

Sin and Bondage

In the Beginning: A Study on Genesis 1-11 Sermon 7

Genesis 4:1-7

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In his journal, John Steinbeck called his novel *East of Eden* “the first book.” It was the book he’d always been writing. He felt it told the story of the world.¹ The novel is, as the title suggests, inspired by the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, which we arrive at today. Last week, we concluded Genesis 3. Sin and betrayal led to the loss of home for Adam and Eve, and that chapter closed with them exiled to live east of Eden (Genesis 3:23-24). Genesis 4 recounts the events of Adam and Eve’s first children, Cain and Abel. Their story is meant to answer the question: *what will life be like, east of Eden?*

We find that sin has not faded outside of Eden but intensified. Portrayed as a cunning serpent in Genesis 3, sin is now a blood-thirsty lion in Genesis 4. Sin deceived and caused shame and alienation in Genesis 3. Now, in Genesis 4, sin goes further—hunting, enslaving, and leading to bloodshed. In the tragic figure of Cain, we learn that sin, when given a foothold, can eventually bring a man into total bondage, making him do things we’d never imagined possible.

But while sin remains east of Eden, so does God. He is here in Genesis 4. He has not given up on Adam and Eve nor their children. Genesis 4 not only warns of the power of sin; it also further reveals the power of grace, God’s love and mercy extended to sinners.²

Midway through Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, the main characters read the story of Cain and Abel, and one says, “No story has power, nor will it last, unless we feel in ourselves that is it true and true of us.”³ We may not at first feel Cain’s horrific crime—fratricide, killing his brother—says anything true about us. But we need to look at the story more closely. What is true, and true of us, is the battle raging between good and evil in Cain’s *heart*. Vividly portrayed in verse 7, God warns a man walking a razor’s edge between fleeing sin and indulging it: “Sin is crouching at your door and desires to have you; you must rule over it” (Genesis 4:7). This is a razor’s edge we each walk. We will spend two weeks with Cain and Abel and focus today on this theme arising from verse 7: **Master sin or sin will master you—and it may take you places you’ve never imagined.**

So, the question organizing our study of Genesis 4:1-7 is this:

How do we master sin, so sin doesn't master us?

This passage, read in light of the rest of Scripture, suggests that mastering sin involves at least these three things: we must (1) Reckon with Sins Power to Progress; (2) Surrender to a Stronger Master; (3) Fight Like Sons and Daughters.

I. Reckon with Sin's Power to Progress

The first time the word "sin" appears in the Bible is Genesis 4:7, and it comes with a vivid description: "sin is crouching at the door; it desires *to have you*" (Genesis 4:7, NIV).⁴ It's the image of a lion, not walking, but hunting. The point: sin is powerful and after you.

We'd be mistaken, however, if we understand sin's power only as this ability to cause extreme acts, like murder. The power of sin, as this scene shows, lies also in its power to *progress*. The power of sin lies in its ability to sneak up on us by taking small footholds, then suddenly, before we realize it, seize total control. The lion's power is not just in his bite but in his ability to creep within striking distance of your throat before you've noticed. Cain doesn't go from loving his brother to killing him in an afternoon—there's a progression.

1. Heartless Worship

It starts with distance from God. Cain and Abel both come to worship God with offerings. Abel offers the choicest, the "firstborn of his flock and their fat portions" (v.4). Cain's offering suggests nothing special or sacrificial, "Cain brought of the fruit of the ground" (v.3).⁵ God is pleased with Abel's open-heartedness; God is displeased with Cain's indifference (vv.4-5).

2. Resentment

Sin takes this foothold, then grows. It progresses from indifference towards God to resentment towards a brother. Cain responds to God's acceptance of Abel and rejection of him by getting "angry and pouting" (v.5).

3. No Repentance

Sin claims its next track of land when emboldened, it refuses God's call for repentance. God comes to Cain with grace in v.6: "what's wrong," He asks Cain, "if you change your ways, you'll be accepted" (v.6). God even warns, "sin is crouching at your door, its desire is for you; you must rule it" (v.7). But without so much as a word, Cain responds by sinking his teeth into his anger, and his eyes turn blood red. He draws his brother into the field and kills him. What began as indifference toward God, grew into violence towards a brother. Could Cain ever have imagined the fuse that was lit the day he started to close off to God?

We are well aware of sin's power to cause extreme horrors—murder, adultery, hate crimes. But have we reckoned with sin's more subtle power *to grow*? Sin never stays stagnant. Give it an inch, and it will take a mile.

Where are we allowing sin a foothold? Where are we underestimating its power to grow?

Perhaps we say things like, *I'm not prideful; I just happen to be right most of the time*. Self-righteousness will grow. *I'm not lustful; it's just the culture I live in*. An awakened appetite will grow. *I'm not hateful; it's just necessary to point out their errors*. Criticism will grow. Cain's first mistake was to underestimate the power of sin to progress.

Thus, the first step in mastering sin is this: **reckon with sin's power—especially its power to grow, taking you places you'd never imagined you could go**. Sin's progression aims at more and more control of its subject; its goal is to master us. And this takes us to our second observation: to master sin, we need to surrender to a stronger master.

II. Surrender to a Stronger Master

The swiftness with which sin grows from a foothold to total control of Cain is frightening. By verse 8, Cain seems to have gone mad: with no more provocation than his own lame offering, Cain's anger has utterly possessed him, taking to a point of no return.

The second lesson of this story, then, is even more sobering: **sin doesn't just grow, in a war with human willpower, it often wins**. From Cain to Abraham, to David, to Solomon, there isn't a hero in the Bible—other than Jesus—who truly masters sin.

And it is here we come to the real difficulty with God's command in Genesis 4:7. God calls us to master sin, but so often it seems sin has mastered us. Jesus also teaches that we should rule over our sin, with a vivid metaphor: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off...." (Matthew 5:29-30). But alongside this teaching, Jesus also says we, like Cain, are enslaved to sin: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34).⁶

The Bible is not saying we all commit the *worst* acts of sin. Rather, it is saying that none of us is capable of *fully* ruling over sin. Who of us can't relate to the power of sin? Who of us doesn't have moments, or places in our lives, where despite our best intentions we end up doing things, or thinking things, we know we shouldn't? And who of our neighbors can't relate to this painful tension between trying to master our bad habits and instead of being mastered by them.

How do we respond to sin's apparent radical power to bring us under its sway?

To begin to answer this question, we should point out two common responses to avoid.

- Heroism

The first is heroism. Here, the way to handle sin is with more willpower, discipline, and strategy. It's within our power to overcome sin; we just need to step up and try harder. But not only does the heroism approach fail in practice, but it also underestimates how complex the workings of sin can be.

Consider, for example, a man born into a family with a long line of alcoholism. Not only does he inherit a proclivity towards addiction, but overuse of alcohol is modeled for him daily. On top of this, he's growing up in a sub-culture that equates handling one's liquor with manliness. So as a teenager, trying to fit in like any teenager, he starts drinking. By the time he's 22, he's a full-blown alcoholic. His drinking not only harms his body, but also his relationships and bank account. And by his own willpower, he cannot stop.

How should we evaluate this man's behavior? Is it all due to his own sin, his own fault? Why doesn't he just "rule over" his sin and stop? We need to recognize how complex such a person's situation is. And while sin is involved, so are circumstance and sicknesses. A heroic use of his willpower won't fix

this man. And it seems only right to show much mercy in our judgements of his predicament. The heroism approach underestimates the power of sin and the complexity of causation.

- **Victimhood**

However, if we reject the hero approach, we may swing to the other end of the spectrum, to what we might call the *victim* approach. Here, because sin is so powerful and acts through circumstances beyond our control—be they biological or social—, people can't help but sin. So, we should stop making people feel so guilty and start accepting the fact that this brokenness is part of life. But to simply say we can't help but be controlled by sin, also is not satisfying.

Consider a second example. A man is born in the deep south in 1820, but not into a home of alcoholics, but a home that seems healthy and stable, except for one thing: everyone is racist, and they don't even recognize it as a problem. His family, community, and school all reinforce the idea that people with a different skin color are inferior. He's inundated with this message every day of his life. By the age of 22, he's a full-blown white supremacist in how he thinks and acts.

How should we evaluate this man? Is he the victim of circumstances? Was not the lion of sin crouching at his door since he was in the crib? Did he ever have a fair chance to rule over it? But despite the power of such a setting to blind him and shape him, it wouldn't seem right to extend him all mercy. No! Our hearts cry that his racism is sin, and he needs to be held accountable.

So, victimhood—saying that sin's power is so strong that we can't find fault when people succumb to it—doesn't won't work either. In a million different ways, we are constantly living in this tension between our power to rule over sin, and sin's power to deceive and rule over us. Our driving question—*how can we master sin, so it doesn't master us?*—is not so easy to answer.

Neither heroism nor victimhood, but surrender to Christ

The battle with sin is not an external war, but an internal one. And the key actor, therefore, is not physical weapons, but the *will*. The problem with both the heroism and victimhood approaches is that they turn the battle over to the wrong will. The hero says the human will can win. The victim says the will of a crouching lion—sin—must win. But in neither case does humanity's real purpose win. There must be a third option, a third will—one more powerful and pure—that can enter the battle for us.

One of the Bible's most penetrating teachings on this conundrum between human will and sin's power comes in Romans 7. As Paul's thought unfolds, notice that we see the will of man in the battle against the will, or power, of sin:

I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand... (Romans 7:19-21)

This brings Paul to a place of helplessness—he can neither master (heroism) nor ignore (victimhood) sin: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24). In the very next verse, Paul shows us the way out. He points us to the only heart pure enough, and will strong enough, to master sin: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25).

The only way to master sin is to surrender to the stronger master, Jesus Christ. Only Jesus can bring sin under His foot, crushing the head of the Serpent. Only Jesus, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah can defeat the lion crouching at your door. In His teaching on man's enslavement to sin, Jesus says: “if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36). And being freed by Christ from sin means surrendering to God as our new master, as Paul explains, “... you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God (Romans 6:22).

In your battle with sin, have you surrendered the fight to Christ? Or are you still going it in your own strength? In your battle with sin, have you given in to it, surrendering not to the will of Christ but the will of the serpent? If you have, say “no more,” “enough,” and surrender to Christ and ask Him to fight for you. When we surrender to Christ the decisive battle is won, because that battle is the war for our soul, and now our souls belong to God. As long as sin can condemn us and shame us, it is winning. But Paul says to the Christian, “There is **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

Having said this, even when we've surrendered to Christ and know we're free of sin's condemnation, in this present life we still experience its fury and power. We're on the winning side, victory is sure, but the battle still rages. This is why early Christians used war-like language to describe Christian life:

“put to death the deeds of the body” (Colossians 3:5); “Let not sin reign in your mortal body...” (Romans 6:12).

In our third and final point, therefore, we need to ask how a life surrendered to Christ masters sin by the power and guidance of Christ. We need to see how to battle sin not as heroes, or victims, but as God’s very own sons and daughters.

III. Battling Sin as Sons and Daughters

1. Sonship

In the ancient world, slavery was everywhere, up to half of the Roman population were slaves.⁷ One could be freed from slavery by being made a free person. But there was an even more profound transformation, and this was to be not merely set free, but adopted as a son or daughter. Here, not only does the one formerly enslaved gain their rights, but they now share the family’s love and inheritance. When Paul says Christ frees us from sin, he says it happens not by setting us loose in the world to fend for ourselves but by God’s adoption of us as sons and daughters:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:15-16).

In your battle with sin, especially when you feel sin’s won a skirmish, never let it lie and say you’re separated from God. Never let it lure you into that fear. If you are in Christ, you are God’s son or daughter, and “nothing can separate you from the love of God.”⁸

2. Watch your door

Sin lurks at Cain’s door (Genesis 4:7). We all should ask: *where does sin lurk in my life? Behind what door—what path, what everyday routine—does sin lie?* In your morning prayer time, take a few minutes to think through your day asking those questions. Where you anticipate that resentment, lust, greed, or worldliness may lie in wait, ask Christ to protect you. And make wise decisions when walking near those doors.

3. Be your brother’s keeper, and ask him to keep you

God asks Cain where his brother is and he pathetically responds, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9). To fight sin, we need to do the opposite: we need to be our brother’s keeper. If you labor to protect a brother or sister in Christ from the lure of sin, you’re likely to be more vigilant about sin in your own life. Don’t fight sin alone. Find one or two brothers or sisters in Christ and agree that when it comes to the battle with sin, you’ll be each other’s keeper.

And we close where we began. Near the end of Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, some of the main characters converse about sin and evil, striving for goodness but failing, and whether or not God gives up on those who seem so deeply entrenched in darkness. Lee—a character who often embodies wisdom in the story— says powerfully, “Can you think that whatever made us—would stop trying?”⁹

If the story of salvation that follows Genesis 4 is any indication, the God who made you and sent His Son to die for you *never ceases* to listen for the sinner’s cry—that cry for deliverance from sin and forgiveness. He stands ready, and He is able, to draw every Cain out of the bondage of sin into the freedom of sonship.

Endnotes

1. See John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 413, where he writes, “A child may ask, ‘What is the world’s story about?’ And a grown man or woman may wonder, ‘What way will the world go? How does it end and, while we’re at it, what’s the story about?’ I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one, that frightened and inspired us.... Humans are caught—in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitious, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too—in a net of good and evil. I think this is the only story we have and that it occurs on all levels of feeling and intelligence.” The contents of *East of Eden* demonstrate that Steinbeck found *that* story articulated most powerfully in the narrative of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4—e.g., “We are Cain’s children,” *East of Eden*, page 270.
2. God clothed the first couple to protect them (Gen 3:21); God marks Cain to preserve his life (Gen 4:15).
3. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 268.

4. Translations render the Hebrew slightly differently, e.g., “it’s desire is contrary to you” (ESV); “it’s desire is for you” (NASB; NRSV), but with same message: sin is after you to control and dominate you.
5. Later, the writer of Hebrews tells us that the difference between the brothers was faith: “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain” (Heb 11:4).
6. Paul too, understands that humanity is not only all capable of sin, but all enslaved to it (see Rom 6:20).
7. M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (London: 1980) 65, explains, “There was no action or belief or institution,” one historian writes, “in Graeco-Roman antiquity that was not one way or another affected by the possibility that someone involved might be a slave.”
8. See Paul’s words towards the end of Romans 8, “³³ Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” (Rom 8:33-35).
9. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 600.