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A DEAD MAN SPEAKS

Hebrews 11:4

By

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Hebrews Lesson 33

A Dead Man Speaks Hebrews 11:4

Since the first couple in human history fell into sin, the most important question for every person to answer is, "How can I, as a sinner, be right before the holy God?" God appointed physical and spiritual death as the penalty for our sin. Hebrews 9:27 plainly states, "it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." Since none will miss that appointment, it is vitally important to answer the question, "How can I be right before God, who is absolutely holy?"

Proverbs 14:12 states, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." Those words apply to this matter of spiritual life and death. Since the earliest times, there has been a way that has seemed spiritually right. In various forms, it is the way of all of the world's major religions. It is even the way of two of the major branches of Christendom. It is the way of self-righteousness and good works. In one form or another, it believes that if a person is sincere and does his best, God will overlook his faults, accept his good works, and let him into heaven. The Bible calls this "the way of Cain" (Jude 11). The Bible is clear: "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified" (Gal. 2:16). Salvation by human goodness or works is impossible (Eph. 2:8, 9).

In contrast to the way of Cain is the way that his brother, Abel, approached God. Hebrews 11:4 explains, "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." Although Abel was the first man in human history to die, "though he is dead, he still speaks" to us today. We do not have any of his recorded words, but his story plainly tells us...

By faith in God's revelation, we obtain His witness that we are righteous, so that our lives count for eternity.

Why did the author of Hebrews begin his list of heroes of the faith with Abel? His concern was that some of his readers might not have a faith that would endure the looming persecution. He

was hoping the best, that “we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul” (10:39). But he knew that there could be some in the Hebrew church that would turn away from faith in Jesus Christ and go back to the Jewish faith.

Rightly understood, that Jewish faith pointed to and was fulfilled completely in Christ, as the author argues in the first ten chapters. But to abandon Christ now that He has come and go back to the religion that pointed to Him would be to abandon God’s only way of salvation. The story of Cain and Abel clearly contrasts man’s way of salvation with God’s way, which is by faith alone in Christ alone. Abel’s faith teaches us five vital lessons related to the question of how we can be right with the holy God.

1. Faith is always an obedient response to God’s revelation.

“By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain....” Scholars have suggested a number of reasons why Abel’s sacrifice was better than Cain’s: “it was living, whereas Cain’s was lifeless; it was stronger, Cain’s weaker; it grew spontaneously, Cain’s by human ingenuity; it involved blood, Cain’s did not” (Leon Morris, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Zondervan], 12:115, summarizing F. F. Bruce). The Genesis account simply says, “the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard” (Gen. 4:4-5). The only hint of a reason is when the Lord tells Cain, “If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?” (Gen. 4:7).

That question indicates that God had previously made clear to these brothers the type of sacrifice that would please Him. Faith is always an obedient response to God’s revelation. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Biblical faith never rests on manmade ideas, or on vague speculations. It rests on the revealed word of God. Abel, by faith, had obeyed God’s command. Cain refused to submit to it. Abel’s faith pleased God; Cain’s disobedience displeased God. When the Lord told Cain to “do well,” He meant, “Bring the kind of sacrifice that you know that I commanded.”

We are not reading too much into the story to infer that God had made this plain to Adam and Eve after they sinned. Their sin

caused them to be ashamed of their nakedness, and so they sewed together fig leaves to try to cover that shame. But God did not accept their fig leaves. Instead, He clothed them with garments made of animal skin (Gen. 3:7, 21). Undoubtedly, at that time He explained to them four things. First, to stand before the holy God, they needed a proper covering. Second, humanly manufactured coverings were not adequate. Third, God would provide the necessary covering apart from their efforts. Fourth, the only acceptable covering for their sin required the death, or shedding of blood, of an acceptable sacrifice (adapted from A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* [Ephesians 4 Group, CD], p. 658).

Surely, Adam had communicated these facts to his sons. They did not think up on their own the idea of bringing sacrifices to God! No, God had clearly revealed to Adam and Eve the necessary and proper way to approach Him through a blood sacrifice. They had made this way plain to their sons. But Cain disobeyed, while Abel, by faith, obeyed. John MacArthur explains,

In Abel's sacrifice, the way of the cross was first prefigured. The first sacrifice was Abel's lamb—one lamb for one person. Later came the Passover—with one lamb for one family. Then came the Day of Atonement—with one lamb for one nation. Finally came Good Friday—one Lamb for the whole world (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Hebrews* [Moody Press], p. 301).

So Abel's sacrifice was better than Cain's because he offered it in obedient faith to what God had clearly revealed. God rejected Cain's sacrifice because he did not offer it by faith, and "without faith, it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6).

2. Faith in God's ordained sacrifice is the only way for sinners to approach Him.

We would be greatly mistaken to assume that God accepted Abel's sacrifice because he was inherently a better man than his brother. Abel brought an animal from the firstlings of his flock because he knew that he was a sinner deserving God's judgment, but he also knew that God had revealed that He would graciously accept the death of a substitute. Cain proudly ignored God's revealed requirement and brought an offering of his own devising. At

the heart of Abel's sacrifice was the acknowledgement that he deserved to die for his sin, and that God's requirement for the shedding of blood was just. At the heart of Cain's sacrifice was the pride of saying, "I don't need shed blood to approach God. My way is just as good. In fact, my way is better! This lovely basket of fruit looks nicer than that bloody, dead animal!" Cain's theme song was, "I did it *my way*."

Paul said, "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." A few verses later, he said, "For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:18, 22-24).

People who think that they're basically good do not need a Savior to die in their place. They may appreciate a good example to follow, but the idea of Jesus shedding His blood for their sin offends them. But those whom God has convicted of their sin and whose eyes He has opened to see His absolute holiness and justice, recognize their need for a sacrifice to pay for their sins. They gladly bow at the foot of the cross, acknowledging Jesus to be the Lamb of God who bore their sins.

Thus, faith is always an obedient response to God's revelation. God has revealed that Jesus is His ordained sacrifice, the only way for sinners to approach Him.

3. Faith in God's ordained sacrifice obtains His testimony that the sinner is righteous.

The text says, "through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts." Some say that the antecedent of *through which* is Abel's faith, whereas others say that it was his sacrifice. But since he offered his sacrifice by faith, it doesn't matter. We do not know *how* God testified that Abel's sacrifice was acceptable, whereas Cain's was not. Many reputable scholars down through the ages have believed that God sent fire from heaven to consume Abel's sacrifice, as He did on subsequent occasions (Lev. 9:23, 24; Judges 6:21; 13:19, 20; 1 Kings 18:30-39; 2 Chron. 7:1; the list is in Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle*

to the Hebrews [Eerdmans], pp. 455-456). But all that Genesis states is that God had regard for Abel's offering, but not for Cain's. Also, Jesus referred to Abel as, "righteous Abel" (Matt. 23:35).

We know (from 1 John 3:12) that Abel lived righteously, whereas Cain's life was marked by evil deeds. But it would be a huge mistake to conclude that God accepted Abel's sacrifice on the basis of his righteous life, or that He rejected Cain's sacrifice because of his evil life. For one thing, our text indicates that Abel offered his sacrifice *by faith*, not on the basis of his righteous life.

Also, Scripture teaches that God justifies (= "declares righteous") sinners by their faith, not by their works. As early as Genesis 15:6, Scripture states of Abraham, "Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." Paul cites that text to prove that Abraham was *not* justified by works, and then explains, "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom. 4:4-5).

This is a judicial action, whereby God acquits the guilty sinner on the basis of Christ's death, which satisfied the penalty that the sinner deserves. He imputes the penalty of our sin to Christ and the righteousness of Christ to us at the instant we believe in Christ. As Paul declares (2 Cor. 5:21), "He [God] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (See my sermon, "Justification by Faith Alone," on Gen. 15:6, [8/11/96] for a much more detailed explanation of this crucial doctrine.)

Once the sinner has trusted in Jesus Christ as God's ordained sacrifice for his sins, his life will become progressively righteous in behavior as a result. But such a godly life begins at the point when the sinner trusts in Christ. To reverse this order and say that God declares us righteous on the basis of our good works is to deny the gospel (Gal. 1:6-9).

Many Christians naively think that if they ever incur persecution, it will come from wicked atheists who despise religion. While that sometimes happens, it is much more common for persecution and opposition to come from the religious crowd.

4. Faith in God's ordained sacrifice incurs the opposition of the self-righteous.

To understand the story of Cain and Abel, we have to remember that Cain was *not* an atheist. He was a religious man who believed in God. He brought a sacrifice in order to worship God, although in his own way. An irreligious atheist never would have brought a sacrifice at all. Such a person probably would have shrugged off his brother's sacrifice as a silly, meaningless superstition. But it wouldn't have offended him. What offended Cain was that he self-righteously thought that his sacrifice was good enough, even though it was not what God had commanded. When God rejected his sacrifice, Cain became angry and depressed. He refused to listen to God's corrective rebuke, and his anger spilled out on his brother, who had obeyed God by faith.

By bringing his own sacrifice as the way to approach God, Cain became the father of all false religion. False religions reject the cross. It offends them because it confronts their self-righteousness. Those in false religions take pride in their own goodness and their own works. They reject the idea that they are sinners in need of a Savior who shed His blood. Or, if they accept the cross (as the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches do), they still want to add their good works to it as a partial means of salvation. But to add human works detracts from the total sufficiency of Christ's death on the cross and gives sinners grounds for boasting in their works.

It was the religious Pharisees who crucified Jesus. It was the self-righteous Judaizers who went after Paul because he proclaimed that the pagan Gentiles could be justified by faith alone. The cross wipes out any room for boasting in your good works. Those who take pride in the flesh persecute those who boast only in the cross (Gal. 4:29; 6:12-14).

But, the story of Cain and Abel shows that it is far better to gain God's approval through faith in His ordained sacrifice and lose your life, than to have God reject you and lose your soul. By faith in God's revelation about Christ, we not only gain His testimony that we are righteous. Also,

5. Faith in God's ordained sacrifice results in a life that counts for eternity.

When you contrast the first three examples of those who lived by faith, you see that a life of faith results in very different circumstances, depending on God's sovereign purpose. The first man on the list became the first murder victim! If you are following Jesus for all the benefits that He will give you in *this life*, you may be in for a rude awakening! Abel isn't exactly an example of a long, happy life. And yet the second man on the list was one of only two men in all history who never died! Enoch was taken directly into heaven. The third man, Noah, lived for 950 years, and was delivered from the flood. Most of us would sign up for the Enoch or Noah track, but we're not interested in the Abel track!

But the author of Hebrews wants us to realize that the rewards of faith are not necessarily in this life. He will shortly mention those who "died in faith, without receiving the promises" (11:13). He gives a long list of those who won impressive victories by faith (11:33-35a). But right in the middle of verse 35, without skipping a beat, he lists those who were tortured, mocked, scourged, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, put to death by the sword, who went about destitute, ill-treated, and homeless because of their faith! If we're banking on a good life here and now, faith in God may not be the way to go. But, if we have God's eternal perspective, it's the only way to live.

The author says that though Abel "is dead, he still speaks." How does he still speak? In several ways:

First, *Abel still speaks to us about the ultimate vindication of God's elect and the judgment of the wicked.* In Genesis 4:10, God says to Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground." God did not let that cry go unheeded! We see a similar thing in Luke 18:7, 8, where Jesus says, "Now will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly."

In Revelation 6:9ff., John sees a vision of the saints in heaven who have been slain because of their testimony. They are crying out to the Lord, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" The Lord gives them each a white robe and tells them to rest a while longer, until the number of martyrs yet to be killed is

completed. Then He will bring judgment. Abel's blood speaks to us about the fact that although we may be mistreated in this world, God is the righteous judge who will right all wrongs and bring justice on behalf of His elect.

Second, *Abel still speaks to us by his life, apart from any words.* We have no recorded words that Abel spoke, and yet thousands of years after his death, he still speaks. This shows us the power of a godly life, not only in his lifetime, but also on successive generations. While we should not discount the importance of godly speech, neither should we disregard the power of a godly example, especially in the home. If the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—are evident in your life, then your words will connect with power. But if your life does not demonstrate these qualities, your words will be in vain.

Finally, *Abel still speaks to us about the fact that the measure of a life is not necessarily its impact during the person's lifetime, but over history.* Viewed from his lifetime, Abel's life was wasted. He died young, without accomplishing anything. But countless generations have looked at his faith and learned that even if we suffer and die for the cause of righteousness, it is not in vain. Cain apparently lived a long and relatively prosperous life on earth. He built cities and fathered many children who were successful in worldly terms. But Cain's life was the wasted one. Abel was the true success. Luther observed that when Abel was alive, he "could not teach even his only brother by his faith and example," but "now that he is dead [he] teaches the whole world." He concluded, "He is more alive than ever! So great a thing is faith! It is life in God" (in Hughes, p. 457).

Conclusion

I can still remember the morning in January, 1956, when I went into the kitchen and my mother was intently listening to the shocking news on the radio. My parents' friend, Nate Saint, and four other young missionaries, including Jim Elliot, had been brutally murdered by the Auca Indians in the jungle in Ecuador. Nate had taken my parents for a ride in his plane. I had passed up that opportunity so that I could spend the night at my grandmother's house. (I knew she would buy me a present!)

Although they all died in their twenties and thirties, those five men still speak powerfully. In her account of the martyrdom of her husband and those other men, Elisabeth Elliot wrote (*Through Gates of Splendor* [Spire Books], pp. 201-202),

Off the coast of Italy, an American naval officer was involved in an accident at sea. As he floated alone on a raft, he recalled Jim Elliot's words (which he had read in a news report): "When it comes time to die, make sure that all you have to do is die." He prayed that he might be saved, knowing that he had more to do than die. He was not ready. God answered his prayer, and he was rescued. In Des Moines, Iowa, an eighteen-year-old boy prayed for a week in his room, then announced to his parents: "I'm turning my life over completely to the Lord. I want to try to take the place of one of those five."

She wrote that the prayers of the widows themselves were for the Aucas. "We look forward to the day when these savages will join us in Christian praise" (*ibid.*). In March, 2003, I had the privilege of hearing one of the men who murdered Nate Saint speak through the translation of Nate's son, Steve, whom this murderer-turned-worshiper by God's grace had baptized. I heard him sing a praise song in his native tongue. By faith, those five missionaries obtained God's testimony that they are righteous, and by faith, their lives still speak, counting for eternity. By faith in God's sacrifice, you may join their company.

Discussion Questions

1. It has been said that justification by faith alone is the doctrine by which the church and the individual stands or falls. Why is this so? Why must we defend it at all costs?
2. Some say that we are saved by faith *plus* good works. How is this different than saying that saving faith *results* in good works?
3. Why is it important to affirm that justification is God's *declaring* the sinner righteous, not His *making* the sinner righteous?
4. Why is it essential to bring in eternity when we present the gospel? (See Heb. 11:35b-39; 1 Cor. 15:19.)

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