



Ministry of the Word

*Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2019*

by Vincent Gannon

**Scripture:** Hebrews 11:4

**Subject:** Part 28 – The Dawn of Faith

Last time we looked at the first three verses of this chapter that gave us the definition of Faith, the reward of faith and necessity of Faith which gave way to understanding that God holds the unfolding of the universe and the ages. From the outset, justification was always by faith alone, through Christ alone, not by works or self-effort.

We also considered that Faith is not a self-attained superpower. But this must not underestimate that there is power in having Faith. It is not Faith in ourselves, but a God-given faith in Christ which shows us the power of the gospel, the power of the glorious hope that God has given to us since the beginning of time. This shows us how faith can take hold of us, and how faith give us power to walk with God, be counted righteous, to have right standing before Him. Faith can deliver us and give us power to please God.

Now in the following verses, we are given examples of people who lived by faith, what they endured because of faith, what they became on account of faith, and what their reward was. Some of the people we are going to meet in this chapter had to endure hardship, torture, ridicule, floggings, imprisonment, killed, experience poverty, amongst some of the trails. While their life experiences differed in many ways, the one thing they all had in common was

they had a relationship with God and believed Him. They all believed that suffering for the sake of God was better than all the riches that this world could give them. All looked forward to their resurrection. They were all interested in their eternal reward and not the passing material incentives. They all received their reward which was approval of God here and in eternity.

Verse 4 presents the very dawn of Faith, with the first person – Abel. Let’s read it:

*By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.*

Abel was Adam and Eve’s second son. But maybe you are asking the question right about now – why doesn’t the illustration begin with Adam and Eve? To answer this question, we have to go back to Genesis chapter 2 and 3. There we see that Adam and Eve couldn’t be examples of faith because they walked by sight, for they walked and talked with God in the garden in their perfect state of being, prior to the fall. However, Abel was born after the fall, after the expulsion from the Garden. He hadn’t seen the manifestation of the invisible God the way his parents had. Adam and Eve, saw and believed but Abel hadn’t seen, yet still believed. So, where did Abel’s belief come from? Where does anyone’s faith come from? Well Romans 10 verse 17 tells us – “*Faith come by*” – what’s the next word? – “*hearing*”. You cannot put your faith in what you do not know. Therefore, to assume that Abel offered a sacrifice by faith, we must assume that he was told, but by whom? He either heard it from his parents or perhaps he heard it from God himself. We know that God spoke to Cain directly when he asked him where his brother was, so maybe God spoke like this to Abel. Either way, Abel’s faith came from hearing what God wanted and understood the set pattern that God designed. He had heard that God required a sacrifice to cover sin. He believed, and he evidenced his faith by doing what God commanded.

Verse 4 tells us that Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice, that he attained a testimony from God who declared or testified that he was righteous and therefore because of this righteousness that was imputed to him, he still speaks to us a model of Faith though he is dead. Abel models faith through his sacrifice, through his testimony and as a preacher or prophet as Jesus called him in Luke 11 verses 50 and 51 –

***“that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation,<sup>51</sup> from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation.”***

To really get to grips with the story of Abel we need to look at Genesis chapter 4.

At the start of the account in this chapter, we see Eve gave birth to her firstborn Cain. His name means ‘to get’ or ‘He is here’. In the previous chapter, remember God gave her a promise that through her seed the serpents’ head would be crushed. We know that this was a prophetic promise about the Messiah, but it is possible to consider that she may have thought that her firstborn was the fulfilment of that promise, hence the name she gave him – Cain. Her second son’s name Abel means in the Hebrew - Hevel means "breath" or vapor. When you think about it, he was named very prophetically for as James 4 verse 14 tells us –

***“whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.”***

From our Verse this morning, the first point we come across:

***By faith, Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain,*** (Hebrews 11v4a)

Abel handled sheep while Cain tilled the land and in verses 3 and 4 of Genesis 4, we read ....

***And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. <sup>4</sup> Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering,***

We are informed that it was by faith that Abel offered his sacrifice to God. This is a very important statement; in that it answers the question often asked regarding the reason why God accepted Abel’s offering over Cain’s. It was Abel’s faith that received approval from God as being righteous. Abel approached God by Faith, but not just any Faith. It was on God’s terms, Revelation, Sacrifice, and on the promise of a person.

When the bible talks about righteousness or being righteous, it is not about being good or moral like many who are not believers can be. When the bible talks about righteousness it is talking about the believers’ right standing before God. It is a righteousness that comes from their “covenant” relationship with God who imputes His righteousness at salvation. That righteousness does not change or alter. It is how we are positionally before God, but it takes

the sanctification process to start perfecting us in our thinking, speaking and behaviour on this earth. Righteousness before God is the way believers are seen by God.

In verses 3 and 4, we see that there was a time of worship as prescribed by God, there was a way of worship, and there was a place of worship. We don't know how often they had to worship, or the times of the year, or even how many times in a year, but there was a time. We don't even know exactly where the place was except it was east of Eden. What we do know is the way of worship which was acceptable before God.

When these brother's parents fell, God showed Adam and Eve the way to approach Him through the shed blood of an innocent Lamb. Abel not just understood the way, but he did what God said, thereby, he revealed his obedience and acknowledged his sinfulness. Abel offered to God a better sacrifice because God had prescribed a blood sacrifice required to cover sin which was a picture of a better sacrifice. Not only did Abel bring the right sort of sacrifice, with the right heart, but he brought his best. We see from the text that Abel did not just kill a lamb for offering as a sacrifice but he also offered the fat of the Lamb that would be prescribed in Leviticus 17:1-6, which as you know prefigured the offering of the Lamb of God. He not only offered what God required but, in the manner that God required it, which is very important. Each and every time he made a sacrifice before God, he was pointing, in type, to the promise of God in sending a Saviour, the Messiah, which as we know is Jesus, God Himself in Flesh. When we break bread we do likewise, as in faith, keeping hold of the promises of God that our sins are forgiven and we expect His soon return.

This account is the most important one of all that we find here in Hebrews 11 as it has to do with worship before God. This is the most fundamental action of man. After all, it is the chief end of man to worship God. If you don't get this right than nothing will go right, and the end of it is a lost eternity. The sum total of God's purpose for man, is to have a relationship, that was broken by the fall but restored by the finished work of Christ on the cross. Even in the giving of God's Commandments, the Lord directs man to the importance of this very thing, to worship the one true and living God. This is why **Abel Obtained a Testimony**

*Through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous. (11:4b).*

God approved of Abel's sacrifice which is why God rewarded him with the testimony that he was righteous before God. That is the only thing that changes a man's relationship to God. It is not how good we are, but whether or not we completely trust in Him, that's what faith is all about! That trust is evidenced in obedience to His Word.

Abel was sinful, just as Cain was. Who knows if he was more likeable or not with his family, but that doesn't matter. God sees the heart (thank goodness!). Abel's was the kind of faith that allowed God to be God. When we have this faith that allows God to be God, it's amazing to experience how He moves in our Lives and actually works on our behalf, imagine that God of all the universe, who holds the universe even in its expanding state, God who holds the ages and works things out for His glory, loves you and will work on your behalf. But we must have true faith which is always obedient. Jesus said to those Jews who had believed Him, ***"If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine"*** (John 8:31).

You know, you can believe Jesus but not have faith in him, some Christians even believe in Jesus for their eternal security but not their everyday need. Obedience does not bring faith, but faith will always bring obedience and the desire to live righteously. The more you grow according to His Word, the more you obey Him, the greater your faith will grow and so too your love for Him and it becomes a cycle. Just as much, we cannot claim to have faith in God and then continually disregard His Word. James must have known some people who thought this way, for he wrote,

***"What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?"***

***Faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself' (James 2:14, 17).***

Nonworking faith, disobedient faith, is not saving faith. It is not valid faith at all. Cain believed that God exists. Even the demons believe this, James goes on to say.

***"But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?" (2:19-20).***

James did not teach salvation by works. Instead, He said that we know when there is real faith because it produces works. We cannot work our way to God, but having come to Him, works will become evident, and prove that our faith is genuine. The Christian, in fact, is

***"created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).***

You know, every human that has ever lived, from the dawn of history, to every human that will ever live, has or will come to God one of two ways –

1 – On their own terms (their own imagination or fabrication), or 2, – On God's terms.

These are the broad categories of either acceptance or rejection. Abel and Cain both went before God with heart conditions. Abel believed God and approached God on God's Terms. But not so his brother.

**Cain was the opposite, in fact, he failed.**

Cain believed in God, why else would he have brought Him a sacrifice? He knew there was God and even knew that he owed Him some sort of worship. He believed in God, but didn't have faith in God. He thought he could approach God in whatever way he wanted, and expected Him to be impressed and satisfied. Cain brought God an offering of fruit of the ground which could have included grain, and interestingly, under Levitical law this type of offering came under free will offerings. Cain wanted to do his own free will, on his own terms and he approached God not by faith. In so doing, Cain became the father of all false religion.

False religion is trying to come to God by any other way than the way God has prescribed. It says, "I can get to God by thinking myself into been a good person" or "I can please God by works," or, "I can satisfy God by my works or by following the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, Joseph Smith, or Charles Russell or whoever." God's Word says,

***"There is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).***

False religion says that there is another name, and another way. False religion is any way to God that God Himself has not ordained. Proverbs 14:12 marks this truth:

***"There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."***

The idea that one way is just as good as another does not seem to be accepted in any area of life except religion and morality. When a person goes to a doctor with a problem, he first of all wants to know the truth. No one likes to hear a diagnosis of a terrible disease. The sensible person would rather know the truth than live in ignorance of something that could ruin his health or even take his life. Once knowing the diagnosis, he then wants the right cure, not just any cure. He wants the best treatment he can find and will usually go to any lengths to

get it. He would be insulted and infuriated with a doctor who told him simply to go home and do whatever he thought best, that one person's opinion was just as good as another's.

The reason we think this way about medicine is that we believe there are medical truths. Medical science does not have all the answers, but a great deal is known and accepted as factual, reliable, and dependable. The reason this same kind of reasoning is not applied to spiritual and moral issues is that the absolute truths and standards God has given are rejected. In fact, the very notion of spiritual and moral absolutes is rejected. Cain rejected God's standards and became the first apostate. What is very interesting also in verse 5 of Genesis's 4, is Cain's reaction to his rejected sacrifice –

*but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.*

He was so angry that his face and his whole essence of who he was, fell. A lot of people get like that don't they, when you tell them that their way is not God's way. In verses 6 and 7 of Genesis 4, we see God's mercy towards Cain, reaching out to him saying –

*So the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it."*

God extended an invitation to Cain to do what was right, to obey Him. He tried to help him by advising him to master sin before it mastered him. But Cain failed to acknowledge his sin and refused to obey God by bringing the sacrifice God required. He did not mind worshiping God, as long as it was on his own terms, in his own way. Like all apostates, Cain knew what was right, there was no ignorance but he chose not to obey God. In fact, he spoke to his brother sometime later in a field, maybe Abel didn't agree with him, maybe Abel was trying to help him see sense, reason with him, who knows, but the outcome of that conversation was that Cain killed Abel. Cain knew what he was doing, he knew about death, sure had there not been lamb killed for sacrifices previously?

Cain's disobedience of God and setting up his own standards of living were the beginning of Satan's world system. Cain "*went out from the presence of the LORD*" (Gen. 4:16) and into a life of continuous self-will, which is the heart of worldliness and unbelief. By his own decision, his own choice, he turned away from God and God's way, to himself and his own way. We

should not be sorry for him because God refused to honour his sacrifice. He knew what God required, and he was able to do it but he chose instead to do what he himself wanted. He was not remorseful at all for what he had done.

There are all kinds of people around under the guise of religion, even Christian religion, who are denying God.

***"Woe to them!"*** Jude says, ***"For they have gone the way of Cain"*** (v. 11).

Cain is an example of the religious natural man, who believes in God and even in religion but after his own will and who rejects redemption by blood. Paul says of such people in Romans 10:2-3 that,

***"they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God"***.

The religion of Cain is so easy, you simply do what you think or feel happy about in seeking to please God. God has shown us the proper way and Jesus tells us in John 4:22-24

***You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.***

God is not arbitrary or whimsical or capricious. He was not playing a game with Cain and Abel. He did not hold them accountable for what they could not have known or could not have done. Abel's sacrifice was accepted because he knew what God wanted and obeyed. Cain's was rejected because he knew what God wanted, yet disobeyed. To obey is righteous; to disobey is evil. Abel was of God; Cain was of Satan (1 John 3:12).

As with all choices, there are consequences. Cain may have killed Abel but he couldn't quieten him. The last part of verse 4 in chapter 11 of Hebrews elaborates for us,

***"God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. (11:4c)***

When the Lord confronted Cain after Abel's murder, He said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10). In the bible when

God asks questions, it is not because He doesn't know the answer, rather, he is inviting an individual to engage in what is going on in their heart.

Abel's first "speaking" after death was to God, asking for his murder to be avenged. Like in Revelation 6 verses 9 and 10 –

*When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. <sup>10</sup> And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"*

Moffatt once wrote these words,

"Death is never the last word in the life of a righteous man. When a man leaves this world, be he righteous or unrighteous, he leaves something in the world. He may leave something that will grow and spread like a cancer or a poison, or he may leave something like the fragrance of perfume or a blossom of beauty that permeates the atmosphere with blessing.: Man leaves, he's either a Paul or a Nero. Dead men do tell tales. They are not silent; they speak. Witness the end of verse 4, He being dead yet speaks. And that is said of Abel."

In all the time that God dealt with Cain, Cain did not repent, he showed no sorrow only wanted to avoid the consequence of being killed himself. The earth to which his brothers blood fell, would never render a living for Cain, for God told him that it wouldn't yield to him any longer and he would instead be a vagrant and wanderer on the earth. Every bit of soil which Cain would place his feet would remind him of his wickedness. Abel, though dead, continued to speak to his brother. All because Cain, would not initially recognise his own sin in his heart and disobeyed God.

The primary meaning of Hebrews 11:4, however, has to do with Abel's speaking to later generations of believers and potential believers.

And if Abel is still speaking, what is he saying? What is this individual who was the second generation of men since the creation, the dawn of the existence of man, have to say to us today? This man who lived only when the earth was new and born and wasn't anything like it is today, what does he have to offer me? Certainly, the economy of God in his day was different than it is now. We have the cross. So, what does he say to me? Abel is talking about Faith. That is the message that Abel wants to give to you.

Abel was the first man to really exercise positive Faith in God. He not only believed, he bet his life on it.

He says three things: man comes to God by faith, not works; man must accept and obey God's revelation above his own reason and self-will; and sin is severely punished. This is Abel's timeless three-point sermon to the world, which he has been preaching for thousands of years to those who will hear.

What else can we learn from this? Is there anything else?

For the Believer I see the following, both for the individual and the body itself. Worshiping Jesus as a believer and together with other believers may be the single most important thing we do. It plays an indispensable role in vitalising our spiritual fire, and keep it burning. Corporate worship brings together God's word, prayer, and fellowship, and so makes for the greatest means of God's ongoing grace in the Christian life. It is good for your soul.

Our approach to worship is of vital importance, if it is or is not accepted by God. If we are simply a spectator going along with the mood or the melody, or carried along by the music that is not true worship. True worship is fundamentally an experience of the heart, and not a means to anything else. So, it's important to distinguish between what benefits might motivate us to be regular in corporate worship, also, we need to be aware that we are worshiping God and not just caught up in a musical moment. We need to come to worship God, we need to come in faith believing that we are coming with a purpose, that is to give God glory and meet with him, not just to get.

Every believer is a priest unto God and as priests, we have not only the privilege but the pleasure in approaching the Lord always. We have the most unique relationship than anyone else in the Bible. We are called the children of the living God. We are the church, the hand-picked of the Lord, Sinners saved by grace. We can come boldly before the Lord.

However, it must be said that we often come into corporate worship feeling a sense of spiritual fog. During the rough and tumble of the week, the hard knocks of real life in the fallen world, we can be disorientated to the ultimate reality of what's truly important. We need to clear our head, recalibrate our spirit, and jump-start our slow heart. Martin Luther found corporate worship powerful in awakening his spiritual fire: "at home, in my own house,

there is no warmth or vigour in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through.”

Better than Luther, though, is the experience of the inspired psalmist. In Psalm 73, he begins by despairing over the prosperity of his wicked peers (see Psalm 73:2-15), but then the fog clears, as he comes consciously into the presence of God:

*“When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end”* see verses 16-17.

He was embattled. The spiritual haze was thick. But the breakthrough came in the context of worship. Which then leads to this climactic expression of praise:

*“Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever”*

Isaiah 61 verse 3 has a similar tone –

*To console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.”*

How many times have we found this to be true for us as well? Instead of staying away from corporate worship when we sense ourselves to be spiritually lethargic, precisely what we need more than ever is the awakening of worship. When our hearts feel it least is when we need most to remind our souls,

*“For me it is good to be near God”* Psalm 73:28.

As George Mueller once wrote – *“Faith begins where man’s power ends.”*

[Barton B., Veerman D. and Taylor L., Life Application Bible Commentary: Hebrews (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1997), 180.]

Abel stood alone and that only for a short while in life but his standing in the Lord and for the Lord has spoken to generations down the annals of time. He was not a Noah or an Abraham or like any of the others in deeds, but he was a true believer and a true worshipper of God. May we be inspired to be like him.

*Amen.*