

CHAPTER 57

THE FAITH OF ABEL

(~~8104~~ HEBREWS 11:4)

The 11th chapter of Hebrews has three divisions. The first, which comprises verses 1 to 3, is introductory, setting forth the *excellency* of faith. The second, which is covered by verses 4 to 7, outlines the *life* of faith. The third, which begins at verse 8 and runs to the end of the chapter, fills in that outline, and, as well, describes the *achievements* of faith. The first division we went over in our last article. There we saw the excellency of faith proved by four facts. Faith gives a reality and substantiality unto those things which the Word of God warrants us to hope for (verse 1). Faith furnishes proof to the heart of those spiritual things which cannot be discovered by our natural senses (verse 1). Faith secured to the O.T. saints a good report (verse 2). Faith enables its favored possessor to understand that which is incomprehensible to mere reason, imparting a knowledge to which philosophers and scientists are strangers (verse 3). Thus, the tremendous importance and inestimable value of faith is at once apparent.

The second division of our chapter may be outlined thus. First, the beginning of the life of faith (verse 4). Second, the character of the life of faith, showing of what it consists (verse 5). Third, a warning and an encouragement is given (verse 6). Fourth, the end of the life of faith, or the goal to which it conducts (verse 7). That which the Holy Spirit now sets before us, is far more than a list of O.T. worthies, or a miniature picture-gallery of the saints of bygone days. To those whom God grants a receptive heart and anointed eye, there is here deep and important doctrinal instruction, as well as most blessed practical teaching. The contents of Hebrews 11 concern our eternal peace, and it behooves us to give them our most prayerful and diligent attention. May it please the Spirit of Truth to act as our Guide, as we seek to pass from verse to verse.

“By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God

testifying of his gifts; and by it he being dead yet speaketh” (verse 4).

Rightly understood, this verse describes *the beginning* of the life of faith. Let us seek to weigh attentively each separate expression in it.

First, it was “by faith” that Abel offered unto God his sacrifice. He is the first man, according to the sacred record, who ever did so. He had no established precedent to follow, no example to emulate, no outward encouragement to stimulate. Thus, his conduct was not suggested by popular custom, nor was his action regulated by “common sense.” Neither carnal reason nor personal inclinations could have moved Abel to present a bleeding lamb for God’s acceptance. How, then, is his strange procedure to be accounted for? Our text answers: it was “by faith” he acted, and not by fancy or by feelings. But what is signified by this expression? Ah, the mere words “by faith” are far more familiar unto many, than their real import is understood. Vague and visionary indeed are the conceptions which multitudes now entertain thereon. We must not, then, take anything for granted; but rather proceed slowly, and seek to make quite sure of our ground.

The one scripture which, perhaps, more than any other unlocks for us the meaning of the “by faith” which is found so frequently in Hebrews 11 is ^{<5107>}Romans 10:17. There we read, “Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.” Faith must have a foundation to rest upon, and that foundation must be the Word of Him that cannot lie. God speaks, and the heart receives and acts upon what He says. True, there are two kinds of “hearing,” just as there are two kinds of “faith.” There is an outward “hearing,” and there is an inward “hearing”: the one merely informs, the other influences; the one simply instructs the mind, the other moulds the heart and moves the will. So there is a twofold meaning to the term “The Word of God” (see our remarks on ^{<5110>}Hebrews 11:3), namely, the Word as written, and the Word as operative, when God speaks in living power to the soul. Hence, there is a twofold “faith”: the one which is merely an intellectual assenting to what God has revealed, and that which is a vital and supernatural principle of action, which “worketh by love” (^{<4086>}Galatians 5:6).

Now we need hardly say that it is the *second* of these which is in view here in ^{<51104>}Hebrews 11:4, and throughout the chapter. But let us move carefully, step by step. It was “by faith” that Abel offered unto God his acceptable

sacrifice, and as ^{<5107>}Romans 10:17 declares, “faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.” It therefore follows that God had definitely revealed His will, that Abel believed that revelation, and that he acted accordingly. Now in O.T. times, God spake to men sometimes directly, sometimes through others. In this instance, we believe the reference is to what God had said to Adam and Eve, and which they had communicated to Cain and Abel. By turning back to Genesis 3 we discover *what the* Lord said to their parents.

“Unto the woman He said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam He said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it; cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (^{<01616>}Genesis 3:16-19).

But further:

“Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them” (verse 21).

Here the Lord spoke to Adam and Eve by action: four things were clearly intimated. First, that in order for a sinner to stand before the thrice holy God, he needed *a covering*. Second, that that which was of human manufacture (^{<5107>}Hebrews 3:7), was worthless. Third, that God Himself must *provide* the requisite covering. Fourth, that the necessary covering could only be obtained *by death*, by blood-shedding.

In ^{<01615>}Genesis 3:15 and 21 we have the first Gospel-sermon which was ever preached on this earth, and that, by the Lord Himself. Life must come out of death. Cain and Abel, and the whole human race, sinned in Adam (^{<5112>}Romans 5:12, 18, 19), and the wages of sin is *death*, penal death. Either I must be paid those wages and suffer that death, or another — an innocent one, on whom death has no claim — must be paid those wages in my stead. And in order to my receiving the benefit of that substitute’s compassion, there must be a link of contact between me and him. *Faith* it

is which unites to Christ. Saving faith, then, in its simplest form, is the placing of a Substitute between my guilty self and a sin-hating God.

Now what we have just gone over above, was made known (probably through Adam) to Cain and Abel. How do we know this? Because, as we have seen, Abel brought his offerings to God “by faith,” and ~~5107~~Romans 10:17 makes it clear that “faith” presupposes a Divine revelation. Further confirmation of this is found in ~~0040~~Genesis 4:7: when Cain’s countenance fell at the rejection of his offering, the Lord said unto him, “If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door.” Thus a Divine institution of sacrifice, clearly defined and made known, is here plainly implied. It was as though God had said to Cain, “Did I promise to accept any other offering than which conformed to My prescription?”

“By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.” Three things here claim our attention: the spring of Abel’s action (faith), the nature of his offering, wherein it was more excellent than Cain’s. The first of these we have already considered, the second we will now examine. The language of our present verse refers us back to Genesis 4; there we read, “And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof” (verse 4). His action here (“brought”) is in sharp contrast from his parents in ~~0008~~Genesis 3:8, who “hid themselves *from* the presence of the Lord God.” The contrast is most significant: a consciousness of guilt caused Adam and Eve to flee; a sense of need moved Abel to seek the Lord. The difference between them is to be attributed unto the respective workings of conscience and faith. An uneasy conscience never of itself, leads to Christ —

“And they which heard, being convicted by their own conscience, *went out* one by one... and Jesus was left alone” (~~800~~John 8:9).

“And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof” (~~0044~~Genesis 4:4).

The separate mention of the “fat” tells us that the lamb had been slain. By killing the lamb and offering it to God, Abel acknowledged at least five things.

First, he owned that God was righteous in driving fallen man out of Eden (~~0024~~Genesis 3:24).

Second, he owned that he was a guilty sinner, and that death was his just due.

Third, he owned that God was holy, and must punish sin.

Fourth, he owned that God was merciful, and willing to accept the death of an innocent substitute in his place.

Fifth, he owned that he looked for acceptance with God in Christ the Lamb. Therefore did he, *by faith*, place the blood of his firstlings of his flock (type of Him who is “the Firstborn” or Head “of every creature” — ^{<5015>}Colossians 1:15) between his sins and the avenging justice of God.

Here, then, is where the life of faith begins. There must first be a bowing unto the righteous verdict of the Divine Judge that I am a sinner, a transgressor, of His holy law, and therefore justly under its “curse” or death-sentence. No excuses have I to offer, no merits have I to plead, no mitigation of the sentence can I fairly ask for. My best performances are only filthy rags in the sight of Him who knows that they were wrought out of self-love and to promote self’s interests, rather than for His glory. I can but plead guilty, and hide my face for very shame. But as the Gospel of His grace is applied to my stricken conscience by the power of the Spirit, hope revives. As He makes known to me the amazing fact that the Lamb of God died so that all who bow to God’s verdict, own themselves as lost, and hate themselves for their sins, might live; and then faith stretches forth a trembling hand and lays hold of the Redeemer, and the criminal is pardoned, and accepted by God.

Having pondered the character of Abel’s sacrifice, let us now consider wherein it was “more excellent” than Cain’s. In ^{<004B>}Genesis 4:3 we read, “Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord.” Cain was no infidel, for he owned the existence of God; nor was he irreligious, for he came before Him as a worshipper; but he refused to conform to the Divine appointment. By carefully noting the nature of his offering, we may observe four things.

First, it was a bloodless one, and “without shedding of blood is no remission” (^{<5022>}Hebrews 9:22).

Second, it was merely the fruit of his toils, the product of his labors.

Third, he deliberately ignored the sentence of God in ^{<0017>}Genesis 3:17: “Cursed is the ground.”

Fourth, he despised the grace made known in ^{<0021>}Genesis 3:21.

Thus, in Cain we behold the first *hypocrite*. He refused to comply with the revealed will of God, yet cloaked his rebellion by coming before Him as a worshipper. He would not obey the Divine appointment, yet brought an offering to the Lord. He believed not that his case was so desperate that death was his due, and could only be escaped by another suffering it in his stead; yet he sought to approach unto the Lord, and patronize Him. This is the “way of Cain” spoken of by Jude (verse 11). It is the way of self-will, of unbelief, of disobedience, and of religious hypocrisy. What a contrast from Abel! Thus we see how there was a striking foreshadowment from the beginning of human history that the church on earth is a *mixed* assembly, made up of wheat and tares.

Cain and Abel stand before us as two representative men. They head the two, and the only two classes, which are to be found in the religious world. They typified, respectively, the two sections of Christendom. Cain, the elder, who is mentioned *first* in Genesis 4 and therefore represents the prominent section, sets forth that vast company who honor God with their lips, but whose hearts are far from Him; who think to pay God a compliment, but who refuse to meet His requirements; who pose as worshippers, but live to please themselves. Abel, on the other hand, *hated by Cain*, foreshadowed that “little flock,” the members of which are brought to feel their sinner-hood, bow to God’s will, comply with His commandments, fly to Christ for refuge, and are accepted by God.

Most solemnly too do Cain and Abel furnish us with a striking example of the *sovereignty* of Divine grace. Both of them were “shapen in iniquity and conceived in sin,” for both were the fallen sons of fallen parents, and both of them were born outside of Eden; yet one was “of that Wicked one” (^{<0112>}1 John 3:12), while the other was one of God’s elect. Marvelously and most blessedly may we here behold the fact that sovereign grace is “no respecter of persons,” but passes by (to human ideas) the most likely, and pitches upon the unlikely. Being the younger of the two, Abel was inferior in dignity; God Himself said to Cain, “Thou shalt rule over him” (^{<0047>}Genesis 4:7). But spiritual blessings do not follow the order of external privileges: Shem is preferred before Japheth (^{<0052>}Genesis 5:32, 10:2, 21); Isaac before Ishmael, Jacob before Esau.

“By (a Divinely-given and Divinely-wrought) faith, Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.” The superiority of Abel’s worship may, perhaps, be set forth thus.

First, it was offered *in obedience to* God’s revealed will. This lies at the very foundation of all actions which are acceptable unto God: nothing can be pleasing unto Him except that which *He* has stipulated: every thing else is “will worship” (^{<S1023>}Colossians 2:23).

Second, it was offered “by faith”: this tells us that there was something more than the mere performance of an outward duty; only that is approved of God which proceeds from the living principle of faith, kindled in the heart by the Holy Spirit. True obedience and faith are never apart: therefore we read of “the obedience of faith” (^{<R106>}Romans 1:5). Yet though inseparable, they are distinguishable in thought: faith respects the word of *promise*; obedience the word of *command*, for promises and precepts go hand in hand. We act in obedience, when the commandment is uppermost in our minds and hearts, which puts us to the performing of duties; we act in faith, when the promise is looked to and the reward is counted upon.

Third, Abel had a “willing mind” (^{<R12>}2 Corinthians 8:12). Faith works by “love” (^{<R16>}Galatians 5:6). This is seen in the fact that he brought of *his best*: it was “of the firstlings of his flock,” which God afterwards took as His portion (^{<R12>}Exodus 13:12); when slain, it was the “fat” which he presented which later God also claimed as His own (^{<R16>}Leviticus 3:16; 7:25). Thus, it was of the most precious and valuable things on earth which Abel brought to God. So it is our best which He requires of us: “Son, give Me thine heart” (^{<R36>}Proverbs 23:26): it is “with the *heart* man believeth unto righteousness” (^{<S10>}Romans 10:10).

Fourth, his sacrificial offering looked forward to and adumbrated the great sacrifice, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. In all these four things Abel excelled Cain. Cain did not act in obedience, for he disregarded the Divine appointment. He did not offer in faith. Nothing is said of any choice of excellent fruit: it was as though he brought the first which came to hand. His offering contained no foreshadowment of Christ.

Ere passing on, let us seek to gather up the *practical* teaching of what has been before us.

1. To serve God acceptably we must disregard all human inventions, lean not unto our own understandings or inclinations, and adhere strictly to the revelation which He made of His will.
2. All obedience, service, and worship, must proceed from faith, for “without faith it is impossible to please Him” (^{-S106}Hebrews 11:6): where this be lacking, no matter how exact the performance of our duty, it is unacceptable to God.
3. We are to serve God with the best that we have: with the best of our abilities, and with the best of our substance; only as *love* constrains us will there be a doing it “heartily as unto the Lord.”
4. In all our religious exercises Christ must be before us, for only as they are perfumed with His merits can they meet with God’s acceptance.

“By which he obtained witness that he was righteous.” There is a little uncertainty as to whether the “by which” refers to Abel’s ‘faith’ or to the “more excellent sacrifice” which he offered. Though the latter be the nearest antecedent, yet, with Owen, Gouge, and Manton, we believe the reference is to his faith.

First, because it is not the apostle’s design in this chapter to specify the kind of sacrifices which were acceptable unto God.

Second, because his obvious purpose was to illustrate and demonstrate the efficacy of faith.

Third, because the apostle here exemplifies what he had just said of the O.T. saints, namely, that by faith “they obtained a good report” (verse 2).

Fourth, because this agrees much more closely with the Analogy of Faith: by the one perfect offering of Christ is the Christian *constituted* “righteous” before God; but it is through faith that he obtains *witness* of the same to his heart.

“By which he obtained witness that he was righteous.” Herein we are supplied with an illustration of “For them that honor Me, I will honor” (⁻⁰⁰²⁰1 Samuel 2:30). In keeping God’s precepts there is “great reward” (⁻⁰⁹¹¹Psalms 19:11). God will be no man’s debtor: he who obediently, humbly, trustfully, lovingly, respects His appointments and obeys His commandments, shall be recompensed — not as a recognition of merit, but

as what is Divinely meet and gracious. God did not leave Abel in a state of uncertainty, ignorant as to whether or not his offering was approved. The Lord was pleased to assure Abel that the sacrifice had been accepted, and that he was accounted just before Him. The Greek word for “he obtained witness” is the same as is rendered “obtained a good report” in verse 2.

“By which he obtained witness that he was righteous.” This too is recorded for our instruction and comfort. From these words we learn it is the good pleasure of God that His obedient and believing children should *know* His mind concerning them. Where there is a justifying faith in Christ which moves the Christian to walk according to the Divine precepts, God honors that faith by granting assurance to its possessor. When we are enabled by faith to plead the most excellent Sacrifice and to present acceptable worship unto God, then we obtain testimony from Him through His Word and by His Spirit that our persons and services are accepted by Him. In Abel’s case, He received from God an outward attestation; in the case of the Christian today it is the inward authentication of his conscience (~~47012~~ 2 Corinthians 1:12), to which the Holy Spirit also adds His confirmation (~~4815~~ Romans 8:15).

“God testifying of his gifts.” We are not told in Genesis 4 in so many words *how* He did so, but the Analogy of Faith leaves little room for doubt. By comparing other Scriptures, it may be that the Lord evidenced His acceptance of Abel’s offering (and thereby testified that he was “righteous”) by causing fire to descend from heaven and consume the sacrifice, which, in turn, ascended to Him as a sweet-smelling savor. In ~~4024~~ Leviticus 9:24 we read, “And there came a fire out from before the Lord, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat.” So too, we are told, “Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice” (~~11838~~ 1 Kings 18:38). Compare also ~~4062~~ Judges 6:21; 13:19, 20; ~~13126~~ 1 Chronicles 21:26; ~~42118~~ Psalm 20:3 margin. There is, however, no certainty on this point.

“By which (faith) he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts.” The second clause is explanatory of the former: the parallel is found in ~~4044~~ Genesis 4:4, where we read, “and the Lord had respect unto Abel *and* to his offering.” He testified in the approbation of his offering, that He had respect unto his person; that is, that He judged, esteemed, and accounted him righteous, for otherwise God is no respecter of persons. Whosoever God accepts or respects, He testifieth him to be righteous, that

is, to be justified, and freely accepted with Him. This Abel was by faith, antecedently unto his offering. He was not made righteous, he was not justified by his sacrifice, but therein show his faith by his works; and God, by acceptance of his works of obedience, justified him, as Abraham was justified by works, namely, *declaratively*, He declared him so to be. Our persons must be first justified, before our works of obedience can be accepted with God; for by that acceptance He testifies that we are righteous (John Owen).

“And by it he being dead yet speaketh.” Marvelously full are the words of God. His commandment is “exceeding broad” (^{<B1996>}Psalm 119:96). In every sentence of Holy Writ there is both a depth and breadth which our unaided minds are incapable of perceiving and appreciating. Only as the Holy Spirit, the Inspirer and Giver of the Word, deigns to “guide” us (^{<B1613>}John 16:13), only as He teaches us to compare passage with passage, so that in His light we “see light” (^{<B360>}Psalm 36:9), are we enabled to discern, in fuller measure, the beauty, meaning, and many-sidedness of any verse or clause. Such is the case in the sentence now before us. We are convinced that there is at least a threefold meaning and reference in it. Briefly, we will consider these in turn.

“And by it he being dead yet speaketh.” The first and most obvious signification of these words is that, by his faith’s obedience, as recorded in Genesis 4 and Hebrews 11, Abel preaches to us a most important sermon. His worship and the fruits thereof are registered in the everlasting records of Holy Scripture, and thereby he speaketh as evidently as though we heard him audibly. There comes to us a voice from the far distant past, from the other side of the flood, saying, “Fallen man can only approach unto God through the death of an innocent Substitute: yet none save God’s elect will ever feel their need of such, set aside their own inclinations, bow to God’s revealed will, and submit to His appointment; but they who do so, obtain witness that they are ‘righteous’ (cf. ^{<B1343>}Matthew 13:43), and receive Divine assurance that they are accepted in the Beloved and that their obedience (imperfect in itself, yet proceeding from a heart which desires and seeks to *fully* please Him) is approved for His sake.”

“And by it he being dead yet speaketh.” And *how* did he die? By the murderous hand of a religious hypocrite who hated him. Then began that which the apostle affirms still to continue:

“he that was born after the flesh, persecuted him that was born after the Spirit” (~~404~~Galatians 4:29).

Here was the first public and visible display of that enmity between the (mystical) seed of the woman and the (mystical) seed of the Serpent. Abel’s death was therefore also a pledge and representation of the death of Christ Himself — murdered by the religious world. Those whom God approves must expect to be disproved of men, more particularly by those professing to be Christian. But the time is coming when the present situation shall be reversed. In ~~0040~~Genesis 4:10 God said to Cain “the voice of thy brother’s blood *crieth* unto Me from the ground.” Abel’s own blood “speaketh,” crying to God for vengeance.

“And by it he being dead yet speaketh.” Though ruthlessly slain by his brother, the soul of Abel exists in a separate state, alive, conscious, and vocal. He is among that company of whom the apostle said,

“I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the Word of God, and for the testimony which they held, and they *cried* with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” (~~668~~Revelation 6:9, 10).

Thus, Abel is not only a type of the persecution and suffering of the godly, but gives a pledge of the certain vengeance which God will take in due time upon their oppressors. God shall yet avenge His own elect (those in heaven as well as those on earth) who cry unto Him day and night for Him *to* avenge them (~~2187~~Luke 18:7, 8). Let us then seek grace to possess our souls in patience, knowing that ere long God will reward the righteous and punish the wicked.