

Sin is lurking at the door

By [Evan D. Garner](#)

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And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.

Why?

Elizabeth and I were away one weekend, and in the three-and-a-half days that we were gone, our four-year-old seems to have grown by an inch and our almost-two-year-old has learned some new words. He's been saying "No!" for a while now, but it has started showing up with new vigor and an accompanying hand-waiving. It's pretty funny. But the really new word—one I had never heard him say until I walked in the door from our trip—is "Why?"

Why? If you've spent any time with two-year-olds, you know what I'm talking about. Why? Why? Why? Dad: I need to get dressed. Child: Why? D: So I can go to work. C: Why? D: Because I have a job. C: Why? D: Because the Holy Spirit spoke to me one night and told me I was supposed to be a priest. C: Why? After a few minutes, it really does get that funny—a father offering increasingly ridiculous and impenetrable answers to his son's never-changing question.

I think [the story of Cain and Abel](#) is a story of "Why?" Why did the Lord regard Abel's offering but not Cain's? We can speculate: because God likes meat more than veggies or because Abel offered the choice firstlings of his flock while Cain offered only left-over vegetables or because God was in a bad mood that day. We can guess, but we don't know. And that's the point. We don't know. But for some reason, the Lord had regard for Abel's offering and not for Cain's. And that made Cain furious. And what was the Lord's response? "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Have you ever had a boss who demanded that something to be done a different way but not explain to you why? During college, I worked in the Mayor's Office in Birmingham. I was a lowly intern, which really meant I helped out in the Office of

Public Information. What we were supposed to do was draft letters of invitation to organizations who were thinking about holding their conferences in the city or write proclamations declaring this day or that day in celebration of a woman's 100th birthday or a church's 100th anniversary. I wrote a lot of those proclamations, and I added a bit of my own flair to them. My boss—not the mayor—repeatedly sent them back to me and asked me to change them back to the plain, ordinary, preapproved format I had been given to work with. Why? I'm pretty sure it was because we disagreed about the rules of grammar, but he never told me why. He just said, "Do it my way." You probably can guess how that made me feel. I never rose up against him and killed him when we were in the field, but I didn't like him very much.

Why? It's a question as old as humanity. Why does God do it this way? Why does God want it that way? He's not a capricious boss who refuses to disclose his wishes to humanity. In fact, quite the opposite. He's made himself known in the giving of the law, in the word spoken through the prophets, and in the incarnation of his son. But sometimes things happen that we don't understand or appreciate or even agree with. Sometimes our best efforts fall flat. Sometimes our good intentions miss the mark. And that's where sin is lying, waiting to suck us in.

That's what sin is, really. It's not merely a misdeed or a wrong act. It's what happens when there is an unreconciled disconnect between our efforts and God's will. Sometimes we know exactly what's wrong, but other times we can't figure it out, or it doesn't make sense, or it makes us angry. Then what will we do? How will we handle the not-knowing? How will we respond to the impenetrable "Why?" Cain's example is extreme, but the mistake is trying to explain it too simply. We're not supposed to point our finger at him and say, "You should have made a better offering." We're supposed to sympathize with him and recognize that our own lives are full of similar moments. We are called to "master" sin—to work on living with that disconnect and responding by searching for a renewed relationship with God.

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