

Hebrews 11:4
(Genesis 4:1-16)
“By Faith Abel Offered God an Acceptable Sacrifice”

Introduction

We said last Sunday that Hebrews 11 – a chapter well known for its illustrations of true faith as exemplified in the lives of notable Old Testament figures – was written to make clear the kind of faith that endures to the end. We saw that the Bible depicts several different kinds of faith, but that only one of them believes and receives the promises of God. In the opening three verses, three points were made about enduring faith that will now be illustrated in the verses that follow:

By faith we are able to stake our lives on God’s promises.

By faith we are able to receive God’s commendation.

By faith we are able to understand the nature of God’s world.

This morning we look at the first illustration, the second son born of Adam and Eve, and the child whom his parents never expected anyone to remember. It is harder for us than it would be for native Hebrew speakers to understand the awful scene in Genesis 4, the story of the first man born of woman becoming the first murderer. From the start, one man was the favored one who saw himself as someone special and deserving of the good things of life, one destined for greatness, and the other a man accustomed to being overlooked. What in the story would make me say that?

The meaning of the names their parents gave them shows how tragically wrong things went from the start. In Genesis 3, when God pronounced the curse, he also promised Eve that she would bear a child who would redeem humanity from the curse. When she bore her first child, she named him Cain, which means, “I’ve gotten a man.” Here he is! God has fulfilled his promise and given us our redeemer. This idea becomes clearer when the second son is born and is named Abel, which means vanity, vapor, nothingness. It is the same word used in Ecclesiastes, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” We don’t need this second child. We have our man.

Imagine what that did to these two brothers as they grew, the first one favored, seen quite literally as God’s gift to humanity, the other considered superfluous. Unlike the true Redeemer who would come in the fullness of time in fulfillment of God’s promise, and who would lay down his life to redeem his brothers and sisters, Cain loved only himself, and was willing to destroy anyone who seemed to take from him the prestige, the esteem, the approval, the blessing, that he considered his birthright. Here began the tragic tale of human history with all of the jealousy, hatred and violence that have marked every era since Cain first raised his hand against his brother Abel. And if we are honest, we all recognize the Cain within our own hearts. The challenge of our text is to know God’s grace through Abel-like enduring faith.

Body

1. **By faith Abel believed God's Word.**

Abel believed the story his parents had told him of the ruin caused by sin, of God's promise of a Redeemer, and of God's illustration of how sin would be covered through a blood-sacrifice offered to cover their nakedness. Feeling keenly his own sin and brokenness, he listened and believed.

Cain heard the same stories, worshiped the same God, but something in him, his own pride and sense of entitlement and autonomy, made him interpret the story in a way that left him feeling free to worship as he chose.

2. **By faith Abel both sought and gained God's approval.**

Abel's sacrifice imitated God's sacrifice of atonement, a bloody offering. And he gave his best, the first-born, and the treasured fat portions. Cain's sacrifice was simply what he chose to give to God. He simply brought something from the ground, not the first-fruit.

God had regard for Abel's offering, but had no regard for Cain's. Cain was very angry, and turned his anger toward God into anger toward his brother. God graciously warned Cain against doing what he was already plotting in his heart against his brother Abel. But Cain could not bear his brother being placed before him in God's sight. Before he ever raised his hand to kill his brother, he had killed him in his heart.

3. **By faith Abel continues to testify to God's justice and mercy.**

Abel's blood cried for justice (like the martyrs of Revelation 6:10) while his story calls us to trust and obey the Word of God, to trust God's sacrifice of atonement once given, to give him our best in return, and to cast ourselves upon his mercy and grace when we have been unjustly attacked for doing the right thing.

But Cain's story warns us of thinking too highly of ourselves, of hating and longing to bring down those whom we see as unfairly given the approval for which we long.

A key point often missed is that Cain's family became great developers and transmitters of culture and built the first city, the model of Babel. Yet their efforts were doomed because they had rejected the Lord who gave them life and to whom they owed everything.

Conclusion

Cain lived a long life, achieved great things culturally, and yet longed to die. Abel lived briefly, yet lives on forever in the list of those who died in faith having pleased God. The questions and challenges raised by this text are many:

What does the Lord require of me? What shall I offer for my sin: Offerings of my own choosing, my own best efforts and good works, or the precious blood of my Redeemer?

Shall I offer the Lord the leftovers of my life, after I have spent and consumed all that I desire, or shall I give him the first and the best as token of my gratitude for his grace poured out upon my life? What does faith call forth from a believing life?

What right have I to judge my brother and see him as an enemy? What actions will flow from the jealousies and enmities I nurture in my heart?

What will I answer when God asks of me, "Where is your brother?" Will I ask, "Who is my brother?"

Am I living the life of faith, God's gift of grace that alone will one day receive the word of commendation, "Well done, good and faithful servant"?

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