2) that there is no spiritual good, that is, good in relation to God,

in sinner at all, but only perversion.

- In other words, total depravity indicates that no part of human nature is not corrupted by sin, and therefore, there's only perversion in humanity's fallen state.

- **Total inability** means (1) that the unrenewed inner cannot do any act, however insignificant, which fundamentally meets with God's approval and answers to the demands of God's holy law; and (2) that he cannot change his fundamental preference for sin and self to the love for God, nor even make an approach to such a change.

- In other words, total inability means that humanity cannot do any spiritual good that meets God's approval regarding His holy law.

Human Freedom.

- One of the hottest topics when it comes to Reformed theology is human freedom. So let's take a look at it.

- In a certain sense, humanity has not, and in another sense, it has lost its liberty. A certain liberty is the inalienable possession of a free agent, namely, the freedom to choose as he pleases, in full accord with his soul's prevailing dispositions and tendencies. Humans did not lose any of the constitutional faculties necessary to constitute them as responsible moral agents. Humans still have reason, conscience, and the freedom of choice. They have the ability to acquire knowledge and to feel and recognize moral distinctions and obligations. Their affections, tendencies, and actions are spontaneous so that they choose and refuse as they see fit. Moreover, they have the ability to appreciate and do many things that are good and amiable, benevolent and just, in the relations they sustain with their fellow beings. However, humanity did lose its eternal material freedom, that is, the rational power to determine its course in the direction of the highest good, in harmony with the original moral constitution of his nature. Having, by nature, an irresistible bias for evil, humanity is not able to apprehend and love spiritual excellence, to seek and do spiritual things, the things of God that pertain to salvation.

- In other words, Reformed theology states that the lack of freedom in humanity has to do with the inability to choose to do what pleases God regarding His law.

- Here, I am going to make a little parenthesis and just share one of the takes on human freedom that I respectfully think is the craziest one: Barthianism. Developed by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, this dialectical theology strongly reasserts the utter inability of man to make even the slightest move in a Godward direction. The sinner is a slave of sin and cannot possibly turn in the opposite direction.

Wesleyan Theology

The academic sources for this section were *Grace, Faith and Holiness* by H. Ray Dunning and *The Story of God* by Michael Lodahl

- Wesleyan theology affirms that sin is not the result of humanity's creaturehood or, in any sense the result of forces or factors beyond its control. Rather, it is the consequence of the exercise of the God-given gift of freedom. In other words, sin is an accident of man's nature and not an essential element of his original being.

- [With that in mind], Wesleyan theology will affirm that men *must not* sin, but all men *do* sin.

Sin is not as a thing but as a state of being and a manifestation of that state in which humankind not only hide from one another, but from a loving and seeking God."

Sin is defined as "an intruder, an interrupter, an interferer in God's good purposes," that violates and causes a separation between God and mankind. [To put it simply], Sin is whatever violates the relationship and causes separation between God and mankind.

- Summarizing then, it can be said that sin is to miss the mark by violating the covenant and thus falling short of the life God intended for us.

- Original sin involves the loss of original righteousness; therefore, it may be seen as the absence or perversion of the relationship in which Adam and Eve stood in the "state of integrity."

- In general terms, Wesleyan theology will say that sin has its roots in unbelief, pride, disobedience, and sensuality.

Sin as unbelief. Perhaps, in the Genesis 3 narrative, the biggest issue was the loss of trust in acknowledging God's Lordship and thus taking heed of His instruction. Trusting the snake's words despite what the Creator had said, humanity (maybe even subconsciously) acted as if the words of YHWH were not trustworthy.

Egocentricity or Pride as Sin. If God doesn't have dominion in human life, something else does, and this something else is one's own ego. This is the state Martin Luther defines as *incurvatus in se* (humanity curved in upon itself)

The same reasoning is found in the words of Augustine in his work *The City of God*,

“What could begin this evil but pride, that is the beginning of all sin? And what's pride but a perverse desire of height, in forsaking Him to whom the soul ought solely to cleave, as beginning thereof, to make the self beginning. This is when it likes itself too well.”

Disobedience as sin. The text of 1 John 3:4 finds a modern interpretation in Wesley's definition of sin as “a voluntary transgression of a known law.”

Sensuality as sin. Reinhold Niebuhr has pointed out that when influenced by Hellenistic thought, Christianity has always been tempted to regard sin as basically lust and sensuality. Perhaps the reason behind this thought lies in the fact that sexual lust is one of the most graphic instances of how egocentricity manifests itself in the form of self-gratification.

The same Reinhold Niebuhr also writes,

“Sensuality represents a further confusion consequent upon the original confusion of substituting the self for God as the centre of existence. Man, having lost the true centre of his life, is no longer able to maintain his own will as the centre of himself.”

Prevenient Grace.

- Prevenient grace testifies to God's being the initiator of our relationship with Him and reveals Him as one who pursues us.
- John Wesley developed his theology of prevenient grace within the context of his rather heated debate with his Calvinist contemporaries. Wesley, along with Calvinistic theology, strongly affirmed human sinfulness and the inability and unwillingness of human beings to seek God in their natural state. However, he rejected the Calvinist solution that God chose some human beings to be saved and then, through a special intervention of God's grace, called these and only these out of sin, enabling them to repent and believe. Wesley argued that God loved all human beings, that Christ had died for the salvation of all, and that God would not hold people responsible for not doing what they were incapable of doing.
- Grace in Wesley's theology of prevenient grace is the active presence of the Spirit of God within all human beings. As such, grace is inherently relational and dynamic. **The active presence of the Spirit enables and calls for human beings to respond to God's revelation and action to the extent that a person responds to the Spirit, and the Spirit works.**
- The presence of the Spirit leads to a desire within human beings for a relationship with God. In other words, God acts to enable human beings to respond to God, who, in turn, responds to their response.
- As a consequence of the presence of the Spirit, all human beings have a sense of right and wrong, a standard by which they evaluate their behavior, and an awareness of having conformed to or departed from this standard.
- When studying Wesley's theology of prevenient grace, there is a danger to assume that God is in competition with humans' desires and agency. Some even go to the extent of saying that this theology can lead people to see the Eternal as a god who is in need of attention, begging for the love of His creatures. However, it's important to note that in the theology of prevenient grace, God's grace does not act in competition with human agency but is **the ground of agency.**
- Even amid depravity, the Spirit responds to, limits, overcomes, and redirects the sinful intentions and evil consequences of human persons and social structures. The Spirit can and does bring good out of evil without legitimating evil.

Notes:

Wait, a talking snake?

"The story does not want to aid our theologizing. It wants rather, to catch us in our living." - Walter Brueggemann

The Text

Genesis

2¹⁶ *YHWH 'ělōhîm* commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; **17** but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die." [...] **19** Out of the ground, *YHWH 'ělōhîm* formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. [...] **25** And the man and his wife were both *'ārōm* and were not ashamed.

3¹ Now the serpent was more *'ārûm* than any beast of the field which *YHWH 'ělōhîm* had made. And he said to the woman, "Even if *'ělōhîm* said don't eat from the tree, so what?" **2** The woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; **3** but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, *'ělōhîm* has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.'" **4** "The serpent said to the woman, "You surely will not die! **5** For *'ělōhîm* knows that in the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like *'ělōhîm*, knowing good and evil." **6** When the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. **7** Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were *'ěrōm*, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings. **8** They heard the sound of *YHWH 'ělōhîm* walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of *YHWH 'ělōhîm* among the trees of the garden. **9** Then *YHWH 'ělōhîm* called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" **10** He said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was *'ěrōm*; so I hid myself."

Some questions:

- So, did this snake really walk and talk?
- Did the snake really lie?
- Why do "naked" and "cunning, shrewd" sound like the same word?
- Is Adam with Even the whole time she's talking to the snake?
- Why, during the conversation between Eve and the snake, do they refer to God as *'ělōhîm* instead of *YHWH 'ělōhîm*?
- Why is there a change for the Hebrew word used for "being naked" (it goes from *'ārōm*/*'ěrōm*)?

What's this story about?

Approaching the narratives, scholar Walter Brueggeman says that,

- In fact, this narrative is quite an obscure and even marginal text. No clear subsequent reference to it is made in the Old Testament, though there are maybe some links in Ezekiel 28.
- Although this story is commonly treated as the account of "the fall," nothing could be more remote from the narrative itself. This is one story which needs to be set alongside many others in the Old Testament. In general, the Old Testament does not assume such a "fall." The Genesis text makes no general claim about the human prospect.
- The Old Testament is never interested in using this narrative as if it were the explanation of how evil came into the world. The Old Testament is not concerned with the origins but with faithful responses and effective coping.

- There is no hint that the serpent is the embodiment of the principle of evil, though the claim has been made since intertestamental times ("the old serpent" - Rev. 19:9; 20:2). In fact, perhaps the snake is the first in the Bible to seem knowing and critical about God and to practice theology in the place of obedience.

Some cool observations.

- There's a snake that talks! Apparently, the author expects the readers not to be surprised by a talking snake since his capacity for language just seems to be given.
- When looking at 2:16-17 we usually focus on the prohibition of not eating from the tree of good and evil, but ignore the permission to eat from any tree of the Garden - including the tree of life!
- No word for "sin" occurs in chapter 3
- The matter of death in 2:17, had not been the main point since it wasn't a threat but a candid acknowledgment of a boundary to life. In the snake's speech the boundary became a threat. It's not God, but the serpent who has made death a primary human agenda.
- A closer look at 3:6 makes clear that while Eve was talking to the snake, Adam was present the whole time
- Both '*ārōm*' and '*ārūm*' come from the Hebrew root '*āram*'; therefore perhaps the author intends to say that both humans and the snake were cunning and naked.
The verbal link between '*ārōm*' and '*ārūm*' suggests that human beings may be exposed at times to shrewd elements in God's words. So, the snake is a metaphor, representing anything in God's good creation that could present options to human beings, the choice of which could seduce them away from God.
We could also infer that both humans and the snake were cunning and naked.
- With the exception of Genesis 2:25, every instance of '*ārōm*'/'*ērōm*' is negative, denoting vulnerability, poverty, grief, or adultery.

Who are you?

3¹ "Even if God *said* don't eat from the tree, so what?"

- If we look closely at the text, we will notice that the snake shared a lot of the characteristics we believe belong to mankind: he talks, walks, and has intellect. Honestly, if we read the conversation between him and Eve, not knowing the characters, we would never guess that the first woman was talking to a snake. However, regardless of all the similarities the snake had to the first humans, he was still a beast.
- I think that the Text uses the snake's speech to help us differentiate him from the humans. Let's go back to 3:1:
- A more literal translation of the Hebrew for 3:1 would be, "Even if God said do not eat from any of the trees of the Garden..." From this line of thought, the snake's question would be, "Even if God said don't eat from the tree, so what?" (as we already had seen above).

Looking at the verse, Rabbi Samsom Raphael Hirsch (considered a giant of biblical exegesis, who lived in the 19th century) suggested that understanding the snake's words is a matter of emphasis. When we usually look at the question proposed above, we emphasize the "so what?" However, Hirsch asked what would change if we emphasized the "said," which would make the question, "Even if God said don't eat from the tree, so what?"

In doing so, perhaps the snake is not challenging God's authority per se, but saying that God's spoken words are not the things you should pay attention to.

In other words, maybe the snake's real question is, "Well, God is your Maker and put inside of you the desire to eat from the tree. So maybe this desire and passion you have is His voice speaking to you. Why wouldn't you listen to His voice?"

- With that in mind, Rabbi David Fohrman brings an interesting interpretation of what the narrative teaches us about the differences between being an animal and being a human being.

"If God speaks to you primarily through passions and instinct; if all you need to do is examine your desires to find out what God wants of you; if your essential self is easily and naturally identified with your passions - *you are an animal*. If you are able to stand outside your passions and examine them critically; if desire is something you have, not something you are; if God addresses Himself to your mind and asks you to rise above your desires, or to channel them constructively - *well, then you are a human*."

From a world of true and false to a world of good and evil.

- In attaining “knowledge” of good and evil, humanity didn’t gain a better intellectual understanding of right and wrong. We gained an experiential understanding of these things. We began to know right and wrong from the “inside.”
- According to Rabbi Fohrman, [perhaps] In the pre-Tree world, humanity could discern clearly what God wanted, and their own desires, while powerful, did not cloud that vision. Humanity could see what was “true” and choose it, or disregard it in favor of what they personally wanted to do. If they would choose the latter, I would at least know that I chose my desire over the “true.” In the Post-Tree world, that clarity is lost. Human desire intrudes and becomes an inescapable part of the moral calculus.
- No longer do we see a clear world of “true” and “false”; now we see something that is ever so slightly different. We see “good” and “evil” - terms that blur the distinction between virtue and desire.
- In the world of good and evil, what I personally consider to be right and worthwhile doesn't always reflect objective reality. Often, what I perceive as "good" might wear the guise of truth, even though it's merely what I desire. When I view life through my own subjective lens, I might mistakenly attribute my own wants to the will of God, blurring the lines between personal preference and genuine divine intention.

Take away:

Notes:

What is he doing?

The complex and obscure beginning of mankind.

The Text

Genesis

1²⁸ *ělōhîm* blessed them; and *ělōhîm* said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

4¹ Now man knew Eve his wife. She conceived, gave birth to *Qayin*, and said: “*qānîtî* [I have acquired] a man with *YHWH*’s help.” **2**She again gave birth to his brother *Hevel*. *Hevel* became a shepherd of the flock but *Qayin* became a tiller of the land. **3**And in the process of time *Qayin* brought some produce of the land as an offering to *YHWH*. **4***Hevel* also brought some firstlings of his flock and their fat portions. *YHWH* paid attention to *Hevel* and his offering, **5**But to *Qayin* and his offering he paid no attention. So *Qayin* was very angry and his face fell. **6**Then *YHWH* said to *Qayin*: “Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? **7**Is it not the case that if you do well, then lift up! And if you don’t do well, then sin lies crouching at the door, its desire is unto you, yet you can rule over it. **8***Qayin* said to his brother. When they were in the field, *Qayin* rose up against *Hevel* his brother, and killed him.



- Why did *YHWH* reject Cain’s offering?
- Why did Cain choose to be a farmer and Abel a shepherd?
- Why is there no explanation for Abel’s name?
- How did Cain come up with the idea of bringing an offering?
- What does *YHWH* intend to mean by His words in verses 6 and 7?

Some questions:

What's this story about?

- Zucker (2020) underscores that: Genesis 4:1–16 is an abbreviated reflection of a narrative that was known to Israelite society before the setting down of the Torah ... This narrative is characterized by gaps, silences, and fateful unexplained actions that provoke more questions than solutions.
- It appears that whatever the cause of Cain’s rejection, the text is more interested in his response to it than it is in delineating the details.
- If chapter 3 represents the fall of humankind, chapter 4 represents the fall of the family
- Just as Gen 3 describes how sin disrupts the relationships between man and wife, God and man, Gen 4:2–16 explains how sin introduces hate between brothers and separation from God. Yet there is also progression between the stories: Cain is portrayed as a much more hardened sinner than his father. Adam merely ate a fruit given to him by his wife; Cain murdered his brother.
- Perhaps this narrative sets in place key themes for the rest of Genesis: family conflict, primogeniture (God’s not choosing the elder son), sibling rivalry, and divine promises given to the non-chosen (e.g. Ishmael, Esau).

Some cool observations.

- It is quite interesting how the narrative starts with humanity apparently doing what YHWH called them to do in Genesis 1:28: Eve gives birth to two human beings, Abel becomes a shepherd (has dominion over the animals), and Cain takes care of the earth.
- Cain was never actually named Cain. He just was Cain.
- Qayin and *qānītî* come from the root *qānâ* which means “acquire.” So probably, the narrator is making a wordplay with Eve’s speech. Another assumption is that maybe Cain chose to be a farmer because in doing so he was acquiring the soil for himself. **Rabbi Fohrman will call him, “Cain the Acquirer.”**
- Abel’s name means ‘vapor’, ‘vanity’ or ‘breath.’ More precisely *Hevel* means the steam that scapes one’s mouth on a cold winter’s day.
- While the birth of Cain was celebrated by Eve, no interjection of joy whatsoever is recorded regarding the birth of Abel.
- A few rabbinic commentators consider the time frame in verse 3 to be “a year” in this context, “After a year **Qayin brought...**”
- Cain is perhaps the first person in history to come up with the idea to offer sacrifices to God.
- There is a chiastic order in which the names of Cain and Abel appear in the narrative:
vv.1-2a: Cain - Abel / v2b: Abel - Cain / vv. 3-4a: Cain - Abel / vv. 4b-5: Abel Cain
I honestly don’t exactly the reason for this changing of order and also didn’t find much study on it. Although I may have a guess, for now, I am “comfortable” without exactly knowing what was on the mind of the author when writing it.
- The immediate reaction of Cain to the rejection of his offering was his expression of excessive anger, and utter disappointment and depression (which indicates the intensity of his passion). His anger literally affects the expression of his face.
- In verse 8 many translations add, “Let’s go to the field” before the murder. Cain’s words to his brother, however, are unrecorded. They may have dropped out through the repetition of endings in words or been deliberately suppressed so as to focus complete attention on the action.

Why did YHWH accept Abel’s offering but reject Cain’s?

Although it’s very hard to state why the Eternal chose the way He did, here are some assumptions:

- (1) God prefers shepherds to gardeners (which seems improbable in the light of 2:15 where Adam was appointed to till the soil).
- (2) Animal sacrifice is more acceptable than vegetable offerings (which doesn’t make much sense since every stratum of the law recognizes the propriety and necessity of grain offerings as well).
- (3) God’s motives are mysterious: His preference for Abel’s sacrifice reflects the mystery of divine election.

On the same line of thought, Walter Brueggeman will say that the trouble in the narrative comes from YHWH, and not from Cain. For no given reason, He accepts and rejects. Conventional interpretation is too hard on Cain and too easy on the Eternal. It is YHWH who transforms a normal report into a life/death story for us and about us. Essential to the plot is the capricious freedom of YHWH.

(4) Inspired by Heb. 11:4, “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain,” some commentators suggest that it was the differing motives of the two brothers, known only to God, that accounts for their different treatment.

(5) The commonest view among commentators, ancient and modern, is that it was the different approach to worship that counted and that this was reflected in the quality of their gifts. On this view, while Abel offered the best of what he had, Cain just offered average produce.

Rabbi Forhman will go to great lengths based on this assumption. According to Him, because Cain was the Acquirer, he offered just the average because he was trying to bargain with God. Cain knew that God was very powerful, so perhaps bargaining chips are more rational than free-flowing gratitude. Maybe God would be happy with his gift and then continue to make him successful in his farming. Cain’s offering was not a gift of gratitude, but really a glorified insurance policy.

Although I am not completely sold on this assumption, I do find it very powerful. How many times we have done things for the Lord that don’t come from a place of gratitude in our hearts. How easy it is to turn our relationship with the Creator into a mere spiritual insurance policy.

“Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? Is it not the case that if you do well, then lift up! And if you don’t do well, then sin lies crouching at the door, its desire is unto you, yet you *māšal* over it.”

- “Crouching” is frequently and plausibly identified with the Akkadian *rābišu*, denoting various officials and also demons, especially those that guard entrances to buildings. It could also be a masculine noun “croucher.”

- The Hebrew verb, *rābaš*, conveys the idea of crouching with the goal of attachment (see Gn 49:9), lying down (49:14), or lying under a weight (Ex 23:5). Here then sin is personified as a demon crouching like a wild beast on Cain’s doorstep.

Sin is not a breaking of rules. Rather, sin is an aggressive force ready to ambush Cain. Sin is larger than Cain and takes on a life of its own. Sin is lethal. However, the Eternal makes it clear that Cain can master the beast!

- In Hebrew, the verb “rule over” is spelled identically to the noun *māšal*, a word that means parable. Although in our days parables are not that common, their use has a very interesting purpose - parables are stories meant to interpret reality.

A good parable aids us in sorting out what is essential from what is incidental. When well told, a parable takes a series of events and directs our understanding of them in a particular way.

In this sense, according to some rabbis, what the Eternal is saying to Cain in verse 7 is that the desire sin has for him can be channeled - directed to a better way. In doing so, Cain can master the beast.

- Because we’re so used to these words, we don’t really pay attention to the order in which they are placed. Most of the time we translate “not doing well” as “sin.” However, that’s not what God tells Cain. The Eternal says that if he doesn’t do well, “sin lies crouching at the door.”

Not doing good is not the same thing as doing evil. It’s simply being neutral. It sounds like God is saying that Cain, by choosing evil, will somehow become vulnerable to sin. Sin will be a crouching beast ready to pounce and overcome him.

So what is God saying here? Rabbi Fohrman offers a paraphrase of God’s speech,

“Why has your face fallen? If you are active, if you seek out the good - you can lift up your face. And if you are neutral - if you do not act positively - you can’t tread water. While being neutral is not itself an evil, it does leave you vulnerable to evil. Sin lies crouching at the door, and even the most well-intentioned neutral party can still become its prey.”

In Genesis 3, listening to the voice of the snake and driven by their desires, Adam and Eve ate from the fruit and were expelled from the Garden. In Genesis 4, Cain gives in to his anger (identifying himself with his passions), does not rule over sin, and goes from the first person in history to offer sacrifices to the first murderer ever known. Mankind once more listened to the voice of the snake and behaved as animals...

Take away:

Notes:

the golden God.

"They made a calf at Horeb, they bowed themselves down to an overlaid image. They swapped their Presence for a likeness of a grass-eating bull" Ps. 106:19–20

The Text

Exodus

24¹² Now *YHWH* said to Moses, “Come up to Me on the mountain and remain there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the law and the commandment which I have written for their instruction.” **13** So Moses arose with Joshua his servant, and Moses went up to the mountain of *ělōhîm*. **14** But to the elders, he said, “Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a legal matter, let him approach them.” **15** Then Moses went up to the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. **16** The glory of *YHWH* rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; and on the seventh day, He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud. **17** And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of *YHWH* was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop. **18** Moses entered the midst of the cloud as he went up to the mountain; and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

32¹ Then the people realized that Moses was long overdue coming down from the mountain, and so they came together against Aaron, and they said to him, “Get busy! Make *ělōhîm* for us who can lead us, because this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we have no idea what has become of him.” **2** So Aaron said to them, “Snatch the rings of gold from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters and bring them to me.” **3** All the people snatched from themselves the rings of gold that were in their ears, and they brought them to Aaron, **4** who took them from their hands and immediately began to press the gold with a metalworking tool. Thus he made a calf with a shaped sheathing. Then they said, “These are your *ělōhîm*, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” **5** When Aaron saw their reaction, he built an altar in front of it, and then Aaron made an announcement: he said, “A feast to *YHWH* tomorrow!” **6** So they got up early the next day, and they offered wholly-burned offerings, and they brought completion-offerings. And then the people sat down to eat and to drink, after which they rose to *šāhaq* [frivolity/ play].

- Why a calf?
- Why does Aaron not hesitate to listen and act upon the people's request?
- Was the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire (Ex. 13:22) around when the people decided to make the calf?
- What does Aaron intend to mean by what he says in v. 5 after he crafts the idol?
- Is this narrative the greatest failure of the people in the wilderness?
- When the people looked at Moses, did they see a kind of Pharaoh?

Some questions:

What's this story about?

- It's a story about identity. The special treasure-people whose identity has been established by the Presence of *YHWH* are suddenly in danger of becoming a people with no identity at all, a **non-people and a non-group** fragmented by the centrifugal forces of their own selfish rebellion and left without hope in a land the more empty because it has been so full of Yahweh's own Presence.
- Typologically, the golden calf incident points backward as well as forward.

- It's a story about identity. The special treasure-people whose identity has been established by the Presence of YHWH are suddenly in danger of becoming a people with no identity at all, **a non-people and a non-group fragmented by the centrifugal forces of their own selfish rebellion and left without hope in a land the more empty because it has been so full of Yahweh's own Presence.**
- Typologically, the golden calf incident points backward as well as forward. Understood within the larger context of the Torah, it points back to the fall of humankind in Genesis 3, signifying the universal weakness of human nature in the wake of the original sin. It points forward in Israelite history to the temptations of religious syncretism in the era of the monarchy.
- The NIV Commentary will say that the rapid pace with which we move from the final instructions for the tabernacle (31:18) to the rebellion at the foot of the mountain (ch. 32) is almost numbing. The reader is not at all prepared for what is about to transpire.
- This story deals with the issue of trust. On the one hand, the people have the God of their fathers they just met. On the other hand, they have all the years spent in Egypt and the kind of worship and gods they became used to. I wonder how foreign the idea of worshiping an invisible God was to them. In times of distress, it is easier to turn to what we are used to. That's what they do.

Some cool observations.

- Though the readers know for how long Moses would be gone, the Israelites had no clue of the time he would spend on the mountaintop. There is no evidence that he had ever stayed overnight on his previous trips to the top of Mount Sinai. **Thus he probably had been with his people every day since long before the exodus began, was seen constantly among them, and made himself at least theoretically available without fail to any and all of them virtually every day (see, e.g., 18:13–26).**
- Scholars debate whether Moses' intent as the narrator of this material was to convey the idea that the people "gathered around Aaron" or that they "gathered against Aaron." (The New American Commentary). After looking at the studies, I personally approach the text as Moses conveying the idea of opposition/threatening; that's why the text above reads, "came together against Aaron."
- Perhaps Israel's problem is not with Moses' leadership but with Moses' absence. It is important to remember that Moses is the only means of contact that the Israelites have with God. In fact, if we look back at 20:19, it was at Israel's own request that Moses acts as a buffer: "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die." But now Moses is taking a long time to return from his meeting with God. In light of this, it is possible that the people's reaction was also a matter of panic for the fear of losing their contact with God.
- We have the tendency to forget that while Moses was gone, the people still had manna and water!
- Aaron, the man who was supposed to "take care of the people" while their leader was gone, was the guy who mostly cooperated in crafting an idol!
- While pagans were known for building altars in front of their gods so that the deities could see the offerings, we read that the Tabernacle and later temple altars were located in their courtyard. With no direct line of sight from the ark in the holy of holies to the altar because of the curtain/veil hiding the ark was a positioning that required Israelites to have the faith to understand that the one true God actually saw what they did for him without having his idol right behind and facing the altar on which they did it. (The New American Commentary)
- The Hebrew word for "God" and "gods" is the same, **ĕlōhîm**. The form is grammatically plural, and whether the sense of the word is singular or plural depends on the surrounding context. Therefore, because of the plural pronoun "these" and the verb "brought you up", **ĕlōhîm** seems to suggest a plurality of gods. By doing so, the biblical writer is accentuating the Israelites' sin. What they are doing is horrible. It is not just idolatry, one of the standard practices of pagan religion, but polytheism as well (NIV Commentary)
- The Hebrew verb **šāhaq**, which means "to laugh, make fun," has a connotation also of sexual play.
- The irony of the story is that while the mob is howling for gods at the base of the mountain, God has just handed the sacred "tables of the testimony" to Moses (31:18) in fulfillment of the promise at 24:12. (John C. Holbert)

Why a calf?

- According to The New American Commentary, substantial evidence exists to suggest that an idol in the shape of a young bull fits the Egyptian concept of how a deity was to be envisioned. A vigorous young bull seemed to the Egyptians an appropriate way to represent a truly powerful god. Scholar Patrick D. Miller says that from Mesopotamia to Egypt, the bull "is a symbol of fertility at times, but it is also a symbol of strength, might, and fighting prowess."

- The choice of a calf is not arbitrary. It was a common idol image in the ancient Near East. It is commonly accepted by Old Testament scholars today that the ancients did not equate an idol with the god, but it was some sort of earthly representation of that god. Specifically, calves or bulls were thought to function as pedestals for the gods seated or standing over them. In this sense, the calf is analogous to the ark (the fact that both are made of gold strengthens this connection). This is important to remember because it is unlikely that the calf itself is being declared "god" by the Israelites as if they actually think that it has brought them out of Egypt. Rather, like the ark, it is the place above which God is enthroned, thus ensuring his presence with them. The calf is thus a pagan representation of the true God. Put otherwise, the Israelites are not saying that this calf and not YHWH brought them out of Egypt, but that YHWH's presence is now associated with this piece of gold. (NIV Commentary)

How many voices do you hear?

- I see that two voices are echoing in this narrative. On one side, we have YHWH's voice calling the Israelites for Himself and asking them to draw near Him. Taking heed of this voice would mean that the Israelites would need to relearn what it means to worship. Instead of a variety of idols, they would only bow down to the One True God and worship Him on His own terms.

On the other side, we have the voice of the "snake," whispering that this God was probably gone with His fellow friend Moses, and the only alternative left would be returning to the ways they were used to. The calf represented YHWH on their terms. How many of us face this same issue in our daily lives...

- Humans long for something they can see, something tangible they can touch. That's what the Israelites wanted. I'd like to know how much of it has to do with our desires and passions. I wonder how the snake still entices us to false worship by making us feel that it is our desires that have to drive the way we behave. I also wonder if that's why doing what pleases God feels so undesirable at times...

"Sin lies crouching at the door, and even the most well-intentioned neutral party can still become its prey..."

- I know it's easy to look at this narrative and blame Aaron for his mistake. Well, if you do so, you're probably right. However, before picking up the stones, let's try to understand what was going on in his mind. What were Aaron's intentions?

The real reason why Aaron crafted the idol is unknown. We don't know if he was afraid of the people (which I would be, too) or if something else was going on. The fact is that perhaps, as we have seen previously, his original desire was to sort of mitigate the situation and control the panic by creating a visible image for YHWH once it seemed like He was not around anymore.

This is evidenced in verse 5 when it seems like he wants to make use of the golden calf to keep the people faithful to YHWH (he wants them to worship Him under this representation). He realizes how bad the situation is and how far the people have turned from the ways of YHWH. However, instead of positioning himself and boldly confronting the people, he gives in and tries to make the best out of a terrible situation. He knows better, but he chooses the easiest route.

He even builds an altar and proclaims that there will be a "festival to YHWH" (*hag layhwb*) the next day (cf. the same or similar expression in 10:9; 12:14; 13:6). Throughout Exodus, we read the refrain that Israel is to leave Egypt to hold a festival to YHWH. That festival is the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai turn it into something else.

- Paying close attention to Aaron's actions, we can see how, throughout the whole situation, he couldn't pick a side. He neither stood for YHWH nor totally embraced the idolatry of the people. **Though well-intentioned, his desire to try to turn the people back to the Eternal didn't help the situation.** By becoming neutral to the situation, Aaron as well as the people were devoured by the beast.

In Exodus 32, humankind fails once again. Listening to the voice of the snake, the Israelites give in to their old ways. Instead of relying on the God who brought them out of Egypt, they crafted their own gods. The beast that crouches at the door devoured the people in the wilderness.

The same beast tried its way with the most powerful king Israel ever knew. Let's fast forward some hundred years and turn our eyes to 2 Samuel 11.

Take away:

Notes:

are you sure this is David?

“When the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate...” Gen. 3:6

The Text

2 Samuel

11¹In the following spring of the year, when the kings march out to battle, David sent Joab with his servants and all Israel, and they devastated the Ammonites and laid siege to Rabbah. David, however, remained in Jerusalem. **2**Then one particular evening David got up from his couch and, as he walked about on the roof of the royal palace, he saw from the roof a woman bathing. And the woman was very beautiful. **3**So David sent someone and made inquiries about the woman, and he reported, “She is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” **4**Then David sent messengers and took her. When she came to him, he slept with her (she had just purified herself from her uncleanness). Then she returned to her house. **5**When the woman realized that she was pregnant, she sent a message to David, saying, “I am pregnant.” **6**Then David dispatched a messenger to Joab, saying, “Send me Uriah the Hittite.” So Joab sent Uriah to David. **7**When Uriah had come to him, David asked about the well-being of Joab and the army, and about the progress of the war. **8**Then David said to Uriah, “Go down to your house and wash your feet!” So Uriah left the royal palace and a present from the king was sent after him. **9**However Uriah slept at the entrance of the royal palace with the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his own house, **10**When it was reported to David that Uriah had not gone down to his house, David said to Uriah, “Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?” **11**Then Uriah answered David, “The ark as well as Israel and Judah are dwelling in temporary shelters while my lord Joab and my lord’s servants are camping in the open field. How can I go to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As surely as *YHWH* lives and as you yourself live, I will not do such a thing!” **12**Then David said to Uriah, “Stay here another day and tomorrow I will send you back.” So Uriah stayed in Jerusalem that day. But the next day **13**David invited him to eat and drink in his presence, and made him drunk. However, in the evening he went out to sleep on his couch with the servants of his lord and he did not go down to his own house. **14**In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by Uriah. **15**He wrote in the letter: “Send Uriah into the forefront of the fiercest battle, and then withdraw from him that he may be struck down and die.”

- Why didn't David go to war? Was there any political implication in his choice?
- Why is the story placed here?
- Does the narrator try to paint David as a bad guy?
- Was Bathsheba trying to seduce David? Why does the author mention that she was bathing?
- Was Uriah suspicious of David's behavior? Did he know there was something wrong?
- Why does the author mention the name of Bathsheba's dad?

Some questions:

What's this story about?

- This is a story to catch readers off guard. The events of 2 Samuel 11 do not surprise us today. That's perhaps due to our familiarity with the text and how much this story is quoted in Christian circles. However, I wonder how much the original recipients of the text were thrown off by the recount of how their awesome and God-fearing king sinned.

As we approach this story, we have to keep in mind that the David who fell with Bathsheba was none other than the slayer of Goliath, the friend to Jonathan, the loyal servant of Saul, the man after YHWH's heart, and the sweet singer of Israel. He is not presented as a sexual pervert or a self-involved, power-hungry tyrant; quite the contrary, he is a remarkably good man, one of the best that Israel ever produced, a new Adam (Brazos Commentary).

It is also interesting to note that it seems as if the author of 2 Samuel "sets the trap" for its readers with the previous chapters. 2 Samuel 9 and 10 show David as king acting with hesed (a quality of steadfast commitment often associated with covenant). In chapter 9, he shows his loyalty to Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, who is brought to court and given an honored place there to fulfill the vow of loyalty David made to his friend Jonathan, Saul's son, whom he loved (1 Samuel 20). In chapter 10, he acts with kindness toward the Ammonites, who have just lost their king.

- This is the great turning point of the whole David story.

- This is a story of how close to becoming an animal the most of the humans can be.

Some cool observations.

- The spring was a typical time for military campaigning in the ancient Near East; the winter rains had stopped, and the labor-intensive harvest time had not yet arrived; thus, able-bodied men were available for military exploits. The comment that David remained in Jerusalem for unknown reasons is not necessarily a condemnation of him; it may simply set the scene for the following story.

- Uriah's name in Hebrew *'ûriyâ*, is a good Yahwistic name, meaning "Yahweh is my light." This may imply that he was born in Israel unless he had changed his original name at some later stage. Probably, "The Hittite" was merely a nickname. He was also listed as the last of David's "mighty men" in 2 Sam. 23:29. The irony, obviously, is that this man of foreign origins shows far greater loyalty to the customs and traditions of Israel than the Israelite king who murders him.

- If soldiers on active duty were expected to observe sexual abstinence, then Uriah, in obeying David's suggestion, would have committed a serious breach of the ritual law. This is partly supported by Uriah's determined resistance to David's efforts. Although we do not know the legal consequences of such an infringement of "war regulations," it is possible that this, too, may have been an attempt to eliminate Uriah by legal means, at the same time, attributing the paternity of the child to him.

- We are not told whether or not the letter was sealed and whether or not Uriah could read it. The essential point is that, ironically, Uriah was the bearer of his own death warrant. Similar motifs are attested in stories elsewhere, but it does not necessarily follow that; therefore there could not be an underlying historical episode. This is the only occurrence of this motif in the OT.

David, the bad guy.

- It's evident that Bathsheba is one of the main characters in 2 Samuel 11. However, she has a small role to play in any of the actions depicted in the narrative, having only one direct speech in the story, "I am pregnant" [in Hebrew, that is only two words]. Though a main character, it seems as if the author displays Bathsheba as an object that King David took, abused, and discarded.

Many scholars, however, have put some blame on Bathsheba for her adulterous act with the king. Using verse 2, they say that Bathsheba's bath was a way in which she tried to get the king's attention.

David may have had his bed on the roof, and from this relatively high position, he would have had a good view of the neighboring houses and courtyards. Thus, there is no real reason to assume that Bathsheba actually intended to be seen by him. It is most likely that she was bathing in her home's private inner courtyard, as was customary. But if the author does not write that Bathsheba was bathing to imply that she was trying to tempt David, why does he tell us what Bathsheba was doing? Well, first of all, we must understand what kind of bath she was taking.

According to many scholars, in bathing, Bathsheba was following the command of Leviticus 15, in which women

should wash after menstruation.

Therefore, the reasons that led the narrator to mention her bathing were, 1) she would be at the time of the month when she was likely to conceive; 2) she was not pregnant when she went to David; and 3) David clearly fathered the child since her husband was away at war.

- David is wandering alone on the roof, peering over at one roof after another. This is the ancient equivalent of staying up late and browsing the Internet. Is it any surprise what happens next? David had put himself in a place where he could be tempted. Deep down, he wanted to be tempted.

- Did David really need to kill Uriah? Well, at first, it doesn't seem like. Being the king, it is unlikely that David could have been brought before a court of law. However, it was David's honor that was at stake. Thus by killing his faithful warrior, David was trying to protect his own honor.

- In this story, it's interesting how Uriah behaves in ways the readers would expect David to do. In fact, Uriah drunk is more pious than David sober!

- David Gunn has traced a pattern of gift and grasp throughout the David story. When David was most attuned to giving and receiving of gift, all went well. When he attempted to grasp through his own power (as with Bathsheba), disaster followed. As God's gift, the kingdom can be a source of God's grace for Israel. As a power to be grasped, the kingdom can lead Israel and its king to be "swept away," as Samuel warned, and exile eventually demonstrates.

"... if your essential self is easily and naturally identified with your passions - you are an animal."

- We've seen how David behaves in ways none of the readers would expect throughout the entire narrative. It is as if David was out of himself. Though, from his first appearance, David has behaved as the best example of what a human can be, in 2 Samuel 11, it seems as if he simply cannot get past his passions and desires. Here are some examples:

1. David does not keep his eyes from looking at Bathsheba.

As we said previously, it is as if David placed himself in a place where he could be tempted. However, though he "couldn't control" his first look at Bathsheba, he surely could control the second.

2. David completely ignores the fact that Bathsheba was married.

If being married wasn't enough, Bathsheba was married to one of David's mighty men, one of his faithful warriors. Scholars affirm that since it was unusual to identify a woman by both her father and her husband, some suggest that both Eliam and Uriah were prominent members of David's inner military circle.

3. David activates his survival mode in trying to hide from the whole situation. First, he brings Uriah and tries to get him to sleep with his wife. When this plan fails, he decides that the best way to solve the issue is to kill Uriah.

- I believe Brueggemann puts it well when he says that, throughout the narrative, David is surely depicted as cunning, never doubting what to do next.

Unable to control his desires, one of the most faithful kings to YHWH that the world ever knew was devoured by the beast. I don't know if that's the author's intention, but it seems that Bathsheba is for David what the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and evil is for Eve. It's unfortunate how both David and Eve could not contain their desires when beholding what was a delight to the eyes.

Being a prey to the beast wasn't a struggle only for the characters of the Old Testament. Let's turn our eyes to Matthew's gospel and read one of the most interesting dialogues between Jesus and his disciple, Peter.

Take away:

Notes:

the true Human

pt.1

The Text

Matthew

16¹³ Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi and began to ask his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ **14**They said, ‘Some, “John the Baptist”; others, “Elijah”; others, “Jeremiah or [another] one of the prophets”’. **15**He says to them, ‘And you — who do you say that I am?’ **16**Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the *Christos*, the Son of the living God’. **17**Jesus answered him, ‘Happy [Blessed] are you, Simon *Bar-Jonah*, because flesh and blood has not revealed [this] to you, but my Father in heaven. **18**And I say to you, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my *ekklēsia*, and the gates of Hades will not prove stronger than it. **19**I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”’ **20**Then he ordered the disciples that they tell no one that he was the *Christos*. **21**From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that it was necessary for him to go away to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and to be killed and on the third day to be raised. **22**And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid, Lord. This shall never happen to you.” **23**But Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Away with you; get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me because your thoughts are not those of God but human thoughts.”

Some questions:

- Why does Jesus rebuke Peter in such a harsh way?
- Did Peter actually want to mess up God's plan? Why did he decide to rebuke Jesus?
- Doesn't Peter display some traces of Cain (Genesis 4) and the snake (Genesis 3)?
- What does it mean for Peter to be the Rock?
- Among the disciples, was Peter the only one thrown off by Jesus' concept of Messiah?
- How come does Peter go from the Rock to Satan?

What's this story about?

- This is a story about the complexity of having Jesus as a Messiah.

Probably because we're reading this narrative 2000 years after it happened and already know the mission of the Messiah, we don't realize how paradoxical Jesus' interpretation of what it meant for him to be the Messiah is. We'll touch more on this subject later.

- This is a crucial point in Jesus' ministry. From now on in Matthew, Galilee, with its enthusiastic crowds, has been left behind, and Jerusalem, with its hostile religious authorities, lies ahead.

- This is a story that clarifies who Jesus is.

Since the beginning of his ministry, there has been a lot of speculation about who Jesus was. That may be one of the reasons why Jesus did a quick survey with his disciples, asking, “Who do the people say the Son of Man is?” Peter, divinely inspired, answers the one-million-dollar question with the correct answer. The man they were following was Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God!

- This is, once again, a story of the snake trying to find his way through with his smooth talk.

Some cool observations.

- The fact that the people saw Jesus as a prophet implies that they believed him to be a figure of great significance and someone with a divine commission.
- Though we can't find the title "Messiah" in the OT, it is clear that by the first century, it was a title of hope to denote the human deliverer God was expected to send to his people. **The Messiah would be a "son of David" who would restore the nation to the glory and independence it had known under the first David.**
- In Mark and Luke, Jesus responds to Peter's declaration by only forbidding the disciples from speaking further, potentially leaving unaware readers wondering if Peter got it wrong. However, in Matthew, Peter's statement is warmly embraced by Jesus, leading readers to ponder why it shouldn't be publicly announced despite its correctness.
- Matthew is the only NT gospel writer to use the term *ekklēsia* (Matthew 16:18;18:17).
- **Throughout the Gospels, Peter emerges as a prominent disciple, often taking the lead.** In Acts, he leads the Jerusalem disciple group and plays a pivotal role in key developments shaping the early church, such as including Samaritans and Gentiles. By the time James took over as president of the Jerusalem church, the foundation had been laid.
Although all apostles contributed to the church's foundation, Peter's leadership, symbolized by his name "Rock," was crucial in the initial phase of the church's growth, as recognized by Jesus.
- "The gates of Hades" is a metaphor for death, which contrasts strikingly with the phrase "the living God" in verse 16. "Hades" is the NT equivalent of Sheol (the place of the dead).
[Perhaps] by saying that "the gates of Hades will not prove stronger than his *ekklēsia*," Jesus proclaimed that death would not be able to imprison and hold the church of the living God. The imagery of verse 18 is of death being unable to swallow up the new community Jesus is building.
- Peter's response in verse 22 is unlikely to have expressed his feeling alone. Just as he spoke for the other disciples in declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, so now he expresses the horror they all shared at Jesus' perverted idea of the Messiah's mission. **But as the one who has just uttered the honorific pronouncement of verse 16, he feels particularly let down and indeed shamed by the idea that his Messiah should be anything less than a public success.**

Peter and Cain.

Yes, I know that that doesn't sound like a fair comparison at first. What does Peter have to do with the first killer of human history? Well, I do believe they share two main things in common:

1. Peter and Cain resembled boldness in responding to God. As we saw in our study of Genesis 4, Cain perhaps was the first human in history to come up with the idea to offer sacrifices to God. Based on what the Bible says concerning sacrifices, we can then imply that Cain, in sacrificing some of his first fruits, was [to some extent] responding to the God of his parents. In the same way, Peter is bold enough to respond to Jesus [who, of course, was God] with the revelation that he was the Messiah.

2. Peter and Cain overreact to God's response to them. Again, going back to our Genesis 4 narrative, we saw how Cain was incapable of lifting up his face after YHWH did not pay attention to his offering. Unable to control his passion, Cain ended the life of his brother.

By now, you may be wondering, "But Peter didn't kill anyone. How can you compare him to Cain?" To do so, I believe it's interesting for us to do some background study.

As we saw previously, for the Jewish people [including Peter, of course] the implications of having the true Messiah would be triumph and freedom. Jesus, the Messiah, would lead them to a new time of glory. However, when Jesus says he would fulfill his destiny as Messiah differently than the common opinion, Peter cannot control his frustration (passion) and rebukes Jesus. The usage of the strong verb "rebuke" displays Peter's overreaction to Jesus' affirmation. It also indicates that he believed that the prospect Jesus has outlined is not a goal to be fulfilled but a disaster to be averted; other people might suffer at the hands of the authorities, but certainly not the Messiah.

Who's talking, Peter or the snake?

Okay, if you thought comparing Peter with Cain was bad now, you may think that I lost my mind by comparing Peter with the snake of Genesis 3. Before throwing me to the lions, though, let's look at two verses:

“The serpent said to the woman, “You surely will not die!” - Genesis 3:4

“And Peter took him [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid, Lord. This shall never happen to you.’” - Matthew 16:22

Can you notice a resemblance between Peter's affirmations and the snake's words to Eve?

Both of these affirmations come right after God spoke. In Genesis, God spoke to Adam, instructing him not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In Matthew, Jesus told the disciples that he needed to die to fulfill his role as the Messiah.

God's affirmations to Adam and Jesus to the disciples were *true*. Regardless of how the snake interpreted God's voice and how Adam and Eve felt about eating from the tree of knowledge, the truth always was that from eating from it, they would die. Regardless of how discouraged the disciples felt about Jesus' definition of being the Messiah and how that didn't feel good or right, the truth was that Jesus had to die.

Following that line of thought, we can [perhaps] say that Peter and the snake tried to re-interpret what has already been interpreted by God Himself.

In our Genesis 3 study, we saw that maybe the snake wasn't trying to deceive Adam and Eve by pronouncing that they wouldn't die after eating from tree. And honestly, I don't think that Peter had any intention to frustrate God's plan for the redemption of the universe through the death of His only begotten Son. However, regardless of the good intentions of the snake and Peter, their proposals were far from the truth. And the True Human has no business with what's not true!

Take away:

Notes:

the true Human

pt.2

Usually, when we talk about Jesus being tempted, the first Bible story that comes to mind is of His 40 days in the desert being tempted by the enemy (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13).

Though I do believe that's a great story concerning the temptations that our Lord faced, I would like to propose a different narrative for this class.

As usual, I am about to share concepts and ideas I am still working on. Though my final assumptions are far from complete, I believe they are Biblical truths connected to the topics we have discussed throughout the class.

For the purpose of this class, building from our previous study of Matthew 16:13-23, we will look at Jesus' prayer moments before Judas betrayed him.

The Text

Matthew

16¹³ Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi and began to ask his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' **14**They said, 'Some, "John the Baptist"; others, "Elijah"; others, "Jeremiah or [another] one of the prophets"'. **15**He says to them, 'And you — who do you say that I am?' **16**Simon Peter answered, 'You are the *Christos*, the Son of the living God'. **17**Jesus answered him, 'Happy [Blessed] are you, Simon *Bar-Jonah*, because flesh and blood has not revealed [this] to you, but my Father in heaven. **18**And I say to you, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my *ekklēsia*, and the gates of Hades will not prove stronger than it. **19**I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."'

20Then he ordered the disciples that they tell no one that he was the *Christos*.

21From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that it was necessary for him to go away to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and to be killed and on the third day to be raised. **22**And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid, Lord. This shall never happen to you." **23**But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Away with you; get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me because your thoughts are not those of God but human thoughts."

What's this story about?

- This story marks a transition of Jesus' ministry.

The phrase "From that time Jesus began" was used at 4:17 to mark the transition from the ministry of John the Baptist to that of Jesus. Now, in 16:21, the same phrase is used to mark the transition from a period of ministry that has reached its culmination in Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, to a period in which orientation towards a fate of suffering for Jesus in Jerusalem comes into sharp focus: Jesus' place in the kingdom of God he preached is as the Christ of the Davidic line, but it will be so as one for whom suffering precedes divine vindication.

- This is a story of overcoming our desires.

- This is a story about crushing the head of the snake.

- This is a story of true humanity!

Some cool observations.

- The Old Testament lays the groundwork for Jesus' understanding that suffering and death are part of his mission. You can see hints of it in Psalms 22 and 69, which are referenced during Jesus' crucifixion. Also, in Zechariah 9–14, this mix of rejection and death meshes with the Messiah's journey, adding to the picture. However, the most profound resonance is perhaps found in Isaiah 52:13–53:12. There, you find this concept of the suffering servant of YHWH, which gets echoed in passages like 20:28 and 26:28. It's this underlying theme that the New Testament really leans into when explaining why Jesus had to go through what He did.
- Apart from references to Jesus' compassion (9:36), Matthew has virtually no reference to Jesus' emotions before this point. This makes the emotion of the present episode stand out the more.
- The additional phrase in verse 38, “to the point of death,” which literally means “until death,” should probably be taken, as in Jonah 4:9 (“angry to death,” using the same phrase in LXX), as expressing the intensity of the emotion; it might be paraphrased “so very sorrowful that I could die” or even “so very sorrowful that it is killing me.”
- The “little way” of verse 39 (Luke 22:41 says it was about a stone’s throw) suggests that Jesus was still within earshot of Peter, James, and John (prayer was usually aloud, even when praying alone).
- The spirit/flesh contrast does not occur elsewhere in Matthew. Here [perhaps], the “flesh” is not so much evil or in itself opposed to the will of God, but represents human weakness over against the desire of the “inner self” to do the will of God. Initial enthusiasm and professions of loyalty too often succumb to human lethargy or fear of the consequences.
- Matthew produces a somewhat different wording for Jesus’ second prayer session. Though much of his wording repeats or rephrases the first, Matthew probably intends it to be subtly different in one important respect. While in the first prayer, Jesus says, “if it is possible, let this cup pass away from me,” in the second, Jesus says, “if this cannot pass away without my drinking it ...”. Though both forms of prayer formally leave the outcome open, the first petition explores the possibility of Jesus avoiding the cup while the second explores the possibility of Jesus not being able to avoid the cup. The center of gravity has moved in favor of the likelihood of the need to embrace the fearful fate represented by the cup.

“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass away from me...”

- I don't know if we fully grasp what Jesus was going through here. Sometimes, reading the gospels, I think we forget that He was a human. A human that shared our fears, anxiety, and desperation. I wonder if sometimes we think that facing the cross was an easy task because He was also God.
- Jesus' state of sorrow was so great that in the gospel of Luke, we learn that an angel came to comfort Him. Luke also tells us that the agony Jesus experienced was so great that His sweat became like drops of blood. I honestly believe that the temptation of fleeing from the cross was a temptation greater than any of us will ever have to face.
- Imagine being the most innocent of all humanity, someone who has never sinned and always did everything right. Now imagine knowing that part of your journey on earth would include the most humiliating death someone could face. You, being the most righteous person that ever existed, would experience death as a criminal. If a criminal death weren't enough, on your way there, you would be humiliated and mocked by the same people whom you helped.
- How would you feel? What do you think that your emotions would be telling you? What do you think you'd genuinely desire knowing that all of that was about to happen to you?
I wonder what the snake was trying to whisper in Jesus' ears while He was praying to the Father in the Gethsemane. I wonder how loud His emotions were yelling inside of Him, saying, “That's too much! That can't be true! There's gotta be another way!”
- It is at the Gethsemane that the dreadful reality of what Jesus is facing has now struck Him. As it stares Him in the face, He flinches from it. Asking God: “Does it have to be?” recognizes the conflict between His natural revulsion and the purpose of his Father. Though it can hardly be that Jesus entertains serious doubts about what He has understood to be the Father's will, a serious gap has opened between what He has understood as his Father's will and what in the reality of his human life He can perceive as desirable.
- In conclusion, Jesus' repeated predictions of his death and his statement in vv. 24 and 31 that this is to happen

“as it is written,” show that he was already well aware of his Father’s will; what is happening in Gethsemane is not the discovery of this as a new fact, but the need to come to terms in emotion and will with what He has already known in theory.

- In Jesus’ prayers (vv. 39,42), I see a human struggling with His emotions. But in Jesus’ prayers, I also see a human overcoming his emotions and holding fast to the truth!

It is interesting to me that most of us read the Gethsemane narrative and display some of the same characteristics of Peter, James, and John. I believe that one of the reasons why the disciples slept lay on the fact that they had no idea of the severity and seriousness of what Jesus was about to go through. Perhaps they slept because they thought Jesus was only doing his usual prayer time. They had no clue of what was at stake.

I fear that sometimes I am like those disciples. By not realizing the seriousness of what it means to truly do the will of the Lord, I sleep. May God help us to be more urgent daily. May God help us stay awake and pray that we will not be put to the test.

...yet not as I wish but as You wish.”

Throughout the class, we’ve been looking at narratives and identifying how the voice of the snake is smooth in finding its way into our ears and making God’s truth a little blurry to us.

We looked at stories of Bible characters who could not overcome their desires and emotions and were swallowed by the beast that crouches at the door. Not being able to hold fast to the truth, they were easy prey. We saw how the voice of the snake of Genesis 3 was the “basis” for our main characters’ bad decisions.

Giving heed to the voice of the snake, humans chose to act and react like him. Humans gave away their position as those created in the image of the Eternal to behave as mere animals.

However, in the narrative of Genesis 3, the Almighty made a promise. He promised that from the seed of the woman, One would come. In full humanity, this man would crush the head of the snake. Though I believe that sounded a little weird to Adam, Eve, and possibly even the snake, now we know who God was talking about.

The Son of Man, the One who overcame death, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Fully God and fully man.

If, in the previous classes, we saw how humans failed to actually be humans, in the person of Jesus Christ, we see someone excelling in being a true human. Overcoming His desires and emotions, He was faithful to what was true - the will of the Father.

It was because of the most of all humans that we now share in His everlasting life. Because of the gift of salvation that comes from His sacrifice, we can say with Paul, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20).

Looking at Jesus, we have an invitation not only to share in His eternal life but also to share in His true humanity.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can overcome the temptations that come our way. Looking at Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, we can obey the words of the Eternal to Cain in Genesis 4:7. We can rule the beast. **We must rule the beast.**

Praised be the name of our Lord Jesus forevermore!

Take away:

Notes: