

COMING BEFORE GOD'S HOLY PRESENCE GENESIS 3:24 - 4:4a

This morning we want to go back to the Lost World. We are studying and learning about how God had revealed Himself to those who lived at the start of our world. Today let's really think about Cain and Abel. The Bible refers to Abel as righteous. In Hebrews it is Abel who heads the list of God's faithful, Heaven bound servants. We need to follow his example.

But here in the Lost World we also meet Abel's brother Cain. God warns us that Cain is the one who started a way of life that leads to the most dreadful ending there could be. The "way of Cain" leads to death without Christ, death with one's sins, and death eternally in the blackness of Hell. Thus we need to heed the bad example of Cain. We need to avoid at all costs "the way of Cain".

To experience these elements and lessons of the Lost World, a mysterious part of human history involving up to 7 billion people who were alive on this planet before the Flood, open with me to the last verse of Genesis 3. As we stand I would like to read with you Genesis 3:24 to 4:4a.

Genesis 3:24 After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden **CHERUBIM** and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. 1 Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man." 2 Later she gave birth to his brother Abel. Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. 3 In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. 4 But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.

WHAT WAS AT THE EAST OF EDEN?

God's Word is fascinating. When we slow down and look closely it all starts fitting together. So it is with Cain and Abel. To understand the enormity of God's love, To experience the reality of the revelation of God's way of salvation, and To shudder at the gravity of Cain's sin, we need to see the hardness of Cain's heart in the face of the EVIDENT HOLY PRESENCE OF GOD. What I mean is, Cain got to see what few have ever seen. Cain and Abel were raised in the HOLY PRESENCE OF GOD!

To find this lesson the Lost World offers us we need to look at that one word in v. 24. The word CHERUBIM tells us a vast amount about this time in history. Why?

CHERUBIM ALWAYS SPEAK OF GOD'S HOLY PRESENCE

Cherubim are “of the highest order or class, created with indescribable powers and beauty.” Their main purpose and activity might be summarized in this way: they are proclaimers and protectors of God’s glorious presence, His sovereignty, and His holiness.”

- ✓ Here in v. 24 they stood guard at the gate of the Garden of Eden, preventing sinful man from accessing the Tree of Life and preventing Satan from hindering the sacrificial altar (Gen. 3:24);
- ✓ But later we find they were the golden figures covering the mercy seat above the ark in the Holy of Holies (Exod. 25:17–22); In the New Testament account of the Resurrection we can see just a glimpse of this mercy seat. Remember when the women were in the tomb they saw two angels “one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying” (John 20:12). Their positions are reminiscent of the two golden cherubim who were on either side of the Mercy Seat on the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 25:18). The two angels in the garden were posted at either end of the tomb of Jesus, who, by the sacrifice He had just made of His own life, became the true and eternal Mercy Seat for sinful mankind.¹
- ✓ But most revealing about the CHERUBIM is the fact that they attended the glory of God in Ezekiel’s vision (Ezek. 1). There we find that CHERUBIM had an extraordinary appearance with four faces—that of a man, lion, ox, and eagle. They had four wings and feet like a calf, gleaming like burnished bronze. And in Ezekiel 1 they attended the glory of God² preparatory for judgment.

EZEKIEL GETS TO SEE GOD'S HOLY PRESENCE

Please turn there with me to Ezekiel 1. In the Book of Ezekiel, we meet an Old Testament saint who feasted upon the whole counsel of God. Even those words that were “hard sayings” became delectable to him. For us to progress in sanctification in this New Year, we must develop an appetite for all of the Word of God—like Ezekiel. The prophet Ezekiel was a victim of the Babylonian captivity. He was deported from his homeland and carried off to an alien and pagan nation. Note what he saw in v. 4 as he sat by the river Kebar and experienced a remarkable vision of the glory of God:

“And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of

¹ MacArthur, John F., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press) 1983.

² Enns, Paul, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press) 1996.

the midst thereof as the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire.”
(Ezekiel 1:4)

This whirlwind, cloud, and fire seem to indicate a kind of theophany. A theophany is an outward, visible manifestation of the invisible God, such as Moses saw in the burning bush and such as the Israelites followed through the wilderness in the form of a pillar of cloud and pillar of fire. Such visions usually involved some manifestation of fire and/or the appearance of the glory cloud called the shekinah, which is characterized by a radiant, dazzling brightness.

What we need to look at this morning is how the Holy Presence of God affects those who experience Him. In Ezekiel we see that such manifestations of divine glory always filled the beholder with dread and awe. When they were confronted with the terrifying presence of the living God, they saw an all-consuming fire. Ezekiel’s vision resembles the vision of the prophet Isaiah and that of John on Patmos. However, what follows is unique to Ezekiel’s vision:

“Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings. And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf’s foot: and they sparkled like the color of burnished brass.” (Ezekiel 1:5-7)

The description of these four creatures explains to us what must have been at the altar in Genesis 3:24. Remember God placed CHERUBIM at the east of the Garden of Eden armed with a flaming sword to guard the tree of life and also to protect the place where His Holy Presence could be approached. They also resemble the four beasts that are around the throne by the sea of glass in Revelation 4:6-8, except that the creatures in John’s vision had six wings, as did the seraphim in Isaiah 6.

The strange motion displayed by the creatures in Ezekiel has provoked all sorts of bizarre speculation, including the idea that Ezekiel was witnessing an ancient visitation by an alien in a flying saucer. But the origin of the four living creatures was not Mars or Venus. Their abode was heaven itself. Ezekiel describes further:

“And they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides; and they four had their faces and their wings. Their wings were joined one to another; they turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward. “As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle.” (Ezekiel 1:8-10)

The four living creatures seem to have supported³ the platform for God’s throne. They had a quasi-human form and stood upright.

³ Sproul, R. C., *The Soul’s Quest for God*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1992.

They had a human face and human hands, yet they differed dramatically from normal human beings.

They each had four faces, four wings, and feet whose soles were like those of calves.

It appears from close study that these four-faced creatures represented the highest forms of created life:

- ✓ Man, mentioned first, faced forward;
- ✓ The lion was considered the king of the wild beasts;
- ✓ The ox was king of the domesticated animals; and
- ✓ The eagle was ruler⁴ of the sky.

We have already studied them as the four-faced creatures in Revelation 4:7. There they are described as “four living ones or beings.” These are the cherubim, those angels frequently referred to in the Old Testament in connection with God’s presence, power, and holiness. Although John’s description is not identical to Ezekiel’s, they are obviously both referring to the same supernatural and indescribable beings **full of eyes**. Although not omniscient—an attribute reserved for God alone—these angels have a comprehensive knowledge and perception. Nothing escapes their scrutiny (cf. v. 8).⁵

The faces were later used as symbols for the four gospel writers—Matthew was depicted in Christian art as a man, Mark as a lion, Luke as an ox, and John as an eagle.

The four creatures formed a perfect square. “Four-square” indicates perfect symmetry. No matter from which direction one observed the creatures, a different face was seen on all of them. All four faces were visible from any angle. The closest face would always be the human one; the face on the left would be the ox; the face on the right would be the lion; and the one in the rear would be the eagle.

“Thus were their faces: and their wings were stretched upward; two wings of every one were joined one to another, and two covered their bodies.” (Ezekiel 1:11)

The creatures were linked together by their wingtips. Two wings of each creature stretched out to touch the others, resembling the outspread wings of the cherubim who guarded the sacred Ark of the Covenant (see Exodus 25:20). Two wings shielded their bodies from the divine glory, while the other two supported the heavenly platform on which God’s throne stood.

“And they went every one straight forward: whither the spirit was to go, they went; and they turned not when they went. As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, and like the appearance of lamps: it went up and down among the living creatures;

⁴ John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel*, Tyndale OTC, p. 55.

⁵ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, (Dallas: Word Publishing) 1997.

and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning.” (Ezekiel 1:12-14)

Though scholars disagree about the meaning of this portion of the vision, I believe it conveys the idea of motion impelled by the divine Spirit. In a commentary on Ezekiel, Walter Eichrodt observes:

What is envisaged is not progress along the surface of the earth, but hovering among the clouds, which form the brightly shining background against which the figures are seen. They have no will of their own, but are ruled by the might of the Spirit streaming through them. Because they face to all four points of the compass, it is unnecessary for them to turn, and thus they always appear as if seen from the front.

In the center of the hollow square made by the four living creatures was the bright fire, the burning coals and lamps, punctuated by flashes of lightning. These images all suggest theophany. In Abraham’s vision in which God swore an oath by himself, God appeared as a smoking furnace and burning lamp that moved between the pieces of carved animals (Genesis 15:17), clearly indicating the divine presence. As the lightning of God flashed on Mt. Sinai, here it signaled the movement of the angelic beings propelled by the Holy Spirit of God.⁶

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU COME INTO GOD'S HOLY PRESENCE?

So wherever the CHERUBIM are, we find the Holy Presence of God. Now quickly rehearse in your mind all the times we have observed in God's Word the entrance of individuals into God's Holy Presence. A summary of their feelings would be feelings of dread, amazement, a loss of a sense of firmness and security, a sense of fear (quaking), being swallowed up, annihilation, consternation, a fear of death, a sense of folly, feebleness, and pollution, a sense of worthlessness (dust and ashes), a sense of dread, terror, confoundedness, and shame. These are not pleasant sensations for the normal person. If finding God involves these experiences, who would deliberately seek Him? Who wants to experience the loss of security and a sense of annihilation?⁷

Remember the vividness of Isaiah’s response? He begins with an exclamation of woe. This “woefulness” reflects an experience of a sense of doom. In the temple Isaiah’s prophetic utterance is directed inwardly. He pronounces the woe of God not on the external enemies of Israel, not on the hypocrites around him, but in the presence of the majesty of God, he pronounces the malediction on himself—
“Woe is me!”

⁶Sproul, R. C., *The Soul's Quest for God*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1992.

⁷Sproul, R. C., *If There's a God, Why Are There Atheists?*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1978.

In this pronouncement Isaiah expresses the feeling of calamity. He has been exposed to the majesty of God, and the fear of death comes upon him. He says “woe” because he feels “ruined” or “undone.” Vos says of this, “This is a sense, not of general fear, but of moral dissolution.”

Thus, in Isaiah’s case, the feeling of being undone, or dissolved, or disintegrated accompanies his vision of the holiness of God. In contemporary nomenclature we use terms like “coming apart at the seams,” “falling apart,” “going to pieces,” “being shattered,” “coming unglued,” “losing one’s cool,” to describe this type of experience. To come apart is to be disintegrated. The loss of a sense of being “integrated” or of “having it all together” produces insecurity and instability. To overcome these feeling-states, men seek to be “whole.” The threat of disintegration or dissolution is a serious one to man. The holiness of God manifests that threat to the utmost.

The disintegrating factor in Isaiah’s experience is not difficult to ascertain. His self-image is destroyed as he faces himself in the light of absolute holiness. The manifestation of God’s holiness functions as the supreme iconoclast. In his encounter with God, Isaiah not only apprehends something about God but he also apprehends something about Isaiah. His vision of God brings with it a new vision of himself. In this experience Isaiah’s ego is not simply bruised but is smashed. And thus he feels “undone.”

The self-realization that accompanies the sense of disintegration is expressed in terms of a loss of a sense of purity. He says, “I am a man of unclean lips.” This loss of cleanness or purity has an obvious moral referent. In the presence of the Holy, Isaiah feels dirty. The sense of filth, of dirt, of uncleanness is a common human feeling associated with moral guilt. When guilt feelings are resolved in the counter experience of forgiveness, men frequently use such images as being made clean or fresh or “white as snow.” The feeling of being clean is a positive moral feeling; the feeling of being dirty or filthy is clearly a negative feeling. It is an experience of pain, not of pleasure⁸

So, back to Genesis 4. Cain and Abel had often seen their parents come and be undone before the awesome, holy Presence of God.

PARENTS THAT BROUGHT THEIR CHILDREN TO WORSHIP IN GOD'S HOLY PRESENCE

In rich earth flew beneath the chubby feet of the boys. It was Saturday again. Every Saturday mom and dad always took them back to that high wall and the little place outside the wall called the altar. There Cain and Abel would watch each week as in tearful reverence their parents killed a beautiful white lamb. And with crimson stained hands placed the lifeless body of that innocent lamb on the

⁸Sproul, R. C., *If There's a God, Why Are There Atheists?*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1978.

blackened rocks piled up. Pouring the blood around the base of the altar, they burned that lamb atop a pile of wood atop those rocks.

The family had done this same thing every week for as long as the little minds of Cain and Abel could recall. Each time it was the same story retold by Adam to his family.

- ✓ The Wonderful walks with the Creator.
- ✓ The fateful day they chose to disobey.
- ✓ The awful eviction from Paradise.
- ✓ The growing curse of the thistles and weeds in the soil of the planet.
- ✓ But every week it all came back to this part. And with wide eyes the boys heard about how God had set up this altar and told Adam and Eve this was the only place they could meet with Him. And, this bloody sacrifice was the key to pleasing Him and covering their sins whatever those were.

The one part that never got old was those amazing cherubim. With those four faces, they always seemed to be looking right at you no matter which direction you came from. Those guardians of God Holy presence from Whose presence one of their former members, the anointed cherub Lucifer had fallen. Now they remain guardians of God's Holy Presence.

Look back to Genesis 4, where we read of Cain and Abel's sacrifice:

“So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. And Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard” (Gen. 4:3-5).

CAIN AND ABEL HAD BEEN TAUGHT ABOUT A PLACE TO WORSHIP GOD

Cain and Abel had been taught there was a place to worship. We see this because they brought offerings. And, some sort of altar must have been used on which to make the sacrifices. There is no mention of their erecting an altar at this time. So it must mean that an altar already existed near the east side of the Garden of Eden, where God had placed the cherubim with the flaming sword to prevent man from reentering.

This would be perfectly consistent with God's grace. Here we see that from the beginning, He would have provided for some means of worship. With the CHERUBIM standing guard the altar here was a forerunner of the mercy seat, a place where man could come for forgiveness and atonement. Here on the first page of man's history God promised a future Deliverer, and here He provided a temporary means of worship and sacrifice.

CAIN AND ABEL HAD BEEN TAUGHT ABOUT A TIME FOR WORSHIP OF GOD

These verses also suggest a *time* for worship. “In the course of time,” means literally, “at the end of days,” that is, at the end of a certain period of time. The most likely way to interpret this would be that Sabbath or 7th day of Creation week. In this day God was to be approached with an offering. Thus God had revealed to them He expected a special time for sacrificing. God is a God of order, and we know that in later centuries He did prescribe definite times and ways of worshiping. The fact that Cain and Abel came to sacrifice at the same time also suggests that God had specified a particular time.

CAIN AND ABEL HAD BEEN TAUGHT ABOUT A WAY TO WORSHIP GOD

I also believe that God's Word shows He had designated a way to worship. Cain and Abel would know nothing about the need for worship or sacrifice, much less the way, had they not been told by God-perhaps through their parents.

Here is Genesis 4 we see the 1st sacrifice. Isn't it significant that the first recorded act of worship was sacrificial a sin offering? This is always the supreme act of worship in all of God's covenants with His people.

Abraham sacrificed to God, and through Moses came the complicated and demanding rituals of sacrifice of the Old Covenant.

The heart of the New Covenant is Jesus' perfect, once-for-all sacrifice on the cross.

So, it would be inconceivable that Cain and Abel accidentally stumbled onto sacrifice as a way of worshiping God. The fact that God accepted only the one sacrificial offering also seems to indicate that He had established a pattern for worship.

A place to worship, a time to worship and a way to worship. Parents are you leading your children there regularly?

Young people, are you following?

Next week we will see the horrible indifference of Cain.

But this morning God's Holy Presence demands and seeks this worship.

From the 1st pages of human history, from the Lost World we see God's Holy Presence may be sought and found.

Let's come to Him this morning.

Augustus M. Toplady
Rock of Ages

- 1 Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r.
- 2 Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill the law's demands,
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears for ever flow,
All for sin could not atone,
Thou must save and Thou alone.
- 3 Nothing in my hand I bring:
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Vile, I to the fountain fly:
Wash me, Savior, or I die.