

# Abel

Though dead, he speaks. This, the last of four facts, is found in verse 4 of Hebrews 11. All are about Abel. The others are: (1) he was commended by God; (2) he offered a more acceptable sacrifice than his brother; and (3) he was a man of faith. The latter is repeated. Clearly the author seeks to underline the reason why Abel behaved as he did.

## ***Abel: Who was he?***

He was the second son of Adam and Eve. Cain was the first. As adults the boys were farmers. Cain grew crops. Abel looked after sheep (*see Genesis 4.1f*).

Both men believed God exists. And both sought to draw near to God. However they did not do so in the same way. Abel got it right. Cain got it wrong. The mistake he made many make today.

How do we know the brothers believed God exists? Because 'in the course of time' both made offerings to God (*Genesis 4.3*). Cain brought the fruit of the ground. Abel offered the firstborn of his flock. Neither would have done what he did if he had not recognised God as Creator and Carer. The special covenant name of God used in *Genesis 4.3*. It speaks, not just of God's power as the maker of all that exists, but also of God

as the One who provides for and cares for his people.

## ***Abel: What did he do?***

We need to take a closer look at what the men did. Why? Because we are told Abel's sacrifice was more acceptable. Naturally we ask how?

Both men were responsible for their actions. They were no longer under the care of their parents. Their duty was to love and serve God. They would have learned of God from Adam and Eve. As a result they would have been aware mankind is accountable to God. We can safely conclude both knew God to be their Creator, their Provider and their Preserver. But we can go further. Abel also believed God to be his Redeemer and Saviour. It is at this point his faith is seen to differ from that of Cain.

Why was Abel's sacrifice better? Our translation renders the comparative term 'more acceptable'. It is not difficult to see why. The word used by speaks of something being better either in terms of quantity or quality. As their offerings were different the context leads us to conclude that the writer is not concerned with the amount of crops and sheep offered. Rather he wants us to focus upon the fact that the motives of Cain and Abel were very different. One acted by faith; the other did not.

A crucial piece of information should not be overlooked. Abel is not just said to have brought an offering 'of the firstborn

of his flock'. He is also said to have offered 'their fat portions' (*Genesis 4.4*). This term points to Abel's offering being a sacrifice and not just a thank-offering. The firstborn of the flock would have been killed for its fat was to be offered up to God. Hence in Hebrews 11.4 we find Abel's offering explicitly described as a sacrifice.

At this point we deduce something. It is that both Cain and Abel knew what God had revealed. Assuming this is so, we see an important truth illustrated. Faith responds to revelation. Unbelief ignores or rejects it.

The information we are given in Genesis 3 and 4 is minimal. Yet it is sufficient. We know some will criticise us for jumping to conclusions. That is not what we want to do. Rather we seek to carefully analyse the details given. We want to see what is said and also to understand why.

God commended Abel for his sacrifice. God accepted his gifts. They were seen by God to be an acceptable sacrifice. How did Abel know God required a sacrifice for him to be acceptable to God?

The earliest clue to be found is in Genesis 3.21. There we read "the LORD God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin." For that animals needed to be killed. Why did God kill animals to make clothes for Adam and Eve ?

Early in the chapter (*verse 7*) we discover the work Adam and Eve undertook after they defied God's word. It was to make loincloths for themselves. They were made from fig leaves. After they heard of God's judgment upon them for their disobedience, God clothed them with garments made of skins.

Were homemade loincloths not good enough? Or, was this act designed to teach them (and mankind) the need of sacrifice if those under God's curse are to be freed from the consequences of it? We are on safe ground when we make such a deduction.

The Scriptures teach: "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (*see Hebrews 9.22*). The author of Hebrews establishes this truth especially in chapters 9 and 10. What he then does, in chapter 11, is provide examples of those who lived by faith. Abel is the first given.

The writer wants us to grasp that Abel saw his need for a Saviour. We can go further. The evidence points to him believing God would provide the Saviour.

Abel's sacrifice demonstrates he knew: (1) he was a sinner; (2) he deserved to die; and (3) that the only way of acceptance with God is by faith. Specifically, he knew faith is to be in the One who would be sent by God to shed his blood and die in the place of those under the curse of death. In other

words, his sacrifice prefigured the death of Christ. Abel's faith was in Christ.

A necessary conclusion of this is to affirm that those who have faith respond positively to what God has revealed. In particular God's children worship him according to his will. They are obedient to what he has revealed. They seek to please God. That was the type of faith Abel showed. It marked him off as different from Cain. Hence his sacrifice was more acceptable.

Interestingly, when we consider God's conversation with Cain when he reacted with anger at God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice and his rejection of Cain's offering (*Genesis 4.4f*), we find Cain encouraged to learn the lesson taught (*Genesis 4.7*). If he did well, he was told, he would be accepted. In other words, if he obeyed God's revealed will he would enjoy God's favour. However we should not see God's favour as something earned. Rather obedience is evidence of faith (*see the letter of James*). Salvation is always by faith alone. However faith is never alone. Its twin is obedience. Hence the chorus, 'Trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey'.

### ***Abel: Commended how?***

We have noted how God accepted Abel's gift as evidence of him being commended by God. He is the one of the two men who offered the acceptable sacrifice. But the author says more. He says God commended Abel as 'righteous'. The

word 'righteous' indicates his actions were right rather than wrong. Abel was a just man who acted in a just way.

That truth is endorsed by the apostle John. In his first letter he contrasts Cain and Abel in this way:

We should not be like Cain, who was the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous (*1 John 3.12*).

The evidence then is that Abel had a new heart whereas Cain did not. He lived a godly, holy and innocent life. This was the fruit of the Spirit of God's work within him. Spiritual truth is spiritually discerned (*see 1 Corinthians 2.14*). By grace, Abel saw God required the following for a sacrifice to be deemed acceptable:

- (1) the living must die;
- (2) the best must be offered (the firstborn);
- (3) it is to be offered to God; and
- (4) it is to be offered by faith in response to God's revelation, command and promise.

Thus faith is more than mere deeds. The heart must also be engaged. The problem with Cain was that he performed an act of worship which was seriously deficient. It did not start from faith. It was therefore evil rather than righteous. God deemed it unacceptable. 'For Cain and his offering he had no regard' (*Genesis 4.5*).

Abel was different. He believed God's revelation. As a result he acknowledged his innate sinfulness and his need of forgiveness. He was penitent. His belief was that forgiveness can only be experienced in God's appointed way.

### ***Abel: How he speaks?***

The writer uses the present tense. Abel though dead speaks. How can that be? The answer requires we consider both the human and divine perspectives.

Cain knew what he had done. He shed the blood of an innocent man. Though he tried to distance himself from Abel - 'Am I my brother's keeper?' he asked God (*Genesis 4.9*) - for the rest of his days he was marked out as the man who slew Abel. He became a fugitive and a wanderer (*Genesis 4.12-14*). Wherever he went he had to live with his conscience. His reputation was known to others.

Those who hear the Scriptures learn of Abel. His fame as a man of faith is declared in *Genesis 4*, *Matthew 23*, *Hebrews 11* and *12*, and in *1 John 3*. Though dead he speaks.

What does God say about Abel? We have seen he is commended as a righteous man. But *Genesis 4* and *Matthew 23* also reveal God avenges the blood of his chosen ones. It was the blood of Abel that cried out to God from the dust of the ground (*Genesis 4.10*). Cain could not hide his crime from God. He was punished by God. And he found his punishment too

much to bear (*Genesis 4.13*).

The Lord Jesus spoke of Abel when he warned the religious leaders of judgment. If they persisted in unbelief upon them would 'come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel...' (*Matthew 23.35*).

Why should that be? Surely the answer is because their sin is just like the sin of Cain.

Cain was guilty of unbelief. He rejected what God had revealed to mankind. He refused to worship God in God's appointed way. He put his understanding above revelation. He rejected salvation through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Abel trusted in Christ; in the Christ who was promised. His sacrifice of the firstborn showed he knew God would provide a Saviour. The sacrifice was a type or shadow of what Christ would do on the cross. For such trust in God he was persecuted.

Abel stands in history as the first man explicitly stated to have had a true faith. It was by faith that he offered a sacrifice. He was the first to suffer for his faith. And he was the first to die for his faith. He was the first martyr.

Though dead he speaks.

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