

Sin and Its Desire

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it. (Genesis 4:7)

Genesis 4:7 introduces the reader to the word sin personified. "Sin is crouching at the door." It has a desire, and that desire "is contrary to you." Sin is an enemy. But what is sin? What is its origin? Why must I rule over it? What are the consequences of failing to rule over it? The Bible has the answer to these questions beginning in Genesis.

In the context of Genesis 4:7, sin is not doing well. Cain was angry with God and his brother Abel. Both presented offerings of worship to God. But God rejected Cain's offering while accepting Abel's. Scripture hints at why the LORD had no regard for Cain's offering. Abel's offering is described as being the firstborn of the flock and having the fat portions. But Cain brought the "fruit of the ground," not the best of firstfruits (Exo 23:19).

The issue was not that one was a blood sacrifice and the other a fruit offering. Both types of offerings were acceptable ways to express worship and thanksgiving. The issue is Cain did not give God his best. The LORD asked Cain, "Why are you angry? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it." Cain must do well. Doing well is God's expectation for His people. "Do" describes the behavior, and "well" is an adverb meaning good or a proper manner, justly, or rightly. Cain can repent – he can turn this around and present God with an offering that God will regard. But will he? God tells him that sin is present and desires to rule over Cain. He must rule over sin by ceasing to be angry and doing what pleases the LORD. If he doesn't, evil wins!

Before Adam and Eve sinned, an angel or angels sinned. Scripture seems to hint that the first sinner was the serpent who deceived Eve in the Garden. We cannot be sure where the first sin occurred (in heaven or on the earth), but the serpent sinned, angels sinned, Eve and Adam sinned, and sin entered the perfect world God made. But sin was not alone – sin brought death (Rom 5:12). Sin separates man from God. Romans 6:23 states that "the wages of sin is death." But what is sin? Sin is a transgression of the Law or lawlessness (1Jo 3:4). Law, in this sense, describes what God the Sovereign has communicated as required or prohibited for His creation. God told Adam not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This prohibition gave them a moral (right or wrong) choice. Now Cain has a choice. Sin is living as though there is no law. A person doesn't stop at a red light, speeds, drives on the wrong side of the road, or doesn't yield to pedestrians. She is operating as though there are no laws for driving. Today it is common to call sin a mistake like "mistakes were made" when referring to sexual immorality. It is a mistake to type the wrong phone number on a form. But sin is different. Sin is a failure to do what one knows is morally or ethically right (Jam 4:17).

Sin continues to be a problem throughout Genesis. In chapters 1-11, there are seven different sin stories clearly illustrating that man can't perfectly rule over sin. Even Noah, a man described as righteous and blameless, could not rule over the sin of being drunk after the flood. The conduct of the men of Sodom and Gomorrah is a "very grave sin" (18:20). In Genesis 31, Jacob asked Laban, "What is my great sin?" Joseph asked Potiphar's wife, "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" And Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood" (42:22). Joseph understood that lying with a man's wife was a sin against God. Reuben understood that what they did to Joseph was wrong – it was sin. And Reuben understood that there must be a reckoning. Sin cannot go unpunished. No one wants to live in a world in which there are no consequences for sin. Reckoning is the same language God used in Genesis 9 when He established capital punishment as the consequence of murder. God said, "And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image" (9:5-6). A reckoning is an accounting – it is a settling of a debt. You killed someone, thus you deserve to die for taking someone else's life. God's holiness prevents Him from ignoring sin and sinners. Someday everyone will give an account for their life at the judgment (Heb 9:27).

Jesus said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell" (Mat 5:29). Could Jesus have used stronger language to communicate the problem of sinning? No. All sin. But there is good news in the death of the resurrected Jesus.