

## THE ROOTS OF EMOTIONAL MALFUNCTIONING

It took only one generation for Adam and Eve's emotional brokenness to infect the lives of their children. The story of their first son, Cain, and his younger brother Abel highlight the tragic consequences of the fall on the emotional life of humanity. You can read the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1-16. I draw five points from their story, each illustrates how the fall has affected our capacity to function in an emotionally mature manner.

### **FIRST, DUE TO THE FALL, INSTEAD OF EMBRACING REALITY AND OPERATING OUT OF SENSE OF EMOTIONAL REALISM, WE PREFER TO FAKE REALITY BEGINNING FIRST WITH OURSELVES AND THEN MOVING ON TO OTHERS AND THE REST OF LIFE.**

Lacking the emotional strength to confront the truth about life, and ourselves we pretend reality is something it is not, preferably something better suited to our self-centeredness and grandiosity. The inevitable outcome is that we exchange humility—an accurate and authentic view of our self, with pride—a skewed, typically overestimated sense of our importance and ability. However we choose to reframe reality, our perceptual clarity is skewed. Such was the case with Cain. Cain simply could not deal with reality, in this case the fact that God had honored Abel's sacrifice and not his. He thought himself superior to Abel—though in actuality, he was not, and thus entitled to the attention and validation his brother received from God. Operating from this emotionally unrealistic stance, Cain felt entitled to put Abel down, literally, in order to lift himself up.

### **SECOND, DUE TO THE FALL, INSTEAD OF RECOGNIZING AND REGULATING OUR EMOTIONAL LIFE, WE LIVE IN IGNORANCE OF THE CONTOURS OF OUR EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE, UNAWARE OF HOW OUR EMOTIONS IMPACT OTHERS AND US.**

We become emotionally reactive in the face of difficulty and disappointment. We find it difficult if not impossible to control our own emotional life, especially our negative emotions, and are prone to various expressions of self-centeredness, including anxiety, fear, despair and rage. Such was the case with Cain. God provided Cain with a sort of "emotional tutorial, helping him identify his emotions, "Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen?" But Cain failed to recognize his jealousy and anger, and regulate his negative emotions. His anger, unacknowledged and thus uncontrolled, grew into murderous rage. In effect, Cain made Abel pay for his uncontrolled emotional life. Out of control of himself, Cain sought the ultimate control over his brother, murdering him in cold blood.

**THIRD, DUE TO THE FALL, INSTEAD OF BOUNCING BACK AFTER DISAPPOINTMENTS AND THE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH ADVERSITY, WE ARE INSTEAD OVERCOME BY THEM, AND GIVE OURSELVES OVER TO THEM.**

This was the case for Cain. He was profoundly disappointed by the fact that God preferred his brother's sacrifice to his own. As Cain read the situation, there could be no positive outcomes. Even though God revealed to Cain the way out of his predicament,

*"If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?"*

Cain saw no "redemptive sequence" which could transform God's preference of Abel's sacrifice into a blessing for him. The situation was hopeless as far as Cain was concerned. There would be no bouncing back. He lost his spiritual and relational equilibrium and never recovered. Instead, sin "mastered" him, and he lost the battle for his inner, emotional landscape to his coefficients of adversity. His "emotional melting point" was low, and the crucible container of his emotional life melted, spewing out a toxic mixture of despair and rage aimed at his innocent brother.

Fourth, due to the fall, instead of resonating with others and responding to their needs and concerns, we live in self-centered isolation, preoccupied with our own emotions and needs and unconcerned with what others are feeling or experiencing. Cain lived a selfish, and so a small and defensive life. His emotional deficits rendered him unable to cope with his brother's "success," and left him profoundly incapable of focusing on his brother's welfare. While the biblical text does not give us information on Cain's relationship with his brother, it is obvious that Cain had no positive relational connection, no genuine caring for Abel.

Cain was so consumed by his own negative emotions, so preoccupied with what he perceived as the divine slight against him, that he could not see beyond his own negative emotions to consider Abel—his feelings, his concerns, and his welfare.

Was Abel humbly grateful to God? Did he love Cain? Was he fearful of Cain? Was he sad for Cain because of his jealousy? We can only speculate. But, needless to say, Cain didn't resonate with Abel or respond in a constructive and appropriate manner to the situation.

**AND FIFTH, DUE TO THE FALL, INSTEAD OF TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR LIFE, THE SITUATIONS WE FIND OURSELVES IN—OR GET OURSELVES INTO, AND THE CONSEQUENCES ASSOCIATED WITH THESE SITUATIONS, WE BLAME OTHERS FOR OUR PREDICAMENTS AND PROBLEMS.**

Cain was the sole author of his emotional predicament and the tragedy it caused. He alone bore responsibility for his jealousy and rage. And God held him fully responsible. "If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." He failed to "master" sin, and true to God's warning, sin mastered him. God, again, gave Cain the opportunity to take responsibility for his actions after Cain killed Abel. "Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?"

But, Cain, again, refused to take responsibility for the murderous consequences of his un-mastered emotional life. He responded to God's inquiry, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

You know the rest of the story. God banished Cain him from the Garden to live the remainder of his days East of Eden in the land of Nod. Cain's story is our story. To this day, the human race resides with Cain, East of Eden, coping with an inner, emotional landscape filled with dread, isolation and fear. While few of us go to the extreme of Cain, nevertheless, we struggle with the same despair, anger, disappointment and self-centeredness. Like Cain, we live in a perpetual state of self-imposed emotional warfare. We battle the negative emotions that threaten daily to rob us of our humanity, and tempt us daily to deny the humanity of others.

East of Eden, we can't, we won't and we don't function as we were designed to function, and as we, on our best days, desperately desire to function. We engage others not out of a desire to connect and serve, but out of self-centered defensiveness and self-serving aggression. We long to live and relate as Emotionally Mature adults. But we lack the inner strength. Emotionally weak, we weaken the community by imposing our selfish needs and emotional deficits on others. Instead of serving others, we dominate them. Instead of giving to others, we take from them.

Where does this leave us? In a sad and self-destructive state to be sure, but not without hope. While we are deeply fallen and profoundly broken, yet we are marvelously designed in God's image and greatly loved by Him.

We still bear the image of our Creator. But the image of God in us has been compromised by the fall, skewed, warped, tainted, resulting in our distorted emotional life. Our emotional isolation and the negative emotions that flow from it—anger, jealousy, grandiosity, self-centeredness, etc., is a symptom of our spiritual isolation from God. We are disconnected from the source of our identity, joy and emotional strength. We simply can't function in the emotional arena as we were designed to function. Our capacity to function in accordance with our original design as emotionally mature, other-oriented adults is dramatically diminished.

And so, we have a problem, a serious and desperate problem that we incapable of solving on our own. We are emotional prisoners of the fall. But God has not abandoned us in the land of Nod. He loves us and is deeply committed to restoring us to function substantially according to our original design.

**God invites us to a life-long process of emotional restoration.**

He seeks to repair our emotional landscape, and to give us the emotional strength and insight we need to successful manage our emotions, and live and contribute to the life of the community as healthy adults

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