

CONVERSATIONS – Dialogue with the Divine

If the past year of disconnect and COVID has taught us anything, it's that connecting and conversing as humans is more than just an itch we scratch, it makes us healthy human beings.

We don't want to go without it.

And we shouldn't.

We were created by God to connect and converse.

God spoke us into existence and we– created in his image– were created to speak and converse

You know there are all kinds of theological takes about what it means that man was made in the image of God...but you could say it's this ability to speak and hold conversation.

We're the one created made in His image, and the one being that walks in the gift of language.

Darwin and the 'Origin of Species.' Language transcends *natural selection*. Language transcends *the need for survival*. It's beyond Darwin's explanations. Alfred Wallace was a friend of Darwin's and helped him come up with theories about the evolution of species on the planet. But in his mind the ability to reason converse through language was so beyond the theory of evolution that he himself chalked it up to a gift from a supreme, divine power.

As a former English major that always fascinated me, as it's like language and the ability to converse is a divine gift.

God spoke us into existence, and we – created in his image – were created to speak and converse. And not just with each other - **but with Him.**

Genesis 4 - in it we see two conversations between God and a man named Cain.

Cain and Abel is a story about two brothers that has become a part of our culture on a mythical scale, but I think because of its mythological size we've forgotten or altogether lost some of the important details.

Like we've got Cain and Abel. In our minds Abel was good. Cain was bad. Abel was holy. Cain was a murderer. In our childish impulse to have good guys and bad guys, and our culture's impulse to paint things in black and white ...Cain gets the evil end of the stick.

But in a matter of words he's already shown himself to understand worship more than a massive majority of people who attend church.

Cain didn't come in order to spectate. Cain didn't come in order to "get fed." Cain didn't come to have HIS needs met. Cain came to give. Cain realized worship starts with sacrifice and giving back to God, not consumption and spectating.

When my worship becomes about my needs and my consumption... that's not worship.

Or really it is worship, I'm just worshipping myself.

We knock Cain, but we should ask if our worship even looks like his. An act of giving to God.

Cain brought an offering.
He brought crops. Abel brought livestock. His was rejected. Abel's wasn't.

Now a whole ocean of ink has been spilled about what was right and wrong about their offerings. Many point to laws about sacrifice, but those hadn't been given yet. And it's not a sacrifice they're bringing, but an offering. An offering in the Bible could be any of a number of things... often grain and products of the harvest like Cain brought.

We look at other accounts in the Bible of their story, and it becomes clear: It wasn't about what they had in their hands. It was about what they had in their hearts.

Hebrews 11:4 - *By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.*

"It was what he believed, not what he brought, that made the difference." (MSG)

How often are we guilty of offering God our leftovers?
How often as we guilty like Cain of going through the motions and checking a box?
Probably way more often than we'd like to admit.

But praise God that he's a god of grace. God's response isn't anger. God's response is grace.

In fact it's worth noting that the author of Genesis is significantly less concerned with why Cain's sacrifice wasn't accepted, and far more focused on the response of God and the response of Cain.

God meets Cain in his anger and asks He starts with a question: ***"Why are you are you so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right."***

But confronted by grace, Cain doesn't apologize. He doesn't ask for a redo. He begins to stew. Envy turns into anger, and anger eventually gives way to an act violence.

In the classic tale Amadeus, the composer Salieri finds himself blessed. He has a good job, the favor of the emperor, and the admiration of the public. Then along comes Mozart. This man behaved like a juvenile but composed like a prodigy. Salieri almost immediately recognizes Mozart's genius. And he immediately envies it. As Mozart's popularity increases, so does Salieri's jealousy.

We see Salieiri tragically comes to believe that Mozart was loved and favored by God but he wasn't. The same way Cain was provoked by the favor on Abel, Salieri feels betrayed that Mozart would be blessed with more talent.

Again – the irony is that Salieri was already blessed. He was also talented. And he falls into the same trap that Cain fell into – so consumed with somebody else's favor that he was blind to his own blessing.

See Cain's issue is just that – he is so fixated on Abel's favor that he is blinded to his own blessing.

What blessing? Didn't God look unfavorably on his sacrifice? Sure.

But look: Cain, in this moment after this sacrifice, is still standing here, graced by the very presence of God, holding a conversation with GOD ALMIGHTY.

Cain in this moment is operating from a baseline of blessing.

God's presence is our greatest treasure.

And God in his presence is saying look: *I'll bless you like I did Abel if you do what is right!*

But the enemy's favorite strategy is to blind us to our blessings.

And his favorite tool to do that is comparison.

Now I use the word **tool** intentionally.

You can build with a hammer or you can kill with a hammer.

And there is a healthy comparison that Jesus called Martha to with Mary, the disciples to with the woman who gave all she had in a coin.. when God calls us to behold others, its to inspire Christ likeness. God doesn't call us to comparison to condemn us, but to capture our hearts.

Comparison used by a healthy heart leads to inspiration and imitation – as Paul would exhort *“Imitate me as I imitate Christ.”*

But the other side of inspiration is envy.

Cain wasn't inspired to obey in worship like Abel did or imitate his obedience.

Taking issue with his brother, jealousy and envy crept up to Cain's heart.

The enemy has turned his blessing bitter until he's blinded by bitterness.

But it's like Cain's eyes are sadly opened to the blessings he was walking in when God declares his punishment, as he says: ***“you have banished me from the land and from your presence.”***

If only Cain could have echoed the sentiment of David in Psalm 16:

“Lord, you alone are my inheritance, my cup of blessing.

The land you have given me is a pleasant land.”

We see David praise God for the land and His presence,

the same thing Cain was blinded to as he was consumed with Abel's favor.

How good would Cain's ***next*** sacrifice have been if he offered it from that heart and that perspective? What if Cain had eyes to see the blessing he was ALREADY IN?

Would that not have sparked an appropriate response of worship that was pleasing to God?

Until I see the blessing, presence, and provision of God all around me I'll never be able to offer Abel's worship – the kind that comes from faith, gratitude, and pleases God.

It's why I've got that verse in Psalm 16 hanging in my prayer closet. Just a different translation:

“The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.”

Because let me be honest. Part of the reason I'm preaching this sermon is I've lived this sermon.
From Cain's shoes.

The path God has my precious family on is... it's unique. Brain surgery. Therapies. Special needs. Full schedules. No sleep.

And unique seasons can be a recipe for comparison.

Those folks over there start looking like Mozart to me. I get consumed with the Joneses and how they've got it instead of focusing on Jesus and how he's with me.

Through common grace God can even speak through secular rappers.

There's an older song called Love Yourz where the chorus says

"There's no such thing as a life that's better than yours. Love yours."

I remember hearing that when I NEEDED to hear it.

Because the enemy would have me bitter thinking about ways life could be better.

Look I can have the heart of Cain... consumed with the blessings of others.

Or I can have the heart of David... content in the blessings I walk in.

"The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places."

I have to learn to fall in love with my life. Not just the life God has given me. The life he meets me in daily.

FALL IN LOVE WITH YOUR LIFE. The enemy wants to turn your blessings bitter.

Blessings come with responsibilities. Sometimes blessings even come with burdens. Because now you have to steward it.

The enemy loves to turn our blessings bitter.

We get the platform we asked for and then stress about the weight of it.

We get the blessing we prayed for and then complain about responsibilities.

Those kids you prayed for... they're a pain. I wish they'd sleep.

That house you prayed for... it's a lemon.

The job you prayed for... it's a headache.

All these blessings... the enemy works to make them taste bitter.

You have to fall so in love with your life that nobody else's life can steal you joy.

Comparison can't steal my contentment. Comparison can't derail my WORSHIP.

My worship of the way the truth and THE LIFE.

When **THE LIFE** is in **MY life**... I've always got reason to worship.

If I'm walking in God's presence and his perfect, loving will...

there's no such thing as a life that's better than mine...

and I've always got a reason to praise him.

No burden can derail the blessing of His presence.

But like we see with Cain, the enemy will come knocking. His favorite strategy is to turn our blessings bitter, and his favorite tool is unhealthy comparison. And when comparison has taken root, the fruit is envy.

And God in his grace through this conversation is trying to help him deal with it.

VERSE 7: *“You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.”*

Again - God is actively extending grace here. He’s present with Cain. Conversing with Cain. Blessing wasn’t absent, waiting for Cain somewhere else.

Blessing was home with him. Relationship with God is what he was created for!

Sin was the stranger.

Sin was the one crouching outside the door, waiting to see if he would let it in.

That word **“crouching”** that God uses is so crucial.

Like all cats hunting prey... it crouches... it makes itself look small.

Small. No big deal. Nothing to see here.

It’s the same with sin. It crouches. I’m small. I’m not going to hurt anyone or anything.

There’s worse thing you could do.

Sin makes you think it’s small and you can handle it. But sin wants to handle you.

As God says to Cain: **“It wants to have you.”**

But God is AT Cain’s side in this moment. And he’s ON Cain’s side.

As one translation says – **“you can conquer it!”**

God is in Cain’s corner coaching him.

And I don’t know where you are tonight, but God is in your corner.

We were created for relationship with God, at home with God,

not a life that invites sin in the door.

You can give God your sin and let him remove it.

You can give God your envy and let him remove it.

You can internalize your jealousy and comparisons and get depressed.

Or you can externalize it and get violent.

Cain gets violent – Cain invites Abel into a field thinking nobody will see it & kills him

But of course God sees him. And God meets him. Again we get a conversation.

Again we see God’s response.

Again we see Cain’s response.

First – God’s response.

By now we begin to realize as much as this is a story about Cain it’s even more about God.

God pursues. God provides. God protects.

God is so gracious.

His presence is our greatest blessing...

... and God pursues.

God had met Cain before in his lukewarm worship.

God had met him when he was downcast and angry.

And now God meets him as his hands were still stained with blood.

What you need to hear tonight: it is NEVER too late for God's grace.

The enemy loves to make you think you're disqualified...

the enemy love for you to think you're too far gone.

If anyone should have been its Cain.

And yet God pursues even still.

God asks questions. He doesn't lead with confrontation and condemnation.

He leads with questions.

Not for information. God knew exactly what happened to Abel.

He leads with questions to give him space to repent.

The questions open the door to him opening his heart.

Letting that sin back out of the door.

Letting him back in.

We see that **God's response** is grace even in the consequences of Cain's sin and the curse.

Cain's response is.... kind of open ended.

"Cain replied to the LORD, 'My punishment is too much to bear!'"

It sounds like he's complaining about his punishment. Once again refusing to repent when confronted with God's grace.

But that word punishment is also translated **"sin"** or **"iniquity"**

And ...that sounds a lot like repentance.

And God's gracious response would seem to indicate to some that Cain's expression wasn't a complaint about the punishment as much lamenting his sin.

But ... it's pretty open.

And it leaves it open for us tonight. What is your response?

We may not have blood on our hands, but to come full circle we may be in a place of worship offering lukewarm praise. Going through the motions. Checking a box.

In **Revelation 3:20** God had spoken to the church in Laodecia, He calls them lukewarm, he says I'm going to spit you out... but LOOK – I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and we will share a meal together as friends.

I love how the Bible is bookended by images of doors and somebody knocking.
In Genesis with Cain it's sin.
In Revelation it's Jesus.
Who will you let in?

God points our attention back to the blood.

But it's not blood that points to our guilt, like Abel's did Cain's.
It's the blood that cleanses our guilt – it's the blood of Christ.

Hebrews – the blood of Jesus speaks a better word.

The blood of Abel speaks condemnation.

The blood of Jesus also speaks out – it speaks forgiveness and grace and mercy.

May we respond to that mercy.

May we respond to that grace.