

GETTING UNSTUCK

Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know: am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen: your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me." Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden."

How does forgiveness work when we've gotten ourselves in a really sticky mess? Lawrence Wood tells us about such a mess in his book, *A Hundred Tons of Ice*, that as the year 1919 began, the Purity Distilling Company of Boston was in a hurry to make as much rum as it could before Prohibition began. Purity had a vat that could hold two-and-one-half-million gallons of molasses, which was needed in the distillation process. The vat was filled to the top.

But whereas on January 12, 1919 the temperature was only two degrees above zero, the next day the thermometer shot up to forty and stayed there. The warm winter weather strained the rivets and weakened the seams of the molasses tank until the rivets popped and the top of the tank was blown into the air. As the tank came apart, a thirty-foot wave of hot molasses shot into the streets of Boston, demolishing nearby city buildings and a firehouse. Twenty-one persons were killed, one hundred fifty injured. Survivors had to have their clothes cut off them.

And then cleanup efforts began. Policemen in blue, Army soldiers in green, and Red Cross volunteers in white were soon turned brown and indistinguishable. They tried to remove the molasses with hoes, brooms, and freshwater from fire hydrants, all to no avail. Progress came only later when fireboats pumped saltwater from the Harbor. But months later Boston doorknobs, trolley seats, benches, and telephones were still sticky. All summer Boston Harbor remained a deep shade of brown. The odor was terrible.

So often forgiveness involves a sticky mess. We sin or make poor choices and no matter how hard we work to make things right again, the consequences of this sin or mistake or bad decision stick to us like molasses to a Boston telephone receiver, doorknob, trolley seat, etc.

In the scripture (above) Cain creates a sticky mess. Jealous that God accepted his brother Abel's offering and not his, Cain murders Abel. And just as filling the molasses tank in Boston brought about unforeseen consequences, this act of murder brought about the

same. God tells Cain, “You are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood... When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”

There are some choices and words and actions that change things forever. Things cannot return to the way they were, and forgiveness, although it opens the way to an ongoing future with God, does not change the consequences. A son who kills his parents’ other son cannot continue to live on the family land as though nothing has happened. Cain has to leave.

Cain said to the Lord, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.’”

And he has a point. Throughout the Bible, clan was very important, as in Hatfields vs. the McCoys. The clan took care of its own. You beat up our guy, we’ll beat up yours. You kill one of us, we’ll kill one of you. That was the practice. Cain knows that as he roams the earth he will meet people who realize that he doesn’t belong to any clan in their neck of the woods. And if they can’t link him to a clan, they can do anything they want to him, including kill him, without fear of retaliation. Cain is in danger because he doesn’t have a family or clan to come to his aid or to retaliate on his behalf.

But “‘Not so!’ says the Lord. Whoever kills Cain will suffer a seven-fold vengeance.’ And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden,” where he met John Steinbeck, who did not attack Cain but used Cain’s experience as the basis for his novel, *East of Eden*. But I digress.

A recap of the story. Cain sins by killing his brother Abel. There are consequences. He cannot stay with his family, he cannot continue his life as a farmer, he has to go away. But God forgives Cain in the sense that he grants him continued life. God has the final say here. In fact, so that he might have a life apart from his family, God puts a mark on him that says, “If you mess with me, no less than God will retaliate against you. And take not just one of your clan, but seven.”

People ask what this mark looked like. We don’t know, of course. Clint Eastwood believes it was a tattoo that read, “Go Ahead, Make My Day.” But again I digress.

Forgiveness does not necessarily remove consequences. Let’s not let them bog us down like molasses in Boston. There’s a big difference between bogging down in the consequences and accepting them and moving on with our lives. God’s forgiveness makes moving forward possible. And sometimes that’s the best one could hope for. - DJ

