

Faith that Worships God Acceptably

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[0 : 00] So we're continuing a series in the book of Hebrews, Hebrews 11, a chapter in Hebrews on faith. And David will be up in a moment to teach for us. But first, let's read together.

We're going to begin with Genesis chapter 4. This is God's holy word. Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord. And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. And in the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, 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. But for Cain and his offering, he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.

And the Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry, and why is your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door, and its desire is for you, and you must rule over it.

[1 : 14] Cain spoke to Abel, his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, Where is Abel, your brother? And he said, I do not know.

Am I my brother's keeper? And the Lord said, What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

In Hebrews 11, verses 1 to 4, the writer says this, Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen, for by it the people of old received their commendation.

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. 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. This is God's holy Word. Our text this evening is Hebrews 11 and verse 4.

[2 : 36] Let me read it to you once again. Down through human history, there have been many examples of men and women who refused to be silent in the face of oppression and injustice.

Their voices could not be silenced, despite perhaps great pressure, persecution, even intimidation. And as we turn to Hebrews 11, verse 4 tonight, we are being, as it were, summoned to listen to a voice that similarly refuses to be silent.

And that voice is the voice of Abel. This is where the writer of Hebrews begins in his great gallery of men and women of faith.

And though Abel's life was one cut short by violence and murder, yet nonetheless, his voice echoes down through the centuries to us this evening.

Though he died, he still speaks. And so what is it about this man Abel that continues to speak to us down through the generations?

[4 : 15] What makes his voice so enduring? What message does his life continue to proclaim? What does he have to say to us this evening?

Well, there's a lot in the text. I want to highlight just three things from it tonight. Tonight, we're going to do this, Abel, in one sermon.

I think I mentioned last week, I'd been looking at the sermons of Thomas Manton. He had eight on this one text. That is not a line that I will be taking.

You'll be glad to know. Three things I want to highlight. First of all, I want you to notice that through faith, Abel offered what we might call an acceptable sacrifice.

By faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain. And so, we are being taken back by the writer to these early chapters of the book of Genesis, and especially to chapter 4 of that great book, to this famous account of Cain and Abel.

[5 : 26] Before the fall, Eden, the garden, was, as it were, a sanctuary of the Lord, a kind of natural tabernacle where God met with Adam and Eve.

It was a holy place. It was a place of fellowship and perfect communion with God. But with the entry of sin, all of that changed.

Judgment fell. Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, driven out of the garden. And Genesis 4 is a chapter that begins to describe the reality of life in a sinful and fallen world.

Along with sin comes disease, decay, disorder, and death. Here is life in a world that has been spoiled by sin, and in which men and women have become alienated from God, and indeed from one another.

Here is life east of Eden. And the story of Cain and Abel is one that reflects this new reality. And it's interesting that first and foremost, it's a story that begins and describes this new reality, first and foremost, as being about worship.

[6 : 49] That's the first thing highlighted in the text of Genesis 4. Genesis 4, verse 1, Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain.

I've gotten a man with the help of the Lord. Again, she bore his brother Abel, Abel a keeper of sheep, Cain a worker of the ground. And in the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground.

And Abel also brought the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. Two brothers, Cain and Abel, children, one commentator says, children of the eighth day.

And they bring their worship to the Lord. They are acknowledging Him as the giver of life, the one to whom they owe honor and respect and praise.

And they each bring some of the fruits of their respective callings. And they bring them as sacrifices to the Lord. Cain brings some of his harvest.

[7 : 50] Abel brings an animal from his flock. But the worship, the sacrifice they make, the worship they bring, the offerings they make, have, we are told, a profoundly different result.

And so we read in Genesis 4-5, the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering, he had no regard.

And so Cain was very angry, and his face fell. Some translations say the Lord looked with favor.

That is, he accepted the sacrifice of Abel, but rejected Cain's offering.

Why was that? What were God's reasons for accepting Abel's worship and at the same time rejecting Cain's?

Now, there are a number of theories and suggestions. We won't go into all of that, but, you know, some suggest it was because of the difference in their offerings.

[9 : 03] Cain offers the fruit of the ground, his crops, and his vegetables. Abel offers a blood or an animal sacrifice. But that's not really what the text tells us.

And anyway, both of those kinds of offerings are deemed acceptable in the Old Testament. The text of Genesis 4 says, the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering, he had no regard.

In other words, the emphasis here is on the person, not on the quality or type of the offering. It's the condition of the worshiper that appears to be of first importance here.

And I think this is exactly what the writer to the Hebrews is highlighting when he says, by faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain.

Why was Abel's worship and sacrifice more acceptable? The answer is faith. Why was Cain's worship unacceptable? There was a lack of faith.

[10 : 08] The critical thing was not the sacrifice or the offerings made, but the spirit in which those offerings were offered. Because God looks not just on what is offered, but on the heart of the one bringing the offering.

The difference between the two brothers was Abel listened to God, trusted God, obeyed God.

Whereas Cain, the implication here, simply did his own thing.

Yes, they both offered their produce. They both offered sacrifices. But the difference was not in the offering, but in the man, in the men. Calvin writes of Abel, his sacrifice pleased God because he himself was pleasing to God.

Abel's heart was given to God, while his brother Cain brought his offering in a completely different attitude and spirit. And that's what we see clearly in the text of Genesis 4.

Verse 6, The Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry? Why is your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? If you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door.

[11 : 22] It's desirous for you, but you must rule over it. When his offering is rejected, you see Cain's reaction, his response, betrays what is in his heart.

You'll notice that he doesn't confess his sin. He doesn't ask for forgiveness. He doesn't throw himself on the mercy of God. There is absolutely no sense of sorrow or humility or repentance before God.

Instead, he is raging. He is full of anger and resentment. And his response reveals arrogance and presumption. I mean, who does Yahweh think he is?

I've done my bit. Haven't I made my offering? Haven't I brought my gifts? Isn't that good enough? There's that kind of underlying assumption that God is obligated to accept him no matter what.

I have discovered over the years, lots of people still think like that. I've done my bit for God. I went to church at Christmas. I put something in the offering.

[12 : 34] But religious formalism is absolutely death to the soul. God looks not simply at what we bring to him, but why and how we bring it.

He looks on the heart of the one bringing worship. Is that worship being offered in faith? Is there trust in God and in his word?

Not all worship is acceptable to God. It's quite possible to offer worship that's actually all about ourselves and not God.

And that is the way of Cain. The important thing about worship in one sense is not whether it suits me, fits my taste, but actually whether it fits God's taste.

Not am I comfortable with this, but is God honored in this? Not does this give me the right feelings, but is the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit glorified?

[13 : 41] Who's the primary consumer towards which our worship is offered? Is it myself? Or is it the living God?

True worship springs from a believing heart. And the key to worship that honors God is faith.

For Cain, it was not merely the presence of sin, but the absence of faith that was decisive. It was through faith that Abel offered an acceptable sacrifice.

Brings me to the second thing here. And that is through faith, Abel was commended as righteous and accepted by God.

Our verse goes on, through which he was commended as righteous. God commending him by accepting his gifts. And again, we have this language of commendation, acceptance.

[14 : 51] Abel was commended as righteous, and that commendation was to be seen in the acceptance of his gift, his offering. And this really is a descriptive, it's really a miracle of divine grace.

Abel, a sinner, is commended, considered, counted as righteous. We're not to read this text and draw the conclusion that somehow Abel was inherently righteous.

Far from it, he was unrighteous. He was a sinner. He was living east of Eden. It was only through faith that he was commended as righteous. By grace, he looked towards God.

And in faith, he trusted in him. By faith, he was commended as a righteous man. And that commendation was not a reward for Abel's perfection.

It was itself a gift of God's grace, received by faith. Because righteousness is never something that we ourselves can manufacture. It is something that God gives and bestows.

[15 : 55] And so, it doesn't matter who we are this evening. If you want to be accepted by God, if you want to be counted as righteous before God, there is only one way.

And that's through faith in Jesus Christ. Only in coming to God in humble faith and trusting in him and in his provision can we be commended as righteous.

The way of arrogant self-sufficiency, that is the way of Cain, is always a dead end. John Calvin writes, of that faith which strips us of all arrogance and leads us naked and needy to God, that we may seek salvation from him alone, which would otherwise be far removed from us.

In the previous chapter, the writer of Hebrews quotes from Habakkuk 2.5. That's in Hebrews 10.38. The righteous by faith shall live.

Men and women of God do not live by their own achievements, but only through faith in God. Our lives are to lean wholly and solely upon God himself.

[17 : 14] We sometimes sing those words, I dare not trust my sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. The American Reformed theologian B.B. Walfield wrote these words, The saving power of faith resides thus not in itself, but in the almighty Savior on whom it rests.

It's not faith that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ. Strictly speaking, it is Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively not in the act or attitude or nature of faith, but in the object of faith.

Abel was righteous before the Lord by faith in the coming seed of the woman who would crush the serpent's head. That is Jesus Christ. By grace, he was saved through faith.

That not of himself, it was the gift of God. By faith, he became the first human being, as it were, to be justified and brought into the presence of God and made perfect.

Only faith in Jesus Christ brings acceptance with God. Only through Christ can we bring acceptable worship.

[18 : 35] And it's interesting that this idea of acceptable worship is actually one that we find throughout the New Testament and throughout the epistles. Peter, for example, speaks of offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2.5. In the very next chapter of Hebrews, the author speaks of offering to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe.

Hebrews 12.28. Philippians 4, Paul writes of the gifts he received as being a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. Philippians 4.18.

And then, most famously of all, Paul writes to the Christians in Rome. He tells them to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Romans 12.1. Worship means offering to God ourselves. It's always a response to what God has revealed of Himself.

[19 : 45] And worship, therefore, involves the whole of life. It involves all of us. It's not a hobby. It's not a pastime. We sometimes sing, love so amazing, so divine, demands what?

My soul, my life, my all. I recall many years ago how old, back in the 1980s.

So that's how old that is. That's a long time ago. And I remember as a younger Christian seeing the Christian artist, the guy called Jeffrey Stevenson. And he was doing a mime.

I actually think he became an academic. I think, actually, might be a lecturer at Edinburgh University if he's the same guy. And this mime, which made quite an impression of me, if I'm sitting in the pew, I won't do the mime.

You'll be glad to know. I'll be going too far. But he was sitting in the pew. And in those days, there was an offering bag passed around. And as it came to him, he mimed this bit.

[20 : 50] He's kind of putting his hand in his pocket and he takes out a few coins and he drops them in. And then the offering bag remains. And so he reaches for his wallet and he takes out some notes and he puts it in.

Put it in the bag. Bag remains. And so then he, eventually, he kind of takes out all the coins and his wallet and he takes off his watch and he takes off his ring or whatever else, puts it in the offering bag.

And so, still the bag is there. Until eventually, he places it on the ground. He steps into it and then pulled it over his head.

It was a very powerful visual image. Christian worship involves everything that we are and all that we have. We're to hold nothing back from him.

That was the big difference between Cain and Abel. Faith and no faith. William still was a prominent Scottish minister of last century.

[21 : 59] And he has a comment on this passage in volume three of his collected writings. This is what he writes. Cain's heart well knew why his offering had not been accepted.

He was not in it. It was a kind of concession. Whereas Abel was in his sacrifice as a humble, believing sinner.

There is all the difference in the world. I think that hits the nail on the head. He was not in it.

He was not in the sacrifice. He was not in the offering. He was not in the worship. Let me ask you tonight, are you in the worship?

Are you in the singing? Are you in the ministry? Are you in the offering? Or are you going through the motions? Are you worshiping the way of Abel or the way of Cain?

[23 : 05] William Temple wrote these words, You have to trust God to worship like that.

You have to believe in Him. You have to cast yourself on Him. You have to give yourself to Him. For trusting Him will lead to joy, not sadness.

To freedom, not slavery. To life, not death. To hope, not fear. True worship begins with a heart that trusts God's character and clings to His grace and mercy.

through faith, Abel offered an acceptable sacrifice. Through faith, Abel was commended as righteous and accepted by God.

And then thirdly and finally here, through faith, Abel continues to speak even after death. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

[24 : 27] Abel's life was cut short. He became the first martyr, first to die for his faith. And yet the writer to the Hebrews says, His voice is not silent.

He still speaks. He still bears witness. He still testifies to God's goodness and grace. What does he speak of? Let me mention three things very briefly.

I think he speaks to us of the cost of faith. Abel's faith led him to a bloody field, just as the faith of countless saints has led them to persecution, suffering, and death.

And yet in their deaths they testify that God is faithful. Abel's blood, we're told in Genesis 4, verse 10, cried out from the ground. The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground, says the Lord.

God heard that cry. And God hears the cries of his people. They are never ignored.

[25 : 39] And if you're suffering for your faith, take heart. Your voice is heard in heaven. Actually, John, the apostle, takes this incident and uses it as a kind of word of encouragement for those he was writing to.

He says, for this is the message that you've heard from the beginning that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother.

And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. God sees the hatred of the unrighteous for the righteous.

And he says, you know, don't be surprised sometimes if the world hates you. And there's a kind of comfort here for God's people. Abel's blood cries out for justice.

But vengeance and justice are not things we're to take into our own hands. These things are matters for God. God will act in justice.

[26 : 45] His will will be done. The God of the Bible is not deaf or blind to the evil and injustice, the many evils and injustices we see in this world.

And even if the world does not care, there is one who does, and that is God himself. Thomas Manton writes, the blood of a martyr hath a loud voice in the ears of God.

The cost of faith. And then, I think also he speaks to us of the triumph of faith. Death could not silence him. His faith, though it cost him his life, secured eternal commendation.

He is alive in God's presence. His example calls us to persevere in the way of faith. And yes, people may mock our faith, maybe our families misunderstand that.

Maybe our own hearts are sometimes, you know, tremble. But faith in God's promise will never be put to shame. And there's a reminder here of the powerful impact a life of faith can have.

[27 : 57] As we live on the basis of what God has promised us in the gospel, who knows how God might be pleased to use our testimony, even after we're long gone.

The life of faith you're living today may yet become a legacy for your children or your grandchildren. We may never know the full extent and impact of our witness in this world.

So let me encourage you to remain faithful and to keep on in the way of faith. sometimes we feel we can feel as if our testimony of faith has been rejected, maybe even despised.

Yet God may use it. Though he died, yet still he speaks. Abel still lives. He's part of that great cloud of witnesses.

And he urges us to trust God, to bring him the same kind of worship. a kind of worship in which we give ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord.

[29 : 07] And then a third thing here. I think Abel also speaks and points us to Jesus Christ. In the very next chapter we have another mention of Abel and it's one that makes a very direct connection

with Jesus.

The author of Hebrews talks of coming in worship as we were thinking. perhaps this morning of the city of the living God. And to Jesus he says, verse 24, the mediator of a new covenant and the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

So what's this connection between the blood of Jesus and the blood of Abel? Well, as I mentioned, back in Genesis 4 we're told that Abel's blood cried out from the ground. What have you done?

The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. Abel's blood cried to God from the ground and demanded justice, demanded condemnation, demanded judgment.

But while the blood of Abel called for justice, now the blood of Jesus speaks of something very different. It speaks not of vengeance or judgment, instead it speaks a better word, a word of forgiveness, a reconciliation with God.

[30 : 29] What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus Christ is an atoning sacrifice.

It is the reality to which Abel's animal sacrifice pointed. In Genesis 4, Abel's offering and the language used to describe it reflects later Old Testament regulations for making atonement for sin at the tabernacle and temple.

Because the worship of faith draws near to God on the basis of sacrifice. That theme runs right throughout the biblical witness from Genesis to Revelation. And in the previous chapter here, the writer of Hebrews reminds us that that sacrifice is nothing less than the blood of Jesus Christ.

Remember he says in Hebrews 10 19, Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way, he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

The blood of Jesus Christ speaks to us a word demanding not condemnation, but deliverance and salvation, not expulsion, but reconciliation, not pushing us away, but welcoming us in.

[32 : 10] And it's at the cross of Christ we see the blood that can make even the foulest clean. Sometimes when, on a Sunday, we've had people round for lunch, occasions I've sent them on ahead with the keys for the house, because we've been delayed, and sometimes they feel a bit uncomfortable letting themselves into the house.

But it's a fact that I've given them the key. I've given them access. I want them to go in. Sinners, we always feel uncomfortable about our sin, and that's a healthy thing.

But God has sent His Son to die that we might be forgiven. And that's the key to God's presence. Forgiveness and His righteousness.

righteousness. And that's the key to worship. He doesn't ask us to try and feel, you know, feel we've got access. He asks us to believe that it's a fact.

And He invites us to come to Him by faith. He has given us the key, as it were, and that key is Jesus. Hebrews 10, 19 doesn't say, since we have confidence to enter by, you know, how well we've been doing as a Christian this week.

[33 : 36] It says, since we have confidence to enter by the blood of Jesus. In other words, it's nothing to do with how well or badly we've been doing. It's entirely to do, completely to do, with Jesus' death.

That's what makes us acceptable to Him as we are. So what does Abel's faith say to us tonight? Well, if you're not a believer, it says, come to God.

Not with your own works, not in your own effort, but trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Come to God, not with your own merits, but pleading the blood of Jesus.

Come by faith in the one whose sprinkled blood still speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

And if you're a Christian, it says, hold fast to your faith.

Even when it leads through the valley of suffering, God will vindicate you. To the weary and the struggling, it says, your voice like Abel's will not be silenced.

[34 : 41] Your faith will endure beyond the grave. And so the invitation then is to join this great cloud of witnesses we see in Hebrews 11, offering to God the sacrifice of faith, trusting in the blood of the Lamb who was slain.

By God's grace, may it be true of us, that even when we're like Abel long gone, our faith like Abel's of old will still speak and point others to the God who is faithful forever.

Let's pray. God, our Father, we thank you for your rich mercy and grace.
we thank you for your great love for us in the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for the shed blood of
our Savior. We thank you that it speaks to us a better word than the blood of Abel.
Lord, receive our worship this evening as we offer ourselves to you in faith and trust, confident not
in ourselves but in Jesus Christ, our great and mighty Savior, and in whose name we pray.
[36 : 05] Amen.