

By faith Abel Lives (Heb.11.4)  
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**By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.**

## Introduction

As we come to Hebrews 11.4 this morning, let us get our bearings by reminding ourselves of the immediate context (flow of thought). The entire chapter is an expansion on the encouragement in Hebrews 10.35-39 to trust the Lord with an enduring faith by which the righteous live and preserve their souls. Thus, the writer began with comments on the objective nature of faith in 11.1 (KJV): **Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen**, which is just to say that faith is part of our hope as God's gift to us in the future, and it is evidence itself of the unseen God and His yet unrealized promises. Then, in 11.3, he took us back to the very creation and to the origin and nature of the world by telling us, not that God created the world, but that He created the world by His word: **By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible**. It encourages faith to know that the world that has its origin in the unseen Creator is itself the speech of God. By His speech in the created order, He reveals His glory to us and through it He gives concrete, earthy, promises of great events yet to come. So, it is within this context of what faith is as God's gift and what the world is as His self-revealing communication that the author now begins to illustrate what faith looks like by example from the history of believers of OT times. For all of these believers, the coming of Christ was something promised in the distant and unseen future. Their experience parallels our experience in the sense that we too wait for the fulfillment of the promises, only now we wait for second coming of Christ; they waited for His first coming.

These historical figures (cited in Hebrews 11) exemplify faith that we are to imitate, but they are more than examples, they are encouragers. Their faith and faithfulness in diverse and challenging circumstances show us what faith is and encourages us to exercise that kind of faith in our diverse and challenging circumstances. So, as we go through the examples, we want to pick up various nuances about faith and drink of the encouragement that is here to persevere in faith and faithfulness (to trust and obey). The first example is Abel. The text draws our attention to His sacrifice in two ways: its background and its acceptance.

### 1A. The background of Abel's sacrifice

Abel was the second son born to Adam and Eve. The first son was Cain. We have little on record regarding Abel. The main account is Genesis 4.1-10, which we read in our Scripture reading earlier.

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." <sup>2</sup> And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. <sup>3</sup> In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, <sup>4</sup> and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. <sup>6</sup> The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? <sup>7</sup> If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." <sup>8</sup> Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. <sup>9</sup> Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" <sup>10</sup> And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.

Our Lord refers to him as the innocent Abel and puts him in the category of those who have "righteous blood" and were nonetheless murdered (Lk. 11.51; cf. Mat. 23.35). The only

other account is what we have here in Hebrews 11.4. Even the fullest narrative, Genesis 4 gives only glimpses about Abel; most of the narrative covers the Lord's dealing with Cain.

According to Genesis, Abel was a **keeper of sheep** (Gen. 4.2) in contrast to Cain who was a **worker of the ground** (4.2). At some undefined point in time, both brothers brought offerings to the Lord: <sup>3</sup> **In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, <sup>4</sup> and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.** (4.3-4). As a result, Cain murdered his brother Abel in a fit of rage: **So Cain was very angry, and his face fell** (4.4b) ...<sup>8</sup> **Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him** (4.8). This murder is all the more heinous because Cain took this course of action despite God's direct warning, and His call to Cain to repent and receive His acceptance. We have that in 4.6-7. <sup>6</sup> **The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? <sup>7</sup> If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it"**.

A problem with anger is that it may lead to murder. Furthermore, even without the overt act of killing someone, anger is an expression of a murderous heart; it is an act of murder in the heart. It is our duty to rule over this sin and not let it rule over us. Cain, however, acted on the anger in his heart. This led to the first murder and to the origin of the famous question about being my brother's keeper: <sup>9</sup> **Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"** <sup>10</sup> **And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground** (4.9-10).

## 2A. The Acceptance of Abel's sacrifice

At this point, we need to discover why it is that the Lord accepted Abel's sacrifice and did not accept Cain's. To do so, we should look at both Genesis and Hebrews.

Commentators make a number of suggestions.

From the word "more" in Hebrews 11.4 (**a more acceptable sacrifice**) some commentators claim that the difference is in the quantity of the offering: Abel's was plentiful and Cain's meager and therefore the one was more acceptable. However, this word "more" can have a qualitative meaning as in the phrase, "**is not life more than food...and clothing**" (Mat.6.25: **Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?**

Others find the difference in the selection of a living animal versus something lifeless, but both kinds of sacrifice were acceptable later under the Mosaic system. There is nothing inherently wrong with either the quantity or the nature of Cain's offering.

Two critical points emerge in the Genesis account. 1) First, there is the hint, at least, that the acceptance of Abel led to the acceptance of his sacrifice, and not the reverse: **And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering** (4.4b). The same holds for the rejection of Cain and therefore of his offering: **but for Cain and his offering he had no regard** (4.5a). The important thing is the person, the character of the person above the nature of the offering. 2) Second, from God's promise to Cain, we learn that the outward act is inseparable from the person acting. Note the promise in these words to Cain, **If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it** (4.7). On the negative side, by not doing what is right, sin is ready to spring forth from your heart in mastery over you. On the positive side, by doing the good, there is acceptance with God. This verse confirms the importance of the inner character of the person by its reference to the desire of sin that rules conduct. Instead of sinful desire, righteous desire is what leads to good actions. But you cannot say that the outward act means nothing. Right action is critically important. Your actions can help you judge your heart!

Therefore, the writer of Hebrews tells us that Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to God and through it **he was commended as righteous** (11.4). He had righteous desire ruling in his heart instead of sinful desire. The outward action manifested the righteousness of his inner person and it

brought a public (outward) commendation from God. Apparently, the condemnation of Cain had a matching commendation of Abel though Genesis only records the former (the word to Cain). The commendation is implicit and we can easily arrive there by good and necessary consequence (by inferring the opposite: what God said to Cain implies that He said the opposite to Abel).

### Conclusion

The pastor to the Hebrews gives us three important insights regarding the acceptance of Abel. They bring us full circle to how encouragement flows from Abel's example. They are insights about faith.

1) By faith his offering was acceptable

**By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain**

The issue is not the nature of the offering, the form, or the elements of worship. The issue is the manner of worship. Particularly, the concern here is the attitude of the heart in doing some deed that may be good *per se* ("in itself") but it may have no acceptance with God because of the sins of the heart.

Interestingly, what is in our hearts cannot be kept there. Envy, anger, and all heart sins show up in actions and in facial expressions for the Lord asked, "**Why has your face fallen?**" Your countenance will betray efforts to put on a façade. Therefore, it is best that you attend to the sins of the heart since you cannot fool all the people all the time, even most all the time. Actually, most of the time, you will not fool anyone, especially those close to you. But of supreme importance is the fact that you do not fool God at any time. It should be evident that the account of Abel has its explicit lessons that carry with them many implicit lessons by the contrast of Abel with Cain. A) Thus, we learn what insubordination looks like and we get a clearer picture of what faith involves. Cain shows that the submissive quality of faith includes repentance (by his lack of repentance). True faith will own up to wrong doing, turn away from sin, and fight with sin; it will not let sinful attitudes get a foothold from which to rule. B) True faith, true submission to God with committed trust will consider the needs of brothers and sisters. If we are people of faith, then we will be people of brotherly and sisterly love; we will consider that we do have responsibility to keep them from harm and promote their health, wealth, and well-being as we are able to do so. And we will try to find ways to do so. Then, arising from the fountain of submission to God, they are acceptable to God; otherwise, without repentant submission to God, "loving" deeds (though good in themselves) are not acceptable to the Lord.

2) By faith he received God's approval

**...through which[through faith]he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts**

Your walk with God is very personal. It is not that God is somehow interested in various offerings, as if He needs this one and wants that one. In a very fundamental sense, the Lord is more interested in you as an individual person than He is interested in some thing. This is not a denial of His delight in the creation. It is an affirmation of the relative value of things in relation to persons.

Regarding persons, God places a premium on holiness and righteousness that arises from the heart and flows outwardly in actions that accord with His will. In this way, you truly image God (in righteousness and holiness of the truth) and that pleases Him. Therefore, when you relate to God personally with holy hearts and hands, He is pleased with you and grants His commendation.

But there is a fundamental problem here, namely, Abel and all of us are sinners and sin taints our attitudes and actions. How can Abel (how can we) find acceptance of our persons? It is by faith. By faith in God and in submission to Him and His will, He is pleased and grants His commendation to the heart attitudes and outward actions that are affected (infected) by sin.

How does this cover our sins? It does *not* cover them. Abel's sacrifice did not cover his sins but His sacrifice anticipated the one and final sacrifice of Christ. For OT *and* NT saints, God accepts them, sinners that they are, on the ground of the work of Christ. Sinners in the old covenant had salvation on credit with respect to the redemption to come in Christ. Sinners in the new covenant have salvation by the accomplishment of redemption in the death and resurrection of Christ.

3) By faith he continues to speak (his voice transcends his death)

**And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks**

He has a testimony, a witness, and a voice that continues beyond and despite his death at the murderous hands of Cain. You would think that the murder is the end of the story. Cain won in a decisively final sense. He had the last word in the deceptive word he spoke to Abel before he killed him (Gen. 4.8a, **Cain spoke to Abel his brother**). You would think that Abel was silenced by death, but that is not the case. Cain did not have the last word; he did not silence Abel.

What does Abel say beyond the grave?

There are a number of views that overlap in answering this question. You might say that he speaks because his testimony goes wherever the Bible goes; he is on the record just as Mary who anointed Jesus is on the record wherever the gospel goes (Mat. 26.13). Another view finds the key point in Genesis 4.10 about Abel's blood crying out for vengeance: **The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground**. Both views are surely true as far as they go, but we should not miss the emphasis on "the spectacle of his trustful integrity" that "should inspire us to persevere and to overcome by the same means" (Hughes 457). However, the text does not speak of Abel's faith in the face of Cain's anger and violence. He approached *God* with his sacrificial offering by faith. Thus, when the writer of Hebrews looks back to the Genesis narrative, he superimposes the fact of Abel's voice from the ground after his death with the faith he manifested in presenting his offering to God. What do we hear from Abel through the lens of the book of Hebrews if we combine faith, acceptable sacrifice, and personal commendation with vengeance? We hear him tell us that faith in the sacrifice of Christ (anticipated in the sacrifices of the OT) is the way that sinners have protection from God's wrath. He tells us that he offered sacrifice with recognition of his sinfulness for which he needed the sacrifice of Christ.

Is there any implication regarding resurrection in these words? Yes, the implication here is that even though he died at the evil hands of Cain, Abel lives on beyond the grave free of God's just wrath. The grave did not end his life under judgment; he lives on in anticipation of the resurrection of the righteous. By faith he presented an acceptable sacrifice to God such that even though his death reveals the consequence of sin (calling for God's wrath), he nonetheless proclaims the conquest of death and therefore he reiterates God's sure promise of the resurrection (the Lord is God of the living and not of the dead; the personal relationship of God with Abel continues beyond his death in the acceptance Abel has with the Lord by faith). Simply put, that he speaks means that he lives, that he communicates with God beyond the grave as he awaits the full fruit of the sacrifice of Christ who lives in the power of an indestructible life.

The acceptable conduct, God's approval and commendation of him as a person, as righteous, and his speech (speaking) that transcends death are all by faith.

It is encouraging to know that faith makes our actions acceptable to God, and to know that faith gives us acceptance as persons (personal acceptance) with God, to know that faith enables us to transcend death because God's acceptance abides.

**May we fall down before the majesty of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the covenant keeping God who is the God of the living and not of the dead. To the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be all glory now and forevermore, amen.**