

CHANGED BY PAIN
Read Genesis 4

Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, “I have gotten a manchild with [the help of] the LORD (Gen. 4:1).

Eve’s wail seemed to shock the still, night air with its unbearable anguish. Tears streamed from her puffy, blotchy red eyes. If the day she had birthed her twins had been the most exhilarating of her life outside the garden, this day was the most devastating. Abel, her second born, had been slain by her first born, Cain.

Earlier that day, Eve had learned that one son had not obeyed instructions regarding sacrifices. Rather than bring the first-fruits, Cain had merely presented some of the fruit of the ground he had tilled. His mediocre offering, she surmised, had demonstrated that Cain was not trusting the Holy One for future needs. Abel, on the other hand, had brought his best. Lambs had passed by their dwelling as Abel led the firstborn of his flock to the altar. Abel’s offering had been approved. Eve was now aware that by faith, Abel had offered a better sacrifice. Cain’s murderous rage, however, had been ignited.

What we normally miss in the story of Cain and Abel are the bookends. As important as the information concerning the offerings is, it is not the introduction to the story (Gen. 4:3-4). Nor is the listing of Cain’s genealogy the conclusion (Genesis 4:17-24). No, the introduction and conclusion to the story are composed of a pair of brackets that envelope the narrative (see the Scriptures that begin and end this article). Furthermore, bookends are the second key to a dynamic Bible Study.

Psalms 8 contains a clear illustration of bookends. The Psalm opens and closes with the words ***O LORD, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth!*** (vv. 1 and 8). The brackets instruct us to read the whole Psalm with thoughts of God’s majestic name. Because of the LORD’s name, His “splendor” is “displayed above the heavens.” Thus, the Psalmist cries out to the Lord in bewilderment, “What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?” The only answer for the query is the final verse: ***O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!***

In the narrative of Cain and Abel, the initial bookend informs us that the man, Adam, had relations with his wife. She then gave birth to a son (Cain), she named him, and she told what his name meant. At the conclusion of the narrative in verse 24, the same ingredients are listed for the birth of Seth. These bookends, however, differ slightly, yet dramatically. The story between may help explain why the wording of the bookends differs.

Initially, at Cain’s birth, Eve launched her remarks with “I” (Gen. 4:1). She claimed most of the credit; Yahweh was merely a helper. Notice, however, what she professed at the birth of Seth: “God has granted me another offspring” (v. 24). What altered Eve’s focus from herself—“I have gotten a manchild”—and directed her attention onto God—“God has granted me another offspring”? The story within the bookends provides an explanation. The intolerable suffering that accompanied Eve’s loss of a son channels her

passion toward God. The horrifying ache of realizing that her firstborn was a murderer drew her focus from herself toward God. Thus, pain changed Eve.

The bookends establishing the introduction and conclusion of this narrative assist us in reading the story in a novel way. We may recognize, through the bookends, that it is the distressful occurrences in our own lives, not the joyful ones, which prompt our intimacy with God. The period when our marriage is on the brink of dissolution, the distress of an obstinate teen, the time our cherished child is very ill, the ordeal of having our car in the shop with no money to pay the bill, draw us to God. Like Eve, our perception of God is refined during hardship; God then becomes our focal point. Like Eve, we are changed by pain.

Adam had relations with his wife again; and she gave birth to a son, and named him Seth, for, she said, “God has granted me another offspring in place of Abel, for Cain killed him” (Gen. 4:25).