

Christus Victor, Part 3: Cain and Abel Revisited

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What we have begun to take a new look at in our series, and will continue to do through Easter, is how the early Christian community found Jesus to be unique – how he embodied the greatest messages of Hebrew faith yet added something new and surprising that somehow fulfilled the very dreams, hopes, and visions behind the old vision even as it surpassed them. In other words, we've been working through some of the key similarities and differences between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

So, for instance, the Old Covenant promised that if Israel followed God's commands closely enough, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8), then there would come a day when Israel's enemies would all be vanquished and the world would stream to the land of Israel to be blessed. Effectively, what the Old Covenant promised was that the land of Israel would be transformed into a new Garden of Eden, or heaven-on-earth, provided that Israel fulfilled its end of the bargain.

By Jesus's day, however, Israel had proven itself completely incapable of living up to the standard of the Old Covenant. That's not a slight on Israelite society, by the way. If the most ethical and godly nation on earth couldn't do it, none of us stood a chance. The reality of life in this world is that we are deeply alienated – alienated from God and God's Creation, alienated from other human beings, and alienated from our very selves – so much so that even if it is theoretically possible to raise life on earth to a whole new level of existence, progress must be measured not in lifetimes or generations, but in millennia.

The shock that Jesus sent into the system was that he came announcing a New Covenant that God was making with the world that did not depend upon raising the level of human perfection. According to Jesus, God apparently prefers relationship over perfection anyhow. So, properly translated, the central message of the New Covenant Jesus announces is this: "The Kingdom of Heaven is already here! Change your whole way of thinking and believe the good news." (Matthew 4:17 / Mark 1:15)

What Jesus's announcement implies is that our quest for the Perfect Life has become the enemy of the Good Life – even the enemy of the Awe-and-Wonder-Filled Life. Instead of trying so hard to create the Perfect Life for ourselves – and continually failing to do so – what Jesus reveals is that finding heaven-on-earth has nothing to do with what we create. And it has everything to do with discovering what is already here, and embracing it. Continually beating yourself and others up for not achieving that higher level of existence where there is no

hardship or struggle or uncertainty has actually been pulling you backward – you, and those you are supposedly trying to help move higher with you.

If you will stop struggling so hard to eliminate struggle, and instead embrace whatever is holy and sacred within the heart of your struggles, then for you it will be like stepping into a whole new world. But it is NOT a new world. It is Eden. The world we inhabit already may not be Eden's *Garden*, but it is no less Eden than it ever was.

One of the ways Jesus illustrated what this Eden, as seen through the eyes of the New Covenant, looks like is by telling parables. Many of his parables drew upon themes central to the Old Covenant. Jesus simply recast them through the lens of New Covenant so people of his day would readily perceive the similarities and the differences between Old and New. Of course, if you're not familiar with the Old Covenant to begin with, then much of what Jesus says is lost on you. This was an issue that Paul took up later, when bringing Jesus's message to the Gentiles. And this is why our relationship with Temple Israel and other Jewish communities promises to be such an endless source of discovery and deepening for us as Jesus-followers.

One of Jesus's most famous parables, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is just such a retelling of an Old Covenant theme. The parable is really a new take on the story of Cain and Abel, as seen through New Covenant eyes. It's not a precise or literal retelling of the story. It can't be, for Jesus is trying to do something fundamentally new with it. But the characters are recognizable: The Prodigal Son is Cain; the Elder Brother is Abel. The Father of them both is God. In Jesus's version of this story, "Abel" isn't killed by "Cain" but remains alive. This is because Jesus is trying to make a critical point about "good people" like Abel, that the original story could never have made, since it killed off Abel so soon.

But we get ahead of ourselves. Let's turn first to the Prodigal ...

I. The Prodigal son

Scripture: Luke 15:11-20

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." '
So he set off and went to his father.

One of the crucial lessons to be learned from Jesus's story of the Prodigal Son is that God has no need to punish us for our sins. Therefore, we should neither punish ourselves for the sins we commit nor punish others for theirs. Repentance is what is required – a turning around – in the direction of Home.

Now, before you get your hackles up, imagining that Jesus was a moral relativist, or envisioned emptying the world's prisons of murderers and thieves, just let those concerns lie still for a moment and put yourself in the story for a little while.

Consider the modern-day Prodigals you know. Consider, for instance, someone you know who may be financially well-off, who may outwardly enjoy all the trappings of what the world calls "success" and even enjoys the esteem of others (or at least their envy) yet who, as far as you can tell, has gotten where they are by lying, cheating and mistreating other people. While you think that they may be living high on the hog at other people's expense, ask yourself this: Is there any amount of money you would accept in exchange for being them? Are there any material goods or is there any height in the social rankings that would make living life as them worth it to you? Alternately, if you had to give up something you have in order NOT to trade places with them, is there any material possession or instrument of wealth you would not divest yourself of to avoid being this person?

"But," you say, "the person I'm thinking of seems quite happy to be who they are, like he or she is on top of the world." Really? Just how happy do you think they really are if there is literally nothing that the world could give you that could entice you to swap places with them? Either your judgment about this person is totally messed up or they are not nearly as happy as they like you to think they are.

Personally, I would much rather be penniless and living in a halfway house with just the smallest notion of God's grace and love in my heart than be the enemy I pray for every morning. So when I pray for my enemy, I don't pray that God "punish" my enemy any more than I would pray that God kick a poor, destitute person in the teeth. Instead, I pray with the compassion I have toward the Prodigal Son in Jesus's parable. I see them as someone who has so little that is nourishing their soul that the spiritual equivalent of pig slop would be a healthy change in their diet.

If you think I'm being harsh on my enemy for imagining them in this unflattering light, bear in mind that I actually pray for the person I consider to be my greatest enemy each day. I pray that, if I am right about them, their inner hunger will move

them to push aside any fear they may harbor toward God for rejecting the life God intended for them, and their hunger will lead them home. For if they will dare to make their way home, Jesus leads me to be confident in what they will find there: not punishment, but welcome. Not judgment (for they have already judged themselves and turned around). Just a lot of good meals, a robe, and a ring.

II. The Patient Father

Scripture: Luke 15:20-24

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

The Prodigal's father, who Jesus uses as a metaphor for God, obviously knew better than most that sin bears its own punishment, and that his son's desire to return home and reestablish relationship on any level was a sign that he had hit "rock bottom" and needed no reminding of what an idiot he had been.

The Prodigal's Father also displayed another piece of rare wisdom in Jesus's story. While the father obviously loved his son like his own self, the father shows his wisdom as much by what he does not do in this story as by what he does do. What he does not do is chase after his son, seeking him out while he's away in the "far country," trying to persuade him to come home. Nor does the Father send any extra help or "care package" to his son that would make his life in the far country more bearable. He will not be an enabler to his son's trajectory of self-harm, or harm of others.

Instead, the Father waits patiently. He knows his son is suffering, yet he is aware that his son must become absolutely convinced through his own, internal logic or his fierce, driving need that living far from home has become unbearable and destructive. To be otherwise forced to return by his father would render it temporary. He would leave again at the next opportunity.

When I pray for my enemy, I try to follow the example of the Father. I don't pray that they will feel better about themselves or enjoy success while they are busy exploiting others and abusing their souls. Such prayers would be prayers of enablement. They would be nothing other than siding with evil. Instead, I pray simply that they become aware of the state of their soul – that whatever may be

blocking them from feeling what their soul is trying to tell them is cleared away so that they can hear the voice of Grace calling them home.

III. The Indignant Brother

Scripture: Luke 15:25-32

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.

He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' "

With the Elder Brother – also known as the “*Indignant Brother*,” we come to the heart of the heart of Jesus’s Parable. We also come to the heart of the heart of Jesus’s message to us.

The big problem with the Indignant Brother is that there’s a party going on, and he feels nothing but anger and resentment. All he can think about is how his younger brother got away with having all the “fun” he wanted to, partying away in the far country doing whatever he pleased and frittering away his inheritance, then he gets to come back home ... to another party! And he’s the guest of honor, no less.

And while his Prodigal Brother has been doing whatever he pleased, the Indignant Brother has not been doing anything he wanted to do. Instead, he’s been working his knuckles bare on his father’s estate. Every day he’s been putting in his time even when he would prefer not to, going the extra mile though he would prefer to take a break, setting his sights on the long-run, not the short run, sacrificing his ability to enjoy life in the now so as to build up a great inheritance for the future.

In other words, the Indignant Brother experienced no more joy over living on his Father’s estate than the Prodigal had originally – only whereas the Prodigal chose to leave the estate, the Indignant Brother worked hard on the estate in the hopes of eventually having a grander estate as his inheritance.

The Indignant Brother, in other words, is every “good” and “pious” person who walks the straight-and-narrow line here on earth for no other reason than either their hope of being rewarded for their good behavior in the Great Beyond, or their fear of being punished by a vengeful Father if they stray from the path.

According to Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven is already here. If you are so busy trying to build up a life in the next Realm that you begin to look down upon and resent your life in this Realm, then you will never – ever – want to join the party that awaits you. Because too many people you can’t stand will be wearing robes and rings and calling you “brother/sister.”

Yes, it is perfectly appropriate to yearn for a better world than the one we inhabit; and it is perfectly appropriate to recognize that this plane of existence is shot through with flaws and riddled with dead-ends. It is even appropriate – and wise – to acknowledge that much of this plane of existence is blanketed in darkness. Yet, if you are so obsessed with the darkness that you cannot see or appreciate the constant and wondrous light that penetrates this world – this Eden – to its core, then you are equipped neither to enjoy the light nor fight the darkness. And you are quite far from God.

There is good news here, though, if you’re feeling a little far from God right now.

In the eyes of the Patient Father, both the Prodigal Son and the Indignant Brother are loved beyond their wildest imagination. They have been since the beginning, which is why they have lived on their Father’s estate since the beginning and will always be welcomed with open arms should they leave and decide to return.

Both children, in other words, are citizens of Heaven. The only real question for either kind of citizen – the Prodigal or the Indignant – is: Will you change your whole way of thinking and embrace the beauty God has given you here – including your beautiful, pain-in-the-rear brother (and sister) – or will you die hoping to experience a beauty you never thought was particularly beautiful in this life?