

**ROTTENNESS TO THE BONE**  
**Genesis 4:1-10**  
*(Wayne Brouwer, modified)*

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It's my problem. It's your problem as well, if you're honest.

Shakespeare's Othello says it thusly: "O beware, my lord, of jealousy. It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds upon."

Several years ago, two high school girls in California, both well-liked, both talented and ambitious, both usually at the center stage of school social activities, came to cheerleading tryouts together. It was a friendly rivalry. One was selected, but the other didn't make it. That night a beast came out of the darkness and bit the heart of the loser. She felt poison charge through her system, and her eyes grew dark and blazing. Her hand found a gun, and she stalked her prey. In the morning, the winner was a loser, and the loser was a devil. The whole community choked in pain.

There was shock in the announcer's voice when the story was told on the radio. Everybody was shocked. A lot of news stories are about people who are in distant places or people who loom high above us socially. We'd never attain to their stature anyway. But this was the girl next door killing another girl next door. We saw her on the street. We chatted with her on the bus. We sat next to her at the ball game. She wasn't some strange and cruel stock character from a B-rated movie. She was our daughter, our sister, our friend, ourselves. And that's why that story was shocking to us all.

The shock was more than just disbelief. The shock brought revelation that someone acted on feelings that most of us have felt – raging envy, insane jealousy.

There is no worse rivalry than sibling rivalry. Brother against brother. Sister against sister. Sibling versus sibling. That's our story today – the story of Cain and Abel.

A modern version of the Cain and Abel story is found in the Lidow family.

**The Lidow family owned the International Rectifier Corporation, a corporation that brought in hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. It's a semiconductor maker. Eric Lidow taught his boys, Derek and Alex, that they were to play to win on the field, even when they were playing against each other. Nothing wrong, thought the father, of a little sibling rivalry. And guess what? Derek and Alexander took that lesson to heart. They became competitors – competitors for life.**

Derek and Alex were gifted boys, to say the least. Both graduated high in their respective classes at Beverly Hills High School. Derek graduated at age 16; his younger brother, Alex, at the usual age of 18. That began the younger brother's obsession with his elder. "I can't let him do better than me," he recalls thinking to himself.

Quite a task to try to keep up with Derek though. He graduated from Princeton summa cum laude at age 20, and earned a Stanford Ph.D. in physics in two years. Alex, though, not to be outdone, was no slouch. He built a photoelectric cell at age 8, got his undergraduate degree in physics from Cal Tech in three years and won his Ph.D. in applied physics from Stanford at age 22.

After they both had their Ph.D.s in their respective fields, they began to work for their daddy's company, the family company – the International Rectifier Corporation, the El Segundo-based outfit their father had started in 1947 with his own father. The company held 124 U.S. and foreign patents.

In 1976, while still a Ph.D. candidate, the younger son, Alex, came up with a new chip – a chip that would break up electrical current into smaller, more usable units and did so much more efficiently than the bipolar transistors used at the time. His father was impressed with his younger son, usually the one who was just a step behind. He gave him an engineer and \$100,000 to work out the Hexfet chip. They bet the whole company, mortgaged up to the eyeballs. They bet everything on the younger boy's new chip.

And it paid off.

The older brother had to admit he was impressed. But he had envy to the bones. He was rotten. His little brother had finally crowded him out from the limelight. His little brother had rescued the company for the future.

A feud started within the company. Alex was representing the new product, and Derek was saying, "Let's not put all our eggs in one basket." He wanted to hold on to the older products. And the father basically bifurcated the company and made them two chieftains and the company devolved into opposing fiefdoms. They had double marketing groups. They had redundant support staffs and sales staffs. And...well...the stock fell from \$12 to \$3. And the brothers were barely speaking.

But their problem wasn't a business problem. It was a sibling rivalry problem. It was an envy problem. It was a jealousy problem. They called in a psychologist, J. Mitchell Perry, who got the boys back on track. Alex, the younger brother, admitted, "I had to resolve a lifetime of issues of competing with my brother."

The stock then rose from \$3 to an all-time high of \$44.5. And the brothers served as co-chief executives. (*Forbes*, 9/11/1995)

Rivalry, envy, destroys much.

We don't want anyone to be better than we are, at our game, at what we do. For when we hear about their success, we turn green with envy. We go through the "Yes, but...." phase. "Yes, he may have made it to the top, but I really don't think...."

Envy is so common, yet seldom mentioned in sermons or anywhere else. But the proverbial writer says in Proverbs 14:30, "It is rottenness to the bones." Ponder for a moment the osteoporosis of this insidious sin.

**C. S. Lewis, in his chapter on forgiveness in *Mere Christianity*, lays out the post-mortem of an envy-cankered soul along these lines. "When I hear another admired, I can either thank God for what he has accomplished through that person, or I can reduce the other's merit by finding fault. Similarly, when I hear another criticized, I can seek some redeeming factor which might excuse or at least lessen his guilt, or I can enjoy the bad I've heard and hope to hear of worse still."**

**The second option is, to quote Lewis, "the first step in a process which, if followed to the end, will make us into devils. You see, one is beginning to wish that black was a little blacker." You hear something bad about someone, you have a suspicion, and you hope it's a little worse than what than what you're hearing. "If you give into that, later on you wish to see grey as black. Then you begin to wish, in the end, that white itself is black. Finally, you insist on seeing everything – God and your friends and everyone around you, yourself included – as bad, and not able to stop doing it, you shall be fixed forever in a universe of pure hatred."**

It's a horrid road to begin walking down – the road that sees black as blacker, then grey as black, and then white as black – looking, always looking for some way to tear someone down, to find fault.

**Envy is not a gentle emotion. It's not I want what you have, too. It's aggressive: I want what you have, and I want you not to have it. I want to take it away from you, and if I can't do that, I'll spoil or destroy it. Envious people live in a perpetual state of anxious, competitive comparison, focusing on what others around them have and what they themselves lack. (Jane Ciabattari, "Will the '90s Be the Age of Envy?" *Psychology Today*, 12/1989)**

Remember the story of Mozart's life told from the perspective of Antonio Salieri? The play and the film were both called *Amadeus*. Salieri was the court musician in Vienna. He worked hard at his craft, writing melodies that were nice and choral pieces that were fine and instrumental works that were good. He knew that God had blessed him. As a young man he had prayed fervently to God. "Let me make music that will glorify you, Father. Help me lift the hearts of people to heaven. Let me serve you through my music."

Then came the boy wonder, the child prodigy, young Mozart. He dazzled the crowds, playing music as if it was second nature to him. Complex melodies came from his dancing fingers. His melodies were complex and fun all at the same time – songs that soared till they seemed to bring heaven right down to earth.

Here's the catch, though: Mozart was such an obvious sinner. He was immature, vulgar, and obscene. He made off with the ladies every chance he could get. Salieri grew green with envy. How could life be so unfair? He was a servant of God. Why should Mozart be blessed with such talents? Salieri lived a pious and obedient life. Why should Mozart traffic in all these worldly pleasures and still get ahead? Salieri spent a lifetime in hard and tedious work. Why should it all come so easily for the youthful Mozart?

The story continues until Mozart dies a mysterious death. Salieri's eyes gleam, and in the dramatic climax Salieri sits in an insane asylum, where he curses God for denying him the kind of talent that blessed young Mozart.

Envy lurks on the path of the crushed spirit. Why should your marriage end in divorce while others survive? Why should your business falter during the recession while hers only grows? Why should your life be plagued with sickness while his seems never to be troubled?

Remember the two women who came to Solomon with one baby between them? One baby had died, and now both women claimed the same child. How could Solomon judge such a case?

"He's mine," says one.

"No, he's mine," retorted the other.

"Bring me the sword," Solomon says. He pretends to mark a dotted line, halving the baby. One woman is heartbroken.

"No," she says. "No, not that. Just give her the baby." The other woman has a smug look on her face and says, "Go ahead. Fair is fair. Chop it in two."

You know what is happening. Life isn't fair. That woman's baby died, and envy leaped into her crushed spirit. And she is saying, "If I can't have my baby, then she can't have hers either."

Envy was Cain's problem. It was the cheerleader's problem. It was Salieri's problem. It was Alex's problem. And it's my problem, too.

Genesis 4:1-10

Cain and Abel were brothers. They played together as children. They built forts. They swam together. They had carved their initials in the tree. They had always been racing and competing with each other. They were brothers; they were rivals and friends.

Adam and Eve showed them the way to worship. They told the boys about the early days in the Garden when they walked and talked with God, and He came down to them every day. Their parents showed Cain and Abel how to prepare sacrifices. They said, "God stays a little way away from us nowadays. So we have to talk to Him by way of smoke signals."

The young men build their altars. They strike up the song of the fire and send their praise and thanks to God. Then comes the word from heaven. Abel makes the cheerleading team, but Cain is cut from the roster.

It's a familiar story. Both of the boys brought their offering unto the Lord. Cain was like his father, Adam. He was a farmer. So when he brought an offering, it was natural for him to bring produce to God. Abel was a rancher. So when he brought an offering, it was proper for him to bring the first born of his flock.

The question that stands in our mind as readers of the story is clear. Why did God accept the offering of Abel and why did He reject the offering of Cain? The New Testament makes it clear. The problem was not mechanical. The problem was not that Abel brought the first of his flock while Cain brought left over grain. Rather, it was the heart of the giver that made the difference.

Hebrews 11:4

By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

Cain is outraged. How does God accept the offering of his kid brother and yet refuse his?

You know the feeling. I know the feeling. It's our problem, too.

Someone else wins, and I'm the loser. That's the jungle where the beast lurks. **Gore Vidal said, "Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little."**

What about you? Of whom are you envious?

**Author James Michener has made his mark in the literary world by producing massive historical novels such as *The Source, Hawaii, The Covenant, Texas, and Poland* (to name a but a few). Ironically, Michener's style has drawn its strength and beauty from characters fleshed out with extensive genealogies and deep cultural roots. Yet he himself is a man without a birth certificate. Abandoned as an infant, raised as a foster-son in the Michener family headed by a widowed Quaker woman, James had never known his biological parents. While he claimed to have come to peace with this vacuum in his life, it is easy to see why he found pleasure inventing extensive lineages for all his characters with each new novel.**

**Despite his generous spirit and kind nature, Michener's accomplishments raised the ire of one of his adopted-clan kin. In a rage of jealousy, mean-spiritedness and sheer nastiness, some anonymous relative – self-signed "a real Michener" – felt impelled to write hate-filled, hurtful notes to James whenever his name gained fame or newspaper space. Even after his Pulitzer Prize, this poison-pen writer charged Michener with besmirching the good Michener name, which, he said, "You have no right to use," and denounced him as a fraud. But the phrase this anonymous hate-monger thrust the most deeply under Michener's skin was, "Who in the heck do you think you are, trying to be better than you are?"**

**The final letter he received from his unknown relative came in 1976 after President Ford had presented James with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The acidic note read, “Still using a name that isn’t yours. Still a fraud. Still trying to be better than you are.”**

**Michener testified that the words of that cry were burned into his soul. But Michener turned the negative power of that accusation into a life challenge. Michener acknowledged his nitpicking kinfolk and admitted to missing the nasty letters when his relative presumably died. “He was right in all of his accusations,” Michener confessed. “I have spent my life trying to be better than I was, and am brother to all who have the same aspirations.” (James A. Michener, *The World Is My Home: A Memoir*)**

We all wish our family and friends well, but perhaps not that well. When we feel down about ourselves, it’s easier to tolerate hearing about a friend’s misfortune than his or her successes. Because your friends are the closest things to being like you, their success makes you question yourself. “Why not me?” you ask.

**We all feel this way sometimes. Nothing alienates people quite like success. When people become successful, they discover a sad and unexpected truth: It is lonely at the top. Your friends need to celebrate their successes without feeling they are intimidating you and to share their failures without your taking secret satisfaction from them. Can you really allow your friends to confide their successes to you without becoming envious of it or asking to participate in it? Just say, “No one deserved it more than you.” You’ll probably be right. And you’ll certainly be a good friend. (David Viscott, *Finding Your Strength in Difficult Times*)**

Or you can choose to be envious.

Envy will possess you. It will consume you. It will rob you of the ability to enjoy the good things that God has given you. It will snatch away your ability to rejoice with a friend when blessings come his way.

If God had looked at Cain as number two, then there had to be a number one. And at all cost, Cain was going to knock off number one.

Back in the fourth century, the great preacher, Basil of Caesarea, preached a sermon on envy. He said it creates three problems in the bitterness of our bitten hearts.

### **1. First, it causes us to slander.**

Three churches struggled to survive. Then one of the churches called a pastor who was extremely gifted. His sermons were relevant and gripping. His personality had the loving compassion of Mother Teresa coupled with the dynamic charisma of Tom Cruise. He could teach in ways that made people hungry for more. People saw God through his ministry. Folks began to drift and find their way into his church on Sunday.

That's where the problems began. The other two pastors met together and decided that surely God was not in such a flamboyant style of ministry. Obviously he preached a gospel that was false. Then they remembered a rumor they heard. Was there some kind of indiscretion? Who knows? The pastors didn't stop it. The rumors spread. People began to wonder. The pastor's family was shamed, and in a short while they left town. Envy found its mark and turned two preachers of the truth into liars and gossips. Envy made the cross of Christ Jesus hypocrisy.

Envy and slander are close friends, aren't they? A French proverb says, "It is only at the tree loaded with fruit that people throw stones." Francis Bacon put it like this: "He who cannot mend his own case will do what he can to impair another's." That's one of the trademarks of envy in our lives.

**2. Not only does envy cause you to slander another, but secondly, it robs you of your thankful heart and makes you ungrateful.**

For those who are envious, their eyes rove the stock on other people's shelves. An envious person doesn't really know gratitude. If God gives them three, they will find someone who has four. If God allows them to have a nice home, they're happy – happy until their neighbors build a better house across the street. The house which used to give so much joy now seems so undesirable.

**3. Thirdly, Basil said that envy gives us a negative focus.**

Those who are envious seem to be able to focus on the negative aspects of things that happen around them all the time. People who are envious have a negative disposition. They tend to have the cancer of envy eating away inside, and they focus only on the worst of life.

Envy.

Yes, it was the cheerleader's problem.

It was Salieri's problem.

It was Alex's problem.

But it's Howie's problem, too. And I've got a sneaking suspicion that I might could add your name to the list.

Envy. Rottenness all the way to the bones. It gives us nothing, but robs us of so much.