INTRODUCTION

Questions arise in our minds and hearts every day. Some are easy to answer: "What should I wear today?" or "What should I make for dinner?" Some are weightier and harder to determine: "Should I move to a different city?" or "Should I marry this person?" But one question rises above all others, the supreme question that each of us asks ourselves time and time again: *What is wrong with the world? What is wrong with the human race?*

That question can take other forms: Why do we treat each other so terribly? Why do we do such horrible things, such as genocide and murder and driving others into poverty? Why can we not live at peace with one another and just be

happy? Whatever form it takes, this question is central to making sense of existence.

Years ago I read a book on the subject of evil in modern life and how we view it.[1] In his introduction, the author noted that it was rare for a week to pass without him seeing news reports detailing horrific events. He noted an account of teenagers performing contract killings for just a few dollars, a story of a man shot in the head over the keys to a car, and—the week he finished the book—reports of atrocities in concentration camps where ethnic cleansing was happening.[2]

What's wrong with us? What could lead human beings to do things like this? If you don't ask that question—if that question doesn't burn in your heart—your head is in the sand.

Many attempts have been made at answering this question. Some people hear news of ethnic cleansing and point to a sociological reason, arguing that it's clearly the result of racism. But that response doesn't actually answer the question. *Why* are we humans capable of such racist atrocities? How can we be so callous toward another race in the first place? Others may read the story about teenagers turned hit men and turn to sociology as well, saying it's the result of poverty. But why would a human being respond to poverty with murder, of all things?

The sociological factor is not, at root, the answer. Sociological reasons may be the *occasion* for murder, but they are not the cause. The answer the Bible gives us for

why we do such heinous things is both simple and complex. That answer is sin. Many reading this may be irritated and think this is a primitive and old-fashioned analysis. My response—and the Bible's—is yes! Of course it's primitive and old-fashioned—because it's true and deeply woven into the world and its entire history. It would be a terrible answer if it *weren't* old-fashioned.

But—and this is where the complexity of the answer begins to appear—sin is not limited to the most grievous things we read about in the news. The questions we ask about humanity's depravity, questions prompted by the previous stories, also extend to our own selves. How does it become so easy for us to lie to someone? Why do we keep coming back to crippling addictions instead of giving them up the instant we realize they're hurting us?

The truth of the matter is that we will *never* be able to answer these questions unless we come to understand sin. We will never be able to resolve our personal problems, let alone the rest of the world's problems, unless we possess a full comprehension of sin. After all, how can we prescribe a remedy unless we first diagnose the disease?

When many of us hear the word *sin*, we think about the didactic parts of Scripture where sin is *taught about*—the Ten Commandments, the specifications of God's law, the thou shalt nots, and so on. That is true so far as it goes. But the Bible's depiction of sin is much more comprehensive than just what is contained in those passages. The Bible gives us many

concrete examples and metaphors to show us the full range of what sin is, how it affects us, and, yes, why we keep coming back to it. In Genesis sin is depicted as a wild beast in the story of Cain. In 2 Kings, we see sin as leprosy in the story of Naaman. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus uses the metaphor of sin as leaven when he reprimands the Pharisees. In addition, the Bible speaks of sin as self-deception, self-righteousness, and slavery. This book addresses each of these metaphors and what it means for our understanding of what is wrong with the world. Each chapter in the book illuminates a specific aspect of sin and explores how we might be saved from it.

Some readers may be thinking, "Why spend an entire book talking about such a negative and unpopular subject as sin?" Others of you might not even be sure what you think about Christianity. "I don't know if I believe in God," you may say. "Why on earth would I be interested in hearing about sin?"

I'll give you two reasons why it is not just important but *all-important* that you understand sin. The first reason is that the biblical teaching about sin is one of the strongest arguments for the truth of Christianity. The second is that it equips you to best handle life as it is.

To take the first reason, I can show you person after person (and I'll mention some of them as the book goes on) who abandoned Christianity but were pushed back to embrace it because nothing other than the idea of sin could account for the darkest depths of human behavior. These individuals saw

human evil up close. The Bible was the only way they could find to explain what they saw.

In *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*, Andrew Delbanco, a professor of American studies at Columbia University and a self-described secular liberal, argues that if you get rid of the ideas of religion along with the moral, spiritual idea of sin, you are forced to conclude that the reason we do the terrible things to each other as described earlier is due to either biology, psychology, or sociology. That creates all sorts of problems. As Delbanco writes, "A gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it."[3]

If the terrible acts humans commit are a result of biology, they're part of our evolutionary makeup, where aggression is bound up with the idea of the survival of the fittest. Or the reasons are found in psychology: We do these terrible things because of repressed emotions. Or in sociology, we do them because of economic deprivation. But when you get a close-up view of the horrors of evil, all those theories fall apart. If those theories are true, then we really can't help doing what we do and therefore we're not really evil. But anyone who witnesses a parent killing their child knows that makes no sense. These acts can't be so easily explained away, no matter how hard we try. As the serial killer Hannibal Lecter says to the FBI agent trying to analyze him in *The Silence of the Lambs*, "Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. *I* happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences. You've given up good

and evil for behaviorism . . . You've got everybody in moral-dignity pants—nothing is ever anybody's fault. Look at me, Officer Starling. Can you stand to say I'm evil ?"[4]

In his book *The Brothers Karamazov*, Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky addresses the idea of seeing biology as the culprit: "People talk sometimes of a bestial cruelty, but that's a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel. The tiger only tears and gnaws, that's all he can do. He would never think of nailing people by the ears, even if he were able to do it."[5] As Dostoevsky knew, something else is going on here, something beyond biology or sociology or psychology. That something is sin.

The second reason it's all-important to understand sin is that if you *don't* take up the old-fashioned, traditional understanding of it, you will be led into countless personal and social miscalculations. You will not be able to deal with life as it is. Not only that, but you won't be able to understand the glory of God's love and grace. You'll never be stunned or amazed by it.

Here is what I mean. If someone came up to you and said, "I was at your house the other day and you weren't there. Then a man came with a bill for you, and I paid it," how would you react? Well, it depends on the size of the bill, doesn't it?

What if it was postage due for seventy-five cents? That's one thing. What if it was the landlord demanding rent? That's another thing. What if it was an auditor from the IRS saying, "You owe ten years of back taxes, and we're repossessing

your property unless you pay up"? That's something else entirely. Until you know whether the bill was $10 or $1,000 or $100,000, you don't know whether you've been helped a little or utterly saved. You don't know whether to shake the person's hand or kiss their feet and swear eternal loyalty.

How does this relate to the idea of sin? Here's how. If there is a lack of joy in your life today, if the thought of Jesus dying for you does not transfix and transform you, if you're not able to draw power out of the thought of what he has done for you on the cross, then you don't understand the enormity and power of your sin. You haven't really seen how much of a debt Christ paid for you. You don't know how far he has brought you. You don't know the magnitude of what he has done. And you don't know the seriousness and depth of your sin that led him to do what he did.

Put another way, if you don't understand sin, you are neither pessimistic enough nor optimistic enough to deal with life. On the one hand, if you believe the reason people do the terrible things they do is because of poor social conditioning or evolution or repressed psychology, you'll never be able to deal with life as it is. You'll be like Agent Starling, speechless before Hannibal Lecter. You won't be pessimistic enough, so to speak, to grapple with the bleak realities of life.

In her book *Creed or Chaos?*, English author Dorothy L. Sayers observes that Christianity, far from its caricature as an escape from reality, is a supremely clear-eyed way of viewing the world. She writes, "It seems to me quite disastrous that

the idea should have got about that Christianity is an otherworldly, unreal, idealistic kind of religion that suggests that if we are good we shall be happy. On the contrary, it is fiercely and even harshly realistic, insisting that there are certain eternal achievements that make even happiness look like trash."[6] In other words, one of the things that precludes an "unreal, idealistic" view of life is Christianity's clear-eyed view of sin.

On the other hand, without a full understanding of sin, you won't have the grounds for the optimism necessary to remain hopeful in the midst of life's harsh realities. Only via a clear view of sin can you see there are some things Jesus has done *for* us and has given *to* us and can do *in* us and *is* doing in us that make any earthly happiness look like little but trash. That's what provides the joy and the confidence to survive. If you don't understand sin, you'll be neither pessimistic enough nor optimistic enough to deal with life.

If we stand any chance of answering the question of what is wrong with the world—much less of being saved from the answer to that question—we must begin with understanding the complexity and multifaceted nature of sin and end with understanding the unfailing love of a God who chooses to save us from it. This book will show you how.

CHAPTER 1

SIN AS PREDATOR

Genesis 4:3–15

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

6 Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you
angry? Why is your face downcast? 7 If 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."

[8] Now 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.

[9] Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

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

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

[13] Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is more than I can bear. [14] Today 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."

[15] But 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.

Years ago I watched the first *Terminator* movie with one of my sons. The film is a violent but well-made work of science fiction about a futuristic cyborg sent back in time to assassinate the protagonist, Sarah Connor. It wasn't until I rewatched it that I realized how much of Sarah's predicament is created solely by people underestimating the predatory power of the killer pursuing her.

Everyone in the film continually fails to understand the power of the Terminator. He *looks* like a human being, but he is actually a nearly indestructible machine. Early in the film, a police lieutenant tells Sarah, who in fear has telephoned the police station from a bar, "You're in a public place, so you'll

be safe till we get there."[1] The lieutenant believes that no one would possibly attempt to kill her in a public place in front of so many witnesses. He has no idea the lengths this predator will go to kill its target, no matter who's around.

Later, after Sarah is taken to the police station, the lieutenant tells her, "There's a couch in this other room. Why don't you stretch out and try to get some sleep? . . . You'll be perfectly safe. We got thirty cops in this building."[2] They don't realize the Terminator can (and does) wipe them all out single-handedly. The problem isn't just that someone is out to kill her—it's that nobody understands the *power* of who is out to kill her.

In the passage of Scripture quoted at the start of this chapter, we read that God himself tells Cain that he doesn't know the power of the sin in his heart. The problem is not only that there is sin in the human heart—though, as the rest of the Bible makes clear, human sin is the primary reason for the world's condition—but also that we don't, and sometimes won't, recognize or acknowledge the *power* of sin. We underestimate it.

Therefore, there's nothing more important for us than understanding sin's true nature. God reveals to Cain—and to us—that nature in one vivid, pregnant utterance: "Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

We are told three things about sin in that one sentence. First, we are told that sin hides itself. It crouches. Second,

we are told that sin is tremendously powerful. It wants nothing more than to have us. Third—and this is implicit in the sentence—we have hope against it. We must rule over it, master it. In one sentence, God tells us about the hiddenness of sin, the power of sin, and that there's a hope to defeat sin.

Sin Hides Itself by Nature

The Hebrew word for "crouching" solicits the image of wild beasts like leopards and tigers—usually large cats. If you have a cat, you know how they get around bugs. My family used to have a cat who wasn't much of a predator, but if she saw a bug flying around, she was suddenly back in the jungle. She would freeze. She would get out of sight, lie down low to make herself look much smaller than she actually was, and hide. She would crouch. Here, sin is depicted as something that hides just like this, although it's much more dangerous than a house cat.

What God tells Cain is that sin, by its nature, makes itself look smaller than it really is. In the midst of our ordinary lives and our ordinary feelings, a monster is hiding—and we often rationalize its effects on us. Let's look at the story of Cain and Abel to see how this works.

Early in the story, Cain experiences what seem to him like justifiable and, really, very ordinary feelings: "Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast" (Genesis 4:5). He was

dejected and jealous of his brother—much like any of us would be if God seemed to prefer our sibling over us. This seems like a normal human response to being overshadowed by someone else.

But God tells Cain that he doesn't see what's at the heart of his own feelings. There is something crouching in the middle of that seemingly normal grudge. He has no clue how much power is hidden in that envy.

What's going on here? Cain and Abel both came to God with an offering. The word translated "offering" is important in understanding this story. There are a number of Hebrew words used to describe an offering, but the one that's used here, *minḥah*, specifically means a gift or tribute offering.

A gift offering is not the same as a sin offering. Cain and Abel are not going to God for forgiveness here. Instead, they are taking something that belongs to them and giving it to God as a symbol that everything they own really belongs to him, including their whole selves.

A good example of a gift offering in contemporary Western culture is when a man wants to marry a woman so he gives her an engagement ring. During the wedding, the bride gives the groom a ring in return. As you probably know, these rings are very valuable. When I proposed to my wife, Kathy, both of us had to sell some of our books and pool our funds together to buy her engagement ring. We were starving students at the time, and getting the money together was difficult. But when a bride and groom exchange rings at

a wedding, they're doing much more than just giving each other rings. They're saying, "This is a symbol of my giving myself to you." In fact, in the traditional Episcopal service (and this is a piece I always use when I do a wedding service), when the husband and wife put the ring on the other, they repeat after me, "I give you this ring as a symbol of my vow, and with all that I am and all that I have, I honor you." The ring is a token, a symbol, of giving all.

Let me ask you a question. What if a man went out, purchased a very expensive ring, brought it to his girlfriend, and said, "I give you this ring. Will you marry me?" She might say yes. But what if the night before, she found out he had been cheating on her? What is she going to say? "Why, thank you"?

No, she's going to say, "This isn't love; this is bribery. You're a liar. Maybe you *do* have feelings for me, but you won't give me your all. You want all of me with this offering, but you won't give me all of *you*. Forget it!"

If *we* dislike such a halfhearted gift, don't you think God does too? We may come to worship and give God all our prayers and money and offerings, but unless we back it up with our life, it's not love. It's not worship. It's bribery. It's a way of saying, "I would like God's favor, but I want to live my life my own way."

That's what Cain does here. How can we tell? Many people over the years have looked at the Mosaic law and its references to blood offerings and concluded that the problem

is that Abel brings sheep while Cain brings grain. They say the issue in this passage is Cain's failure to bring a blood offering.

But that's not the issue here. To make a gift or tribute offering in those days, you brought something that symbolized whatever you did to make a living. Cain is a farmer; he brings produce. Abel is a shepherd; he brings sheep. There is nothing wrong with the *form* of the offering, with what each brought. The problem is something else. First John 3:12 gives us a clue. It specifies that "[Cain's] own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous." Why is that? The problem is what lies behind Cain's offering, with the state of his heart.

Cain's problem is that he is halfhearted, not wholehearted. That posture is tremendously common in the average churchgoer today. The average churchgoer is not a drug dealer. They're not running a prostitution ring. But they want to come to church and be moral and thereby pay God off while living life their own way, determining for themselves what is right and wrong. This is ordinary, lukewarm religion.

By contrast, Abel's religion is wholehearted. As a result, we are told that "the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering; but for Cain and his offering He had no regard" (Genesis 4:4–5 NASB). The word *regard* can be a little hard to understand in this context. Does it mean that after they make their offerings at the altar, a thunderous voice comes down from the heavens saying, "Abel? Great! Cain? Terrible!"? Probably not, since we are given direct quotations of what God said to Cain.

What is likely meant by "had no regard" for Cain is that God simply does not bless him and that Cain can tell this because his life isn't going well. In other words, God withdraws his favor from Cain, while Abel is blessed and loved. How does Cain respond? The King James Version says, "And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell" (v. 5). Or as the NIV translates it, "Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast."

The American theologian Cornelius Plantinga Jr. wrote a great book on sin called *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. In it he says that the core of the halfheartedness we are discussing—whether as seen in Cain or in the ordinary, lukewarm religion of our day—is viewing ourselves as our first cause and viewing God as an accessory to us. Sin is acting as if *we* are God. We try to use God as the means to meet our own ends: our own joy, our own happiness, our own agenda.[3]

When a true worshiper of God finds their life going poorly, they grow confused and ask, "Lord, why?" But when life doesn't go well for a briber of God, they get exceedingly wroth. They say, "This isn't right—and I have a right for things to go my way." At the heart of this attitude is a demandingness—a sense of entitlement, as if God owes us whatever we want. As if life owes us whatever we want. That little seed of entitlement, if left unchecked, will grow. You'll start trampling on people to get what's best for you. You'll get angry and do whatever it takes to get what you seek. The

monster hiding in this halfheartedness will show itself whenever life doesn't go your way.

This halfheartedness, this unwillingness to say, "You're God and I'm not," is very common. It's even ordinary for most of us. But in it are the seeds of something terrible. God goes to Cain and says, in effect, "In this envy is hidden murder. Don't you see what's crouching at your door? It looks ordinary, but it's not. It's a monster."

Sin Hides Itself Intellectually

When I ask the average person how humanity could be capable of the Holocaust or how teenagers could commit contract killings or why Bosnian concentration camps existed, most people give the same answer. They say that those instances are exceptions and that ordinary people aren't capable of such evils and that most of us are inherently good.

In the 1960s, a former Nazi and organizer of the Holocaust named Adolf Eichmann was arrested after he was found hiding in Argentina. What many found unnerving about Eichmann—and indeed many other Nazis tried for war crimes—was how ordinary he appeared. When Hannah Arendt, a German American political theorist, reported on Eichmann's trial for the atrocities he committed, she coined the now-famous phrase "the banality of evil" to convey his seeming ordinariness, despite what he had done.

We want to believe ordinary people can't do monstrous things—that only the truly evil ones do things like that.

But when we see the monsters, we see that they're like us. They're ordinary. If *they* are capable, *we* are capable. Historically, we want to believe that ordinary people are all right, but the Bible tells us that at the heart of the ordinary is a monster.

In *The Roosevelt I Knew*, the memoirs of Frances Perkins, the secretary of labor for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Perkins tells a fascinating story that illustrates the difficulty we often have believing that a regular, ordinary person could be capable of such evil. Roosevelt received many reports about incredible atrocities happening in Europe during the early years of World War II, but he didn't listen to them. He didn't really believe what he was hearing and chose not to deal with it.

When it dawned on Roosevelt that the reports were not exaggerated, he was at a loss as to how normal human beings could act so evilly. In early 1944 he went to church at Hyde Park, where an Episcopalian minister asked him if he had read Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard's writings on original sin. Roosevelt began to read them. Not long after that, he called Perkins into his office and asked her, "Have you ever read Kierkegaard? Well, you ought to read him. It will teach you about the Nazis. Kierkegaard explains the Nazis to me as nothing else ever has. I have never been able to make out why people who are obviously human beings could behave like that. . . . Kierkegaard gives you an understanding of what is in man that makes it possible for these Germans to be so evil."[4] In other words, a normal, liberal,

secular humanist like Roosevelt could not believe human beings were capable of doing what he was hearing. For the situation to be comprehensible, he had to read—and be amazed by—Kierkegaard's explanation of what the Bible teaches us about original sin. Without that biblical teaching, Roosevelt was out of touch with reality and therefore unprepared to handle life.

Sin Hides Itself Personally

Our own worst sins look much smaller to us than they do to anyone else. If we have good people in our lives who really know us, like a great spouse or great friends who tell us the truth, they can see our shortcomings much more clearly than we ever could. If you ask them to point out your flaws, you will be amazed at how evident your shortcomings are to them when they're barely visible to you. We never see what is obvious to others.

This is why it's so important to live life alongside people who can help you see what you can't. Today, many people—especially those in cities, but it is true everywhere—live alone or away from family, close friends, or anyone who sees them day in and day out. If this is the case with you, find a small group at a church that will offer you the chance to grow close to others who can be of help. All of us need people who can see in us what we cannot see in ourselves.

This is crucial because if we leave our sins unaddressed, they will grow larger than we could ever imagine. Every

grudge wants to be murder. Every lust wants to be adultery. Every envy wants to be robbery. Every self-pity is an idolatry of something you're sure will save you—something more important than God.

Our sin tells us it won't hurt us and that we deserve what it offers, and so we give it quarter. We tolerate it. This is exactly what God is trying to warn us about in this passage. He's calling us to master our sin, to "rule over it" (Genesis 4:7 NKJV). The old Puritans had an expression: "Have quit with sin." That meant to have nothing to do with it. Don't give it any spot in your life. Don't just say to yourself, "It'll be okay. I see it over there in the corner. It's really rather small. In fact, I think it's asleep." Don't do that.

Throughout history, the hiddenness of sin has fooled every society and every culture. Don't let it fool you too. Tolerate it not a bit.

Sin's Desire Is to Have Us

In Genesis 4:7, God says to Cain, "If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door." This speaks to a powerful reality: When we don't do what is right, we create something that haunts us and chews on us.

Let me put it in a pithy little way: After you've done a sin, the sin does you. Sin is not done with you after you're done with it. When you sin, it doesn't just pass away; it takes on a

life of its own and wants to devour you. Sin has a power and vitality to it. And its job is to have you.

Throughout the rest of the book, we'll examine how exactly sin can have us, but for now let me give you an example of this two-sided power of sin. After you tell a lie, you're not suddenly done with lying. You will find you have to lie again to maintain the first lie you told. You don't have to be a Christian and believe the Bible to know this dynamic; plenty of wise thinkers and religions have all acknowledged it. Sin has an addictive power. It's like the old advertising claim of Lay's potato chips: You can't stop at just one. When you lie, you find you *have* to do it again. And when you lie again, you'll also find that it's easier than it was the first time. It's amazing how fast the unthinkable becomes thinkable after we find ourselves doing it.

The same is true of hate. If you hate, the hate grows. You want more of it. This is why C. S. Lewis argued that, at first, the Nazis killed the Jews because they hated them, but eventually, they hated them because they were killing them.[5] Do you see what he means? When we misuse somebody because we're mad at them, we find ourselves compelled to stay mad at them to justify what we've done. It becomes a cyclical habit that we can't simply slip out of. Before we know it, the behavior has overtaken us. Haters are eaten up by hatred. Liars are eaten up by lies.

John Steinbeck wrote a fascinating novel called *East of Eden*. It's about a man named Adam whose life has been destroyed by a competitive rivalry with his brother Charles.

Adam then marries and moves to California to set up a new home where he'll finally have a happy life. He has two sons named Caleb and Aron. Sounds a lot like Cain and Abel, doesn't it? That is intentional.

As his life unfolds, Adam finds to his horror that the problem in his life wasn't Charles—it was himself. The pride and competitiveness in his own heart pass down into the hearts of his children. Instead of loving and sharing with each other, they're just as hostile as Adam and Charles were. The sin keeps on going, and it becomes more pronounced as it goes.

But there is more to this dynamic than just the addictive power of sin. If you lie, not only will it become easier, even compulsory, to lie more; you will also find yourself being lied *to*. When you lie, not only does something happen *inside* you, but something happens *outside* you.

This is what Cornelius Plantinga calls the "law of returns":

> No matter what we sow, the law of returns applies.
>
> Good or evil, love or hate, justice or tyranny, grapes or thorns, a gracious compliment or a peevish complaint—whatever we invest, we tend to get it back with interest. Lovers are loved; haters, hated. Forgivers usually get forgiven; those who live by the sword die by the sword. "God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow" [Galatians 6:7].[6]

This is the way God made the universe. When we go against God's law, we go against ourselves. Sin is not just

wrong; it's stupid. It goes against not just the grain of our souls but also the grain of the entire universe.

Liars end up being lied to. Gossips are always gossiped about. Haters will always be hated back. Betrayers will be betrayed. Cowards will be deserted. Why? It may not happen immediately, every day, or at every moment, but eventually we always reap what we sow. Our sins are not done with us when we're done with them. They will stop at nothing to overtake us.

There's Hope for Sin

Some of you may be reading this and thinking, "Where's the hope? This is such a bleak introduction. Why am I reading this?" I have good news. The Terminator may be after us, but there is something much greater that can save us from it. There is a Savior who can help us. At one point in the film, when Sarah is on the verge of being terminated, someone approaches her and says, "Come with me if you want to live." The Bible tells us the same thing. Sin is after us, and we'll never be able to save ourselves from it on our own. So what do we do? Although God says we must master it, he doesn't exactly show us how. Let me explain what's going on here.

First, God comes to Cain. Don't overlook this. There is hope in the fact that God appeals to Cain. I love this conversation. He says, "Why are you angry? Why is your face

downcast?" (Genesis 4:6). In essence he's asking Cain, "Don't you see what's going on?" What can we learn about God from these questions? For one, we can tell his approach is much different from those of the ministers and Christians whose attitudes toward sinners are terribly condemning. When we read about God conversing with sinners, what does he say? God asks Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" asking them, in essence, to tell him what has gone wrong. He asks Jonah, "Have you any right to be angry?" And here he invites Cain into a conversation, as if to say, "Now Cain, let's think about this." These responses from God are amazing. There is a challenge and an honesty about the seriousness of sin—but there is also hope.

It's as though God is saying, "Cain, can't you see that Abel is not your real enemy? Sin is your real enemy. Your real problem is not what I've done to you or what your brother has done to you. You're not miserable because of what has happened to you. You're miserable because of what's *in* you. Don't you see, Cain? You're not a victim. But there's hope. There's something you can do about it."

God offers this same question and counsel to all of us. We may have been mistreated, but it is our self-pity, our anger, our bitterness, our refusal to forgive, our pride, our hurt feelings, or our insistence that certain things will save us that makes us truly miserable.

God comes to us and challenges us to repent because it's the only answer to our problem that carries real hope. If sin is our problem, we can work with God to master it. If our problem

is solely what is outside of us—as Cain thought, believing his problem was Abel—then our options are limited. Even the most extreme responses will ultimately fail to solve the problem, as Cain's murder of Abel reveals. But if the problem is the sin *in us*, then we stand a chance to do something that will help solve it. Do you hear God coming to you and giving you this hopeful challenge?

Even after Cain murders Abel, God comes to him again and asks, "Where is your brother?" (Genesis 4:9). God isn't looking for information. He already knows what happened. He's looking for repentance. He's giving Cain one last chance to repent. There is hope if he can see the sin, stop blaming Abel and God and everything else for his own sorrow, and say, "I'm miserable because of my sin."

But Cain says the most horrible thing he could say. He coldheartedly says, in contemporary terms, "Am I Abel's babysitter?" That response makes clear that sin has already devoured him.

What does God say? "Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" (v. 10). Human blood is not so easily washed away as ink or water. When a human being is killed, a wealth of evidence is left behind. This is an illustration of an underlying reality. Because human beings are valuable, because creation is good, God cannot pass over sin. When we, in our sin, destroy relationships, reputations, or lives themselves, the ruins of God's creation cry out to him.

God can't let such destruction go unaccounted for.

Why? Because he stands for peace. He stands for harmony. He stands for love. He is for the goodness of his creation. For him not to listen to the cry of the blood on the ground would be for him to treat human beings as if they were trash. Because Cain won't repent, God shows him Abel's blood.

It's tempting to wonder, "What if Cain *had* repented?" But let's turn the question back to ourselves. What if *we* repent? What if today we finally say, "You know what? My problems *are* because of my sin. The main problem in my life *is* my sin, not what has been done to me." What will happen? God will take you to a pool of blood too—a pool of blood that's crying out—but it won't be Abel's. And this is where hope is found.

Abel was only the first in a long line of wholehearted people who were killed or persecuted because they challenged, convicted, or showed up their halfhearted brothers. When somebody comes along who's wholehearted and pure, we hate them because they make the rest of us look bad. They're the smartest student who performs well on the test and kills the grading curve for the rest of us. Abel was the first to do this. Joseph was another hated by his brothers and persecuted. David was despised by Saul and persecuted. Stephen was a great religious leader killed by the other religious leaders.

But the ultimate Abel was Jesus. He's not just *like* Abel; he's the ultimate Abel. He wasn't just good. He was perfect. He didn't just die *by our hands*—he died, voluntarily, *for our sin*. Hebrews 12:23–24 says, "You have come to . . . Jesus the

mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." All human blood cries out for justice, and so does Jesus's. But Jesus's blood cries out in a different way than any other. Because he was perfect and died for our sins as our substitute, Jesus's blood cries to God "a better word" than anyone else's.

If we repent, God takes us to Jesus's blood—and it petitions God to bless us with his grace, his mercy, and his salvation. It cries out, "Father, sin must be paid. I have paid for the sins of those who believe in me. It would be unjust for you to punish them, lest you receive two payments." If we don't repent, the blood of everyone else we've hurt—the ruins of all we've destroyed—cries out against us, saying, "In the name of justice, reject them!" Jesus's is the only blood that cries out, "In the name of justice, save them. Embrace them. Love them. I have paid for them." Without Jesus, God's justice is against us. With Jesus, God's justice can be *for* us.

Maybe you've never acknowledged your sin. Maybe you've never repented. Maybe you're like Cain—you're religious to a degree, but you've never wanted to go all the way when it comes to submitting yourself to God. If you've ever heard yourself say, "I'm religious, but I'm not fanatical about it," look out! Watch for what's in your heart of hearts: a desire to *be* God rather than to be *under* God.

If any of those descriptions apply to you, hear God's words and don't underestimate the predator that wants to claim you. If you repent, God will take you to Jesus's blood,

which is crying out on your behalf. If you don't, you choose for yourself a much more tragic future in this life: a restless wandering in which you will always wonder why you are never satisfied—just like Cain.

Recall how at the end of the passage Cain says that someone will surely kill him for what he's done. The truth is, he deserves to be killed. He murdered someone, after all. But what does God do? He shows Cain compassion even then: "Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him" (Genesis 4:15).

God will, to the end of your life, continue to care about you and preserve you and keep you from getting what your sins deserve. He cares that much about you. Go to him. Only then, through the saving work of Jesus Christ, can you master that which seeks to destroy you.