

“Cain’s Lack of Faith” – Hebrews 11:1

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take a Bible and meet me in Hebrews 11...

[VBS Week...Happy Father’s Day...]

One of the most interesting things about Hebrews 11 is that “it provides a great deal of information that we would not know merely by reading the Old Testament.”¹ We will see some of that in the first character introduced by the repeated phrase “*by faith*.” Through him, and the other historical figure to follow, “the author personifies the faith he is commending, and we thereby see all the things faith does and the benefits it conveys.”² So far in this series we have learned some important truths about faith from Hebrews 11 and its context...

Saving Faith *Lasts*
Saving Faith *Testifies*
Saving Faith *Hopes*
Saving Faith *Assures*

Today and next week we will add to this list another crucial idea:

Saving Faith *Justifies*

This truth is one that we will see reiterated in various ways as we explore the biblical figures mentioned this chapter. The repetition speaks to the importance of the doctrine of justification through faith alone—a doctrine at the heart of the Gospel (as we shall see). And it’s also at the heart of the very first recorded death in the Bible. The victim was a man named Abel. And Abel was a man of faith.

But before we get to him, listen to these words from Al Mohler:

“...repeating [the phrase] *by faith* [throughout Hebrews 11] also teaches us to avoid the error of moralizing the Old Testament stories. This happens quite often among evangelicals, particularly in children’s Sunday school curricula: ‘Be like Moses, not like Pharaoh.’ While the Old Testament narratives do indeed contain moral lessons we ought to learn, the author reminds us that these moral lessons are not the main point. We must remember that the moral lessons of the Old Testament come within the context of the storyline of the gospel. The writer draws some hortatory applications from these individuals, but he does so while reminding us that the reason these men lived as they did was because they walked *by faith*—looking to a Redeemer.”³

That is exactly right! And we need to keep it in mind throughout this series and every time we open our Bible. Hopefully yours is open by now. So then, let’s have a look at what the author says to us about Abel in verse 4. This is God’s Word...

“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.” (Hebrews 11:4)

These words harken back to a story in Genesis. The author assumes his readers are familiar with the story, but in 2019 we cannot. So turn with me to the chapter 4 of Genesis, the first book in the Bible.

While you’re turning there, let me remind you of the context. In chapter three the first humans—Adam and Eve—defy God’s instruction and eat of the one tree God told them to avoid. This was the choice that rendered them sinful in God’s sight, along with all their descendants after them. This episode of biblical history is usually referred to as “the Fall.” One of the consequences of the Fall is that humanity is separated from God. This is first seen in the exile of Adam and Eve. At the end of Genesis our first parents are kicked out of the garden of Eden, never again to enjoy the presence of God in the same way for their lifetime. This is how Genesis puts it:

*“...the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.
24 He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:23-24)*

Cherubim, a group of angels in the Bible, are usually associated with God’s presence and are here seen as preventing access into His presence and defending the fruit of the Tree of Life. Think of them as winged bouncers. They’re fearsome creatures. They are not “heavenly eye-candy,” but “deadly security guards.”⁴ Their flaming sword impresses upon us our inability to enter into God’s presence. So when we see cherubim in the Bible we are reminded of our separation from God, our exile from paradise.

All of this may seem harsh, but that’s probably because we do not understand the holiness of God and the wretchedness of sin. More than that though, it may be because we don’t see the mercy of God’s response. Adam and Eve deserved to die because of their sin, but God allows them to live, shedding the blood of another (i.e., an animal) in whose remains He clothes them to cover their shame (cf. “*garments of skins*”⁵ in 3:21). This, of course, foreshadows another whom God would crush and cause to bleed on a cross many generations later that we too might be clothed in Him.

But the Cherubim keeping us away from the tree of life is a mercy too. How so? Adam and Eve were now corrupted by sin. They were fallen sinners. Depraved to the bone. And so would their offspring be, as we shall see momentarily. Would they really have wanted to live *longer* in that state of fallenness? Perhaps. I’m not so sure they would have wanted to, but those who came after them, those who knew nothing but a creation and personal condition of sinfulness, might want to see their days prolonged forever through the fruit of that tree. Glen Scrivener writes,

*“When a person we love is dying of cancer we pray for healing. We pray fervently. But even if God grants miraculous healing, what then? Do we dare to ask for ten more years of health? Twenty? Fifty? What about a hundred? How long do we want *this kind of life* prolonged? For how long do we want God shuffling around these cursed conditions? Is it just a case of ‘holding back the tide’ of death and decay a little while longer? Or does the Lord have something better for us?”⁶*

The answer is “Yes!” And it is life. Eternal life. But it’s not eternal life in this cursed state. He will give us eternal life free from sin. God will give us access to that tree again only when our sinful flesh has been redeemed to the full and this whole world bears the gleam of new creation. Until then, we don’t need that tree. It’s a mercy that God keeps it from us. Those heavenly bouncers were doing Adam (and us) a favor by barring the gates.

But deep down inside we long for what is withheld from us. Every fiber of our being longs for what was lost in the Fall. But to get back to that “we would have to go through the fire and the sword.” Who could survive that?

Not you. Not me. And yet in the book of Exodus we read of one who can walk past those Cherubim, past the fire and swords. As Scrivener explains,

“In Exodus 25-31 we read about the tabernacle—a portable, multimedia presentation of the gospel. Through the tabernacle, its priests and sacrifices, we learn about how sinners can get into the presence of God. On the outside of the tabernacle was an altar—a place where the knives were drawn and where the fires burnt up the sacrifices. In the center of the tabernacle was ‘the Holy of Holies,’ the sanctuary of God. And woven into the curtain that separated God’s presence from everything else were cherubim, guarding the way to God.”⁷

So here’s the million dollar question—How do you get through those cherubim and approach God? The answer is, *you* don’t. Someone does on your behalf—the high priest.

“On one day every year, the high priest would make the journey from outside to inside, from east to west, from estrangement and into God’s presence. With his sacrifices he would go through the sword and the fire. Then he would pass through those deadly cherubim, parting the curtain and ascending into the Holy of Holies. In this way he modeled to the people what Christ would do.”⁸

And this is precisely what the book of Hebrews has been celebrating with us thus far.

“Christ is our Great High Priest. He joined us in our predicament: east of Eden, estranged from God. But He went through the fire and the knife in his sacrificial death. As he rose again, he ascended ‘through the curtain’ into God’s presence. He did all this on our behalf... And where he is, there we will be also. The way back to Eden is blocked, but Jesus is our way forwards.”⁹

When we approach the presence of God in Christ and when we on that great Day are given access to the Tree of Life when Christ returns, we will find that the Cherubim have been relieved of the ancient duty. This is part of our glorious hope in the Gospel. And this hope is anticipated even in the story of Abel, which picks up after Adam and Eve were removed from the Garden of Eden.

The story of Abel and his brother Cain is enigmatic. Most of the details focus on the Cain, but we learn a good bit about Abel in the process. Follow along as I read the beginning of Genesis 4.

“Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.’”² And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,⁴ 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,⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.⁶ The LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?’⁷ 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 contrary to you, but you must rule over it.’” (Genesis 4:1-7)

One question that has puzzled interpreters through the ages is why “*the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering*” but not for Cain and his? Genesis doesn’t clear that up, so many theories have been proffered.

Some wonder if Abel’s offering was accepted because it involved a sacrifice of blood and Cain’s rejected because it did not. We do know, after all, that blood is important to our approaching God in worship. The Bible is clear, as Hebrews has stated, that “*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins*” (9:22). And while the Old Testament sacrificial system had not yet been established during the life of Abel, many consider Abel’s offering as anticipatory of that whole system and, by extension, the death of Jesus.

This is probably true. But it's doubtful that Cain's offering was rejected simply because it did not involve blood. The word here translated "offering" or "tribute" (*minhâ*) was a word used of gifts that were often bloodless.¹⁰ And I think it would be a mistake to conclude that God favors shepherds to gardeners. Let's not forget that Adam himself was a gardener, like Cain. Grain offerings would be a common and legitimate part of Israel's worship. God would even demand the firstfruits of Israel's harvests later in the Old Testament.

Another theory as to why one offering was accepted and the other rejected focuses not on the kind of offerings involved but the quality of those offerings. One brought his best and most valuable to God and the other something less so. Someone advocating for this position may argue like this:

"Abel offers the *first* of his flock (4:4; see Exodus 34:19; Deuteronomy 12:6; 14:23) and the fattest (4:4; see Numbers 18:17). Abel gives what cost him most—the firstborn and the most choice selections. On the other hand, Cain's offering is not described as his first or his best, merely as *the fruit*."¹¹

This is certainly one possible factor in God's decision. But the text doesn't confirm it conclusively. And we should remember that Cain's offering would have involved a lot of work too. We tend to imagine it as mere scraps. Perhaps it was, but it just as likely may have been "beautiful, pleasing to the eye, and sweet to the taste," requiring much of Cain to prepare and offer. As one writer explains,

"There must have been much to commend such an offering to Cain. Here was a portion of what arose from his own hard-fought labor. God had said to Adam in his curse, 'By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread' (Gen. 3:19). So what Cain brought to God came only by hard labor, just as farming continues to demand today."¹²

But perhaps that's where the misunderstanding crept in for Cain. He may have been able to look at his offering and reasoned that it was more valuable and required more of him than his brother's. He may have designed it that way because he intended to win God over by his hard work and worshipful service. And if so, he would have misdiagnosed what God is looking for in worship. Yes, He wants the first and the best for the worshipper. But God doesn't judge by mere externals. He looks at our heart. And he looks for a heart of faith. And this brings us to the next theory and the one that the writer of Hebrews would confirm (though it's not incompatible with the other two), namely that Abel's offering was acceptable because it was offered in faith.

Notice that Cain's dejection is met by a series of questions from God. God calls into question the heart of the man, not the substance of his offering.¹³ "God draws our attention away from what fallen humans think is important (how our works make us look impressive) to what God thinks is important (how our work reveal who we trust)."¹⁴ This suggests that God's displeasure with Cain's offering may have had more to do with what preceded it (i.e., his motives and intentions) than with what it consisted of. God's disregard of Cain's offering, in other words, was owing to the fact that, unlike his brother, Cain did not offer his worship in faith. It took work. Lots of work maybe. But it didn't involve faith, so it was rejected.¹⁵ And I believe we can see his lack of faith in his response to God as well. "Instead of repenting for his failure to please God," writes Bruce Waltke, "he becomes angry with God, expecting God to change to accommodate his sacrifice instead of his changing his sacrifice to please God."¹⁶ If only the story stopped there. But it doesn't. "Cain's hatred metastasized into horror."¹⁷ Look at verse 8...

"Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him." (Genesis 4:8)

We can see the premeditation of this murder in verse 8, which makes the scene all the more wicked. "He would rather kill than turn to God's gentle pleadings and repent. So he directed his hatred for God at his brother Abel and killed him."¹⁸ Look at verse 9 and following...

Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel your brother?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’¹⁰ And the LORD said, ‘What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.¹¹ And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.¹² When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.’¹³ Cain said to the LORD, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear.¹⁴ Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.’ (Genesis 4:9-14)

Commenting on this scene, one of my favorite Old Testament scholars, Bruce Waltke, writes,

“Cain’s failure at the altar leads to his failure in the field—theology and ethics are inseparable. His renunciation of God leads to his renunciation of God’s image; his bad feelings toward God spill over into his bad feelings toward his brother. His cankered and corroded soul leads to loss of contact with this brother. His irrational rage against his younger brother—presumably out of jealousy—escalates to fratricide. Having dispatched his brother to premature death, he absurdly takes no responsibility for his death: ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ (v. 9). His play at innocence reprises his father’s attempt at concealment: both reject the doctrine of God’s omniscience of the human heart. The seed of the Serpent is a murderer like his father [the devil] (John 8:44).”¹⁹

In fact, did you notice that the question God asks Cain in verse 9—“*Where is Abel your brother?*”—parallels God’s question to Adam, the boy’s father, in the previous chapter—“*Where are you?*” (3:9). In both cases, these guilty men respond defensively. “The fact that Cain dispassionately denies what he has done shows a lack of care and concern that parallels Adam’s lack of regard for his wife (3:12).”²⁰ Like father, like son. The apple, it seems, has not fallen far from the tree.

Cain never seems to come to his senses even when confronted by God. “He fears physical and social exposure but not the God from whom he cannot hide.”²¹ His negotiating reveals his heart. There is no remorse for his dead brother. No grief over displeasing God. Just a callous pleading for self-preservation. That’s Cain. And his name becomes synonymous with unbelief in the Bible. He is the seed of the serpent.

But what about Abel? Well, he is something altogether different. And that’s what I want to consider with you next week...

[Closing remarks]

Let’s pray...

¹ R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 171.

² Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* (REC; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006), 401.

³ Mohler, 171-172.

⁴ Glen Scrivener, *Reading Between the Lines: Old Testament Readings, Volume 1* (Great Britain: 10Publishing, 2018), 59.

⁵ George Whitfield famously saw in these garments a picture of Christ's death on the cross: "What were the coats that God made to put on our first parents, but types of the application of the merits of the righteousness of Jesus Christ to believers' hearts? We are told that those coats were made of skins of beasts.... Those beasts were slain in sacrifice, in commemoration of the great sacrifice, Jesus Christ, thereafter to be offered. And the skins of the beasts thus slain, being put on Adam and Eve, they were hereby taught how their nakedness was to be covered with the righteousness of the Lamb of God." George Whitefield, "The Lord Our Righteousness," sermon 14 in *Select Sermons of George Whitefield* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 117; Also cited in Phillips, 403-404.

⁶ Scrivener, 59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 60. Richard Phillips follows a similar line of thought: "Although no sinner could come directly into God's presence, just as neither Adam nor Abel could return to the garden, there was one day of the year, the day of atonement, when Israel's high priest could enter into the holy of holies. This one day prophesied an entire age to come. When the high priest came, he was confronted by the sight of the two cherubim. The atonement cover of the ark of the covenant thus graphically portrayed the gate to the garden. There two mighty angels faced each other, with wings upswept, casting down the shadow of their presence. Their eyes gazed downward to the ark which contained the tablets of the law of God, broken by sinners. They saw that man is barred from the garden and from the presence of God. Because he is a transgressor, man is under the sentence of death and therefore cannot enter back into life. But on the day of atonement, the high priest came and poured the blood of the atoning sacrifice upon the mercy seat between the cherubim. And thus the way that was barred now was opened. This provides an important insight about the guardian cherubim: they not only kept shut the way to God without the atoning blood, but they also secured the way for the great day to come when the true sacrifice would open wide the gates to Paradise. That one day a year when the high priest came before the cherubim with a blood offering symbolized an entire age that would be opened by the true high priest with the true blood he himself had shed. God therefore said to Moses, concluding his commands for the mercy seat: 'There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you' (Ex. 25:22). God met with his people between the cherubim—not in the garden, but at its gate. God met with them at the place where the blood was poured to cover the breaking of the law. Between the angels on the ark of the covenant sat the mercy seat. In Greek this is the *hilastērion*, the very term the apostle Paul used in Romans 3:25 to describe what God presented to us in the death of Jesus Christ. 'God put [him] forward as a *hilastērion*,' that is, a *mercy seat*. The English Standard Version precisely defines this as 'a propitiation,' and the New International Version gives the more general translation, 'a sacrifice of atonement.' The point is that what the angels were looking for all along was Christ, whose coming would end their watch, and therefore they guarded the way to God until his coming." Phillips, 409.

⁸ Scrivener, 60..

⁹ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

¹⁰ E.g., Leviticus 2:4; 1 Samuel 10:27; 1 Kings 10:25; Bruce K. Waltke (with Charles Yu), *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2007), 270.

¹¹ Tremper Longman, Consulting Editor, *Layman's Old Testament Bible Commentary* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Books, 2010) 18. Similarly, "Cain manifests his lack of faith by his tokenism—'Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil' (v. 3)—but Abel scented his tribute offering with the incense of love, faith, and devotion (the most common interpretation)—'Abel brought the fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock' (v. 4...). Unless we offer our best to God, our sacrifice is a stench in his nostrils. What is not said of Cain's offering is as important as what is said of Abel's. Cain offered some fruit, not the firstfruits as God mandated." Waltke, 270.

¹² Phillips, 404.

¹³ Longman, 18.

¹⁴ Jon Bloom, *Things Not Seen: A Fresh Look at Old Stories of Trusting God's Promises* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 145.

¹⁵ "The sacrifice of Abel was more acceptable than that of his brother only because it was sanctified by faith... Where did his pleasing come from other than that he had a heart purified by faith?" John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1994), 12:160.

¹⁶ Waltke, 270.

¹⁷ Bloom, 144.

¹⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 69.

¹⁹ Waltke, 271. "The ground, which God intends should produce and sustain life (Gen. 2:7, 9, 19), 'drinks' innocent blood and so reverses the divine intention. For in opening its mouth, as it were, to drink Abel's innocent blood, God makes the ground sterile for Cain." *Ibid.*

²⁰ Longman, 19.

²¹ Waltke, 271.