

Hebrews 11:4 The Faith of Abel: An Example of True Worship

It seems clear enough to me that the point of Hebrews 11 is faith, not worldly faith, not the faith of demons, but faith that beholds the promise of God fulfilled in the Jesus Christ! In this chapter we have what many call the “hall of faith,” as the Holy Spirit gives us examples of men and women of faith. And how do we know they have faith? By their works. They are obedient to the commands of God. Their lives are different than those around them. Therefore, we need this chapter to encourage us and to help us see the works stemming from faith. And our first example is Abel, one of the sons of Adam and Eve. Look at v. 4: **“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.”** Here we see the first example of faith as described in vv. 1-3. Look back at those for a moment. **“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 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 knew that God had created all things and that there was a reward waiting for him. Look at 11:6: **“Without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.** By faith Abel received the promises of God, knowing they would come to pass. By faith Abel had great understanding about what is true in this world.

In v. 4 the author highlights Abel’s sacrifice as the key to his faith. Or to put it another way: We see Abel’s faith by his works. Abel offers a **“more acceptable sacrifice than Cain.”** So, in order to delve deeper into Abel’s faith, we must go back to Genesis 4. Look at vv. 1-7: **“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. 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. The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has 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. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.”** In this story we find two worshippers. Both know there is a God. Both come to God. Both give an offering. Both profess. And, both worship. And at the end of the day, only one of these men worships in the right way, which is by faith. (I give credit for this point to A.W. Pink in his commentary on Hebrews.) I have 4 truths about true worship with some applications. 1) True worship is obedient; 2) True worship is by faith; 3) True worship gives what is best; and 4) True worship finds its fulfillment in Christ.

1. True Worship is obedient. When Abel offered the firstborn of his flock, it was out of obedience to the revealed will of God. This is an implied truth which comes from the rest of the Bible. Hebrews 11 is all about faith. And throughout the chapter we see people of faith acting in obedience to the word of God. Back in cps. 3 & 4 we have the example of those who perished in the dessert because they did not obey the commands of God. And our author warns them, saying, in 4:11: **“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.”** Faith is never separated from obedience to the word of God. Rom. 10:17 says,

“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing the word of God.” How does one know what is acceptable worship if God does not tell us? A.W. Pink says, *“Faith must have a foundation to rest upon, and that foundation must be the Word of Him that cannot lie.”* God speaks. We hear. And faith acts in obedience. This is acceptable worship.

Now, I believe Cain and Abel knew what was acceptable to God. We aren’t told the specifics. But, their parents would have told them about God’s judgment upon sin for the man, the woman, and Satan. They would have remembered that when Adam and Eve tried to cover themselves from their nakedness, God provided a sacrifice (the very first death recorded in the Bible – Gen. 3:16-21). Cain and Abel would have remembered God’s promise in his judgment upon the serpent that life would only come from death. Brothers and sisters, death and all evils are in this world because of Adam’s fall. And all of us come from him. We are separated from God because of sin. The wages of sin is death. And there must be a sacrifice of death to cover our sins. Either I will receive my wages and suffer death. Or, there will be a sacrifice in my place, which also includes death. And in order for me to receive that sacrifice there must be FAITH that unites me to that sacrifice. (This is the gospel!)

Cain’s offering was an offering of the fruit of the ground. Abel’s was of the firstborn of his flock. I believe Abel knew what was acceptable. He knew the commands of God. He heard God’s words of truth. And he was obedient! Cain was not! And when God did not accept his offering, he was angry, and v. 5 tell us *“his face fell.”* And in v. 6 God says to Cain, **“Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? . . .”** It was as if God says to him, *“Did I promise to accept any other offering than that which I have prescribed?”* In other words, *“Obey my instructions.”* This is acceptable worship.

Application: We must pay careful attention to all the Word of God in our obedience. I often go to the grocery store and come home with lots of groceries only to find that I didn’t pay close enough attention to Kristen’s list. It is the same with God’s word. You cannot leave things out. And, even if you don’t know because we have overlooked something, God still holds you responsible. And, I cannot pick and choose what I obey and what I don’t obey. I cannot pick and choose what we I want to preach and what I don’t want to preach. I think of Paul who said, **“I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God”** (Acts 20:27).

2. True Worship flows from a heart of faith. This is the main truth of Heb. 11:4. Abel wasn’t merely acting out of obedience. There was faith behind his obedience. He believed God’s promise of salvation. Look back at 11:1. With the obedient offering of Abel and all that it pictures, Abel believes God’s promise to be true. In his soul, there was the “substance” of things hoped for. In his soul, there was the conviction of things not seen. Yes, there was obedience. But, his obedience was mixed with faith. Really, what we see is that Abel understands the significance of his offering. He knows what it means to offer the blood of the firstborn of his flock. And when he offers this animal, he knows the mercy and grace of God in his life.

I am sure he remembers the words of God to Adam: *“cursed is the ground because of you.”* He would have heard the story of the Garden of Eden from which his parents were cast out. And by faith, he believed that he was a sinner, born into sin from his father. By faith, he knew that he deserved death and separation from God. By faith he knew the holy character of God, that He

was righteous and just. By faith, he knew that his offering from the firstborn of his flock was a substitute in his place. And finally, by faith he knew that this offering was picture of a final offering to come in which God would save his soul. By faith, Abel offered a more acceptable (KJV excellent) sacrifice. When we compare this sacrifice with Cain's, we see the difference. Cain's sacrifice was bloodless. (And we know that Heb. 9:22 says that without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins). Cain's sacrifice was merely the fruit of his labors (just like Adam and Eve's attempt to cover themselves in self-righteousness). Cain's sacrifice ignored the sentence of God that the ground is "cursed" as his offering was from the ground. And he despised the grace of God given him and his parents as God Himself made for Adam and Eve garments of skins from a slain animal (Gen. 3:21).

Brothers and sisters, in the same kind of way, for us, this is faith. We must believe there is a God who is holy and just. And, we must believe that we have sinned against God. For all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. And we must know that God will carry out justice against our sins and the sentence of death falls upon us. We make no excuses. No merit of our own do we bring to help with our own righteousness. In our sin, we have rebelled. We want our way. We think we know better. But, by faith we know that all our righteous deeds are filthy rags in his sight. All we can do is plead that we are guilty and hide our faces in shame. All we can do is by faith, fall upon the mercy of God in sacrifice. But, not the sacrifice of the firstborn of Abel's flock. And not the sacrifice of the spotless lambs and bulls of Israel's system of worship. But instead, we look to **ONLY ONE SACRIFICE** for our sins. It is the precious blood of lamb of God. And this is faith in its most simple form. As we look back through the OT, we believe God's word to be true. And looking back, we look upon Jesus, the great high priest, and the Priest who is also the Offering, believing that God offered Him in our place. And our sins are forgiven. This is the simple message of the gospel. And though Abel did not have all the details, he had faith in this gospel truth.

Application: The world gets angry when God does not accept their worship. We must not forget that Cain was also a worshiper. He also came to God. He also gave an offering. In this way Cain represents the world; he pictures a false worshiper. Look at v. 7: God says: **"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it."** At the end of the day Cain came to God his own way in his own self-righteousness, thinking that God would accept him. This was neither in obedience nor was it by faith. And when one comes to God this way, anger, and many other emotions ensue. I have spoken with so many people when I speak of the gospel and their sin, they say, *"You don't think I'm a Christian do you?"* They say, *"Of course I am."* *"I've made a profession. I've been baptized. I go go to church."* But, when I look at the fruit of their lives, I must question. I think of James 4:1-3: **"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."**

Application: There are those who obey on the outside, but there is no faith. The Pharisees are a prime example. Though they seem obedient to those around them, their obedience is faulty. They are not obedient from the heart. And, their obedience lacks faith. Here is the difference: With

faith, there is always a heart of repentance. The best picture to me is still the difference between the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector noted by Jesus in Luke 18:10-13: **“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”**

3. True Worship gives what is best. Look at v. 4. Abel’s offering was from the **“firstborn of his flock.”** And he held nothing back as we see that all the **“fat portions”** were given. Later in Mosaic Law we will see that this is exactly what God requires and will claim as his own (Exod. 13:12; Lev. 3:16; 7:25). Therefore, I believe Abel’s offering was the most precious and valuable thing he could have brought. And the motive of this offering was faith from the heart. Abel knew that there was no ONE or nothing more valuable than God Himself. And to God he brought the best. It is true that Cain also gave an offering. But, it was not out of obedience. And it was not by faith. And it was certainly not as valuable.

Let me give two examples of gift buying. First example: I buy Kristen a gift on Christmas Eve from the Dollar Store with no planning whatsoever because I know this is what I’m supposed to do, even if it had some value. Second example: What if I started saving early in the year, taking money from money I would have used towards a disc golf tournament, and then planned to eat out less every month and take that money to purchase a gift. And in the meantime I probe and think and ask others and our children what Kristen would like. And then with the money I had gained with some sacrifice, purchased something of more value and that which would be precious to Kristen. Which offering is better? In the same kind of way true worship gives the best, which comes from a willing mind and an eager heart to please the one we worship! Cain was an idolater as he really worshipped himself (See Jude 11). Abel worshipped God with a willing mind and a heart of love for God.

I think of Gal. 5:6 which says: **“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”** And in Prov 23:26 the writer says **“My son, give me your heart!”** Rom. 10:9-10 says, **“if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”** Brothers and sisters, the heart that loves God will give what is best. And this is true worship.

4. True Worship finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. I will be brief here because, as we’ve seen in the Book of Hebrews, and particularly in 11:1-3, the object of faith is the promise of God to save. And all God’s promises are found in Jesus Christ. And though Abel did not know how all this would play out in the plan of God, his faith looked forward to fulfillment in Christ. Such is the same in all the saints found in this “Hall of Faith” in Heb. 11.

I think of John 4 and the Samaritan woman at the well. As she tried to change the subject as Jesus spoke to her about spiritual things, she said, *“the Jews worship on that mountain. We Samaritans worship on this mountain. But when the Messiah comes, he will tell us which is*

right" (my paraphrase). And Jesus says to her, **"Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him"** (John 4:21-23). And then he says to her *"I am the Messiah. I am the one with whom you are speaking. I am one who is telling you exactly what it means to worship."* The same is true today. Acts 4:12 says, **"And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"** (Acts 4:12). This is the promise of God to which Abel looked . . . by faith. And in his sacrifice, God commended him. God accepted him. And we have the story of his sacrifice today written down for us in Hebrews as an example of faith, an example of true worship.

By faith Abel was obedient to the revealed will of God. He is an example of Prov. 3:5-6: **"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."** Abel's offering and his worship was by faith, for "without faith it is impossible to please God." Abel's offering was the best he could give as he loved God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind. And his offering looked forward to Christ, in whom his righteousness was found. And we have this example written for us in Hebrews.

3 big truths from this story:

Abel and Cain picture the "seed of the woman" and the "seed of the serpent" from Gen. 3. There are only two types of people in this world: the people of God who by faith look unto Christ as they worship God and the people of Satan who may worship, but do not worship God's way. And in the end, they are not righteous in God's sight. They do not by faith receive the Son of God and they will pay for the sins.

Though we did not speak of Abel's death, his murder by Cain pictures the murder of our Lord as he was killed by those who hate him and his sacrifice. And, those who follow Christ will be persecuted in this world.

In Cain and Abel, we see the sovereign election of God.