



The Bellowing of Cain

by

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Sample Chapter

Note: This chapter comes from Section 3, “Finding Newness: Perspectives for Starting Over and Finding Hope,” which offers help on living with the losses long-term and rebuilding a life worth having.

Chapter 21: Living with the Guilt of Having Hurt Others

A new doctor in a psychiatric unit asked the nurse about a young patient who lay unmoving in her bed all day long without speaking.

“Oh, her? Tragic story. She used to be a school bus driver, poor thing. One snowy morning, her bus slid over the edge of an embankment and rolled. Bunch of kids died. Courts never figured out why it happened—faulty brakes, slick road, another driver, maybe all of it—but she hasn’t said a word since.”

The doctor decided to make it his mission to reach the young woman and spent weeks at her bedside, speaking to her inert form, encouraging her to not blame herself. After all, it might have happened to anyone.

Then one day her lips moved, and she mumbled, “Tell all that to the children.”

And he realized he could not ... for they were already dead.

I used to do a lot of my sermon writing at a local microbrewery. Its second floor was always abandoned on Tuesday nights, and nothing promotes good homiletics like a mindful Hefeweizen in a quiet public house. One night the barkeep walked up to me and said, “I started coming to your church.” Turns out she was a recently divorced mother of two, trying to figure out the next chapter of her life. I waved at her at church after that, and our children’s pastor told me her kids loved the program. Every few weeks, I’d see her at the pub and ask how she was. I learned that her divorce had been a brutal one and she said my sermons were really helping her heal and move on.

But a few months later, my scandal broke, and the church blew up. I didn't go back to the pub for a long time, but at one point I asked the children's pastor about her. He said, "Oh, her? She hasn't been back in months." That was one of the lowest points of my whole journey.

What are you supposed to do with the knowledge that your choices have destroyed other people? How do you live with the memory of the faces of the people you hurt? What do you do with the powerlessness you feel to fix, redress, or in any way mitigate the damage of your own choices? These questions haunt all of us in one form or another. Everyone has regrets. We've all been hurt by people and have surely hurt others in innumerable ways.

I think leaders, however, bear a special responsibility for the harm they inflict on the people who follow them. It's a special class of sin, less like a starving man stealing a mutton chop and more like a shepherd who eats the sheep in his care. As Plato rightly reminded us in *The Republic*, the only reason leaders exist at all is for the sake of those who follow, so when they do things that destroy those people, it's a uniquely pungent form of evil. If we deny this, then we need to stop reading here and go back to chapter 2, for self-deception of a particularly insidious kind knocks at our door.

The only alternative is to admit the guilt, own it, and deal with the crippling shame that such a confession brings.

From Despair to Gospel

It's a horrible thing to suspect that someone's life may have been better for *not* having met you—someone like that poor young woman at the pub. When I was finally up to going out in public, I eventually went back to that little taproom. She wasn't there. She'd moved on. God alone knows where.

I have died a thousand deaths in my heart over what I did to her. I don't even remember her name, and I wouldn't recognize her now if I passed her on the street. But the thought of her journey—how she was finally beginning to find some hope but had now shrunk back into the shadows, perhaps with deeper wounds than when she met me, perhaps in disgust even leaving the whole church—well, that tears me up. And since I don't really know what happened to her, shame makes me imagine the worst. It wakes me at night in cold sweats. And she is just one of many such stories.

A few people have told me they still remember my time at the church with fondness, that they learned a lot, that they still appreciate things I taught, and I'm grateful when such stories come to me. They help mitigate the sense of absolute failure. But they can't release me from the burden that many hundreds of others may have thrown up their hands and walked away from the church, from God, from their own lives because of me. No, such well-wishers cannot release me. They don't have the power, and I don't have the right to let them. You don't get to weigh the good you've done in life on the scale against the evil and then, if the good outweighs the bad, think well of yourself. That's not how the world works. And it is certainly not how God works.

When confronted with your failures, you don't get to wave your successes in God's face and say, *Look—I have compensated for my sins with my righteous acts*. That is neither Christianity nor the gospel. If I may be blunt, the gospel, at least as the prophet Isaiah forecasts it, says if I am attempting to clothe myself in even my most righteous actions, they will be revealed to have only

the value of used menstrual rags. Yes, that’s literally what Isaiah said.¹ Who would wrap themselves in those, stand before the mirror, and say, “See my fancy new clothes?” The naked emperor in all his pompous self-deception was better off than that.

No, the gospel of Jesus Christ never weighs our good actions against our evil ones and then takes a sum. The stains of our sin are not removed by any amount of countervailing good. We do not diligently darn our bloody rags into wedding gowns. As Aslan said to the dragonish Eustace after his repeated attempts to shed his scaly skin, “You will have to let me undress you.”² Our rags must be shed, and we must be dressed in another’s clothes—in another’s righteousness.

How Shall We Then Live? Embrace the Oldest Truth Once Again

This is an old truth, one of the oldest, and if you’re reading this because you were once in a position to proclaim that truth, then you already know it well. I am reminding you that the message you once proclaimed to others applies to you still. You cannot remit, remove, or reduce your agonized conscience by any subsequent act of virtue. Nor can such a conscience be answered by anyone sincerely reminding you of the good you did once upon a time. Be grateful for such reminders, but do not rest your heart upon them. They are not strong enough to silence for long a disturbed and voluble conscience.

Learn again that first lesson of the faith, my friend. Our sins cannot be outlived or outlasted; they can only be forgiven. And there is only one who has the power to answer the recriminations of our heart. St. John reminds us that “even when our own heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart.”³ There it is. That same Christ you spent all that time pointing people toward now beckons to you to come again and find rest in the only place it is to be found.

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I can’t undo whatever I did to that poor young lady at the brewing company or a hundred others just like her. I cannot make it right. It’s beyond my power. I must live with it. I can only go to Jesus, offering my remorse and shame as the only offering I have to bring, believing in faith that *he* has not lost track of her or anyone else. That he has the power to redeem even where I destroyed. He has done it for Adam’s folly, and he can do it for yours and mine. He bids me to lay *this* burden down as he bids us to do with all others and let him carry it.

This does not in any way make me less responsible for the things I did and the hurts I’ve caused. It means only that those who are now lost to me are not lost to God, and I have to rest in that. That is what faith looks like. You once gave your own life to Christ? Perhaps it’s time to entrust him with all those other people’s lives as well.

¹ Isaiah 64:6

² C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2016), 77.

³ 1 John 3:20.