

# Faith: Abel

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[ 0 : 00 ] Hebrews chapter 11 on page 1209 we looked last evening together in the hall for a moment or two at the subject of faith and in the calling of Samuel and today we're going to look at the subject again and particularly with the reference to Abel and apply that to our own hearts and lives.

Hebrews 11 from the beginning now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did.

By faith he was commended as a righteous man when God spoke well of his offerings and by faith he still speaks even though he is dead.

And I'd like to look for a few moments in the context of the Lord's Supper and of that as an expression of our faith. Like to look at the subject of faith and particularly as it's example in the life of Abel and not example in the life of Cain.

[ 1 : 24 ] But here in Hebrews chapter 1 we have Hebrews chapter 11 and verse 1 one of the few definitions that we find in the Bible about faith.

That just went right through me. I'm not sure what happened there. And so I think as people of faith it's important for us to consider this chapter and this subject that's in this chapter.

And here we have one of the few definitions of what faith is in the Bible. Faith is often example in the Bible and ultimately at one level in Jesus in his perfection.

But there are not many definitions given to us of faith and this is one of them in chapter 11 of Hebrews.

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for. Certain of what we do not see. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command so that what was seen was not made out of what was visible.

[ 2 : 39 ] So we recognize and we see very much that faith biblically is in relation with Jesus Christ and we'll go on to unpack that a little bit more.

But here we have two foundational realities with regard to faith as it would be expressed in relationship with Jesus Christ.

And the first thing is there's a certainty about faith that we know where we are going. Faith is a present aspect and that present aspect is the relationship with Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior.

But there's a certainty within that present relationship that is focused on our future. We know where we're going. We have a hope that is certain both for today and also for the future.

There's a surety. It's being sure. It has substance. It has meaning. It has significance. It is well grounded.

- [ 3 : 49 ] It's not the kind of vague ethereal hope that sometimes we will have, for example, hoping for a nice summer in Scotland. That's a vain hope in many ways.
- But it's a kind of longing, aspirational thing that we might have in our lives. But the hope of the Gospel isn't that, well, that I'm living this kind of way and that I'll just wait till I die and I hope that I've done good enough to get to heaven or I've understood.
- I hope to be there in some kind of unsure and uncertain way. But the hope of the Gospel is a very concrete hope based on the person and on the word and on the word of Jesus Christ.
- It isn't merely optimism and it certainly isn't merely intangible feelings. Feelings do come into a relationship with God, obviously.
- It always will be the case, will it not, that we are creatures who are molded in many ways by our feelings, but that isn't the foundation and the surety of our faith.
- [ 5 : 00 ] It's not that I think God is real or I hope He might be real or I consider Him to be real. It's not merely a personal thought process but it is based on the certainty of the person of Jesus Christ.
- As we've been looking over these last weeks, over His life, His incarnation, His life, His teaching, His death and His resurrection, His ascension, that we believe in these things that are important to us.
- The historicity of the word of God matters to us. It's significant. We can't really sit around a table and discuss with great aplomb that it doesn't really matter if the Gospel is true or not.
- It's just the spiritual realities that somehow rise up from them. It's nonsense. We believe in the historicity of God and of the Bible and of Jesus Christ and of the Gospel and of the death and resurrection of Jesus, which we remember today at the Lord's Supper.
- And by faith, as believers here, we have come to know Jesus Christ. We've accepted His diagnosis of our need, of our need for His salvation, of His righteousness in our lives, of His goodness and of His grace and of His gifts.
- [ 6 : 27 ] We recognize that and it changes how we live because it gives us a certainty and a direction and a vision and a future dimension to our lives.
- And as we worship today, the Lord's Supper is given to us to cement the certainty of our faith. It's not a ritualistic religious pastime.
- It is given to us by God to deepen and strengthen and secure our relationship with Him by faith in His finished work.
- Are you certain about your faith? You sure? You died this evening or today would you be sure? Because of what Jesus has done, not in a kind of self-centered arrogance, but in a Christ-centered confidence, would you be sure of your future in Him?
- Tremendously important that surety, which reveals itself as we live our lives in confidence, in conviction and in expectation.
- [ 7 : 37 ] And that's a vital sign of our Christian faith, that our faith is growing and developing when we live wholeheartedly with conviction and with expectation, that we believe and that it transforms and moulds our lives because of that, that there's strength, that there's confidence, that there's reliance on the Holy Spirit in our lives, that there's therefore power and that there's change and there's movement.

We're looking for that conviction in our lives. We look for that in you young people who are Christians, that you have a solid rock on which to stand, that you have conviction in an age where conviction and where solid truth is despised and rejected, where you have an ongoing, along with all of us who by faith are believers in Christ, that we have a solid foundation and we move forward in that despite our circumstances, despite our feelings, despite our failures, that we can come to the living God and I'll say a little bit more about this later, and be assured of His loving acceptance and of newness and freshness and vibrancy in Him.

This is certainty about where we're going and where we are with Him in the kingdom. And we do need to challenge ourselves if we feel that our lives are lukewarm spiritually.

We lack conviction, we're half-hearted, we have a fruit in both camps. We're not sure, we're not certain. We're not convicted, we have no expectation.

It's a cause for self-examination. I say, where is my rooting? Where am I grounded? What is my relationship with Jesus Christ?

[ 9 : 43 ] In whom do I have faith? And what does that faith involve? Good thing to analyse and to examine, not indefinitely of course, as it becomes a bit navel-gazing then, but examine our lives and look to Christ and be refreshed and renewed by Him.

It's a certainty of where we're going because of Him, because of His finished work, because of His love. But it's also a certainty in terms of faith.

It's a certainty of where we've come from as well. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. That is Christ and His work, but it's also understanding the universe was formed at God's command so that what was seen is what was made out, what was visible.

So that's a certainty of where we've come from, a tremendously important part of living our lives today, of being grounded, of being rooted. It's a sense of who we are as people.

We are people who have been made in the image of God, people who are part of that early story in Genesis which reminds us of who this world has been made by and who we are in this world.

[ 11 : 05 ] That we live in a world much against the common thinking of today that is impregnating all our thinking, whether we accept it or not, whether we think about it or not, much against the thinking of today's society which is nihilistic ultimately, that there is no meaning, no direction, no future, no hope, that we are simply a physical entity as a world and as individuals.

And here we are reminded by faith because none of us were there but by faith we believe that the world has been created by a personal loving good God in whose image we are made.

Hugely significant. If Satan can get Christians to believe that that is not the case or the world to believe that that is not the case, he is one a massive victory because there is no grounding, there is no root, there is no ultimate meaning and purpose if we take God out of that beginning place that he has, his creative, not only his creativity but his power and his glory and him being the uncreated centre of this universe.

That gives us a great sense of value as people made in the divine image, even though tainted by sin and bruised and broken.

Intrinsic worth. In a world that has no longer and intrinsic worth, worth that is just being moulded and made up as we go along, as we unfold the physical realities of the world in which we live, which speak nothing of origins and of God and of spiritual truth and of image.

[ 13 : 14 ] It's of value in a world that has its own different values, unborn children are unvalued, old people are unvalued, women are not valued, abused, violence is common, greed is the mantra of business where the world itself is not valued but simply exploited and used and it can never be that we are simply sophisticated because it means we are ultimately meaningless without God.

It gives us a sense of value and a sense of worship as Christians particularly, this great God, amazed by scientific discovery and by scientific fact.

We think God is very ordinary, the God who is behind all of the glory and creativity and intricacy and magnificence of the world in which we live.

It's of wonder as we consider who He is and where we come from and our place in this massive universe but also surely a sense of great love.

The same God, it's the God who we remember today, is the crucified, forsaken God on the cross who because of His love restores.

[ 14 : 54 ] It's a great thing today to be loved by God and I know that, I know it's kind of, it's at the heart of the Gospel and I know for us verbally, conversationally, ceremonically we know these truths but we need to let these truths deeply soak into our lives that we are loved today by the living, loved and forgiven, redeemed, bought back.

That's a tremendously significant reality particularly in darkness, particularly when things are going wrong, particularly when things don't seem to make sense.

But you are loved, it matters because it changes the way you look at one another at the Lord's table. It speaks of unity doesn't it because if we are loved by God we don't need to find our belonging and our significance and importance in the love of other people, not that other people don't matter, far from it.

But we are free to love them without putting them down. We are free to not need to be accepted by others as we condemn and criticise others within the congregation or within our lives.

It means that we can deal with situations that are unfair and unjust in our lives because we are loved. It gives us a different perspective in our family life, in our life with our children, in our service, in our sacrifice, in the way that we give rather than the way we receive because we are loved.

[ 16 : 39 ] It takes away a critical spirit, it takes away pride doesn't it? So we talk about loving and we recognise that this foundational truth transforms us and it transforms who we are and what we are.

And it is the foundation of all of our lives because we know who created and that Creator was the same one who was nailed to the tree.

It's a sense of wonder and of love and significance and most of all because all of that comes from Him as His gift for it is by grace that you are saved.

That not of yourself is the gift of God so that no one should boast. Now whether the Apostle there speaking about grace or speaking about faith as the gift of God is irrelevant at the moment because they are both His gifts.

We ask and receive and know His gift of faith in our lives. Can I just speak for a moment about Abel and recognise him in our lives?

[ 17 : 54 ] Just one or two bullet points about Abel. Very little is said about Cain Abel and when we look at the story we think well, it seems that Abel pleased God because of what he did.

He was a good man and that Cain was a bad man. You know that's our simplistic interpretation of the passage. Abel is good, Cain is bad. Abel gets to heaven because he is good, Cain maybe goes to hell because he is bad.

Bad man, murderer, not good. And that is so often how we have formulated our faith and also formulated Christianity. That's very much how the world outside looks at Christianity.

Christianity is about people who at least think they are good, sometimes even think they are better than others and they will get to heaven because they are trying their best to be good, bad people won't.

But in the story that we have in Genesis and that is, we are reminded of here in verse 4 of chapter 11, we are told that Abel had faith.

[ 18 : 58 ] By faith he was commended. Abel was a righteous man. Now biblically that always means that he had been made right.

Man in the Bible who is called righteous other than Christ himself has been made right with God. Abel was somebody who recognized he needed a Saviour.

He was sacrificing the first fruits of his flock. He recognized that he was a sinner and that his sin needed to be atoned for.

And as with all of the believers in the Old Testament who worked through the sacrificial system they recognized that it was temporary, how much we don't know. But some more than others maybe recognize it was pointing forward to the great redemption that one day would be Jesus Christ.

All these sacrifices, the blood of bulls and goats, didn't take away sin but it pointed forward to the coming of Jesus. And Abel trusted in God and knew that God would forgive him because of the sharing of blood and sacrifice and knew that he was a sinner who needed a Saviour and who loved God because God accepted him through the sharing of blood.

[ 20 : 20 ] It reflected his heart, his offering. It was a better sacrifice than the sacrifice of Cain which we'll go into, just look at for a minute.

Why was it a better sacrifice? Because it came from a heart that had been made right by God, for God. He loved God because he recognized he was a sinner who was only redeemed by what God had ordained not by his own goodness.

And as a response he gave his firstborn the best of his flock, something that was sacrificial, something that reflected his love for God and his life of faith and obedience.

What's the New Testament? In a sense what's the New Testament parallel to that? Maybe Romans 12-1. Offer yourselves as living sacrifices to God.

Why? Because that is our acceptable act of worship. So we offer ourselves and that is the costly reflection of our understanding of his love which I've spoken about, which demands as we've sung already our all in life.

[ 21 : 41 ] And that is vital, isn't it? It's vital for us today, if we take that very early Old Testament example, vital for us today, that true worship is heart worship. It is heart worship from someone who's been changed by the living God, who's been touched, who's been made righteous, who's a sinner who is forgiven, who's repentant, who's obedient and renewed.

It reflects our understanding. And our faith will reflect our understanding of his love and of the greatness of his gift.

If we feel that sacrificing our lives in response to his grace and his goodness is too much, we don't understand. We simply don't understand.

Our worship and the giving of our lives to Christ will reflect our understanding of the free and full gift that he has given to us in Jesus Christ.

And so as we are living sacrifices, it's not in order to earn favor with God. It's because we've received his favor and we've received his grace and we've received his love.

[ 22 : 59 ] That makes all the difference. We're not earning our salvation. We're not earning our favor. We're not earning by obedience, closeness to God.

We're not earning by church attendance, by our good moral living. By anything we can do, we're not earning. But faith is recognizing that we need him.

Faith is his gift. Grace is his gift. And we accept that and we are made righteous in the same way that Abel was. And that is something that Cain hadn't got.

He didn't have such faith. Now what's interesting about Cain, isn't it? He knew about God. He knew all about God. He felt obligated to offer from his own fields, as it were.

We're not told it was a first fruit. We're not told it was costly. And that may be significant. It may have been rather a cheap and meaningless offering.

[ 24 : 10 ] It might not have been. We don't know much about the offering. But really we know that it was grudging, that it was done on his own terms, and that his heart wasn't right.

Clearly reflected in his reaction to his brother. His religion, knowing about God, even worshiping God, but with sin unresolved, with anger, jealousy, separation, bitterness in his heart unresolved.

You know, if we had been there and it had been a marks out of ten sacrifice between Cain and Abel. How could we not have been able to tell the difference?

They maybe didn't look terribly different. The way they worshiped wasn't terribly different. The offerings they gave, although one was fruit, one was meat, might not have looked terribly different.

But the difference was in the heart. And Cain had unresolved sin. And there was anger in his heart. Could it have been that he'd been asked to give animal sacrifice?

[ 25 : 30 ] But that would have made him dependent on his brother, who was the shepherd for the first root. Did he say what's wrong with my offering? Is it good enough? Is my ambition, is my job not good enough?

Is the first roots of my career not good enough for God? We don't know. But we know he was doing his work on his own terms. He was rejecting God's summary of his need of his sinfulness and of the offer of righteousness and forgiveness.

He resented God. There was an anger about him in response to God. We see it in his reaction, don't we, to the way God deals with him.

Cain was very angry. His face was downcast. God said to him, why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you're doing what is right, will you not be accepted? Sin is crouching at your door.

It desires to have you, but you must not master it. Cain didn't like that. He didn't like that exposure of his heart. He didn't like the fact that God knew what was in his heart, even though maybe Abel didn't and nobody else knew.

[ 26 : 42 ] And he takes that anger, which James talks about in James chapter 1, starts with temptation and sin and crouching at the door and anger and rage and then murder.

And that's exactly what he does. He can't stand the reality of a righteous one in his presence condemning his own guilt.

And so he hopes to just obliterate him, get him out of the picture, salve his conscience that way by getting rid of his brother.

Please don't do that with the righteous one, with Jesus. You know you can sit in church every day of your life, but you can murder him from your heart and thoughts.

You can close him down. You don't want to know about Jesus and his righteousness because of the guilt and because of the exposure of your own heart and of the cost that is involved in accepting the free gift.

[ 27 : 46 ] Isn't that interesting? The cost involved in accepting his free gift of salvation. The cost to nurturing and enjoying sinful independence and separation.

Please remember the difference between Cain and Abel and remember the righteous gift of salvation that is ours in Christ.

Remember that ultimately there's no difference between Cain and Abel as people. It's not that one was good and one was bad, both were bad. But Cain accepted that and came to recognise God's sacrificial redemption and the offer of righteousness through that forgiveness.

And that's what it must be today, that it's in here or whether it's as we have the whole of the universe standing before God in the day of judgment.

It's not that some are good and some are bad. It's that all are bad. In God's eyes all have sinned, fallen short of his glory, but some will have recognised that by his grace and goodness and come to accept the free offer of the gospel.

[ 29 : 07 ] That is why Hebrews tells us that Abel still speaks through the living word of God. We know that we are accepted because of the righteousness that is attributed to Abel, is the same righteousness by which we will sit at the Lord's table today.

Not our own. Please don't ever think we are saying we are better than other people. We are there because we are accepted, the righteousness of Jesus Christ and by faith we have come to accept Him.

And if we are struggling, please ask Him for more faith. It's His gift. Ask Him for more understanding of grace.

Love Him more and you will also love one another more. And that is what is asked of us in response to His salvation and in response to having the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Abel still speaks. If you look onto verse 12, chapter 12 and verse 24, we are reminded of that again.

[ 30 : 22 ] We have come to Christ, we have come to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

That's a difficult verse. Thinking the account and Genesis, justice is done, isn't it? Cain is judged by God absolutely, perfectly and fairly and justly.

We don't know how His life ended. But the blood of Christ speaks more than simply justice. It speaks also of great mercy.

It speaks of a better way. Speaks of the way of redemption. Speaks of the way of love. And it speaks of the way of His own sacrifice on our behalf.

And may it be that we live our lives in the light of Jesus Christ and in the light of who He is. This chapter in Hebrews is surrounded in the context of perseverance.

[ 31 : 34 ] We're given this example of faith, these examples of faith and it's shrouded in the teaching of keeping on going, persevering, not giving up, recognising who the Lord is.

Look at verse 2 of Hebrews 2. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. The author and perfecter of our faith, who for joy set before Him, endured the cross, scorned at shame, sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

After Him, we endure such opposition so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. The Lord's table is to help us not grow weary and lose heart, to help us to fix our eyes on Jesus.

And I hope you will do that today as we sit together around the table.