

# Moments before stumbling

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Sin. It is at the very center of the gospel. Without it, there would be no need for good news.

You would think we, as Christians, would be absolute experts at dealing with sin. And yet sometimes it seems as if we haven't moved past the most rudimentary academic principles. Sin is bad. Its wages are death. We are saved by grace through faith. Jesus didn't do it. Don't do it. You shouldn't have done it.

Sin comes in many different forms. It can be intentional or unintentional. It can be public and observable; or it can be private and unseen. Acts of sin vary in their perceived effects. Sometimes the effects seem small, hardly worth mentioning. And other times a cascade of separation and pain ripples ever-outward, affecting those who are near and those who are far away. In the midst of these distinctions, one unifying principle emerges: sin is ever-present.

We dwell simultaneously in the opposing states of both sin and grace. This means we are worse off than we thought (we really are that bad) and also far better off than we even realize (we really are that saved). John described this in one of his letters.

*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. (1John 1:7-8)*

I don't plan to do a theological analysis of sin, distinguishing between one original Hebrew word and another. This article also does not deal with specific sin actions. Instead, it considers the experience of living with ever-present sinfulness, of what happens in the space between *Don't do it* and *You shouldn't have done it*. We can't really afford to relegate this topic to mere academics. The stakes are just too high: all around us hearts are breaking, lives are falling apart, and people are getting hurt. We need help.

Our lens for the article will be the account of Cain and Abel paired with the parable of the prodigal son.

## The Concerned Father

When we meet Cain, he is angry, downcast, and presumably steeped in resentment. He had sweated and toiled, working the cursed ground, contending with weeds and thorns and thistles. He has brought his offering to the LORD, and he has been overlooked. Instead, God preferred Abel. We find Cain at a spiritual crossroads. As readers, we cannot help him. We know his mood and we know he is on the verge of disaster. All we can do is watch him make a choice that wrecks everything, sealing his fate as one of history's many villains.

The whole account is a lot like the parable of the prodigal son. In that story, there is also a younger son and an angry older brother. The older brother comes in from the field, approaches the house, and hears music. He finds out from a family servant that everyone is celebrating his brother's return and that his father has even killed the fatted calf. The older brother is so upset that he won't even enter the house. He stays outside, enraged.

In both stories, the concerned father figure approaches the upset older brother, offering him a new perspective. In the parable, the father pleads with the son. In the story of Cain, we hear the actual plea.

*Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." (Gen 4:6-7)*

God wants to turn Cain's attention inward by imploring him to consider his state of mind.

## Crouching, Prowling, Devouring

God could have spoken to Cain plainly, "You are at risk of hurting your brother." He didn't. Instead, he uses a literary device called personification. He turns sin into a living entity possessing both movement (crouching) and motive (it desires you).

Historically, people in the Christadelphian community used these personification texts in debates about the existence of a supernatural devil. In hindsight, the doctrinal debate might have overshadowed the actual lessons in the text. What happens if we turn to these passages for reproof and instruction instead of turning to them for doctrine? What if we take the descriptions at face value, not in order to disprove a capital-d Devil, but in order to understand what God was trying to tell Cain.

What actions or qualities are ascribed to the ideas, forces, and inclinations that oppose us?

Sin is busy. It crouches, waiting for its moment. The flesh wars against the soul. The adversary prowls like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. It entices us and carries us away. The devil wields the power of death. Sin is able to harden us with its deceitfulness. The messenger of satan torments us. The devil has schemes and forces and even flaming arrows. It tempts in the wilderness. It blinds us with darkness. It walks through dry places seeking rest, eventually returning to its unoccupied, clean, ordered home. The enemy sows weeds among the wheat at night while everyone is sleeping and then quietly slips away. The devil leaves for a while, waiting for an opportune time to return. Sin holds us in bondage. It is hostile toward God and does not subject itself. And, perhaps most surprisingly, it declares that we should not suffer: “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”<sup>1</sup>

The underlying message is that sin is active. It is present. It is strategic, coming and going at will, showing up when we are depleted and not paying attention. It acts quickly, and yet it is patient and willing to wait. It is opportunistic – filling the void, hiding anywhere, quietly wreaking havoc in secret. It is both subtle and relentless.

Sin works in the realm of opposites, much like a mythical shapeshifter hiding in plain sight. Sin tells me I am far better than you – and also much, much worse. It wants me to have my fill, taking what is not mine, doing what I ought not to do, saying what should be left unsaid. In the next moment, it encourages false piety, suggesting that holiness is obtained by ever-increasing restriction, until I find myself backed into a corner, crouching in an ash heap counting cumin seeds. Sin is indignant, telling me I have reasons to hate you, to resent you, to look down on you, to withhold forgiveness from you, to tear you to shreds in the confines of my mind. Then it turns on a dime and does the same thing to me.

Sin loves to feel overworked and overburdened. It also conjures up an ever-present sense of scarcity, hinting that there is never enough time, enough money, enough love. (Apparently, I can’t even have Naboth’s vineyard.) One moment it is the cruel Egyptian task master: “Make more bricks. I don’t care if there isn’t enough straw.” The next it sidles in as the lackadaisical deliverer,

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 4:6-7, 2Timothy 2:24-26, 1Peter 2:11, 1Peter 5:8, James 1:14, Hebrews 2:14, Hebrews 3:13, 2Corinthians 12:7, Ephesians 6:11-16, Matthew 4:1, 1John 2:11, Matthew 12:43-44, Matthew 13:24-25, Luke 4:13, Romans 7:14, Romans 8:7, Matthew 16:21-22

pedaling an easy out and the wisdom of Jeroboam: “Way too much is being required of you here. Just go to Bethel instead.”

Do we understand what is happening? Can we perceive it while it is happening? The same underlying force is showing up at the masquerade ball wearing one hundred different masks. If I expect it to show up in only one or two ways, I will miss it over and over again. How can I resist it if I don’t even know it’s there?

And yet, more often than not, I do miss it. I only realize its presence afterwards, when I perceive its effects: *it always manages to separate me from God, from myself, or from you.*

In a cunning sleight of hand, the mind often comes to terms with this grim reality by deciding that the enemy is outside of us. We know that all of the madness occurs inside our own minds, and yet we can’t seem to bear this truth. Instead, we focus on external factors. We get busy blaming people, discrediting groups, and fearing ‘bad’ influences. We’re standing with a log in our own eye, using coded, pious, ‘concerned’ church language to describe all the specks in all the eyes around us.

If you think I’m overstating my case, just look at Cain. God says, “Why are you angry?” Cain answers this question, but not with words. He answers it in a distant field with a deadly blow to his unsuspecting brother. *It’s all Abel’s fault. Abel is the reason I’m angry. If not for Abel, everything would be fine. If I can just get rid of Abel, I will be fine.*

## Repentance

God could have left Cain alone. He didn’t. Instead, he shows up and talks to him, trying to get him to consider his plight while there is still time to change. He basically says, “You might want to rethink this. A different path is possible.”

God is trying to get Cain to turn things around, to turn *himself* around. He is trying to get Cain to repent. We tend to think that people repent *after* they sin. But this story teaches something different: the opportunity for change occurs before the sin is enacted.

Within the space between intention and action lies this moment where anything can happen. It is an in-between space, a crossroads. Inside this space we have time to re-think things. Jeremiah put it well:

*Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths; ask where the good way is and walk therein, and you will find rest for your souls. (Jer 6:16, NIV)*

When we try to rethink things without any external input, we often get stuck in our own thought patterns. Jeremiah offers a way out: *Ask for help*. Talk to someone. Reason things out. Read the Bible. Read other books. Find out what has worked for people in the past. Watch a TED Talk (I know, I know, Jeremiah didn't tell anyone to watch a TED Talk). My point is that when we reach out – when we ask for help – we gain a new perspective. Light enters in, and the darkness is dispelled, at least temporarily.

So why don't we reach out?

There are a few obstacles that might keep us from asking for help. First, we may not believe that anyone really *wants* to help. Second, we may not believe that anyone is *able* to help. Third, maybe we can't bear the thought of someone finding out that we are struggling.

Richard Rohr writes about this third obstacle in his book *Breathing Under Water*. He says that when you get a bunch of people together in a church and tell them to be good, they are worse off in some ways than a group of alcoholics gathered together to admit their common struggle. Why? Because in a church setting, looking good can become so important that it begins to stifle honesty. Clearly, this is a problem.

The good news is that we can help shape our church environment. We have choices.

On the one hand, we can foster a culture riddled with shock, dismay, shame, disappointment, and judgment. That type of environment encourages secrecy. It encourages people to hide and to not seek help. In that environment, I have nowhere to turn when I am struggling with something.

On the other hand, we could nurture a culture of openness, honesty, empathy, care, concern, and support. One that accepts – *even anticipates* – the struggle. One that acknowledges the experience of living with ever-present sinfulness. One that tries to see people in a new light, *in the present*, not forever defined by – or weighed down by – their darkest thoughts or their worst moments. In this type of an environment, love and grace prevail. And reaching out for help feels safe.

## Comfort

God could have scolded, berated, and laid down the law with Cain. He didn't. He does, however, plead with Cain. And there are echoes in the parable of the prodigal son.

In the parable, the father comes out of the house to talk to the older son. Depending on the translation, he either pleads, entreats, appeals, or begs – all of which suggest that the father is offering the son a compelling argument, even a lecture, perhaps. These translations capture the unidirectional transfer of information, but they do not necessarily capture the emotional connection between the father and the son. What if the emotional connection was as important – or more important – than the words?

The Greek word translated as plead is *parakaleo*. It means to call near, to call to one's side or aid. The older brother is alone, isolated in his thoughts, determined to remain outside the house, outside of community and connection. In both stories, the father comes close – to the son's side – attempting to help. The father is not repelled by the son. He draws near.

The word *parakaleo* is often translated as *to comfort*. We find it in the beatitudes:

*Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted (parakaleo) (Matt 5:4)*

Imagine using plead, entreat, appeal, or beg here. It would be like saying, *Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be lectured*. The man of sorrows, acquainted as he was with grief, knew that lectures are cold comfort. When we are grieving, our aching hearts long for the soothing connection of community. We want the presence of someone who can handle witnessing all our confusing, overwhelming, painful emotions.

I know this from my own experience. I have received comfort from so many different people throughout my life – from people older than I am, and younger; from family members and strangers; old friends and new; therapists and people in support groups; people inside my church community and those who are outside of it. What these people all have in common is the ability to be near, to be by my side.<sup>2</sup>

This is how the father is seeking to connect with his son.

We actually need the soothing connection of community when we are struggling with *sin* just as much as we need it when we are struggling with *grief*. This same idea has emerged in addiction research. Author Johann Hari puts it well:

*The opposite of addiction is not sobriety, the opposite of addiction is connection.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Sara Schlageter's Press On article [Holding Space](#)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/johann\\_hari\\_everything\\_you\\_think\\_you\\_know\\_about\\_addiction\\_is\\_wrong](https://www.ted.com/talks/johann_hari_everything_you_think_you_know_about_addiction_is_wrong)

What if connection is the answer to much of what ails us? What if kindness actually does lead to repentance?<sup>4</sup> What if God was comforting Cain? If so, then perhaps we should focus more on comforting.

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*  
(2Cor 1:3-4)

The God of all comfort wants us to receive comfort even after we have hurt people and wrecked our relationships and messed up our sense of belonging. Can we maintain or regain at least some sense of connection? The alternative is to banish each other to permanent social exile, which does not seem to be the biblical exhortation.

*Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.* (2Cor 2:7-8)

## The Observer

God could have told Cain that he was his sin. He didn't. Instead, he shows Cain a way out. He tells him he is separate from his sin. In doing so, God sets up a dynamic in which the self is able to observe itself.

Paul described this arrangement in his letter to the Romans when he referred to three distinct internal parts: the self, the inner man, and sin. Within this system, sin is a separate agent inside of us. We considered its characteristics earlier.

*But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.* (Rom 7:20)

This passage is often used to describe the war between the competing parts. I would like to do something different with this passage. I want to concentrate on the *I* instead of the opposing forces. There is a self – *the I* – that observes the other parts.

God wanted Cain to turn his focus inward in order to observe his own internal experience. Why are you angry? Why are you downcast? What is really going on here? What is happening

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 2:4

inside you? What are you telling yourself? What are your feelings? Your thoughts? Your plans? Years later, the psalmist echoes this line of inquiry:

*Why are you in despair, O my soul?*

*And why have you become disturbed within me? (Ps 42:5)*

Let's think about thinking for a moment. Our use of language affects how we view the world. In this case, it affects how we interpret and approach our internal experience. Do I think I *am* my thoughts? Or do I *have* thoughts? *Am* I my emotions? Or do I *have* emotions? Am I my *inclinations*? Or do I *have* inclinations?

If I *have* thoughts – if I notice them without identifying with them – then I can observe my own internal experience, much as an audience watches a play. This, in turn, places some distance – a buffer – between my inclinations and my actions. This mode of observation makes it possible to witness my internal experience without acting on it.

As Observers, we watch the sin crouching at the door, while it watches us.

## Free Will

God could have stopped Cain. He didn't. Instead, he works within the parameters of free will that he has granted to his creation. He tries to offer Cain insight and direction, but Cain's free will overrules this guidance. Cain still killed Abel.

Let's think about this. God *made* Cain. He knew exactly what Cain was going through and he knew what was at stake. He knew exactly what to say to best persuade Cain and exactly when to say it. He must have said it in a spirit of love. And still Cain killed Abel.

I find this discouraging. If Cain was not dissuaded, even after talking to God, what hope do I have of mastering the sin crouching at *my* door? And if God could not help Cain, then how can I ever hope to help anyone? All of these tools – the personification of sin, repentance, comfort, observing the self – they didn't work. Cain still killed Abel.

I wonder what emotions God experienced towards Cain. Was there grief? Sorrow? Regret? What was it like for God to watch Cain fail? What is it like for God to watch us, to witness our struggles and endure our failure? I used to think of the loss of Abel when I thought about this story. Nowadays I find myself thinking more of Cain, and my heart aches for God.



I find our collective failure hard to bear, probably because iniquity and love go hand in hand, and when one abounds, the other naturally waxes cold. Because of this reciprocal relationship, sin always leaves collateral damage, impacting the love, warmth, and kindness of those in its vicinity. Sin begets sin. If you fail, I am provoked: I lose patience, I become unkind, I behave unseemly, and there's a really good chance I will start keeping a record of your wrongs.<sup>5</sup>

Sin also leaves deeper, more-insidious, longer-lasting effects. It rips through our lives like an earthquake, shaking our very foundation. How so? Because love is not just about warmth and kindness. The steady principles of love form the very ground on which we stand. Paul describes this in his letter to the Corinthians,

*Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1Cor 13:7)*

When iniquity increases, love decreases – and all these underlying principles are threatened. Life is simply harder to bear. Belief feels laborious or elusive. Hope falters. Endurance lags. Or maybe even gives up.

And yet there is a message of relief hiding in the rubble of Cain's failure. If *God* could not help, then how can *I* expect *myself* to be able to help? God set up this world so that Cain's free will would reign over God's own superior will. How, then, can I expect my own will to triumph over anyone else's will? It is utter insanity to expect such a thing. And yet I do. On some level, I still hold on to the mistaken belief that I could have helped Cain. Intellectually, I know this is absurd. On my good days, I am able to step back and simply observe the absurdity of the thought.

And so I find peace in an odd, unexpected place: God's inability to save Cain from himself. And I am somehow freed. I can begin to let go of my own compulsion to control or change people. If God can be at peace with free will – even though it is accompanied by so much failure, mess, and pain – then one day, perhaps, I might be able to become more comfortable with free will, too.

## The Storyteller

Let's return to the parable of the prodigal son, but not to the story. Instead, we're going to fix our eyes on the storyteller, the author and finisher of faith. He is standing in a crowd

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<sup>5</sup> see 1Corinthians 13

surrounded by tax collectors and sinners who are drawing as near as possible in order to hear his message. Somewhere on the periphery, Pharisees and scribes are complaining that Jesus is willing to hang out with these sorts of people. It is within this context of these two disparate audiences that Jesus weaves together his stories about lostness.

Jesus could have finished the story of the prodigal son. He didn't. Instead, he ends with the father and the older brother standing together outside the house.

*And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found." (Lk 15:31-32)*

The storyteller does not tell us how the older brother responds to the father's final plea. There are so many different ways Jesus could have ended the story. The older brother could have entered the house right away. He could have returned to the field by himself. He could have taken the other half of the inheritance and left town. He could have killed his younger brother out in the field the next day, breaking his father's heart...

By leaving the ending open, Jesus lets the religious leaders write their own ending. By not finishing the story, he is choosing love over cynicism.<sup>6</sup> Because even in the face of resentment, jealousy, and indignation, his love still hopes *all* things.

Jesus has already decided that he, like the father in his story, wants to be in the house with all the sinners. Now he is hoping that the religious folks will join him. He knows it is a stretch. They have trained themselves to reject people, convincing themselves and each other that separation is pious and necessary.

Jesus knows the religious group wants to murder him, just as Cain murdered Abel. He knows he can't stop them, that his desire for their healing cannot prevail over their own desires. He knows they are struggling with sin and he knows that they will fail. And yet he does not despair. He tries to get them to repent, to take an honest look at themselves while there is still time to change. And he leaves the door open. Are they completely lost? Or will they see him one day, when this same storyteller will say, *Enter thou into the joy of thy lord.*

On that day, love will prevail.

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<sup>6</sup> Dick Keyes, class on cynicism at L'Abri, <https://www.labriideaslibrary.org/searchtest2>