

III. Sacred Space in Promise

Adam and Eve's decision to yield to the serpent's temptation had broader impact than merely introducing sin into the human race. It had a calamitous effect on the entire created order, destroying sacred space and, by implication, desolating the creation's shalomic character. These things are at the heart of the penalty of *death*, for death refers biblically not to the cessation of animate existence, but the destruction of the creation's ability to fulfill its intended design.

- As it has its focal point in man, death refers to the loss of true humanity through the introduction of human dysfunction centered in the principle of estrangement.
- Because of man's role in relation to the rest of the created order, his estrangement from God and himself brings estrangement from every other created thing. This is evident in the way Adam's disobedience brought a curse upon the earth (Genesis 3:17-19). Adam had violated the principle of shalom by upsetting God's ordained hierarchy, and God sealed this disorder by means of His curse. In God's design, the earth was to serve Adam as its lord by yielding itself and its produce to him. But now, the earthly creation would act against man and effectively reign over him by causing his life to be filled with painful labor and struggle. The ground would devour man's time, energy, enthusiasm and joy, and, in the end, consume his flesh in the grave.

The shalomic nature of the creation expressed in the harmonious interrelationship of all things was replaced with the "death" that is estrangement and enmity. At the very heart of that estrangement was man's alienation from God, and therefore the destruction of sacred space. This destruction, however, wasn't absolute: The Fall didn't completely eliminate God's interaction with men, but put an end to its creational expression. The divine-human encounter would continue after Adam and Eve were expelled from God's garden-sanctuary, but in a compromised form. Toward the accomplishment of His eternal goal for His creation, God would continue to break through the barrier of estrangement with His image-bearers so as to make Himself present and known to them, but the previous continuous and natural Father-son intimacy of the original creation was gone. Sacred space would now exist in the realm of the mysterious and cultic.

A. The Pre-Patriarchal Period

Following the pronouncement of His curse upon the serpent, woman, man and earth, God expelled Adam and Eve from His garden-sanctuary and terminated their access to the tree of life. That expulsion itself testified to the intrusion of death, as would man's forthcoming struggle to survive in his new and hostile surroundings. And yet, all was not lost; before sending Adam and Eve out into the world, God issued a promise that would carry the hope of mankind forward until the day of its appointed fulfillment.

1. Protoevangelium

Adam's disobedience introduced death to the created order, but in the midst of the curse God promised the recovery of life. Appropriately, the divine promise was issued in the context of the curse upon the serpent (Genesis 3:15).

- a. The serpent had instigated the episode that resulted in death, and so it was fitting that God should set His promise regarding the restoration of life in the midst of His pronouncement against the serpent. The promise specifically pertained to the serpent's destruction, but the implication was that his demise would include the destruction of his works. The "bruising" of the serpent's head would serve to overthrow the curse imposed on the entire created order.
- b. This conquest was to come through Eve's seed. The curse formalized a state of enmity between the serpent and Eve, and that enmity would be manifested in the perpetual hostile relationship between her seed and his. And yet, from this line of descendents one offspring of Eve would finally bring this enmity to a head by triumphing over the serpent, and so also over all those who belong to him.
- c. This promise of a triumphant human seed is God's first indication of His intention to address and reverse the calamity of the Fall, and Adam understood the significance of God's oath. God was promising life through the woman, and Adam acknowledged and celebrated His promise by naming her Eve, expressing her status as the mother of all the living (3:20). This designation certainly reflected what was true in the physical realm; every human being would claim Eve as his or her mother. But Adam's act was an expression of his faith in God: he believed God concerning His promise of a conquering seed, and it was in this sense that Adam acknowledged Eve as the mother of all the living. She would give birth to the Seed who Himself is the "Living One"; the One whose triumph would recover life for all men by reconciling and restoring them to themselves and their Creator-Father. Ironically, the very same woman who brought death upon the world as the instrument of the serpent was now God's chosen instrument to recover life. As death had come upon the creation through man, so would life.

*"In the context, it shows Adam reclaiming dominion in faith through **naming** his wife **the mother**, which cannot help but allude to the more specific role she will have as the one who will provide a seed who will strike the serpent [who is the usurper]...The seed of the woman will restore the lost glory...The realization of the kingdom of God is linked to the future of the human race."*

(Stephen Dempster, Dominion and Dynasty, emphasis in original)

2. Introduction of Provisional Sacred Space

When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, they were effectively sent away from God's presence. They sought independence as a way to become more like God; they gained an independence that separated them from God and His life. The extent and significance of this separation become evident as the storyline progresses and turns its attention to Adam's first two sons, Cain and Abel. In that regard, it's notable that nothing is revealed about the lives of these two individuals prior to the circumstance presented in Genesis 4:3ff. The text mentions their vocations, but only because that information is relevant to the matter of concern, which is their respective acts of worship. These acts provide profound insight into the consequences of the Fall and its impact on sacred space.

The first two chapters of Genesis reveal that man's unique nature as divine image-bearer was to serve his created function as divine *son*. All of his roles and responsibilities were to be met in the context of his core devotion to his Creator-Father; above all else, man was created to worship his God, for worship is the essence of communion when viewed from the human side. The divine image in man serves the goal of divine-human communion, and communion is worship. And since the Fall did not – indeed, could not – destroy man's essential nature as image-bearer, it follows that worship also continued subsequent to it. But, given what the Fall entailed, there should be every expectation that man's worship of God was radically altered by it.

Adam and Eve's disobedience had far-reaching effects that implicated the whole created order, but the core issue was its effect on the divine-human relationship. The Scripture emphasizes this truth by turning first to the matter of worship as it begins the process of chronicling man's new existence out of the Garden (4:1-7). This passage reinforces the fact that the Fall didn't eradicate either human consciousness of God or the need to engage Him; *what it did do is introduce psychological and spiritual **distance** into worship because of the new, determinative reality of alienation between man and God.* Human independence had come at the cost of estrangement: Adam's intimate familiarity with God as his Father had been replaced by a pervasive sense of strangeness. God had become distant and increasingly mysterious within human consciousness, so that His person and presence now needed to be **mediated** to His image-bearers. Because of the Fall, worship – even authentic worship – was now a matter of symbolism and sacrament.

The text highlights this radical alteration by recounting the first post-Fall worship episode involving Adam's two sons, Cain and Abel. Often the common features in their worship are overlooked in the process of noting the differences, but those commonalities are crucially important because they show that the curse of estrangement had passed to them from their parents. Whatever the differences in the particulars of their worship and the way it was received, both men's worship reflected the reality of distance between them and God – distance addressed through ritual offerings. Abel's worship was pleasing and Cain's was not, but both were constrained to encounter God in the same way.

a. Symbolic Sacred Space – Abel

In considering these two acts of worship, the first thing to observe is that Cain and Abel *brought* offerings to God. This suggests that there existed a particular locale – possibly an altar – that was recognized by Adam and his family as the designated place of divine-human encounter. *This is important in that it shows that sacred space had taken on a temporal and spatial quality;* human encounter with God was now a matter of tangible symbols and sacraments.

While some have theorized that Cain and Abel's presenting sacrifices points to such practices being a part of life in the Garden, the fact that there is no mention (or suggestion) of either altars or offerings prior to this event argues otherwise. Indeed, this account coming immediately after the Fall suggests a *change* in man's worship arising from it. Estrangement now necessitated mediated worship.

Abel brought an offering to God and his act of worship was accepted by Him (4:4). Nevertheless, it remains that his worship assumed the form of symbol and sacrament. The point is simply this: *Abel, being a son of Adam, had no capacity to commune with God directly; his worship, although acceptable to God, reflected both distance and mediation.* Abel's worship was still set in the framework of fundamental human estrangement; though he was a man of faith (Hebrews 11:4), Abel was constrained to express his faith in the context of the curse.

b. Pseudo-Sacred Space – Cain

Cain brought his own offering to God, and like his brother's, his offering was entirely voluntary. The text gives no indication that either man was acting out of compulsion, whether by divine command or the need for forgiveness (as in the case of a sin offering). Both Cain and Abel brought their offerings freely, and, as such, their actions testify to the reality that fallen man cannot escape his own created identity; he still retains his inherent need for fellowship with his Creator.

The Scripture records these as the first offerings presented by men, and has them being brought apart from divine directive. *In this way the text seems to indicate that the universal human religious practice of ritual offerings (in whatever form) does not have its origin in God's prescription or command.* Cain and Abel are shown bringing offerings without any indication that God had prescribed them (and one cannot "read back" onto this context the commanded sacrifices of the Levitical cultus). *But there is equally no suggestion that this practice was merely an accidental invention.* Rather, the two brothers brought offerings to God because, as beings created in His image, they were moved within themselves to draw near to Him. At the same time, their awareness of the distance between them and God – made tangible to them by their toilsome existence outside the Garden – left them seeking a way to mediate His presence.

Cain and Abel shared the same means of approach to God, and both men brought offerings taken from the fruit of their labors. But whereas God was pleased with Abel's offering, He had no regard for Cain's (4:5). The text doesn't explain how God made His displeasure known, but Cain was clearly aware that his offering had been rejected. What is important to observe is that the source of God's displeasure was Cain himself. Cain, like his brother, brought an offering drawn from his own wealth and produce, and there is no indication that God found fault with the offering because of its *form*. His lack of regard for Cain's offering was due to the heart that lay behind it.

Both employed the devices of symbol and sacrament to draw near to God in worship, but that's where the similarity ends. Abel's offering constituted true worship, but Cain's was counterfeit. Each man's worship reflected the realities of distance and mediation, but whereas Abel's bridged the chasm of estrangement, Cain's "worship" perpetuated it. Cain's worship was the effective self-worship of fallen man – the worship that views deity through utilitarian eyes.

Like Abel, Cain's actions expressed the inherent human need to draw near to and interact with God, but his "worship" reflected his fallen condition. *Cain's encounter with God is the first example of the pseudo-worship that characterizes man in his autonomous estrangement.* In this way it provides the paradigm for all human religion in every place and time. For, every religious form reflects the conflicted duplicity of the human soul: Being image-bearers, people are moved within themselves to seek some sort of encounter with deity, but at an acceptable spiritual and psychological distance determined by their estrangement. Human religious practice is ultimately self-concerned and self-seeking; it doesn't seek closeness to God Himself – which is true worship, but access to His provision.

- 1) That this was the case with Cain is evident first in the description of his offering. Whereas Abel brought the "firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions," Cain's offering carried no such distinction. At issue was not the form of his offering, but its quality.
- 2) But God's displeasure wasn't bound to the offering itself, but what the offering represented in terms of the person of Cain. God has no interest in crops or animals; He desires worship from His image-bearers, and what Cain brought testified to how he viewed his Creator and His worship.
- 3) Cain's offering was concerned with *Cain*, and the greatest proof of this was his response to God's displeasure and subsequent rebuke (4:5-8). God lovingly exhorted Cain and warned him not to yield to the sin that clearly was "crouching at the door," and he responded, not by humbly acknowledging his folly and praising his good and gracious God, but by killing the brother whose accepted offering had humiliated him.

Cain is the model of the pseudo-worship of the natural man, and this is reinforced by the subsequent narrative (4:16ff). As punishment for murdering Abel, God banished Cain and consigned him to be a wanderer and scavenger on the earth. The earth's enmity toward man, sealed in the curse, was to be multiplied for him. His father Adam was able to obtain a yield from the ground only through toilsome labor (3:18-19), but the earth would close itself off to Cain altogether.

The heightening of the Adamic curse suggests the intensification of human estrangement and rebellion against God, and the text substantiates this by two sub-texts that follow immediately upon Cain's banishment. The first is the account of the first city – a city Cain built and named after the son in his own image. Human estrangement was expressing itself in the *city of man*, a religio-sociological concept reflecting man's sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency and expressed in the narrative by the emergence and development of human culture and technology (4:17-22). The second is the poem of Lamech (4:23-24), in which this Cainite brazenly celebrated his arrogant brutality and the fact that it exceeded that of his notorious forefather. If Cain's notoriety warranted a seven-fold response by God (4:15), his was worthy of a much greater one.