REBELLION IS A CHOICE

It was night. A pastor in his 30s was in the intensive-care unit waiting for the moment to die. His life was fading away after an apparently unsuccessful surgery, following a hemorrhagic episode.

Why would I be allowed to die? he thought. Was God rejecting him and his ministry? Was there a sin that he forgot to confess, for which he was now being punished? It seemed as if God were too severe, hard, and revengeful, lacking mercy and grace. Was he serving the right God? What if salvation was a mirage?

Amid darkness, a spark of revolt and bitterness started to burn inside his heart. Whether I harbor rebellion and bitterness or not, I will die anyway, he thought. But what if I decide to cling to Jesus’ feet, begging for forgiveness, even though it seems as if He is kicking me aside?” Once making that choice, he was no longer interested in fighting for temporary healing, but for eternal life.

A verse flashed before his mind: “The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out” (John 6:37, NKJV). After a night of talking to Jesus and with no evidence of God’s acceptance, he was visited by a nurse who prayed with him. After that prayer his bloodwork indicated that the healing process had started. After some more time in the hospital, the pastor was finally discharged! He was now sure that Jesus Himself had healed him that night!

Through Cain and Abel’s narrative we will explore not only the importance of regular offerings, but also how the choice to rebel or to accept God’s sovereignty will affect our worship and eternal destiny.
Write out Genesis 4:1–7 from the translation of your choice. You may also rewrite it in your own words, or outline or mind-map it.
KILLED FOR TRUSTING

The bitterness that precedes rebellion is not always easy to identify. In the case of Cain, his high opinion about himself led him to believe that he was able to see things that his parents and Abel were too naive to understand. So he allowed feelings of rebellion against God to grow.

By distancing himself from God, he lost sight of God’s character. Then, could it be that he started to think that humans were victimized, manipulated, and oppressed by a harsh, severe, and mean God? Perhaps he thought that the way God had treated Adam and Eve, and by extension himself, expelling them from the garden, was something even worse than the pair’s failure. After all, wasn’t Adam and Eve’s failure something really small? Why was even the earth cursed?

Cain could have believed that meticulously following God’s commandments was a sign of subservience and weakness. He may have preferred to look at what he felt was the big picture and pick what would look reasonable to him. After all, why would people gifted with free will and intelligence need to strictly follow Another’s mind? Can’t they have autonomy and be a law to themselves? Would not strict obedience be a sign of stupidity? Would it not be fanaticism to follow point by point all the smallest details of God’s requirements?

Abel, on the other hand, even though also affected by God’s curse, decided to accept His dealings with humanity as something fair, believing in His justice and mercy, and, above all, trusting in the promised redemption. He decided to humble himself under a Superior Mind, under the authority of a Wisdom that cannot always be understood by limited, fallen minds.

The conditions were far from ideal after they lost access to the Garden of Eden. But trusting in the promise of a brighter future after redemption, Abel accepted God’s gift of forgiveness through the bloodshed of a Substitute, prefigured by the sacrificial animal. He could find love in the promise of a future Deliverer that would join His fate with humanity, being also injured by the serpent, before bruising its head (Gen. 3:15).

While trying to convince Abel to join him in his rebellion, Cain met a kind, meek, but firm reaction from his brother. Abel exalted God’s law as good, desirable, and something meant to protect them, and His mercy in sparing the life of their parents. He also testified about God’s justice and love in providing an escape for every repentant transgressor, symbolized by the bloody sacrifice. Then he invited Cain to worship God according to the prescribed way, but that made Cain even more determined to follow his own way.

Enraged because he was unable to enlist Abel’s sympathy to his cause, or to answer to his arguments, Cain gave way to violence, ending up killing the representative of true faith. And the same thing will happen at the end of time between those who trust in the Lord and those who are just nominal worshippers. The harsher persecution should be expected to come from inside God’s people.
Abel brought an offering “of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat.” “The Lord respected Abel and his offering” (Gen. 4:4), considering it “a more excellent sacrifice than [Cain’s]” (Heb. 11:4).

The word “firstborn” may indicate that for Abel it was a regular offering (not tithe), given as regularly as a female of his flock would produce her first young. This was a sign of submission and allegiance to God. This offering was given triggered, not by feelings, but by an event—a female animal producing its young—which was considered a blessing from the Lord. This offering helps us see God as the giver, provider, and benefactor, promoting gratitude, trust, and peace of mind. In this way it was supposed to be an antidote against bitterness, ingratitude, and rebellion.

The act of offering the firstborn from every animal was an ancient practice among God-fearing people that was later regulated for the Israelites (Ex. 13:1–16). Usually less costly and not requiring bloodshed, this firstfruit offering was under the principle that God should be the first (Matt. 6:33).

“Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase” (Prov. 3:9, NKJV), records Solomon, validating this God-first principle even for us who have salaries or an income instead of herds or crops. It should lead the giver to trust that the One who provided once would provide again: “So your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine” (v. 10).

Regular offerings, under the God-first principle, should be primarily triggered, not by good feelings, a specific need, a call, sympathy for a priest or a religious leader, nor even a desire to provide for the temple or mission work. Instead, they should be triggered by God’s act of sending some form of an increase. They are a means to worship God, in addition to the tithe (Mal. 3:8–10), whenever there is an addition of income.

Out of gratitude, some people today practice this principle, for example, when they return to the Lord the first rental income of a new tenant, or the first paycheck of a new job. They keep putting God first by returning the tithe and another proportion as an offering from every regular salary or rental income.

Triggered by God’s blessings, as does the tithe, regular offerings tend to foster (as in Abel’s case) a “worship mentality” instead of a “donor mentality.” When a “donation mentality” is adopted, givers may be tempted to see themselves as owners of the resources, and later benefactors or philanthropists (sometimes yearning for recognition). “Donors” may be more inclined to think that they are in the position to decide to give or not, where to give, and to decide how funds should be applied.

(Cont. on p. 21)
Review your memorized verse from Genesis 4:1–7.

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Genesis 4:1–7?

Hebrews 11:4
Proverbs 3:9, 10
Matthew 6:33
2 Cor. 13:5
1 John 3:12
Jude 11
John 6:37

(Cont. from inTerpret p. 20):

Worshippers under the God-first principle instead consider God as the benefactor, the owner of all things, and the philanthropist. The regular offering for worshippers is a celebration that attributes glory to God for what they have received every time they receive something from Him. In this way, they are less inclined to expect human praise or recognition. For them, special spontaneous offerings may be given, but only in addition to or beyond regular offerings, never replacing them.

True worshippers see themselves just as receptacles of God’s goods, as His representatives, and as stewards of His possessions. Because everything belongs to Him, they consider themselves responsible before the Owner for even the use of what remains in their hands after they bring their tithe and offerings!
“By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous” (Heb. 11:4). Through the absence of fire descending from heaven, (Ellen G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets, 71) God showed that “He did not respect Cain and his offering” (Gen. 4:5). How can we explain this discrimination now in an age of pluralism and inclusiveness?

The system of offerings implies more than simply recognizing God as the provider and benefactor. It should also point to God as the Redeemer. Both Cain and Abel were well familiarized with that system of worship specified by God, centered in the killing of an animal and the need of spilt blood—something not intended to be pretty.

That ritual, intended to benefit the sinner and not God, was conceived to lead every worshipper to recognize her/his sinfulness and to express faith in the promise that the death penalty for sin would fall on Someone else. All privileges and blessings for death-deserving sinners were possible only because of the plan of redemption. God's grace would be revealed through His own death on behalf of the unmerited sinner.

But Cain refused to see the offering as a benefit to himself. (E. G. White, 72.) Instead, proud of his own refined senses, he presumed those bloody sacrifices too disgusting and repugnant. (E. G. White, 72, 73.) Cain likely choose to interpret them as evidence of God's severity and cruelty, in addition to his interpretation of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden.

Believing that only inferior minds needed to comply with the smaller details of God's requirements, he opted for a cleaner and convenient way to worship. By doing it his way, he missed that worship must be offered, not according to the preferences of the worshipper, but according to the prescriptions of Him who is worshiped.

The rejection of Cain was not arbitrary, as God is not a respecter of humanity. Jesus sees, weighs, remembers, evaluates, and estimates every heart and every offering (Mark 12:41; Acts 10:4), not by any human criteria, but according to His law. The way we bring our offerings (or even the absence of offerings) is frequently a reflex of our feelings toward Him.

Even after Cain's offering was rejected, God did not leave him alone to perish. Instead, Cain was assured by an angel that he could still be accepted if he would “do well” (Gen. 4:7). He was also warned that because of his sinful nature, sin was “crouching at the door” (v. 7, ESV), and its desire was to control his life, leading him to failure. Nevertheless, Cain would still retain the choice to “rule over it” (v. 7) or not.

We serve a righteous God, who is not a respecter of humanity. Though He has died for all, in the end God will respect everyone's choice to accept or reject Him! Those who refuse to accept Jesus’ death on their behalf will need to pay themselves for their sins. As David did later, Cain could have confessed his sin and his rebellion, being completely forgiven. He could then express his trust in God's forgiveness by bringing an appropriate offering, according to God's prescription. Nonetheless, like Satan, Saul, and Judas, Cain chose to keep his cherished thoughts of bitterness and a haughty attitude.

Even today, any offering that fails to express faith in Jesus as Savior, Creator, and Provider becomes a modern imitation of Cain's offering. It may be brought to the church, be praised by others, and produce good feelings in the giver, but will not be accepted by Heaven. Only true, penitent worship will connect the giver to the Source of all good things.
THE TWO CLASSES

The followers of Christ should not wait for thrilling missionary appeals to arouse them to action. If spiritually awake, they would hear in the income of every week, whether much or little, the voice of God and of conscience with authority demanding the tithes and offerings due the Lord. (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 4 [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948], 474.)

Abel . . . saw justice and mercy in the Creator's dealings with the fallen race, and gratefully accepted the hope of redemption. But Cain cherished feelings of rebellion, and murmured against God because of the curse pronounced upon the earth and upon the human race for Adam's sin. He permitted his mind to run in the same channel that led to Satan's fall—indulging the desire for self-exaltation and questioning the divine justice and authority . . . .

They were acquainted with the provision made for the salvation of man, and understood the system of offerings which God had ordained. They knew that in these offerings they were to express faith in the Saviour whom the offerings typified, and at the same time to acknowledge their total dependence on Him for pardon . . . .

Abel pleaded with his brother to approach God in the divinely prescribed way, but his entreaties only made Cain the more determined to follow his own will. As the eldest, he felt above being admonished by his brother, and despised his counsel.

Cain came before God with murmuring and infidelity in his heart in regard to the promised sacrifice and the necessity of the sacrificial offerings. His gift expressed no penitence for sin. He felt, as many now feel, that it would be an acknowledgment of weakness to follow the exact plan marked out by God, of trusting his salvation wholly to the atonement of the promised Saviour. He chose the course of self-dependence. He would come in his own merits. He would not bring the lamb, and mingle its blood with his offering . . . . He presented his offering as a favor done to God, through which he expected to secure the divine approval . . . . He rendered only a partial obedience. The essential part, the recognition of the need of a Redeemer, was left out.

Cain had the same opportunity of learning and accepting these truths as had Abel. He was not the victim of an arbitrary purpose. One brother was not elected to be accepted of God, and the other to be rejected. Abel chose faith and obedience; Cain, unbelief and rebellion. Here the whole matter rested.

Cain and Abel represent two classes that will exist in the world till the close of time. One class avail themselves of the appointed sacrifice for sin; the other venture to depend upon their own merits . . . . It is only through the merits of Jesus that our transgressions can be pardoned. Those who feel no need of the blood of Christ, who feel that without divine grace they can by their own works secure the approval of God, are making the same mistake as did Cain. (E. G. White, Patriarchs and Prophets [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1890, 1908], 71–73.)
inQuire

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Could Cain still be forgiven even after he killed his brother? Can we determine when someone has gone too far?

If fanaticism means to follow all the small details of God’s requirements, which ones should we disobey to consider ourselves as “balanced” persons?

Is zeal synonymous with fanaticism? with legalism? What are the differences?

Why do freewilled and intelligent people need to follow God’s mind? What is the problem with even intelligent minds?

In which situations can self-reliance become a negative trait of character and jeopardize the spiritual life? Explain.

Is there any hope for those who, like Cain, still foster feelings of revolt and bitterness against God? How can they be saved?