

By Faith: Abel | Hebrews 11:1-4

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July 3, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Over recent weeks Pastor Hopper has spoken frequently and movingly about “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.” Those words are from Hebrews ch. 12.

This week we take a step back, first because I’m not the preacher Pastor Hopper is, and second because our Bible reading is from Hebrews 11. That’s back one ch. from Hebrews 12.

I should mention that this morning we begin a new sermon series. It will focus on Hebrews 11, a ch. sometimes called the Hall of Faith chapter because of all the OT people it presents as models for our faith as Christians.

The series title is the two words “by faith.” You’ll find those words about 20x in Heb. 11. This morning we consider the faith of Abel, second son of Adam and Eve.

Out of love and respect for God’s Word written, please stand as I read Hebrews 11:1-4, p. 1007 in your pew Bible.

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 For by it the people of old received their commendation. 3 By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. 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.

In Chaim Potok’s novel *The Chosen*, early in the story a Brooklyn Orthodox Jewish rabbi’s son smashes a baseball that hits a Reform Jewish rabbi’s son in the eye. Doctors fear he will lose his sight. From his bed the injured boy Reuven tells his father that he thinks the other boy Danny did it on purpose. It’s a dark and desperate accusation. It reflects the tension and suspicion between Orthodox and Reform Jews.

His wise rabbi father asks him this stern question to make his son reconsider: “Things are always what they SEEM to be, Reuven? Since when?”

Faith SEEMS like all kinds of things to all kinds of people. Few matters are more misconstrued than Christian faith. Last week I had a conversation with a cell phone specialist at a tech store; his faith was basically “Keep cool and stay zen.” Google “keep cool zen” for translation.

That techy's ideas are an example of misguided notions of faith floating around. This is sad, because Scripture has so much good and promising to teach us about faith. The truth is that faith, true faith, is the key, the only key, for any of us to find acceptance by God and delight in God.

And that brings us to Heb 11. Hebrews as a book is not about faith. It is about God and the Son of God Jesus Christ. The word faith does occur 32x in Heb. So it's important. But the words God, Jesus, Lord, Spirit, Son, or Christ occur 146x. Many passages speak of God and Christ without using those words.

So faith is big in Hebrews. But faith pales next to the God in whom faith is placed. What Hebrews says in our Abel reading confirms that. The four vv. we read answer four questions. The first one is this:

1. What is faith? V. 1 answers: "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Abel knew that. You remember the story. Some time after Adam and Even sinned in Gen 3, they had two sons. That's great! God had said, Be fruitful and multiply. Even after they sinned, God made a way for our first parents' restoration. They could continue a relationship with God. They could still enjoy earth's bounty through marital love and childrearing.

But it would be a little different now. Before sin their communion with God was personal and direct. It says the LORD God walked in the garden in the cool of the day to talk with them. Sin altered that. Their pure and holy fellowship with God by direct word and sight would now be refracted. They would have to seek God through the static and distance created by their transgression of his word.

In other words, Adam and Eve had to learn to live trusting God that he was still with them and had their future in his hand. They had to learn to replenish the earth and subdue it despite the thorns and thistles that sin introduced, and despite the pain in childbirth and marital tension that came with the fall.

Yet they had the assurance that God's promise in Gen 3:15 to crush the serpent's head would come true. They had the conviction that things not yet seen—namely, that a now fallen world order would be made right again—would come to pass.

Adam and Eve had to learn to walk, to live, to labor, to love, to aspire, to achieve, to worship, to build their family, in faith.

And so they had two sons. Cain first. Eve had such high hopes. In Gen 4:2 she says, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." His name, Cain, sounds like the Hebrew word for "gotten." What a great day for mom and dad.

Then Abel came. Double bonus. Both boys grew. Work the earth, God had said. Have

dominion. Be fruitful. Adam and Eve taught them as the boys grew. They learned from their parents more and more about trusting this God who made all things and who put people on this earth made in his image to serve him and honor him.

Abel was better with animals and majored on sheep. Cain had a green thumb. God worked it out so that they knew to present the fruit of their labor to him from time to time as an act of worship. I'm sure Adam and Eve already did this. Perhaps they presented something each seventh day, like we gather and affirm God and present our offering of bodily presence and hearing God Word and praising him and offering our tithes and gifts.

But one day those boys, or maybe full men by now, made their offerings. There was a glitch. God rejected Cain's offering. Cain got royally ticked. The Bible says later when they were in the field, he rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.

I don't think God rejected Cain's offering because Cain offered crops and not animals, like Abel did. I think it was because before that day ever arrived, he broke off trust in God. We don't know how or why. Lots of parents have two kids, and one seeks God, and the other rebels. Cain was the rebel. It says in 1 John that Cain murdered Abel "because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous."

I propose that Abel offered in faith. Cain offered with his heart not right. When we're defying God inside, or running from God, or acting like he doesn't matter, or breaking his commands, everything we think or do is off. Cain was off.

If he had trusted God, loved God, honored God, he wouldn't have killed Abel. Also, when God asked Cain, Where is Abel your brother?, Cain wouldn't have replied with that brilliant immortal sneer, "I don't know; am I my brother's keeper?"

Talk about a breach of faith. You murder one-fourth of the human population on earth and then smart off to the Creator?

So what is faith? Abel had it. Faith is lived out confidence in what God prescribes and promises. It is the conviction borne out by action that something we can't see is what matters most in all we do. Faith is the knowledge that God is life's biggest reality, and we approach him on his terms and let him transform us in the course of time. This Abel did.

Our Hebrews reading answers a second question, and I'll be briefer here, about four minutes.

2. What good is faith? V. 2 answers: "By it the people of old received their commendation." Interpretations of those words vary. But I'll explain them this way.

You've heard Pastor Hopper say everyone has a religion. Everyone has some view of meaning, of morality, and of mortality. That's your religion. Well, everyone receives a "commendation," as v. 2 puts it. God looks at your life and commends it, not to say you're perfect but you trust in Christ and you're growing in grace.

Or God looks at your life and shakes his head and hopes you turn to him while you still can. Scripture puts it this way: God is “patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Here are some OT people, “the people of old” as v. 2 says, whom God commends in his Word the Bible: Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Sarah, Rahab, Ruth, Deborah, David, and Ezra. None was perfect. But they all sought God and through faith found him. They received God’s commendation in that sense.

That’s what faith is good for. We were made for this. You’ve been to the airport and had the beagle or other snuffling dog go by. They have this capacity to detect odors that humans can’t.

Abel had a capacity to sense God, to extend himself toward God, Cain went another way. Cain received a negative commendation as a result. Abel’s God-report card was an A, again not because he was perfect but because the record shows he sought God on God’s terms. He trusted God. God received him and his offering with open arms.

That’s what faith is good for. Faith is the disposition toward God that enables him to equip us through Christ with everything good that we may do his will (Heb 13:21).

The only question is: Do we crave God and his commendation more than our everyday tangible lives? Or does the melodrama of life grip us so tightly that even as we listen to a sermon, our minds are racing back and forth to other things: our jobs, our plans this afternoon, family matters and crises, MLB standings, the presidential race, how long will this sermon go on, and so forth?

The biggest threat to faith is not skepticism. It is crowding out God with our “busy.” Recall the first commandment: you shall have no other gods before me. The digital age has idolatry down to an art form.

Our Hebrews reading answers a third question. **3. How does faith work? V. 3 answers that question: “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.”**

Faith works by giving us eyes to see the truth of God in a world of smoke and mirrors. I return to my earlier reference to the rabbi whose son condemned the batter who smoked him with a line drive to the eye socket. That sure SEEMED malicious! But then came that wise question: “Things are always what they SEEM to be, Reuven? Since when?” In that novel, the evil batter Danny later becomes Reuven’s best friend. Reuven had to rise above what he thought he knew to trust and test his father’s higher knowledge.

Human reason can’t see far beyond its own limitations. Faith gains a share in the knowledge of God who sees all things and imparts his wisdom in his Word.

Notice the words “by faith we understand.” There’s a prevalent notion in the West fed by an interpretation of Immanuel Kant that faith is not about cognitive understanding. Faith and facts are mutually exclusive. If you went to public school in the US, that is probably what you learned about religion. Faith is unverifiable superstition with no basis in reality.

That is an untrue definition of faith as defined by biblical writers.

Here’s how faith works. It works by God’s grace. All people are like straying sheep. We go our own way. But God sent someone to round us up, a shepherd for those straying sheep. He opened our eyes to his offer of pardon and new life. People of faith buy into it.

Around us, maybe even in our own family, were skeptics. Around us were people indifferent to this God and the Son he sent. Around us were people of other religions, other faiths. For some reason, by God’s mysterious and glorious grace we grasped the message of Scripture. By God’s Word we understood who the true God is, what he did in Jesus Christ, where trust in him leads, what knowledge of him calls for. This was God’s doing and we can’t take the credit.

We do and must exercise faith, that’s true. But it is God who beyond our ken worked in us to will and to do what pleases him. We love because he first loved us.

A year ago I was having trouble reading and typing, bad news for a seminary professor. I feared some eye disease or even brain disorder. Who knows when you get my age? I underwent an eye exam. I braced myself for the bad news.

The ophthalmologist said, “Go to Walgreens and buy readers that say 1.75 or 2.0.” With those readers, what seemed like a blur instantly clarified. You can buy three pairs for \$8 at Walmart.

“With faith we understand,” v. 3 says. When you are open to God being right and his Word being true, you get readers that pull all kinds of things into fresh focus.

Faith, as biblical writers describe it, works by cracking open our psyche so that the self is willing to listen to God. Hear, O Israel, the OT says. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God, the NT says. The whole Bible is a call to hear and act and be saved from our bondage to the voice in our own head. Learn and heed rather the word that comes from God.

The word that made the universe is alive today with the message of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to remake the world as he grants us the vision called faith.

Faith works by wising us up to know and base our lives on what sin-blinded human nature typically ignores or denigrates. Just like we did before God gifted us with faith in Christ

Our Hebrews reading answers a fourth question.

4. Where did faith take Abel? V. 4 answers: “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’s where faith took Abel. And I’ll compare him to Cain.

- A. Faith attracted Abel to God. I take it Cain sacrificed because he had to.
- B. Faith gave Abel the right attitude. Cain’s attitude stunk.
- C. Faith gave Abel unselfishness to give freely to God. Cain offered with a chip on his shoulder.
- D. Abel’s faith overcame the kinds of impediments Cain modeled. God told Cain, “Sin is crouched at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” Cain relished his grievance over God.
- E. Faith enabled Abel to stand up to Cain’s abuse. Cain became the abuser, the first persecutor of the righteous in a long line with a worldwide presence today.
- F. Faith got Abel God’s commendation and membership in the Heb 11 Hall of Faith. Cain is there too, but as history’s first anti-hero, not counting the devil and his angels.

I have to add this: one more thing that faith got Abel was an early ticket to paradise. He was righteous through faith, and he was murdered. From the beginning faithfulness to God has meant earthly death for some. Other examples include the OT prophets, Jesus, and the NT apostles. We have brothers and sisters in the faith around the world who die every day because of Abel-quality faith. It is likely that a Central member will die a martyr’s death in times ahead if the world keeps going like it is.

Jesus told the thief on the cross who confessed faith in him: Today you will be with me in paradise. Our earthly lives have a termination date. Faith means we place our calendar in God’s hands and let him deal with the fallout of our obedience in the face of hostility like Cain’s.

I close with this. Faith is as good as its object.

Hebrews 11 is not about faith in faith. It is not about trust in our sincerity, our religiosity, our income, our competence, our degrees, our denomination, our politics, our service, our intelligence, our achievement, our heritage, our experience, our power, our reputation, or anything else based on or rising from the self, or selves united--family, church, race, nation.

Our hope, our faith, is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.

We look to, we live for, Jesus, the founder and perfecter of THE faith (the faith modeled by the Heb 11 lineup), “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Through his faith, though he died, Abel still speaks. He commends to you and me the excellence of the object of our faith: God, who in the fullness of time sent his Son.

Let us pray.

Lord, receive the praise of those here with faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

For those uncommitted, have mercy on their souls. Soften their hearts and grant them faith to know and serve Jesus, in whose name we pray.

Benediction: Heb 13:20-21

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.