

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

The Characters of Faith (Part 1 – Hebrews 11:4-40) Hebrews 11:4

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 For by it the men of old gained approval. 3 By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. 4 By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

This morning I would speak to you further and more fully on the matter of faith. Over the past couple of messages, I have defined faith as follows, for this will be important to us as we examine the examples of faith in the rest of Hebrews 11, as a *firm and fully confident trust in the person, promises and provision of God through Jesus Christ resulting in behavior consistent with the Word of God*. Faith is trust and faith is action.

As we progress through Hebrews 11, we will be presented with a simple, yet profoundly important phase, *by faith*. Repeated some 19 times in this chapter, it is safe to say that the central truth communicated for us is that “the righteous ones will live by faith.” (reference 10:38). Having already examined the description of faith in Hebrews 11:1-3, we are now ready to consider the demonstrations of faith in Hebrews 11:4-40, the first of which may be somewhat surprising for anyone who has not read this text before, for we are presented with Able, the second born son of Adam and Eve, as the first of the examples of “*men of old*” who “*gained*” the “*approval*” of God, not by their own merits or efforts, but by faith alone – *soli fide*. This morning then let us look at three things:

- I. The meaning of “by faith”
- II. Worship “by faith”
- III. The result of faithful worship

I. The meaning of “by faith”

Before we proceed, I believe it is of utmost importance to explain what is meant by this phrase, “*by faith*”. The way this is constructed in the Greek text, “*by faith*” speaks of a means or agency. In every example given in Hebrews 11, the means of walking rightly with God, the agent by which we have assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen is faith – this implicit, singular, focused, dependent, God-given, Christ-exalting faith.

We must remember that biblical faith is not something humanly deduced. It does not come as the end result of man’s reason but only by God’s revelation and illumination. Biblical faith is not of human origin (Philippians 1:29; Ephesians 2:8) but is a divine gift. Apart from faith, following the commandments, the precepts, the teachings and the ways of God do not make sense. Why would anyone seek to practice the precepts of a person that lived 2000 years ago? Why would anyone believe that such a person rose from the dead never to die again? Why would anyone believe that only by being in some mystical union with this person alone that he has access to the Holy God? Why would anyone come and sing the praises and attributes of a person he has never seen, with and in front of others (something very few of us would do otherwise)? It is all by means of this God-given; Christ-manufactured, Spirit-

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illuminated faith – this faith which is a *firm and fully confident trust in the person, promises and provision of God through Jesus Christ resulting in behavior consistent with the Word of God.*

In other words, as we look at the first example of a person who lived by faith, we are presented with Able, who because of His trust in the person and promises of God, offered, that is, he followed a behavior that is consistent with God and His Word. If your child has a confident trust in you and your word, when you tell him to come to you, then he will do it. But, if there is a spirit of rebellion, if there is doubt at all as to whether or not you really mean what you say, what does the child do when you say, “Come to me.” That child will run the other way – his actions will not be consistent with your word because he doubts either the sincerity or the severity of not acting in accordance with your words.

II. Worship by Faith

As we examine then Hebrews 11:4, we are faced with this question: “What is it that made Able’s sacrifice better than Cain’s? The simple answer is **“by faith.”** Able made his offering by faith and Cain did not. But just how was this faith exhibited? It is important that we grasp exactly what it was that Able did **by faith** in contrast to what Cain did by unbelief so that we might imitate Able and stay clear of the way of Cain. To do this, we need to move over to another text and briefly expound upon it in light of this statement in Hebrews 11:4, **“By faith Able offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous...”** Turn with me if you will to Genesis 4. Genesis 4 is the fuller record of the offerings of Cain and Able – the very account which the author of Hebrews expected his readers to be familiar with and so, let us re-familiarize ourselves with it. Let me submit to you what I see as the central truth of both Hebrews 11:4 as well as the first half of Genesis 4 – that truth being that *God is to be worshipped and that He can only be rightly worshipped by faith.* He can only be rightly honored and we can only draw near to Him by, or through this firm trust in who God is and what God has said. When we worship **by faith**, then the good report, the testimony is made certain that we are righteous, that we have been made right by God alone, the evidence of which is that we worship according to God and His Word.

Let me show you how this is revealed to us in Genesis 4:1-10 as we take note of three things we learn about worship from this text before we consider the contrast between the worship of Able and the worship of Cain.

1. God is to worshipped in a prescribed place (Genesis 4:1-4)

As we come to verse three, there is a clear indication that **“Cain brought an offering to the LORD..”** There was a place prescribed by God as to where both Cain and Able were to gather to worship the LORD. This is also gleaned from verse 4 where it says as well that **“Able brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions.”** This tells us that Able knew something of slaughtering an animal and the offering of its fat portions would suggest that there was an altar upon which the fat could be burned. In other words, God had Cain and Able come into His presence at a prescribed place.

2. God is to worshipped at a prescribed time (Genesis 4:3)

Our text says, **“So it came about in the course of time...”** or “at the end of days...” that these offerings were brought before the LORD. While it is true that everyday is to be a day of worship, particularly private and with family, there is also a prescribed time in which

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God's people are to gather together to corporately worship Him. In ancient Israel that day was the Sabbath, when God was formally worshipped by the congregation. For believers today such a day is the "first day of the week" – Sunday, a celebration and commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus from the grave, a day which is to be specially guarded and not neglected as we noted in Hebrews 10:25. So then, God is to be worshipped in prescribed times.

3. God is to be worshipped by a prescribed means (Genesis 4:4-7)

That both Cain and Able brought any kind of offering suggests that Adam and Eve did indeed instruct them concerning the place of worship, the time of worship and therefore the commanded means of worship. How else would either Cain or Able have known to bring a sacrifice unless such a sacrifice had been instructed by God? And it is here then that we begin to see the parallels between Hebrews 11:4 and the characters of Cain and Able. Hebrews 11:4 tells us that Able worshipped how – **by faith**. We might also be reminded of Romans 10:17 which says that **faith come by hearing**. God, through Adam and Eve, had instructed both of these young men on where, when and how to worship God. Able responded with confident trust in the person and promise of God, that what God said He meant and that by such a trust or faith, Able would be accepted, or would "**gain approval**" from God. Able heard the command of God, that to approach God required a sacrifice, a sacrifice in accordance with God's revealed will and so, **by faith**, by taking God at His Word, he so came before God.

There has been debate as to whether or not it was the nature of the sacrifices themselves, a non-blood versus a blood sacrifice that brought the displeasure and pleasure of God. While I do think it plausible that God required a blood sacrifice as evidenced back in Genesis 3:21 where God had slain an animal in order to provide Adam and Eve a covering, I do not think Cain's troubles are founded in the sacrifice itself, but rather in his heart and attitude. God's displeasure with Cain was not because of the type of his offering, but rather because of his heart – Cain's heart was not right with God. For thus far in the Genesis account there is nothing to indicate that Cain was somehow worse or more evil than Able. Cain is not an atheist – he acknowledges the existence of God. The problem of Cain is this, while ready to worship God, he determined to worship God in his own way, without a prepared heart. Rather than worship God **by faith**, by the prescribed means and attitudes instructed by God, Cain's sacrifice revealed a heart that wanted to do things as he desired. It wasn't that he worshipped a false God, but rather that he worshipped the true God in a false manner. He evidently doubted the sincerity of God when God said to worship in a certain manner, or he doubted the severity of God for disobedience.

In other words, rather than worshipping by faith, Cain worshipped in unbelief and therefore in disobedience. Remember Romans 14:23, "**whatever is not from faith is sin.**" So, if Cain had been commanded to bring a blood sacrifice, then he was obviously disobedient. But likewise and even more important, if Cain's heart was not right, if he was callous or cavalier toward God, and this was somehow revealed in his sacrifice, then he was again disobedient. Why this is so we may not know, but what we do know is that Cain's attitude, as he came to worship God, was rebellious and somehow he determined to come to God on his own terms and in his own way. And to this I say, *to do things one's own way in disregard to God's way is the opposite of faith, it is unbelief and such is deadly to the soul.*

The other day Tyler and I had an opportunity to speak with a delightful woman who had committed her life to helping others and seemed to genuinely desire to do so out of love to

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God and Jesus Christ. As we talked with her, she confessed to us that she no longer attends any church because she had been involved in three churches that went through ugly splits through which she had been hurt. Our hearts sincerely ached for her and we apologized on behalf of a Christian community that had so wrongly treated her and yet, as has been said so many times from this pulpit, circumstances cannot dictate obedience. The sad reality for this lady is that she has determined to come to God on her own terms in disregard (as she herself noted) to what God's word says. I fear for her as this is clearly an area that she is not walking in faith, but rather by sight, looking out for herself, protecting herself from others rather than trusting in God to protect her and to provide for her. So again I say, *to do things one's own way in disregard to God's way is the opposite of faith, it is unbelief and such is deadly to the soul.*

So then, this is Cain's unbelief, but what do we learn of Able's belief or faith? In Genesis 4:4 we note again that Able ***"brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions."*** While we know that ultimately it was the attitude of Cain by which the LORD rejected his sacrifice, I do believe that it may well be that God had revealed the necessity of a blood sacrifice for forgiveness of sin. Hebrews 9:22 reminds us that ***"without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness."*** God had shed blood as a result of the first sins of Adam and Eve and while a blood sacrifice would not be clearly required until the Law of Moses, we also know that the accounts of those who lived before Moses offered blood sacrifices to God, including Noah, Abraham, and Job.

So, it should not surprise us if the faith of Able is revealed in the fact that since God revealed to his parents that a substitutionary death was needed for a proper covering so that Adam and Eve might be right before God, then ***by faith*** he would offer such a sacrifice to be made right with God himself. Remember that our Hebrews 11:4 text tells us that ***"by faith Able offered a better sacrifice..."*** It was not that Able himself was any better, but rather the sacrifice he gave was better and therefore regarded by the LORD. Able trusted what God had communicated to him about worship and wanted to worship in accordance to what was revealed.

III. The Result of Faithful Worship

And what is the result of Able's faithful worship? Genesis 4:4, ***"...the LORD had regard for Able and for his offering..."*** or, as Hebrews 11:4 goes on to say, ***"God testifying about his [Able's] gifts."*** God gave Able a good report, a sign by which he knew God had accepted his offering. It has been suggested that in light of other passages that speak of similar sacrifices, that the means the LORD employed to demonstrate His regard was a fire from heaven which came down and consumed the sacrifice, something seen in Leviticus 9:24; Judges 6:21; 1 Kings 18:38; 1 Chronicles 21:26; and 2 Chronicles 7:1. I would also suggest that it may have been simply Able's knowledge that he had done things God's way that brought a joy and confirmation to his heart – in other words, he took it on faith that God had regarded his sacrifice.

In contrast, Genesis 4:5 tells us that the LORD had no regard for Cain's offering, meaning that in spite of whatever efforts Cain had gone to, in spite of how physically well presented the offering, there was no visible sign, no fire out of heaven, no confidence that Cain was right with God. And therefore, where Able had received the testimony that he was righteous, what do we learn about Cain. Ultimately that he was unrighteous. As he failed to

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worship God **by faith** but rather in accordance with his own heart, Genesis 4:5 tells us that his countenance fell and that he became “very angry.” A.W. Pink suggests that Cain’s anger was the result of three things:

1. He was furious that all his labors should stand for nothing.
2. He was angry at the thought that he could not approach and worship God according to the dictates of his own mind.
3. And, he was filled with wrath as he contemplated the exaltation of Abel above him.

What a lesson for us. What is the source of our anger, pride, and distrust of God and even of God’s people? Often such vices are nothing more than the result of not trusting God, of living by your own standards and means, doing things your own way. The life Jesus promises is a life of joy, fullness and completeness. When we feel like we are coming up short in such things, take it as a warning light of your soul, that somewhere faith is lacking, that somewhere your knowledge of God and His promises is incomplete and you are trusting now in yourself or in someone other than God.

The phrase translated “very angry” in Genesis 4:5 speaks of a deep, intense and burning anger. Such a passion would lead Cain to murder his own brother. This thought reminds me that if we don’t burn with a passion for God, we will inevitably burn with a passion for sin. This is essentially what the LORD says to Cain in Genesis 4:7 –

If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.

Cain, because he walked in the passion of his flesh, was devoured by his sin, killing his brother. And just what testimony did God give of Cain, this one who did not live “by faith.” We read this in 1 John 3:11-12 -

11 For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; 12 not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous.

The testimony of Cain was that he was of the evil one and his deeds were evil. The one who does not live by faith, his deeds are evil and his soul separated from God. But for the one who lives and worships by faith, even as Able, the testimony is that such a one is righteous, he alone is right with God by faith, a faith which Hebrews 11:4 reminds is continual, for we read that “**God testifying of his gifts**” implies that Able made repeated and continual sacrifices, or offered these gifts to God, by faith, which again emphasizes the passion of Able to worship God aright.

Our Hebrews 11:4 text closes with these words, “**and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.**” Some have seen this as a reference to the blood of Able crying out to God for vengeance as recorded in Genesis 4:10. I think that this is different. It is not the blood of Able that cries out to God here, but rather Able himself is a preacher of sorts, speaking not to God but to us of the importance of faith when we worship. This is Able’s plea to the readers

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of Hebrews, worship God **by faith**, worship according to the Book, worship God's way and in order to please the heart of God rather than to please yourself. It is an exhortation to God-centered worship.

Beloved, we are in a culture that longs for worship according to its own designs. We have people that move from church to church, looking for one that "appeals" to them. If they find what they are looking for, they plant themselves and worship according to what pleases them. If we are guilty of worshipping this way we need to repent. Worshipping by faith is not about what I want, but about what God wants? Are we learning about God's person, God's promises, God's provisions and God's precepts, seeking to worship by these, making issues of style and preference greatly secondary to the revealed truth of God. God is never pleased with our worship – He is pleased with worship by His design, according to His word, which His people can only then do, by faith; by denying self and following after Christ.

In the first example given in Hebrews 11 concerning true biblical faith, we are called to contrast two kinds of worship. The worship Cain offered God was a worship of convenience, according to the dictates of the human heart and was therefore displeasing to God. The worship Able offered was a worship of faith. He brought to God what God required, what God expected, what God desired. How do you worship God? Do you know what He desires of your worship? And as you learn of these, will you pursue such worship by faith? Worship by faith is the only means of gaining God's approval. Any other worship only solicits God's disregard. Let us learn to worship God all the more **by faith** – by this *firm and fully confident trust in the person, promises and provision of God through Jesus Christ resulting in behavior consistent with the Word of God.*

Let me close with this quote from the great puritan Thomas Watson who spoke to this issue of faith and worship when he wrote:

"Many come to the Word only to feast their ears; they like the melody of the voice, the mellifluous sweetness of the expression, the newness of the notion (Acts 17:21). This it to love the garnishing of the dish more than the food; this is to desire to be pleased rather than edified. Like a woman that paints her face, but neglects her health."

Worship apart from faith is dead and all our singing, all our outward expressions of godliness are like putting make-up on a dead person. Let us be certain and clear that we worship God by the Book and that we therefore worship God by faith. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

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