

Scripture Studies

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May God bless you as you study His Word.

Old Testament Study: Genesis 4

Here, we continue our study in Genesis with a study of the fourth chapter.

Cain and Abel

¹Adam 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.” ²Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. ³In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. ⁴But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, ⁵but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

⁶Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? ⁷If 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.”

The fourth chapter of Genesis deals with the history of Cain and Abel. In the previous chapter, the origin of sin was dealt with; in this chapter, the progress of sin is described. The consequences of the first sin are far-reaching, to say the least, affecting our lives even thousands of years later. The fourth chapter of Genesis shows how quickly sin progressed, yielding a murder only the first generation after the first sin.

The chapter begins with the births of Cain and Abel. It is widely, presumptively assumed that Cain and Abel were the first and second and the only children of Adam and Eve until Seth was born. There is nothing in the narrative to support this. Clearly, Adam and Eve had many other children (see Gen. 5:4), and possibly some even before Cain and Abel were born.

Certainly, they had daughters of marrying age before Seth was born because Cain was married to one of them! Of Adam and Eve's many children, the history of three of them (Cain, Abel and Seth) are recounted because of the importance of the events in their lives.

We know nothing specific about Cain's and Abel's childhood. We are first told that **"Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil."** From this we can infer that God instructed the first humans in the practical skills that they needed in order to carve out an existence. They also, undoubtedly, were instructed in spiritual principles, such as the need to be reconciled to God and the means to be reconciled to God: atonement for sin through blood sacrifice. Before the revelation of God was recorded and distributed in written form in the Bible, He revealed His law and will directly to His people. Thus, we have many instances in the Old Testament of God speaking directly to His prophets. His prophets were charged with the task of communicating the revelation of God to the rest of the people.

Now, Jesus referred to Abel as a prophet (see Luke 11:50-51) and implied that he was the first prophet. Thus, it could very well be that Abel was the one entrusted by God to communicate to the people the proper way to worship God and the proper sacrifices to offer for atonement. Certainly, Abel worshiped God properly. He **"brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock."** The sacrifice that Abel brought was the same as what was prescribed later when the law was given to Moses for the fellowship offering: **"From the fellowship offering he is to bring a sacrifice made to the Lord by fire: its fat, the entire fat tail cut off close to the backbone, all the fat that covers the inner parts or is connected to them"** (Lev. 3:8).

In addition to bringing the proper sacrifice to the Lord, Abel offered it with the proper attitude: in faith. The writer of Hebrews speaks of Abel's sacrifice: **"By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead"** (Heb. 11:4). Now, what was the object of Abel's faith? For Abel to have offered his sacrifice **"by faith"**, he must have had faith in something. We can infer that Abel's faith was in a promise that he received from God that, through his blood sacrifice, he could be reconciled to God. The fact that Abel offered his sacrifice **"by faith"** tends to confirm our supposition that Abel had been instructed by God in the proper way to offer sacrifices of atonement.

Not only did Abel offer the proper sacrifice, with the proper attitude, but

his offering was also given the proper priority. We are told that Abel offered his sacrifice from **“the firstborn of his flock”**. Abel’s first priority was not in clothing himself from his flock, but in making atonement for his sins and getting right with God.

In contrast, Cain did not offer the right sacrifice, his offering did not have the proper priority and he offered his sacrifice with the wrong attitude. While Abel offered the proper and required blood sacrifice, Cain offered **“the fruits of the soil”**. While Abel offered the **“firstborn of his flock”**, Cain merely brought **“some”** of the fruits. Moreover, whereas God **“looked with favor on Abel”** because he offered his sacrifice by faith, God **“did not look with favor”** on Cain, implying that Cain did not offer his sacrifice with the right attitude.

One may ask then, what was Cain’s purpose in offering his sacrifice? After all, he did go to the trouble of offering a sacrifice. One can infer what his purpose was by considering the sacrifice that he did bring. He brought the result of his labor, **“some of the fruits of the soil”** that he had farmed. In doing so, to his credit, he was in a way acknowledging his debt to God for providing for him. However, to please God, we must acknowledge more than our physical debt to God for his providence: we must also acknowledge our spiritual debt to Him for our sin. Many today acknowledge a debt to God for providing for them, for creating them and the universe, for sustaining the creation by His power; but this is not enough. To have peace with God, we must acknowledge our spiritual debt to God by coming to God through Jesus Christ, who repaid our spiritual debt for us. Those who fail to acknowledge their spiritual debt to God reject God’s requirement for an atoning sacrifice. In doing so, they are in effect rejecting the fact that they have sinned. They think that they are good enough, that they do not need God’s forgiveness. They think that they can please God by living their decent lives and coming to God on their own terms, as thought Cain. They may even acknowledge that there is a God and acknowledge some aspects of God’s work in their lives, such as His providence. However, ultimately, they fall short of being reconciled to God because they have not taken care of their spiritual debt to Him.

Abel and Cain are typical of the two types of people who live today. Like Abel, many hear the Word of God, accept it by faith, and are reconciled to God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Like Cain, many hear the Word of God, but ignore it and establish their own way to worship God. There are

those, as Abel, who choose the way that God has prescribed, acknowledging their spiritual debt to God; and there are those as Cain, who choose their own way. They appease their consciences by showing God a measure of homage, but they ignore God's instructions and true requirements. In doing so, they put themselves above God by deciding for themselves how to worship God.

Also like Cain, they are angry when it is suggested that their way of worshiping God is insufficient. When Cain saw that Abel's sacrifice was accepted by God, but his was not, Cain **"was very angry, and his face was downcast"**. God, in His mercy, directly spoke to Cain, telling him what he must do to find favor with God: **"If you do what is right, will you not be accepted"**. It is puzzling that people get upset when they hear of God's requirements. If they do what is right, they will be accepted. Nowadays, to do **"what is right"** is much easier than in the days of Cain and Abel. Cain and Abel had to offer a blood sacrifice; our blood sacrifice was offered by Jesus Christ when He gave Himself. We need only to accept His sacrifice by faith. It is the blood sacrifice that made the difference between Abel and Cain, between the Israelites and Egyptians on the Passover, between the Christian and non-Christian today. It is the blood sacrifice that makes the difference between death and salvation.

Cain's problem was that, even after being admonished by God, he did not desire to **"do what is right"**, he did not desire to obey the Lord. The Lord tried to correct Cain, but Cain ignored Him. We must be careful not to despise or even ignore the correction of God. As the book of Proverbs exhorts: **"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son"** (Prov. 3:11,12; Heb. 12:5,6). When the Lord admonished Cain, He spoke directly to him. In doing so, He is speaking to us through His revealed Word. The primary way that God admonishes us today is through His revelation in the Bible.

The danger that Cain faced by ignoring God was that sin was **"crouching at his door"**. Since Cain did not desire to do right, the sin at his door indeed overtook him, as we shall see in the next section.

The First Murder

⁸Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

⁹Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

¹⁰The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹²When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

¹³Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Not so; if anyone kills Cain, he will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. ¹⁶So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

The fact that sin was crouching at Cain's door is evident in this section. Cain murdered his brother, rather than heed the Lord's reproof. Instead of meeting God's requirement to provide a blood sacrifice, Cain shed the blood of his brother. So soon after their own sin, Adam and Eve tragically reaped the fruit of it.

"And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous" (I John 3:12). The natural reaction of the ungodly to the Godly is to persecute them. Abel was not only the first prophet but also the first martyr. As a prophet, he certainly must have spoken of the proper way to offer sacrifices and to worship God. Cain despised the teaching of God and the prophecy of Abel, and chose to kill the prophet. Ironically, the motive of the first murder concerned the worship of God. Sadly, there have been wars over religion ever since.

Cain was not only the first murderer, but also the first hypocrite. Cain's response to the Lord's admonition was proof that he did not give his offering to the Lord in the spirit of worship. If he had, in response to the Lord's admonition, Cain would have sought to correct his offering. One can determine the state of a worshiper's heart by looking at their behavior after they leave the place of worship. So it is today. Watch the behavior of a Sunday worshiper on Monday morning and discern the true state of his heart in worship.

Rather than immediately punishing Cain with death, God graciously sought out Cain in order to give him a chance to repent. Cain, however, already showed contempt for the righteousness of God through despising the right sacrifice. Now, he shows contempt for the righteousness of God by his lack of repentance.

Unlike Adam and Eve, who acknowledged their sin, Cain tried to hide his sin by denying that he knew where Abel is: **“Am I my brother's keeper?”** It is futile to try to hide sin from the Lord. Ask Moses (who murdered an Egyptian, but was found out); ask David (who committed adultery and murdered Uriah, but was found out). As the Lord warned the Israelites: **“You may be sure that your sin will find you out”** (Num. 32:23). Just as Abel's **“blood cries out”** to the Lord, so also the results of all of our sins cry out to God.

The mention of Abel's blood is the first mention of blood in the Bible. Interestingly, the first mention of blood does not concern the blood of an animal sacrifice, but the blood of a righteous man and a prophet, whose blood was shed for righteousness sake.

The writer of Hebrews says, concerning Abel: **“And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead”** (Heb. 11:4). Abel testifies that we must worship the Lord in the way that He has prescribed, not in a way that we have devised. Our own sincere sacrifices mean nothing if they ignore the instruction of God. The writer of Hebrews then goes on to point out that the blood of Jesus **“speaks a better word than the blood of Abel”** (Heb. 12:24). The blood of Abel speaks of righteousness via the Old Covenant sacrifice; the blood of Jesus speaks of righteousness through His shed blood for us, once for all. Thus, it is a **“better word”** than what is spoken by the blood of Abel.

Since Cain tried to hide his sin, and was clearly unrepentant, God's punishment was surely going to come. Be assured: the punishment of God follows the sin of the unrepentant. **“Do not be deceived: God cannot be**

mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (Gal. 6:7,8).

God’s immediate punishment on Cain was that the land would **“no longer yield its crops”** for him and that he would be a **“restless wanderer on the earth”**. So, God’s punishment on Cain affected his prosperity and his peace. God will often chasten us by limiting our prosperity. He will more often chasten us by limiting our peace. Sinners, in general, who reject God are **“restless wanderers on the earth”**, for why are they alive? What purpose does their life have apart from God?

When Cain heard of his punishment, he said: **“My punishment is more than I can bear.”** As so often happens, Cain only despairs over his sin when he learns of his punishment. We sin willfully, but are not willing to accept the consequences. We willfully choose to reject God’s offer of forgiveness, but are not willing to bear the punishment.

Cain feared not only the punishment of God, but the retribution by man. Although Cain deserved death, God in His grace allowed Cain not only to live, but to be under His protection from any retribution by man: **“Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him”**. I believe that God, through the mark of Cain, was giving Cain further opportunity to repent. Cain seems to have been given an extra measure of leniency. Presumably, this was because Cain did not have the examples from history or from the written Word of God that speak of the detestableness of murder.

Cain’s Descendants

¹⁷Cain lay with his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch. ¹⁸To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael was the father of Methushael, and Methushael was the father of Lamech.

¹⁹Lamech married two women, one named Adah and the other Zillah. ²⁰Adah gave birth to Jabal; he was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock. ²¹His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all who play the harp and flute.

²²Zillah also had a son, Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron. Tubal-Cain's sister was Naamah.

²³Lamech said to his wives,

**“Adah and Zillah, listen to me;
wives of Lamech, hear my words.
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for injuring me.**

**²⁴If Cain is avenged seven times,
then Lamech seventy-seven times.”**

There is no direct evidence that Cain ever turned back to God. Cain went, with his wife (to whom, apparently, he was married before the murder of Abel), and built his own city. Now, from man's point of view, it is a great achievement to build a city; however, we do not remember Cain for his city, but for his sin. Ultimately, it is not the works of man that count, but man's work for God.

The descendants of Cain were a civilized people, and pioneers in many trades, crafts and art forms. They were the first nomads, musicians, metalworkers and tool smiths. They seemed to follow in their father Cain's footsteps, and became **“restless wanderers on the earth”**, seeking after worldly pursuits to appease their restlessness. Yes, they were the first musicians and craftsmen, but they were also apparently godless and so, what did their civilization gain them?

Their godlessness reached a pinnacle in the person of Lamech. He was the first bigamist (breaking the law of marriage, which had already been given in Gen. 2:24), and the first who is shown to hold his wives under ungodly subjection, rather than in Godly submission. He was also quite possibly the first poet, for his threat to his wives in vv. 23-24 was spoken in poetic form. In his poem, he took pride in the sin of murdering a young man for injuring him, and he used his sin as a defiant display of power to hold his wives in fear of him. He also referenced God's statement that anyone shedding Cain's blood would be avenged seven times. Lamech, in effect, boasted that he did not need God's protection, for he would take revenge himself, and not just **“seven times”** but **“seventy-seven times”**. Moreover, Lamech took advantage of God's mercy. He saw that his forefather Cain was not punished by death for his murder, so Lamech defiantly murdered a man himself. There

are two ways to respond to God's grace: we can be instructed by it, or we can show contempt for it.

Seth

²⁵Adam lay with his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, "God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him." ²⁶Seth also had a son, and he named him Enosh.

At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord.

Some time after Abel was murdered, Eve gave birth to Seth. Prophetically, she says: **"God has granted me another child in place of Abel"**. Out of all her children (cf. Gen. 5:4), Eve saw Seth as taking the place of Abel as a spiritual leader. Her prophecy was fulfilled, for **"at that time men began to call on the name of the Lord."**

In Seth's time, presumably under Seth's influence, men began to turn back to God. The implication is that, by **"calling on the name of the Lord"**, they did more than just offer the required sacrifices; they sought a closer relationship to God than what was merely required to gain His favor. They most likely began to sing praises in worship of the Lord. They quite possibly even used the musical instruments invented by the descendants of Cain to glorify God. Indeed, this can be seen as the first revival.

So, in summary, while the descendants of Cain built their city and chased after worldly pursuits, the descendants of Seth sought to get themselves right with the Lord and desired to develop the kingdom of God. While the descendants of Cain drifted from the Lord, the descendants of Seth drew closer to the Lord. While the descendants of Cain saw no need to turn to God, the descendants of Seth realized that they needed the Lord and began to call on His name. This division still exists today. Even today, we can distinguish figuratively the descendants of Cain and the descendants of Seth. We see the separation between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Of all the offspring of Adam and Eve, only the thin line of Seth drew close to the Lord. The rest, it seems, belonged to the seed of the serpent. And throughout history, it seems that there has always only been a thin branch of the human family tree that has called on the name of the Lord.

Closing Prayer

Oh Lord, may we be known as those who call on Your name. Give us an acute awareness of our need for You. Turn our hearts from worldly pursuits, so that seeking Your will and calling on Your name would be our priority. We praise You that the blood of Christ, which was shed for our sins, cries out to us, drawing us near to You. May we answer its call and accept its cleansing power. In the name of Jesus, who shed His blood for us, we ask these things, Amen.

(The study in Genesis will continue in the next issue)

A Study of Exhortation: Romans 12:9-10

This article continues an on-going, verse-by-verse series on the exhortations in Romans 12.

How to Serve: With Sincere Love

⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.

In the last issue, we looked at verses 6-8, which spoke of the different gifts that God has given us to serve Him. These verses begin a section devoted to the manner in which we should serve Him.

First and foremost, when we serve, we must have **“sincere love”**. In order to carry out the work of God--each person in his specific roles, each with his own God-given emphasis and ambitions--genuine love is required. It is love that differentiates Christian service from worldly pursuits. Those who serve God must do so with love for God and love for their fellow man. This fact may seem obvious to the Christian, but it is well worth discussing because, though obvious, it is very difficult to achieve.

To serve with love is to do so with no thought of your own benefits from serving (such as recognition or respect from observers), but with the sole goal of furthering God’s will through your service. Being in accordance with God’s will and serving with sincere love are intimately connected because **“God is love”** (I John 4:8). If one is furthering God’s purpose by serving in God’s will, one is necessarily showing love because God always acts in love.

However, Paul is not merely exhorting us to perform acts that result in love, but to serve with the feeling of **“sincere love”**. This exhortation is, in effect, stating that the ends do not justify the means. If we do good works, yet grudgingly, we are not serving as a Christian. When we serve, we must

remember that we are Christ's representatives. If we serve sourly, we misrepresent Christ, who loves to serve His people.

Implicitly, one of our goals in serving the Lord is to reach people for Christ. Serving without **"sincere love"** may result in good works, but it will not turn people to the Lord. On the contrary, when service is carried out grudgingly, people get the impression that Christianity is a "works-based" religion; one gets the impression that service is mandatory in order to be loved by God; one gets the impression that God is a cruel master rather than a loving Father.

So, indeed, in service, **"love must be sincere"**, without hypocrisy, not pretended, but genuine. Our works should not be meaningless reciprocity of deed for deed, but actions motivated by true love. This requires help from the Holy Spirit. We need Him to ignite our hearts and fill them with His love, giving us the desire to serve His people with His love. Our own limited potential for love will not get us very far. We need God's love. We need to depend on Him, through prayer, to pour out His love into our hearts. We must not forget that **"love comes from God"** (I John 4:7).

Paul goes on to give three elements that characterize sincere love. First, if one has sincere love he **"hates what is evil"** and **"clings to what is good"**. Sincere love does not tolerate evil, or smirk at evil, or take evil lightly; rather, sincere love hates evil. Many times, to show love is to hate evil. If we tolerate evil, we give the impression that we approve of it. As Paul states in another place: **"Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth"** (I Cor. 13:6). At times, sincere love entails speaking out against evil and thus, **"rejoicing with the truth"**.

Certainly, your hatred of evil should be well known to those around you. Your Christian character should reflect that you hate evil. Those around you should feel uncomfortable doing or speaking evil in your presence. Especially, they should feel uncomfortable speaking against or blaspheming our Lord in your presence. To be such is to be light in a dark world. **"God is love"** (I John 4:7) and, in addition, **"God is light"** (I John 1:5), so the love in us should result also in our being light.

The second element of love that Paul points out is devotion, for Paul says, **"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love"**. Devotion suggests an ardent, selfless, and on-going (not temporary) love. Devotion is not a love of just the moment, but a love that follows up in continuing concern. Persistent devotion can soften even the hard-hearted. Again, as Paul says elsewhere:

“Love is patient” (I Cor. 13:1).

The third element of sincere love that Paul points out is humility: **“Honor one another above yourselves”**. Our service should not have the goal of exalting ourselves, of showing the world how pious we are; rather, our service should encourage and edify others. The recipients of our service should feel honored, not patronized; they should feel valued, not used. They should not feel that they have received your service in order that you might “make points” with God; rather, they should feel that you have served them because you love them. Only then will they see your service as an example of God’s love for them.

“Sincere love” is necessarily humble and selfless. It seeks out the needs of others, not worrying about any inconvenience to oneself. **“Sincere love”** never acts in a way that would place a burden of indebtedness on the recipient; it never makes them feel that they must pay the love back. Rather, it leaves the recipient with the desire to have and to seek the same kind of love for others.

In conclusion, seek **“sincere love”**, and see that your service of God is always motivated by it. Indeed, the benefits of sincere love are not just for the recipient. Service motivated by sincere love will give you joy as you serve God. The burden of service is always lighter when it is accompanied by **“sincere love”**.

Now, Father, give us this love by filling our hearts with Your love. May all of our service for You shine with the light of Your love, to bring You glory and to turn others to seek out the same love. We can do this only by the power of Your Spirit, so fill our hearts afresh with Your Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

*(In the next issue, we will continue our study in Romans 12
by looking at verses 11 and 12)*

New Testament Study: James 3:1-12

Care in Teaching

¹Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. ²We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

James' next exhortation concerns our proper service. He points out the danger of someone **"presuming"** to be a teacher when they are not called to serve in that way. In general, to perform service for which one is not truly called is a waste of time at best, destructive at worst. James gives a special warning concerning teaching because, he says, **"we who teach will be judged more strictly"**.

To teach the things of God in any capacity is, as James implies, **"presumption"**. There is a natural tendency for us Christians, who study the revelation of God in the Bible, to try to teach others concerning God. James warns that we must be careful in doing so. Indeed, we should not ourselves **"presume"** at all to be teachers, rather, we should allow only God to **"presume"** to make us teachers. Since we who teach will **"be judged more strictly"**, we must subject every lesson and message to guidance by the Holy Spirit through prayer.

The danger in teaching is that, as James goes on to say, **"we all stumble in many ways"**. Those who teach, by taking on that role, become examples, whether they like it or not. By presuming to teach the things of God, they become representatives of God whose lives come under the scrutiny of those who hear their teaching. Thus, teachers must take great care that their lives reflect what they teach. As Paul says: **"You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourselves?"** (Rom. 2:21). Indeed, teachers should first teach themselves. A teacher's first student should be his own heart, then he can go on to teach others.

Unfortunately, **“we all stumble in many ways”**. There are no exceptions, for **“all”** stumble. James, by saying **“we”**, even includes himself as one who stumbles. As teachers, we may sincerely try to live an exemplary life, but we will at times **“stumble”**. Teachers, however, are **“judged more strictly”** when they stumble because they often cause others to stumble.

The primary way that we stumble, and cause others to stumble, is by what we say; so James points out: **“If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man”**. It is so easy, when teaching, to offend with the tongue. It is so easy to let one’s words wander from the issue at hand and blurt out some **“innocent”** jeer or slur or sarcasm which can be taken the wrong way. This is aggravated by the fact that the hearers, when being taught the things of God, are more likely to get offended by careless words because they see the teachers as representing God. Christ Himself held the Pharisees, the teachers of that time, especially accountable for what they said, when He told them: **“For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned”** (Matt. 12:37).

The prevalence, indeed universality, of sinning with the tongue is such that James states that whoever can control his speech can achieve sinlessness: **“If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check”**. James has much more to say about controlling the tongue in the next section.

The Importance of Controlling the Tongue

³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

James continues with a section addressed to all believers concerning the

importance and difficulty of controlling one's speech. Exhortations concerning the tongue are numerous in the Epistle of James; they are in every chapter (see 1:19, 26; 2:12; here; 4:11; 5:12). The great men of God know the danger of the tongue: Job said to the Lord: **"I am unworthy--how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth"** (Job 40:4); Isaiah exclaimed: **"Woe to me!...For I am a man of unclean lips"** (Isaiah 6:5); Solomon wrote many Proverbs warning of the dangers of an uncontrolled tongue (see Prov. 10:28; 13:3; 17:27; etc.); David prayed (as we should also pray each day): **"Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips"** (Psalm 141:3); Paul, in describing the depravity of all men, speaks much about the corruption of their speech: **"There is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness"** (Rom. 2:12-14). Christ alone was faultless in speech: **"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate"** (I Pet. 2:22,23).

Many, if not most, of our sins come from our tongue: from lying, swearing, slander, loose talk, quarreling, boasting, berating, blasphemy, etc. To keep from these sins, we should fill our mouths with encouragement, edification, exhortation, praise and prayer. As Paul urges: **"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen"** (Eph. 4:29).

Speech is one thing that distinguishes the human race from animals. By it, we display our intelligence and our reasoning abilities. We can use our powers of speech to change minds, hearts and even the whole course of a person's life through rhetoric. It is the privilege of man and a gift of God to speak. Have we lived up to this honor?

James begins this section with an illustration that depicts the importance of controlling the tongue. James had a talent for devising appropriate, insightful illustrations (he learned well from his step-brother!). "He used commonplace things to illustrate divine truth", just as Christ did. Christ through parables and illustrations used birds, wheat, coins, trees, vineyards, houses, etc., to illustrate the things of the kingdom of God. Likewise, James here uses **"bits"** and **"rudders"**.

The point of his illustration is that very large things can be influenced

and controlled by very small devices. The small **“bit”** in the mouth of a horse is used to control the wild animal, so that the horse performs useful work. The small **“rudder”** on a ship is used to control the ship, to keep it from wandering aimlessly, and to guide it away from the danger of the rocks. So, the small **“bit”** and **“rudder”** are used for great good, to control large, reckless bodies and make them useful and productive.

Likewise, our tongue could be used for great good, to (as James stated earlier) **“keep our whole body in check”**. Unfortunately, our tongues, which are small, are used more often than not to cause great harm. A bridled, controlled tongue can accomplish great good, communicating the gospel, turning people toward God; an unbridled tongue, however, is reckless and wild, untamed and trampling, causing much destruction. Like rudders, our tongues steer our lives and the lives of others, sometimes toward the things of God, sometimes away.

James goes on to liken the tongue to a **“small spark”** that sets a great forest on fire. He says correctly that **“the tongue also is a fire”**. Indeed, the tongue can be hot, scorching and dangerous. Just as a spark can destroy a great forest, the tongue **“corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire”**. Just as a fire, the tongue can very quickly do great damage. **“Thus has a peace been ruined, thus has a reputation been blackened, thus has a friendship been embittered, thus has a mind been poisoned, thus has a life been blasted.”** The enemy makes much use of our wild tongues, so James points out that the tongue **“is itself set on fire by hell”**.

The Difficulty of Controlling the Tongue

⁷All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, ⁸but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. ¹¹Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹²My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh

water.

Having shown the corruption of the tongue, James now describes how difficult it is to remedy this. He points out a paradox. Man has been greatly successful in taming just about everything else except the tongue: **“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue.”** The entire world is a testimony to the truth of James’ words. We all sin with the tongue; none of us has ever been successful taming it. Sins of the tongue are committed by those of all ages, sexes, and temperaments. While many other sins are **“tamed”** by age or will or experience, **“no man can tame the tongue”**.

The key here is that **“no man”** can tame the tongue; yet, what man is unable to do, God is able to do. Men may try, through resolution, to tame their tongue, but their attempts will be doomed to failure. They will be as David, who tried to tame his tongue through his own will: **“I said, ‘I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence.’ But when I was silent and still, not even saying anything good, my anguish increased”** (Psalm 39:1,2). Rather than through our own resolution, we should enlist God’s help, and pray as David did later: **“Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips”** (Psalm 141:3).

James goes on to describe the nature of the tongue as **“full of deadly poison”**, as a snake. With our tongue, we can be poisonous. Certainly, to the extent our words turn people away from Christ, they become death. Before you speak, remember that your tongue can be deadly poison, and handle it with care, as you would any other poison.

James then speaks of the hypocrisy of the tongue: **“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness.”** The tongue is the author and instrument of hypocrisy. The same tongue is put to the best and worst use: the praising of God and the cursing of men. Do we really believe that we can sing praises to God, read His Word aloud, speak out in prayer, and then also curse our brothers? The cursing of men is an affront to God, who made each man for His purpose. Rather than curse men, even those who do you wrong, pray that they would fulfill God’s purpose in their lives.

In conclusion, James shows that the hypocrisy of the tongue is, in fact,

contrary to nature: **“Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?”** Nature itself abhors hypocrisy. Nevertheless, we, contrary to nature, somehow think that we can speak bitter water and pure with the same tongue. However, James’ point is that the bitterness coming from our mouths, in effect, nullifies the purity: **“Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”** The cursing of our brothers nullifies our praises to God, because our curses show that our praise is really not sincere. If it were, we would not insult God by cursing His prize creation, men **“who have been made in God’s likeness”**.

Closing Prayer

And so, Father, forgive us for our sins of the tongue. Help us, by Your Spirit, to control what we say, so that all we say may be sweet to Your ears. Put our tongues to good use: give us words of encouragement, songs of praise, and fervent prayers. In the name of Jesus, we ask this, Amen.

A Topical Study: The Frailty of Life

The Frailty of Life

“Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure.” (Job 14:1-2)

“Show me, O Lord, my life’s end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man’s life is but a breath.” (Ps. 39:3-5)

What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. (James 4:14)

This is the third and final article in a series concerning the frailty of life. This article deals with the context of the last verse cited above, James 4:14.

The Frailty of Man and the Sovereignty of God

¹³Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” ¹⁴Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” ¹⁶As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins. (James 4:13-17)

In this section of verses, James speaks on the control that we have over the events of our lives. We all feel at times that we ourselves are in control. We think that our destiny is in our own hands. We proclaim (as has been cited in these pages before): “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.” We think that our life is our own. It isn’t. James wants to make this very clear, so he begins emphatically: **“Now listen”**.

The target audience for James’ exhortation is those who have their whole future planned out and decided. They say: **“Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money”**. Of note is the fact that there is no room for God in any of their plans. They will travel; they will work; they will **“make money”**, but apparently accomplishing the work of God is not any part of their ambition.

James tries to bring them back to reality by informing them: **“Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow”**. This passage in James is reminiscent of the parable that Jesus told concerning a rich landowner whose ground produced a good crop. The rich man, seeing his prosperity, planned to build bigger and better barns to store all of his goods and grain. He fantasized about the time when his big barn would be built: **“And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’ ”** (Luke 12:19). His fantasy was short-lived, however, for God said to him: **“You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for**

yourself?” (Luke 12:20). Then Jesus remarked, concerning this parable: **“This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God”** (Luke 12:21). Those who live for themselves, with no thought toward God’s purpose in their lives, can never be certain about their future; however, if you live for God, if your desire is to fulfill His purpose in your life, you can be assured that you will attain your goal.

We must realize the frailty of our lives, and how little control that we have over them, as James says: **“What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”** Man’s life is fleeting. With all the distractions in this world, one could easily live his whole life and not achieve any worthwhile goal. So many people chase after the things of this world, as the one in James’ example, whose goal is to **“go to this or that city,...carry on business and make money”**. To what end? So that he can **“eat, drink and be merry”**. What if the Lord came to you this evening and said, **“This very night your life will be demanded of you”**? Is that a terrifying thought?

It shouldn’t be. If you are living for Him, you can say what James advises us to say concerning the future: **“If it is the Lord’s will, we will live”**. Whether we acknowledge it or not, our lives are in His hands. He controls our destiny. We only continue to live because it is His will that we continue to live. Yes, in His will, He has given us the choice of how to live our lives, as long as we live that is. We can choose to seek to fulfill His purpose for our lives, or we can seek to fulfill our own pleasures. However, if we seek to fulfill our own pleasures, we must ever be looking over our shoulders, anxious that God too will visit us in the night demanding our lives. On the other hand, if we live for Him, we already realize that our lives are in His hands, and, indeed, we even look forward to the day when we will join Him in His kingdom.

When we presumptuously plan out our future with no consideration for God’s will, as James says, **“we boast and brag”**. We are, in effect, rejecting the fact that God controls our lives. We are boasting that we are sovereign over the events in our future. As James states: **“All such boasting is evil”**. Now, it is not the planning itself that is evil, it is the lack of consideration for God’s will that is evil. Yes, we can plan to buy a new car, we can plan to take a vacation, we can plan to move to another area and start a new career, but as we are planning, we must seek the Lord’s will in these matters. Again, we should say, **“If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that”**.

And if we seek His will, His will be revealed to us. Now, it may turn out that His will does not agree with what we planned. At this point, again we can choose to obey His will, or to continue on with our plans. If we continue on with our plans, we are rejecting God's will for us, and thus, rejecting the good that we ought to do. So, James concludes, **“Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins”**. Since our lives are a **“mist”**, we do not have time to ignore God's will. We always say, “Oh, next year I will do this or that for the Lord.” However, the reason that we don't have time to do God's work is usually because we are too busy fulfilling our own goals for our lives. In doing so, we often do not realize that we are sinning, but James states, in no uncertain terms, again: **“Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins”**.

Our lives are a **“mist”** (James 4:14); they are like a **“fleeting shadow”** (Job 14:2); our days are a **“mere handbreadth”** (Psalm 39:5). It is time that we seek to do the **“good we ought to do”**; it is time that we give our lives entirely to the Lord and seek to fulfill His purpose for them. Christ is our example in this. In His short earthly life, He accomplished much, always doing **“the good he ought to do”**, the will of His Father.

So Father, put the desire in our hearts to seek to fulfill Your purpose for our lives and to always seek to do Your will. Lessen our desires for worldly pursuits and increase our desire to do that which will have eternal significance. Give us an acute awareness that You are in control of our lives, that we are alive only because it is Your Sovereign will that we remain so. May we live as Jesus did, in whose name we pray these things, Amen.

A Study in Psalms - Psalm 6

Psalm 6

For the director of music. With stringed instruments.
According to *sheminith*. A psalm of David.

- ¹O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.**
- ²Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am faint;
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in agony.**
- ³My soul is in anguish.
How long, O Lord, how long?**
- ⁴Turn, O Lord, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing love.**
- ⁵No one remembers you when he is dead.
Who praises you from the grave?**
- ⁶I am worn out from groaning;
all night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.**
- ⁷My eyes grow weak with sorrow;
they fail because of all my foes.**
- ⁸Away from me, all you who do evil,
for the Lord has heard my weeping.**
- ⁹The Lord has heard my cry for mercy;
the Lord accepts my prayer.**
- ¹⁰All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed;
they will turn back in sudden disgrace.**

Psalm 6 is the first “Penitential Psalm”, or psalm of repentance. Others include Psalms 32, 38, 51, 130 and 143. All of these psalms have as their main theme repentance and confession of sin. In particular, Psalm 6 shows David’s repentance from his sin by expressing his sorrow over and hatred of his sin.

This psalm, like so many of David’s psalms, has universal application. We can all at times pray this psalm. This is a psalm of anguish in the midst of sin. As Christians, sometimes we glory in righteousness, other times we mourn for sin. Both are appropriate behavior under certain circumstances.

The inscription of this psalm identifies David as the author and implies that the psalm was a musical work, “**for the director of music**” and “**with stringed instruments**”. It goes on to say that the psalm was written “**according to sheminith**”. We have no idea for certain what this means. This fact demonstrates the antiquity of this psalm: we have no record of the use of the word “**sheminith**” that could determine its meaning.

Psalm 6 can be divided into four sections: David’s plea for mercy (v. 1-3); David’s appeal to God on the basis of His love (v. 4-5); David’s demonstration of his remorse (v. 6-7); God’s mercy on him (v. 8-10).

David’s Plea for Mercy

**¹O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.
²Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am faint;
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in agony.
³My soul is in anguish.
How long, O Lord, how long?**

In these verses, David in his sin realizes that he deserves to be punished, so he asks God: “**Do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath**”. One of our greatest fears is that God will give us what we deserve. Indeed, God would be just in angrily rebuking us or venting His wrath upon us. Surely, if we were wronged by someone as we ourselves do wrong to God, we would look for some way to vent our wrath. However, David errs here in implying that God would rebuke us in His anger or discipline us in His

wrath. He depicts God as a “hot-head”, when in reality God is patient and long-suffering with us. David here attributes to God what man often does, which is to punish in anger, displaying a hot temper (oh how often have I punished my children in a fit of temper, rather than showing them Godly discipline). No, God does not have a hot temper. As He Himself says: **“I will not carry out my fierce anger,...For I am God, and not man”** (Hos. 11:9).

Nevertheless, even the true believer feels, at times, that the Lord will cut him off. The remedy for this is to seek God’s mercy, so David pleads: **“Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am faint”**. God draws us back to Him through our conscience and conviction of sin. During these times, it is right and proper for the repentant to plead with God for mercy, because mercy is consistent with God’s character. We must learn to depend on and take refuge in the mercy of God. “Men will never find a remedy for their miseries until, forgetting their own merits, by trusting to which they only deceive themselves, they have learned to betake themselves to the free mercy of God.”

David goes on to ask for God’s healing: **“O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in agony”**. David has the right priority: he first asks for mercy, then for healing. We need God’s mercy first and above all else that we need from God. When a paralytic was brought to Jesus for healing, first Jesus said: **“Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven”** (Matt. 9:5), then later, **“Get up, take your mat and go home”** (Matt. 9:6). What good would it be for us if God healed all of our physical infirmities, but our sins remained unforgiven? Such healing would be incomplete. The healing of our souls is much more critical than the healing of our bodies.

Apparently, when he wrote this psalm, David was experiencing affliction. As we have seen in the Psalms that we have studied, David was often in trouble. His affliction seemed to give him a greater awareness of his sin. There are two responses to affliction: “what did I do to deserve this?” (the incorrect response), or “I, in my sin, deserve this” (the correct response). In general, our afflictions should cause us to reflect on our behavior, and cause us to search for sin in our lives. While not all of our afflictions are directly a result of sin, nevertheless, as Christians, when we are afflicted, we should examine our lives to determine if God is trying to tell us something through our afflictions. “It is a great secret to know how to be sick, and to profit by sickness.”

Our afflictions seem worse when we know that we are in sin. During those times, we can have no feeling that we are suffering for righteousness sake. We also, during those times, cannot come to God for healing based on our righteousness. We must come to Him for mercy, knowing that we deserve our pain. It seems that the greatest affliction can be borne by the mind at peace; but the mildest pain is torment to the restless heart.

Again, afflictions are an important tool used by God to bring us to Him. Who can resist turning to God under the weight of great affliction? We have often heard the truism that “there are no atheists in fox holes”. Unfortunately, some will only turn to God when under the greatest of afflictions. “Many a man’s soul has been saved by the destruction of his body with wasting disease.” Yes, many of us only turn to God when we are afflicted. Is it any wonder, then, that God allows us to be afflicted?

In his anguish, David cries: **“How long, O Lord, how long?”** Here, David asks the Lord how long he will be under God’s rod of correction, but God has His timing according to His purpose. The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt for over 400 years; Joseph languished in prison over 3 years; Judah was exiled in Babylon for 70 years; we Christians have waited anxiously for the Lord’s return for nearly 2000 years.

David’s Appeal to God

**⁴Turn, O Lord, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing love.
⁵No one remembers you when he is dead.
Who praises you from the grave?**

Here David appeals to God on the basis of His love. David knew well the character of God. He first appeals to God’s mercy, then to His love. He cries: **“Save me because of your unfailing love”**. We must always remember, especially in times of affliction, that God loves us. He will respond to our heart-felt cries of repentance and cries for mercy.

After appealing to God on the basis of His love, David appeals to God based on the fact that David glorifies God in his life: **“No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?”** David is, in a sense, bartering with God. He gives God a reason for saving him, that he will

praise the Lord in his life. Would not God be more apt to save those who will give Him the credit for their salvation?

Surely, whether miraculously saved from death, or enjoying a comfortable existence, it is our duty to praise God, our Creator, while we are living. What is more, considering that we all deserve death, it is certainly our duty to praise the Lord, our Savior, as long as we live. “If we fail here, we fail utterly.”

Apparently, David, in his sin, had a great awareness and fear of death. From this passage, we see that he had a fear that his sin would forever separate him from God, for he asks, **“No one remembers you when he is dead.”** David did not have the full revelation concerning the afterlife that we have. For David, death still had its “sting”, so he could not say, as Paul could: **“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”** (I Cor. 15:55). He was still held in slavery by his fear of death (cf. Heb. 2:14-15). Let us not take for granted the wonderful revelations concerning the kingdom of God given to us in the New Testament. We have a tremendous advantage over David in that we understand these things and have an assurance of our salvation through our faith in Jesus Christ.

However incomplete David’s knowledge about the afterlife was, he correctly realized that the dead do not glorify God on earth. The testimony of God is trusted to the living, not the dead. It is the duty of the living--God’s prophets, His saints and His Son--to glorify God on the earth. **“It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to silence; it is we who extol the Lord, both now and forevermore. Praise the Lord”** (Psalm 115:17-18).

David’s Sorrow Over His Sin

**6I am worn out from groaning;
all night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.
7My eyes grow weak with sorrow;
they fail because of all my foes.**

Here, David shows that his repentance is real. His behavior demonstrates that he truly sorrows, even agonizes over his sin. Oh, that we would despise our sin as much. We must realize that true repentance sorrows over, agonizes

over, and truly hates sin.

It is quite possible that David here is agonizing over his sin with Bathsheba. If so, it is interesting that the place of his sin, his bed, was also the place of his repentance.

God's Mercy

**⁸Away from me, all you who do evil,
for the Lord has heard my weeping.
⁹The Lord has heard my cry for mercy;
the Lord accepts my prayer.
¹⁰All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed;
they will turn back in sudden disgrace.**

Here, David receives confidence as his prayer has been answered. What a merciful God we have! Forgiving us, in His mercy, for our sins, and more than that, building us up and giving us confidence to face life once again, cleansed and ready to serve. In response to his answered prayer, the first thing that David does in his renewed confidence is to rid himself of the presence of evil, so as to flee temptation and future sin, so as not to fall again. He says: **“Away from me, all you who do evil”**. The truly repentant will do what they can to rid themselves of the influences and situations that caused them to sin.

Now, David in some way sensed that his prayer was answered. He says: **“The Lord has heard my weeping. The Lord has heard my cry for mercy; the Lord accepts my prayer.”** We do not know how he knew this, perhaps “some favorable change in the aspect of public affairs, some check to corruption, some succor from temptation, some sweet sense of God’s love, some improvement in health, one or all of these may have united with an increase of faith to persuade him that the worst was over, and that deliverance was sure and near at hand.” In any case, **“the Lord has heard”**, the Lord listens to the prayer of the truly repentant.

David’s renewed and displayed confidence was proof to those around him that his prayer was answered. We should use our experiences of answered prayer to give us confidence in standing up to evil and boldness in serving the Lord. No doubt, the fact that the Lord had answered many of David’s prayers in the past gave David the confidence to believe that He had answered this

one. What a blessing that the Lord can change our sorrow into triumph so quickly through prayer!

Closing Prayer

Yes, Father, we praise You for answered prayer and the confidence that You give us through it. We thank You that, indeed, You do not rebuke us in Your anger, but You are ever so patient with our many failings. Give us a hatred for and a true repentance from our sins and keep us from further temptation; guide us in fleeing from that which causes us to fall. In the name of Your Son through whom we have received forgiveness, Amen.

(Our study in the Psalms will continue in the next issue with Psalm 7)

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----- Footnotes -----

1. Strauss, *James, Your Brother*, pg. 129.
2. Guy King, cited in Strauss, *James, Your Brother*, pg. 135-136.
3. From "Invictus", William Ernest Henley.
4. Calvin, cited in Plumer, *Studies in the Book of Psalms*, pg. 103.
5. Plumer, *Studies in the Book of Psalms*, pg. 103.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., pg. 104.
8. Ibid., pg. 100.