



## **Faith That Speaks**

*Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul*

Hebrews 11:4-6 (4)

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This morning, beloved, we are getting into the meat of one of the greatest and most beneficial chapters in the Word of God. It is a huge blessing, a Godsend, a source of encouragement and of exhortation to perseverance in the faith, both to the Hebrew Christians who first received it and to faithful Christians throughout history. This chapter has been labeled in a lot of ways over the years – The Hall of Faith, The Heroes of the Faith, The Hall of Heroes – everyone seems to have their favorite title but whatever title that you give to it, this chapter has been a source of great inspiration and of real, flesh-and-blood examples of living faith, examples of the outworking and the operation of saving faith in the face of trial, persecution, testing, and everyday living.

The men and women to whom this letter was addressed were facing an uncertain future and their pastor who wrote them this letter loved his flock and wanted to encourage them to be faithful to Christ at a time when such faithfulness could be exceedingly costly. The persecution they were facing for their faith in Christ was widespread and unrelenting. They were losing family, friends, jobs, possessions, freedoms, and in this increasingly hostile cultural climate, some of them would lose their lives. He knew that what they needed in their battle to remain devoted and faithful to Jesus Christ, to hold fast to faith in Him and to live in manner that would honor and please God, were godly examples of man and women who had trusted Christ and not been disappointed. They didn't need pity; they needed motivated to see richness of all that they had in Christ, to see the certainty of God's promises to His people that trumped their current circumstances, and to be exhorted to live a life of faith that drew a bold line of division between the people of God and the society in which they lived. They needed to be fully committed to faith in Christ, without any degree of wavering.

To that end, this chapter presents a brief survey of Biblical history, of men and women who gladly trusted God and were not put to shame, who remained faithful to God despite the obstacles. And here's why. Doctrinal instruction is invaluable; biblical truth is priceless; but sometimes it helps for us to see truth enfleshed, to see flesh and blood examples that we can imitate, right? That truth is at the heart of discipleship – learning from observing. By nature, we are drawn to heroes, aren't we? We all have people, heroes we look up to, people we want to follow and be like. It's just part of human nature. It is the reason why little kids, little boys in particular, love capes and masks when they are little. We all love heroes. For me it was Batman... from the time I was big enough to wear a towel around my neck and jump off our front porch and climb on top of our roof. Then it was Johnny Bench, spending countless hours firing a baseball at a tree in our yard pretending to gun down runners trying to steal second or throwing a baseball into the air “with 1 on and two down in the bottom of the ninth in game 7 of the World Series,” needing a homerun to win the game. Later my heroes were Jack Lambert and Joe Greene, then astronauts, pilots, military heroes, and my brothers. Now, of course, my heroes are entirely different – Moses, Elijah, Paul, Jesus – for obvious reasons. But, the truth is, we are naturally drawn to heroes.

The writer of Hebrews knows the power of a good example. Back in chapter 6, the writer had expressed his desire for the Hebrew Christians, not to fall away, but that they would be **“imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” (Hebrews 6:12, ESV)** And so here in this chapter, he gives the Hebrew Christians and us some people to emulate. But what sets these heroes apart is not capes and masks and batarangs, not athletic prowess or feats of great daring that showed itself in their lives. What set them apart is faith. Through these historical, biblical figures, the writer puts skin on the kind of faith that he is commending and that he is calling us to emulate. And he starts this role call of the faithful with Abel.

**The Faith of Abel (4)** Look at verse 4 with me. The pastor writes: **“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.” (Hebrews 11:4, ESV)** That verse speaks volumes. There is a lot in this one verse of Scripture to unpack and here's how we are going to do it this morning. We are going to take this verse and break it down by asking and answering questions, ok? And we are going to begin by asking the question:

**Why does the writer begin with Abel?** He could have started with anyone and generally when we think of faith in the OT, immediately we think of Abraham, who is commended as the father of faith, or maybe of David, so why start here? Here's why – because together with his brother Cain, Abel was the first person in human history that had to exercise faith in God without having seen Him face-to-face. He is the prototype of faith. Think about it. Prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve communed with God, face-to-face, in the cool of the day when He came to the Garden of Eden. Adam had had the blessing of hearing from God directly, meeting with Him, conferring with Him, but after the Fall and they were cast out of the Garden, they enjoyed that privilege no longer. Born to Adam and Eve after the Fall, Abel had to exercise the kind of faith that we saw defined last week as ***“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*** (Hebrews 11:1, ESV) He did not have the blessing of direct and face-to-face communication with God and so he stands as the prototype of faith. So starting with Abel, the writer of Hebrews makes this declaration: ***By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain.*** And that begs the obvious question:

**How and in what way was Abel's sacrifice more acceptable than Cain's?** Now the obvious answer to that question is that Abel's sacrifice was offered in faith whereas Cain's was not. But how do we understand that? Let's look at the backstory. This verse references the account recorded for us in Genesis 4. Look at it with me. ***“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 for you, but you must rule over it.” Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?” And the LORD said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.”*** (Genesis 4:1–10, ESV)

Now we need to do some real thinking on this together if we are going to mine this verse in Hebrews for all that it is worth. Faith, as we see it presented to us in the Word of God, is always an obedient and believing response to God's revelation. Biblical faith never rests on human wisdom, or human feelings, or human reasoning but on the revealed Word of God.

To do something by faith, you must do it in response and according to a Word from God. You hear God's Word and the revelation of His will and by faith you respond in trust and obedience to what God has said. That is the essence of faith. **"Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."** (Romans 10:17, ESV) Faith is hearing and responding to the word of God.

What was the word to which Abel responded in faith? What was the revelation to which Abel responded? The word, the revelation, to which Abel responded in faith was the revelation, given to his parents on the day when by their disobedience and rebellion, Adam and Eve plunged the human race into the misery of sin. Remember what happened. When Adam and Eve sinned, their first reaction was to hide from God and to fashion for themselves a covering made of fig leaves to hide their shame. But God did not accept their attempts to cover their sins. Instead He fashioned for them garments made from animal skins that required the death of an innocent animal, a substitute. It was the first death they had ever seen. Though Adam and Eve died spiritually on that day, they were spared physical death by the sacrifice of an innocent. They learned on that day that to stand before the holy God, they needed a proper covering. Humanly manufactured coverings were not sufficient. God was the only one who could provide that covering, and that, apart from any effort on their behalf. They learned that the only acceptable covering for their sin required the death, or the shedding of blood, of an acceptable sacrifice. And of most importance was that ultimately this covering could only be provided by Jesus Christ. On the day of their sin and the announcement of judgment for their rebellion, they heard the first announcement of the gospel hope in the context of God's cursing of Satan.

Scripture tells us in Genesis 3, starting in verse 14, **"The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.** Then looking beyond the serpent to Satan, God says: **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."** (Gen 3:14-15, ESV) The gospel, outlined in this grand prophetic statement – the protoevangelium – the first announcement of the gospel – is directed to Satan. Adam and Eve first heard the gospel by overhearing it spoken to Satan. It is at this point, in outline form, that the cross is set forth as the means of salvation by which Christ's heel would be bruised but by which as well, Satan's head would be crushed. Satan would tear at Christ's heel but Christ would crush his skull. These words of doom for Satan held in them great hope for man and Adam heard the good news of God's redemption as an eavesdropper.

And though humanity first heard the gospel in that way, there is hope that is born in Adam. A moment before he is a fugitive from what he imagined was in the heart of Creator God toward him a rebellious creature. Now he learns that he is not to be destroyed but that there is to be a warfare to redeem him and his believing offspring that will end in triumph. Adam heard and believed what was said – He did not know the name of Jesus Christ and he was not sure of all that redemption would entail, but he believed God’s words and there is no doubt that he communicated this truth to his sons. Think about it. Abel and Cain did not think up on their own the idea of bringing sacrifices to God. God revealed the necessary and proper way to approach God after the Fall, through a blood sacrifice and Adam and Eve made that way known to their sons. Cain disobeyed, but Abel, by faith, obeyed. He responded in faith to the revelation of God.

Listen, when Abel offered the sacrifice of the firstborn of his flock and the fat portions to God, Abel demonstrated by faith that he understood God’s judgment of sin and that God’s judgment is right and good. Abel was testifying that God was right to do all that He did, in the judgment of his parents and casting them out of the Garden of Eden, that He was right in his dealing with His parents and His dealing with Him. When in faith he offered his sacrifice, Abel was confessing that he was a sinner deserving of death. You don’t bring an animal sacrifice to God to cover your sins unless you believe you are a sinner. When he brought this sacrifice to God, by faith, Abel was confessing that God is merciful. He was confessing, in effect, “God, I am a sinner and you are righteous to judge me. I deserve judgment and separation from you. But you are also the merciful God who will accept this innocent substitute on my behalf and so I come in faith, trusting in your rich mercy.” And when Abel offered his sacrifice in faith, he was confessing his trust in the promise of a coming redeemer and his need for that redeemer. He was confessing his faith in the promise of a coming Savior, the “seed of the woman,” a Savior that he desperately needed.

Abel was confessing, in his sacrifice, his faith. Cain, by contrast, was confessing his unbelief. Cain, by rejecting the way that God had established, brought instead the fruit of his labors, the produce of his own hands. He came in a way that failed to acknowledge his own sin, in a way that failed to acknowledge the righteousness of God, in a way of his own devising, believing that he could approach God and stand before him on his own terms, in pride and self-righteousness, believing he was acceptable to God as he was. And Cain was rejected. God showed no regard for his offering.

You may say, Cain didn't know better, but you would be mistaken. Genesis 4, starting at the end of verse 5 says, ***“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 for you, but you must rule over it.”*** When God says to Cain, ***“If you do well, will you not be accepted?”*** the idea is that He is telling Cain, “Bring the kind of sacrifice that you know I commanded.” Cain was rejected because he did not bring, by faith, the kind of sacrifice that God commanded, the kind of sacrifice that faith, that an obedient and believing response to God demanded. Abel's sacrifice was more acceptable to God because, by faith, he obediently offered the sacrifice that God had established and revealed as the means by which He would receive sinful mankind.

But there is more. It is not just that, by faith, Abel offered the proper sacrifice. He did, but even more than that, by faith he offered this sacrifice with the proper heart. Cain's response to God's gracious correction paints this in stark relief. When God rejected Cain's offering, Cain was angry and his face fell. You've seen this, no doubt, with your own kids or someone at work that you have had to correct. And when God reasoned with Cain to do what was right in God's eyes, His pleas were met with complete silence. What a contrast with the heart of Abel, who came to God with a submissive, surrendered, devoted heart. The sacrifice of Abel was accepted because it was the proper sacrifice yes, but also because it had worth because of his faith. His faith was the reason that he offered the proper sacrifice to God in the first place. It was because Abel had a heart purified and motivated by faith that God accepted his offering. It was a work of grace in his heart that produced a faith that responded in trust and obedience to the commands of God.

These men, Abel and Cain, are representative of radically different approaches to God. There is the way of Cain, a way of unbelief, of self-righteousness, and of man-made religion. And then there is the way of Abel – the way of faith that we have been describing. And it is the way of Abel that God accepts. The writer of Hebrews says, ***“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.”***

**What does it mean that God commended Abel as righteous by accepting his gifts?** Now, understand what is being said here. The writer is not saying that Abel was commended as righteous because he offered an acceptable sacrifice to God. He didn't offer the accepted

sacrifice and win righteousness with God. The point is that his righteousness that Abel had by faith in God's word, in God's revelation and the early declaration of the gospel, was confirmed or commended by God as being true and real by God's acceptance of his sacrifice. By his act of faith, the reality of Abel's righteousness through faith in God was commended as being true and genuine. His faith was real and that faith produced acts of practical, concrete, living, authentic righteousness. It was Abel's faith that enabled him to do what was pleasing to God. God's evaluation of Abel was that his faith was real and He made that approval manifest.

**How exactly did God make His approval of Abel manifest?** No one knows for sure, but it had to be in a way that was unmistakable and obvious both to Abel and to Cain. A great number of trustworthy scholars down through the ages have believed that God sent fire from heaven to consume Abel's sacrifice as he did on other subsequent occasions in the Word of God. We don't know for sure, but it sounds very plausible.

Whatever the case, Abel's faith resulted in a life that testifies even to this day. The writer of Hebrews closes by saying, ***And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.*** But Abel didn't just die, he was murdered by his brother who rather than receiving the testimony of his faith, or hearing the correction of God, instead struck him down in cold blood. Viewed from a faithless perspective, Abel's life was wasted. He died young, at least for those days, without leaving any earthly legacy. On the contrary, Cain who was banished lived a relatively long life. He built cities and fathered children who were successful in earthly terms but who were wicked. Abel's life was short on this earth, but it was Cain's life that was wasted. It is Abel's life, because of his faith that is commended by God and speaks to this day.

Think about it. Cain tried to silence Abel's testimony, the testimony of his faith in God and the righteousness that real faith brings. And yet it is the man of faith, Abel, whose life and faith still speaks to us in the Word of God. Faith is never silenced because it is God Himself who keeps the testimony of His faithful servants alive. Abel was the first martyr for his faith in God, the first man to die in history, and also the first to appear in heaven. G. Campbell Morgan writes, ***"It was a great occasion when this first soul representing a fallen race appeared in the unsullied light of the home of the unfallen. He came by faith, ransomed by love, at the cost of the sacrifice. As the Scripture declares, that "the angels long to look into" these things, it must indeed have been a mystery of life and love demanding their close attention, and not perchance, even fathomed by them until the***

**explanation... was wrought out upon the Cross of Calvary.”** Though Cain attempted to silence him, Abel still speaks. Though none of his words are recorded, Abel has been eloquently preaching for thousands and thousands of years about authentic faith.

### **How does his life of faith still speak to us today?**

By his faith, Abel still speaks to us today that sinful man is justified and accepted by God only by faith in the blood of the sacrifice that God has provided. Abel's faith, in his own day, spoke of a sacrifice yet to come that would take away our sin and declare the sinner righteous. Now that Christ has come, his faith still speaks with a voice that rejoices in our Savior's full and free work to bring sinners to Himself. We can only be forgiven by faith in Jesus Christ.

By his faith, Abel still speaks today, testifying that none of us can come to God in any way that we choose. None of us can decide the terms of our drawing near to God. There is the false and faithless way of our own works, our own merits, our own supposed righteousness which God rejects. And there is the way of confession of sin, the confession of our need for grace, embracing by faith the gift of God's own Son to die in our place. And that way is open to everyone who will humble themselves.

By his faith, Abel still speaks to us today that by faith we must offer our best to God, just as Abel did. There is no higher privilege than for us to do all we can to honor and bless His name.

By his faith, Abel still speaks to us today that true faith is proven by joyful obedience from a proper heart and that such faith in God is powerful to direct the course of our lives and make our paths straight and acceptable in God's sight. God commends and rewards unwavering faith.

By his faith, Abel still speaks to us that it is far more rewarding and far greater to live a faithful life, even if it is cut short by persecution, than it is to live a long and easy life.



By his faith, Abel still speaks to us of the ultimate commendation and vindication of God's people and the eternal hope that must shape our lives. Abel's faith received the commendation of "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter the joy of the Lord." The righteous God will be opposed and suffer at the hands of the unrighteous, but God will honor the faith of those who suffer for Him and He will punish all evil.

By his faith, Abel still speaks to us today that "the righteous shall live by faith," ***"And 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."*** (Hebrews 11:6, ESV) Abel is the preacher, and he preaches a timeless sermon.

By his faith, Abel still speaks to us today and by God's grace, his mission field has expanded from one person to millions. Not even death can stop the work of the Lord. God's Truth continues to march on and fill the earth with His glory, and God has joined the voices of many peoples over many generations in many nations into one great chorus that no one can ever silence.

The faith of Abel speaks and so will our faith if we are justified by faith in God and clothed in righteousness, if we are obedient by faith to God, from the heart, and accepted by God as Abel was, and if we make it our sincerest desires to please God through faith in Him.

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